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Com-passion: On the Foundations of Moral Philosophy for J. J. Rousseau and Arthur Schopenhauer*

There are impressions to which one only needs enough unprotected exposure to know that they ought not to be. It is generally our emotions which inform us about this judgement (Theunissen 1983. 41–44). There is hardly a phenomenon which brings this before our eyes with more urgency than being affectively impacted by the suffering of others. As everyone knows from personal experience, this state of being impacted belongs to the form of reactive affects which can scarcely be translated into objective statements. This form of affectivity furthermore refers us back to ourselves, not directly and without mediation, but in a way which is infiltrated through and through with the pain of the other. It confronts us with ourselves, although this self-confrontation has already traversed the way of the other without seriously posing the question as to how this person here has come to enter into a relationship with that person there in the first place (Waldenfels 2000. 290). Compassion – with which the following is concerned – is mediated through an experience of the self which strikes the subject in his innermost core and, for Schopenhauer, throughout the entirety of its existential self-realisation. It concerns the subject's fragility and vulnerability – a vulnerability which numbers among the basic elements of our finitude, and thus ultimately of life itself (cf. Hühn 2007).

I. THE ETHICS OF COMPASSION AS AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL TO AN ETHICS OF PERSONAL RECOGNITION

Along with the phenomenon of being affectively impacted by the suffering of others, a relation which is always already moving between self-relation and relation to the other is on the table. Yet neither side of this relation could be

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separated from the other precisely because it has been determined long before any reflection that they are mediated through one another (Das 1995); indeed, as Schopenhauer suggests, they may even form a unity. It is no coincidence that Schopenhauer provides plausible proof of an essential identity of all living creatures founded on a metaphysics of the Will by means of explicit reference to the phenomenon of compassion. In a clear and deliberate dissociation from a morality based on theories of recognition, Schopenhauer anchors this identity so deeply in the fundament of our practical relation to ourselves and the world that we derive our right to recognition from this identity. These rights extend to all other creatures which are capable of suffering, animals included. The avowed intention of the ethics of compassion is to prevent a gulf before it happens, specifically that gulf which emerges between self and other and which should be overcome because of this separation. The ethics of compassion consciously opposes itself to the Kantian-idealist model of personal recognition by ensuring that all dualistic models are defanged before the separation of self and other first appears through reference to the monism of a hidden initial identity of all beings capable of suffering. Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion has a further anti-Kantian point in that it extends the obligatory character of moral norms to nature by valorizing a single feeling, namely that of compassion. It thus reaches a domain which is excluded from the traditional ethics of purely personal recognition. In a way which upends the anthropocentric orientation of the Cartesian paradigm, the feeling of compassion extends the frontiers of subjectivity. Yet it does not experience the conditions which render it possible, namely the totality of a nature founded on a theory of Will and including humans as well as animals.

II. ETHICS OF COMPASSION AND UTILITARIANISM: THE CRITERION OF THE CAPACITY TO SUFFER

From an ethical perspective, being moved by the suffering of others is not uncommonly connected with the practical imperative to intervene in a situation and reduce the suffering where possible (Maio 2006). It is no coincidence that the moral obligation to eliminate suffering belongs to the basic components of all ethics which orient themselves solely according to the feelings of those to whom we have obliged ourselves morally. Utilitarianism and the ethics of compassion, as much as they differ in other aspects, have this in common: they emphasize the capacity to suffer as a criterion for morality in such a way that the capacity to suffer entails the obligation not simply to capitulate impotently before the suffering of others, but rather to prevent or reduce it wherever and however it occurs (Tugendhat 1997). Doubtless, this ethical attitude goes much further than an attachment to the immediate horizon of concrete observation

(Birnbacher 2006). This is readily apparent in the case of utilitarianism, with its criteria of sustainable efficiency for measures serving to prevent suffering; in the case of the ethics of compassion, it has yet to be discovered.

