

SCHOPENHAUER'S VOLUNTARISM AND EARLY BUDDHISM: A COMPARATIVE METAPHYSICAL STUDY OF WILL, SUFFERING, AND LIBERATION

*O VOLUNTARISMO DE SCHOPENHAUER E O BUDISMO PRIMITIVO:
UM ESTUDO METAFÍSICO COMPARATIVO DA VONTADE, DO
SOFRIMENTO E DA LIBERTAÇÃO*

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negation of the will to life in Schopenhauer remains metaphysically tense because the principle to be overcome is also the ultimate ground of appearance. Buddhist liberation, by contrast, follows from the cessation of the conditions that sustain craving. Using comparative hermeneutics, the article clarifies both convergence and divergence across metaphysics, anthropology, ethics, and soteriology. The article contributes to comparative philosophy by showing that Schopenhauer and early Buddhism converge in their existential diagnosis of suffering while diverging in their ontological account of its cause.

Keywords: Schopenhauer; early Buddhism; will; *taṇhā*; *dukkha*; *nibbāna*; comparative philosophy

Abstract: This article examines the philosophical relation between Arthur Schopenhauer's metaphysics of the will and early Buddhist teachings on *taṇhā*, *dukkha*, and *nibbāna*. It argues that both systems diagnose suffering as rooted in restless striving or craving and both associate liberation with the cessation of desire. Yet the article also shows that this similarity has clear limits. Schopenhauer presents the will as the thing in itself and as the inner essence of phenomenal reality, whereas early Buddhism treats craving as a conditioned phenomenon arising through ignorance, feeling, and dependent origination. This distinction has significant consequences for their accounts of liberation. The

Resumo: Este artigo examina a relação filosófica entre a metafísica da vontade de Arthur Schopenhauer e os ensinamentos do budismo primitivo sobre taṇhā (desejo ou sede), dukkha (sofrimento) e nibbāna (nirvana). Argumenta-se que ambos os sistemas identificam o sofrimento como enraizado em um esforço incessante ou em um desejo compulsivo, e ambos associam a libertação à cessação do desejo. No entanto, o artigo também demonstra que essa semelhança possui limites claros. Schopenhauer apresenta a vontade como a coisa em si e como a essência interna da realidade fenomênica, ao passo que o budismo primitivo trata o desejo (taṇhā) como um fenômeno condicionado que surge por meio da ignorância, das sensações e da originação dependente. Essa distinção tem consequências significativas para suas concepções de libertação. A negação da vontade de viver em Schopenhauer permanece metafisicamente problemática, pois o princípio a ser superado é também o fundamento último da aparência. A libertação budista, em contraste, decorre da cessação das condições que sustentam o desejo. Utilizando a hermenêutica comparativa, o artigo esclarece tanto as convergências quanto as divergências entre os dois sistemas nos campos da metafísica, antropologia, ética e soteriologia. O artigo contribui para a filosofia comparada ao demonstrar que Schopenhauer e o budismo primitivo convergem em seu diagnóstico existencial do sofrimento, mas divergem em sua explicação ontológica de sua causa.

Palavras-chave: Schopenhauer; budismo primitivo; vontade; taṇhā; dukkha; nibbāna; filosofia comparada.

Introduction

Suffering occupies a central place in both Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy and early Buddhist teaching. In Schopenhauer's system, the world that appears to the knowing subject is not the whole of reality. Beneath representation lies the will, a blind and ceaseless striving that objectivates itself in nature, the body, desire, conflict, and human restlessness. Because willing arises from lack, life cannot be understood as a neutral field of possible satisfaction. It is marked from within by need, frustration, and the unstable relief that follows temporary fulfilment. Schopenhauer's thesis that the world is both representation and will therefore does not merely add a metaphysical layer to ordinary experience. It changes the meaning of experience itself. What appears as individual desire is, at a deeper level, the appearance of a striving that has no final rest (Schopenhauer, 2010, pp. 124–135, 338).

Early Buddhism also begins from a sober diagnosis of human existence. The First Noble Truth names *dukkha*, often translated as suffering, unsatisfactoriness, or distress. The Second Noble Truth identifies *taṇhā* as the arising of *dukkha*: craving for sensual pleasure, craving for continued existence, and craving for non-existence (Bodhi, 2000, p. 1844). At first glance, the parallel appears striking. Schopenhauer's will and Buddhist craving both seem to describe a structure in which ordinary life is driven by wanting and therefore exposed to suffering. Both traditions also resist the common hope that happiness can be secured by satisfying desire more efficiently. The more one looks at their central claims, the more one sees that desire is not merely one problem among others. It is the form in which bondage ordinarily appears.

This article argues that the parallel is philosophically significant but must be handled with caution. Schopenhauer's will is not simply psychological desire. It is the inner essence of the world as it appears. By contrast, *taṇhā* in early Buddhism is not an ultimate metaphysical substance. It is a conditioned phenomenon within dependent origination. The difference matters. If suffering arises from the will as thing in itself, liberation has the form of a difficult and perhaps mysterious negation of the metaphysical ground of appearance. If suffering arises from craving as a conditioned process, liberation has the form of the cessation of the conditions that maintain craving. The two accounts look close when one begins from suffering. They move apart when one asks what kind of reality is assigned to the source of suffering.

