Schopenhauer’s Titus Argument

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In *Good and Evil*, Raimond Gaita suggests that expressions of “lucid remorse” can shine light on the nature of the moral. Yet, he writes,

if one puts in the mouth of the remorseful person many of the philosophical accounts of what makes an obligation a moral obligation or a principle a moral principle, of the nature of morality and of its authority, we get parody. ‘My God what I have done? I have violated the social compact, agreed behind a veil of ignorance.’ ‘My God what have I done? I have ruined my best chances of flourishing.’ ‘My God what have I done? I have violated rational nature in another.’ ‘My God what have I done? I have diminished the stock of happiness.’ ‘My God what have I done? I have violated my freely chosen principles.’

These statements sound like parody, Gaita suggests, because “the individual who has been wronged and who haunts the wrongdoer in his remorse has disappeared from sight.”

My focus in this chapter is an argument that presages Gaita’s in some respects. The argument appears in Schopenhauer’s main work on ethics, the *Prize Essay on the Basis of Morals* (hereafter: OBM), where Schopenhauer defends the view that “compassion… [is] the only genuinely moral” incentive (OBM 4:231), and that “only in so far as an action has sprung from [compassion] does that action have moral worth” (OBM 4:208-9). Schopenhauer’s defense of this view has several strands. The argument I am concerned with appears in §19 of OBM, and revolves around two characters, Titus and Caius. Unlike some of Schopenhauer’s other arguments, the Titus argument, as I will call it, does not appeal to Schopenhauer’s distinctive moral psychology or to the metaphysical monism he believes underlies compassion. Even so, the argument has been overlooked by contemporary ethicists. Most commentators on Schopenhauer’s ethics simply pass over the Titus argument, while those do address it have found it objectionable. I will argue that most of their objections, however, stem from misunderstandings of the argument, and that the argument has significant virtues.

My discussion proceeds as follows. In §1, I provide an overview of the Titus argument. In §2, I attempt to clarify the argument’s intended conclusion, methodology, and key move, drawing on several objections from the secondary literature. In §3, I make use of the lessons of §2.

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1 Gaita 2004, xxi.
2 Gaita 2004, xxii.
3 Gaita does not say whether he took inspiration from Schopenhauer, though shortly before the quoted passage, he mentions Schopenhauer’s critique of Kant on compassion (Gaita 2004, xix), suggesting at least some familiarity with Schopenhauer’s moral philosophy.
4 Immediately after the Titus argument, Schopenhauer presents a related argument concerning moral outrage, in which different moral theories are used to spell out the question, “How is it possible to do such a thing?” (OBM 4:233). This latter argument shares many features with the Titus argument (though its motivating examples are non-fictional), and much of what I saw below likely applies to it as well.
5 One exception is Magee 2009, 197-98.
to reconstruct and evaluate the argument. One of the crucial lessons will be that Schopenhauer is not, in the Titus argument, attempting the method of reflective equilibrium, that is, of attempting to impartially integrate existing first-order moral judgments into a coherent whole. Understanding Schopenhauer’s method helps that clarify the virtues and limitations of the Titus argument, and reveals its affinity with Gaita’s parody argument. Ultimately, I conclude that the Titus argument is plausible enough to deserve attention by contemporary philosophers.

1. Overview of the argument

Schopenhauer takes the Titus argument to provide a decisive experiment (“experimentum crucis”) for his claim that compassion is the only truly moral incentive, the source of morally worthy action, and the basis of virtue. The argument hinges on a thought experiment, or rather, a schema for thought experiments. Schopenhauer describes two putatively fictional characters, Titus and Caius, who each face a romantic rival. They both resolve “to dispatch their respective rival from this world,” knowing that they would be “completely safe from all discovery” (OBM 4:231). But before murdering their rivals, “both desist after a struggle with themselves,” and then both give “an honest and clear account of the grounds for their abandoning their resolve.” The accounts they give are the focal point of the thought experiment.

What Schopenhauer provides is merely a schema, for what Caius says is left “entirely at the choice of the reader” (OBM 4:231). Schopenhauer implies that the reader can try out any putatively moral grounds other than compassionate ones. He himself offers some examples drawn from other philosophers, including:

**Religious:** considerations about “the will of God, the retribution to come, the future judgment and the like” (OBM 4:231)

**Kant:** “I reflected that the maxim of my conduct in this case would not have been suitable for yielding a universally valid rule for all possible rational beings, in that I would have treated my rival solely as a means and not at the same time as an end” (OBM 4:231)

**Wollaston:** “I have deliberated that that action would be the expression of an untrue proposition” (OBM 4:232)

**Hutcheson:** “The moral sense, whose sensations, like those of any other sense, are not further explicable, determined me to refrain from it” (OBM 4:232)

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6 I agree with Patrick Hassan that Schopenhauer’s real focus is on moral virtues (see Hassan Forthcoming), as opposed to criteria for morally correct action.

7 “Titus” is probably an allusion to Titus Flavius Vespasianus, who Schopenhauer elsewhere mentions as an example of “tireless goodness” (OFW 4:54). Matters are less clear with “Caius.” One possibility is Caius (or Gaius) Julius Caesar Germanicus, better known as Caligula, who Schopenhauer (in the same passage) gives as an example of “incorrigible, deeply rooted wickedness” (OFW 4:54). However, Caius in §19 of OBM is hardly an example of wickedness. Another possibility is the morally ambiguous Caius Marcus Coriolanus, perhaps as portrayed in Shakespeare’s Coriolanus (mentioned at WWR2 3:499). Coriolanus is unusual among Shakespeare’s tragic protagonists for his relatively lack of emotional soliloquies, leaving his underlying motivations difficult to discern. That said, the evidence of this connection is mixed, since (1) Schopenhauer uses the German spelling (“Kajus”) instead of Shakespeare’s Latinate spelling, and (2) Schopenhauer elsewhere uses “Caius” for trivial, non-moral examples (e.g., WWR2 3:116 and P&P2 6:84).
Smith: “I foresaw that my action would have aroused no sympathy at all for me in those who witnessed it” (OBM 4:232)

