

The Moral and Metaphysical Implications of the Buddhist *Karman*, and of *Character* According to Schopenhauer*

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The wandering of the Buddhist karman does not follow the dictate of destiny ("neither the same, nor another..."). Buddhists want to discourage men from the avidity of self-existence, which is destined to be unsatisfied. Schopenhauer's metaphysical journey follows a prescriptive essence, which is in fact an act of parceling out the will, which betrays itself by individuating itself, and objectivizing itself in multiplicity, hence the suffering; essence is therefore hindered. This is why Schopenhauer talks about a destiny of renunciation and of "bad character". The latter shows that one must renounce an avidly gained self.

Introduction

Fear of death motivates our questions. Schopenhauer declares:

[...] it is the knowledge of death, and therewith the consideration of the suffering and misery of life, that give the strongest impulse to philosophical reflection and metaphysical explanations of the world [...]. In keeping with this, we find that the interest inspired by philosophical and also religions systems has its strongest and essential point absolutely in the dogma of some future existence after death.¹

We've all asked ourselves more or less the questions of the puthujjana (Pāli word meaning non educated in the Buddhist doctrine): "What was I in the past? What will I be in the future?"² The Buddhists, following the Brahmins, answer that our lives are linked to one another in an unlimited circle (*samsāra*) dependent on the *karman*, i. e. on our own actions, whose ripened effect determines our re-birth. Even before the Upanishads, there already existed in ancient Brahmanism

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1 Schopenhauer, Arthur: *The World as Will and Representation*. Trans. by E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols. New York: Dover Publications 1966. Vol. 2, ch. XVII, 161.

2 Wijayaratna, Mōhan: *La philosophie du Bouddha*. Paris: LIS 2000, 214–215).

the belief in a second existence, which was unfortunately followed by a second death *punar-mrityu*.³ Thereafter the unlimited series of deaths and rebirths was introduced to appease the anguish of that second death and to complete the karmic benefits. Schopenhauer too assures us of the unlimited series of our existences after death just as before birth. By that he means that will does not lack phenomena constituting its objectification, if it is true that life follows the will like a shadow.

But is this the real difficulty? It is the “craving” that produces rebirth, unless someone says “from the bottom of his heart with regard to this game: ‘I no longer like it.’”⁴ Both Schopenhauer’s and the Buddhist doctrines consider that the real difficulty is the care for oneself, i. e. the painful attachment to the self, present in the questions of the *puṭhujjana*. Schopenhauer often mocks the attachment to a trite and miserable existence. One should therefore free oneself from all deaths and therefore from rebirth: such was Buddha’s aspiration...

I - The Infinity of Past and Future Lives, or Samsāra and Karman as Becoming Again

Schopenhauer knows that both Brahmanism and Buddhism upheld the unlimited character of lives, and he commended these religions for avoiding looking for a first cause, since the cause is always an effect as well:

[T]he original religions of our race, which even now have the greatest number of followers on earth, I mean Brahmanism and Buddhism, [...] carry on to infinity the series of phenomena that condition one another.⁵

However, he notes that Brahmanism and Buddhism do not present this series rationally but through the myth of transmigration. He remarks that that nevertheless carries its justice. Told in an allegorical language aimed at the masses, which distinguishes space, time, and cause and effect, this myth comes very close to the philosophical truth. Conversely, the philosopher ironically criticizes the Judeo-Christian doctrine that claims to convert Hindus and Buddhists by teaching them “that they are created out of nothing, and that they ought to be grateful and pleased about it”⁶. The same remark comes back in *Parerga and Paralipomena*: “They will never be persuaded that the world and man have been made out of nothing.”⁷ Here the critique of a creation *ex nihilo* by an all-powerful God, providential and kind, is obvious. The philosopher thinks that if someone

3 Kapani, Lakshmi: “*Karman*”. In: *Encyclopédie Philosophique Universelle, Dictionnaire des notions philosophiques*. Vol. II, ed. PUF 1990, 2846.

4 *WWR II*, ch. XLI, 479.

5 *WWR I*, 484.

6 *WWR I*, Book 4, ch. 63, 356–357.

7 *On Ethics*, § 115, 222–223, FN 22 in Schopenhauer, Arthur: *Parerga and Paralipomena*, trans. by E. F. J. Payne. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1974.

comes from nothing, he should logically go back to nothing, and the promise of resurrection seems illogical to him. More deeply, and behind the sarcasm, Schopenhauer suggests that a created being necessarily has a determined essence “[f]or no one can ever create without creating something, that is, a being that is precisely determined in every way and in all its attributes.”⁸ In this theistic vision that the Buddha also rejected, the creator should therefore bear the responsibility of a universe made of misery and suffering, without any possibility of escape (such as Saint Augustine’s *free will*). One must then abandon theism. We are free in the sense that we created ourselves, as Nietzsche said: in man, creator and creature become one. However, our empirical actions are determined by our empirical character: such is man, so must he act. Will is free, but its phenomenal manifestations are determined by our character, which is a permanent mark of a mysterious act of the will. We learn to recognize it by the return of the same actions in the course of our life. It is an element of experience.

The point of our study is the analogy between this specific return to the character and the Buddhist *karman*.

