

### Schopenhauer and the *Diamond-Sūtra*

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### Abstract and Keywords

Commentators on Schopenhauer's philosophy have been at odds with one another concerning the signification of the "nothing" with which he closed the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation* in 1818, and how this relates to Schopenhauer's proposition that the will is Kant's thing-in-itself. This chapter contends that Schopenhauer's works contain two conceptions of soteriological nothing: an early conception that is ontological and contrasted with the vanity of phenomenal life, and a later conception in which nothing is employed as an apophatic denial of our epistemological categories. Schopenhauer sought to conceal the way in which his use and understanding of these concepts had changed by 1860 by appending a handwritten note to the close of the first volume that cited Isaak Jacob Schmidt's translation of the *Diamond-Sūtra*, an explanation of the Buddhist concept of *prajñāpāramitā*. Examination of Schmidt's treatise throws some light on the development of Schopenhauer's metaphysics and soteriology between 1818 and 1860.

Keywords: will, nothingness, soteriology, *prajñāpāramitā*, *Diamond-Sūtra*, Buddhism

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In the closing section (§71) of *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer turned to consider the condition of the saintly ascetic, in whom the will has asserted its original freedom and denied itself. To elucidate this enigmatic state, Schopenhauer drew a contrast between an absolute nothing (*nihil negativum*) and a relative nothing (*nihil privativum*) (WWR1, 436). The latter he summarily dismissed as "not even conceivable," in accordance with his habitual disdain for phrases that affix adjectives such as "absolute" and "unconditioned" to otherwise meaningful concepts. This is because his main purpose in the section was to set in opposition the incommensurable perspectives included within the concept of a *nihil privativum*, or relative nothing. On the one hand, there is the nothing (*Nichts*) of the saint's internal state, and particularly his consciousness which, in the absence of the will's striving, perceives no distinctions between phenomena, even between his own body and external objects, so "cannot really be called cognition, because it no longer has the form of subject and object." On the other, there is the vanity or nothing-

ness (*Nichtigkeit*) of the aims and activities of a consciousness shot through with insatiable will, pursuing a variety of particular external objects to satisfy its empty subjectivity, but receiving only suffering for its efforts. Schopenhauer recognized that, for most of his readers, the nothing of the saint's condition is likely to appear menacing and fearful, but he explained this as simply a reflex and "expression of the fact that we will life so much, and are nothing other than this will and know nothing other than it" (WWR1, 438). For, from the antithetical perspective of the saint, the "being" for which we strive appears as "nothing," so that he looks back upon the objects and values of our lives with an abhorrence equal to that with which we regard his mode of life:

... for everyone who is still filled with the will, what remains after it is completely abolished is certainly nothing. But conversely, for those in whom the will has turned and negated itself, this world of ours which is so very real with all its suns and galaxies is—nothing. (WWR1, 439)

(p. 364) This is the point at which Schopenhauer closed his first systematic articulation of his single thought—with nothing (*Nichts*). If Schopenhauer had hoped that this final word might have clarified his conception of the point of termination of his philosophy, and thereby the condition and consciousness of the saint, then debates in the secondary literature suggest that he failed. One might issue the rejoinder that the attempt itself was foolhardy, since—as he observed elsewhere—"the more that is thought *under* a concept, the less is thought *in* it," so that "the most universal concept, e.g. being (i.e. the infinitive of the copula) is practically no more than a word" (WWR2, 70). But if being—arrived at through negation of concrete perceptual content—provides no purchase for thought, how much more so does its opposite, nothing?

The debate in the secondary literature is not confined to the semantic issue of the meaning or possible referent of the word "nothing," nor is it limited to Schopenhauer's conception of the soteriological condition and consciousness of the saint. The nature of the nothing realized by the saint in the absence of willing raises issues concerning the ontological status of the will itself, in addition to the propriety of Schopenhauer's pretensions to objective knowledge of Kant's thing-in-itself.

Two broad positions can be found in the literature concerning Schopenhauer's metaphysics of will and soteriology of its negation, both of which relate their interpretations to Schopenhauer's concept of nothing. On the one side are commentators such as D. W. Hamlyn and Robert Wicks, who take Schopenhauer at his word when he says that the will is the thing-in-itself and the ascetic's salvation its negation.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation considers the opposition between the incommensurable perspectives contained in the concept of a *nihil privativum* as central to Schopenhauer's point in §71. Since will as thing-in-itself is the original reality, the soteriological nothing of the saint denotes "a condition of liberation from desire that reveals no new worlds or higher dimensions, but that provides a detached, liberated, and tranquil outlook on life"<sup>2</sup> and hence a negative state that is nevertheless desirable because "by comparison with the misery of our lot it is nothingness that provides the only clear contrast and the only release."<sup>3</sup>

