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978-0-521-87140-2 - Arthur Schopenhauer: The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics

Edited by Christopher Janaway

Excerpt

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# *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics*

*Treated in two academic prize essays*

*by Dr. Arthur Schopenhauer,*

member of the Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences

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- I. On the Freedom of the Human Will, *crowned with a prize* by the Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences, at Trondheim, on 26 January 1839.
- II. On the Basis of Morals, *not* crowned with a prize by the Royal Danish Society of Sciences, at Copenhagen, 30 January 1840.

Μεγάλη ἡ ἀλήθεια καὶ ὑπερισχύει.

[Great is truth, and mighty above all things.

– 3 Ezra (I Esdras), 4, 41]

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Although they came about independently of one another in response to external occasions, these two essays mutually complement one another to form a system of the fundamental truths of ethics, in which, it is to be hoped, people will not fail to discern some progress in this science, which has been on holiday for half a century. Yet neither of them was allowed to refer to the other, nor to my previous writings, because each was written for a different academy and strict incognito is the familiar condition in such circumstances. So it also could not be avoided that some points were touched on in both, as nothing could be presupposed and everywhere a start had to be made from the very beginning.<sup>a</sup> They are really separate expositions of two doctrines that can be found, in their fundamentals, in the Fourth Book of *The World as Will and Representation*, although there they were derived from my metaphysics, hence synthetically and *a priori*, and here, where as a matter of course no presuppositions were allowed, they appear instead grounded analytically and *a posteriori*: so what was first there is last here.<sup>b</sup> Yet precisely in virtue of their starting from the standpoint that is common to all, and also in virtue of the separate exposition, both doctrines gained greatly here in graspability, persuasive power and the unfolding of their significance. Accordingly these two essays are to be regarded as supplementing the Fourth Book of my chief work, just as my text *On the Will in Nature* is a highly essential and important supplement to the Second Book. Incidentally, however heterogeneous the subject of the text just named may seem to be from that of the present one, there is nonetheless a real coherence between them, indeed the former

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<sup>a</sup> *ab ovo* [literally 'from the egg']

<sup>b</sup> [In *WWR* 2, ch. 12 (Hübscher *SW* 3, 133) Schopenhauer explains this use of 'synthetically' and 'analytically'. The analytic method, in this sense, proceeds from facts or particulars to theoretical propositions (*Lehrsätze*) or the universal. The synthetic method, in this sense, operates the other way around. 'So', he adds, 'it would be much more correct to designate them as *the inductive and the deductive method*'.]

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text is to some extent the key to the present one, and the insight into this coherence completes for the first time the perfect understanding of both. If ever the time will come when people read me, they will find that my philosophy is like Thebes with a hundred gates: one can enter from all sides and reach the centre point on a straight path through all of them.

I should remark further that the first of these two essays has already found its place in the most recent volume of the records of the Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences that appear in Trondheim. In consideration of Trondheim's great distance from Germany, this academy, with the greatest readiness and liberality, granted me the permission I requested of them – to have the right of arranging a printing of this prize essay for Germany – for which I hereby publicly declare my sincere thanks to them.

The second essay was *not* awarded a prize by the Royal Danish Society of Sciences, although there was none other present to compete with it. Since this Society has published its judgment upon my work, I am justified in examining it and making a reply to it. The reader will find it after the relevant essay and will see from it that the Royal Society found nothing whatsoever to praise in my work, but only to criticize,<sup>a</sup> and that this criticism comprises three different objections, which I shall now go through individually.

The first and chief criticism, to which the others are attached only in an accessory way, is that I had misunderstood the question, thinking erroneously that the requirement was to establish the principle of ethics: instead the question had really and chiefly been concerning the *connection of metaphysics with ethics*. I had completely failed to expound this connection ('For, omitting what was principally required'<sup>b</sup>), the judgment says at the *beginning*; yet three lines further on it has now forgotten this and says the opposite: namely, that I had expounded that very thing ('he expounded the connection between the ethical principle proposed by him and his metaphysics'<sup>c</sup>), although I had provided this as an appendix and as something in which I accomplished more than was required.