The Buddhists’ return of action cannot be called reincarnation, because there is no distinction between the soul and the body. Indeed, personality is understood as five aggregates (*khandha* in Pāli). It would be more fitting to call this return becoming again, which translates punabbhava or punabbhavabhinibbatti (Pāli), coming again to the becoming, i. e. rebirth (cf. Dī ...gha-Nikāya II-15). One must sometimes take this term of rebirth literally; the return gives birth to a new child, gandhabba (Pāli), which slips into the uterus after the uniting of a fertile mother and a father. This child is called visitor, emigrant and immigrant.⁹

This becoming again is also an element of experience for the Buddhists. To tell the truth, the passage through other lives, i. e. the samsāra determined by the karman, can be experienced in exceptional conditions:

[...]having a very pure superhuman eye that surpasses the ordinary vision of human beings, he [the Buddha] sees how the beings leave earth and how they are reborn. He understands that if beings become excellent or ordinary, ugly or elegant, happy or unhappy, it is the consequence of their own actions (*kamma* in Pāli).¹⁰

That is how, according to the Jātakas, the Buddha experienced being a hare offering himself in sacrifice because he didn’t know what other alms to give to a Brahman¹¹; and becoming in his penultimate life the prince Vessantara, agreeing

8 *On Ethics*, § 118, 235–236.

9 Wijayaratna, 223.

10 *Cula-Sukulu Dayi-Sutta, Majjhima-Nikāya*, II, 29–39, in Wijayaratna, 115. The extracts from *Majjhima-Nikāya* given by Mōhan Wijayaratna in his book are taken from a publication by the Pali Text Society (PTS) referenced as *Majjhima-Nikāya*, 3 volumes, PTS, London, 1888–1902.

11 *Cariya-Pitaka*, I, 10, PTS, London 1902–1903.

to abandon all his close relatives and possessions. These extraordinary experiences came through meditations or contemplations (jhāna in Pāli). However, certain outcomes of the karman can be seen in ordinary experiences, within one's life, and verified by all.

From the verb Kri, to act, to do, the term karman (masculine noun/neutral in Sanskrit) means work, action, act, or the works' resultant in the form of worthiness and unworthiness, and destiny (the inevitable consequence of accomplished acts in a previous existence). More precisely, the act leaves behind a trace (vāsanā) that can produce a fruit (phala) if maturing (vipāka). According to the Buddhists, the whole process depends on the conditioned production (paticca-samuppāda in Pāli). Only the intentional or deliberate act, good or bad, makes its author accountable for what he's done. In this sense, animals take no part in it, although they can be the victims of it, since the journeys of the becoming can run across the existences' six stages: gods, titans, humans, animals, avid spirits, damned souls. There are three types of acts: corporal, vocal, and mental. The last category is all the more important that only the intentional action is considered, to the extent that a strong intention is equivalent to an act, and therefore may have a consequence. The idea is that the intentional force of the act does not stop with the deed, but continues to act through the traces, creating thereby the samsra. Thus understood, the karman contains genetic heredity, and well beyond that, holds the explanation of the incomprehensible differences and inequalities of all sorts, particularly those of social statuses. So state the laws of Manu in Brahmanism, claiming all the while that the respect of the social hierarchy in this world conditions the social position in the subsequent life (castes). This brings us to the karmic consequences. In the laws of Manu, these consequences carry a very strong moral tone: for example, whoever has stolen some grain is afflicted with dyspepsia.

II – The General Consequences of the Karman in Buddhism and Character in Schopenhauer

Schopenhauer is well aware of the doctrine of the karman, which he almost identifies with samsāra: "Man's good and evil deeds follow him, like his shadow, [...] all this I know quite well."¹² He carefully notes the shadow metaphor of Dhammapada: joy and sorrow follow action, especially pain, and kamma (Pāli) is often compared to the red-hot iron wheel. The painful existence is closely linked to karmic formations. The Buddha enunciated the four noble truths about suffering. The second truth, especially in its extension to the law of conditioned co-production, has a close relationship with the concept of karman-samsāra (see Samyutta-Nikaya, IV, 133). The force of karman lies in the intensity of the in-

12 *On Ethics*. § 119, 238.

tion. The return is inevitable for the passionate being. It brings to mind the famous image of Vishnu Smṛiti-XX, 47: “As a calf finds his mother among thousands of cows, so does the previously-committed act find its author for sure.” However, it can be purified or neutralized by the effect of other actions. The study of the return of karman or karmic consequences is very subtle, to the extent that it is sometimes said that the organ where the act took place will also receive the reward of that act. The fruit of the acts (karman) matures either in the present life, or indefinitely in subsequent lives, according to its degree of severity. But what makes the reading of the karmic experience difficult is that its type of action is distributive, which excludes the kind of generalization such as “all who have killed will have a short life in a subsequent existence.”¹³

The karmic consequences are the formation of tendencies to act (samskāra in Pāli) starting from a trace. One can distinguish three types of karmic effects: the amplifying repetition, the re-turn, and the choice of circumstances of a form of life, which we will all find in Schopenhauer.

The amplifying repetition: this is the case of a karman that causes a compulsive tendency to reproduce the same type of action. If an adult establishes a karman of murder, he will be reborn as a child who will have murderous desires at a very young age.