The contribution of this study is therefore not to claim that Schopenhauer was a Buddhist or that early Buddhism secretly contains Schopenhauerian metaphysics. Such claims would flatten both traditions. Rather, the article offers a comparative account of structural affinity and doctrinal divergence. Schopenhauer and early Buddhism

share a diagnosis of ordinary life as bound to striving, a suspicion toward egoistic selfhood, an ethics of compassion, and a soteriological orientation toward release. They differ, however, in the metaphysical status they assign to the force that binds beings to suffering. The comparison becomes more persuasive when this difference is not treated as a small qualification but as the central issue.

The article uses comparative hermeneutics. It reads Schopenhauer's major works alongside early Buddhist materials and recent scholarship on aimlessness, suffering, compassion, and the negation of the will to life. The method is interpretive rather than historical in a narrow sense. It does not attempt to prove direct textual borrowing at every point. It asks how two systems can illuminate one another without erasing their internal differences. This is important because the long history of comparing European philosophy with Asian traditions has often moved too quickly from resemblance to identity. A more cautious comparison can still be philosophically bold. It simply refuses to purchase elegance at the cost of accuracy.

Literature Review

The relationship between Schopenhauer and Buddhism has often been discussed through the language of affinity. Abelsen (1993, p. 255) argues that both Schopenhauer and Buddhism require more than abstract conceptual analysis, because each presents a worldview whose meaning becomes intelligible only through interpretive sensitivity. This observation remains useful because it warns against reading either tradition as a set of isolated doctrines. In both cases, metaphysics, ethics, and liberation are closely connected. One cannot understand Schopenhauer's negation of the will to life without his metaphysics of the will. Similarly, one cannot understand Buddhist liberation without the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination, and the discipline of the path.

Conze (1975, p. 210) provides an early and influential statement of the proximity between Schopenhauer and Buddhism. He notes that Schopenhauer's insistence on compassion and the negation of the will to life gives his system a spirit close to Buddhist thought. This line of interpretation has shaped many later comparisons. It rightly identifies compassion and renunciation as shared concerns, but it can also encourage an overly harmonious reading. To say that Schopenhauer sounds Buddhist is not yet to explain whether will and *tanhā* have the same philosophical status. A likeness of tone can hide a difference of structure.

Recent scholarship makes the comparison more precise. Janaway (2018, pp. 331–332, 340–342) focuses on the aimlessness of the will in Schopenhauer. His reading

is especially important for the present article because it clarifies that the problem is not merely that particular desires fail. Even when a particular aim is satisfied, willing as a whole is not ended. No finite satisfaction transforms the subject into a being without further willing. This supports the present article's claim that Schopenhauer's pessimism rests on the structure of willing itself, not on a contingent shortage of pleasures. It also prevents a weak reading of Schopenhauer according to which suffering could be overcome simply by better organization of desire.

The question of liberation deepens the problem. Head and Vanden Auweele (2020, pp. 188–190) analyze Schopenhauer's account of the saint and the negation of the will to life, showing that denial is not simply moral discipline or psychological restraint. It concerns a radical transformation in which the usual motives of willing lose their power. Their study helps clarify why Schopenhauer's soteriology cannot be reduced to advice about moderation. The negation of the will to life is a metaphysical and ethical event, not merely an improvement of conduct. This makes Schopenhauer closer to religious and ascetic models of release, but also makes his account more difficult to explain philosophically.

At this point, the divergence from early Buddhism becomes unavoidable. Maharaj (2017, pp. 1192–1193) identifies a serious tension in Schopenhauer's system: if the will is the noumenal ground of appearance, then it is difficult to explain how it can be transcended or denied. Although Maharaj's article is concerned with Vedānta rather than early Buddhism, the critique is useful here because it brings into focus the metaphysical burden carried by Schopenhauer's concept of will. Early Buddhism does not carry the same burden, since *taṇhā* is not the ultimate ground of reality. It is a conditioned factor. This does not make Buddhist liberation simple, but it does make its causal logic clearer.

Eliopoulos (2020, pp. 64–65, 73–75) develops the ethical comparison between Schopenhauer and Buddhism through compassion and the purity of motive. His analysis confirms that both systems resist a purely rationalist account of morality. Compassion is not a calculation of advantage. It involves a displacement of egoistic concern. Yet even this agreement requires qualification. Schopenhauer grounds compassion in the metaphysical unity of beings as appearances of the same will. Early Buddhism grounds compassion in insight into suffering, impermanence, and non-self. The ethical result may be similar, but the metaphysical route is different.

Wadhams (2019, pp. 235–236, 241) adds another useful dimension by reading boredom in Schopenhauer not only as suffering but also as an emotion with epistemic significance. Boredom discloses the emptiness of willing when the subject is not held by a determinate object. This reading helps explain why Schopenhauer's pessimism is

not merely a doctrine about pain. It is also a doctrine about the failure of finite aims to secure meaning. If pain reveals frustrated willing, boredom reveals willing without a worthy object. Together they form the pendulum that gives Schopenhauer's account of human life its severe rhythm.

The scholarship therefore suggests a more balanced research gap. Earlier accounts often emphasized resemblance. More recent studies allow the comparison to become sharper by asking what kind of resemblance is involved. Vietnamese scholarship, represented by Nguyen (2015), has also identified the selective character of Schopenhauer's reception of Buddhist and Indian soteriological themes, particularly his affinity with liberation from craving rather than with Buddhist ethical discipline or the doctrine of dependent origination. The present article builds on this observation by specifying more precisely the philosophical basis of both convergence and divergence: Schopenhauer and early Buddhism converge in existential diagnosis and soteriological direction, but they diverge in the ontological status of the cause of suffering and in the logic of liberation. The point is not to weaken the comparison. It is to make it more philosophically responsible.

