Schopenhauer’s Transcendental Problem

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The more clearly you become conscious of the frailty, vanity and dream-like quality of all things, the more clearly will you also become conscious of the eternity of your own inner being. (Schopenhauer, Aphorism V)

In *The World As Will And Idea*, Schopenhauer tells us that the self—the real self—is not our corporal identity, or perceptual sense of ego, but a will with “an existence for itself” (15). The will is a force that extends beyond the organic body, it is the inner essence of a being. In his *Essays and Aphorism*, Schopenhauer declares that death is not the end of life, but the end of a particular existence (Aphorism IV). Schopenhauer’s philosophy presents us with an inherent paradox—what exactly is it that survives bodily death? To understand this we must look at Schopenhauer’s Vedic (more particularly Upanishadic) heritage along with the few fragmentary Buddhist text he had access to. The Upanishads and Vedanta literature affirms the immortality of self in the transcendental notion of *atman*. Buddhists, on the other hand, reject any notion of true self or immortal essence while simultaneously supporting the doctrine of metempsychosis. The paradox is similar to Schopenhauer’s—what survives death if the self is illusory? The Buddhist believe that reincarnation is a karmic process that excludes personal identity. Schopenhauer’s understanding of will (an indestructible essence that survives

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1 The philosophic Greek term denoting the transmigration of the soul, or essence, of a person into another living being at death. The term is very similar to the theological notion known as reincarnation in Hinduism; but dissimilar to the one found in Buddhism, which often denotes a transference of karma at death instead of essence or soul.
death), on the other hand, is a concept developed from the Vedic Brahman (Dauer, 7-8). This provides an important clue that will enable a better understanding of the origin of Schopenhauer’s paradox. In the following essay I will show that Schopenhauer’s will more closely resembles the Vedic notion of a transcendental self—essence or soul—than the Buddhist notion of residual karmic metempsychosis.

In his anecdotal work, *Essays and Aphorisms*, Schopenhauer presents us with a philosophy that posits the will—the inner self—as the primary manifestation of the thing-in-itself (Aphorism III). Robert Wicks tells us that the “thing-in-itself [...] is the ultimate ground of the object’s transcendental foundation” (47). The thing-in-itself is the primary force behind every subjective being and objective manifestation. Not realizing that all phenomenal existence emerges from the will, or its higher emanation the thing-in-itself, is the fundamental mistake at the core of all philosophies (Aphorism III). The truth, according to Schopenhauer, lies in the fact that “intellect and matter are correlates *i.e.*, that the one exists only for the other, both stand and fall together, the one is only the reflexion of the other, and indeed they are really the same thing” (World, 22). This idea is not dissimilar to the all-encompassing Vedic notion of Brahman, as we will later see.

In *The World as Will and Idea*, Schopenhauer says that will is “the knowledge *a priori* of the body, and the body is the knowledge *a posteriori* of the will” (33). The former “is not in space and time, for it is whole and undivided, in every percipient being” (21), while the latter is the very form of space and time (21). We live in a universe that is exploring itself through the subjective and objective manifestations of the same self—the same will—in infinite variations.
For Schopenhauer, all phenomena are subject to the realm of time. In this view, death “merely affects the individual” (23) and not the real self. “From this it follows that the existence of [one’s] body as something extended and acting always presupposes a knowing entity distinct from it” (5). Put differently, Schopenhauer sees the body as an extending feature of an inner and discrete “knowing entity”. This knowing entity is both beyond time and subjected to time simultaneously—through the manifestation of its physical experience. Schopenhauer tells us that this inner entity is always accessible; to reach it we must remove the forms—or illusions—of phenomenon “and all those forms which are subordinate to it” (83). What we then discover is the essence of that distinct entity, the all-encompassing will (83).