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On the other side are commentators who take the contrast between a *nihil negativum* and a *nihil privativum* as the key to interpreting §71, with Schopenhauer's dismissal of an absolute nothing denoting his denial of a purely negative condition of salvation, and his concept of relative nothing an apophatic disavowal of the applicability of our linguistic and conceptual forms to the positive reality allegedly attained by the saint. Julian Young and John Atwell have developed versions of this reading, supporting it by qualifying Schopenhauer's claim that the will is thing-in-itself, which—the argument goes—he could not have meant literally, insofar as it illegitimately transports Kant's thing-in-itself into the phenomenon, making it an object for a subject. Young maintains that the will is not the thing-in-itself, but an intermediary object of metaphysical investigation that lies between perceptual appearance and unknowable thing-in-itself.<sup>4</sup> Atwell contends that there are two implicit accounts of the thing-in-itself in Schopenhauer's philosophy—one knowable as object, expressing itself as will in the phenomenon, and another that transcends subject-object cognition, describable only through negations, such as "ultimate reality ... noumenon ... or, to say it best, unconditioned being."<sup>5</sup> Young in particular (p. 365) argues that a transcendent thing-in-itself apart from will is presupposed by Schopenhauer's soteriology, for "the possibility of salvation *demands* that a metaphysical account of the world as Will should not be an account of the world in itself,"<sup>6</sup> and that one of Schopenhauer's key arguments for this position is "the 'relativity of nothingness' argument."<sup>7</sup> As such, Schopenhauer's closing reflections on nothing is not an ontological descriptor on the order of being (*ordo essendi*), but only a negation on the order of knowledge (*ordo cognoscendi*), so that when Schopenhauer "says that the saintly ascetic achieves, ultimately, salvation (*Erlösung*), there is some positive state or condition which he believes the term to designate."<sup>8</sup>

These two opposed commentarial stances can and do marshal a variety of quotes from Schopenhauer's published works, notebooks, and letters in support of their contrary interpretations. Schopenhauer's dominant position is that the will is Kant's thing-in-itself, so that once we remove the subject-object form of representation, what is left over "can be nothing other than *will*, which is therefore the true *thing in itself*" (WWR1, 187). However, alongside these unequivocal statements there are some tentative qualifications of this position, which concede at least *the possibility* of a distinction between knowable will and unknowable thing-in-itself, such as that "the thing-in-itself (which we cognize most directly in willing) may have—entirely outside of any possible appearance—determinations, properties, and ways of being that entirely elude our grasp or cognition, but which would remain as the essence of the thing in itself even when ... this has freely annulled itself as *will*" (WWR2, 209).<sup>9</sup>

Such quotations pose a genuine difficulty for any exposition of Schopenhauer's philosophy that strives to present it as a coherent, atemporal, and seamless whole, in accordance with Schopenhauer's own characterization of his system as the unfolding of a "single thought" (WWR1, 5). As a result, commentators are confronted with a choice concerning which quotations to prioritize, while limiting the force or relevance of others to the overall presentation of Schopenhauer's philosophy.

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The debate concerning whether unknowable being or literal nothingness is attained by Schopenhauer's saint in whom the will has turned and denied itself, recalls a comparable debate that absorbed academic Buddhology in the nineteenth century, concerning whether key Buddhist concepts, such as *nirvāṇa*, *śūnyatā*,<sup>10</sup> and *prajñāpāramitā*,<sup>11</sup> denote extinction or entry into a higher mode of existence signposted through negations.<sup>12</sup> It is significant, therefore, that in 1860—forty-two years after Schopenhauer brought the first statement of his system to a close with the word “nothing”—he annotated a handwritten footnote to the effect that “[t]his is precisely the Pradschna-Paramita [*prajñāpāramitā*] of the Buddhists, the ‘beyond of all knowledge’, i.e. the point where subject and object are no more. (See I. J. Schmidt, *Ueber das Mahajana und Pradschna-Paramita*)” (WWR1, 439).

Schopenhauer's citation is to a treatise published in 1840 by the Russian-based Buddhologist, Isaak Jacob Schmidt.<sup>13</sup> Schmidt's work was a translation of a Mahāyāna scripture known as the *Diamond-Sūtra*, accompanied by Schmidt's exposition of the key teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Schopenhauer's reference to Schmidt's publication provides a clue to the aforementioned equivocations found in his work concerning the (p. 366) status of the will and what is at stake in its denial. This is because Schmidt's publications indicate that his position on the controversy over Buddhist soteriology was that *nirvāṇa* and *prajñāpāramitā* constitute a transition into the “beyond of wisdom [*Jenseits der Weisheit*],” and hence reunion with the “incomprehensible and fathomless fullness of the immaterial, simple abstraction of the divine being.”<sup>14</sup> Or, in Schopenhauerian language, reabsorption into the inner nature of the thing-in-itself.

Schopenhauer associated the “nothing” that terminated his first work with Schmidt's positive and transcendent account of Buddhist soteriology for a reason, one that becomes clearer when the negative reviews and subsequent neglect to which his system was exposed after 1818 are taken into account, alongside his exposure to mystical religious literature between 1818 and 1860. It is the thesis of this chapter that the inconsistent statements concerning the status of the will and its denial found in Schopenhauer's works are best unraveled diachronically rather than synchronically, because Schopenhauer surreptitiously modified the connotation of key concepts such as “will” and “nothing” between 1818 and 1860. His tendency to juxtapose confident reassertions of the central proposition of his *Willensmetaphysik* with subtle qualifications in later works, as well as the footnote to Schmidt's treatise appended to the word “nothing” in 1860, are unifying techniques of his authorship, employed to sustain the conviction that his philosophy was based on a single thought, in relation to which his works were the empirical-temporal unfolding of its unified transcendental character. However, it is highly unlikely that Schopenhauer's understanding of his key concepts, developed over four decades, remained stable. If, instead, we carry over an insight from Nietzsche's genealogical method, we might regard the words “will” and “nothing” as the stable element, whose meaning is unstable and subject to mutation so that, by 1860, they contain not just “one meaning but a whole synthesis of meanings,” insofar as “only something which has no history can be defined.”<sup>15</sup>

The thesis that Schopenhauer's growing encounter with literature on Buddhism relates to the "shift in his thinking concerning the nature of the thing-in-itself" has been previously articulated by Moira Nicholls.<sup>16</sup> However, whereas Nicholls regards the relation as one of influence, this chapter develops the view that Schopenhauer's reading of the work of Schmidt, and especially the latter's treatise on *prajñāpāramitā*, provided a way out of difficulties concerning the relation between metaphysical will and soteriological nothing highlighted in critical reviews of the first volume of his chief work.