The re-turn (to oneself?): this is the famous case of a kamma (in Pāli) in which the effect undergone by a person will have the same nature as the act perpetrated by him or her. These questions are examined in the Maha-kamma vibhanga-Sutta and the Cula-kammavibhanga-Sutta, where a killer gets a shorter life; a cruel person a sickly life; an angry person becomes ugly; a jealous person gets an unenviable and impoverished life; the proud person is reborn into a lower class; the inattentive person becomes ignorant in another life. Let’s note the subtlety of the study of the person who doesn’t enjoy his riches obtained in this world because, in a former life, he regretted having been generous towards the bhikku (Pāli).

The repeated choice of the same circumstances goes without saying: everyone knows it. Psychoanalysis has called our attention to that type of case originating from the compulsion of repetition (*Wiederholungszwang*).

According to Schopenhauer who was well versed in physiognomy and phrenology, the character is this trace, this mysterious writing that Brahmā left on the skull. It is the trace of an act of individual will, and it identifies itself in fact with the individual. Although the character is discovered in the course of the temporal experience, and sometimes even later, it is immutable, it does not change. It is innate (which does not exclude previous births), it is not the work of reflection, it commands a repetitive response to a given pattern in the same circumstances

13 About the distributive character of the generation of acts, see Kapani, 2847.

that do not determine it, but solicit it. Its constancy shows precisely that it is, in its essence, out of time, although its manifestations are held in time: “this unity now finds its expression in the necessary relation and concatenation of those parts and developments with one another, according to the law of causality.”¹⁴ Although the character acts as a result of occasional causes, it depends on a timeless decision that escapes the principle of sufficient reason, that is to say spatial, temporal and causal determinations. The philosopher calls this decision “the intelligible character”. Indivisible, unchanging, it is an unconditional act of free will.¹⁵ This empirical character therefore grows and develops in accordance with a fixed essence.

Like karman, the character appears in the experience of becoming again in three ways: amplifying repetition, re-turn to the author, repeated choice of the circumstances and existential situations. The first case is familiar to us: for example, the Earl of Northumberland acting as a traitor and a coward, each time more severely.¹⁶

For the re-turn to the author, the philosopher does not use the allegorical language of the return in time, but merely notes that “the tormentor and tormented are one. The former is mistaken in thinking he does not share the torment, the latter in thinking he does not share the guilt.”¹⁷ Let’s understand that the executioner will not necessarily become a victim, the victim will not necessarily become an executioner, but each of them obscurely feels that he is no stranger to the other.

The repeated choice of circumstances is the most interesting and most delicate point because Schopenhauer has always maintained that events match a character, suggesting of course the idea of destiny, which we studied a propos our translation of an essay from *Parerga and Paralipomena*, “Transcendent Speculation on the Apparent Deliberateness in the Fate of the Individual.” Let’s briefly say here, to clarify the question of karman, that our lives can be compared to a dream where something (favorable or not) happens to us, something that comes in fact from us, but without our knowing. In a sense therefore, it would appear that we are the ones who desire and chose the elements of our lives, even if they are external.

First ignored, the character is then discovered as such in the course of experience, sometimes with horror,¹⁸ but always with astonishment.¹⁹ To be perfectly

14 *WWR I*, ch. 28, 157.

15 *WWR I*, book IV, ch. 55, 289.

16 *On Ethics*, 233.

17 *WWR I*, book IV, ch. 63, 354.

18 Cf. *Prize Essay on the Freedom of Will*, ed. by Günter Zöllner, trans. by E. F. J. Payne. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999, ch. 4.

19 Cf. *On Ethics*, § 118.

clear, the horror and astonishment concern the effects of the repetition, the return, and the renewed choice of the same circumstances. The revelation may arise at the end of life, at the hour of death. Buddhists also give great importance to the time of death determined in some way by our actions and their consequences (the karman). The last wishes and final thoughts decisively influence the coming karman and the samsaric journey. Through meditation (vipassanā in Pāli), it is possible to awaken the memories of the preceding life before death, and the affects of those last moments.²⁰ This point did not escape Schopenhauer who saw the hour of death as a crisis that determines our fate. Here are the beautiful lines that the philosopher devotes to it.

At the hour of death, all the mysterious forces (although really rooted in ourselves) which determine man's eternal fate, crowd together and come into action. The result of their conflict is the path now to be followed by him; thus his palingenesis is prepared together with all the weal and woe that are included therein and are ever afterwards irrevocably determined.²¹

Note that the decisive character of time is not avoided, on the contrary! He adds, "To this is due the extremely serious, important, solemn, and fearful character of the hour of death."²² Why? Because then the revelation of character is complete. Indeed, according to the philosopher, each "deed [...] is the expression of the intelligible maxims of his conduct, the result of his innermost willing. It is related as a letter is to the word that expresses his empirical character, this character itself being only the temporal expression of his intelligible character."²³ If then each act reveals one more letter of a message, only at the time of death will the message be complete. Consciousness then receives it and decides whether it will maintain the character. Is ignorance (avidyā) then lifted? This consciousness is primarily responsible for karmic formations according to the Buddhists. Is thirst soothed, quenched, revived or frustrated? This is to be decided during the crisis described by Schopenhauer. One could say that the karmic trip is then launched or stopped.

