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Insight Into Irrationality: Schopenhauerian Tragic Compassion

Soofia Lateef
University of California
e-mail: slate003@ucr.edu
https://orcid.org/0009-0003-6834-6366

This project investigates the nature of existential disvalue, arguing that a profound insight into its structure is mediated through two distinct yet correlated channels: the formal philosophical doctrine of Schopenhauerian pessimism and a specific affective-cognitive orientation I term "tragic compassion." This paper addresses the problem of how a metaphysics of fundamental irrationality and universal suffering translates into a practical, ethical way of being for the human subject. Arthur Schopenhauer, Julius Bahnsen, Philipp Mainländer, and Eduard von Hartmann all endorse a type of insight through affect—I offer tragic compassion to synthesize these views as they relate to ethics. I foreground an under-explored dimension of Schopenhauerian thought concerning the epistemic status of affect and offer an original account of tragic compassion.[1]

Keywords: Arthur Schopenhauer, Philipp Mainländer, Julius Bahnsen, Eduard von Hartmann, irrationality, affect, compassion

[1] Thank you to the reviewers at *Kultura i Wartości* for constructive suggestions, and to Kevin Korczyk for careful and insightful feedback on this paper.

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Introduction

The Schopenhauerian tradition of philosophy is marked by irrationalist metaphysics (a characterization of the structure of reality as irrational), the possibility of affective insight (a non-intellectual, feeling-laden, motivationally significant mode of apprehending metaphysical truths), and the centrality of compassion to ethics. This paper connects these three elements, showing that a metaphysics of irrationality makes it such that, in the domain of ethics, compassion becomes key to ethical insight. Beyond what Schopenhauerian compassion is generally taken to convey (that another's pain is my own), there is further insight enabled by a specific type of compassion that I label "tragic compassion." Tragic compassion is a stable mode of apprehending another's pain and its determinant (fundamental irrationality).

I draw on Arthur Schopenhauer, Julius Bahnsen, and Philipp Mainländer to develop my account of tragic compassion. I outline their accounts of metaphysics, non-intellectual (or affective) insight, and compassion before turning to the under-explored phenomenon of tragic compassion. Throughout, I also discuss Eduard von Hartmann, who offers a contrast case to the other three philosophers: he diverges in building rational progress into his metaphysics and diminishes the role of compassion for ethics (I will argue the latter is a consequence of the former). All of this will suggest that tragic compassion captures both an important unifying feature of Schopenhauerian philosophy and a potentially attractive mode of affective responsiveness to unavoidable suffering and its constitutive structure.

Metaphysics of Irrationality

A distinguishing feature of Schopenhauerian metaphysics is its posit of fundamental irrationality.[2] Schopenhauer argues that the fundamental structure of

[2] For discussion that highlights the irrational and senseless in Schopenhauer's metaphysics, see: Julian Young, "Is Schopenhauer an Irrationalist?," *Schopenhauer Jahrbuch* 69 (1988): 85–100; Alex Neill and Christopher Janaway, eds., *Better Consciousness: Schopenhauer's Philosophy of Value*, European Journal of Philosophy Book Series (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Mathijs Peters, *Schopenhauer and Adorno on Bodily Suffering* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137412171; William Desmond, "Schopenhauer's Philosophy of

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the world is animated by an irrational process. His system follows Kant's by dividing reality into two aspects: phenomenon (the world as appearance) and noumenon (the world as thing-in-itself).[3] The former is the "world as representation"—the ordinary world of objects individuated by human cognition, according to the principle of sufficient reason and the principium individuationis (the forms of space and time). However, this world of individuated objects is an "illusion of multiplicity."[4] What is not illusory is the world as Will. This Will is the thing-in-itself, the single, underlying "kernel and essence" of all reality.[5] The defining feature of this Will is its absolute irrationality; Schopenhauer describes it as "blind"[6] and "without purpose or goal"[7]. It is a ceaseless, aimless, and insatiable impulse that manifests in all phenomena, from the force of gravity to human desires.

This metaphysical premise entails a necessary consequence: suffering. Schopenhauer states, "all suffering is nothing other than unfulfilled and thwarted willing."[8] Because the Will strives aimlessly, it exists in a state of perpetual lack and can never find satisfaction. Any happiness in the phenomenal world is merely the temporary absence of desire rather than a positive state. Instead of achieving our ends and sense of peace, "life swings back and forth like a pendulum between pain

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the Dark Origin," in *A Companion to Schopenhauer*, ed. Bart Vandenabeele, Blackwell Companions to Philosophy (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Robert Guay, "Schopenhauer's Moral Philosophy Responding to Senselessness," in *The Oxford Handbook of Schopenhauer*, ed. Robert L. Wicks, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford University Press, 2020).