In order to counter misunderstandings, it must be emphasized in view of Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion that it by no means aspires to the strict expansion of a concrete and spontaneous act of compassion according to the standards of situational ethics which intervenes in certain occasions of need; nor is it a naive pantheistic feeling of unity which extends to each and every thing in the manner of a one-dimensional anthropomorphism. The ethics of compassion is much more concerned with a readiness to recognise others not as specific persons, but as sufferers and only as such – a readiness which extends beyond the immediate situation. This means perceiving this or that person with a conscious abstraction from all the other determinations which otherwise constitute her existence. To be sure, compassion begins with the familiar suffering of others which I encounter at close proximity and develops generically from there. Yet an emotionally oriented state of being impacted, dependent on a situation and bound to perception, doesn't go very far, particularly in the case of an acute given pain, and certainly not far enough to serve as a foundation for a morality which would be deserving of the name. Such a morality is not episodic; it does not decide from case to case and does not permit any exceptions but extends with universal validity to all – all that we count among the universe of moral addressees. There is also no doubt that being affectively impacted through suffering does not replace moral judgements. And yet if the impact is missing, then the elementary experience of values which precedes every moral judgement is generally missing as well (Spaemann 2001). It is in particular the practical impulse needed for moral action which is missing. This impulse leads us to do that which, after considering all foreseeable results, will sustainably limit suffering and introduce measures to prevent it. Horizons of distance and proximity; behavior which is personally addressed and yet frees itself from personal relations: these fall into a paradoxical connection which Walter Schulz recalls again and again because to his eyes, it continuously and fundamentally characterises the ethics of compassion. The paradox is namely that, while proximity, however unspecified, is always required for compassion, the behavior which compassion demands is abstracted from personal conditions. Discussing contemporary problems under the title of an "ethics of broken world reference" (Schulz 1994), he polemicizes them in view of Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion and its applicability.

Compassion considers the other precisely not as a specific person, but as a suffering being as such. The paradox of compassion is that it is directed towards a concrete human being. Yet not on account of his personality but empathizes only because he suffers. Compassion is universal. (Schulz 1994. 71.)

The common ground of utilitarianism and the ethics of compassion also contains the conviction that, if we at all want to understand ourselves as moral beings, we have factually consented to the commandment of eliminating suffering as the elementary moral norm (Tugendhat 1997. 183). How far this consent really goes and how deeply it is anchored in our moral self-conception becomes apparent when this consent is challenged, and particularly when suffering, which could have been prevented, was not prevented, when it has been deliberately brought about, and above all, when it must be responsibly accounted for (Dalferth 2006. 103).

III. THE MORAL DUTY TO ELIMINATE SUFFERING

From an ethical perspective, the pairing of the experience of suffering with the imperative to alleviate it is not mandatory (Tugendhat 1984; Wolf 1984; Hallich 1998). Suffering is not *per se* a concept with a normative context presenting it as a candidate for the grounding of morals. Like other candidates, it must pass through the filter of an evaluation. It must pass the test of grounding norms in a way that is inter-subjectively valid and capable of general consent, and yet a glance at the history of medicine or psychoanalysis shows how little it is suited for the challenge. It is no accident that the thought that certain forms of experiencing suffering present the challenge of recognising it as something elementarily connected with fragility as a basic constitution of our lives belongs to the central tenets of the ethical self-understanding of entire disciplines and subjects – just think of palliative medicine (Rentsch 1992). And the conviction that a largely unconscious side of the soul may only show itself in suffering, and that this part of the soul cannot be accommodated or employed anywhere else in our life plans: this concept is connected inextricably with the name Sigmund Freud and with psychoanalysis itself. Anyone who perceives in suffering only the occasion to overcome it wants to abolish suffering (Waldenfels 1986). And anyone who – as is so often the case with postmodern esteem for technological possibilities – merely wants to abolish suffering, must be confronted with the question, formulated here with Bernhard Waldteufels, “whether in stoppering the sources of suffering, one does not also stopper the sources of life, whether one does not simply trade in a bit of potential happiness for a bit of security” (ibid.): in other words, whether one does not abolish life along with suffering, as suffering belongs to life in a fundamental sense. Hartmut Kreß, picking up on a basic objection of Rousseau’s,¹ points out emphatically that the technological

¹ “[N]umberless sorrows and afflictions which are felt in all conditions and by which souls are perpetually tormented: these are the fatal proofs that most of our ills are our own work, and that we would have avoided almost all of them by preserving the simple, uniform, and

vanquishment of suffering first of all creates more suffering and second of all opens up a field of problems which are greatly disputed, morally and philosophically (Kreß 1993. 14–15).