Methodological Orientation

The comparative method used here has two commitments. First, it seeks structural comparison. It asks how Schopenhauer's will and Buddhist *taṇhā* function within their respective systems. The question is not whether the terms can be translated into one another. They cannot. The question is whether they occupy comparable explanatory roles in accounts of suffering, selfhood, and liberation. The will and *taṇhā* both explain why ordinary life fails to rest in satisfaction. They both name a dynamic of grasping, restlessness, and repetition. Yet the first functions as metaphysical essence, while the second functions as a conditioned factor in a causal chain.

Second, the method remains sensitive to doctrinal limits. A comparison becomes philosophically weak when it treats resemblance as identity. Schopenhauer's will is not equivalent to *taṇhā*. The Buddhist doctrine of *anattā* is not identical with Schopenhauer's critique of the principium individuationis. *Nibbāna* is not simply the same as the negation of the will to life. These pairs can be compared only when their differences are kept visible. The danger is not comparison itself. The danger is comparison that smooths away the conceptual edges of the traditions being compared.

This approach also explains why the article privileges early Buddhist sources over later Buddhist developments. Concepts such as *bodhisattva* compassion, Buddha nature, and emptiness in the later *Mahāyāna* sense are significant, but they belong to

different doctrinal contexts. Since the present article focuses on early Buddhism, it centers the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination, the five aggregates, *anattā*, and *nibbāna* as presented in the *Nikāyas*. *Mahāyāna* materials can illuminate later ethical and metaphysical developments, but they cannot be treated as the primary basis for a study of early Buddhism. Early Buddhist sources are chosen rather than *Mahāyāna* developments for a further philosophical reason: the absence in early Buddhism of anything resembling a positive metaphysical absolute makes the structural contrast with Schopenhauer's will sharper and more analytically precise. *Mahāyāna* concepts such as Buddha-nature or *tathāgatagarbha* introduce a positive ontological dimension that complicates the comparison in ways that risk obscuring rather than clarifying the central divergence between will as noumenal ground and *taṇhā* as conditioned phenomenon.

Citations to classical Buddhist materials in this article follow the modern translated editions listed in the references and give page numbers from those editions. Standard textual names such as *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Dhammapada*, and *Udāna* are used in the prose only when needed for clarity.

A brief historical note is necessary here. Schopenhauer's direct access to Buddhist literature was more limited than his later writings might suggest. When he completed the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation* in 1818, he acknowledged that only limited materials on Buddhism were available to him in Europe, and these were not the early Pāli sources examined in this article (Abelsen, 1993, p. 257). His primary Indian philosophical source in that formative period was Vedāntic, mediated through Anquetil-Duperron's Latin translation of the *Upanishads*, the *Oupnek'hat*, which he read from 1814 onward and described as a lifelong intellectual resource. Systematic engagement with Buddhist materials came later, mainly through Isaak Jacob Schmidt's studies of Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhism in the 1820s and 1830s, and through Eugène Burnouf's *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien* (1844). The Buddhist materials available to Schopenhauer were therefore not primarily the early Pāli sources examined in this article, but later European representations of Buddhism, including Tibetan, Mongolian, and Indian Buddhist materials mediated through nineteenth-century scholarship. His recognition of affinity with Buddhist thought was consequently retrospective: he identified convergences with a system he had not directly consulted in building the first architecture of his own philosophy. The present comparison is accordingly a structural and philosophical analysis, not a claim about direct historical dependence. Early Buddhist teachings from the *Nikāyas* are chosen precisely because their doctrinal clarity makes the philosophical divergence between the two systems most visible.

The method is also hermeneutic in a more ordinary scholarly sense. It reads claims in relation to their place within a wider architecture. Schopenhauer's statement that all willing springs from lack should not be detached from his account of the body, representation, aesthetic contemplation, compassion, and ascetic denial (Schopenhauer, 2010, p. 338). Buddhist statements about craving should not be detached from dependent origination, the three marks of existence, and the practical path. The comparison proceeds by placing concepts back into the systems that give them force.

Will and Tanhā: Similar Diagnosis, Different Ontological Status

Schopenhauer identifies the will as the inner nature of the world. The world as representation is the world as it appears to the subject under the forms of space, time, and causality. But the body gives the subject a privileged access to reality from within. I do not know my body only as an object among objects. I also experience it as willing, striving, impulse, need, and effort. From this internal experience Schopenhauer generalizes: the essence of the world is will (Schopenhauer, 2010, pp. 124–135). This move is bold. Kant had limited knowledge to appearances and left the thing in itself beyond theoretical cognition. Schopenhauer claims that the inward experience of willing gives a clue to what the world is in itself.

The will is not rational, moral, or purposive. It is not a divine intelligence seeking a good end. It is a blind striving that objectivates itself at many levels of nature. In human beings, it appears as desire, fear, sexual impulse, hunger, competition, attachment, and the search for satisfaction. This makes suffering more than an accidental feature of life. If to live is to will, and if willing springs from lack, then suffering belongs to the basic structure of embodied existence. The human being is not a rational subject who happens to desire. The human being is an embodied expression of striving who uses intellect largely as an instrument of the will.

