# BETWEEN MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM AND ADVAITA VEDĀNTA: A CRITICAL READING OF ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER AND THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

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*Abstract: The world today faces an endless range of problems—ecological, social, cultural, economic, health-related, and religious—along with new anxieties generated by rapid technological advancement. Philosophers have long recognized this difficulty and have therefore sought more foundational approaches. The Buddha, for example, did not attempt to address every form of suffering separately; instead, he articulated the Four Noble Truths as a fundamental framework for understanding and overcoming suffering. In a similar spirit, this paper engages Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy. We place Schopenhauer between Mahāyāna Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta, arguing that his metaphysics of the Will draws from both traditions yet belongs fully to neither, revealing certain internal tensions. To address this, we interpret his insights through the more life-affirming perspective of Advaita Vedānta, as articulated in its modern form by Swami Sarvapriyananda and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, offering a brief but critical reassessment of his relevance for our present age.*

## I

Philosophy begins with problems the philosophers confront, be they confusion, doubt, mystery, suffering, boredom, or whatever. Accordingly, we can sympathize with Arthur Schopenhauer, who centers the discourse on suffering and existential unease. But that does not mean he wants us to be happy by solving our everyday struggles; rather, he advocates annihilating our very existence. He categorically put forth that "There is only one inborn error, and that is the notion that we exist in order to be happy (Schopenhauer, 2012, p. 634). And we can trace this tendency throughout his scholarship. In *Parerga and Paralipomena* (1974), for another instance, Schopenhauer presents the famous porcupine analogy not merely as a social observation but as a profound philosophical problem at the heart of all living creatures, including human existence. On a freezing winter day, porcupines draw near to one another for warmth, yet as they approach, they wound each other with their quills; forced apart by pain, they again suffer from cold and once more seek proximity, until they discover a tolerable distance between nearness and injury. For Schopenhauer, this oscillation captures the tragic structure of human life in relations: we are beings who cannot endure isolation, for we crave recognition, companionship, and relief from existential solitude, yet we are equally incapable of sustained intimacy because each individual, as an embodiment of the blind and self-assertive Will, inevitably wounds others through egoism, pride, desire, and competition.

The philosophical problem, then, is not merely psychological but metaphysical: how can beings whose inner essence is a restless, self-centered striving achieve genuine community without mutual harm? The porcupine dilemma reveals that sociability is both necessary and intrinsically conflictual; warmth and injury arise from the same proximity. What appears socially as irritation or incompatibility is, at a deeper level, the Will's plurality objectifying itself in mutually resistant individuals. Accordingly,

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the analogy dramatizes a structural contradiction within human existence itself—our simultaneous need for, and impossibility of, unproblematic togetherness—leaving us to negotiate a fragile equilibrium between loneliness and suffering rather than hope for their complete resolution. But the problems from Schopenhauer's time have compounded. It is no longer merely humanistic. For instance, to articulate him in our time often feels like boarding a journey without quite knowing when or how it began. The world is warmer, louder, and more exhausted than before, and the signs of strain are everywhere—on the land we have overused, in the air we struggle to breathe, and in the quiet desperation that marks everyday human life.

It increasingly appears as though the evolution of the physical world has been hindered, replaced by a kind of non-evolutionary movement without genuine change. Everything advances in speed but not in direction, as if the world were merely repeating itself. This condition invites comparison with the older scientific "oscillating-universe theory", which held that the universe expands rapidly, exhausts its energy, and eventually contracts back into itself (Gorkavyi, 2025). Our moment feels uncannily similar. Technology, consumption, and control expand relentlessly, yet meaning, care, and ecological balance shrink alongside them. Progress multiplies outwardly, while inwardly it collapses. As the universe imagined in that theory, the world seems driven by an initial momentum that can no longer sustain creative growth, only repetition and eventual compression. What looks like development may, in fact, be the prelude to contraction: not a dramatic end, but a slow tightening, a future that feels less open with each passing moment. Schopenhauer says, "Not merely that the world exists, but still more that it is such a miserable and melancholy world, is the tormenting problem of metaphysics" (Schopenhauer, 2012, p. 72).

Accordingly, the question that remains is whether this trajectory is inevitable or whether human thought and responsibility can interrupt this cycle of expansion followed by reduction before it completes itself. Why does suffering feel so intimate and yet so widespread? Why, amid environmental ruin and social conflict, do we experience our pain as if it were ours alone? Schopenhauer offers deep wisdom on such questions. To explore this, we turn to Mark Rowlands (2005), who captures this condition through a striking thought experiment inspired by Schopenhauer. He asks us to imagine being stuck on a deeply unpleasant bus ride. The heat is oppressive, the road uneven and punishing. Nothing seems to function properly; the air is heavy with neglect and decay. Your body is tired, your patience worn thin. Around you, people argue, invent stories, shout, and lash out—each reacting in their own way to the same unbearable situation. The ride offers no comfort, no dignity, and no sense of direction. Then, almost by accident, you meet another passenger's gaze.