It was none other than Sigmund Freud who denounced the immaturity of this model and suggested alternative proposals to the expression “abolishment of suffering” (Küchenhoff 2005). It speaks volumes that the psychoanalysis of Freudian slant wants to ‘remember’, ‘repeat’, ‘work through’ as well as ‘decode’ and ‘translate’ the specific sufferings of people in therapy instead of approaching the illusion that suffering could be ‘overcome’, ‘abolished’ or made not to have happened (Freud 1981).

IV. THE IDEA OF THE GOOD LIFE

Even if suffering or the capacity to suffer generally isn’t worth aspiring to, and that which causes suffering ought not to be, the idea of non-suffering is inherent in this judgement, however indistinct it may be. This idea cannot be grasped on the basis of external observation of naturalistic descriptions: such an idea cannot even occur at the descriptive level of a given sense-data which should be summed up externally as one fact among others.² It is much more out of the perspective of being impacted and being addressed in which this idea comes into view. The concept of suffering is philosophically relevant to the extent that it refers to possibilities for living which are enclosed within a condition of suffering, but should remain open even in its absence.

It is this openness within the phenomenon of suffering itself whose tension Schopenhauer spells out according to its two sides: illusion-less recognition of the negativistic hardness of that which suffering reveals as a truth about the “existence of the world”³ on the one hand; but to reach out from this recognition

solitary way of life prescribed to us by Nature. If she destined us to be healthy, I almost dare affirm that the state of reflection is a state contrary to Nature and that the man who meditates is a depraved animal.” (Rousseau 1992. 23.)

² See the project sponsored by BMBF at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Ethics of the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg: *Zu den ethischen Grenzen einer präferenzorientierten Medizin – Eine interdisziplinäre Untersuchung am Beispiel der Anti-Aging-Medizin* under the direction of Giovanni Maio, Lore Hühn, Holger Gothe and Georg Marcmann.

³ “At base it is redundant to argue whether there is more good or evil in the world: for the mere existence of evil decides the matter, as the good present along with it or after it can never wipe it out and therefore cannot ever compensate for it [...]. That thousands have lived in happiness and bliss: this could never nullify the angst and death pangs of a single individual; just as little as my current wellness can undo my previous suffering. If then there were even a hundred times less ill in the world than is the case, its mere existence would yet be sufficient to ground a truth which may be expressed in different ways, although always somewhat indirectly, namely, that we should not be gladdened, but rather dismayed by the existence of the world; – that the world’s inexistence would be preferable to its existence; – that the world is something which ought not to be; etc.” (Schopenhauer ZA 2. 674–675).

to a horizon of possibilities characterized by its radical capacity to be otherwise on the other. This horizon testifies to its reality within the world in three ways, namely in saying ‘No’ to that-which-is in order to bring resistance into play if possible; but also in the form of a somewhat open place⁴ which vouches for the possibility of life as it ought to be or even the good life (Hühn 2002. 163); and thirdly in the form of a fundamental question of what sort of life we factually lead under the dominion of the Will in Schopenhauer’s terminology, and what kind of life we actually want to lead.⁵ It is Franz Rosenzweig who viewed this fundamental question as Schopenhauer’s pioneering discovery for the new approach of post-idealistic philosophy. In the effort to explain the essence of that which ought not to be precisely through the phenomenon of suffering, an affinity becomes apparent.⁶

⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, taking up a basic figure from the first print/version of Schelling’s *Ages of the World*, characterized this place as the place of a freedom which lives “above all being,” and further defined this freedom as a freedom from the compulsion to self-realization. The relevant passage from Schelling reads: “The true, the eternal freedom lives only above being. Freedom is the affirmative concept of eternity or that, which is above all time. To most, as they have never sensed this highest freedom, it seems most high to be a being (*Seyendes*) or a subject. They thus ask: what can be thought above being? And they answer themselves: nothing, or something similar to it. Certainly it is a Nullity (*ein Nichts*), but as ‘pure’ freedom is a Nullity (*ein Nichts*); as the Will which wants nothing, which does not desire any matter (*Sache*), for whom all objects (*Dinge*) are equal, and which is therefore not moved by any of them. Such a Will is nothing and everything. It is nothing to the extent that it neither desires to become effective, nor yearns for any form of reality. It is everything because all power (*Kraft*) comes from it alone as the eternal freedom, because it has all things beneath it, commands all and is comanded by none.” (Schelling WA. 26–27.) Schopenhauer comments appropriately: “Rather, we profess it freely: that which remains after the total negation (*Aufhebung*) of the Will is, to all those who are not filled with the Will, certainly nothing. But in reverse, it is for those in whom the Will has taken a turn and negated itself, this our so very real world with all its suns and Milky Ways – nothing.” (Schopenhauer ZA 2. 508.) See on this topic Hühn 2006. 154–155.

⁵ “Yet now that we ask about the freedom of the Will itself, the question would as such present itself like this: ‘Can you also *will* what you will (*wollen was du willst*)?’ – which emerges as if the Will were dependent upon another Will lying behind it. And if one posits that this question would be affirmed, then a second would also emerge: ‘Can you also will what you want to will (*was du wollen willst*)?’ and so it would be postponed (*hinaufgeschoben*), in that we would always think *one* Will as dependent upon one which was earlier and more deeply situated, and would strive in vain to arrive in this way at a final Will which we would not need to think of as dependent.” (Schopenhauer ZA 6. 46.)

⁶ “Schopenhauer was the first of the great thinkers to ask not after the essence, but after the value of the world. A highly unscientific question, if it was really so intended, that one should not ask about the objective value, the value for ‘something’, the ‘sense’ or ‘purpose’ of the world – which would simply be an expression for the question about the essence –, but if the question only referred to the value for humans, or perhaps for the human Arthur Schopenhauer. And this is the way it was intended. The question was consciously referred to the value of the word for humans, but even this question had its fangs broken, in that its solution was once more found in a system of the world. For system already means independent general validity. Thus, the question of the pre-systematic person found its answer in the saint of the closing section, which had been developed through the system. Nonetheless, even this is something unheard of for philosophy: that a type of person and not a concept closed the

It is Arthur Schopenhauer and his disciple Theodore W. Adorno who direct their analysis of that which ought not to be through the phenomenon of suffering and directly raise suffering to the standard of knowledge. With his famous phrase, according to which “the need to give suffering a voice is the condition of all truth” (Adorno 1966. 27), he explains as Schopenhauer before him, that it is precisely the experience of suffering which presents the challenge of morality, at least for one’s own.

The phenomenon of suffering is accorded a key role to the extent that it is inscribed with a normative content from which the ideal of that which isn’t but which ought to be draws a good deal of its evidence. It is the ideal of what out to be which releases the view to the possibility of a good life precisely in letting us say no to that which is suffered. Clearly, this ideal also attests its presence in the decoding of the unconscious appeal which expresses itself in suffering.

V. THE COGNITIVE AND INTERPRETATIVE POTENTIAL OF THE CONCEPT OF SUFFERING FOR THE ETHICS OF COMPASSION

No doubt, the cognitive and interpretative potential of the concept of suffering reaches much further than the philosophically relevant way the concept is applied, at least in the narrow confines of Schopenhauer’s ethics of compassion and Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*. These are certainly forms of suffering which in no way evoke the practical impulse to soothe suffering, nor should they. Examples from medical ethics suffice to demonstrate how necessary it is to separate suffering as an expression of a purely subjective and private experience from its overdrawn normative portrayal, in other words to clarify whether and to what extent suffering can be called upon as something which ought not to be in a morally significant sense (Maio 2006). The fact that it is shameless to deal with suffering in the form of an immediate experience of pain – such suffering as evidenced by a sprained ankle, for instance – in the same breath where one evokes the abyss of nameless suffering in Auschwitz, as Hans Jonas so urgently reports in his *The Concept of God after Auschwitz* (Jonas 1995); all this does not need any further commentary. In short, language presents us with a single concept for a vast and highly complex spectrum of different experiences of pain and suffering in experiences which a concept can scarcely cover without further differentiation. It stands to reason that the complex and many layered phenomenon of suffering can only be joined under a common denominator at the price of illegitimate unities and possibly maddening equivalences.

system, really closed the system as its final stone and was not added as an ethical decoration or an appendage.” (Rosenzweig 1988. 8–9.) See also Schwab 2006. 332–334.

