

# Schopenhauer and Modern Moral Philosophy

Stephen Puryear  
North Carolina State University

In her influential essay on modern moral philosophy, Elizabeth Anscombe counsels us to dispense with many of our most central moral concepts. The second of her three main theses is that

the concepts of obligation, and duty—*moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say—and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of ‘ought,’ ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible; because they are survivals, or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it. (1958: 1)

She proceeds to identify this earlier conception of ethics as a divine law conception. Shorn from the framework of such a conception, she contends, these moral concepts become harmful and indeed lose their very intelligibility:

Hume discovered the situation in which the notion “obligation” survived, and the notion “ought” was invested with that peculiar force having which it is said to be used in a “moral” sense, but in which the belief in divine law had long since been abandoned: for it was substantially given up among Protestants at the time of the Reformation. The situation, if I am right, was the interesting one of the survival of a concept outside the framework of thought that made it a really intelligible one. (1958: 6)

Those of us who have abandoned the idea of a divine law should therefore dispense with these concepts. According to Anscombe, however, this does not amount to dispensing with morality itself. For we might instead revert to a pre-modern conception of ethics such as Aristotle’s, according to which we evaluate actions not as right or wrong, obligatory or impermissible, and so forth, but merely as belonging to some category of virtuous or vicious action, such as *just* or *unjust*, *truthful* or *untruthful*, and the like (8–9).

Anscombe’s essay ranges widely over the history of ethics: she discusses Aristotle, Hume, Bentham, Kant, Mill, Butler, Sidgwick, and others. But one person conspicuously absent from her discussion is Schopenhauer, who argued along

strikingly similar lines more than a century earlier.<sup>1</sup> He too maintains that concepts such as the moral *ought*, along with related concepts such as that of a moral imperative or moral law, can derive their intelligibility only from a divine lawgiver. And he too contends that we should abandon these concepts. Yet his critique differs from hers in at least two significant respects. The first is that he offers reasons for abandoning these concepts that differ from and indeed cut deeper than Anscombe's. The second is that the concepts implicated in his critique differ in part from those mentioned by Anscombe. They do indeed include that of the moral *ought*, as well as those of moral imperative, command, and law. But they do *not* include the concepts of moral right and wrong, or of moral duty or obligation, which according to Schopenhauer can be given a perfectly good sense outside the framework of a divine law conception of ethics. From his perspective, Anscombe could be said to be throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

In another work (Puryear 2022), I treat at length of the parallels between these two accounts and of the first difference. Here my focus will be the second point of disagreement: namely, whether the notions of moral right and wrong, and of moral duty and obligation, are implicated in the critique of the moral *ought*. According to Schopenhauer, in contrast to Anscombe, they are not. My aim will be to develop Schopenhauer's accounts of these notions, accounts which neither advert to nor presuppose a divine lawgiver. I begin, in Section 1, by briefly surveying Schopenhauer's critique of the moral *ought*, a critique which I see as fundamentally in agreement with Anscombe's. In the remaining sections, I turn to Schopenhauer's accounts of the other notions. Section 2 concerns what he sees as the most fundamental of them, the concept of wrongdoing or wrong action. Section 3 then turns to the notion of right action and of rights, as things that can be possessed. Finally, Section 4 concerns the notion of moral obligation or duty. Through reflection on these accounts, I hope to show that we can accept the critiques of Schopenhauer and Anscombe, and thus dispense with the imperative in ethics, while retaining a distinctively modern conception of morality.

---

<sup>1</sup> Regarding Anscombe's familiarity with Schopenhauer, Roger Crisp (2014: 77) reports the following: "Professor Peter Geach has told me (in private conversation, for which I am most grateful) that, as far as he knows, Anscombe had little direct knowledge of Schopenhauer's work, but that he and Wittgenstein would certainly have talked to her about Schopenhauer."

## 1. Schopenhauer's Rejection of the Moral *Ought*

In his prize-essay *On the Basis of Morality*, Schopenhauer objects to Kant's conception of ethics in terms of command, law, and duty:

Separated from the theological presuppositions from which they issued, these concepts really lose all meaning as well, and if, like Kant, one thinks to substitute for them by speaking of an *absolute* ought and *unconditioned* duty, then one is turning the reader away with words for food, really giving him a contradiction in terms to digest. Every *ought* has any sense [*Sinn*] and meaning [*Bedeutung*] only in relation to threatened punishment or promised reward. (BM §4, 122–23)

An *ought*, Schopenhauer claims, can have no sense or meaning apart from a threatened punishment or promised reward. But a *moral ought* purportedly binds us more strongly than could any *ought* stemming from a threat or promise issuing from a mere creature. This threatened punishment or promised reward must therefore issue from a divine authority. Accordingly, if separated from their “theological presuppositions”—that is, from the presupposition of a divine lawgiver—these concepts lose all sense and meaning. As Anscombe puts it, they cease to be intelligible.