The next section of this chapter develops an interpretation of Schopenhauer's conception of relative nothing in 1818, using only quotes from the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation* to elucidate his meaning at that time. In the following section, Schmidt's translation of the *Diamond-Sūtra* and commentary on Mahāyāna will be analyzed, with particular reference to the positively transcendent account of *prajñāpāramitā* that he imported into the *Sūtra*. The fourth section of the chapter will trace the steps and developments in Schopenhauer's *Willensmetaphysik* and soteriology that followed on from his initial statement in 1818, which led up to his appropriation of Schmidt's apophatic account of Buddhist soteriology in the footnote of 1860.

### (p. 367) **22.1 Schopenhauer on Absolute and Relative Nothing: 1818**

If the closing section of the first edition of *The World as Will and Representation* is interpreted using only materials from that time period, then there is no indication that the concept of relative nothing (*nihil privativum*) is an indirect affirmation of the saint's entry into a positive reality that exceeds our linguistic and conceptual categories. Indeed, Schopenhauer positively excluded such an idea. He unequivocally stated that "[o]nly nothing remains before us" (WWR1, 438), and counseled his readers not to bypass or "evade" (*umgehen*) it with "myths and meaningless words [*Mythen und bedeutungsleere Worte*] as the Indians do, words such as 're-absorption into the primal spirit' [*den Urgeist*<sup>17</sup>], or the *Nirvāṇa* of the Buddhists" (WWR1, 439).

This comment clearly signifies that Schopenhauer at this stage regarded any suggestion of mystical reabsorption or equivocal negation (*nirvāṇa*) as mere evasive fig leaves for the saint's attainment of a negative state, despite Schopenhauer's nascent admiration for other aspects of Indian thought at this stage. Urs App has argued the contrary, contending that Schopenhauer's comment is "very positive," and "is usually completely misunderstood as a critique of *nirvāṇa* and Buddhism."<sup>18</sup> However, rather surprisingly, App's argument turns solely on the circumstance that Isaak Schmidt used the word *bedeutungsleer* to expound the Mahāyāna critique of all names and forms, including *nirvāṇa*, in a work published in 1843, from which App argues back to Schopenhauer's supposed identical use in 1818. But App's argument assumes that Schopenhauer possessed a level of sophisticated knowledge of Mahāyāna's negative dialectic unknown to any European in 1818, and also ignores the force of Schopenhauer's contention that Buddhists use *nirvāṇa* to "evade" (*umgehen*) "the dark impression of that nothing that hovers behind all virtue and

holiness as the final goal” (WWR1, 439). Schopenhauer’s reference is clearly dismissive, and indicates that, at this stage, mystical reports of the soteriological condition were not a respectable source.

Instead, Schopenhauer’s conception of the nothing of the saint was worked out in relation to European philosophers, specifically Kant and Plato. He cited Kant as the origin for the contrast between an absolute nothing (*nihil negativum*) and a relative nothing (*nihil privativum*): Kant defined the former as an “[e]mpty object without concept,” which coheres with Schopenhauer’s comment that it is “not even conceivable,” for it “would be nothing in every respect” and hence self-cancelling (WWR1, 436). Nothing in every respect suggests that, were there an absolute nothing, there would never have been a world at all, and hence no will and no representation to wonder at—just nothingness for eternity. By contrast, Kant defined a *nihil privativum* as an “[e]mpty object of a concept,”<sup>19</sup> and hence the concept of an absence or void. By itself a void has no content, so can only be thought indirectly, through the relation of thinking away, absenting, or emptying out that in relation to which it is nothing—namely, the will as thing-in-itself, along with its mirror, the world as representation.

(p. 368) Schopenhauer also referenced Plato’s *Sophist* in §71 (WWR1, 437), a dialogue concerned with how to say or think what is not, the solution to which was given in the Form of Otherness or Difference (το ἕτερον). The section of the dialogue to which Schopenhauer referred has the Eleatic Stranger outlining how the parts of Difference pervade all other Forms, allowing each one to remain itself, by virtue of not being, or being different from, all the others. However, Difference itself has no specific nature and so cannot be thought independently, apart from not being, or being different from, all other Forms. Since non-being is Difference, it is not therefore the contrary of being, for that would be absolute nothing; instead, non-being is a relative nothing that can be brought into discourse because it is *different from* being, “and necessarily, because it is different from *that which is*, it clearly can be *what is not*.”<sup>20</sup>

In sum, Schopenhauer’s line of thought in §71 might be compared to the response that Silenus gave to King Midas’s question concerning the best life:<sup>21</sup> Schopenhauer’s concept of relative nothing would correspond to dying very soon and absolute nothing to never having been born at all, a condition that is—insofar as we have heard those words—“not even conceivable,” because “nothing in every respect” (WWR1, 436). Both indicate a negation or absence, one absolutely without a preceding condition of existence—and hence inconceivably—and the other relative to the existence that both King Midas and the reader of *The World as Will and Representation* are currently enduring, whose negation gives it content for our understanding.