Janaway's analysis of aimlessness is crucial here. The will has no final aim that would bring willing as such to completion (Janaway, 2018, pp. 340–342). A person may satisfy hunger, ambition, love, or vanity for a time. But such satisfaction does not bring the activity of willing to an end. A new lack appears. Another object becomes desirable. Relief gives way either to renewed striving or to boredom. This is why Schopenhauer's pessimism is not only empirical. It follows from the formal structure of willing. It is not enough to say that many people suffer because they fail to achieve what they want.

Schopenhauer's deeper claim is that even achieved desire does not end the condition of wanting.

Early Buddhism also locates suffering in craving, but it does so within a different explanatory framework. *Taṇhā* arises in dependence on feeling, and feeling arises in dependence on contact. The chain of dependent origination shows that suffering is not produced by a permanent metaphysical force. It is sustained by conditioned processes: ignorance, formations, consciousness, name and form, sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, aging, and death (Bodhi, 2000, pp. 533–534). This is not a doctrine of a hidden substance behind appearances. It is a doctrine of conditionality. Things arise because supporting conditions are present. When those conditions cease, the result ceases.

The Second Noble Truth defines craving in three forms: craving for sensual pleasure, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence (Bodhi, 2000, p. 1844). This formulation is more psychologically and soteriologically precise than a general theory of desire. It does not merely say that human beings want things. It says that craving binds beings to processes of appropriation: this is mine, this I am, this is my self. The problem is therefore not pleasure alone but the structure of grasping. Even the craving for non-existence remains a form of craving because it still turns around an imagined self and its release from unwanted experience.

The comparison can now be stated carefully. Schopenhauer's will and Buddhist *taṇhā* both explain why life becomes restless, dissatisfied, and bound to suffering. But they do not explain this in the same way. The will is a metaphysical principle. *Taṇhā* is a conditioned phenomenon. The will is the thing in itself as Schopenhauer understands it. *Taṇhā* arises and ceases depending on conditions. This difference gives early Buddhism a clearer causal account of liberation, while Schopenhauer's account remains more dramatic and more difficult. In Buddhism, the problem can be analyzed into conditions. In Schopenhauer, the problem reaches into the inner essence of appearance itself.

This distinction should also guard against a common misunderstanding. If one equates will with *taṇhā* too quickly, one turns Buddhist craving into a metaphysical absolute. That would be a serious distortion of early Buddhism. Conversely, if one treats will as only a psychological appetite, one weakens Schopenhauer's metaphysics. Schopenhauer does not merely describe what people feel when they want something. He describes what he takes to be the inner reality that expresses itself through all natural and human phenomena. The comparison is powerful only if this asymmetry is preserved.

Dukkha, Pessimism and the Negativity of Happiness

The concept of suffering must also be treated carefully. Schopenhauer's pessimism is often summarized too quickly as the claim that life is painful. That is only part of the argument. His stronger claim is that happiness, in the usual sense, is negative rather than positive. We notice satisfaction mainly as the removal of a prior need. The pleasure of drinking depends on thirst. The pleasure of success depends on prior striving, fear, and lack. Once the pressure disappears, the feeling fades. The subject then returns to wanting, or falls into the emptiness that appears when wanting has no immediate object.

Schopenhauer's negativity thesis does not deny that pleasure occurs. Rather, it challenges the metaphysical and existential weight usually given to pleasure. Pleasure does not reveal a positive fulfilment of life. It records the temporary suspension of disturbance. This explains why Schopenhauer is not impressed by ordinary optimism. Optimism counts satisfactions but often ignores the conditions that make them meaningful. It forgets that satisfaction depends on lack and that lack is already a form of suffering. At its most severe, Schopenhauer's claim is that life offers only intervals within a structure that remains unsatisfied.

This is why Schopenhauer places human life between pain and boredom. When desire is obstructed, we suffer. When desire is satisfied and no object holds us, boredom appears. Wadhams (2019, pp. 235–241) shows that boredom in Schopenhauer is not merely a minor mood. It reveals the emptiness of existence when the forward movement of willing is suspended without being overcome. Boredom is therefore philosophically significant because it exposes the dependence of ordinary life on restless striving. It is a poor consolation to say that boredom is less dramatic than pain. For Schopenhauer, boredom discloses that the subject does not know how to exist without being driven by lack.

Early Buddhism uses a wider and more layered account of dukkha. There is ordinary suffering, such as pain, grief, illness, aging, and death. There is suffering through change, because pleasant experiences are unstable. There is also the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned existence itself. The five aggregates affected by clinging are dukkha because they are impermanent, conditioned, and unable to serve as a secure self (Bodhi, 2000, pp. 1844, 901–903). The Buddhist analysis does not need to deny ordinary joy. It asks whether any conditioned joy can be held without anxiety, appropriation, or loss.

Both traditions therefore resist the common belief that human fulfilment can be secured by arranging the world around desire. Schopenhauer argues that desire

itself renews suffering. Early Buddhism argues that craving and clinging perpetuate dukkha because they misread impermanent processes as sources of lasting possession and identity. The agreement is substantial. Ordinary happiness is unstable because it depends on conditions that cannot be permanently controlled. One may refine the objects of desire, but refinement does not by itself undo craving.