Wolff: “I recognized that in doing that I would be working against my own perfection and also not promoting anyone else’s.” (OBM 4:232)

Notably, Schopenhauer does not question whether Caius, construed in any of these ways, exhibits a believable moral psychology. Here, at least, he seems willing to grant that Caius could possess and be moved by the various grounds he articulates.8 Instead, Schopenhauer’s focus is on a contrast with Titus, who states the following:

As it came to arrangements and I therefore had to occupy myself for the moment not with my passion but with that rival of mine, then it became fully clear to me for the first time what was supposed to be happening to him now. But then compassion and pity sized me, I felt sorry for him, I could not find the heart to do it: I was unable to do it. (OBM 4:232)

The passage finishes with four questions: (1) “Which of the two is the better human being?” (2) Which of the two would he rather assign his fate to? (3) Which of them was held back by the purer motive?”, and (4) “Where, accordingly, does the foundation of morals lie?” (OBM 4:232).

2. Clarifications and objections

Despite its brevity, it is not obvious what exactly the Titus argument is meant to prove, what Schopenhauer’s underlying methodology is, or why we should supposedly favor Titus’ compassionate motivation to Caius’s non-compassionate motivations.

In this section, I attempt to provide clarity on each of these fronts, by way of responding to several potential objections to the argument. The objections I consider are not the only ones – someone could, e.g., also object to the accuracy of Schopenhauer’s depictions of opposing moral theories. I choose the objections I do because they are especially useful for understanding the internal workings of the argument.

2.1. What is the intended conclusion?

Schopenhauer introduces the Titus argument as a proof that compassion is the only genuinely moral incentive, and concludes the argument by indicating that the conclusion answers the question “Where... does the foundation of morals lie?” (OBM 4:232). At first glance, these appear to be different topics: the first concerns proper motivation, whereas the second sounds more like a metaethical question, concerning the ultimate basis of moral facts. I will return to this issue in §2.3. His main concern, however, is surely with showing that compassion the sole moral incentive. But it is not obvious what this means, nor how it relates to the other three questions he poses at the end of the Titus argument. I’ll discuss each issue in turn.

What does Schopenhauer mean in claiming that compassion is the sole moral incentive? Schopenhauer first makes this claim in §16 of OBM, entitled “Presentation and proof of the sole genuine moral incentive” (OBM 4:205). He initially presents it as a claim about actions, namely, that only actions done from compassion have “genuine moral worth” (OBM 4:205-207). He then shifts, without explanation, to a claim about virtue, namely, that “compassion alone is the real

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8 Schopenhauer elsewhere rejects Kant’s claim that reason itself can be motivating (OBM 4:165), and his moral psychology makes no room for (e.g.) a Wollastonian moral psychology, in which the untruth of a proposition expressed in action can itself be motivating (though Schopenhauer does seem to grant that actions can express propositions – see P&P2 6:233).
basis of all free justice and all genuine loving kindness’ (OBM 4:208, see also 4:212-13). Schopenhauer’s view of compassion, then, encompasses both the claim about action and the claim about virtue. Those claims appear to be linked by an implicit assumption that whatever motivation gives actions genuine moral worth is also the basis or defining feature of moral virtue.

What does Schopenhauer mean, however, by “genuine moral worth”? One natural reading, which Sandra Shapshay articulates, is that an action has genuine moral worth if and only if it is the morally right action. Yet if Schopenhauer’s claim is that compassionate motivation is necessary and sufficient for performing the right action in a given situation, then it would seem to face counterexamples like the following:

**Helping the Happy**: Helping a friend, whose life is already pleasant, prepare to interview for an even better job.

**Short-Sighted Benevolence**: Giving candy to a toddler who is throwing a tantrum over candy.

The case of Helping the Happy poses a challenge insofar as Schopenhauer holds that compassion is directed merely at suffering (see OBM 4:210), which means that there is no room for compassion when it comes to those who are not suffering and so, given Schopenhauer’s view, no room for morally valuable action. Yet, intuitively, there seems to be at least some moral value in such cases, which suggests that compassion is not necessary for morally valuable action. In the case of Short-Sighted Benevolence, by contrast, compassion seems to lead to the morally wrong action, since adults should often not be compassionately drawn into toddlers’ desire for more candy. This suggests that compassion is not sufficient for morally valuable action either.

These apparent counterexamples can help clarify two aspects of the view that the Titus argument is meant to defend: the wide scope of “compassion,” and his understanding of an action’s having moral worth. Let’s consider each in turn.

Though a case like Helping the Happy might not seem to involve any suffering, and so not involve any compassion, Schopenhauer in fact uses “suffering” (“Leiden”) quite broadly, which implies a correspondingly broad use of “compassion” (“Mitleid”). Suffering, for Schopenhauer, encompassing all “unfulfilled and thwarted willing” (WWR1 2:429) and the “slow course” of “the game of constantly passing from desire to satisfaction and from this to a new desire” (WWR1 2:196). In other words, any frustrated desire may count as a form of suffering, not merely those associated with pain or intense agony. For Helping the Happy to be a case where there is no room for Schopenhauerian compassion, then, it must be one where the friend is indeed completely satisfied with her current situation—in which case, her desire for a new job seems like a mere whim, and so of little moral significance. Moreover, if there is anything morally valuable about helping a friend in such a situation, Schopenhauer would likely hold that

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9 Shapshay 2019, 161-62. Magee takes the argument’s conclusion to be that we morally approve of actions insofar as the underlying motives are altruistic and not egoistic (Magee 2009, 197). Magee is right that Schopenhauer allows for degrees of moral approval, but showing that is not an aim of the Titus argument (which presents only a single action of moral worth).