In that fleeting moment, you reveal something painfully familiar. The fear, the disgust, the fatigue you carry are written just as clearly on their face. What becomes evident is not merely that others are suffering, but that they are suffering in exactly the same way you are. The bus is no longer just crowded; it is shared. For Schopenhauer, much like Buddha, this recognition changes everything. It does not remove suffering, but it alters how it is borne. You realize that your pain is not singular, and this alone makes it more tolerable. At the same time, your judgment of others softens. Their irritations and failures appear less as personal defects and more as expressions of the same wounded condition. Everyone on the bus is trying, often clumsily, to endure what cannot easily be endured. As Jualin Young put it in the context of Schopenhauer's metaphysics

The world is the perpetrator of all this horror. So, it is evil. But since it is the world, it is also the victim of its own evil. It bears all the suffering it itself creates. Since every part of the world is part of the world organism, every time an animal sinks its teeth

into another's flesh, the world sinks its teeth into its own flesh (Young, 2005, p. 81).

Seen this way, the thought experiment raises a deeper moral problem for our time. In a world strained by ecological crisis and human misery, how long can we pretend that suffering is a private affair? If we are all confined to the same damaged vehicle, moving through an uncertain future, perhaps what is called for is not blame or moral superiority, but a shared patience. Life remains difficult, and suffering does not disappear. Yet there is a difference between suffering alone and suffering together—and in that difference lies the fragile possibility of forgiveness and compassion, for others, for everything that exists, including the environment, and for ourselves. These virtues, in other words, become a part of our life world. Of equal importance, Schopenhauer does not remain content with this moral injunction and empirical analogies. He adheres to a strong metaphysics to solve all problems. In this regard, he may be regarded as a monist in his own distinctive way and in full consistency with our objectives, since he seeks to explain both reality and human experience through a single fundamental principle, which he famously calls the "Will" (Schopenhauer, 2012).

One reason for adopting Schopenhauer as one of our guides is that he stands among the earliest modern thinkers to argue forcefully against radical skepticism, insisting that reality is not merely thinkable but experientially accessible—most immediately through our own embodied willing; an aspect given supreme importance in Indian thought, particularly in Vedānta and Buddhism (Barua, 2008; Barua et al., 2012; Cross,2013; Barua, 2018). Schopenhauer's position becomes especially significant when read against Hegel's idealistic project (Scruton, 1997). Although both philosophers respond to Kantian agnosticism, they do so in markedly different ways. Hegel attempts to overcome Kant's limits on knowledge by subsuming experience within the self-development of the Absolute Idea. In doing so, however, Hegel risks abstracting philosophy away from concrete, lived experience. The Absolute, as the self-unfolding rational totality, ultimately stands prior to and determines all particular experiences, rendering them moments within a pre-given rational structure.

This is precisely where a serious critique of Hegel's idealism arises. By privileging the logical necessity of the Absolute over the immediacy of experience, Hegel appears to detach philosophy from the phenomenological richness of lived life. Human experiences—suffering, contingency, individuality, and freedom—are reconceived as merely transitional stages in the rational march of Spirit. As a result, reality becomes fully intelligible only retrospectively, from the standpoint of the completed system, thereby diminishing the openness and unpredictability that characterize actual human existence. Moreover, Hegel's philosophy tends toward determinism. Since every event and experience is interpreted as a necessary moment in the dialectical self-realization of the Absolute and historicism, little room remains for genuine contingency or existential freedom. History, nature, and individual agency are all integrated into a teleological narrative in which whatever happens is retrospectively justified as rational and dialectically necessary. In other words, if Hegel answered Kant's epistemic restrictions with an ambitious vision of total reconciliation and absolute inclusion, Arthur Schopenhauer—one of Hegel's fiercest and most enduring rivals—reacted from the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum, in a deeply pessimistic register (Horstmann, 2009).

