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Abstract: Richard Wagner's animal ethics is an underresearched issue within Wagner scholarship. In this article, I aim to fill this gap. In particular, I will demonstrate that, by drawing on Schopenhauer's philosophy, Wagner indicated a path to elaborate an animal ethics. First, I will reconstruct Schopenhauer's animal ethics, showing how it was deeply imbued with tenets of Brahmanism and Buddhism. Second, I will deal with Wagner's animal ethics, illustrating its indebtedness to Schopenhauer.

Key Words: Wagner, animal ethics, Schopenhauer, compassion, Brahmanism, Buddhism, metempsychosis, palingenesis

INTRODUCTION

Richard Wagner's animal ethics is an underresearched issue within Wagner scholarship. The recent book *The Philosophies of Richard Wagner* (2014) by Julian Young does not address this issue. Apart from the very recent PhD dissertation *Richard Wagner's Political Ecology* (2018) by Kirsten Sarah Paige and the 1999 book *Ethical Vegetarianism: From Pythagoras to Peter Singer* by Kerry S. Walters and Lisa Portmess, the import of Wagner's reflections for animal ethics has been mostly ignored by scholars. While the 2018 dissertation basically only mentions Wagner's concern for animal health without expanding on that, the 1999 book merely lists some of Wagner's most important quotations on animals, without putting them into the context of Wagner's philosophical thought, which is this article's aim. In particular, the main goal of this article is to demonstrate that, by drawing on Schopenhauer's philosophy, Wagner indicated a path to elaborate an animal ethics. In the next section, I will reconstruct Schopenhauer's animal ethics, showing how it was deeply imbued with tenets of Brahmanism and Buddhism. In the last section of the article, I will deal with Wagner's animal ethics, illustrating its indebtedness to Schopenhauer.

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SCHOPENHAUER'S ANIMAL ETHICS

Between 1814 and 1818, when he was working on the first edition of *The World as Will and Representation* (1818), Schopenhauer was especially under the spell of the ancient sacred text of Brahmanism *The Upanishads*, which he read in the Latin translation by Anquetil Duperron, the *Oupnek'hat*. Schopenhauer (2015) had a lifelong reverence for this book, and about 9 years before his death he affirmed: "It is the most rewarding and elevating reading . . . possible in the whole world; it has been the consolation of my life and it will be that of my dying" (p. II:357).

Schopenhauer's view is that the very doctrine of compassion is contained in the *Oupnek'hat*'s concept of metempsychosis, particularly in its formula "tatoumes," or "tat tvam asi," as Schopenhauer specifies in the second edition of *The World* (1844), meaning: "You are that." In the first 1818 edition of *The World*, Schopenhauer (1969) so explains the *Oupnek'hat*'s concept of metempsychosis:

> Tormentor and tormented are one. . . . The wise ancestors of the Indian people have directly expressed it in the *Vedas*, permitted only to the three twice-born castes, or in the esoteric teaching, namely in so far as concept and language comprehend it, and in so far as their method of presentation, always pictorial and even rhapsodical, allows it. But in the religion of the people, or in exoteric teaching, they have communicated it only mythically. We find the direct presentation in the *Vedas*, the fruit of the highest human knowledge and wisdom, the kernel of which has finally come to us in the *Upanishads* as the greatest gift to the nineteenth century. (p. I:355)

The above quotation from the fourth and last book of *The World* is one of its most important passages, and perhaps the most famous. For Schopenhauer, the *Oupnek'hat* indirectly affirmed the doctrine of compassion through the concept of metempsychosis in order to convey it more easily to the majority of people. This is because they, lacking an enlightened understanding, were not able to gain an insight into the oneness of reality, and thus this concept was the only means to make this insight understandable to them.

According to Schopenhauer, the concept of metempsychosis holds that, due to karma, if we inflict suffering on another being in our current existence, to expiate this evil action we will be reborn as this very being in our next existence and endure precisely the same suffering we caused before. For example, if we kill an animal in our current existence, we will be reborn as this animal and experience the same destiny. Thus, the concept of metempsychosis indirectly teaches the oneness of reality in that it affirms the identity of the beings throughout the transmigrations. We are identical to the same being we make suffer, and the law of karma will cause us to be reborn precisely as this being in the next existence.