[3] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, trans. and ed. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Schopenhauer (Cambridge University Press, 1818), 26.

[4] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. II, trans. and ed. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Schopenhauer (Cambridge University Press, 1844), 334.

[5] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, 407.

[6] Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena,* vol. II, 1st ed., trans. Adrian Del Caro and Christopher Janaway (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 62, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139016889.001.

[7] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, 181.

[8] Ibid., 390.

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and boredom."[9] Desire is satisfied only to lead to new desire or to the state of "terrible emptiness and boredom."[10] This structure of the Will, manifest in each person, ensures that they will bring suffering onto themselves, while the structure of the world as representation ensures that each will heap suffering onto others as well. The principium individuationis fractures the Will into countless individuals all expressing the same "Will-to-Life," which necessarily turn against each other. Schopenhauer uses the Australian bulldog-ant to illustrate this: when the ant is cut in half, its head and tail attack each other, the mandibles reflexively clamping down on the tail and the tail stinging the head.[11] On this picture, suffering is not an aberration, but an essential manifestation of the world's nature.

During the late 19th-century "Pessimism Controversy," philosophers including Bahnsen, Mainländer, and Hartmann developed alternative metaphysics influenced by Schopenhauer's.[12] All considered themselves pessimists, Bahnsen and Mainländer maintaining irrationalism in their metaphysics with Hartmann as an exception.[13]

Philosopher	Metaphysical Principle	Nature of Will	Path to Redemption/ End Goal
Schopenhauer	Will (Monistic)	Blind, aimless striving	Individual ascetic denial
Bahnsen	Individual Wills (Pluralistic)	Self-contradictory, non-teleological	None; permanent contradiction
Mainländer	Fragmented Will (Pluralistic)	Teleological striving for non-being (Will-to-Die)	Collective annihilation
Hartmann	The Unconscious (Monistic & Dualistic: Will + Idea)	Rational/teleological process toward self-awareness	Collective, rational renunciation

[9] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, 338.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., 172.

[12] For a vital history of the Pessimism Controversy, see Frederick C. Beiser, *Weltschmerz: Pessimism in German Philosophy, 1860—1900* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

[13] For alternative analyses of the differences between these thinkers' views of Will, see Sebastian Gardner, "Post-Schopenhauerian Metaphysics Hartmann, Mainländer, Bahnsen, and Nietzsche," in *The Oxford Handbook of Schopenhauer*, ed. Robert L. Wicks, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford University Press, 2020); Anthony K. Jensen, *The Philosophy of Will: A Reexamination of Late Modern German Philosophy*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2025), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003593362.

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Bahnsen's metaphysics involved a rejection of Schopenhauer's monism in favor of a metaphysical individualism; he argued that "absolute reality of the Will entails the reality of an absolute multiplicity."[14] Bahnsen's central concept, the Realdialektik (Real-Dialectic), is an inversion of Hegel's dialectic.[15] In contrast to the Hegelian promise of historical resolution in rational synthesis, Bahnsen argues that contradiction is fundamental to the structure of reality. Therefore, no synthesis can occur; contradictions result in negation and conflict.[16] This permanent contradiction manifests in art, logic, and history.[17] Within each person it is seen in their irreconcilable ends (as is often depicted in tragedies), which makes suffering inescapable.[18]

Mainländer, greatly influenced by Schopenhauer, diverged in his picture of the Will in two main ways: positing pluralism and teleology. He describes a unified God that found non-being preferable to being but was unable to will complete non-being. To achieve annihilation, God created the universe through fragmentation into individual Wills. These individuals would, through history, weaken themselves and each other until non-being could be achieved.[19] Mainländer argues the aim of God in self-destruction is the same as the telos of all things: the Will-to-Die. The Will-to-Life that Schopenhauer observed is in fact a mechanism that the Will-to-Die uses to achieve annihilation.[20] From this telos, Mainländer derives his valuation of existence and his ethics. Life, as something that should be destroyed, has negative value. Morality aligns with this teleology so that pursuit of non-being becomes the supreme principle of morality.[21]

Hartmann, like Bahnsen, combined aspects of Schopenhauer's thought with Hegel's. But unlike Bahnsen's, his was an attempt to rationalize Schopenhauer's

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[14] Julius Bahnsen, *Der Widerspruch im Wissen und Wesen der Welt; Princip und Einzelbewährung der Realdialektik*, vol. I (T. Grieben, 1880), 172.