Like Hegel, Schopenhauer begins with Kant, but unlike Hegel, he remains firmly within the Kantian framework and radicalizes it rather than overcoming it. He treated Kant's transcendental idealism as his philosophical foundation, even describing it as an "intellectual rebirth." In particular, he fully accepted Kant's claim that space, time, and causality are not features of reality as it exists in itself, but forms imposed by the human mind as the conditions of any possible experience. They function as unavoidable lenses through which the world appears to us, not as attributes of things independent of our cognition. From this standpoint, Schopenhauer could draw his famous

conclusion: the world is representation. Everything that appears—objects, events, the entire empirical universe—exists only in relation to a subject that represents it. In this sense, Schopenhauer pushes Kantian idealism to its most uncompromising conclusion. Yet Schopenhauer was equally convinced that Kant's system harbored a serious internal flaw. Kant had insisted, on the one hand, that the thing-in-itself is completely unknowable, while, on the other hand, he continued to describe it as the cause of our experience.

For Schopenhauer, this move was philosophically illegitimate. Causality itself, he argued, belongs to the very framework of representation; it is one of the mind's organizing principles and has meaning only within the phenomenal world. To claim that a noumenal thing-in-itself causes appearances is therefore to smuggle a category beyond the limits Kant himself had set. It amounts to applying a rule where it no longer applies, a conceptual sleight of hand that empties causation of any intelligible content. Kant, in Schopenhauer's view, had thus left behind an unresolved tension: a reality posited as the ground of appearances but rendered unintelligible by the very epistemological rules meant to govern it. As Schopenhauer writes:

> On the path of objective knowledge… we shall never get beyond appearances. We shall therefore remain at the outside of things; we shall never be able to penetrate into their inner nature, and investigate what they are in themselves…So far, I agree with Kant. But we ourselves are the thing-in-itself. (Schopenhauer, 2012, p.195).

Accordingly, Schopenhauer did not deny that something lies beneath the veil of *Māyā*, if we speak in the Advaita terminology, beneath the world as mere appearance. He agreed with Kant that the phenomenal world cannot be ultimate, but he insisted that we cannot access what underlies it by extending inquiry outward. Starting from representation, he argued, as a typical Kantian, that we will never get beyond it. The decisive shift, therefore, is inward rather than outward. We do not only know subjects confronted with objects; we are also embodied beings, and Schopenhauer locates a unique point of access to the thing-in-itself here. The human body, he observes, is given to us in a double manner. From the outside, it appears like any other object, situated in space and time and governed by causal laws. In this respect, it is simply one representation among others. But from within, we do not encounter the body as an object at all. We live it immediately, before reflection or conceptualization. When we attend to this inner dimension, we do not discover a transparent rational self or a thinking ego. The body, Schopenhauer accomplishes, is Will rendered visible, the outward appearance of an inward reality. It is "infinitely more familiar and more intimate than anything else" (cited in Wickes,2008, p. 71). And from this subjective experience, he takes us to the world of objectivity. He asks us to introspect:

> Now let us consider attentively and observe the powerful, irresistible impulse with which masses of water rush downwards, the persistence and determination with which the magnet always turns back to the North Pole, the keen desire with which iron flies to the magnet, the vehemence with which the poles of the electric current strive for reunion…If we observe all this, it will not cost us a great effort of the imagination to recognize once more our own inner nature, even at so great a distance. It is that which in us pursues its ends by the light of knowledge, but here, in the feeblest of its phenomena, only strives blindly in a dull, one-sided, and unalterable manner (as cited in Safranski, 1991, p.214).

This insight becomes the key to his metaphysics. If the inner essence of our own being is Will, then the same must hold, in principle, for all appearances, including nature.

Schopenhauer insists that this is not a loose metaphor but a warranted extension, since our body itself belongs to the same phenomenal order as the rest of nature. What reveals itself inwardly as Will in us must therefore be the world's inner reality. The thing-in-itself is not an abstract, unknowable thing-in-itself but Will—one, universal, blind, and without ultimate purpose. In this world, the Will is both hunter and prey, torturer and tortured, deceiver and deceived, killer and killed. The flight of a hawk, the growth of a tree, the fall of a stone, and the motion of distant galaxies are all different objectifications of this single underlying force. In this way, Schopenhauer arrives at a form of monism comparable in scope to that of Spinoza or Hegel, but radically different in spirit. The ultimate reality is not rational, self-conscious, or benevolent; it is insatiable striving without final satisfaction. Will endlessly pushes itself into existence, consuming itself in the process. Nature thus appears as a scene of perpetual conflict, where one form of life survives only by destroying another. Because willing is endless and fulfillment is always temporary, suffering is built into the very structure of existence. Individual beings appear separate only at the level of representation; in truth, all are expressions of the same restless Will, divided against itself and condemned to ceaseless wanting. Or as he put it more clearly:

> Therefore, so long as our consciousness is filled by our will, so long as we are given up to the throng of desires with their constant hopes and fears, so long as we are the subject of willing, we can never have lasting happiness nor peace. It is essentially all the same whether we pursue or flee, fear injury or seek enjoyment; the care for the constant demands of the will, in whatever form it may be, continually occupies and sways the consciousness; but without peace, no true well-being is possible (cited in Nahm, 1974, p.555).