10 These examples stem from similar ones in Atwell 1990, 109-13, Cartwright 2012, 258, and Shapshay 2019, 163-5.

11 Alternatively, Bernard Reginster suggests that, for Schopenhauer, “the elimination of suffering implies the satisfaction of all desires” (Reginster 2009, 114).

12 Schopenhauer would also deny, of course, that anything more than momentary satisfaction is possible, but since he already brackets questions of psychology in the Titus argument, that cannot insulate him from the case in this context.
It stems from the disappointment (suffering) that would result from declining a friend’s request for help. To be sure, some philosophers take personal relationships like friendship to intrinsically generate moral reasons, but Schopenhauer is not alone in rejecting that view, and it is not intuitively clear that friendship generates significant moral reasons in cases where there is no possibility of disappointment. In other words, though Schopenhauer does limit compassion to suffering (in a broad sense of “suffering”), his claim that compassion is the basis of morally worth action can accommodate the most compelling versions of cases like Helping the Happy.

The case of Short-Sighted Benevolence, however, does show that compassion alone is not sufficient for someone performing the uniquely right action in a given situation. Quite often, the morally best thing to do is not to give in to someone’s immediate desires. Fortunately, Schopenhauer’s view is consistent with this. Somewhat surprisingly, Schopenhauer does not employ the notion of unique right actions. Instead, he understands “wrong” as “injury to another” and “right” as “the actions that one can perform without injuring others” (OBM 4:216-17, see also WWR1 2:400). Giving into a toddler’s candy tantrum does not injure them, and so counts as a right action by Schopenhauer’s terms.

Schopenhauer’s inclusive notion of right action, however, does not imply that all right actions are equally morally good. There are, moreover, textual reasons for thinking he recognizes finer moral distinctions. His core moral principle is “Harm no one; rather help everyone to the extent that you can” (OBM 4:158), and one could fault a parent for failing to help the child to the extent that they can – say, by lovingly directing the child toward other, healthier options. In addition, Schopenhauer sharply distinguishes morally virtuous action from rational action, as in a case where I “give to someone in need something that I myself shall need even more urgently than him tomorrow” (OBM 4:150). In this last case, the act of giving displays virtue despite its comparatively negative consequence. Hence, Schopenhauer regards a range of morally and rationally sub-optimal actions as having moral worth, and he can agree that the actions like that in Short-Sighted Benevolence are not morally ideal.

So far, then, we’ve found reasons to read Schopenhauer’s intended conclusion to be that compassion is necessary and sufficient for morally valuable action, with the understanding that compassion can be directed at all unsatisfied or frustrated desires and that morally valuable actions can be sub-optimal. Given Schopenhauer’s way of linking actions of moral worth and virtue, this also shows that his notion of virtue is fairly broad: a virtuous person need not always perform the optimal action.

With that in place, consider again the first three concluding questions from the Titus argument: (1) “Which of the two is the better human being?” (2) Which of the two would he rather assign his fate to? (3) Which of them was held back by the purer motive?” (OBM 4:232). The link between morally valuable action and virtue explains the relevance of question (1). Question (3) is slightly more mysterious, since it isn’t obvious what notion of purity is in play, or why it is relevant. The most difficult interpretive question, however, concerns Question (2). If

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13 For example, Noddings 1984 (discussed more below). In general, though, we can expect Schopenhauer’s views to clash with partialist ethical intuitions (cf. WWR1 2:444).

14 For a relevant discussion of nuanced instances of compassion, see Mannion 2002, 110.

15 In the case of parenthood, Schopenhauer holds that failing to provide help is itself a form of injury (OBM 4:221), so his concept of injury is somewhat expansive. Even so, it would not apply to giving into tantrums. This part of my discussion draws on Marshall and Mehl-Hutchinson Forthcoming.

16 Schopenhauer also provides a ranking of wrong actions at WWR1 2:395.

17 In the case of religious grounds Caius offers, there is an obvious appeal to egoism, which would certainly make the motive impure from Schopenhauer’s perspective (see, e.g., OBM 4:204). In Part 2 of OBM, Schopenhauer likewise suggests that Kantianism involves egoism (OBM 4:155-56). Yet it is not clear why,
morally worthy action can be sub-optimal, then it is not obvious that we should assign our fate to the virtuous person instead of (e.g.) the person moved by egoistic fear of divine retribution. Moreover, Titus is hardly a model of reliable motivation – otherwise, he would not have plotted to murder his rival in the first place. Yet the fact that Schopenhauer poses the question suggests that the argument’s conclusion is somehow concerned with the reliability or consequences of compassionate actions.

On the basis of Question (2), Shapshay takes the Titus argument to concern consequences or reliability of moral action. In support of Shapshay’s reading, it is notable that Schopenhauer later states that anyone “filled with [compassion] will reliably injure no one… and rather have consideration for everyone, … help everyone” (OBM 4:236).

How can we reconcile this apparent concern with consequences or reliability with Schopenhauer’s recognition that compassion can lead to sub-optimal actions? I suggest that, for Schopenhauer, compassion reliably produces good consequences only in ideal cases. This would be why Schopenhauer claims there is value in “enlightening the head” of people with good character by helping them consider consequences (OBM 4: 255). He could claim that, other things being equal, someone with compassionate motivation is more reliable than someone without it. From the details we are given about Titus and Caius, we would therefore have defeasible reason to trust Titus over Caius, and this is all Question (2) points us to. Overall, however, Schopenhauer is really not concerned with consequences or reliability in this case, which explains why he makes no mention of the durability of Titus’s or Caius’s change of heart. This suggests that the Titus argument is meant to largely abstract from considerations about consequences.