We may wonder why an *ought*, or more precisely a *binding ought*, can have no sense or meaning apart from an external incentive. Schopenhauer casts a bit of light on this topic by invoking Locke:

Every *ought* has any sense [*Sinn*] and meaning [*Bedeutung*] only in relation to threatened punishment or promised reward. Thus, long before Kant was thought of, *Locke* already says: ‘For since it would be utterly in vain, to suppose a rule set to the free actions of man, without annexing to it some enforcement of good and evil to determine his will; we must, where-ever we suppose a law, suppose also some reward or punishment annexed to that law.’ (*On Understanding*, Bk. II, ch. 33, §6). So the *ought* is necessarily conditioned by punishment or reward [...]. But once those conditions are thought away the concept of *ought* remains empty of sense. (BM §4, 123)

Locke's point is simple: to suppose a rule of conduct apart from an associated reward or punishment would be in vain; hence laws, not being in vain, must consist in a rule of conduct together with an associated reward or punishment. Essentially the same point was made by Locke's contemporary, Samuel Pufendorf,

in his *On the Duty of Man and Citizen According to Natural Law* (1673). There he defines *law* as “a decree by which a superior obliges one who is subject to him to conform his actions to the superior’s prescription” (Bk. I, Ch. 2, §2/1991: 27). He then explains that the law acquires this power to oblige, this binding quality, from the threat of a punishment:

Every complete law has two parts: the one part in which what is to be done or not done is defined, and the other which declares the punishment prescribed for one who ignores a precept or does what is forbidden. For because of the wickedness of human nature which loves to do what is forbidden, it is utterly useless to say “Do this!” if no evil awaits him who does not, and similarly, it is absurd to say, “You will be punished”, without first specifying what deserves the punishment. (Bk. I, Ch. 2, §7/1991: 29)

Even more instructive is the account of Schopenhauer’s contemporary, John Austin. In his *The Province of Jurisprudence Determined* (1832), he defines *law* as a generally applicable command, and *command* as the intimation of a wish together with a threatened sanction:

If you express or intimate a wish that I shall do or forbear from some act, and if you will visit me with an evil in case I comply not with your wish, the *expression* or *intimation* of your wish is a *command*. A command is distinguished from other significations of desire, not by the style in which the desire is signified, but by the power and the purpose of the party commanding to inflict an evil or pain in case the desire be disregarded. If you cannot or will not harm me in case I comply not with your wish, the expression of your wish is not a command, although you utter your wish in imperative phrase. If you are able and willing to harm me in case I comply not with your wish, the expression of your wish amounts to a command, although you are prompted by a spirit of courtesy to utter it in the shape of a request. (Lecture I/1995: 21)

Austin then adds: “Being liable to evil from you if I comply not with a wish which you signify, I am *bound* or *obliged* by your command, or I lie under a *duty* to obey it” (Lecture I/1995: 22). Imperatives or laws, and more generally all commands or *oughts*, thus presuppose a threat of punishment (or perhaps a promise of reward)

because that is the only possible source of their binding quality.<sup>2</sup> Apart from the external incentive, all we have is a mere intimation of a wish, not a genuine law or command.

Why, then, does a binding *ought* (law, command, imperative) lose all sense and meaning apart from an external incentive? Because the binding force of such an *ought* must have a source, and this source cannot be conceived as anything other than an external incentive, that is, a threatened punishment or promised reward. In the case of morality, as we have said, this external incentive could issue only from a divine authority. Hence, the kind of *ought* (law, command, imperative) we call moral must derive from a divine lawgiver.

After making essentially the same point, Anscombe argues that we should reject the central concepts of modern moral philosophy because the divine law conception of ethics from which they derive their intelligibility “no longer generally survives” (1). According to Schopenhauer, however, the problems with the moral *ought* run deeper. Most fundamentally, the problem is not that the moral *ought* is out of step with currently prevailing views, but rather that the very idea of such an *ought* is contradictory and thus ought to be abandoned not just by those who reject the idea of a divine lawgiver but by every right-thinking person. For one thing, if we join Kant in conceiving the moral *ought* as essentially unconditioned, then that concept harbors a contradiction, since any *ought* that binds must in fact be conditioned, namely, by a threat or promise.<sup>3</sup> This concern might of course be sidestepped by simply eschewing the Kantian conception of the moral *ought* as unconditioned. But a deeper problem remains, one that concerns the opposition between self-interest and morality. As Schopenhauer explains:

It is simply impossible to think of a commanding voice, whether it come from within or from without, except as threatening or promising: but then obedience towards it will indeed be prudent or stupid, according to circumstances, yet always self-interested, and so without moral worth. [...]