[15] Julius Bahnsen, *Der Widerspruch im Wissen und Wesen der Welt; Princip und Einzelbewährung der Realdialektik*, vol. II (T. Grieben, 1882), XXVIII.

[16] Ibid., 32.

[17] Ibid., XII.

[18] Ibid., 63.

[19] Philipp Mainländer, *The Philosophy of Redemption*, vol. I, trans. Christian Romuss (Irukandji Press, 2024), 272–274.

[20] Ibid., 279–281.

[21] Ibid., 191.

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metaphysics by infusing it with Hegelian dialectical logic. Hartmann's metaphysics had, as a fundamental principle, the Unconscious, which was a combination of chaotic Will and rational Idea.[22] On this picture, history is a teleological process by which humanity becomes aware of the misery of existence.[23] In line with this, our collective aim becomes achieving the "best attainable state, painlessness."[24] Hartmann's introduction of rational progress constitutes a major departure from Schopenhauer, Mainländer, and Bahnsen. As arguably the most popular and well-received post-Schopenhauerian philosopher of his time, Hartmann serves as an important contrast to more standard Schopenhauerian strains of irrationalist metaphysics.

Irrationalist metaphysical systems contrast with theological and rationalist systems that posit God or rationality as an ultimate ontological foundation: Leibniz argues that the principle of sufficient reason suggests that a perfect, rational God chose the "best of all possible worlds," and Hegel conceives of the development of humanity as rationally governed by the teleological unfolding of the Absolute Idea. On these views, reality is structured by what is assumed to be valuable, such as perfection or rationality. If this fundamental value entails empirical value (such as harmony with nature), empirical disvalue (such as suffering) becomes something to be explained. The question becomes: what is it that explains the incongruence between the supposedly perfect or rational world order and the apparently imperfect and irrational world of experience? Suffering, then, becomes a "problem of evil" requiring theodicy.

Schopenhauer inverts this tradition. If the "inner being of this world" is a "blind, aimless striving" that "feasts on itself," then suffering is the problem of the world, not merely a problem in the world that could be explained away. With an aimless and irrational Will as the ground of being, his metaphysics casts the structure of existence as disvaluable, as inhibiting value, or as able to produce disvalue.[25] This view does not just admit of disvalue (as many views do) but further

[22] Eduard von Hartmann, *Philosophy of the Unconscious* (Routledge, 2014), xv–xxx, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315822952.

[23] Ibid., 1, 137.

[24] Ibid., 124.

[25] A similar contrast is brought out in: Christopher Janaway, "The Real Essence of Human Beings: Schopenhauer and the Unconscious Will," in *Thinking the Unconscious: Nineteenth-Century German Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); Mor Segev, *The Value of the*

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acknowledges a structural and all-consuming disvalue that infects all of existence. Such a view has no obligation to justify disvalue; instead, it fundamentalizes it. The Will necessarily involves striving, lack, and conflict. Consequently, the painful human condition is not a contingent accident or a temporary state. Suffering is the direct, necessary, and essential expression of the world's innermost nature. Thus, metaphysical irrationality entails disvalue.

Insight

Schopenhauer posits a link between his theoretical metaphysics and the practical, affective life of the virtuous person. The key textual proof for this idea lies in Schopenhauer's statements regarding his metaphysics being expressed or "translated" by those that are noble. He states that

> [...] practical wisdom, doing right and doing good, would in the and harmonize perfectly with the profoundest teaching of theoretical wisdom carried to its farthest limits; and the practical philosopher, that is, the just, the righteous, beneficent, and magnanimous man, would express by his deed that knowledge only which is the result of the greatest intellectual depth and the most laborious research of the theoretical philosopher.[26]

He reiterated this connection: "to be just, noble, and humane is simply to translate my metaphysics into action."[27] Schopenhauer names this non-theoretical grasp of metaphysical truth "practical mysticism."[28] For Schopenhauer, "[m]ysticism in the broadest sense is any instruction leading towards direct awareness of what is unreachable by either intuition[29] or concept, and hence what cannot be reached

World and of Oneself: Philosophical Optimism and Pessimism from Aristotle to Modernity, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197634073.001.0001.

[26] Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. Eric F. J. Payne (Berghahn Books, 1995), 209–210.

[27] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. II, 616.

[28] Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, 212.

[29] Here, Schopenhauer uses "Anschauung".