III – The Moral Implications of the Doctrine of the Karman, and of the Character According to Schopenhauer

The pan-Indian, Brahmin, Jain and Buddhist laws of karman raise moral and metaphysical problems, not to mention their social and political implications that the work of Max Weber in Hinduism and Buddhism has shown, even if it

20 Wijayaratna, 221.

21 Schopenhauer, Arthur: *Transcendent Speculation on the Apparent Deliberateness in the Fate of the Individual in Parerga*, vol. 1, 223.

22 *Ibid.*

23 *WWR I*, book IV, ch. 55, 300.

confused somewhat Buddhism with Brahmanism. Schopenhauer's doctrine of character presents similar problems.

The effects of karman appear as justice, or at least as a non-automatic reward. We know that the Buddha disagreed with the theory of Makkhali Gossala who supported the idea of a samsāra having a determined time of rebirth set before liberation, and in some way automatic.²⁴ Schopenhauer considers the karman as a non-external immanent justice, which of course is not exercised by an Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth.

On the one hand, through the unalterable nature of character and, on the other, through the strict necessity with which all the circumstances occur in which everyone is successively placed, his course of life is precisely determined from A to Z. And yet the course of one man's life turns out to be incomparably happier, nobler, and worthier than another's in all its modifications both subjective and objective. If, therefore, we are not to eliminate all justice [emphasis added], this leads to the assumption which is firmly established in Brahmanism and Buddhism that the subjective conditions with which everyone is born, as well as the objective conditions under which one is born, are the moral consequence of a previous existence.²⁵

We can refer to two other instructive texts in this respect. The first: "the world itself is the tribunal of humanity, [...] everything that lives must atone for its existence first in living and then in dying".²⁶ Along with Saint Augustin, Schopenhauer considers that the *malum poenae* fits with the *malum culpae*, but he also notes the convergence of his views with the Buddhists' for whom samsāra implies that poverty, injustice and stupidity are equivalent. Schopenhauer returns to that subject in paragraph 116 of the same work:

This world, then, is not merely a battle-ground for whose victories and defeats prizes are distributed in the next, but it is itself already the last judgement in that each brings with him reward and ignominy according to his merits; and by teaching metempsychosis, Brahmanism and Buddhism know nothing different from this.²⁷

Thus, according to Schopenhauer, the karman expresses a general equivalence between evil and suffering. We can ask about the author of this evil/suffering by looking at the issue of the moral imputation that the Buddhists cannot avoid, since the act committed previously finds its perpetrator "without fail". In other words, who is the guilty party?

24 Wijayaratna, 220.

25 *On Ethics*, §118, 234.

26 *Ibid.*, §114, 218.

27 *Ibid.*, §116, 228.

Is it the individual or specific character (of the species) according to Schopenhauer? In most cases, the individual characters portrayed by Schopenhauer are evil. He goes as far as to say that the individual is in himself an error and a mistake, something that should not have been. The individual would therefore be evil for his participation in the Idea of humanity, which is bad at heart, because the will to live, both selfish and lusting sexual pleasure, is served by a partial and limited intellect. From this point of view, the philosopher loudly and clearly praises the Christian myth of original sin for allegorically telling the specific identity of humanity. If sin is inherited, it is because the idea of man is one:

Considering not the individuals according to the principle of sufficient reason, but the Idea of man in its unity, the Christian teaching symbolizes nature, the affirmation of the will-to-live, in Adam. His sin bequeathed to us, in other words, our unity with him in the Idea, which manifests itself in time through the bond of generation, causes us all to partake of suffering and eternal death.²⁸

The malice of a singular man lies in his relationship with the human race, and each of them manifests in some wicked and foolish way “his kinship with the human race that is essentially wrong-headed and absurd.”²⁹ We recognize here the portrait of the Augustinian man, fallen as a result of original sin, and whose intelligence is now obscured, and whose will is corrupt.

Although the Buddha does not speak the language of evil, he considers that the monks’ first mistake was to engage in sexual activity: birth leads to death, a fatal predestination that no one escapes of course. There is agreement on this point.

Although Schopenhauer argues for a collective author of evil/suffering, he paradoxically argues for an autonomous and individual character:

[...] [I]ndividuality does not rest solely on the *principium individuationis* and so is not through and through mere phenomenon, but that it is rooted in the thing-in-itself, the will of the individual; for his character itself is individual. But how far down its roots here go, is one of those questions, which I do not undertake to answer.³⁰

This is one facet of the Idea of mankind³¹, accessible only to aesthetic contemplation or at the time of death. Schopenhauer’s interest in the individual character does not diminish, which radically differs from Buddhism. It is like a “penetrating dye” on all the karman of the individual that “determines all his actions and thoughts down to the most insignificant, in consequence whereof one man’s whole course of life, in other words, his inner and outer record, turns out to be

28 *WWR I*, book IV, § 70, 405.

29 *On Ethics*, §114, 210.

30 *Ibid.*, §116, 227.

31 *WWR I*, book III, §45, 224.

so fundamentally different from that of another's".³² Just as Cuvier reconstructed the whole animal from a single bone, one can recognize an individual character from a single action. We can intuit that unity, but it seems quite difficult to grasp it conceptually.