And it is what he wants us to overcome. As analyzed previously, Schopenhauer also found, in ethics, a gateway to this transcendence. The moral emotion of compassion (*Mitleid*) arises, he wrote, from a metaphysical recognition that the apparent boundary between beings is illusory. Beneath the surface, all life is one Will. To feel another's pain as one's own is not sentimental but revelatory—a momentary lifting of the veil of individuation. As he put it:

> Compassion is the most likely alleviation of the countless and multifarious sufferings with which our life is beset and which no one completely escapes, and at the same time, compassion is the counterbalance to the burning egoism that fills all beings and often develops into malice (Schopenhauer, 2010, p. 128).

In other words, what the Indian thinker calls *sahṛdayta*, the communion of hearts, Schopenhauer recognized as the ethical expression of this same truth: a spontaneous participation in the unity that underlies existence. But such moments—whether aesthetic or ethical—are rare and fleeting. They offer a glimpse of liberation, only for the ordinary sense of self to reassert itself. This raises a timeless and haunting question: if these states of freedom are possible, even briefly, can they be made lasting? Can one learn to dwell permanently in that unconditioned awareness where the self no longer strains and suffers? For Schopenhauer, as for many of the world's spiritual traditions, this question points toward the very heart of religion and philosophy. The world offers endless distractions and temporary escapes, but none can quench the deeper thirst. At their esoteric core, the great traditions can be seen as disciplined paths—systems of consciousness crafted to turn momentary insight into enduring realization. Through meditation, contemplation, devotion, and moral purification, they seek not merely to comfort the self but to dissolve it, to align human consciousness with the absolute. What we experience fleetingly in compassion or beauty, they suggest, is not an accident but a glimpse of our true condition—a reminder of the unity from which we have

never, in truth, been apart.

## II

Schopenhauer offers a powerful diagnosis of human suffering, but his proposed ultimate solution faces serious difficulties. Since the Will itself is the source of all dissatisfaction, Schopenhauer concludes that genuine liberation requires transcending the very desires through which the Will expresses itself. For this reason, he ultimately advocates asceticism as the highest solution to the human predicament. He writes, "Every fulfilment of our wishes won from the world is only like the alms that keep the beggar alive today so that he may starve again tomorrow. Resignation, on the other hand, is like the inherited estate; it frees its owner from all care and anxiety forever (Schopenhauer, 2012, p. 390)." He writes further of ascetics that "Nothing can distress or alarm him anymore; nothing can any longer move him; for he has cut all the thousand threads of willing which hold us bound to the world, and which, as craving, fear, envy, and anger, drag us here and there in constant pain. He now looks back calmly and with a smile on the phantasmagoria of this world, which was once able to move and agonize even his mind (Schopenhauer, 2012, p.390)." Yet this proposal raises important questions. Is such a radical withdrawal from desire truly feasible for human life as we know it? More importantly, does it not amount to a fundamentally life-negating philosophy? By treating existence itself as something to be renounced, Schopenhauer's vision appears to deny the affirmative possibilities of human engagement with the world.

All willing springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering. Fulfillment ends this; yet for one wish fulfilled, at least ten remain denied. Further, desire lasts a long time; demands and requests go on to infinity; fulfillment is short and meted out sparingly. But even the final satisfaction itself is only apparent; the wish fulfilled at once makes way for a new one…No attained object of willing can give satisfaction that lasts and no longer declines…Therefore, so long as our consciousness is filled by our will, so long as we are given up to the throng of desires with its constant hopes and fears, so long as we are the subject of willing, we never obtain lasting happiness or peace (Schopenhauer, 2012, p. 196).

This leads to a deep internal tension: Schopenhauer claims that the Will is the single metaphysical essence of all reality, yet it can be "denied" only in the human being through ascetic knowledge akin to *vairāgya*. If the Will is truly one and indivisible, manifesting itself in all beings from plants to animals to humans, then the denial of the Will in a saint appears metaphysically puzzling: does the Will negate itself in one of its own objectifications while continuing unchanged in others? If so, plurality seems reintroduced at the level of the Will itself, as though one expression could stand over against the rest. If not, and denial is merely subjective, then the metaphysical status of liberation becomes ambiguous. Moreover, Schopenhauer still presupposes a graded evolution of the Will's objectification—from blind force to plant life to animal instinct to rational human awareness—suggesting developmental differentiation within what is supposed to be a unitary reality. This leaves a structural duality between Will and its negation, between striving and renunciation, and between liberated and non-liberated manifestations.