Yet their tones are not identical. Schopenhauer often presents the world as a scene of tragic striving. Early Buddhism begins from suffering but does not end in despair. Its analysis of dukkha serves a therapeutic and liberating purpose. The diagnosis is severe because the cure requires clarity. This is why calling Buddhism pessimistic can be misleading. It does not affirm suffering as final. It analyzes suffering so that its cessation can be understood. Schopenhauer also speaks of release, but his metaphysical language gives that release a darker and more paradoxical character.

A further contrast concerns the role of knowledge. In early Buddhism, seeing dukkha correctly is already part of the path. Right view transforms the relation between feeling, craving, and clinging. In Schopenhauer, knowledge can also become transformative, especially when it sees through the principle of individuation and recognizes the nature of willing. Yet Schopenhauer gives less detail about a disciplined method by which ordinary persons gradually train this insight. Buddhism, by contrast, embeds diagnosis in a path of ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom. The difference is not simply practical. It reflects the different status of the problem itself.

Selfhood, Individuation and Non Self

The issue of selfhood is one of the most delicate points in the comparison. Early Buddhism teaches anattā, usually translated as non-self. What is ordinarily called the person is analyzed into five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. None of these is permanent. None is fully controllable. None can rightly be taken as self (Bodhi, 2000, pp. 901–903). The point is not that nothing exists in any sense. The point is that no enduring owner or essence can be found behind the conditioned processes that compose experience.

This doctrine is directly linked to liberation. Craving depends on appropriation. One clings to body, feeling, ideas, social identity, reputation, or spiritual attainment by reading them as mine, I, or self. Insight into anattā weakens this appropriation. When the aggregates are seen as impermanent and not self, the basis for clinging is undermined. The doctrine is not a merely theoretical denial. It is an intervention into the way experience is habitually owned.

Schopenhauer also challenges ordinary egoism, but his path is different. The

empirical individual belongs to representation. It appears under the forms of space, time, and causality. The principium individuationis makes beings appear separate, opposed, and self enclosed. Egoism arises because the individual takes this appearance of separateness as ultimate. The ego treats its own suffering as central and the suffering of others as secondary. In this sense, egoism is not merely a moral weakness. It is supported by a cognitive and metaphysical illusion.

Schopenhauer's critique of individuality does not amount to the Buddhist doctrine of anattā. He does not dissolve all claims about inner essence into conditioned aggregates. Instead, he argues that beneath empirical individuation lies one will. The individual ego is not ultimate, but the will as metaphysical ground remains. Thus, Schopenhauer weakens the autonomy of the empirical self while retaining a deeper metaphysical unity. This is an important difference. Buddhism refuses to find a permanent essence behind the person. Schopenhauer finds a transindividual essence, though not a personal soul.

The difference has ethical consequences. In early Buddhism, compassion emerges from insight into shared vulnerability, impermanence, and the absence of a fixed self. In Schopenhauer, compassion emerges when the veil of individuation is pierced and the suffering of another is recognized as not absolutely alien. The two views converge in their critique of egoistic separation, but they differ in what lies beneath that separation. Buddhism finds no permanent self. Schopenhauer finds the same will.

This distinction also helps avoid a misleading interpretation of Schopenhauer as an advocate of Buddhist non-self. Schopenhauer can be read as anti-egoistic, but not as anattā theorist. He attacks the finality of the empirical individual, not the idea that there is any inner essence at all. Indeed, his entire metaphysics depends on identifying such an essence as will. Early Buddhism takes a more radical analytical route. It refuses to locate liberation in the discovery of a hidden metaphysical self, even a universal one. Liberation comes through the ending of ignorance, craving, and clinging.

The comparison is therefore strongest when it is framed around the critique of egoic illusion rather than the doctrine of self as such. Both systems ask the subject to distrust the immediate feeling that I stand over against the world as a self sufficient center. Both see this feeling as ethically dangerous and existentially binding. But the metaphysical explanation of why this feeling is false differs. For Schopenhauer, individuation conceals unity. For early Buddhism, the sense of self conceals conditionality and impermanence.

Compassion and Ethical Transformation

Schopenhauer's ethics is built around compassion. In *On the Basis of Morality*, he rejects accounts of moral action grounded in self-interest, social approval, or abstract rational duty. For him, an action has moral worth only when the weal and woe of another person become the agent's direct motive; this is the phenomenon he identifies as compassion (Schopenhauer, 1995, pp. 143–144). He later states more explicitly that “compassion is the real moral incentive” and contrasts it with Kantian moral formalism and other abstract moral principles (Schopenhauer, 1995, p. 170). Compassion interrupts egoism because it allows another's pain to matter immediately. This is why Schopenhauer gives compassion a foundational role rather than treating it as an optional virtue added to justice.

This ethical account follows from his metaphysics. If individuation is not ultimate, then the boundary between self and other is less secure than egoism assumes. Compassion is not merely a pleasant emotion. It is a practical disclosure of metaphysical truth. The compassionate person acts as if the other's suffering is not foreign. In that moment, the principium individuationis loses some of its power. The ethical act becomes a small breach in the ordinary architecture of self concern.

Early Buddhism also places compassion within a larger transformation of perception and conduct. Karuṇā is connected with the recognition that beings are vulnerable to aging, illness, death, loss, and confusion. The Dhammapada's warning that all tremble before violence is not a sentimental appeal; it is an ethical reminder grounded in shared exposure to suffering (Norman, 1997, p. 18). Insight reduces the self-centered reflex that makes harm seem acceptable when it benefits the agent. Compassion is therefore inseparable from wisdom, because one cannot fully understand suffering and remain indifferent to the suffering of others.