Schopenhauer sings the praises of the concept of metempsychosis contained in the *Oupnek'hat* because he sees a great correspondence between the doctrine of compassion expressed by this concept and his ethics of compassion as elaborated in the fourth book of his masterpiece. Schopenhauer's main argument is that, once we liberate our-

selves from our wrong understanding of reality due to our senses, we come to realize the real essence of the world as one, which he calls "will to live." This is an eternal and immutable metaphysical principle of which the world of fleeting phenomena we experience in our everyday life is an apparent manifestation. In our everyday life, we see other human beings, animals, plants, and inorganic matter as different things. In reality, they are one: will to live. Rocks, waterfalls, and everything that exists on earth are the same thing as us, sharing with us the same essence as will. The will to live is an endless striving, a blind "impulse" that continuously seeks to satisfy its desires. The *principium individuationis*, a cognitive tool inborn in us, makes us behave egoistically because, in seeing the world as an environment of different phenomena rather than as the one will to live, we are led to take care only of ourselves. But if we went beyond the *principium individuationis*, which for Schopenhauer drawing on Indian thought means going beyond the "veil of maya," we would be led to practice compassion toward others.

Schopenhauer's point is that, since Brahmanism, the most ancient religion on earth, affirms the doctrine of compassion, this is a proof of its truthfulness. As a consequence, his ethics based on compassion must also be true. Schopenhauer shared the conviction of many intellectuals before him, such as the philosophers of the Enlightenment, Herder, Goethe, and the Schlegel brothers, that India was the cradle of humankind. Along with them, Schopenhauer believed India to be the place in which perennial philosophy containing the main truths of humankind, which then spread in other corrupted forms all over the world throughout history, had been first thought of. By illustrating how his ethics was in harmony with that of the ancient Indian sages, Schopenhauer hoped to gain authority from them.

If, on one hand, in the first 1818 edition of *The World* Schopenhauer seeks confirmations of the truthfulness of his system in Brahmanism, on the other hand, from 1844, the publication year of the second edition of *The World*, he looks for confirmations in Buddhism.

> If I wished to take the results of my philosophy as the standard of truth, I should have to concede to Buddhism pre-eminence over the others. In any case, it must be a pleasure to me to see my doctrine in such close agreement with a religion that the majority of men on earth hold as their own, for this numbers far more followers than any other. And this agreement must be yet the more pleasing to me, inasmuch as in my philosophizing I have certainly not been under its influence. (Schopenhauer, 1969, p. II:169)

In the second edition of *The World*, Schopenhauer holds Buddhism in high esteem, considering its doctrine the criterion of truth *par excellence* according to which one should evaluate the other doctrines, both philosophical and religious. In this respect, he is very pleased that his own doctrine is in "great agreement" with Buddhism. Hence, it must be true in the same way as Buddhism.

In the modern editions of the second volume of *Parerga and Paralipomena* (1851), which incorporate Schopenhauer's posthumous comments, Schopenhauer (2015) under-

lines again the "great agreement" between his philosophy and Buddhism, in particular the Buddhist teaching of palingenesis:

> One could very well differentiate metempsychosis, as the transition of the entire so-called soul into another body, and palingenesis, as disintegration and new formation of the individual, insofar as only his will persists and obtains a new intellect, adopting the shape of a new being. The individual therefore disintegrates like a neutral salt whose base then combines with another acid to form a new salt. (p. II:249)

In Schopenhauer's understanding, on the one hand the Brahmanical concept of metempsychosis expresses the cycle of rebirth in which the same soul, being eternal and immutable, every time enters a new body. On the other hand, in his eyes, the Buddhist palingenesis instead affirms the rebirth of a perishable being: in particular, it claims that at death there is the "disintegration" of the individual and out of such a disintegration the "new formation" of another individual. That for Buddhism rebirth does not involve an eternal and immutable soul but a perishable individual for Schopenhauer is in harmony with his philosophy.