Another tension in Arthur Schopenhauer's metaphysics often leads readers to interpret his philosophy as alternately close to Advaita Vedānta and, at other times, resembling Buddhism (Cross, 2013). On the one hand, as we have been seeing, Schopenhauer argues that the underlying reality of the world is Will and that everything that appears in the phenomenal world is ultimately a manifestation of this single

metaphysical principle. In this respect, his view sometimes appears analogous to the Advaitic insight expressed in the dictum *sarvam khalvidam brahma*—that all this is Brahman. On the other hand, his persistent emphasis on suffering, striving, and dissatisfaction strongly echoes the spirit of the First Noble Truth articulated by Gautama Buddha, which holds that existence is pervaded by suffering. Yet a closer examination reveals an important difficulty. Schopenhauer's Will functions as a metaphysical substance or a foundational reality. Such a position would not be acceptable within Buddhism, particularly Mahāyāna thought, which rejects any permanent underlying substance and instead emphasizes emptiness and dependent origination (Williams, 2008). At the same time, the Advaita Vedānta tradition would also resist Schopenhauer's characterization of ultimate reality. For Advaita, the Absolute—Brahman—is not blind striving or endless dissatisfaction but *sat–cit–ānanda* (being, consciousness, and bliss). The ultimate principle is therefore intrinsically fulfilled and not marked by the restless suffering that characterizes Schopenhauer's Will. In this sense, the philosophical synthesis that seems to emerge in Schopenhauer's thought—a blending of Buddhist pessimism with a quasi-monistic metaphysics—appears to contain a genuine tension.

One possible response, however, may be suggested from within Schopenhauer's own framework. Since he explicitly describes the Will as irrational, demonic, and blind, the contradictions that appear in his system may not be entirely accidental. If the ultimate principle itself is irrational striving, then inconsistency and tension may reflect that very nature. Had Schopenhauer conceived the ultimate reality as rational—such as the Absolute in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's dialectical system, or the pure Being (*sat*) of Advaita Vedānta—these contradictions might have been resolved through dialectical development or through the transcendence of illusion. But because the Will is fundamentally irrational, such reconciliation remains elusive. Despite these tensions, Schopenhauer's work still offers a profound philosophical insight. He formulated the problem of suffering with unusual clarity and seriousness, bringing philosophy closer to the immediacy of human experience. Too often philosophy becomes preoccupied solely with abstract questions of truth, treating suffering as merely a psychological category and thereby distancing philosophical reflection from lived reality. Schopenhauer helped restore this connection. Nevertheless, as argued above, his proposed solution—ascetic withdrawal and the negation of the Will—requires reconsideration. The present approach, therefore, suggests that his diagnosis of suffering may be retained, while his final solution can be refined and transformed by the more life-affirming orientation of Advaita Vedānta.

Advaita Vedānta puts forth the Absolute as non-dual, changeless, and indivisible, and the appearance of multiplicity, striving, bondage, and liberation belongs only to the realm of *māyā*. Liberation is not one part of reality negating another, but the sublation of ignorance through knowledge, wherein no real transformation occurs in Brahman itself. Thus, Advaita leaves no metaphysical remainder—no plurality within the Absolute, no evolution in the Real, and no duality between Will and its cessation—since all differentiation is only phenomenological appearance, not ontological division. Accordingly, as we shall see shortly, Advaita emerges as a more life-affirming philosophy. The exploration of ethics within spirituality, particularly through the lens of Advaita Vedanta as articulated by Swami Sarvapriyananda, reveals a profound connection between metaphysical realization and moral life without life-negating injunctions. For him, as for many Vedanta scholars such as Radhakrishnan (1959), Advaita never reduces enlightenment to merely abstract insight or life-negation; it insists that realization must transform the whole person.

Spiritual life begins with understanding, but it cannot end there. It must reshape the way one lives, relates, and responds to the world. Swami Sarvapriyananda (2020) often emphasizes two complementary ways of speaking about enlightenment. One is the radical shift in knowledge, an epistemic transformation in which one's

understanding of the self and reality is fundamentally restructured. In Indo-Tibetan Buddhist traditions, this is expressed as the direct realization of emptiness, where the belief in intrinsic, independent existence is dismantled. In Advaita Vedanta, this shift takes the form of liberating knowledge, *jñāna*, in which one realizes with certainty, "I am Brahman." The non-dual reality alone is real, while the world is understood as dependent and appearance-like. This realization is not simply a conceptual conclusion but a profound reorientation of one's entire way of knowing and being. At the same time, Swami Sarvapriyananda repeatedly insists that such realization must find expression in life. Enlightenment is not a private or purely inward event. If knowledge is genuine, its fruits will appear in conduct. Ethical transformation is not an optional add-on but a natural consequence of insight.