The conclusion, therefore, that Schopenhauer wants us to draw from the Titus argument is instead that compassion (broadly understood) is necessary and sufficient for morally worthy (though not always morally optimal) action, which is meant to therefore imply that compassion is the essence of moral virtue.

2.2. What is the methodology?

The Titus argument focuses on agents changing their minds about murdering romantic rivals. Yet how can a single case (or limited schema for cases) support a general theory about the basis of morality? A possible hint here is Schopenhauer’s comment that the case he presents will be one that does not “make the matter easy for myself” (OBM 4:231). One natural understanding of Schopenhauer’s argumentative strategy is as defending his general theory by addressing the prima facie strongest counterexample to it. By analogy, someone might defend psychological egoism by analyzing a case of painful self-sacrifice, with the idea that if egoism is in play in such a case, then it likely is in play everywhere. Showing the success of a view in what seems like the most difficult case does indeed suggest that it can succeed in other cases. Call this the ‘Goliath strategy.’ The Goliath strategy can be understood as a shortcut within a widespread methodology in contemporary ethics: John Rawls’ reflective equilibrium, which aims at bringing our ordinary moral judgments into a cohesive, principled whole. Rawls introduces reflective equilibrium as a philosophical analogue of holistic, inductive approaches to empirical science, in which scientists gather large amounts of data and then finds the most elegant theoretical

(e.g.) Wollastonian motivation would be impure (were it possible). As to whether Schopenhauer requires a complete absence of egoism in order for actions to have moral worth, see Jacquette 2005, 220.


19 When David defeats Goliath, the entire Philistine army flees (1 Samuel 17:48-53).

20 Rawls 1951.
explanation for them, with no individual data point carrying decisive weight. However, gathering data concerning moral beliefs is much more difficult (at least, from the armchair) than gathering empirical data, since moral beliefs are not straightforwardly observable, and are hard to individuate. Hence, a shortcut that let us draw general conclusions about a theory based on a single moral belief is appealing, and this is what the Goliath strategy promises.\(^{21}\)

The Goliath argumentative strategy works, however, only if it is applied to a genuinely challenging prima facie counterexample for a view. However, some commentators have suggested that other cases pose more serious challenges for Schopenhauer, and that Schopenhauer may therefore have cherry-picked a relatively easy case. Alongside cases like those discussed in §2.1, perhaps the most challenging case they offer is the following:\(^{22}\)

**Just Punishment:** Sentencing someone who has committed a horrible crime to a harsh jail sentence.

In such a case, compassion (however broadly construed) for the criminal can seem morally inappropriate, whereas an impartial sense of justice seems fully appropriate.\(^{23}\) This is, moreover, hardly an appeal to uncommon intuitions – cases like this loom large in ordinary moral thinking. Hence, even reading Schopenhauer’s conclusion along the lines of the previous subsection, it seems that he has hardly picked a proper Goliath against which to test his views.\(^{24}\)

My suggestion, however, is that the fact that Schopenhauer picks an easier case for his view in the Titus argument tells us something about the methodology behind that argument. Despite how it might initially seem, Schopenhauer is not employing reflective equilibrium or the Goliath strategy.

To begin, note that immediately before the Titus argument, Schopenhauer signals that his view of compassion is somewhat counterintuitive. There, he states that his identification of compassion as the sole moral incentive “is paradoxical in a strange, and indeed an almost incomprehensible way” (OBM 4:231). To be sure, he also presents the Titus argument as drawing out “utterances of universal human feeling” (OBM 4:231), but in claiming his view is paradoxical, Schopenhauer must think that something other than this “universal human feeling” distorts some of our moral views.\(^{25}\)

\(^{21}\) Schopenhauer describes his methodology in ethics as empirical or descriptive (see WWR1 2:319-20, OBM 4:109-110, 4:195). This much may fit well with reflective equilibrium methodology, insofar as the latter is understood on analogy with empirical science. (Note, though, Schopenhauer says that his topic is moral character and action, not moral beliefs.)


\(^{23}\) As Shapshay notes, there is an intermediate view, on which proper moral motivation involves both compassion and rational elements, but this would be a clear break from Schopenhauer’s own view (Shapshay 2019, 164).

\(^{24}\) Another type of challenging case involves righteous anger in the face of injustice (see, e.g., Cherry 2019). Schopenhauer categorically excludes anger from moral virtue, claiming that someone with true goodness of heart “is not capable of anger” (WWR2 3:263, see also WWR2 3:300). Not coincidentally, Schopenhauer is uncomfortably silent about the perspectives of the oppressed – one place where anger seems especially appropriate. For example, his discussions of slavery say nothing about what the proper motives would be of slaves who resist their oppressors (see OBM 4:230, P&P2 6:261-62).

\(^{25}\) In that same sentence, Schopenhauer declares that, with respect to the truth that compassion is sole moral incentive, he will “versuchen, sie den Ueberzeugungen des Lesers... zu entfremden” (OBM 4:231). Christopher Janaway (like other recent translators) takes this to be missing a negation or qualifier, and so renders the clause as “I will attempt to make it less alien to the reader’s convictions” (my emphasis). However, taking the text at face-value, Schopenhauer can be read as saying that he will try to distance (i.e. protect) the truth that compassion is the sole moral incentive from the reader’s convictions, which would
What distortion might Schopenhauer think is in play in the case of Just Punishment? One distorting factor is egoism, which Schopenhauer sees as the “chief and fundamental incentive in a human being” (OBM 4:196). Elsewhere, he states that egoism exerts a “secret power over our judgment: what suits it suddenly appears to us as fair, right and reasonable” (WWR2 3:244). Egoism, in his Hobbesian political view, prompts the invention of state institutions, “arising out of mutual fear or mutual force” (OBM 4:198). Part of our desire to punish those who harm others, then, is to dissuade others from harming us. Schopenhauer introduces the Titus argument by reminding us that compassion is, in his view, “the sole-non-egoistic incentive.” Not surprisingly, then, in setting up the argument, Schopenhauer attempts to set aside egoistic moral (or quasi-moral) beliefs, in at least two ways. For one, Caius and Titus being fictional (and having names that suggest long-dead Romans) should help us bracket our own egoistic concerns in evaluating them. For another, Schopenhauer stipulates that both Caius and Titus know they would have been entirely safe from detection had they murdered their rivals. This would not only set egoistic considerations aside from Caius and Titus, but also indicates to Schopenhauer’s readers that the dissuasive power of the state would not be effective in this case.