---

<sup>2</sup> Schopenhauer follows Locke in supposing that one could be bound by either a threat of punishment or a promise of reward. In contrast, Pufendorf and Austin hold—more plausibly—that binding requires a threat of punishment. As Austin explains, “Rewards are, indisputably, motives to comply with the wishes of others. But to talk of commands and duties as *sanctioned* or *enforced* by rewards, or to talk of rewards as *obliging* or *constraining* to obedience, is surely a wide departure from the established meaning of the terms” (Lecture I/1995: 23).

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of this objection, see Puryear (2022: 21–23).

Thus the contradiction-concealing assumption of an *unconditional, absolute ought* avenges itself. (BM §4, 123–24)<sup>4</sup>

It is of the essence of such an *ought*—and likewise of the moral law or a moral imperative—that it induces us to act or forbear acting in certain ways. According to Schopenhauer, however, it can do so only through a threat of punishment or promise of reward and thus only through an appeal to self-interest. Yet insofar as an action springs from self-interest, he thinks, it lacks moral worth. Hence, this sort of *ought* essentially works against morality and thus cannot without inconsistency be described as ‘moral’. The very idea of a binding moral *ought* is in this sense a disguised contradiction.<sup>5</sup>

For this reason, above all, Schopenhauer rejects the concept of a moral *ought* and the related concepts of moral law and moral command or imperative.<sup>6</sup> He does not, however, go so far as to reject the other concepts mentioned by Anscombe, namely, “the concepts of obligation, and duty—*moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say—and of what is *morally* right and wrong” (1958: 1). On his view, as we will see, the latter concepts can be given a perfectly good sense without imputing to them an overriding binding force and thus without presupposing a divine lawgiver. Let us now turn to his accounts of these concepts,

---

<sup>4</sup> See WWR 1:620 for another statement of the argument.

<sup>5</sup> For further development and discussion of this point, see Puryear (2022: 23–28). For a contrasting perspective, see Shapshay (2019: 146), who imputes to Schopenhauer the view that “the only *moral laws* we have any knowledge of are humanly constructed laws of society, e.g., the civil law” (see also Shapshay 2019: 149). Although such laws do prescribe and proscribe certain behaviors, they are not properly speaking *moral laws*, on Schopenhauer’s view, because they essentially operate through appeals to self-interest.

Concerning Schopenhauer’s critique of Kant’s ethics more generally, see, e.g., Tsarnoff (1910); Young (1984); Cartwright (1999: 254–63); Welsen (2005); Hassan (2019: 2–10). For other criticisms of the moral *ought*, see Foot (1972); Slote (1982); Williams (1985: 174–96); Taylor (2000: 139–77); Taylor (2002: 77–84); see also Capaldi (1966) for an argument that Hume means to reject “ought” as a moral category.

<sup>6</sup> Schopenhauer formulates the fundamental principle of morality somewhat misleadingly as an imperative, i.e., “Harm no one; rather help everyone as much as you can” (BM §6, 137). Despite being in the imperative mood, however, this principle does not command but merely expresses what sorts of action have moral worth: “The *principle* or the highest *basic proposition* of an ethics,” Schopenhauer writes, “is the shortest and most concise expression of the way of acting that it prescribes, or, should it not have an imperative form, the way of acting to which it ascribes genuine moral worth.” (BM §6, 136). His principle may therefore be viewed as an indicative dressed up as an imperative.

starting with what Schopenhauer considers the most fundamental of them, that of *wrong*.

## 2. Wrong Action

Although the German *Unrecht* is lexically posterior to *Recht*, Schopenhauer believes “we must keep not to words but to concepts” (WWR 1:400); and he considers the concept *wrong* to be both historically and conceptually prior to the concept *right*. The original phenomenon was that of being wronged by another, and actions came to be called ‘wrong’ when they involved someone being wronged *by* another. This in turn led to the idea of right action as the negation of wrong action, and as we will see in Section 4, to the idea of moral obligation or duty. Accordingly, Schopenhauer begins with an analysis of the concept *wrong* and then defines those of *right*, *obligation*, and *duty* in its terms.