This contradiction of the judgment with itself I wish to disregard altogether: I take it as a child of the embarrassment in which it was composed. On the other hand, I ask the just and learned reader now to read through the question set by the Danish Academy, with the introduction that prefaces it, as they stand printed at the front of the essay along with my translation of them, and then to decide *what the question is really asking after* – after

<sup>a</sup> *tadeln*<sup>b</sup> *omisso enim eo, quod potissimum postulabatur*<sup>c</sup> *principii ethicae et metaphysicae suae nexum exponit*

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the ultimate ground, the principle, the foundation, the true and proper source of ethics, or after the connection between ethics and metaphysics. – To make the matter easier for the reader, I want now to go through introduction and question, analysing them and bringing out their sense as clearly as possible. *The introduction* to the question tells us that there is supposedly a necessary idea of morality,<sup>a</sup> or a primordial concept<sup>b</sup> of the moral law, which appears doubly, that is, on the one hand in morals<sup>c</sup> as a science and on the other hand *in real life*; in the latter it shows itself doubly again, that is, partly in judgment about our own actions, partly in that of the actions of others. Then to this primordial concept of morality there are supposedly linked other further concepts that rest upon it. On this introduction the Society grounds its question, namely: Where is *the source and basis of morals* to be sought? Is it perhaps in a primordial idea of morality that might actually and immediately reside in consciousness, or conscience? This idea must then be analysed, as must the concepts that issue from it; or is it that morals have another cognitive ground? – In Latin, when stripped of what is inessential and put in a totally clear formulation, the question runs like this: *Ubinam sunt quaerenda fons et fundamentum philosophiae moralis? Suntne quaerenda in explicatione ideae moralitatis, quae conscientia immediate contineatur? an in alio cognoscendi principio?*<sup>d</sup> This last interrogative sentence reveals in the clearest possible way that the question definitely asks after the *cognitive ground of morals*.<sup>e</sup> I will now add, into the bargain, a paraphrastic exegesis of the question. The introduction sets out from two wholly *empirical* remarks: there is factually a *science of morals*,<sup>f</sup> it says; and it is likewise said to be a fact that moral concepts make themselves noticeable *in real life*, partly inasmuch as we ourselves are moral judges of our actions in our conscience, partly inasmuch as we judge the actions of others in a moral respect. Similarly a variety of moral concepts, e.g. duty,<sup>g</sup> accountability<sup>h</sup> and the like, are said to be in universal currency. Now in all this there is supposed to emerge an original idea of morality, a fundamental thought of a moral law, whose necessity is, however, to be

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<sup>a</sup> *Moralität*<sup>b</sup> *Urbegriff*<sup>c</sup> *Moral*<sup>d</sup> [Where are *the source and basis of moral philosophy* to be sought? Are they to be sought in the explication of an idea of morality that resides immediately in consciousness (or conscience)? or in another cognitive ground?]<sup>e</sup> *Erkenntnisgrund der Moral*<sup>f</sup> *Moralwissenschaft*<sup>g</sup> *Pflicht*<sup>h</sup> *Zurechnung*

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IX a peculiar and not a merely *logical* necessity, i.e. one that could not be proved in accordance with the mere principle of contradiction from the actions to be judged, or from the maxims that lie at their basis. The rest of the chief moral concepts are supposed to issue from this primary moral concept, and to be dependent on it and hence inseparable from it as well. – What, then, does all this rest upon? – that would indeed be an important object of investigation. – That is why the Society is setting the following task: *the source, i.e. the origin of morals, the basis* of them, is to be sought (*quaerenda sunt*). *Where* should it be sought? i.e. where is it to be found? Could it be in an *idea of morality* that is innate in us and resides in our consciousness, or conscience? Then this idea, together with the concepts dependent on it, would merely need to be analysed (*explicandis*). Or is it rather to be sought somewhere else? i.e. do morals perhaps have as their source a cognitive ground of our duties quite other than the one just put forward by way of suggestion and example? – This is the content of the introduction and question, conveyed more extensively and clearly, but faithfully and precisely.