Yet Schopenhauer believes there is another distorting factor besides egoism here. Just Punishment illustrates the appeal of retributivism – the idea that it is intrinsically morally appropriate to punish agents who act wrongly, whether or not that punishment leads to any further benefits. Schopenhauer rejects retributivism, and in WWR1, says he takes to be the distorting factor is that generates its appeal. Considering a case of someone “who manifests an exceptional degree of wickedness,” Schopenhauer writes that “most people would demand that such a person atone for all this suffering by… suffering an equal amount of pain” (WWR1 2:422). The reason most people would demand this, in Schopenhauer’s view, is because they do not “see the extent to which the offending and the offended parties are one”, where this “more profound recognition… no longer fosters a temperament disposed to retribution” (WWR1 2:422-23). In other words, Schopenhauer thinks that retributive intuitions arise from a lack of metaphysical insight – where the relevant metaphysical insight (into the truth of radical monism) is at least part of the insight that he believes constitutes virtue.

Schopenhauer therefore has principled reasons for ignoring putatively moral cases that invoke retributivist intuitions. Unlike his reasons for bracketing egoism, however he does not offer those reasons in OBM. This offers a clue to the sort of argument he is making: Schopenhauer recognizes that there are other common moral judgments that stand in tension with his view, and has some separate reason for thinking that the Titus case is especially revealing. In other words, he does not simply adopt the Goliath strategy described above, nor is he attempting to achieve reflective equilibrium. Instead, he has background reasons for ignoring some cases altogether, despite their presenting obvious intuitive counterexamples to his intended conclusion.

One indication of Schopenhauer’s methodology here may be his use of the “experimentum crucis” label for the Titus argument. As Schopenhauer knew, Isaac Newton used

26 Hence, Schopenhauer claims that criminal justice “should be based on the principle that it is actually not the person but only the deed that is punished, in order to prevent it from happening again” (WWR2 3:685), and that the basis for the justice administered by the state rests on a Hobbesian egoistic contract (WWR1 2:408). For a helpful discussion of the relation between Schopenhauer’s ethics and political philosophy, including his attitudes towards retributivism, see Woods 2017.

27 See Marshall Forthcoming. Sean Murphy suggested to me that Schopenhauer might also think that these intuitions can arise from a lack of appreciation of the unalterability of character (see, e.g., OBM 4:252).

28 Schopenhauer’s “On Vision and Colors,” which had its origins in an attempted collaboration with Goethe, is largely devoted to critiquing “the Newtonian-Superstition” (OVC 1:86), though Schopenhauer
that label for an experiment in which a ray of white light passes through screens and prisms in a dark room. In Newton’s view, this experiment reveals that white light consists of various rays that are distinguished by their angles of refraction (‘refrangibility’).\(^\text{29}\) Now, Newton was well aware that, in the vast majority of cases, white light does not \textit{appear} to be composed of other colors of light. Hence, the experimental set up hardly addressed the prima facie hardest case for his view. That means that Newton’s methodology was not a matter of the Goliath strategy (or, being a single case, of simple induction). Instead, his experiment was meant to \textit{reveal the composition of its subject matter} using quite artificial circumstances, with background principles helping guide that construction. Something along these lines, I suggest, is what Schopenhauer is attempting in the Titus argument, and my reconstruction of the argument in §3 will take Newton’s experiment as a model.

2.3. \textit{What is the key move?}

I have argued that Schopenhauer’s conclusion is that compassion (broadly understood) is necessary and sufficient for morally worthy (though not always optimal) action, and that his methodology involves taking a crucial example to reveal to the composition of such action. Even so, the key move of the argument remains unclear. What exactly is the morally-relevant feature that Schopenhauer thinks distinguishes compassion from other motivations, and that he thinks his decisive experiment reveals?

As before, we can address this question via an objection to the argument. This objection concerns whether Schopenhauer’s attack on opposing views is fair. Even if (as I’m granting) Schopenhauer’s depiction of those views is accurate, one might worry that Schopenhauer runs together two issues: \textit{moral motivation vs. metaethical explanation}. In other words: Schopenhauer seems to unfairly have Caius express metaethical components of rival theories, which were never supposed to be part of conscious moral motivation. For example, Shapshay suggests that Schopenhauer has Caius, when representing Hutcheson’s view, express the metaethical appeal to a basic moral sense as such, whereas Hutcheson could in fact agree with Schopenhauer that the proper conscious motivations for a virtuous agent are the ones Titus expresses.\(^\text{30}\) Likewise, even though Kant held that the universalizability principle was a “fact of reason” that “forces itself upon us” in some sense,\(^\text{31}\) Kant surely did not think that virtuous actors consciously ran through the test prior to acting, as Schopenhauer describes Caius as doing. By analogy: perhaps the ideal citizen in a just state is motivated to obey the law simply because it is the law, even though (metaethically-speaking) the law has normative force only insofar as it contributes to justice in complex ways.\(^\text{32}\)

This objection can be sharpened further, since Schopenhauer does not seem to have Titus articulate the metaethical grounds that Schopenhauer himself provides for compassion later in partly agrees with Newton when it comes to the relation between white and other colors (see OVC 1:45-46).

\(^{29}\) For a methodologically-oriented discussion of both Newton’s experiment and Goethe’s criticisms, see Marcum 2009.