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by any cognition at all."[30] This mysticism (direct awareness of the unity of all beings) is practical as it entails just and compassionate acts. Schopenhauer argues that:

> A saint can be full of the most absurd superstitions, or conversely he can be a philosopher: it makes no difference. Only his deeds confirm him to be a saint: because morally, his deeds do not come from abstract cognition, but from an intuitively[31] grasped, direct cognition of the world and its essence, and he filters this through some dogma only to satisfy his reason.[32]

Schopenhauer insists that "dead" abstractions are not needed for virtue, stating, "it is just as unnecessary for the saint to be a philosopher as it is for a philosopher to be a saint."[33] The core ideas here are: virtuous actions express metaphysical truths, direct awareness of the truth (which the saint has) motivates virtuous actions, and direct awareness captures truths that reason cannot.

For Bahnsen, insight depends on feeling:[34] "[t]he crucial nexus between the metaphysical and the empirically real world is occupied by feeling; from this, the progression toward representation, abstraction, and their conventional language of signs unfolds."[35] Some tragedians have the rare ability to turn contradiction, the fundamental nature of reality that manifests in personal inner conflict, into "tangible objectivity."[36] While this feeling can be translated into art, it cannot be fully captured by concepts: "[t]o pure rationalism, the tragic remains as much a riddle as humor appears a folly and the beautiful a mere figment of the imagination."[37] He goes on to say:

> So it is everywhere the same Will: in the Beautiful it deceives itself, by means of its underlying unity, about its fundamental self-division; in the Tragic it recognizes itself as self-divided; and in Humor, by turning its own duality against itself and

[30] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. II, 626.

[31] Here, Schopenhauer uses "intuitiv."

[32] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, 410.

[33] Ibid.

[34] I have translated "Gefühl" as "feeling"; elsewhere, Bahnsen uses the term "Affect."

[35] Bahnsen, *Der Widerspruch im Wissen und Wesen der Welt*, vol. I, 35.

[36] Julius Bahnsen, *Das tragische als Weltgesetz und der Humor als ästhetische Gestalt des Metaphysischen: Monographien aus den Grenzgebieten der Realdialektik* (F. Ferley, 1877), 47.

[37] Ibid., 7.

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> setting the spirit victoriously against what is willed, it rises above itself — corresponding to the three stages of immediate intuition[38], of rational reflection, and of metaphysical speculation…[39]

Here, Bahnsen lays out a correspondence between aesthetic and intellectual insight. He maintains "the difference between a truly tragic contradiction and a merely superficial one, such as frequently manifests in the relationship between a mere surge of affect[40] and one's fundamental Will," emphasizing that not all feeling provides insight.[41] Elsewhere, he argues that the proper end to inquiry is "when abstract (fully conscious) knowledge fully aligns with intuitive (pre-conscious) knowledge—a congruence in which Schopenhauer, too, sees the criterion of intellectual maturity."[42] At the point of maturity, the non-intellectual insight (perhaps through the beautiful, tragic, or humorous) provides the same insight as abstract reason and speculation. This mirrors Schopenhauer's claim that metaphysical truth is translated by the virtuous into action, but it shifts from the practical to the aesthetic.

Mainländer argues that the essence of the Will cannot be grasped through reading philosophy: "we apprehend immediately the core of our essence, through self-consciousness, in feeling. It is an immediate awareness of our essence by means of the mind, or more accurately, by means of sensibility."[43] Similarly to Schopenhauer, he prioritizes awareness that carries practical import, arguing that "[m]ere knowledge is worth nothing at all, for the intellect has no power whatsoever. Knowledge must pass over into the blood, the archetype of all force. The blood catches fire, ignites and shatters; the intellect merely mirrors the flames and

[38] Here, and in the following quote, Bahnsen uses "Intuition" and not "Anschauung."

[39] Bahnsen, *Das tragische als Weltgesetz und der Humor als ästhetische Gestalt des Metaphysischen*, 6–7.

[40] Bahnsen uses "Affects" here.

[41] Bahnsen, *Das tragische als Weltgesetz und der Humor als ästhetische Gestalt des Metaphysischen*, 17.

[42] Bahnsen, *Der Widerspruch im Wissen und Wesen der Welt*, vol. I, X.

[43] Mainländer, *The Philosophy of Redemption*, vol. I, 43.

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the wreckage."[44] Mainländer holds that apprehension through feeling involves insight and motivation not available through other forms of thought, while not endorsing the idea of insight being translated into action.