As one progresses on the path, and especially as realization deepens, certain qualities inevitably begin to manifest: non-violence, truthfulness, inner restraint, purity of intention, compassion, and a spontaneous concern for the welfare of others. These are not imposed moral rules but the outward signs of an inward awakening. From a Buddhist perspective, this ethical flowering is described as the embodiment of Buddha-nature in action. From an Advaitic perspective, it is the lived expression of one's true nature as *sat-chit-ananda*(existence, consciousness, and fullness). When separateness falls away, selfishness loses its grip, and love and compassion arise naturally, without strain. In this light, Swami Sarvapriyananda makes it clear that the fullness of enlightenment includes both inner realization and ethical living. One cannot genuinely claim spiritual depth while remaining indifferent or acting harmfully. While one can be morally good without explicit spiritual inquiry, one cannot be truly spiritual without becoming good. Ethics, as a way of life, is therefore not secondary to spirituality; it is its foundation, its companion on the path, and its visible manifestation in the world. As S. Radhakrishnan put it forth

The ethics of Vedanta depend on its metaphysics. According to Vedanta metaphysics, Brahman is the sole reality, and individuals are merely its modifications. The Vedanta postulates the absolute oneness of all things. "In a Brahmana endowed with wisdom and humility, in a cow, in an elephant, as also in a dog and a dog-eater, the wise see the same" ("Bhagavadgita," I Chap. V, 18). This metaphysical monism requires us to view all creation as one, regarding all thinking beings and the objects of their thoughts as non-different. In morals, the individual is enjoined to cultivate a spirit of *abheda*, or non-difference. Thus, Vedanta's metaphysics naturally leads to the ethics of love and brotherhood. Every other individual is to be regarded as your coequal and treated as an end, not a means (Radhakrishnan, 1914, p. 168).

Equally important, Advaita Vedanta makes this integration of ethics and realization explicit and foundational. The spiritual journey begins not with abstract speculation but with disciplined ethical and mental preparation. The student is expected to cultivate four core qualifications, known as *sadhana chatushtaya*. These necessities demonstrate that realization rests on a refined moral and psychological foundation; one must already live ethically and, through practice, become inwardly prepared for subtle truth. The goal of Advaita directly addresses the root of human suffering: attaining supreme freedom and the complete cessation of sorrow. According to this tradition, suffering arises from ignorance of our true nature. We often mistakenly identify with our body and mind and, as a result, imagine ourselves as limited individuals. The remedy is liberating knowledge, a lived insight into the Self as Atman, identical with Brahman. We are not separate, finite beings seeking fulfillment, but the one, limitless reality appearing as the many.

Accordingly, this metaphysical truth underpins ethics. Why be ethical? The usual philosophical justifications—utilitarian calculus aiming for the greatest happiness, or

deontological duty based on rules—are seen as unstable. Utilitarianism can justify harming a minority for the majority's benefit, leading to troubling moral dilemmas. Deontological rules depend on the authority that issues them, and they are not universally binding. The classic philosophical problem is the difficulty of deriving an "ought" from an "is"—that is, moral prescriptions from factual descriptions. Advaita Vedanta asserts that ethics can indeed be derived from metaphysics, from the fundamental "is" of reality. If the true nature of all is one non-dual consciousness, then unethical behavior stems from a delusion of separation. When I lie, cheat, or harm another, I am, in the deepest sense, acting against myself. I am fracturing a unity that is fundamentally real. Immorality is thus a symptom of ignorance, a failure to recognize the oneness that underlies apparent diversity. Ethical action, conversely, flows naturally from knowing this oneness. It is not compelled obedience to external law but a free, spontaneous expression of one's expanded identity.

From this principle, practical criteria for ethical discernment emerge. What is selfish tends to be unethical; what is unselfish tends to be ethical. That which strengthens one—physically, mentally, morally, spiritually—is aligned with truth; that which weakens is not. What fosters unity and harmony is good; what creates division and strife is not. These are not rigid rules, but rather guidelines based on the core insight of interconnection. Profound implications cascade from this ethical foundation. The first is radical equality. If all beings are manifestations of the same Brahman, then no inherent hierarchy of worth can exist. Swami Vivekananda emphasized this point, critiquing the social inequalities that had coexisted with Vedantic philosophy in India. A second implication is selfless service (seva). If the same reality looks out from all eyes, then service to others is not altruism but enlightened self-interest—a natural movement of care for the one Self in all its forms. As one monk beautifully expressed, "When I close my eyes in meditation, I find peace within. When I open my eyes, my attitude is, What can I do for you?" This reverses the default mode of seeking what one can get from the world.