Anscombe has a rather different take. She maintains that the concept *morally wrong* has its roots in certain legal concepts: “‘morally wrong’ is the term which is the heir of the notion ‘illicit,’ or ‘what there is an obligation *not* to do’; which belongs in a divine law theory of ethics. [...] for what obliges is the divine law—as rules oblige in a game” (1958: 17–18). Anscombe offers this genealogical thesis in support of her contention that *morally wrong* essentially includes the idea of a special binding force and thus cannot coherently be retained apart from a divine law conception of ethics. She even goes so far as to claim that this concept “seems to have no discernible content except a certain compelling force, which I should call purely psychological” (1958: 18). If Schopenhauer is right, however, then *wrong*—that is, *morally wrong*—is both historically and conceptually prior to concepts such as *law* and *obligation*, and thus need not be understood to include in its essence the idea of a binding force.

Schopenhauer analyzes what it means to wrong someone as a kind of encroachment (*Einbruch*) on the territory of that individual’s will (WWR 1:394–95). What this means, expressed less metaphorically, is that one individual wrongs another, at least to a first approximation, when the former acts so as to prevent the latter’s will from attaining its object. This happens in the first instance when an individual thwarts the will of another through some kind of violence or coercion. So, if *A* restrains, assaults, or murders *B*, then *A* interferes with *B*’s will and thus wrongs *B*. But it also happens, more subtly though no less perniciously,

when through cunning or deceit one is made to serve another's will rather than one's own (WWR 1:398–99).

Schopenhauer casts additional light on his view when he describes the act of wronging as the denial of another's will "with the aim of a stronger affirmation of one's own" (WWR 1:400). Similarly, in his discussion of the virtue of righteousness (*Gerechtigkeit*), that is, the disposition not to wrong others, he claims that the righteous (*gerecht*) person will not inflict suffering on others "in order to enhance his own well-being" (WWR 1:437) and that the essence of righteousness, its innermost being, lies in the intention (*Vorsatz*) "not to affirm one's own will to the point where it negates other appearances of the will by forcing them to serve one's own" (WWR 1:438). What Schopenhauer appears to be getting at in these remarks is that wronging involves not merely impeding the will of another but doing so with a view to affirming one's own will over that of the other, or in other words, to elevating one's own aims or interests above the other's. An encroachment thus constitutes a wrong if (and only if) it implies that the encroacher assigns greater importance to her own well-being than to that of the one on whose will she encroaches.

Such encroachments may take one of two basic forms. Schopenhauer gestures toward this when he notes that we feel dissatisfaction with our actions not simply because we have acted egoistically but because "we have acted *too* egoistically, with *too* much regard for our own well-being and *too* little for that of others, or because we have indeed made into our ends the *woe* of another for its own sake without advantage to ourselves" (BM §9, 173–74). Accordingly, a wrongful encroachment may stem from what he calls "extreme egoism" (*äußerster Egoismus*) (BM §14, 200), which involves pursuing one's own ends without proper regard, or even with deliberate disregard, for others. Even worse, it may be an expression of malice (*Bosheit*), in which the mistreatment of another is not the means to one's end, but the end itself. According to Schopenhauer's analysis, then, an action is wrong—that is, *morally* wrong—just in case it thwarts the will of another out of malice or excessive egoism.

As I noted above, Anscombe considers the idea of a binding force or obligation to be essential to and perhaps even exhaustive of the concept *morally wrong*. She therefore sees no way that it can coherently be retained in the absence of belief in a divine law and she chides her contemporaries for "depriving 'morally ought' of



its now delusive appearance of content” while at the same time retaining the “atmosphere” or “psychological force” (8, 17–18) of the term by helping themselves to the concept *morally wrong*. But here I think we can see that Anscombe has somewhat misdescribed the situation. She is quite right that a concept of moral wrongness that includes the idea of a binding force has no place in an ethics that eschews divine commands. It is a mistake, however, to think that such a concept of moral wrongness is *the* concept of moral wrongness, the only such concept. In truth, there are different ways of conceiving moral wrongness and thus different concepts of moral wrongness. One of those concepts is the one Anscombe imputes to her contemporaries, which involves the idea of a binding force and hence should be abandoned. But another concept with at least as good a claim to being a concept of moral wrongness is the one that emerges from Schopenhauer’s analysis; and this concept in no way traffics in the idea of a binding force. When he analyzes *wrong* in terms of thwarting the will of another out of malice or excessive egoism, there is no suggestion that we *should* not or *must* not thwart the will of another, or that we *ought* not to wrong anyone, at least in the moral sense of these terms. Yet this concept is no less a moral one; for to deny the will of another out of malice or callous indifference is surely to wrong that individual in a moral sense. Schopenhauer’s concept of moral wrongness does not therefore “retain the atmosphere” of the moral *ought* and hence is not implicated in his critique of the latter concept. From this perspective, Anscombe has cast her net too wide, by lumping the concept of moral wrongness together with those such as law, command, and *ought*, which really should be abandoned.