Even in a sense which comes close to our quotidian intuition, the concept of suffering stands out on account of its wide range of different meanings and connotations: The unity of these meanings is not apparent without further explanation, and ways of using the concept which may be normatively strong or weak run up against one another unanalysed. In view of the variety of problems which arise here and to avoid making the field which should be analysed fully unfathomable, a rigorous selection is necessary. The question of what suffering is should be discussed in the following with a view to make the discourse about the ethics of suffering assessable. This demands first of all that one brings a certain order to the ambiguity and complexity of the concept of suffering. Naturally, there is no fixed scale for suffering.

As I have shown, the ethics of compassion does not orient itself on just any feeling, but specifically on one in which the subject comports himself to suffering through being impacted by it and thus takes a stance towards suffering that is as follows.

- (1) The stance revealed in compassion relates to suffering first of all in the sense of a negative evaluation as something which ought not to be and certainly ought not to continue in the future. This concept of suffering is not neutral in the sense of putting up with that which one encounters, and cannot be translated as a form of passivity: a passivity, that is, which lives in opposition to activity, although they translate two moments of an opposition which are structurally and logically equal. Such a neutral concept of suffering only plays a role in the ethics of compassion to the extent that it precedes the determination of suffering in the sense of that which ought not be (Anghehrn 2006).
- (2) The stance revealed in compassion is secondly one which requires a readiness to alleviate and prevent suffering just as much as it calls again to the impulse to oppose oneself to suffering wherever possible. This concept of suffering is paired with the moral imperative to alleviate suffering, although action wins the upper-hand in the interplay of action and suffering. This leads to a process in which suffering increasingly takes on the character of an evil which should be avoided and evicted in such a way that an end to the negative condition of powerlessness in which the object of compassion finds herself.
- (3) The stance revealed in compassion is thirdly one which conceives of the practical impulse to intervene in a normative way. It does this so deeply that one expects a plausible explanation of moral action as such. Schopenhauer formulates the question of how it is possible to want to alleviate the suffering of others as the question of how the “welfare and grief” (Schopenhauer ZA 6. 247) of others can become a motive for action.

Obviously only in that the other becomes the final end of my Will, just as it is otherwise myself: thus in that I want his welfare with complete immediacy and do not want his grief, I directly suffer with him in his grief, feel his grief as usually I only feel my own, and therefore immediately desire his wellness, as I usually only desire my own. This demands, however, that I am in some way identified with him, i.e. that the entire *difference* between myself and every other, on which my egoism rests, is to a certain degree abolished. (Ibid. 247–248.)

In this definition, compassion is oriented by action and not a state of indifferent, purely aesthetic contemplation. The ethics of compassion appeals to the character of moral obligation which is unique to the concept of suffering in this third definition. For Schopenhauer, this obliging character is placed in parenthesis with a warning – a warning which differs fundamentally from that of Rousseau’s conception to the extent that the latter sanctions a border in compassion as the “natural repugnance to see any sensitive Being perish or suffer” (Rousseau 1992. 15). This is precisely the border which Schopenhauer attempts to eradicate. Schopenhauer undermines the demarcation of the self with reference to the affinity of all beings capable of suffering which comes to light in compassion, while Rousseau does everything he can not to damage this demarcation line. In anticipation of one of Nietzsche’s key figures, Schopenhauer seeks the dissolution of the boundaries of personal relation to the self-evident in the *pricipium individuationis*, while Rousseau provides it with a stable foundation.⁷ Suffering is ultimately essential to life, says Schopenhauer, although this equalisation makes suffering one of the forms in which we carry out our lives. This form extends to the total constitution of the concept of suffering. For compassion should reveal to our eyes the other as a particular form of the same, although the other is only experienced as a particular, transient, individuated form of the Will. Here, compassion becomes a privileged place of knowledge which renders the identity of the Will transparent in all its apparitions. The concept of suffering is thus a border concept which sets the abolition of the difference between ego and non-ego in motion through the reconstruction of the other to my equal.