Schopenhauer confronts us here with a dreadful philosophical difficulty about the individual. At the bottom we find the essentially evil human character; on the surface we do not find the individual character as we would expect, but we only find the genius and the saint. The genius abandoned his individuality in aesthetic contemplation. Schopenhauer knows that "[h]igh intellectual faculties have always been regarded as a gift of nature or of the gods; thus they have been called *Gaben*, *Begabung*, *ingenii dotes*, gifts (a man highly gifted), and have been regarded as something different from man himself, as something that has fallen to his lot by favour."³³ The intellect is added to the character's will, it does not command it, it is subjected to it... This duality hinders the karmic imputation! The "I" looks surprisingly at the actions done by the character, especially if it belongs to a genius. On the other hand, the saint too has abandoned his individual character dissolved in renunciation. There is one last chance to find the individual by considering his external and internal history, that is to say his fate. We find proof for this at the end of the Transcendent Speculation, where we are told that the will expects a determined course of events it somehow prescribes. It could be, according to the philosopher, the history of renunciation opportunities that are seized or abandoned, a history which goes on to become *nirvāna* or *palingenesis*. Thus, our question is not settled: the perpetrator is inseparable from his singular path. However, regarding the point of absence of identity, Schopenhauer meets the Buddha.

IV – The Metaphysical Problem of the Transmigrating Self

The question gets even more critical: who is that traveler who, not only morally but also metaphysically, transmigrates and bears the karmic consequences? Schopenhauer thought he had found the individual, but he only described the singularity of a journey. The individual took his secret along with himself.

If we ask the Buddha about it, his answer is ambiguous: it is "neither the same nor another" who bears the consequences of the action done. There is some logic to that ambiguous answer: if there is no Same, there is no Other because the Other is always the Other of the Same. In any case, we are far removed from the Brahmanic assertion of a soul (*atta* in Pāli) whose core identity is that of the *Brahmā*. Personality has no intrinsic unity outside the conventional unit of the name, as evidenced by the famous theme of the aggregates (the five *Khandas* in

³² *On Ethics*, §118, 230.

³³ *WWR II*, ch. XIX, 230.

Pāli): aggregate of substances/forms, sensations, perceptions, volitional components (samskāra), and finally aggregate of consciences. There is therefore no ontological support for the self, mainly because of impermanence. This will later become the emptiness of Nāgārjuna. Thoughts, and therefore conscience, have no privilege over things because there's nothing more volatile than thought, for it varies even more than the movements of the body. It is comparable to a fire feeding on fuel but unable to part with it. It is conditioned and plural, which means precisely that it is linked to what it is the conscience of, a diverse and plural fuel. Thus there appears to be several consciences, even though to some degree, we can speak of mental consciousness separate from the consciousness of the sensations and perceptions. So there is neither a consciousness of consciousness, nor a consciousness of self-consciousness, except, perhaps for the seventh consciousness in the hierarchy of awareness of the Mahayana. However, for Descartes, consciousness of consciousness is precisely what reveals the authentic Self, according to the founding experience of the cogito.

The Buddhist study of personality opens a well-known examination of the conditioning, "the fuel". Conditioning leads to suffering through the becoming again according to Mahā-Tanhāsankhaya-Sutta.³⁴ This conditioning (pattica-samuppāda) is not really a strict causality, but rather an interdependence, or even a circular causality. Its account does not follow a fixed order, and the one we give here is the most famous one. Twelve elements are connected to each other in the following way: ignorance, the mental compositions, the consciences, the physical and mental phenomena (names and forms), the six internal spheres, contact, sensation, thirst, ownership, becoming (bhava or samsāra), the birth and finally the inseparable procession under the banner of dukkha (suffering or discomfort, old age, death, lamentation, pain, sorrow, grief). One goes from ignorance to dukkha. Neither substance nor Self! All that is left is the name. The ego is the result of an appropriation, not its source. We recognize here a great theme of Christian philosophy: Fénelon, Pascal... Claiming a self is to succumb to the thirst for life (tanhā). To deny it is to obey a thirst for inexistence (tanhā); it is the point of materialism. As the Buddha says, the one who transmigrates is neither the same nor another in that sense as well.

Schopenhauer, too, considers that the subject of transmigration cannot in any way be a thinking soul. Let's remember that the character is not the work of the intellect or reason. The will and representation do not coincide, but constitute in us a fragile unity. Schopenhauer gives an illuminating note in this regard:

[...] this double character of our inner being [Duplicität unsers Wesens (note the extraordinary formula in German!)] does not rest on a self-existent unity, otherwise it would be possible for us to be conscious of ourselves in ourselves and in-

34 *Majjhima-nikāya*, I, 256271, in Wijayaratna (see FN 10).

dependently of the objects of knowing and willing. Now we simply cannot do this, but as soon as we enter into ourselves in order to attempt it, and wish for once to know ourselves fully by directing our knowledge inwards, we lose ourselves in a bottomless void; we find ourselves like a hollow glass globe, from the emptiness of which a voice speaks. But the cause of this voice is not to be found in the globe, and since we want to comprehend ourselves, we grasp with a shudder nothing but a wavering and unstable phantom.³⁵