In the latter section of Schopenhauer’s fourth book in *The World As Will and Idea*, we are told that the will is inherently different from personal identity. The self—ego—is a product of the temporal world and therefore illusory. It is the ego that dies and which “can extract [...] little nourishment and consolation” (184) from the temporal idea of death. R. Raj Singh tells us that Schopenhauer’s philosophical “rejection of individualism” (90) is what leads him to declare the death of the ego. Robert Wicks adds that the ego “produces a feeling of separation from other people and from reality as a whole, it is a principle of the “I” [...] and my sense of finite individuality” (37). It is this false perception of separation from the rest of the universe that Schopenhauer denounces. Wicks likens the illusion of ego to “ice cubes floating in a basin of water, that fail to realize how they are constituted by the very water in which they [are] situated” (37). In this example, water is the thing-in-itself or will—that which encompasses all things—and the ice cub are the illusory bodily identity that dissolves away at death.
The same notion is directly referenced in Vedic literature. Singh tells us that: “according to Vedanta, individuality or ego (agam) and self-love (mamta or mineness) are the traps for the worldly individual that take him or her further away from the real self (atman)” (93). Atman is understood to be the eternal and unchangeable identity of every being—an emanation of Brahman. Atman can be likened to will, while the thing-in-itself to Brahman. Buddhists, however, reject this idea. They argue that “in fact there is no self or ego; it is all a chimera” (93). Walpola Rahula tells us that for Buddhists the idea of self is a fetter that leads to the notion “I AM” (Chapter V). This in turns leads to clinging, one of the main causes of suffering in Buddhism.

It is here that the transcendental problem of Schopenhauer becomes evident. “As thing-in-itself everyone is timeless, and therefore endless” (World, 184)—as ego everyone is time bound and finite. The will, the emanation of the thing-in-itself, transcends time and continues to exist after death, and not the individual ego—a false association i.e., not the central essence, or identity of a person. “As thing-in-itself he is the will which appears in everything” (World, 185), or the common force that enables all life to exist. This is what Singh identifies as the “presence of something within us, which always was and always will be” (122). In Schopenhauer’s view, the phenomenal world is an illusion, what the Buddha would call “conditional things,” (Rahula, The Last Words of The Buddha) which all end with death. This is why Schopenhauer declared that “death removes the illusion which separates [our] consciousness from that of the others” (World, 185).

For Schopenhauer and Buddhism the ego’s corporal identity is temporary and transient. According to Rahula, ego is “only a false belief, a mental projection” (Chapter 6, ¶17). For Schopenhauer it is the will—“the universal force” (Singh, 122)—that ena-
bles our illusory identity to grow. It is the energy that drives corporal growth, as a particular phenomenon of that original force. It is for this reason that only the will, or inner force, can strive for “immortality” (World, 185). It existed a priori to birth and will exist a posteriori to death. Schopenhauer was aware of this logical inconsistency, voicing it in his Essays And Aphorisms:

No, you can’t cheat me out of my individuality in that way. I have stipulated that my individuality should continue to exist, and I cannot be reconciled to its loss by mechanisms and phenomena. I, I, I want to exist! That is what I want, and not an existence I first have to be argued into believing I possess (Aphorism 8).

Thrasymachus’ frustration exemplifies the dichotomy between self and Schopenhauer’s will. The transcendental problem is likewise found in Buddhism. Rahula asks: “If there is no permanent, unchanging entity or substance like Self or Soul (atman), what is it that can re-exist or be reborn after death” (Chapter 3, ¶16)?

When asked to account for the apparent inconsistency between the no-self doctrine and reincarnation, the Buddha answered: “If we can understand that in this life we can continue without a permanent, unchanging substance like ‘Self’ or ‘Soul,’ why can’t we understand that those forces themselves can continue without a Self or a Soul behind them after the non-functioning of the body” (Chapter 3, ¶16)? Rahula tells us that when the “physical body is no more capable of functioning, energies do not die with it, but continue to take some other shape or form, which we call another life” (Chapter 3, ¶17). As Dorothea Dauer explains, “In the Buddhist theory of rebirth, emphasis is al-
ways laid on karma” (18), instead of the individual. Rahula tells us that the Buddha equated karma to volition (Chapter 2, ¶22), i.e., willing. In other words, it is the force, or energy, of the act of willing which propagates the universe through karma. Dauer agrees, “an individual is at one and the same time the generator of karma affecting the next generation and the receiver of the karma accumulated by the previous generation” (18). Our act of willing is determined by those who have preceded us, just like our act of willing influences those that are to come. It is this continuation of ‘willing’ from one individual to the next that the Buddhists understand as reincarnation.