Hartmann offers an account of how affective states serve as the "resonance" of unconscious cognition. He maintains that feeling provides an immediate, primary conviction that serves as the "mother of philosophy."[45] Wonder[46], triggered by pain, forces the individual to interrogate the "riddle" of the world.[47] Hartmann distinguishes between "dead knowledge," which lacks the energy to motivate, and ideas from the Unconscious that provide the "energy" necessary to impact the subject.[48] Feelings are "unconsciously containing ideas" that have not yet been consciously articulated.[49] Truths can enter human awareness in an "inadequate form" (manifesting as dull feelings, premonitions, or awe) before they can eventually be translated into clear thought.[50] Similarly, he recommends the "sublimation" of raw states, such as Weltschmerz, into "cold theoretical knowledge" of the universality of suffering.[51] According to Hartmann, situational pain and individual misfortune serve as essential "passage points" for the recognition of pessimistic truth.[52] On Hartmann's view, affect is motivating but inadequate as insight and must be passed through and formed into theoretical knowledge—this marks an important difference between Hartmann and the other pessimists.

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[44] Philipp Mainländer, *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*, vol. II (Jaeger'sche Buchhandlung, 1894), 484.

[45] Eduard von Hartmann, *Gesammelte Philosophische Abhandlungen zur Philosophie des Unbewussten* (Carl Duncker's, 1872), 20.

[46] I translate "Verwunderung" as "wonder."

[47] Hartmann, *Gesammelte Philosophische Abhandlungen zur Philosophie des Unbewussten*, 20.

[48] Ibid., 109.

[49] Hartmann, *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, 35.

[50] Hartmann, *Gesammelte Philosophische Abhandlungen zur Philosophie des Unbewussten*, 109.

[51] Eduard von Hartmann, *Zur Geschichte und Begründung des Pessimismus* (Haacke, 1892), 192–194.

[52] Hartmann, *Zur Geschichte und Begründung des Pessimismus*, 217.

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Compassion

These thinkers posit that affective states are vital for gaining certain kinds of insight that are otherwise inaccessible. We see the importance of specific affects from the preceding discussion: insight is to be found in experiences of tragedy, humor, and wonder. To fully understand the role of affect in the ethical domain, we must turn to Schopenhauer, Bahnsen, and Mainländer on compassion. After discussing each of their views on the epistemic dimension of compassion, I will turn to Hartmann's alternative approach to compassion, which will again provide a helpful contrast case.

For Schopenhauer, compassion is foundational to ethics: "wholly direct and even instinctive participation in another's sufferings—compassion—is the sole source of such actions when they are said to have moral worth."[53] The ethical virtues of non-interference (justice) and active help (loving-kindness) have compassion as their basis.[54] Compassion further serves to counteract human tendencies towards egoism and malice.[55] Schopenhauer argues that compassion is not mere sentiment; it constitutes an "immediate participation" in the suffering of another.[56] The principium individuationis is affirmed by egoism, but a moment of genuine compassion "sees through" it, lifting the "veil of Maya."[57] The subject recognizes their own essence in the other, grasping the metaphysical identity of all beings. For Schopenhauer, that this can occur serves as proof that his monistic metaphysics is correct.

Following the Hellenic tragic tradition, Bahnsen identifies fear and compassion as the fundamental emotional chords of tragic art.[58] While some "weep over the merely sad in soft-hearted compassion," "the genuinely tragic awakens something better than empty lamentation: it unveils to us an insight into the most secret

[53] Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, 163.

[54] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, 397–398.

[55] Ibid., 390.

[56] Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, 144.

[57] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, 405.

[58] Bahnsen, *Das Tragische als Weltgesetz und der Humor als ästhetische Gestalt des Metaphysischen*, 20.

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depths of the Primordial-Eternal itself."[59] Compassion does not only appear in Bahnsen's discussion of aesthetics, as he also argues for "the absolute significance of compassion as the foundation of all ethics."[60] Bahnsen distinguishes "noble love" that maintains the dignity of the subjects and the requirements of justice from "a certain kind of compassion, often called mercy… which takes place without the slightest stir of genuine warm-heartedness, [and] is rightfully deemed contemptible."[61] On this view, a right kind of compassionate feeling (that is not too weepy and not too cold) must accompany genuinely good acts.

Mainländer similarly placed compassion at the center of his ethics. The goal of social change is to reform each person's egoism so that, "The suffering of their neighbours provokes in them the ethical, extraordinarily significant state of compassion, the fruits of which are genuinely moral deeds. In the state of compassion we sense a positive suffering within ourselves; it is a deep feeling of unpleasure which lacerates our heart and which we can only abolish by *relieving of his suffering* our suffering neighbour."[62] For Mainländer, compassion is the recognition that life is a burden we must cast off by denying the Will-to-Life.[63] He believed compassion should lead to social progress to make life tolerable until all people choose not to reproduce.[64] Mainländer argued for the permissibility of suicide; since there is a distinct Will in everyone, destroying oneself achieves annihilation of the Will.[65] The demand of his ethics was for chastity and non-reproduction, which would result in the annihilation of all individual human Wills.[66]

Despite its role as a "corrective and restricter of egoism," Hartmann differs in ultimately labeling compassion as an "evil" because it brings more pain than pleasure to the sufferer.[67] For the sake of redeeming the "Great Whole," he advocates for a "pessimistically purified universal compassion" that manifests as "work

[59] Bahnsen, *Das Tragische als Weltgesetz und der Humor als ästhetische Gestalt des Metaphysischen*, 47.