### 3. Right Action

With his analysis of morally wrong action in place, Schopenhauer turns to his account of its opposite: morally *right* action. Since the former consists in a kind of *injury* to another, he concludes that this concept “is a *positive* one and precedent to that of *right*, which is negative and designates merely the actions that one can perform without injuring others, i.e. without doing *wrong*” (BM §17, 216–17).<sup>7</sup> He expresses the same idea more fully in the main work:

---

<sup>7</sup> In support of this, Schopenhauer cites the following statement from Hugo Grotius, who he describes as “the father of the philosophical theory of justice”: “Right is here nothing other than

It follows from this [analysis] that the concept of *wrong* [*Unrecht*] is the original and positive one: the opposite one of *right* [*Recht*] is derivative and negative. For we must keep not to words but to concepts. In fact, there would never have been any talk of *right* if there were no wrong. The concept *right* contains namely only the negation of wrong, and subsumes every action that does not overstep the boundary presented above, i.e., that is not a negation of the other's will through the stronger affirmation of one's own. That boundary therefore divides, with respect to a merely and purely *moral* determination, the entire field of possible actions into those which are wrong or right. (WWR 1: 400)

An action is therefore morally right, according to this account, just in case it does not involve the affirmation of one's own will to the point of denying the will of another; or, to put the point in more concrete terms, just in case it does not thwart the will of another out of malice or excessive egoism.

In addition to this analysis of right action, Schopenhauer offers an inchoate but nonetheless coherent account of *rights*, things which can be possessed. These too he defines in terms of not-wronging another. In the first instance, he defines a right as the ability to do something, or to take or use something, without wronging anyone. Thus, a person can be said to have a right to breathe air, to be on public lands, to admire the starlit sky, and so forth, because none of these actions would wrong anyone. Similarly, I have a right to defend myself against some act of violence or cunning because such a response, at least if not excessive, would not wrong my attacker (or anyone else). But I do *not* have a right to do anything that would wrong another. So I do not have a right to assault, steal, trespass, or insult. This basic sense of a right corresponds to what Hohfeld calls a *privilege* and others more appropriately call a *liberty*.<sup>8</sup>

Schopenhauer sometimes gives the impression that on his view *all* rights are liberties in this sense. For example, he remarks that "*human rights* [*Menschenrechte*] are easy to determine; everyone has the right to do that which injures no one" (PP 2:241/SW 6:257). But clearly he does not mean to limit rights merely to liberties; for in various places he chides other philosophers for denying

---

what is just, and that more in the negating sense than in the affirming, in so far as right is what is not unjust. (*The Law of War and Peace*, Book I, ch. 1, §3)" (BM §17, 217).

<sup>8</sup> Wesley Newcomb Hohfeld, *Fundamental Legal Conceptions*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919.

that animals have rights (WWR 2:739; FR 98; BM §19, 238, 243; PP 2:370–71, 376/SW 6:394, 400), his point being not the trivial thought that animals can do many things without wronging others, but rather that animals *can be wronged*, that our conduct toward them has moral significance, even apart from its bearing on ourselves and other humans. He contrasts the view that animals have rights with the belief that animals are mere things with which we can do as we please. Likewise, he equates the view that they lack rights with “the delusion that our actions towards them are without moral significance” (BM §19, 238). Obviously, the rights he has in mind in these contexts concern not what can be done without wronging another, but what cannot be done by others without wronging the right-holder. To have a right in this sense is just to be capable of being wronged, as when we say, for instance, that a person has a right to humane treatment, because to treat her otherwise would be to wrong her. These rights correspond roughly to what, following Hohfeld, we now call *claims*. More precisely, they are *negative* claims, since they concern not the provision but the withholding of something, namely, the interference of another.

Besides liberties and negative claims, Schopenhauer also recognizes the existence of *positive* claim-rights. Unlike negative claims, which are general in the sense that they express facts about the right-holder’s relationship to all moral beings or at least all moral agents, positive claims are those that arise because one or more moral agents enter into an agreement with the right-holder. Thus, if *A* enters into an agreement with *B* to provide the latter with some good, but then reneges on the agreement, *A* wrongs *B*. So in accordance with the idea of a right as the negation of a wrong, Schopenhauer recognizes that the agreement between *A* and *B* endows *B* with a right to the promised good from *A*. This right is a claim because it expresses what *A* cannot do, or rather cannot fail to do, without wronging *B*. But since it is a right to the provision of something positive (i.e., the good) rather than to the absence of something positive (i.e., interference), the right is positive. *B*’s right is therefore a positive claim.