Despite their metaphysical differences, ultimately for Schopenhauer the Brahmanical metempsychosis and the Buddhist palingenesis contain the same ethical core. They both share the insight of tat tvam asi, underlining our kinship with animals:

> Christianity . . . has a major and fundamental imperfection in the fact that its precepts are limited to human beings and it leaves the entire animal world without rights. . . . Among Hindus and Buddhists, on the contrary, what matters is the Mahavakya (the great word) "Tat tvam asi" (you are that), which is to be spoken at all times over every animal in order to bring home to us and remain mindful of the identity of its inner essence and ours, as a guide to our conduct. (Schopenhauer, 2015, pp. II:334, 336)

In Schopenhauer's eyes, both the Brahmanical metempsychosis and the Buddhist palingenesis affirm the identity of beings throughout the transmigrations and hence the need for compassionate behavior toward all living beings, both human and nonhuman. If Christianity emphasizes the ontological leap between humans and animals, Buddhism and Brahmanism affirm that we are the same being, that taking care of other beings, both human and nonhuman, is tantamount to taking care of ourselves. Ultimately, Schopenhauer suggests an animal ethics based on tat tvam asi. As we shall see in the next section, in this respect Wagner completely aligns himself with Schopenhauer.

WAGNER

In the middle stage of his career, Wagner, an ardent supporter of anarcho-communism, strongly believed in the potential of art to foster the revolution. He himself even took part in revolts. In 1848, political upheavals demanding for the abolition of the *ancien régime* were spreading across Europe. At that time, Wagner, a famous opera composer, was in Germany, leading the Royal State Opera of Dresden. He had reached the fame especially for his operas *Rienzi*, *Der fliegende Hollander*, and *Tannhäuser*, which had

been well received by some of the prominent figures of the epoch, such as Baudelaire, Spohr, and Hanslick. Between 1848 and 1849, the revolution broke out also in Dresden, and Wagner enthusiastically joined it, together with Mikhail Bakunin, who at that time was already a famous revolutionary anarchist in contact with Karl Marx and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Wagner and Bakunin were both members of the left-wing action group *Vaterlandsverein* in Dresden.

As with most of the 1848 revolutions, the revolt in Dresden failed, and in 1849 the 36-year-old Wagner fled to Zürich in Switzerland holding a passport with the name of Professor Widmann. Despite the fall of the revolutions, at the beginning of his Zürich stay, Wagner still believed in the necessity of a radical societal change and in the revolutionary role of art. He keenly embraced the optimism of the materialistic philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach and even dedicated his book *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft,* or *The Artwork of the Future*, (1849) to him.

In 1854, an event happened that was a turning point in Wagner's life. In the fall of the same year, the poet Georg Herwegh introduced Schopenhauer's *World* to him. After that, Wagner would never be the same. The encounter with Schopenhauer led him to completely change his worldview. Schopenhauer had entirely persuaded him of the worthlessness of life. He then replaced Feuerbach's optimism with Schopenhauer's pessimism. If previously he had sought for redemption through revolution, now with Schopenhauer he started looking for redemption through denial of the will. The flame of his revolutionary ardor extinguished forever. Wagner (1936) was so enthralled by Schopenhauer's *World* that he read it four times "by the summer of the following year" (p. 616). In a letter to Franz Liszt from December 1854, Wagner (1987) fully expressed his enthusiasm for Schopenhauer's philosophy, describing it as "a gift from heaven":

> I have now become exclusively preoccupied with a man who, although only in literary form, has entered my lonely life like a gift from heaven. It is *Arthur Schopenhauer*, the greatest philosopher since Kant. . . . His principal idea, the final denial of the will to live, is of terrible seriousness, but it is uniquely redeeming. . . . I have . . . found a sedative which has finally helped me to sleep at night; it is the sincere and heartfelt yearning for death: total unconsciousness, complete annihilation, the end of all dreams, the only ultimate redemption! (p. 323)

In his autobiography, Wagner (1936) admitted that his encounter with Schopenhauer represented a crucial moment in his life, leading him to abandon the optimism of Feuerbach and the Greeks and espouse Schopenhauer's pessimism:

> In the peaceful quietness of my house at this time I first came across a book which was destined to be of great importance to me. This was Arthur Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. . . . For those who hoped to find some philosophical justification for political and social agitation on behalf of so-called "individual freedom" there was certainly no support to be found here. . . . At first I naturally found his ideas by no means palatable. . . . On looking afresh into my *Nibelungen* poem I recognised with surprise that the very things that now so embarrassed me theoretically had long

> been familiar to me in my own poetical conception. Now at last I could understand my Wotan, and I returned with chastened mind to the renewed study of Schopenhauer's book. (pp. 614–616)

Wagner soon understood that Schopenhauer's pessimism undermined any demand for "individual freedom," for which he had fought for so much in the previous years. Hence, he first rejected Schopenhauer's ideas. However, after a deep introspection, he realized that these ideas belonged so much to him that he had more or less implicitly expressed them in his epic music drama *Der Ring des Nibelungen,* or *The Ring of the Nibelung*. It was thanks to Schopenhauer's philosophy that Wagner obtained a more complete self-awareness. Schopenhauer could not be closer to Wagner. Wagner's disappointment with the fall of the 1848 revolutions reached its full shape with his adoption of Schopenhauer's pessimism. Wagner himself admitted that Schopenhauer's philosophy was "destined to be of great importance" to him. He could not be more honest.

In a letter to Franz Liszt from June 7, 1855, Wagner shows how deeply he had absorbed Schopenhauer's worldview. With words that could be mistaken for Schopenhauer's words, Wagner (1987) affirms that everything that exists is will to live:

> This will to live, which is the actual metaphysical basis of all existence, demands solely to live, i.e. to eat and reproduce itself perpetually, and this tendency is demonstrably one and the same whether it be found in the dull rock, in the more delicate plant, or, finally, in the human animal; the only difference lies in the organs which man, having reached the higher stages of his objectification, must use in order to satisfy more complicated needs which, for that reason, are increasingly contested and hardly to meet. (p. 345)

In a letter to Mathilde Wesendonck from July 22, 1860, Wagner (1987) reveals that he feels very close to Schopenhauer, the only "friend" who helped him to gain a completer understanding of himself:

> But I have a friend to whom I am growing more and more attached. It is my old friend Schopenhauer, so sullen in appearance and yet so deeply affectionate a person. Whenever my feelings have ranged most widely and deeply, a unique sense of self-renewal overcomes me each time I open that book of his, for here I find myself a whole person once more and see myself fully understood and clearly expressed. (p. 497)

Some years later, in a letter to Otto Eiser from October 29, 1877, Wagner (1987) reaffirms his closeness to Schopenhauer, claiming that he shares "a deeply tragic perception of the world" with him (p. 876).

Furthermore, much as Schopenhauer, beyond considering everything as will to live, Wagner placed a high value on the Buddhist teaching of palingenesis. Wagner (1936) found particularly fascinating the musical representation of palingenesis through the repetition of the same musical themes, as he admits in his autobiography:

> To the mind of Buddha the past life (in a former incarnation) of every being who appears before him stands revealed as plainly as the present; and this simple story has its significance, as showing that the past life of the suffering hero and heroine is bound up

> with the immediate present in this life. I saw at once that the continuous reminiscence in the music of this double existence might perfectly well be presented to the emotions, and I decided accordingly to keep in prospect the working out of this poem as a particularly congenial task. (p. 638)

In a letter to King Ludwig of Bavaria II from August 8, 1865, Wagner incredibly affirms to consider "the transmigration of souls" a reality, thus attributing the "standard of truth" to Buddhism as with Schopenhauer. In particular, Wagner (1987) feels that he has already conducted several lives:

> I then relive anew the fairest and most profound of all nations' myths and dogmas; and the noble belief in the transmigration of souls becomes an inwardly experienced truth. How clearly do I feel that I have lived through several lives in me, in you, in her, and in all who are dear to me: and whenever I feel to be living there, I am conscious of the joys of death, of redemption, and of an end to being. What mysterious riddle is this? It is the mystery of love, a love which no longer knows desire, but which only gives, gives of itself in self-liberation. (p. 656)