[60] Bahnsen, *Der Widerspruch im Wissen und Wesen der Welt*, vol. II, 227.

[61] Ibid., 176.

[62] Mainländer, *The Philosophy of Redemption*, vol. I, 186.

[63] Ibid., 186–189.

[64] Ibid., 179, 254, 260.

[65] Mainländer, *Die Philosophie der Erlösung,* vol. II, 218.

[66] Mainländer, *The Philosophy of Redemption*, vol. I, 179.

[67] Hartmann, *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, 42.

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in the service of the moral world order" while warning against "unfruitful compassion" that fails to aid "in the struggle against remediable suffering."[68] Hartmann is the most critical of compassion and does not give it pride of place as a vehicle for insight. Instead, fitting with his emphasis on progress, compassion serves as a motivator for social reform. This marks a stark divergence from Schopenhauer, Mainländer, and Bahnsen. In the following section, I will account for this divergence and offer a general Schopenhauerian theory of tragic compassion.

Tragic Compassion

Schopenhauer, Bahnsen, and Mainländer assign priority to non-intellectual insight with regard to the fundamental nature of the Will, and thereby the nature of reality. Further, all of them can be interpreted as construing this non-intellectual insight as affective (as it involves feeling and motivation). Compassion is the affective phenomenon all three philosophers associate most closely with the ethical implications of their irrationalist metaphysics. However, the insight of compassion should be understood as having two varieties: one involving instances of compassion, the other involving a compassionate way of being. The first involves a momentary piercing of illusion, while the second consists of a stable, or even permanent, falling away of illusion (as happens with the saint on Schopenhauer's description). This latter phenomenon I will call "tragic compassion."

If one sees the nature of things with "a high degree of clarity," then they are forced to take "the pain of the whole world" upon themselves.[69] An insight of this kind and degree is what I take to coincide with tragic compassion. Tragic compassion represents the radicalization of compassion; it is the saintly disposition to feel compassion often (if not always) and to many (if not all). Ordinary compassion may remain localized, seeking the amelioration of individual pain, or be momentary. In contrast, tragic compassion is the stable state where the agent no longer distinguishes between a neighbor's woe and the structural woe of existence itself. The tragic element arises from the realization that the source of suffering is incurable. Tragic compassion is the transition from momentary compassionate

[68] Hartmann, *Zur Geschichte und Begründung des Pessimismus*, 192–194.

[69] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, 405.

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instants to an attunement to ineradicable vulnerability.[70] If ordinary compassion says, "I feel your pain," tragic compassion concludes, "All life is pain, and this pain is mine."

Tragic compassion is thus analogous to Schopenhauer's conception of aesthetic genius. On his view, genius consists in providing insight into the nature of reality by engaging with art disinterestedly.[71] While many can briefly achieve this state, experiencing a moment of disinterested aesthetic contemplation, the genius is defined by the sustained capacity for this state.[72] Their creative output (art, music, poetry) is a reproduction of this insight, making them a channel for humanity to access the objective character of the world.[73] This distinction between momentary disinterested contemplation and genius is, I think, parallel to the distinction between momentary compassion and the tragic compassion of the saint. For Schopenhauer, the insights provided by genius and tragic compassion differ: the former is access to the Ideas that govern the objectification of the Will[74], while the latter is apprehension of individual suffering and its constitutive structure.[75] For Bahnsen, however, "the specifically aesthetic is merely a particular mode of contemplating the very same objects that otherwise fall under the categories of the Real (force), the Ethical (relations of conscious individual Wills), and the True (cognition of the Real Contradiction)".[76] This is a different view of aesthetic insight that implies a correspondence between the insight of tragic compassion and that of aesthetic genius. How this should be resolved requires further work comparing Schopenhauer's and Bahnsen's aesthetics.

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[70] On the shift from focus on suffering to vulnerability to suffering, see: Gudrun von Tevenar, "Schopenhauer, the Philosopher of Vulnerability," in *Schopenhauer's Moral Philosophy*, ed. Patrick Hassan (Routledge, 2021).

[71] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. II, 398.

[72] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, 209.

[73] Ibid., 207.

[74] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. II, 393–396.