\(^{30}\) Shapshay 2019, 160-61. A number of Schopenhauer’s commentators have suggested that his account of moral motivation be separated from his monism-centered metaethics (e.g., Cartwright 2008, Marshall 2018, Welchman Unpublished).


\(^{32}\) In contemporary terms, such theories might be called ‘self-effacing’ (though it is controversial what, if anything, is problematic being a theory’s being self-effacing). See Patrick Hassan’s chapter in this volume on whether Schopenhauer’s own ethics might be self-effacing relative to the ultimate aim of renouncing the will.
OBM. Broadly speaking, those grounds are the facts that the apparent distinctness between individuals is illusory, and that compassion is the immediate apprehension of others’ suffering which itself reveals the deep metaphysical unity of all things. Yet Titus’s statement says nothing about the illusoriness of distinctions between individuals. Moreover, his compassion is not directed at any actual suffering in his rival, but only at the hypothetical state (“what was really supposed to be happening to him” OBM 4:232) the rival would have been in had Titus gone through with his plan.33 With that in mind, imagine a modification of Titus’s declaration that does explicitly incorporate Schopenhauer’s metaethics:

> As it came to arrangements, then it became fully clear to me for the first time that the apparent distinction between individuals was illusory, and that I was immediately participating in my rival’s merely potential suffering.

So adjusted, Titus hardly sounds like a “better human being” (OBM 4:232) than any of the versions of Caius that Schopenhauer offers. In other words: one might object that Schopenhauer unfairly makes Caius articulate aspects of opposing philosophers’ views that were never intended to be part of ordinary, conscious moral motivation, while not having his representative Titus articulate the corresponding metaethical aspects of Schopenhauer’s views.

Before attempting to answer this objection, I want to grant that Caius’s articulations of rival views could be framed in more appealing terms. For example, a more appealing Kantian Caius might, dropping the jargon of ‘ends,’ say something like, “I realized that my rival is another person, like me, and so has dignity that demands my respect.” Schopenhauer is therefore guilty of at least some unfairness, though it’s worth wondering whether these alternative framings might effectively bring these alternative theories closer to Schopenhauer’s own view.34

Despite that superficial unfairness, I believe that the Titus argument does not ultimately hinge on unfairly sliding between motivational and metaethical concerns. To start, recall that Schopenhauer’s central concern in OBM is motivational: what exactly are the motivations that characterize the virtuous person and that give actions moral worth, and (in Part 4 of OBM) what do these motivations ultimately rest on?35 The contrasts between moral theories he is most concerned with in the Titus argument, then, concern the ultimate source of agents’ motivations. In looking for the ultimate source, we are prompted to look beyond an agent’s conscious deliberations and venture into metaethical territory. The key background principle behind the Titus argument, I propose, is that the only plausible moral source of motivation must be nothing other than the apprehension of the potentially affected other, without supplementation from egoism, rational principles, or emotions. As he says earlier in OBM, “if my action is to happen simply and solely for the sake of the other, then his well-being and woe must be my motive immediately, just as my own is in the case of all other actions” (OBM 4:208).

To appreciate how this principle plays out in the argument, consider Hutcheson first. As Schopenhauer understands him, Hutcheson thinks that moral motivation arises from a fundamental moral sense. That sense can be activated by apprehensions of other creatures’ states, but that apprehension itself does not generate any motivation. In a different vein, Kant, as

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33 The structure of OBM likewise suggests that the metaethical dimension of Schopenhauer’s view is left out here: the Titus argument appears in Part 3, whereas Part 4 is devoted to the metaethical dimension of compassion, and Schopenhauer is clear that Part 4 is an “addition” to Part 3 (OBM 4:260).

34 In a similar vein, Shapshay 2019 argues at length that Schopenhauer’s moral philosophy contains multiple Kantian elements.

35 “The moral incentive simply must… at least possibly overcome the gigantically strong egoistic motivates that stand opposed to it. For moral has to do with real acting of human beings and not with aprioristic building houses made of cards” (OBM 4:143).
Schopenhauer understands him, thinks that moral motivation ultimately arises from practical reason, which considers which laws can be universally valid (see OBM 4:141). Schopenhauer denies there is any such fundamental moral sense or practical reason, but that is not his point here. Instead, he thinks that Hutcheson and Kant try to locate the source of moral motivation in morally irrelevant places. Morally worthy action, in Schopenhauer’s view, should arise simply from becoming “fully clear… what was really supposed to be happening to” an affected creature (OBM 4:232).

For philosophers attracted to a sharp Humean distinction between cognitive and conative states, the key principle I’ve described might seem absurd. How could the apprehension of another’s state (whether understood as a belief or a perception) itself be motivational? Schopenhauer recognizes that this sort of motivation is mysterious, which is why he rejects Ubaldo Cassina’s attempt at explaining compassion in terms of non-mysterious features of the imagination. In Schopenhauer’s view, the ultimate explanation of moral motivation is that the other’s suffering is immediately present to our minds, and this is possible only because we are not ultimately metaphysically distinct. Note that, though Schopenhauer does not expand on this in OBM, his broader metaphysics also makes such immediate presence possible with merely hypothetical states of suffering, since he holds that the distinction between actuality and possibility is merely ideal.

My response to the objection, then, is that part of Schopenhauer’s metaethics is in fact implicit in Titus’ statement, since Schopenhauer thinks there really is nothing more to compassion than the intrinsically-motivating apprehension of the other’s suffering. Hence, both Titus and Caius are given introspective (metaethically-sensitive) powers that go deeper than ordinary self-awareness in action. Titus does not mention the illusoriness of individuals, but that is (in Schopenhauer’s view) a part of the explanation of how the immediate motivation is possible, not itself part of the source of motivation. What drives the argument, then, is a principle about the metaethical character of proper moral motivation, a principle that Schopenhauer uniformly (and so fairly) applies this to other views and his own. The application of this principle is the key move of the Titus argument.