It seems, therefore, that Schopenhauer’s dismissal of the concept of absolute nothing proceeded from assumptions that also prompted his dismissal of the concept of absolute good, for just as “every good is essentially relative: because its essence is to exist only in relation to a desiring will” (WWR1, 389), so every nothing is essentially relative, because its essence is related to and assumes a recently extinguished will. Sainly mystics may re-

sort to positive phrases when celebrating their liberation from willing, such as “ecstasy, rapture, enlightenment, unity with God” (WWR1, 438), but these will be as empty of content as exclamations of happiness, contentment, and satisfaction of willing, which are similarly “of a negative rather than positive nature” (WWR1, 346). Schopenhauer would not, therefore, have taken mystical phrases as reliable reports from the beyond, insofar as the experiences and actions of a saint “do not come from abstract cognition, but from an intuitively grasped, direct cognition of the world and its essence, and he filters this through some dogma only to satisfy his reason” (WWR1, 410). The saint thereby has no other language in which to express his phenomenological experience of negative liberation from willing, or relative nothing, than the abstract myths and meaningless words made available by his religious and cultural tradition. These will often consist of transcendent terms denoting union with some positive object or supernatural reality, but the terms that Schopenhauer himself used to describe the nature of the saint were psychological and hence ontologically neutral, such as the “peace [*Friede*] that is higher than all reason ... that completely calm sea of the mind [*Meeresstille des Gemüths*], that profound tranquillity [*tiefe Ruhe*], imperturbable confidence and cheerfulness [*unerschütterliche Zuversicht und Heiterkeit*]” (WWR1, 438). On this reading, the intuitive content of ascetic wisdom converges with (p. 369) what was, for Hamlet, the abstract knowledge that “our condition is so miserable that complete non-being would be decidedly preferable” (WWR1, 350).

This, at least, is how Schopenhauer understood the concept of relative nothing in 1818; in his published works from 1844, it undergoes a subtle shift. In the supplementary essays that accompanied the second volume of 1844, Schopenhauer posited an “essence of the thing-in-itself” that might be left over (*übrig bleiben*) after the abolition of the will. For “cognition” this state appears as “an empty nothingness”, but if “the will were simply and absolutely the thing in itself, then this nothingness would be *absolute*, instead of which it expressly proves precisely here to be a *relative* nothingness” (WWR2, 209). It seems, therefore, that absolute nothing is no longer an empty object without concept, “not even conceivable,” but a possible state of simple non-existence, *were* the will the thing-in-itself without remainder; in other words, the condition that, I have argued, was denoted by relative nothing in 1818. By contrast, the 1844 passage states that the self-abolition of the will is a nothingness only for “cognition”, and hence relative to our intellects.

Schopenhauer often juxtaposed this possibility of an “essence of the thing in itself”, inaccessible to our intellects, with Buddhist concepts such as *nirvāṇa* (WWR2, 576; 624) and *prajñāpāramitā*. In the supplementary collection of essays of 1844 he remarked that “in the essence in itself of all things, to which time and space and therefore plurality as well must be foreign, there can be no cognition”, and in 1860 annotated to this a handwritten note to the effect that “Buddhism describes this as *Prajñāpāramitā*, i.e. what is beyond all cognition”,<sup>22</sup> citing Schmidt’s translation of the *Diamond-Sūtra* as his source for this claim (WWR2, 288). This is the same treatise cited at the close of his chief work of 1818, to which we now turn, to see what light it can throw on the development of Schopenhauer’s concepts of “will” and “nothing” between 1818 and 1860.

## 22.2 Schopenhauer and Schmidt's *Diamond-Sūtra*

Isaak Jakob Schmidt (1779–1847) originally learned Tibetan and Mongolian as a Moravian Missionary to Kalmyks, but from the mid-1820s he began to publish translations of and commentaries on Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhist scriptures. Although isolated from the main activities of European Buddhology centered in Paris, Schmidt's work was noticed by Eugène Burnouf, who had instigated the *nirvāṇa* controversy in 1844 by defining the term as “complete annihilation.”<sup>23</sup> To establish his interpretation, Burnouf questioned the fidelity to the original Sanskrit of the Tibetan manuscript from which Schmidt translated his *Diamond-Sūtra*, in order to dispute the accuracy of Schmidt's rendition of *nirvāṇa* as a transcendent location, or “region free from misery.”<sup>24</sup>

Schopenhauer first encountered Schmidt's scholarship in 1830, when he read and took notes from Schmidt's 1829 *History of the Eastern Mongols* (MR4, 47–48). (p. 370)

Schopenhauer recommended this work (alongside two by other authors) in the footnote covering recent Buddhist scholarship in the first, 1836, edition of *On Will in Nature*.<sup>25</sup> Citations to Schmidt's publications became a regular feature in Schopenhauer's works thereafter, occasionally accompanied by tributes, such as that Schmidt is “an admirable scholar whom I firmly believe to be the most thoroughly knowledgeable expert on Buddhism in Europe” (FR, 118). In the expanded version of the footnote that appeared in the second edition of *On Will in Nature* in 1854, Schopenhauer recommended three more books by Schmidt, in addition to the lectures on Buddhism that Schmidt had delivered to the Academy of St. Petersburg between 1829 and 1832, and published in its proceedings (WN, 432–33n).

One text by Schmidt not mentioned by Schopenhauer in the footnote of 1854 was the treatise on *praññāpāramitā* and translation of the *Diamond-Sūtra*, published in the Academy's proceedings of 1840. It is not completely clear when Schopenhauer might have first *read* the text, but it is safe to assume that it was late. Urs App has usefully recorded that Schopenhauer's personal copy indicates that he received it from the Librarian at the St. Petersburg Academy in 1860.<sup>26</sup> This accords with the absence of any notes to the text in Schopenhauer's *Nachlass* and only two references in his published works, both late and handwritten (WWR1, 439; WWR2, 288). These references indicate that the main idea that Schopenhauer carried over from Schmidt's treatise was the notion of an “essence in itself of all things” that transcends the division into subject and object, and is therefore “beyond all cognition” (WWR2, 288). It would be implausible to maintain, given Schopenhauer's late encounter with the treatise, that he *derived* this idea from Schmidt's work. However, his citations signify that his encounter with it merged with and confirmed key trends in his later thought, specifically that of the nothing that characterizes the condition of the ascetic.