[75] For an argument that these moral and aesthetic insights are importantly different, see Sandra Shapshay, "The Moral Perception of Inherent Value," in *Schopenhauer's Moral Philosophy*, ed. Patrick Hassan (Routledge, 2021).

[76] Bahnsen, *Das Tragische als Weltgesetz und der Humor als ästhetische Gestalt des Metaphysischen*, 2.

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With this understanding of tragic compassion in hand, we may usefully contrast it with two other Schopenhauerian concepts involving transformed compassion. The first is "Menschenliebe" (loving-kindness or philanthropy): the active, expansive manifestation of the compassionate impulse—the sustained, pro-social expression of solicitude for the collective.[77] The second is the transformation of compassion into quietism: "a virtuous action is a momentary passage through the point to which the negation of the will to life is a permanent return."[78] Compassion concerns activity, while quietism is constituted by passivity. The tension between these two Schopenhauerian ethical ideals has led some to argue that they are independent[79] while others[80] argue that each is an ideal for a different standpoint. Tragic compassion, as insight into the structural and necessary causes of suffering, might seem to diminish activity. Why would you be motivated to relieve suffering when you realize that the conditions which produce it are permanent? The difference between tragic compassion and quietism lies in the affective dimension of compassion. Tragic compassion involves the feeling of another's pain; the model here is the saint rather than the ascetic. This creates a tension between the feeling of pain ("I want this to stop"), activity ("I want to stop this"), and passivity ("I cannot stop this—its determinants are unchangeable"). Therefore, tragic compassion is unlike loving-kindness as it involves conflicted agency. It is also unlike quietism as it still motivates action: action without the expectation that the conditions that make suffering possible will ever be overcome.

The distinction between compassion and a saintly disposition for compassion (as captured by the concept of tragic compassion) is under-explored in the

[77] Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, 174.

[78] Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. II, 625.

[79] Sandra Shapshay and Tristan Ferrell, "Compassion or Renunciation? That Is the Question of Schopenhauer's Ethics," *Enrahonar. an International Journal of Theoretical and Practical Reason* 55 (October 2015): 51–69, https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/enrahonar.427.

[80] Patrick Hassan, "Schopenhauer's Ethics of Compassion," in *The New Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, ed. Sandra Shapshay and Colin Marshall (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), accessed 3 July, 2026, https://philarchive.org/rec/HASSEO.

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literature on compassion in Schopenhauerian thought. The distinction is not often made[81], and when it is,[82] the discussion does not capture differences between the two kinds of compassion. The first distinguishing feature of tragic compassion is its complex set of contradictory motivational states, as discussed above. The second distinguishing feature is that tragic compassion offers insight not only into the pain in another's body, but into the metaphysical and volitional structures that make pain possible. The insight of tragic compassion involves a lasting apprehension of the condition of being ineradicably vulnerable to suffering, which is not the case with every instance of compassion.

Now to return to the contrast case in Hartmann. Hartmann argues that sublimated compassion seeks, through rational progress, to overcome the immediate connection to the sufferer that compassion involves. This suggests that there may be something about construing existential disvalue as ameliorable that makes the apt affective state future-oriented hope (or something similar) rather than agent-oriented compassion. If the nature of reality is at bottom irrational, and if feeling is to reveal this to us, then it will have to be a painful affect like compassion (rather than any positive emotion) that gives us the clearest possible insight into the suffering of the world. Consequently, Hartmann's thought can be read as an illustration of how the importance of compassion for ethics tends to fall away when a foundational rationality is re-introduced to metaphysics. If history inexorably moves toward a rationally ordered state of harmony that will eliminate all pain, then what is the need for compassionate "suffering-with" another person when all suffering is guaranteed to end? Moreover, for any metaphysical system that puts goodness, rationality, or perfection at the heart of things, compassion will no longer be capable of conferring epistemic insight: suffering will simply no longer be central to all of existence.

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[81] Colin Marshall, "Schopenhauer on the Content of Compassion," *Noûs* 55, no. 4 (2021): 782–799, https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12330.

[82] David E. Cartwright, "Schopenhauer on the Value of Compassion," in *A Companion to Schopenhauer*, ed. Bart Vandenabeele, Blackwell Companions to Philosophy (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); David E. Cartwright, "Compassion and Solidarity with Sufferers: The Metaphysics of Mitleid," *European Journal of Philosophy* 16, no. 2 (2008): 292–310, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2008.00312.x; Patrick Hassan, "Schopenhauerian Virtue Ethics," *Inquiry* 65, no. 4 (2022): 381–413, https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2019.1629337.