When Schopenhauer wrote *The World as Will and Idea* he did not have access to all of the above. Dauer tells us that he only had access to a few fragmentary translations of Buddhist text (7-8) and not much more. For this reason, Schopenhauer's understanding of Buddhism remained primarily speculative. According to Dauer, Schopenhauer primarily reconstructed Buddhism from the Upanishads, which were available in a complete Latin translation. Consequently, in order to retrieve the origins of Schopenhauer's transcendent problem we must investigate the Vedic literature instead.

Dauer explains that Schopenhauer himself equated the ‘will’ with the Vedic concept of Brahman (13). In Vedic literature, Brahman is an unchanging essence or soul, from which all individual souls (atman) originate. It is through his association of will with Brahman that Schopenhauer says: “exemption from death [...] is due only in so far as [we are] thing-in-itself” (World, 185). In *The World as Will and Idea*, Schopenhauer follows this idea through by saying that the real nature of the world consists in Brahman (thing-in-itself) (83). Schopenhauer reinterprets the term Brahman and atman—unchanging soul—by dissociating it from individualism. The energy that survives death
(will), for Schopenhauer, is egoless. The Brahmic atman (individual soul), on the other hand, maintains personal identity after death and eventually transmutes to a new body.

Raymond Marcin tells us that Schopenhauer’s philosophy allows us to “know something about the ultimate nature of reality” (18)—through the will itself. In Schopenhauer own words: “the word [will], like a magic spell, is to reveal to us the essence of everything in nature” (43). Will, as the emanation of the thing-in-itself—or Brahman—is able to understand its own origin. According to Marcin, we can access the thing-in-itself because we have two inherent perception points, one that reaches outward into the world and the other, Schopenhauer’s will, which reaches inward towards the thing-in-itself (43). Dauer presents a similar suggestion when she says that one cannot “grasp the absolute” through outward perception, or “ordinary methods of cognition”, and must seek it through one’s inner perception, or through the will (13). Wicks also supports this position and tells us that Schopenhauer “acknowledges open-mindedly that mystical, non-rational experiences—a position he calls ‘illuminism’—might reveal a higher reality” (37) also through the will. Given this, Schopenhauer can justifies indirect knowledge of the will as thing-in-itself in spite of the Kantian challenge, which is overwhelmingly present in *The World as Will and Idea*.

For Schopenhauer, “philosophy and rational thought in general can have nothing positive to say about such hypothetical mystical dimensions” (Wicks, 37). For this reason, the thing-in-itself is never properly defined or described. Schopenhauer’s philosophy will not show us that *mystical dimension*. To understand the thing-in-itself we must turn to the notion of Brahman, which Schopenhauer explicitly likens to will.
According to Singh, Brahman is represented in “the Upanishadic dictum tat tvam asi, (that thou art) [which] best describes the reality that all things are bound together and emanate from the same unity” (37). This is the source, the thing-in-itself or in Schopenhauer’s own words: “the inner content, the essence of the world” (World, 177).

The nature of this reality—Brahman—according to Singh is not nonexistence, but “‘ever-existent and blissfully pure consciousness’” (113). It is a dimension that is desirable and attainable at death. In the monumental Hindu Epic—Bhagavad-Gita—we are given further insight regarding the relation between inner self—our immortal essence—and Brahman:

Those with the vision of eternity can see that the imperishable soul is transcendental, eternal, and beyond the modes of nature. Despite contact with the material body, O Arjuna, the soul neither does anything nor is entangled. [13.32] (527)

Similarly for Schopenhauer the will does not “entangle” itself with the body. It is always evasive and remains at a distance. At death it returns to the thing-in-itself (Brahman)—“pure consciousness” (Singh, 113). In Schopenhauer’s philosophy, this is not an explicit return but a continuation of the already existing inner state, or as Wicks puts it: “the thing-in-itself is Will in the most straightforward way” (Wicks, 131) with no explicit difference.