Given this, who can retain the faintest doubt that the Royal Society is asking after the *source*, the origin, the basis, the ultimate cognitive ground of *morals*? – Now the source and basis of *morals* can in no way be other than that of *morality* itself: for that which theoretically and ideally is *morals*, is practically and really *morality*. The source of *the latter* must, however, necessarily be the ultimate ground of all moral good conduct: so for its part *morals* must also establish this very ground, in order to support itself on it and make appeal to it in everything that it prescribes to human beings – unless it wants either to pluck its prescriptions out of the air or, on the other hand, to ground them falsely. So *morals* has to prove this ultimate ground of all morality: for as a scientific edifice it has this as its foundation stone, just as morality as a practice has it as its origin. So this is undeniably the ‘foundation of moral philosophy’<sup>a</sup> which the task is asking after: consequently it is as clear as day that the task really demands that *a principle of ethics* be sought and established, ‘*ut principium aliquod Ethicae conderetur*’, not in the sense of a mere supreme prescription or fundamental rule, but rather in the sense of a *real ground of all morality, and therefore a cognitive ground of morals*. – But the judgment *denies* as much when it says that because I thought this, my essay could not be awarded the prize. Yet anyone who reads the task will and must think this: for it stands there plainly, in black and white, with clear, unambiguous words and cannot

<sup>a</sup> *fundamentum philosophiae moralis*

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be denied away so long as the words of the Latin language retain their sense.

I have been long-winded over this: but the matter is important and remarkable. For from what has been said it is clear and certain that *what this academy denies it asked, it patently and incontrovertibly did ask*. – On the other hand, it claims to have asked something different. That is, the *connection between metaphysics and morals* is supposed to have been the chief subject of the prize question (this alone can be understood by ‘the theme itself’<sup>a</sup>). Now the reader may wish to check whether *one word* about that can be found in the prize question or in the introduction: not a syllable and not a hint either. Someone who is asking about the connection between two sciences must after all name them both: but mention of metaphysics occurs neither in the question nor in the introduction. Incidentally, this whole key sentence of the judgment becomes clearer if we bring it out of its wrong order into the natural one, where it reads in precisely the same words: ‘The theme itself demanded the kind of investigation in which the connection between metaphysics and ethics would have been considered first and foremost; but the writer, omitting what was principally required, thought that the task was to set up some principle of ethics: so that he placed the part of his essay where he expounded the connection between the ethical principle proposed by him and his metaphysics in an appendix, in which he offered more than had been required.’<sup>b</sup> Nor does the question about the connection between metaphysics and morals lie in any way within the point of view from which the *introduction* to the question starts out: for it begins with *empirical* remarks, refers to the acts of moral judgment that occur *in ordinary life* and the like, then asks what all of that ultimately rests upon? and finally proposes as an example of a possible resolution an innate idea of morality residing in consciousness. Thus in its example it provisionally and problematically assumes a mere *psychological fact* as the solution, and not a metaphysical theorem. But by doing this it clearly gives us to understand that it is demanding the grounding of morals by some *fact* or other, whether of consciousness or of the external world, and does not expect to see it derived from the dreams of some metaphysics or other: so the academy would have had every right to reject an essay that solved the question in that way. This should be considered well. But then there is the further point

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<sup>a</sup> *ipsum thema*<sup>b</sup> *Ipsum thema ejusmodi disputationem flagitabat, in qua vel praecipuo loco metaphysicae et ethicae nexus consideraretur: sed scriptor, omisso eo, quod potissimum postulabatur, hoc expeti putavit, ut principium aliquod ethicae conderetur: itaque eam partem commentationis suae, in qua principii ethicae a se propositi et metaphysicae suae nexum exponit, appendicis loco habuit, in qua plus, quam postulatum esset praestaret.*