3. Reconstruction and evaluation

Having offered some clarifications about Schopenhauer’s conclusion, methodology, and key move in the Titus argument, I now turn to reconstructing the argument. After presenting my reconstruction, I make some brief points of comparison with Raimond Gaita’s argument and offer some evaluative comments.

3.1. Reconstruction

My goal in reconstructing the Titus argument is help contemporary readers understand how Schopenhauer intended it to work, and so to facilitate evaluation. Assuming the conclusions of §2, then, the Titus argument can be reconstructed on analogy with Newton’s prism experiment, where the core idea is to use an artificial context to facilitate insight into something’s inner nature. More specifically, Newton’s experiment had the following elements: the subject matter

36 Cf. J.L. Mackie’s influential characterization (and skepticism about) objective goods as things that “good would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it . . . just because the end has to-be-pursuedness somehow built into it” (Mackie 1977, 40)

37 “As a consequence of the above exposition of compassion as a being-motivated immediately by the suffering of the other, I must rebuke the error – frequently repeated later – made by Cassina” (OBM 4:211).

38 For more on this, see Marshall Forthcoming.
(white light in general) is examined by blocking off a range of potential distorting influences (such as ambient light) through an experimental set up (a dark room), which then allows for examination of the subject matter using artificial means (prisms and screens), revealing the composition of the subject matter (rays of various colors). Correspondingly, the Titus argument can be understood as having the following elements:

**Subject matter:** morally worthy actions and virtue in general

**Distorting influences:** egoism, retributivism, consequences

**Experimental set up:** the Titus and Caius schema

**Artificial means of examination:** metaethically-deep insight into a range of possible motivations

** Revealed composition of subject matter:** being motivated by the apprehension of the other’s state itself

In other words, the Titus argument involves Schopenhauer positioning his readers to see into actions’ moral worth in a way that is never possible in ordinary circumstances. The conclusion that compassion is necessary and sufficient for actions of moral is reached via the (supposedly) obvious connection between compassion and the revealed motivational state (see OBM 4:208). Recall that Schopenhauer has separate reasons for regarding retributivism and other factors as distorting influences. He does not articulate those reasons in the Titus argument, but that does not deprive the argument of its force. After all, witnessing Newton’s experiment could give someone good (though not decisive) reason to accept the Newtonian view of color even if they were unaware of why he made use of a darkened room – seeing white light spread out into colors through an uncolored prism is revealing by itself.

### 3.2. Comparison with Gaita and Evaluation

The above reconstruction can now help guide some comparisons with Gaita’s argument and some evaluative remarks. Gaita’s thought experiments, some of which were quoted in the introduction, also seems intended to function in a way that parallels Newton’s experiment. In investigating his subject matter (moral goodness), Gaita suggests there is something especially revealing about certain cases of remorse. Like Schopenhauer, Gaita thinks that other ethical approaches involve distractions and distortions. Gaita holds that consequentialism, for instance, fails to give appropriate weight to who does an action, and that other views overlook a crucial component of morality because they tie moral responsibility too closely to culpability. Much of his methodological approach revolves around a small number of concrete cases. For example, in discussing remorse, he devotes extensive attention to the remorse felt by a Dutch woman who, during World War II, made some Jews she was sheltering leave (after which they were captured and murdered) so as not to jeopardize her involvement in a plot to assassinate Hitler. Such cases,

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39 This is not an exhaustive list. Other potential distorting factors he brackets might include the apparent reality of pleasure and the appeal of anger.

40 “in experience only the deed is given… while the impulses are not open to view” (OBM 4:203).

41 Gaita 2004, 54, 44.
in Gaita’s view, “reveal something universal,” and so help us appreciate the real constitution of morality. This is not a method of ordinary reflection equilibrium. Gaita and Schopenhauer’s methodology therefore seems to be fundamentally the same.

It is not clear whether Gaita’s arguments rely on specific principle that is key to Schopenhauer’s argument. However, there seems to be at least some overlap here, insofar as Gaita agrees with Schopenhauer on the importance of focusing on the individuals wronged. These similarities might speak in favor of the Titus argument (though the topic is slightly different: cases of remorse are more removed from motivations to act than Schopenhauer’s core cases). At the same time, Gaita’s broader views differ from Schopenhauer’s in at least two crucial ways: (1) Gaita thinks that the subject of remorse is “radically singular,” as opposed to the monistic, anti-singular content Schopenhauer finds in compassion, and (2) Gaita’s exemplary moral subjects are gripped by the “infinite preciousness” of others, something that has no straightforward connection to others’ subjective experiences.

Hence, Gaita and Schopenhauer arguably employ the same method, and appeal to similar key principles, while arriving at somewhat different conclusions. This difference in conclusions provides a good starting point for some directly evaluative remarks about the Titus argument, specifically on the methodological front. After all, we have reason to doubt the reliability of a method if it generates inconsistent results. That might seem to be the case here, and not just in the comparison with Gaita. Every ethical theory has cases that seem to support its core contentions, cases that proponents of that theory might dub as decisive experiments: consider Kant’s case of the lying promise, Peter Singer’s case of the child in the pond, or Nel Noddings’ cases of parental and educational relationships.

I believe that Schopenhauer’s methodology is defensible, at least up to a point. I’ll suggest a three-tiered defense. The first tier concerns Schopenhauer’s justification for regarding factors like retributivism as distorting influences. As noted above, Schopenhauer does offer justifications for his views about why certain factors are mere distortions, though not in the Titus argument itself. For the Titus argument to succeed, then, Schopenhauer needs to be right about which factors are mere distortions, but his specific justifications need not be the correct ones. This is fortunate, I think, since Schopenhauer’s dismissal of retributivist intuitions stems in part from his radical metaphysical monism, which few contemporary philosophers find plausible. It is obviously beyond the scope of this paper to properly evaluate the moral validity of retributivism, anger, etc., but Schopenhauer would hardly be alone in regarding them as distorting influences.