Here, the philosopher shows the precariousness of the association of the subject of representation with the will and he also notes that consciousness is always assigned to a subject-object duality.³⁶ It seems that Schopenhauer excludes the possibility of a consciousness of consciousness or self-awareness, as does the Buddha. But Schopenhauer does not easily abandon the self because he knows that it is through consciousness that the fundamental truth of his philosophy is discovered, i. e. the identity of the lived body as will with the body as representation, as well as the omnipresence of will, which is the extension of the fundamental truth. Schopenhauer knows the privilege of consciousness and would like to rely on this skiff for his metaphysical journey. Hence, these beautiful words on the nostalgia we feel of a consciousness that would not be a knowing state affected by the subject/object duality:

[...]everyone will perhaps feel in his heart of hearts a consciousness that an entirely different kind of existence would really suit him rather than this one which is so unspeakably wretched, temporal, transient, individual [...] then thinks that death might lead him back to that other existence.³⁷

The executioner probably also has the consciousness of being the victim and vice versa. We need to examine this point.

V – Can Compassion Enlighten the Question of the Self?

Here is a true meeting ground! Where Schopenhauer praised the Indians, the Brahmins and the Buddhists for having extended compassion to all living things, he – a bit unfairly – blamed the Judeo-Christians for not having done the same.

As an essential part of Buddhism (especially Mahāyāna Buddhism), compassion was initially the reason for the teaching of the Tathāgata. Indeed, the Buddha decided to break the silence after having found the path to deliverance from death by compassion³⁸. But he found the teaching of the law of conditioned

35 *WWR I*, book IV, §54, 278, FN 5.

36 On this subject, see our conference at the Nancy colloquium, “Metaphysical and Religious Issues of The ‘Unconscious’ Will in The Philosophy of Schopenhauer,” Presses Universitaires de Nancy (June 2010).

37 *On the Doctrine of the Indestructibility of our True Nature by Death in Parerga*, vol. 2, ch. 139, 275.

38 Mahavagga, I, 5, 2, in *Majjhima-Nikāya*, I, 167, in Wijayaratna (see FN 10).

production dangerous, and that of the extinction of lust even more so. But Brahma Sahampati leaves heaven to visit Buddha and tells him that some men caught in the earth's mire can only escape it if they hear the doctrine, and thus work out their salvation, while if they do not hear it, they will remain captives of kamma (equivalent to dukkha in certain statements). These men are like lotuses emerging from the muddy water.³⁹ Three times, Brahma reiterates his call, and Buddha finally agrees to teach his doctrine out of compassion for these men. Buddhists also recognize the concept of transfer of merit, which is rather close to the Christian intercession, but on the condition that the recipient agrees. Later in Mahāyāna Buddhism, the bodhisattva postpone the complete liberation out of compassion.

What is this compassion based on? For the Buddhists, it is undoubtedly based on the community of suffering. It is also undeniable in Schopenhauer, but a close textual analysis indicates a community of being, or even a communion. According to Schopenhauer, compassion requires us to make no difference between the self and the non-self. In front of another individual, the compassionate individual says in his heart: "I once more!" instead of saying, "not-I."⁴⁰ The compassionate individual goes beyond representation, i. e. the principle of sufficient reason, in order to grasp a unity of "I" deeply rooted in the common will. This important theme will become in his disciple Nietzsche the figure of the Dionysian through tragic compassion. This feeling is the source of all ethics and of all goodness. It is necessary to study some passages very closely.

The [...] recognition of one's own true nature in the individuality of another who is objectively manifesting himself, appears with special clearness and beauty in those cases where a man, beyond all recovery and doomed, is still anxiously, actively, and zealously concerned over the welfare and rescue of others.⁴¹

Schopenhauer goes on to say:

How could there be more clearly expressed the consciousness that this destruction is only that of a phenomenon and so is itself phenomenon, and that, on the other hand, the true essence of the one who is perishing is untouched by it, continues to exist in the other in whom he so clearly recognizes just now that essence, as is revealed by his action?⁴²

Schopenhauer's vocabulary shows here that he hasn't abandoned traditional metaphysics. The Buddhist Āstiveda speaks of what he calls "the great secret", the reversal of the self and others that is proposed as an exercise: "to ease my

39 Oldenberg, Hermann: *Le Bouddha*. Paris, Robert Laffont 1976, 53–55 (first published in German in 1881).

40 *On Ethics*, § 117, 229.

41 *Ibid.*, § 115, 219.

42 *Op. cit.*, 220.

pain and that of others I give myself to others and adopt the other as ‘me’.”⁴³ He stops short of the extreme experience of Schopenhauer, which is a real recognition of one’s self in the other according to both the Western metaphysical tradition and also Christianity. While Çāntiveda remains in the limits of empirical moral practice, Schopenhauer on the other hand, despite his reasserted Kantianism, does not give up on the being and the essence, or rather the being of the essence, as evidenced by his vocabulary: *das eigene Wesen*, *das wahre Wesen*, *das innere Wesen*. He believes that the will is the inner being or essence of beings. When the dying individual recognizes himself in the other, he recognizes his being, which the partiality of his individual will prevented from seeing. The metaphysics of will is here reinterpreted in thomistic terms: the true being could be the will. These considerations lead us away from Buddhist emptiness, for if the will is the being of beings there is no emptiness.