Eliopoulos (2020, pp. 67–75) is helpful here because he shows that both Schopenhauer and Buddhism oppose a morally corrupt egoism and give compassion a central role. Yet the comparison again requires restraint. Buddhist ethics includes the cultivation of right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. It is embedded in a practical path. Schopenhauer's ethics gives a profound account of compassion but offers less confidence in gradual moral formation. Character, for him, is not easily transformed by instruction. The ethical life can be clarified, but the metaphysical root of action remains difficult to change.

This distinction should not be softened. Schopenhauer can explain why compassion matters, but he is less systematic about how ordinary persons can be trained toward liberation. Early Buddhism, by contrast, places ethical discipline within a path

that joins *sīla*, *saṃādhi*, and *paññā*. For this reason, Buddhism gives a more practical account of ethical cultivation, while Schopenhauer gives a more metaphysically charged account of compassion's meaning. One system is stronger in pedagogy; the other is stronger in its dramatic exposure of egoism.

There is also a difference in moral psychology. In early Buddhism, intention has a central place. Actions are ethically shaped by greed, hatred, and delusion, or by their opposites. Transformation is possible because the mind can be trained. In Schopenhauer, motives pass through cognition, but the underlying character is more resistant. This makes Schopenhauer's ethics austere. He distrusts moral improvement that relies on instruction alone. Buddhism is not naïve about habit and ignorance, but it is more confident that disciplined practice can reshape the conditions of action.

The shared emphasis on compassion remains important. Both traditions expose the poverty of a moral life ruled by self interest. Both also suggest that ethics must involve a change in perception, not only obedience to rules. Yet the difference in their accounts of transformation affects how compassion is understood. In Buddhism, compassion can be cultivated as part of a path. In Schopenhauer, compassion breaks through the illusion of separateness and points toward metaphysical insight. These are related, but not identical.

Asceticism, Practice and the Problem of Transformation

Asceticism is a major point of convergence, but it also reveals an important difference. Schopenhauer sees ascetic negation as the highest response to the misery of willing. The ascetic no longer seeks happiness through the satisfaction of desire. Instead, he or she refuses the will's ordinary affirmations. Sexual desire, luxury, pride, and attachment are not merely morally risky. They are forms in which the will continues to bind the individual to life. Asceticism is meaningful because it reverses the usual movement of affirmation (Schopenhauer, 2010, pp. 448–452).

Head and Vanden Auweele (2020, pp. 188–190, 198–200) show that Schopenhauer's account of saintliness should not be read as simple indifference. The saint is not merely a calm personality. The saint embodies a difficult relation to suffering, one in which the will's motives have been intellectually overcome but the body still exists in the world. This interpretation helps explain why Schopenhauer's ascetic is not a Stoic sage in a strict sense. The Stoic seeks rational composure within nature. Schopenhauer's saint moves toward the negation of the will to life itself. The difference

is decisive.

Early Buddhism also values renunciation, but renunciation belongs to a disciplined path. Nekkhamma is not hatred of existence. It is the release from the compulsive pull of sensuality, becoming, and appropriation. The monastic life gives institutional form to renunciation, but the inner meaning is not mere withdrawal. Renunciation makes room for ethical restraint, concentration, and insight. The Noble Eightfold Path does not ask the practitioner simply to suppress desire. It trains the conditions through which craving loses its authority.

The contrast can be stated in terms of transformation. In Buddhism, the path is teachable. It is demanding, but it has a structure: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The practitioner learns to observe feeling before it becomes craving, craving before it becomes clinging, and clinging before it hardens into identity. This gives liberation a practical grammar. The work is not easy, but it can be described.

Schopenhauer's account is less procedural. Aesthetic contemplation can suspend willing for a time. Compassion can pierce egoism. Suffering can lead to insight. Ascetic practice can weaken affirmation. Yet the decisive negation of the will to life seems to arrive as a rare transformation rather than a universally teachable method. This is where the comparison with early Buddhism becomes especially revealing. Buddhism offers a path of gradual cultivation. Schopenhauer offers a metaphysical drama of insight, suffering, and denial.

This does not mean that Schopenhauer has no practical relevance. His account is powerful precisely because it refuses shallow consolations. It asks whether human beings truly want liberation or only improved satisfaction. This question can challenge Buddhist readers too, because the language of liberation can itself be absorbed into desire. One may desire nibbāna as an object of self enhancement. Early Buddhist texts are aware of this danger, which is why clinging to views and spiritual attainment is also criticized. Here the two traditions again meet, not in identity, but in severity.

Liberation: The Negation of the Will to Life and Nibbāna

The deepest convergence between the two systems appears in their accounts of liberation. Both reject the idea that salvation or peace comes from satisfying desire. The problem is not that human beings desire the wrong objects only. The problem is that bondage is sustained by desire as such, or more precisely, by the structure of

willing, craving, and clinging. This is a hard teaching. It means that ordinary projects of improvement may soften life without touching its root.