Schmidt's treatise is a compound of elements: it reproduces the Tibetan text of his manuscript of the *Diamond-Sūtra*, followed by a German translation; there is also a translation



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of a Tibetan primer summarizing Buddhist doctrine, along with Schmidt's own general exposition of Mahāyāna religious philosophy. Schmidt's account of Mahāyāna is not rigorously derived from his translation of the *Diamond-Sūtra*, for the latter's account of *prajñāpāramitā* does not support Schmidt's gloss that it consists of the view that "only the greater unity outside of the borders of nature, in which every ego disappears, this Beyond all Knowledge [*prajñāpāramitā*], is to be accepted as true and unmistakable being."<sup>27</sup> The *Sūtra* itself makes no reference to true being beyond nature, but confines itself to applying a deconstructive logic to all phenomena, followed by an affirmation of their conventional existence. Shigenori Nagatomo describes this procedure as a "logic of not," which he formalizes as "A is not A, therefore it is A." This may, *prima facie*, appear to be a nonsensical statement, but as Nagatomo contends, "to understand it properly ... one must read it by effecting a perspectival shift to a non-dualistic, non-egological stance. Only then can one see that it is not contradictory, and hence that it is not nonsensical."<sup>28</sup>

The non-dual, "non-egological stance" to which Nagatomo refers is the Buddhist teaching that subjects and objects are empty (*śūnya*) of an inherent, self-defining (p. 371) nature (*svabhāva*).<sup>29</sup> The first part of the *Sūtra's* logic—A is not A—negates the common view that the objects of sense are self-grounding substances or Selves, negation of which is the ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*). The second part—therefore it is A—affirms the existence of subjects and objects on the level of conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*), as empty assemblages of changing elements, which is the perspective that the Bodhisattva must assume toward them in order to fulfill his vow to "liberate all of these aggregates from misery without remainder."<sup>30</sup> The Bodhisattva entertains both perspectives simultaneously, taking his stance on the field of emptiness, beyond subject and object, in which phenomena are indistinguishable and hence non-dual, while recognizing on a conventional level that these aggregates experience themselves as suffering beings in need of deliverance. In Schmidt's translation, the Buddha teaches his disciple Rabdschor (Skt. Subhūti) "that which is called living beings, *Deshinschegpa* [Skt. *Tathāgata*] has declared as non-beings [A is not A]; this is why they are called 'the living beings [therefore it is A].'"<sup>31</sup> The Bodhisattvas' ability to move between the ultimate perspective of emptiness and the conventional truth of suffering aggregates parallels, to an extent, Schopenhauer's 1818 conception of two states of nothing that are relative to one another—one vain, the other nothing, as outlined in the previous section.

It is nevertheless a tribute to Schmidt's conscientiousness that the *Sūtra's* studied avoidance of transcendent speculation comes across even in his German translation, but his exposition of the main principles of Mahāyāna tends to steer his readers toward a specific interpretation of the *Sūtra's* enigmatic dialectic. One might be tempted to argue that Schmidt projected his Christian presuppositions onto a non-theistic text when he remarked that, for Buddhists, "the fullness of the godhead resides in the beyond of human knowledge."<sup>32</sup> This, however, would be unfair, for as with any religious tradition, Buddhism as a living practice does not fully inhere within its scriptures: these are always interpreted within the context of a commentarial tradition that takes its bearings from the metaphysical assumptions of a particular school. As Paul Williams notes,

Buddhist texts were intended as no more than mnemonic devices, scaffolding, the framework for textual exposition by a teacher in terms of his own experience and also the tradition, the lineage transmission from his teachers, traced back to the Buddha himself, or to a Buddha, or to some other form of authorized spiritual revelation. This approach to, and treatment of, the sacred text in Buddhism is not only of historical interest. In traditional Mahāyāna cultures, particularly among the Tibetans, these texts are still used and studied in the age-old way. The scholar who would write a study of Buddhist practice or even doctrine without bearing this in mind is like an art historian who would study architecture by ignoring the building and looking only at the bricks!<sup>33</sup>

The lineage from which Schmidt obtained his manuscript of the *Diamond-Sūtra* was Tibetan Vajrayāna, a school that posits an innate, non-dual Buddha-nature in all beings, so that *prajñāpāramitā* constitutes the realization that one has been, always already, (p. 372) enlightened. Its philosophical underpinnings were derived from the Indian Mahāyāna school known variously as *Yogācāra*, *Cittamātra* (Mind-Only), or *Vijñānavāda* (The Way of Consciousness), which developed its doctrines in response to the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) school of Madhyamaka. The Yogācārins concurred with Madhyamaka that objects and subjects of experience are void or empty of self-nature, but objected that the theater in which phenomena arise and pass away must have inherent existence. They identified this with the non-dual consciousness experienced in yogic trance, in which there is merely a flow of phenomena, with no awareness of a self or subject within the flow that might be opposed to an object. This they named the *param-ālaya*, or “abode beyond,” which when corrupted appears as the *ālaya-vijñāna*, or storehouse consciousness, in which resides the seeds that ripen as karmic fruits and perpetuate the round of *saṃsāra*. *Prajñāpāramitā*, the condition beyond all knowledge, occurs when the mind realizes that phenomena are nothing but mental constructs, which thereby effects a return to “the ultimate source of mind or consciousness, which is in itself empty of all natures and features.”<sup>34</sup>