Schopenhauer also believes in finding brahmanism along these monistic lines. A few lines before the ones we quoted, he recalled the famous statement of Chāndogya-Upanishad: “*tat tvam asi*,” translating as “you are this”, a word of self-recognition in the other he met, instead of translating it strictly as “you are That,” as Lakshmi Kapani noted⁴⁴. “You are That” means that the individual spirit recognizes itself in the universal spirit, the One towards which the multiple returns. Schopenhauer departs here again from Buddhism, which asks to deliver all beings from suffering without asserting at the same time a metaphysical unity of spirit. Kapani notes that Schopenhauer believes that ethical compassion corresponds to both the unity of the will and of the Brahman, and it is true that the will without reason, one, universal, unconditional, indestructible, free from time, space and causality may look like the Brahmanic One, but that Brahmanic One is not a blind force. This mistranslation gives a clue as to the monistic intentions of Schopenhauer at the metaphysical level.

Schopenhauer seeks in everything the ultimate explanation of external phenomena and the ultimate meaning of inner phenomena, namely the destination. The *samskāra* or volitional aggregates, vectors of *kamma/karman*, become the Will; ignorance *avidyā* becomes the will’s blindness; suffering (*dukkha*), crossroads of the four Buddhist truths, becomes the will’s solitude devouring itself through individuation; finally, if all that is causal is impermanent for Buddhists, Schopenhauer on the other hand understands that the cause does not properly reflect the being of the world, which is the will. It seems that he collects the Buddhist experiences in preparation for a metaphysical construction, whereas Buddhism offers a corrosive critical analysis of all the psychic and conceptual

43 *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, VIII, 120–140, quoted in René Guyon, *Anthologie des textes bouddhiques*, 1924, T.II, 193. Translation mine from French to English.

44 Kapani, “Schopenhauer et son interprétation du ‘tu es Cela’” in *L’Inde inspiratrice*. Ed. by Michel Hulin and Christine Maillard. Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg 1996, 62–63.

constructions. Thus Schopenhauer is convinced that metempsychosis and palingenesis are images that must be interpreted conceptually in order to account for the karman and find out who transmigrates. Palingenesis, which is an allegorical model infinitely preferable to that of metempsychosis, should be interpreted in the following way: the will tries several intellects before liberating itself. Let's listen to Schopenhauer:

To the will that does not deny itself, every birth imparts a new and different intellect; until it has recognized the true nature of life, and, in consequence, no longer wills it.⁴⁵

Schopenhauer remains faithful to the vipāka in this conceptual reconstruction, "that of us which is left over by death is the seed and kernel of quite another existence, in which a new individual finds himself again so fresh and original, that he broods over himself in astonishment."⁴⁶ He remains no less faithful when he writes: "a changing of the individuality [is brought about] under the exclusive guidance of his own will,"⁴⁷ without involving the soul.

In contrast, the Buddha always eludes pure theoretical analysis. On transmigration, as elsewhere, he looks for healing without trying to find out who is responsible for the suffering. This is a kind of moral pragmatism. Remember that the logical exercise of the tetralemma is enlightening in this regard. There are four possible propositions on the subject of transmigration: the individual exists after death; he doesn't exist after death; and he exists and he doesn't exist after death; he neither exists nor ceases to exist after death. The tetralemma rejects all four propositions. This tetralemma, used by Nāgārjuna and by the Buddha before him, reveals an indifference to the logical debate that is purely theoretical, with its requirements of identity and of non-contradiction, hence the "middle way" (*madhyamā pratipad*): neither the same nor another.

The suffering community of the shifting shapes of the samsaric journey is the basis of compassion in the two doctrines. However, Schopenhauer thinks fit to support this existential community with a true communion of being, which compassion confirms at the extreme time of death, in support of the theoretical studies on the will as thing-in-itself. Therefore, there is still a possible agreement on the doctrine of salvation, which justifies the praise Schopenhauer awarded to Buddhism as the best religion, one that minimizes the most the role of images and allegories. Let's now look at the exit outside of karman/samsāra.

45 *WWR II*, ch. 49, 637.

46 *Ibid.*, ch. 41, 501.

47 *Ibid.*

VI – *The Doctrine of Salvation or the Exit Out of Samsāra: the Neutralized Karman or Nirvāna*

In both Schopenhauer and the Buddha's points of view, salvation implies an exit out of the karman, i. e. out of the world for Schopenhauer, through a passage through nirvāna. The escape from samsāra is a liberation regarding the past, regarding conditioning according to the Buddha, and regarding phenomenal determinism in Schopenhauer, which, let's not forget, obliged man to react according to his character to every situation grasped by his intellect as motive. The real present, the only reality of time for both doctrines, is then given center stage. For the Buddhists, it is the present of the effort towards pure conduct.⁴⁸ According to the agrarian metaphor, the maturation of karman depends on the other karmans but most of all on the present actions:

[...] if someone says that we reap the harvest of our actions, he thereby states that pure conduct has a value and that there is a possibility of reaching the complete cessation of the dukkha.⁴⁹

Despite the emphasis on the pure and meritorious conduct, the exit means that we are no longer in the realm of ethics or in the Eightfold path, but beyond good and evil. It is no longer about repairing the past by atoning through mortifications the bad effects of former acts, nor is it about compensating these deeds through good meritorious actions, which are likely to procure subsequent happy existences. In Schopenhauer also, the realm of ethics is very relative; one can't dictate anything to will; acts disappear at the moment of liberation. The character is dissolved, freedom re-conquered, for will negates itself, having learned to recognize itself through its manifestations. This liberation is described in a remarkably similar way in both visions.