⁷ Though Schopenhauer refrains from naming this difference (see Schopenhauer ZA 6. 285–288), his confrontation with Rousseau shows how unequally compassion is weighted in the balance between compassion and self-love: “[A]nd as long as he does not resist the inner impulse of commiseration, he will never harm another man or even another sensitive being, except in the legitimate case where, his preservation being concerned, he is obliged to give himself preference” (Rousseau 1992. 15).

This occurrence [of compassion], however, is astonishing, even mysterious. It is, in truth, the great mystery of ethics, their originary phenomenon, and the border stone beyond which no metaphysical speculation dare to venture. In this occurrence, we see the partition separating being from being according to the light of nature removed, and the non-ego in a certain way becomes an ego. (Schopenhauer ZA 6. 248.)

The removal which Schopenhauer advises is eloquent to the extent that the equalising of the universalising elements with which the Danziger lends all beings capable of suffering the status of an object of moral consideration comes all too unconditionally to light. He obviously accepts that the concept of individuality, in particular the otherness of the other, is robbed of its entire substance and the other is reduced to an ephemeral apparition of the Will. A further price must be paid: qualitatively different forms of suffering – such as the reflected suffering of human on the one hand or the possibly immediate creaturely sufferings of an animal on the other – may be descriptively differentiated from one another, but are accorded an equivalent normative status. This normative equivalence is connected to the fact that, while there can be different qualities of suffering, these qualities are normatively irrelevant in view of the question of whom we ultimately owe moral consideration (Wolf 2004. 75–85).

Anyone who tries, as is often the case in contemporary debates about animal ethics, to stylize Schopenhauer as the primary witness of an ethics which extends the whole of its universalising foundation along the circle of moral addressees to the animals, must remember that animals attain the position of moral addressee because and only because they are contained in a whole which reaches beyond humans and animals: the Will – the dominant structural principle of reality (ibid. 137–145).

(4) The stance revealed in compassion is fourthly one which accords the affective impact of the suffering of others with the power to conclude truths – a power which refers to the total constitution of human existence and even existence as such. Using the affinity of all beings gifted with senses which shows itself in compassion, Schopenhauer provides a plausible proof that life, in its totality, stands under the sign of the negative – sign that does not come to light anywhere other than the experience of suffering and which marks the way to the metaphysical interpretation of existence according to which the world is fundamentally something which ought not to be.

Yet compassion is not the only experience from which, for Schopenhauer, light falls on the total metaphysical constitution of existing and existence. The impulse announcing itself in compassion is action-oriented and must as such be distinguished from a comportment to suffering which emerges from aesthetic distance. It is, in the original sense of the word, the theoretical stance of observation (Figal 2006) which most clearly opposes the action-oriented impulse in the phenomenon of compassion. And this is the basic contradiction which, and this

is my guiding thesis, shakes Schopenhauer's philosophical consideration about morals to its core. The indifference and composure demanded of the ascetic's contemplative comportment negates that which the ethics of compassion seeks as a whole: namely, to behave in a way which is action-oriented and relates to the suffering of the other in a normatively meaningful way.

Particularly in the tragic form of compassion, the aesthetic subject adapts a certain comportment to the suffering of the protagonists – a comportment which can no longer be appropriately described as an identificatory projection into the mental sensitivities of the other. Rather, through the contemplative comportment of *aesthetic* indifference, it disempowers that which the normative comportment of active compassion, *linked to action*, seeks to attain. 'Tragic compassion' frees the view for such knowledge and has the unveiling of the other as my equal for its goal (Recki 2006). Structurally analogous to the variety of suffering which the tragic hero represents, Schopenhauer says the following of the ascetic who releases himself from the pressure of the Will:

Such a person who, after many bitter battles against his own nature finally overcomes the Will, remains solely as a pure knowing subject, as an unclouded mirror of the world. Nothing can frighten him any longer, nothing move him. [...] Calmly and smilingly, he looks back on the phantasm of this world, which was once capable of moving and tormenting his mind. [...] Life and its forms but float as yet before him, like a transient apparition. (Schopenhauer ZA 2. 483.)