As with the notion of wrong from which they derive, these concepts of morally right action and of the various kinds of (moral) rights do not include, and should not be thought to include, so much as a whiff of the moral *ought*. There is no suggestion here that one *must*, or *has to*, or *ought to* perform right actions, or

respect the rights of others. Accordingly, these concepts likewise fall outside the scope of the critique of the moral *ought*.

#### 4. Duty and Obligation

We come now to the concept of *duty*, or *obligation*, in the moral sense of the term. This concept of course figures centrally in the ethics of Kant, who may be viewed as essentially reducing morality to a system of duties, i.e., to a matter of what we have a duty either to do or to forbear doing. But Schopenhauer complains that Kant and others have given *duty* “too great an extension” and that it “forfeits all its peculiar character and gets lost if, as in morals hitherto, one wants to call every praiseworthy way of acting duty” (BM §17, 220; see also BM §4, 125; §17, 213). To correct this error, Schopenhauer proposes to restore the true limits of the concept.

He begins by noting that a duty is something *owed* and thus a kind of *indebtedness* (BM §17, 220). To have a duty to speak truthfully is just to owe others the truth; to have a duty to help others is just to owe them my assistance; and so forth. As such, a duty cannot be imposed on someone, as an *ought* can, but must rather be *assumed* by that person (BM §4, 124). To put the point in terms of rights, for me to have a duty to another is for that other to have a right to something from me; and for someone else to have a right to something from me is for me to lack a right that I would otherwise have. For I naturally have a right to what is mine, and such a right—that is, a moral or natural right—cannot be *taken* from me: it can only be *relinquished* by me. A duty must therefore be assumed through some kind of consenting act. As a rule, Schopenhauer thinks, this act takes the form of an explicit and mutual agreement between parties, though he does recognize one exception: the case of a parent’s duty to their children, where the obligation arises not through an agreement but “immediately through a mere action, because the one to whom one has it was not yet there when one assumed it” (BM §17, 221).<sup>9</sup>

From this it follows that duty has a much narrower extension than it does on the Kantian view. In part this is because most morally good or praiseworthy actions are not ones we have undertaken a commitment to perform. If I come across a stranger in need, it would indeed be morally good and praiseworthy for

---

<sup>9</sup> It may be objected, with good reason, that if we can assume duties tacitly by the mere act of procreation, then we can presumably assume a range of duties in similar ways, as for example when one breeds or adopts animals. For more on this see Puryear (2017: 260–61).

me to help that person. But unless there is some underlying agreement or commitment in place, I do not have a duty or obligation to help that person. In contrast, if I have agreed to help you in exchange for a wage, which you have already paid, then I do have a duty to help you. It might be objected that even if this is so, we still owe things to one another even apart from an agreement; for example, I could be said to owe you my noninterference, just as you owe me your noninterference. The problem with this line of thinking, I believe, is that properly speaking only something positive can be owed. I can owe another person my labor, or money, or some other possession of mine, etc., but I cannot properly speaking owe someone the mere absence of something, such as my noninterference in their affairs. Thus, I cannot have a duty not to wrong others, or more broadly, not to act in a morally bad way. I can have a duty only in cases where I owe some positive thing to another.

Another respect in which Kant's conception of duty falls wide of the mark, from this point of view, concerns the *subjects* of duties, that is, the range of beings to whom they apply. According to Kant, what the moral law commands is a duty for all rational beings as such, so that when we reach the point in life at which we achieve rationality, we immediately find ourselves saddled with a vast number of duties, i.e., debts. On Schopenhauer's view, however, this is far from the case. Since duties must be assumed, one cannot merely find oneself with duties just in virtue of one's status as a rational being. Accordingly, it is not true that what is a duty for some rational beings is a duty for all rational beings.