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that the question about the *connection of metaphysics with morals* which was allegedly set, but which is nowhere to be found, would be a wholly unanswerable question, and consequently, if we grant any insight to the academy, an *impossible* one: *unanswerable*, because there is no *metaphysics pure and simple*,<sup>a</sup> but only a number of different (and indeed extremely different) *metaphysics*,<sup>b</sup> i.e. all sorts of attempts at metaphysics, considerable in number, in fact as many as there have been philosophers, each of whom sings a quite different song, and who fundamentally differ and dissent. The question could well be asked, accordingly, about the connection between the Aristotelian, Epicurean, Spinozist, Leibnizian, Lockean, or some other determinately stated metaphysics, and ethics; but never ever about the connection between *metaphysics pure and simple* and ethics, because this question would not have any determinate sense, since it calls for the relation between a thing that is given and one that is quite indeterminate and maybe even impossible. For so long as there is no metaphysics that is recognized as objectively true and undeniable, that is, a *metaphysics pure and simple*, we simply do not know if such a metaphysics is even so much as possible in principle, nor what it will or might be. Meanwhile, if someone wanted to urge that we do have a wholly universal, and hence admittedly indeterminate, concept of *metaphysics in general*,<sup>c</sup> with regard to which the question could be posed concerning the connection in general between this metaphysics in the abstract<sup>d</sup> and ethics – then that can be conceded, but the answer to the question taken in this sense would be so easy and simple that to put a prize on it would be ridiculous. For it could not claim anything more than that a true and complete metaphysics must provide ethics too with its firm support, its ultimate ground. Furthermore, this thought can be found expressed right in the first paragraph of my essay, where among the difficulties in the question before us I point out especially *this*: that by its very nature it excludes the grounding of ethics by means of any given metaphysics that one could take one's departure from and support oneself upon.

In the above, then, I have proved incontrovertibly that the Royal Danish Society really did ask what it denies having asked; and on the contrary that it did *not* ask what it claims to have asked, and indeed could not even have asked it. This conduct by the Royal Danish Society would certainly not be right according to the moral principle that I put forward: but as they grant

<sup>a</sup> *Metaphysik schlechthin*

<sup>b</sup> *Metaphysiken* [plural: no plural of the English 'metaphysics' can be formed in the same way]

<sup>c</sup> *Metaphysik überhaupt*

<sup>d</sup> *in abstracto*

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no validity to my moral principle, they will presumably have another one according to which it is right.

As to what the Danish Academy *really* asked, I answered that precisely. I showed first in a *negative* part that the principle of ethics does not lie where people have assumed it as securely proven for sixty years. Then, in the *positive* part, I revealed the genuine source of morally praiseworthy actions and really *proved* that its source is this and that it could be no other. Finally, I showed the relation in which this real ground of ethics stands – not to *my* metaphysics, as the judgment falsely alleges, nor to any determinate metaphysics – but rather to a universal grounding thought<sup>a</sup> that is common to very many metaphysical systems, perhaps to most, and without doubt to the most ancient and in my opinion the truest of them. I did not give this metaphysical exposition as an appendix, as the judgment says, but as the final chapter of the essay: it is the keystone of the whole, a treatment of a higher kind in which the whole culminates. The fact that I said I was accomplishing more here than the task properly demanded arises from the fact that the task does not allude to a metaphysical explanation with a single word, and is still less, as the judgment asserts, wholly directed to such an explanation. In fact, whether this metaphysical argument is an addition, i.e. something in which I accomplish more than was required, is a side-issue, indeed it is irrelevant: enough that it is there. But the fact that the judgment wants to make *this* count against me bears witness to its embarrassment: it grasps at everything just so as to bring something forward against my work. Besides, in the nature of the case that metaphysical discussion had to constitute the conclusion of the essay. For had it gone before, the principle of ethics would have to have been derived from it *synthetically*, which would have been possible only if the academy had said which of the many extremely different metaphysics it preferred to see an ethical principle derived from: but then the truth of such a principle would have been wholly dependent on the metaphysics that had been presupposed, and so would have remained problematic. Consequently the nature of the question made an *analytic* grounding of the primary moral principle necessary, i.e. a grounding that is achieved on the basis of the reality of things, without presupposition of any metaphysics. Precisely because this way has been universally recognized in recent times as the only secure one, *Kant*, like the English moralists that preceded him, was at pains to ground the moral principle in the analytic way, independently of any metaphysical presupposition. To abandon that

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<sup>a</sup> *Grundgedanke*