The metaphysics of Yogācāra pervades Schmidt’s commentary on the *Diamond-Sūtra*, although it ought to be emphasized that, for Tibetan Vajrayāna, the Buddha-Nature is a monist principle or “*immanent presence* in reality,”<sup>35</sup> rather than a transcendent abstraction. This does not come across in Schmidt’s fairly gnostic and dualist account of Mahāyāna, according to which Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are docetic appearances of a “hidden godhead,” appearing in physical nature to liberate “spirits captured within the bonds of matter.”<sup>36</sup> Schmidt maintained that the “idea that threads the system [Mahāyāna] together cohesively” is that “the indwelling spirit [*Geist*] of matter does not belong to the living organism, but to the godhead hidden in abstraction, because like this, it is eternal, immaterial and immutable in essence, and is thus willingly assimilated into and absorbed by it, as a related and constituent part.”<sup>37</sup> This sounds very much like the mythic and meaningless notion of reabsorption into the primal spirit, which Schopenhauer in 1818 regarded as an evasion of “that nothing that hovers behind all virtue and holiness as the final goal” (WWR1, 439).

The treatise nevertheless indicates that Schopenhauer and Schmidt were in agreement on the origin and nature of religion, for Schmidt similarly traced religions to something akin to Schopenhauer's metaphysical need, stating that it is "not sufficient for the human mind to remain within the authorized limits of its intuition; the feeling of its overly narrow margin drives [*treibt*] it over these limits."<sup>38</sup> And, like Schopenhauer, Schmidt regarded Buddhism as one of the foremost attempts to satisfy this drive (WWR2, 178), commenting that "among the many philosophical systems, from grey antiquity up to our days, all owe their existence to mental efforts of which Buddhism occupies the first place."<sup>39</sup> However, whereas Schopenhauer regarded monotheism as a minority (FR, 118) and dispensable faith (WWR2, 170–71), and located metaphysical need in wonder and distress (WWR2, 180), Schmidt traced the quest for metaphysical meaning to the universal question, "what and where is god?"<sup>40</sup>

(p. 373) It is likely that Schopenhauer would have taken Schmidt's suggestion that Buddhism was motivated by an alleged universal quest for god with a grain of salt, for he habitually distinguished Buddhists from other mystics who "mean *nirvāṇa* by the name God" and thereby "relate more than they could know, which the *Buddhists* do not do; hence their *Nirvāṇa* is merely a relative nothing" (PP2, 94). Indeed, Schopenhauer often referred to Schmidt's works in support of his view that Buddhism was atheistic, insofar as "[t]he writings of the Buddhists lack any positive indication of a supreme being as the principle of creation" (FR, 119). This suggests that, for Schopenhauer, a necessary condition of monotheism was a doctrine of creation out of nothing, which Schmidt consistently emphasized was absent from Buddhism. In his treatise on the *Diamond-Sūtra*, Schmidt noted that the "creation of worlds and their different regions is not at all regarded as an act of the highest divine essence," but proceeds or emanates (*ausgang*) "from the fragmentation of mind [*Geistheit*]" into a plurality of individual egos on contact with matter. And whereas Schopenhauer stressed that monotheism proper was obliged to regard creation as a gift, "πάντα καλὰ λῖαν" (PP2, 271), Schmidt observed that "according to the main teaching of Buddhism, in the connection between spirit and matter that issues in creation, there lies only disaster and ruin."<sup>41</sup>

Schmidt's Yogācāra-inspired account of the world's emanation from fragmented mind would possibly have struck Schopenhauer as a religious and hence *sensu allegorico* version of his theory that the world as representation arises when "the *one* eye of the world that gazes out from all cognizing creatures" carves up the thing-in-itself in accordance with the principle of sufficient reason (WWR1, 221). For, central to Schmidt's exposition of Mahāyāna was that the world of sense-experience, and everything conditioned by "materialistic-consequent reason," is "empty [*leer*] and void [*nichtig*]."<sup>42</sup> The same claim is stated in poetic fashion in Schmidt's translation of the *Sūtra*, when the Buddha describes objects of sense using imagery that resonates with Schopenhauer's own figurative descriptions of the phenomenon.

Consider all things and any accumulation (issuing from essence) like the covering of the stars, like a lamp, like an optical illusion (word-jugglery), like the thaw, like

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a water-bubble, like a dream, like a weather-light (lightning-flash), like the clouds!

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However, the subtle balance between two opposed but relative states—one painful but vain (*Nichtigkeit*) and the other painless but nothing (*Nichts*)—that characterized Schopenhauer’s conception of nothing in 1818, contrasts with Schmidt’s presentation of Mahāyāna’s opposition between the “apparent being of the forms and shapes of the world of appearance (phenomena)” and the “true immutable being” that lies beyond subject and object in *prajñāpāramitā*.<sup>44</sup> Schmidt would thereby have been instrumental in confirming the validity of Schopenhauer’s post-1818 conviction that the condition of the saint or Bodhisattva is a relative nothing in an epistemological sense, insofar as the ascetic passes “into the incomprehensible and fathomless fullness of the immaterial, simple abstraction of the divine being.”<sup>45</sup>

### (p. 374) **22.3 Schopenhauer on Absolute and Relative Nothing: Post-1818**

Although it cannot be claimed that Schmidt’s *Diamond-Sūtra* influenced Schopenhauer’s intellectual development, his 1860 citation to Schmidt’s treatise on *prajñāpāramitā* at the close of his first work indicates the direction in which Schopenhauer had been revising his key concepts after 1818. This project of revision evidently began early, in response to the few reviews of his chief work, but especially that by Johann Friedrich Herbart published in 1820.<sup>46</sup> Herbart was the first to articulate a set of objections to Schopenhauer’s system that have since become standard in the literature: concerning the inconsistency of Schopenhauer’s self-identification as a Kantian, who nevertheless assumes to know the thing-in-itself;<sup>47</sup> and the problem of understanding how the original freedom of the will can break into the order of determined phenomenal causes.<sup>48</sup> Both objections relate to the compatibility between Schopenhauer’s concepts of “will” and “nothing.”