For Schopenhauer, the highest response to suffering is the negation of the will to life. This does not mean suicide. Suicide, for him, remains an affirmation of the will because it destroys the individual phenomenon while leaving the will as principle intact. The metaphysical will continues to manifest through other appearances; only the particular individual is removed, not the will itself as the ground of appearance (Schopenhauer, 2010, pp. 425–427). The negation of the will to life is fundamentally different. It is not produced by discursive argument alone. It arises when cognition of suffering, the weakening of egoistic individuation, compassion, and ascetic transformation converge in a rare reorientation of the subject. The saint or ascetic no longer affirms the world as a field for desire. The world is seen, but not grasped in the old way. Schopenhauer is careful to distinguish this transformation from ordinary intellectual insight: reading *The World as Will and Representation* does not by itself produce the negation of the will to life. The transformation he describes is existential rather than purely cognitive, and it belongs to a movement from compassion and self-denial toward ascetic resignation (Schopenhauer, 2010, pp. 405–408).

Head and Vanden Auweele (2020, pp. 198–200) help clarify this point by reading the figure of the saint as central to Schopenhauer's account of self denial. The saint does not merely follow rules. He or she embodies a change in relation to willing itself. Ascetic practices such as chastity, poverty, fasting, and renunciation are meaningful because they weaken the will's ordinary forms of assertion. Their value lies in the transformation of orientation, not in outward deprivation for its own sake.

Nibbāna in early Buddhism is the cessation of craving, ignorance, and clinging. The *Udāna* describes the unconditioned as that without which there would be no escape from the conditioned (Ireland, 1997, p. 103). This does not require positing an eternal self behind experience. It requires the cessation of the processes that generate bondage. The path is not a metaphysical leap out of the world but a disciplined reversal of the conditions that sustain dukkha. Nibbāna is difficult to describe because ordinary language is shaped by conditioned experience, but its function within the teaching is clear. It names the end of the fires that sustain suffering.

The structural similarity is clear. The negation of the will to life and nibbāna both name release from the force that drives suffering. Both require insight, ethical seriousness, and a loosening of attachment. Both reject ordinary happiness as insufficient. But the doctrinal difference remains decisive. Schopenhauer's liberation involves the negation of the very principle he identifies as the inner essence of reality. Buddhism's liberation involves the cessation of craving because craving is conditioned

and therefore vulnerable to cessation.

This difference gives rise to a philosophical question. Is Schopenhauer's soteriology internally stable? Maharaj (2017, pp. 1202–1204) presses a related concern from a Vedāntic angle: if the will is the noumenal ground, the claim that it can be denied appears difficult to reconcile with its metaphysical status. Early Buddhism avoids this problem because it does not elevate craving to the level of ultimate reality. It can say: what arises through conditions can cease when those conditions cease. Schopenhauer has to say something more obscure: the will can turn against itself in the rare case of ascetic insight. Schopenhauer might respond that the will's self-denial does not require a separate agency operating outside the will, but rather emerges when knowledge fully illuminates the nature of willing itself. Yet this response relocates rather than resolves the tension: it is still the will that must produce the knowledge that denies it.

The difficulty should not be dismissed too quickly. Schopenhauer's obscurity may reflect the nature of the experience he is trying to describe. If liberation means the end of willing, then it cannot be fully represented from within the standpoint of willing. Still, the philosophical tension remains. Buddhism can describe the cessation of craving through a causal and practical framework. Schopenhauer can describe the negation of the will to life, but the metaphysical explanation of how the ground of appearance denies itself is less clear. This is not a minor weakness. It is one of the most important points where the two systems diverge.

Boredom, Wonder and the Philosophical Awakening to Suffering

Boredom deserves separate attention because it shows how Schopenhauer moves from ordinary experience to metaphysical insight. Pain is easier to recognize as suffering. Boredom is more ambiguous. It can look trivial, even luxurious. Yet Schopenhauer treats boredom as a sign that life cannot rest in itself. When the subject is not pressed by a particular need, the emptiness of existence becomes visible. The individual then seeks diversion, not because diversion has deep value, but because stillness exposes the poverty of willing.

Wadhams (2019, pp. 235–236, 241–249) argues that boredom has an epistemic role in Schopenhauer. It reveals the miserable condition of existence and can provoke wonder about why existence is structured in this way. This is an important correction to readings that treat boredom only as one more unpleasant feeling. If boredom reveals, then it belongs to philosophy's beginning. The bored person may not yet be wise, but

boredom can disturb the complacency of ordinary life. It shows that life driven by desire is not meaningful merely because it is busy.

Early Buddhism does not give boredom the same philosophical role, but it does examine restlessness, dissatisfaction, and the search for distraction. The mind turns toward objects because it does not understand feeling, impermanence, and craving. When feeling is pleasant, craving seeks continuation. When feeling is unpleasant, craving seeks escape. When feeling is neutral, ignorance can still operate through dullness or subtle restlessness. From a Buddhist perspective, boredom may be read as a form of dissatisfaction that reveals dependence on stimulation.

This provides another point of comparison. Schopenhauer sees boredom as the exposed underside of willing. Buddhism can interpret similar experiences through the instability of feeling and the tendency toward craving. In both cases, the subject discovers that ordinary consciousness is not at peace when deprived of objects. But again the frameworks differ. Schopenhauer uses boredom to confirm the metaphysical misery of the will. Buddhism uses such dissatisfaction as material for mindful observation and insight into conditionality.

The difference is instructive. Schopenhauer's boredom can awaken philosophical wonder, but it can also deepen pessimism. Buddhist attention to dissatisfaction aims to prevent both indulgence and despair. It trains the practitioner to see feeling as feeling, craving as craving, and thought as thought. Thus boredom need not become a metaphysical verdict on existence. It can become an occasion for insight into the conditioned mind. Schopenhauer's diagnosis remains powerful, but Buddhism offers a more precise discipline for working with the experience.