The second tier of my defense starts by emphasizing that Newton’s experiment really did reveal something about the relation between white light and other colors, and other supposedly

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42 Gaita 2004, xv.
43 Schopenhauer’s theory of the anguish of conscience (Gewissenangst) resembles Gaita’s theory of remorse in some respects, but is directly linked to his metaphysical monism (see, e.g., WWR1 2:432).
44 Gaita 2004, 58, xx.
45 E.g., Kant, Groundwork 4:422. Singer 1972, 231 Noddings 2013, 15. From a contemporary psychological perspective, one might be tempted to dismissively diagnose this method as a dressed-up availability heuristic, in which a salient case is taken to accurate represent of some large class of cases (Tversky and Kahneman 1973).
decisive experiments (e.g., staring carefully at white paper in sunlight looking for colors\textsuperscript{46}) would have been less revealing. Now, there is no simple measure for when an experiment truly is revealing, but one source of (non-decisive) support for a given experiment’s epistemic value is the robustness of its results, that is, how well those results can be replicated in other appropriate contexts.

With robustness in mind, therefore, recall that the Titus argument hinges on a \textit{schema} for cases, with a range of possible motivations for Caius. Moreover, Schopenhauer makes it easy to see how to extend the argument beyond the (fairly uncommon) situation of refraining from murdering a romantic rival. Take, for example, Kant’s case of the lying promise, and let Caius’s motivation for not making the promise be that he cannot universalize his maxim, with Titus’s motivation being his apprehension of some state of his interlocutor (either their trust or their potential disappointment). My sense is that Titus again seems morally superior to Caius, so Schopenhauer’s view holds up here. To the degree that the schema yields similar results across a range of cases, we have reason to thinks Schopenhauer was indeed onto something.

The final tier of the defense is to point out that Schopenhauer’s conclusion in the Titus argument is in fact compatible with many contemporary ethical theories. Keep in mind the key conclusion Schopenhauer wants us to draw, which can be expressed without specific reference to compassion: that morally worth action (and so moral virtue) involves being directly moved by a grasp of some potentially affected person’s state, leaving open what the rationally or morally optimal attitude or action would be. This claim is compatible with a range of ethical theories. For example, in one of her defenses of Kantianism, Christine Korsgaard writes:

> when you met an objective value, according to [J.L.] Mackie, it would have to be… able both to tell you what to do and make you do it… But… there are entities that meet these criteria… They are people, and other animals.\textsuperscript{47}

Similarly, in her seminal presentation of care ethics, Nel Noddings writes:

> if I take on the other’s reality as possibility and begin to feel its reality, I feel, also, that I must act accordingly; that is, I am impelled to act as though in my own behalf, but in behalf of the other.\textsuperscript{48}

I do not have space here to consider whether Korsgaard and Noddings employ the same methodology as Schopenhauer. But that fact that they seem to converge on similar conclusions (albeit with different labels) does speak in Schopenhauer’s favor here.

Methodology aside, I’ll end by directly considering the key principle I have suggested is behind the argument: that moral worthy action requires (and more virtue consists in) being directly moved by the apprehension of another’s state. The principle, and the resulting conclusion, leaves open whether such directly-motivating apprehension is really possible. For all the argument says, maybe only fictional characters like Titus and Caius have compassion, and so moral virtue.\textsuperscript{49} This means the key principle is compatible with a range of metaethical views,

\textsuperscript{46} See Marcum 2009 for a discussion of the experiments that Goethe thought better revealed the nature of color than Newton’s experiment.

\textsuperscript{47} Korsgaard 1996, 166. Elsewhere, though, Korsgaard argues for connecting moral motivation to an agent’s own practical identity – which would fall afoul of Schopenhauer’s key principle.

\textsuperscript{48} Noddings 1984, 16.

\textsuperscript{49} In that respect, the Titus argument (though not other parts of OBM – see Hassan Forthcoming) is parallel to Kant’s arguments in the first two parts of the \textit{Groundwork}, which attempt to show what actions of moral worth would consist in \textit{should there be any}. 
including various forms of ethical error theory like Mackie’s. Elsewhere, I have attempted to show that Schopenhauer’s view does not require the metaphysical monism Schopenhauer thinks it does in order to avoid error theory, but none of that is needed for the Titus argument to succeed on its own terms.

The key principle also does not require Schopenhauer’s broadly Buddhist focus on the suffering (however broadly construed) as the sole object of moral concern. Perhaps, in a Kantian vein, suffering is bad because of its impact on our agential capacities, or because it is the effacement of something with intrinsic value. Shapshay has argued for an interpretation of Schopenhauer along those Kantian lines, and the Titus argument is entirely consistent with Shapshay’s reading. It is also compatible with taking Titus’s compassion to be a sophisticated appreciation of others’ irreplaceability as individuals (in line with Gaita’s view).

What I have offered here is far from a full evaluation of the Titus argument. After all, mere compatibility with a range of views is hardly decisive support for a claim. Nonetheless, I hope to have shown that the Titus argument does not fail on any obvious front, and is worth great attention from contemporary ethicists. It is worth such attention, moreover even if it does not establish the general character of morally worth action, as Schopenhauer believed it does. We would stand to learn much from the argument even if shows the real nature of even some truly morally worth actions.

Works cited


51 Shapshay 2019, 175-84.


53 This paper has benefited from exchanges with Patrick Hassan, Christopher Janaway, Conor Mayo-Wilson, and Sean Murphy. Special thanks to Ellwood Wiggins for discussions concerning ‘Kajus’ and ‘entfremden’, and to Sandy Shapshay for both encouragement and invaluable critical feedback.