Schopenhauer’s *Nachlass* evidences his immediate concern with these criticisms: in a note from late 1820 he considered the idea, later aired publicly in 1844 (WWR2, 209), that the will merely appears as thing-in-itself in the phenomenon, but may have other aspects unknowable to us (MR3, 41). This line of thought became clearer in a note from 1829, where it is tied into the soteriological concept of nothing that closed his first work.

I have, of course, declared this will to be the thing-in-itself, yet not absolutely, but only in so far as the thing-in-itself is to be named after its most immediate phenomenal appearance and accordingly the extreme boundary-stone of our knowledge is to be found in the will. When subsequently I represent this will as abolishing itself, then here I have expressly stated that the nothing that is left for us is only a relative and not an absolute nothing. From this it is obvious enough that that which abolishes itself as will must yet have another existence wholly inacces-

sible to our knowledge, and this would then be simply the existence of the thing-in-itself. (MR3, 595)

Schopenhauer's further ruminations on these themes did not appear in his next publication, *On Will in Nature* of 1836, which contained no new elaboration of his metaphysics, but a motley assemblage of alleged empirical confirmations of it. These new developments made their first appearance in 1844, in the second edition of *The World as Will and Representation*, accompanied by supplementary essays larger than the original work. The expanded material also indicated the extent of Schopenhauer's engagement with mystical religious literature between 1818 and 1844, including Schmidt's works on Buddhism. The work contains the aforementioned qualifications of his original statement that the will is the thing-in-itself, and what occurs in its denial. Schopenhauer still made a point of the immanence of his philosophy, which "sticks to the facts of outer and inner experience, as they are accessible to everyone" (WWR2, 657), so that his soteriology can only positively indicate "what is denied, surrendered" and hence "needs ... to (p. 375) describe as *nothing* what is thereby gained or grasped" (WWR2, 627). One might contend that the suggestion that there is a something to be "gained and grasped" after the will's abolition is already straying beyond facts accessible to everyone, but Schopenhauer goes further by adding the consolation that

... this still does not mean that it is absolutely nothing, that it has to be nothing from every possible perspective and in every possible sense; but only that we are restricted to a wholly negative cognition of it, due very probably to the restrictions of our standpoint. —But this is precisely where the mystic proceeds positively; from this point onwards, nothing remains but mysticism." (WWR2, 627)

This recognition of mysticism does not amount to a literal validation of its propositions, since the intuitions of mystics are grounded in individual rather than common experience, and their statements impossible, insofar as they aim to pass beyond wisdom or knowledge and express the inexpressible (WWR2, 626): as such, mystical propositions will still be "myths and meaningless words" (WWR1, 439). However, the quote above concedes a positive proceeding to the mystical quest that was absent in 1818, and moreover indicates how Schopenhauer's soteriological concept of nothing surreptitiously moved its focus from the opposed perspectives denoted by a *nihil privativum*, to the epistemological contrast between an absolute and relative nothing.

The possibility that there may be an unknowable entity prior to the will soon began to appear in Schopenhauer's works as *philosophical knowledge*, without reference to mysticism. In his last work of 1851, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, he maintained against "certain silly objections" that "the *negation of the will to life* in no way signifies the annihilation of a substance," and posited a prior, transcendent subject for which willing and not-willing are equal options, and which is consequently therefore "not annihilated by one or the other act" (PP2, 281).

Although these qualifications of his originally bold claim that the will is the thing-in-itself, and its negation nothing, enabled Schopenhauer to bypass the objections of critics and find in mysticism an independent confirmation of his soteriology, they unintentionally produced an imbalance in the explanatory power of his philosophy. This is because, as Schopenhauer often pointed out, the strength of his original statement resided in its ability to acknowledge the reality of evil and suffering without resorting to Ptolemaic epicycles, such as evil as non-being, the will's indifferent freedom, or a historical Fall of a Primal Man. By contrast, almost all other systems have optimistically but naïvely deduced the world of finite squalor from an infinite principle of perfection and plenitude. But, having done so, they have been immediately confronted by

... the question of the origin of evil, of the monstrous, nameless evil, of the horrible, heart-rending misery in the world, and to settle such a costly account they become dumb or have nothing but words—empty, sonorous words. In contrast, if the existence of evil is already woven together with that of the world in the foundation of a system, then it need not fear this spectre, just as a vaccinated child need not fear (p. 376) smallpox. But this is the case if freedom is placed in the “being” [*esse*] instead of the “acting” [*operari*] and then from freedom proceed wickedness, evil, and the world. (WN, 444)

But if the will does not possess original aseity, but is merely thing-in-itself in relation to appearance, and beyond all knowledge there is an inscrutable subject, originally indifferent to willing and not-willing, whence evil and suffering? The wickedness, evil and suffering of willing seem to have been relegated to the status of contingent effects of this subject's action or *operari*, as opposed to proceeding from the *esse* of the world. This transcendent subject definitely lacks the “inner conflict with itself” that characterized the will as thing-in-itself of the first volume (WWR1, 381), and that so readily accounted for the war of all against all observed in the phenomenon. By seeking to iron out contradictions in one part of his system, Schopenhauer's late reinterpretation of his concepts of will and nothing opened up a gap elsewhere.