Intercultural Hermeneutics and Philosophical Implications

A careful comparison between Schopenhauer and early Buddhism contributes to intercultural philosophy in two ways. First, it shows that shared existential concerns can appear in different metaphysical languages. Suffering, desire, egoism, compassion, and liberation are not the property of one tradition. They are enduring philosophical problems. Schopenhauer and early Buddhism approach them with unusual seriousness. Both refuse the optimism that assumes life becomes good when desire is better supplied.

Second, the comparison warns against easy synthesis. It is tempting to say that will is *taṇhā*, negation of the will to life is *nibbāna*, and compassion is *karuṇā*.

Such a reading is too smooth. It removes the tensions that make the comparison philosophically useful. Schopenhauer becomes more interesting, not less, when we see that his closeness to Buddhism is limited by his own metaphysical commitments. Early Buddhism becomes clearer, not poorer, when we refuse to turn *taṇhā* into a Western noumenal principle.

The comparison also has implications for the debate over pessimism. Schopenhauer's pessimism is metaphysical. It claims that suffering belongs to the structure of willing life. Early Buddhism is diagnostically severe but therapeutically oriented. It begins with *dukkha* because liberation requires seeing *dukkha* without evasion. The difference between tragic quietism and disciplined cessation should remain visible. If Buddhism is called pessimistic, the term must be carefully qualified. It is pessimistic about ordinary craving, not about the possibility of liberation.

For contemporary philosophy, this dialogue provides a model of cross cultural thinking that does not depend on romantic agreement. A rigorous comparison can let traditions challenge each other. Schopenhauer pushes Buddhist readers to think about the depth of striving and the difficulty of release. Early Buddhism pushes Schopenhauerian readers to ask whether desire must be treated as ultimate or whether it can be analyzed as conditioned, dependently arisen, and ceasing.

This is the philosophical value of the encounter. The point is not to dissolve one tradition into the other. It is to allow each to expose the strengths and limits of the other's account of human suffering. Schopenhauer's strength lies in the uncompromising depth with which he links suffering to willing. His weakness lies in the metaphysical tension of negating what he also treats as ultimate. Early Buddhism's strength lies in its causal and practical account of suffering and cessation. Its risk, in comparative readings, is being misrepresented as a pessimistic metaphysics of the will. A responsible hermeneutic must hold both clarity and distance.

The comparison also matters for how philosophy understands liberation. In many modern contexts, liberation is interpreted as autonomy, self expression, or the removal of external constraint. Schopenhauer and early Buddhism both question this assumption. The self that demands expression may itself be bound by craving or will. External freedom, though important in social and political life, does not by itself end suffering. The deeper problem concerns the structure of wanting, owning, identifying, and resisting. This does not make social questions irrelevant. It simply shows that metaphysical and existential bondage cannot be solved only by changing external arrangements.

This point also explains why both traditions continue to speak to contemporary ethical life without being reduced to modern psychology. They do not merely recom-

mend emotional balance or personal resilience. They ask whether the ordinary pursuit of fulfilment is itself organized by an error. Schopenhauer calls attention to the blind movement of will beneath rational justification. Early Buddhism calls attention to the conditioned movement from feeling to craving and clinging. Both accounts ask the reader to examine the place where suffering is produced before it becomes visible as crisis.

A final implication concerns the place of compassion. Both traditions suggest that liberation from egoism is inseparable from a transformed relation to others. The person who sees through egoistic illusion does not become cold. In Schopenhauer, compassion is the ethical sign that individuation has been pierced. In Buddhism, compassion belongs to the weakening of self-centered craving and the recognition of shared vulnerability. Thus, release is not mere private escape. It changes the way one sees suffering wherever it appears.

Conclusion

Schopenhauer's voluntarism and early Buddhism present one of the most significant comparative encounters between Western metaphysics and Asian soteriology. Both understand ordinary existence as bound to restless striving. Both see the pursuit of happiness through desire as unstable. Both regard egoistic selfhood as a source of distortion. Both give compassion an important ethical place. Both imagine liberation as release from the force that sustains suffering.

Yet the similarity is not identity. Schopenhauer's will is a metaphysical principle, the thing in itself as he interprets it. Early Buddhist *taṇhā* is a conditioned form of craving that arises within dependent origination. Schopenhauer's negation of the will to life therefore carries a metaphysical tension: what is ultimate must somehow negate itself. Early Buddhist *nibbāna* is articulated through a more explicit causal framework within its own system: when ignorance, craving, and clinging cease, suffering ceases.

The article has argued that this divergence should become the center of the comparison rather than a marginal qualification. Schopenhauer and early Buddhism are closest where they diagnose suffering and challenge egoism. They are furthest apart where they explain the ontological status of the cause of suffering. Keeping both points in view allows the comparison to avoid two errors: reducing Buddhism to Schopenhauerian pessimism, and turning Schopenhauer into a disguised Buddhist thinker.

A more careful reading shows a stronger conclusion. Schopenhauer and early Buddhism do not say the same thing. They ask overlapping questions with different

metaphysical instruments. Their dialogue remains valuable precisely because the distance between them has not disappeared. That distance prevents the comparison from becoming decorative. It makes the comparison philosophical.

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