As with the concepts of rights and right action, and in keeping with the conception of duty as a form of indebtedness, Schopenhauer defines *duty* in terms of the concept *wrong*: to have a duty (or obligation) to  $\varphi$ , he maintains, is just for it to be the case that to not  $\varphi$  would be to wrong someone (BM §17, 220–22). I thus have a duty to perform any action that I could not fail to perform without wronging another. So, for instance, in our previous example, *A* has a duty to provide *B* with the promised good, because if *A* were to fail to provide that good, then *A* would be wronging *B*. But *A* does not have a duty to help others in general, since to withhold help from them would not be to wrong them. Contrary to this, it might be thought that a person in need would will to be helped by me, so that if I did not offer that help, I would be thwarting that person's will. In that case, if my refusal to help sprung from some form of malice or excessive egoism (e.g., thinking

that I am more important than this other person), then it would follow on Schopenhauer's analysis that I am wronging that person and thus that I have a duty to help them. This is not, however, how Schopenhauer sees it. On his view, "denying help to those in urgent need, calmly observing someone starve to death while you have more than enough, although cruel and diabolical, are not wrong" (WWR 1:400). This is because the one who declines to help another does not thereby encroach on the territory of the other's will. Declining to help might well *disappoint* that will, but that is not the same as negating it or encroaching on its territory. In contrast, if I agree to provide someone with some good, then that promised good is transferred (as it were) from the territory of my will to the territory of the other's, so that if I then refuse to provide the good, I am indeed encroaching on the territory of the other will and thus wronging that person (assuming that I do so out of malice or excessive egoism).

From this we can see that duties, as understood by Schopenhauer, correlate in a way with rights. When *A* enters into an agreement with *B*, *A* assumes a duty. But by the same token *B* acquires a claim. Likewise, since such agreements always involve a mutual exchange of goods—*A* agrees to provide *B* with some good only because *B* agrees to provide something in return—*B* also assumes a duty and *A* also acquires a claim. Further, since such agreements always involve a mutual exchange of *goods*, the rights acquired by the parties are *positive* claims. Duties in Schopenhauer's sense may therefore be said to correlate specifically with positive claims.

Schopenhauer's statements about duty might seem in one respect inconsistent. In his critique of the moral *ought*, discussed above in Section 1, he assimilates the concept of moral duty (or obligation) to those of the moral law or moral *ought*, which he dismisses as contradictory. For instance, he equates the imperative form in ethics with the "doctrine of duty" (BM §4, 122, 125). He says that the concepts *ought* and *duty* are "very closely related and almost identical," the lone difference being perhaps that "*ought as such* can also rest on sheer compulsion, while *duty* presupposes obligation, i.e. the acceptance of duty" (BM §4, 124). Despite this assimilation, however, he does not simply dismiss the concept of moral duty, as he does its close relatives. Rather, he thinks it can be retained and given a legitimate sense. What gives?

To resolve this apparent inconsistency, we should note that when Schopenhauer criticizes Kant's conception of duty, his stated target is duty "taken in this unconditioned sense" (BM §4, 125). It may well be that duty in this sense is "almost identical" to the moral *ought* and hence suffers from the same problems. If we understand duty as Schopenhauer proposes, however, then the concept need not be thought to face the same difficulties. In the first place, duty in his sense is conditioned and is thus not contradictory in the way that an unconditioned duty would be. Second, duty in his sense is conditioned specifically by a consenting act—typically a mutual agreement between humans—and not by a threat of punishment that must issue from a divine authority. Hence, it does not fall prey to the objection, which Schopenhauer levels against Kant's doctrine of duty, that it presents us with a theological ethics disguised as a philosophical one (BM §4, 122–23). Finally, duty in Schopenhauer's sense differs fundamentally from the concepts of moral law, imperative, and *ought*—and even from that of duty in the unconditioned sense—in that it is not conceived to operate through a binding force. As we saw in Section 1, the very idea of a moral law or *ought* essentially includes the idea of a binding force, a force that must come from the threat of some punishment. It was this fact about the moral *ought* that gave rise to Schopenhauer's deepest objection to the concept. But his conception of duty as an action the failure to perform which would wrong someone does not include the idea that one is *bound* to perform that action, just that if one does not perform it, one would thereby wrong someone. Duty in his sense does not therefore operate through self-interest and so can coherently be considered moral in nature.