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Conclusion

Comparing Schopenhauer and the philosophers who followed him allows us to recognize the affective phenomenon that I call tragic compassion. Tragic compassion motivates us to act even when we can't believe that suffering can be alleviated, or, more radically, if we can positively know that suffering can never be alleviated. This makes it not only an interesting feature of Schopenhauerian thought but a potentially fruitful political and ethical attitude. Tragic compassion promises to motivate action while generating and sustaining a set of contradictory motivational states. The volitional character of tragic compassion addresses concerns that are often raised concerning the effect of accepting pessimistic philosophy as true.[83] With the posit of an irrational structure of reality, it may be entailed that only through a non-intellectual form of cognition such as feeling can we gain complete (or as complete as is possible) insight into reality. This is because the nature of reality, if assumed to be irrational, does not lend itself to rational comprehension. The metaphysicians of irrationality (Schopenhauer, Bahnsen, and Mainländer) all develop a similar non-rational alternative: affective insight. In the ethical realm, affective insight allows us to apprehend something about our fellow beings. The thing that metaphysical irrationality ensures is that all beings of ethical consideration suffer. The apt affective response to this is Mitleid[84], suffering-with.

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[83] These concerns go back to the Jesuit writers who coined the term "pessimism" to disparage Voltaire, and have continued to the present day with critiques of philosophies that undermine hope.

[84] Standardly translated as compassion, Mitleid, broken into its component words, is: mit ("with") + Leid ("sorrow, suffering"). The same is the case for the Latin compassio (con + passiō) and the Ancient Greek sympathēs (syn + pathos).

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Streszczenie

Wgląd w irracjonalność: Schopenhauerowskie tragiczne współczucie

Projekt poświęcony jest egzystencjalnej naturze tego, co jest bez pozytywnej wartości. Główna teza głosi, że głęboki wgląd w jego strukturę dokonuje się za pośrednictwem dwóch odrębnych, lecz fundamentalnie powiązanych dróg: formalnej filozoficznej doktryny pesymizmu Schopenhauera oraz swoistej orientacji afektywno-poznawczej, którą nazywam tragicznym współczuciem. Artykuł porusza problem tego, w jaki sposób metafizyka fundamentalnej irracjonalności i powszechnego cierpienia przekłada się na praktyczny, etyczny sposób istnienia ludzkiego podmiotu. Arthur Schopenhauer, Philipp Mainländer, Julius Bahnsen oraz Eduard von Hartmann uznają szczególnego rodzaju poznanie poprzez afekt; proponuję pojęcie tragicznego współczucia jako próbę syntetycznego ujęcia tych stanowisk w kontekście etyki. Na pierwszy plan wysuwam niedostatecznie dotąd przebadany aspekt filozofii Schopenhauera dotyczący

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epistemicznego statusu afektu oraz przedstawiam oryginalną koncepcję tragicznego współczucia.

Słowa kluczowe: Arthur Schopenhauer, Philipp Mainländer, Julius Bahnsen, Eduard von Hartmann, irracjonalność, afekt, współczucie

Zusammenfassung

Einblick in die Irrationalität: Schopenhauers tragisches Mitgefühl

Das Projekt widmet sich dem existentiellen Wesen des Unwerts. Seine Hauptthese lautet, dass ein tiefer Einblick in dessen Struktur über zwei getrennte, aber grundlegend miteinander verbundene Wege erfolgt: über die formale philosophische Lehre des Schopenhauerschen Pessimismus und über eine spezifische affektiv-kognitive Orientierung, die ich als tragisches Mitgefühl bezeichne. In diesem Artikel wird die Frage analysiert, wie sich eine Metaphysik der grundlegenden Irrationalität und des allgegenwärtigen Leidens auf eine praktische, ethische Lebensweise des menschlichen Subjekts auswirkt. Arthur Schopenhauer, Philipp Mainländer, Julius Bahnsen und Eduard von Hartmann halten für möglich eine besondere Art der Erkenntnis, die sich über den Affekt vollzieht; ich schlage den Begriff des tragischen Mitgefühls als Versuch einer synthetischen Zusammenfassung ihrer Standpunkte in der Ethik vor. Im Mittelpunkt der Analyse stelle ich einen bislang wenig untersuchten Aspekt von Schopenhauers Philosophie, der den epistemischen Status des Affekts betrifft, und stelle ein originelles Konzept des tragischen Mitgefühls.

Schlüsselwörter: Arthur Schopenhauer, Philipp Mainländer, Julius Bahnsen, Eduard von Hartmann, Irrationalität, Affekt, Mitgefühl

Ins Deutsche übersetzt von Anna Pastuszka