A third implication is harmony. Non-duality does not erase diversity but embraces it as the playful expression of the One. Different religions, cultures, genders, and viewpoints are not threats to a single truth but manifold expressions of it. The spiritual challenge is to foster harmony amidst this variety, creating a symphony rather than a cacophony. This extends to harmonizing the inner spiritual life with outer action, and even to reconciling science and religion as different methodologies exploring the same reality. Yet, a critical question arises: Is knowledge of oneness enough to ensure ethical behavior? History and contemporary times show that even those who claim spiritual insight can act unethically. Here, the dialogue introduces a crucial psychological insight. The intellect, which grasps the teaching, is like a mahout (rider) on an elephant. The elephant represents the vast, habitual, emotional, and unconscious parts of the mind-body complex. The mahout may know the right direction, but if the elephant is untrained and driven by primal impulses, it will not obey. Spiritual knowledge informs the mahout, but it does not automatically train the elephant.

This training requires persistent practice (*abhyasa*) and discipline (*sadhana*). Ethical living must become an ingrained habit. This is why Vedanta's preliminary qualifications are so demanding. They are the repetitive training that tames the mind's elephant. A life of ethical discipline, often supported by a community (sangha) and accountability, wears down the grooves of selfish conditioning and creates new neural and karmic pathways. This is where the codified "do's and don'ts" of religious traditions have value—not as absolute ends, but as protective fences for the tender sapling of spiritual growth. Once the tree is mature—once realization is stable—the fence may become less critical, but the ethical shape of the tree remains. This addresses the complex issue of guilt and the shadow side of ethical striving. When ethics is imposed as a threatening set of "shoulds" fueled by fear of punishment (divine or social), it can

split the psyche: a persona striving to be "good" and a repressed shadow teeming with "bad" impulses. This can lead to hypocrisy, projection, and internal torment. The Vedantic approach seeks to transcend this by grounding ethics not in fear but in freedom and knowledge. Guilt is acknowledged but not clung to; it is offered into the fire of one's own divine nature, with a commitment to change.

The aim is to cultivate fearlessness (*abhaya*), recognizing that the source of evil is often fear itself—fear of loss, fear of the other, fear of death. Strength, born from the knowledge of one's immortal nature, becomes the true wellspring of virtue. Applied to contemporary crises—such as pandemic fear, social injustice, and inequality—this philosophy offers a twofold response. First, it provides an unshakable existential anchor: your true Self is beyond the body and its fate. This does not advocate passivity but provides the courage to act without being paralyzed by fear. Second, it frames the world's suffering not as a surprise but as part of samsara—the realm of change and duality. This realistic view prevents disillusionment and fuels compassionate engagement. The response to suffering becomes service, motivated by the clear-seeing recognition of oneness, not by guilt or obligation. Eventually, the challenging phenomenon of unethical behavior among spiritual teachers underscores that knowledge alone is insufficient. The "elephant" of latent tendencies (*vasanas*) requires lifelong training and discipline.

This highlights the importance of humility, accountability, and unity. Teachers in a lineage or peer community often have built-in checks that "cut them down to size." Association with others on the path, along with the simple routines of shared life, provides a grounding that solitary practice may lack. The imperative remains: any teaching or teacher should make you stronger, more independent, and more rooted in your own divinity. If it creates dependency, weakness, or excuses unethical behavior, it has strayed from the path's essence. In synthesis, the ethics of Vedanta and kindred spiritual paths present a holistic vision. It begins with ethical preparation as the gateway to wisdom. It grounds moral action in the non-negotiable truth of non-dual existence, making ethics a spontaneous expression of reality rather than a burdensome obligation. It acknowledges the arduous psychological work needed to align our entire being with this truth. And it ultimately envisions a life where the supreme epistemic shift—realizing "I am the One"—irresistibly manifests as a life of impeccable integrity, compassionate service, and harmonious unity with all existence. The journey from ignorance to knowledge is simultaneously the journey from fragmentation to wholeness, and from selfishness to boundless ethical love. As S Radhakrishna cites:

> Max Muller says: "The Vedanta philosophy has not neglected the important sphere of ethics; but, on the contrary, we find ethics in the beginning, ethics in the middle, and ethics in the end, to say nothing of the fact that minds, so engrossed with divine things as the Vedanta philosophers, are not likely to fall victims to the ordinary temptations of the world, the flesh, and other powers." It is true, the Vedanta does not contain an articulate code of morality derived from an acknowledged ethical ideal. Although the problems of modern ethics are not explicitly addressed in the Vedanta writings, answers to them can be gleaned from the suggestions contained therein. It is for the critical student of the Vedanta to bring together the scattered elements and present them as a whole (Radhakrishnan, 1914, p. 168).