In summary, one may retain the following of the fourth point: that which is revealed in the neutrality towards action of the aesthetic comportment towards suffering becomes the defining factor of an ethical indifferentism which arrests *every* form of action, even those which refer to the "welfare and grief" (ZA 6 247) of the other. Those who attempt, like Schopenhauer, to make the subject's battle for their self-preservation the unalterable reference point for the analysis of the existence of human selves must be confronted with the question of whether such a one-sided determination is at all able to leave room to differentiate between actions which are morally prescribed and those which are reprehensible. It is not by chance that this suspicion has proved itself so hard that a morality founded in this way on compassion puts its own foundation in question without fail (Wischke 1994. 113–114). Finally: how can it meaningfully be maintained that an empirical morality which is anchored in the feeling of compassion is indispensable for ethics, when the whole point of this ethics is to generally obfuscate the empirical setting in which this morality can become effective? And if a moral act, for Schopenhauer, is the negation of self-interest, then such an action is from the start a contradiction which consists in defining itself in opposition to the requirement to which it owes its execution, namely to will the welfare of others.

(5) The stance revealed in compassion is fifthly one which mobilises an immemorial feeling which precedes all reflection in order to preserve suffering's anthropological dignity from dishonest appropriation and to re-establish it. To be sure, it must be protected from the various ways it can be disempowered and cynically belittled through the dominion of a morality which orients itself on reason, but also from any and all attempts of theodicy which would diminish the reality of suffering. Following Rousseau, there is a „repugnance to see any sensitive Being perish or suffer, principally those like ourselves” (Rousseau 1992. 57), which expresses itself in compassion. This is simultaneously the expression of the originary *feeling of relation* which unites humanity with one another along with the animals and which cannot be meaningfully challenged. Far from even noting the asymmetrical difference between the subject and object of compassion, Rousseau, in his thoughts on moral philosophy, takes into account the eminent vulnerability and fragility of all beings capable of suffering. He does this in such a way that, upon immediately observing the sufferings of another, the mind is at once directed to the way one's own nature, as well as that of every other human being, is structured (Ritter 2005. 55–56). Rousseau writes:

There is, besides, another Principle which Hobbes did not notice, and which – having been given to man in order to soften, under certain circumstances, the ferocity of his amour-propre or the desire for self-preservation before the birth of this love – tempers the ardor he has for his own well-being by an innate repugnance to see his fellow suffer. [...] I speak of Compassion, a disposition that is appropriate to beings as weak and subject to as many ills as we are; a virtue all the more universal and useful to man because it precedes in him the use of all reflection; and so Natural that even Beasts sometimes give perceptible signs of it. (Rousseau 1992. 36.)⁸

With his conception of compassion, Rousseau undermines the unbridgeable difference between humans and animals which the Cartesian tradition purposefully stresses in denying animals reason along with the capacity for language, as a result of which they are excluded from the universe of moral addressees. The ethics of compassion has its anti-Cartesian impact in building on a pre-reflexive self-understanding – a self-understanding which is centred in a chosen feeling of relationship and which permits access to that which firstly precedes reflection as much as it receives from it, and which secondly be brought to language in its spontaneity, yet in a way that at the same time is not unfeigned. And yet – this is the discovery for the critique of language – every language which is subordinated to the rules of writing risks blocking the articulation of authentic experience in a fundamental way. Rousseau declares the mute language of gestures and signs to be the depraved form of articulation submerged in a society which sepa-

⁸ Translation slightly modified.

rates humans and animals. Such a language belongs to the rules of reason which “reason is later forced to re-establish upon other foundations when, by its successive developments, it has succeeded in stifling Nature” (Rousseau 1992. 15).