In the subsequent verse of the Bhagavad-Gita, we are told: “the soul situated in Brahman vision does not mix with the body, though situated in that body [13.33]” (527). The soul—will—is a distinct entity, or as Singh declares, it is “man’s inner being that is untouched by death” (124). For, as Wicks affirms, will is the thing-in-itself presented
“translucently through the thin veil of time” (131). Schopenhauer confirms this in his *Essays and Aphorism*:

> How can one believe that when a human being dies a thing-in-itself has come to nothing? Mankind knows, directly and intuitively, that when this happens it is only a phenomenon coming to an end in time, the form of all phenomena, without the thing-in-itself being affected thereby. (Aphorism IV)

As thing-in-itself we intuitively apprehend our own immortality. It is only as humans—or what Schopenhauer calls *principium individuationis*—that we doubt it.

This inner knowledge—will knowing itself as thing-in-itself—is the closest form of rational mysticism. This intimate connection between “will” and “thing-in-itself” is how “Schopenhauer explains [our inner] confidence against death” (Singh, 123). Singh calls this a “strange confidence that defies the intellectual awareness of possible and certain death” (123). This confidence is available as a deeply rooted subjective truth that defies objective experience (Singh, 123), or the will itself. It is this will, which according to Schopenhauer is the true essence of an individual, that generates our intuitive confidence against death. The will is connected to the thing-in-itself, the real essence of the world (World, 83). In this line of reasoning, every individual is directly linked to the source itself. For this reason, fear of death is unnatural. For Brahman does not die, Braham *is*. Likewise, the will does not die, the will is.

In spite of his persistence in denying the self, Schopenhauer’s will lacks any positive or negative definition. Dauer’s work is crucial here, she tells us that Schopenhauer had reconstructed Buddhism from Brahmanism (7-8). Knowing this, many of the blanks
left by Schopenhauer can be filled by analyzing Schopenhauer through the veil of Vedic literature itself.

The ego, as a transient identity that ends at death, is different from will or Brahman that survive death. That which continues in a new reincarnation, in the Vedic texts, is an emanation of the original self, now found in a new context. Schopenhauer’s will is omnipresent in all beings (World, 21). It exists in the current self as well as in all future beings. The thing-in-itself connects all beings. It is the expression of a universe that is looking back upon itself through individual identities, or melting ice cubes in a glass of water, as Wicks would call it (37).

Schopenhauer’s denial of individuality is not a denial of transcendence, but a denial of illusory reality. The self extends beyond death in will; for the self preceded death in will (Essays, Aphorism II). For Schopenhauer, it is the individual, the current ego, that does not exist. The inner essence of self is transcendent, and exists beyond time as thing-in-itself. It is this essence, which we most deeply identify with, and which transcends the material realm of illusion, (Essays, Aphorism III) that survives death. For this reason Schopenhauer’s philosophy allows for the survival of self in the most intimate manner (Singh, 123).

The Vedic literature presents a similar idea in its description of atman. Atman survives death, but leaves the individual behind. It lives again in a new body as that most intimate part that does not blend with the physical body (Bhagavad-Gita, 527). Schopenhauer’s will lives simultaneously in all people at all times. It comes into being and cessation only in the realm of temporal reality (Essays, Aphorism III; World, 22). Although the definitions differ at face value, atman is present in everything through
transmutation. Likewise, Schopenhauer’s will is present in everything through the illusory nature of time (World, 83). Both atman and will survive death and return to the thing-in-itself or Brahman as that most intimate part of self.