Buddhism	Schopenhauer
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No more desire or attachment, not even in the spheres of meditation and contemplation. • The samskāra disappear and so do their trace, which was the support of the karman. • Awakening, no more ignorance: a consciousness that does not fix itself on any object. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will renounces and negates itself. • The character is dissolved with the disposition and the trace it contained. • Knowledge of the character as a whole and of all sufferings: a total consciousness?

⁴⁸ Wijayaratna, 248–249.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, *Anguttara-Nikāya* I, 249, 253. Translation mine, from French to English.

Let's add to this parallelism a common negative trait: the exit from samsāra cannot be a suicide because suicide still shows an attachment to life through the thirst for non-existence.

Schopenhauer insists more than Buddhists on the discontinuity of renunciation. A representation that had to be a motive on a given character becomes calm [*quietiv* in German], as shown in the example Schopenhauer gives about Raymond Lulle who discovers a tumor on the breast of a loved-one, thereby immediately abandoning all earthly desire. There must be a representation of all the suffering, of one's suffering at the time of death, or that of others. For Buddhists, the discontinuity is possible but rare. Some people after having heard the Buddha only once abandon all attachment. But in general, the progression along the Eightfold Path seems inevitable: pure faith, pure will, pure language, pure action, pure livelihood, pure application, pure memory, pure meditation, not to mention the distinction between levels or degrees of detachment: sotapatti, sakadāgami, anāgami, arahat (Pāli). These notions of training, exercise and meditation do not appear as much in Schopenhauer who stands for the prior radical departure, which is a result of an overall representation as soon as truth is grasped.

Nirvāna remains the preferred term for both. Schopenhauer subscribes to it: Nirvāna, he says, is the mere negation of samsāra⁵⁰. This is not a real nothingness as the monk Yamaka heretically suggested.⁵¹ It is therefore a relative nothingness, the nothingness of phenomena where the subject/object distinction is canceled as in the prajñā paramita according to Schopenhauer, but the thing-in-itself has not disappeared as noted by Jean Lefranc.⁵² As for the Buddha, he holds nirvāna for an unconditioned state, the only one that can suppress dukkha: "there is, ô bhikkhu, a non-born, non-produced, non-composed situation [otherwise] there would be no liberation from the one that was born, who was created, is constructed and composed."⁵³ The end of suffering is a situation without origin, without progress, without destination, nothingness relative to the conditioning.

Conclusion

As we have seen for the doctrine of karman as well as for Schopenhauer's doctrine of character, suffering and the obstacle to freedom come from neither an imperious God, nor from sheer coincidence, which would only mean that the effort of elucidation has stopped. Man is handed over to himself.

50 *WWR II*, ch. 48, 608.

51 *Samyutta-Nikāya*, vol. III, 109 et sqq, in Oldenberg, 202.

52 Lefranc, Jean: *Comprendre Schopenhauer*. Coll. Cursus. A. Colin 2002, 138–139.

53 *Samyutta-Nikāya*, III, 24–25.

The karmic obstacle comes from our past action that gathers together our desires, fixes them, maximizes them, orients them, revives them, either directly by strengthening the impulse, or indirectly through the passivity endured in the trial of the consequences of those actions, which give rise to desires of compensation... And the multidimensional chain continues. All this, often without our knowledge! Here, the Buddhist desire/ignorance pair perfectly corresponds to the blindness of Schopenhauer's will. There is no fixed author... we are only the heirs of our actions that are as much our parents as they are our children. This legacy must be controlled (the Eightfold Path...) and then liquidated.

Schopenhauer has mostly kept the idea of the fixity of desire, i. e. the imprint of the character, its selective dimension, and its unconsciousness whose manifestation is the tireless repetition of the same actions in the realm of representation. But these actions, dictated by the empirical character, express the essence of a being. They translate them but they do not make them. The course is imposed by an essence that is already established. This is a great difference between the character according to Schopenhauer and the Buddhist karman.

However, looking further, the significance of this difference fades away. If the character dictates the actions without the actions modifying it, in contrast, it is the act of will – “the intelligible character” – that has formed the empirical character from which a repetitive series of actions results. Here too then, the act gives birth to the being, so to speak, but this transcendent act placed on a metaphysical level is irreversible, inevitable, and irrevocable except to leave this world: *nirvāna*. What is this act? It looks like an act of separation from the whole, which mars the emergence of the individual with its errors and mistakes, dragging along a duality of essence already mentioned in Schopenhauer's remark (see above).

The wandering of the Buddhist karman does not follow the dictate of destiny (“neither the same, nor another...”). Buddhists want to discourage men from the avidity of self-existence, which is destined to be unsatisfied. Schopenhauer's metaphysical journey follows a prescriptive essence, which is in fact an act of parceling out the will, which betrays itself by individuating itself, and objectivizing itself in multiplicity, hence the suffering; essence is therefore hindered. This is why Schopenhauer talks about a destiny of renunciation and of “bad character”. The latter shows that one must renounce an avidly gained self.

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