In a letter to Jacob Sulzer from May 10–12, 1855, Wagner shows that he had well understood the implications of "the transmigration," meaning by it the Buddhist palingenesis: our identity with animals. In Wagner's eyes, affirming that humans and animals are the same being, palingenesis teaches us that we should treat animals with the same respect as humans. Schopenhauer himself had highlighted these consequences of palingenesis. In addition to sharing with Schopenhauer the concern about the fair treatment of animals, Wagner (1987) also borrows from him the Indian expression "veil of maya":

> And so there are often moments in my life when I feel so completely annihilated by this insight that I suddenly begin to ask myself whether I can go on living. You will perhaps laugh when I tell you that such moments occur above all when I see an animal being tormented: I cannot begin to describe what I then feel and how, as if by magic, I am suddenly permitted an insight into the essence of life itself in all its undivided coherency, . . . which is why I have taken such a great liking to Schopenhauer in particular, because he has instructed me on these matters to my total satisfaction (?). It is at moments such as these that I see the "veil of Maya" completely lifted. (pp. 338–339)

In a letter to Mathilde Wesendonck from October 1, 1858, Wagner tells her how much he was frightened at the sight of a hen being plucked, admitting that he feels more compassion or fellow-suffering for animals than for humans. The reason is that, in his eyes, animals are not capable of achieving a divine state of calm and resignation through suffering as humans do instead:

> Recently, while I was in the street, my eye was caught up by a poulterer's shop; I stared unthinkingly at his piled-up wares, neatly and appetizingly laid out, when I became aware of a man at the side busily plucking a hen, while another man was just putting his hand in a cage, where he sized a live hen and tore its head off. The hideous scream of the animal, and the pitiful, weaker sounds of complaint that it made while being overpowered transfixed my soul with horror. . . . That is why, basically, I feel less fellow-

> suffering for people than for animals. For I can see that the latter are totally denied the capacity to rise above suffering, and to achieve a state of resignation and deep, divine calm. (Wagner, 1987, pp. 422, 424)

In a letter to Ernst von Weber from August 14, 1879, the founder of an antivivisection society, Wagner (1987) laments the poor communication strategy of the Bayreuth Society for the Protection of Animals:

> Yesterday I officially became a member of the local Society for the Protection of Animals. Until now I have respected the activities of such societies, but always regretted that their educational contact with the general public has rested chiefly upon a demonstration of the *uselessness* of persecuting them. . . . I none the less thought it opportune to go a stage further here and appeal to their *fellow feeling* as a basis for ultimately ennobling Christianity. One must begin by drawing people's attention to animals and reminding them of the Brahman's great saying, "Tat twam asi" ("That art thou"), even though it will be difficult to make it acceptable to the modern world of Old Testament Judaization. (p. 896)

For Wagner, instead of insisting on the uselessness of persecuting animals, the Bayreuth Society for the Protection of Animals had better focus on fellow-suffering. Only tat tvam asi can be a solid ground for compassion. Following Schopenhauer, Wagner suggests an animal ethics based on compassion: Only if we consider all beings, both human and nonhuman as related to us, we are motivated to act ethically and practice compassion. Animals are not to be considered inferior beings but the same being as us: will to live, and hence the reason for compassion.

Almost two centuries ago, Wagner had understood the important implications of Schopenhauer's philosophy for animal ethics. However, nowadays, Schopenhauer seems to have disappeared from the current debates on animal ethics. In this respect, it is all the more striking that in the *Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics* (Beauchamp & Frey, 2011) Schopenhauer does not appear among the main points of reference of the current animal ethics theories. The *Handbook* suggests the following thinkers instead: Aristotle, Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and Jeremy Bentham.

However, Schopenhauer was the first Western philosopher to elaborate a systematic ethical theory taking into account both humans and animals. Schopenhauer's philosophy represents an invaluable source of inspiration for animal ethics. Today, it can still play a crucial role in society. It is time to go back to Schopenhauer to rebuild our relationships with the animal world.

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