I have suggested that Schopenhauer's conception of wrong contains nothing of the special binding force traditionally imputed to the moral *ought*. Accordingly, if moral duties consist by definition in those actions which we cannot fail to perform without thereby wronging another, then it would stand to reason that these concepts likewise contain nothing of that binding force. Yet Schopenhauer does seem to acknowledge, at least indirectly, that there is a binding force *associated* with duties. Just after presenting his account of duty in *On the Basis of Morality*, in a discussion of the morality of lying, he notes that "The binding nature of *promises* and *contracts* rests on the fact that, if they are not fulfilled, they are the most solemn lie whose intent, to exercise moral compulsion over others, is all the more evident given that the motive for the lie, the performance by the opposite

party, is expressly announced” (BM §17, 222). Schopenhauer does not explain himself well here, but I suspect he has something like the following thought in mind: namely, that failing to fulfill a promise or contract renders one’s commitment such an evident and serious lie that one who does so can expect to incur various penalties, such as a loss of trust or the disapprobation of others, and is thus in a way bound by a threat of punishment. The same would presumably hold true for the mutual agreements that typically lie at the basis of duties, so that these agreements, though not the duties themselves, would have a binding quality. It should be emphasized, however, that duties as understood by Schopenhauer, while often accompanied by a binding force, are not themselves conceived as operating through such a binding force, and thus are not implicated in his critique of those concepts, like that of the moral *ought*, which are conceived as operating through such a force.<sup>10</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Like Anscombe, Schopenhauer believes that we should abandon the moral *ought*, together with any other putatively moral concepts that essentially involve the idea of a special binding force. In contrast to her, though, he does not put the concepts of moral right and wrong, or of moral duty or obligation, in this category. Instead, he offers analyses of these concepts which show that they need not be understood to involve such a binding force. On his view, one’s action is wrong just in case one thereby negates the will of another out of malice or excessive egoism. An action is right just in case it is not wrong. And one has a duty (or obligation) to  $\varphi$  just in case one cannot fail to  $\varphi$  without thereby doing wrong. So understood, these concepts do not suffer from the defects of the moral *ought* and thus can be retained. Accordingly, the proper conclusion to draw is not that we should abandon modern moral philosophy and return to something like the ethics of Aristotle, but that we

---

<sup>10</sup> The same point may be made about right and wrong action: we may in a sense be bound to do what’s right and not to do wrong, in consequence of the threat of certain penalties (e.g., social), but this binding force merely attends right and wrong action. Unlike laws, commands, and imperatives, right and wrong action are not conceived by Schopenhauer to operate through such a binding force.



should abandon those parts of modern moral philosophy that are essentially prescriptive, while retaining the rest.<sup>11</sup>

## References

- Anscombe, G. E. M. 1958. "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33(124): 1–19.
- Austin, John. 1832 [1995]. *The Province of Jurisprudence Determined*, ed. Wilfrid E. Rumble. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Capaldi, Nicholas. 1966. "Hume's Rejection of 'Ought' as a Moral Category," *Journal of Philosophy* 63(5): 126–37.
- Cartwright, David E. 1999. "Schopenhauer's Narrower Sense of Morality," in Christopher Janaway (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 252–92.
- Crisp, Roger. 2004. "Does Modern Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 54: 75–93.
- Foot, Philippa. 1972. "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," *The Philosophical Review* 81(3): 305–16.
- Hassan, Patrick. 2019. "Schopenhauerian Virtue Ethics," *Inquiry*, DOI: 10.1080/0020174X.2019.1629337.
- Hohfeld, Wesley N. 1919. *Fundamental Legal Conceptions*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Paley, William. 1785. *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pufendorf, Samuel. 1673 [1991]. *On the Duty of Man and Citizen According to Natural Law*, ed. James Tully. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Puryear, Stephen. 2017. "Schopenhauer on the Rights of Animals," *European Journal of Philosophy* 25(2): 250–69.
- Puryear, Stephen. 2022. "Schopenhauer's Rejection of the Moral Ought," in Patrick Hassan (ed.), *Schopenhauer's Moral Philosophy*. Abingdon: Routledge Press.

---

<sup>11</sup> For helpful comments on previous versions of this material, I would like to thank David Bather Woods, Colin Marshall, and my audience at the meeting of the North American Division of the Schopenhauer Society at the 2018 Central Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Chicago.

- Shapshay, Sandra. 2019. *Reconstructing Schopenhauer's Ethics: Hope, Compassion, and Animal Welfare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Slote, Michael. 1982. "Morality Not a System of Imperatives," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 19(4): 331–340.
- Taylor, Richard. 2000. *Good and Evil*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Press.
- Taylor, Richard. 2002. *Virtue Ethics: An Introduction*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Press.
- Tsanoff, Radoslav A. 1910. "Schopenhauer's Criticisms of Kant's Theory of Ethics," *The Philosophical Review* 19(5): 512–34.
- Welsen, Peter. 2005. "Schopenhauer's Interpretation of the Categorical Imperative," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 61(3/4): 757–72.
- Williams, Bernard. 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Young, Julian. 1984. "Schopenhauer's Critique of Kantian Ethics," *Kant Studien* 75: 191–212.