## Conclusion: From Shared Suffering to Engaged Freedom

Suffering is not an isolated issue; rather, it is a universal phenomenon. As Buddha said, all is suffering, and suffering is all. It is not merely a psychological category, as analytical philosophers often charge. Everywhere one looks, signs of strain appear: on

human faces, in parched landscapes, and in the anxious rhythm of everyday news. What gradually comes into view is not merely a collection of isolated crises but a shared exhaustion, hinting at a deeper and more unified source of distress. From this sense of collective burden, and the recognition of a common predicament, the present inquiry took shape. This paper traced Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophical trajectory, from a powerful metaphysics of the universal Will to an ethical ideal that culminates in resigned quietism. It examined the experiential depth of his thought, especially the moral importance of compassion that arises from an intuition of unity beneath the illusion of individuation and duality. At the same time, it drew attention to a tension in his final solution: the demand to silence the Will entirely, a move that seems to require abandoning the *Dharma*—the structured field of relations, meanings, and obligations—as a whole. Such a position raises a troubling question about the desirability of a world in which fire no longer burns and water no longer flows, where the textures of lived reality are effectively negated.

In response, the discussion turned to Advaita Vedānta. Here, the paper implicitly examined an ontology of layered reality in which the empirical world of difference and moral action is ultimately Brahman, though it appears otherwise due to illusion. Within this framework, ethical life is not merely a preparatory discipline for liberation but an expression of liberation itself. Realization does not cancel the world; it transforms one's way of being within it. Non-duality, in this sense, dissolves the ultimate separation between self and other, humanity and nature, without erasing their lived distinctions. Within this framework, the Advaitin ideal of the jīvanmukta—a liberated being who lives in the world with wisdom, detachment, and universal sympathy—becomes intelligible, embodying an ethical life grounded in the realization of existence's deeper unity (Fort, 1998). On this basis, it may also be suggested that we sometimes romantically equate Schopenhauer's teachings with the Upanishads. Of course, he revered the Upanishads, yet his outlook on reality—pervaded as it is by suffering—does not fully justify such an alignment.

For Schopenhauer, as we saw, reality as Will is inseparable from suffering. By contrast, as analyzed, for the Vedāntins, for whom the Upanishads constitute an integral source of knowledge alongside the *Brahma Sutra* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, ultimate reality is *sat–chit–ānanda* (being–consciousness–bliss), not suffering. Accordingly, Schopenhauer is a contradictory blend of Buddhism and Vedanta; this needs careful reading from an Indian philosophical point of view. Apart from this, the paper argued that bringing Schopenhauer's incisive diagnosis of suffering into dialogue with Advaita Vedānta's affirmative non-dual vision yields a more compelling philosophical outcome—one that recognizes unity at the root of suffering while resisting withdrawal from the world, and instead calls for engaged, transformative freedom within it. The further question, then, is whether such esoteric wisdom can be rendered more conceptually articulate. While this task often invites the assistance of analytic philosophers, it also requires them to exercise humility about their empirical and naturalistic predispositions.

To sum up, Schopenhauer's reflections on suffering invite us to take the condition of the world more seriously and, in doing so, may also help us respond to several long-standing Western criticisms of Indian philosophy. Critics have often argued that Indian metaphysics leaves no genuine place for individual plurality because the ultimate reality is an ineffable Absolute—Brahman—and that this vision allegedly neglects the individual by making the highest goal of life a complete merging into that Absolute (Bhattacharyya, 1964). From this perspective, it has been further claimed that such a worldview prevented the development of systematic ethics and social philosophy in India, reducing religion to a form of mystical pantheism that appears detached from moral responsibility. Some have even suggested that the doctrine of karma denies individual freedom of will. By foregrounding the existential reality of suffering, however,

Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy encourages a re-engagement with these concerns, opening space to reconsider whether Indian metaphysical traditions truly neglect the individual or address human suffering and agency in a different yet philosophically meaningful way. This kind of approach can also render the classical ethical maxim "*ātmanah pratikūlāni pareṣāṃ na samācaret*"—do not do to others what is harmful or disagreeable to oneself—philosophically and culturally meaningful.

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