VI. ROUSSEAU’S ETHICS OF COMPASSION AND THE DIALECTICS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

With these lines, Rousseau laid down a sketch of the basic figure of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, completed behind the backs of its actors from which the whole history of this figure can be traced. It is the thought of a ‘return of the repressed’ with which Rousseau attempts to illustrate the binding and structuring potency of the state of nature with his “natural feeling” of compassion. This basic thought, which confronts civilised society with the repressed potential of its origins, has its entire point in the fact that it challenges this civilisation so thoroughly that this can ultimately be interpreted as a process of liberation which threatens to collapse into the pathological distortion of the damage that human existence does to itself and through itself. No doubt either that it is the strength of the structural model of the return of the repressed to orient itself explicitly according to the logic of ruinous self-exclusion and as a result to be predestined to offer a framework for explaining and analysing the phenomenon of alienation in all its abysmal negativity. Long before this model established itself through the winding pathways of philosophical tradition of the unconscious to a psychoanalysis of Freudian provenance, thereby advancing itself to one of the key figures in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* of our days, it served as a guiding concept of cultural criticism which anticipated the critiques of alienation in the 18th and 19th centuries. Rousseau, as well as Schiller⁹ in his footsteps, may have contributed to the career of a model which grew greatly in significance by the end of its diversified career to the extent that the general context of alienation is inescapable for the modern era.

Characteristic for this dialectic is that it aids in the form of a return on an unaccustomed radical level, at least in the modus of extreme alienation in bringing that which was previously repressed to reality, along with all natural feelings, as nature (Horkenheimer–Adorno 2004).

⁹ In his letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Friedrich Schiller spelled out the dialectics of the Enlightenment once more through a perspective on the difference between the wild and the barbaric as defined by Rousseau. Schiller writes in his fifth letter: “The enlightenment of the understanding, of which the cultivated classes are not incorrect in boasting, demonstrates all in all so little an ennobling influence on the ethos (*Gesinnung*) that it rather secures its corruption (*Verderbniß*) through maxims. We deny nature on the terrain that justly belongs to it only to experience its tyranny in the moral terrain, and by resisting its impressions, we accept its axioms.” (Schiller 1962. Bd. 20. 320.)

It is very certain, therefore, that compassion is a natural feeling which, moderating in each individual the activity of love of oneself, contributes to the mutual preservation of the entire species. It carries us without reflection to the aid of those whom we see suffer; in the state of Nature, it takes the place of Laws, morals, and virtue, with the advantage that no one is tempted to disobey its gentle voice; it will deter every robust Savage from robbing a weak child or an infirm old man of his hard-won subsistence if he himself hopes to be able to find his own elsewhere. (Rousseau 1992. 37.)¹⁰

Of course, along with the position on the suffering revealed in compassion, comes the fact that the complexity of the way it can be accessed reacts to the complexity of the concept, of which the concept of compassion so deeply anchored in European philosophy and widely spread in the theory of natural law, particularly Rousseau's, can present but *one* abbreviated expression. The history of this concept includes a spectrum of meanings. On the one hand the Aristotelean theory of affects, so influential through the history of its reception, holds that "compassion is first of all a kind of pain on the basis of something held to be an ill that is pernicious or painful with someone who has not deserved that such a thing come upon him and of which one (secondly) can expect that oneself or one of one's kin may suffer it and this is (thirdly) the case when it seems near" (Aristotle, *Rhetorics* 1385b). On the other hand, one should also mention the tradition of *Misericordia* in the sense of the virtue of Christian charity – a tradition which dominated medieval Christian philosophy. And if, to intensify the argument, the concept of suffering unites an entire palette of heterogeneous meanings, whose unity can only be ascertained with difficulty, under its banner, then the same goes for compassion. It answers the experience of suffering first in the form of a reactive affect which cannot be contained in direct experience, but it is mediated by forms of processing in the horizon of self-interpretation – forms of processing which react to the existential sensitivity and the eminent vulnerability of our lives (Angehrn 2006). Finally, I would like to resume by saying that the concept of suffering is something we approach through interpretation.

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¹⁰ Translation slightly modified.

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