## 22.4 Conclusion

One might regard the conceptual and explanatory problems that this chapter has traced from Schopenhauer's early statement in 1818 up to his closing modification in 1860 as insoluble, and perhaps inherent in the very project of combining a positive metaphysic with a soteriology. This is because a metaphysic that traces the world to an original pristine principle faces the difficulty of explaining why we need to be saved. Christianity has struggled with Adam's Fall from the goodness of his original nature into Original Sin, just as Yogācāra has struggled to explain how the original, non-dual *param-ālaya* manifested itself as a world of subject-object cognition and conventionally suffering beings. Even Schmidt observed in relation to Buddhism that the “gap in the system, the open question, concerns the infinite fragmentation of a multiplicity of minds or one mind into the forms of matter: from whence did this multiplicity or fragmentation *originally* arise?”<sup>49</sup> The

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*Laṅkāvatāra-Sūtra*, deeply influenced by Yogācāra, attempted to seal this gap by likening the *param-ālaya* to an ocean with still depths, and *saṃsāra* to waves moving on its surface, “stirred uninterruptedly by the wind of objectivity.”<sup>50</sup> However, if the original mind is the still ocean, and the waves the round of *saṃsāra*, what is the wind? It appears to be an external element, so that Yogācāra’s attempt to establish a positive monism to match its soteriology, passes over into a dualism.

But if Christianity and Yogācāra failed to explain why we need to be saved, Schopenhauer’s early statement of his system suffered from the opposite problem—of explaining how we might be saved, given that the essence of self and world is omnipotent will. This is the weak point on which Herbart focused in his review, and which has recently motivated more recent qualifications of the status of the will by Young and Atwell. In response to Herbart’s criticisms, Schopenhauer subtly modified his key concepts “will” and “nothing”, drawing the former into the background and foregrounding (p. 377) the latter, now taken as merely a negation of our modes of cognition. But by so doing, he introduced a dissonance elsewhere in his system concerning evil, of which he seemed to remain oblivious. These movements back and forth recall Schopenhauer’s own, early, critical commentary on the history of Christian theodicy, spinning “in an endless circle by trying to bring these things into harmony, i.e. to solve the arithmetical problem that never works out but whose remainder appears sometimes here, sometimes there, after it has been hidden elsewhere” (WWR1, 434n.).

### Further Reading

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Williams, Paul. *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*. London/New York: Routledge, 1989.

### Notes:

- (1.) D. W. Hamlyn, *Schopenhauer* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 92–102; 149–55. Robert Wicks, *Schopenhauer's "The World as Will and Representation" – A Reader's Guide* (London & New York: Continuum, 2011), 80; 142–46.
- (2.) Wicks, *Schopenhauer's "The World as Will and Representation,"* 143.
- (3.) Hamlyn, *Schopenhauer*, 155.
- (4.) Julian Young, *Willing and Unwilling: A Study in the Philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 31–32.
- (5.) J. E. Atwell, *Schopenhauer on the Character of the World: The Metaphysics of Will* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 126.
- (6.) Young, *Willing and Unwilling*, 34.
- (7.) Ibid., 131.
- (8.) Ibid., 130.
- (9.) This passage is reiterated in WWR2 (1844) from Schopenhauer's manuscript notes (see MR3, 40–41 [HN,36]) written down no later than 1821. See later discussion.
- (10.) A Sanskrit term usually translated as "emptiness."
- (11.) A Sanskrit term often translated as "perfection of wisdom," but the original is closer to Schmidt's "beyond all knowledge": a more accurate translation might be "wisdom [*prajñā*] gone beyond [*pāramitā*]."
- (12.) For a comprehensive account of what has become known as the *nirvāṇa* controversy in nineteenth-century European scholarship on Buddhism, see Guy Richard Welbon, *The Buddhist Nirvāṇa and its Western Interpreters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).
- (13.) Isaak Jacob Schmidt, "Über das Mahājāna und Pradschnâ-Pāramita der Bauddhen," in *Mémoires de l'Académie Impériale des Sciences de St. Pétersbourg*, VI:4 (St. Petersburg: l'Académie Impériale des Sciences, 1840), 123–228.
- (14.) Ibid., 224. Translations from Schmidt's works are the author's own.
- (15.) Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, translated by Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), II.13, 53.



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- (16.) Moira Nicholls, "The Influences of Eastern Thought on Schopenhauer's Doctrine of the Thing-in-Itself", in *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, edited by Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 194.
- (17.) The term used in the 1818 and 1844 editions of the first volume, replaced by *Brahma* only in the third of 1859 (see the editorial comment in WWR1, 590).
- (18.) Urs App, "The Tibet of the Philosophers: Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer," in *Images of Tibet in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, edited by Monica Esposito (Paris: EFEO, 2008), 57n. 214.
- (19.) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A292/B348, translated by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 383.
- (20.) Plato, *Sophist*, 259a-b, translated by Nicholas P. White, in *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by J. M. Cooper (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 282.
- (21.) See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), §3.
- (22.) See the editorial comment in WWR2, 671.
- (23.) Eugène Burnouf, *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism*, translated by Katia Buffetrille and Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 146.
- (24.) Ibid., 539; Schmidt, "Über das Mahâjâna und Pradschnâ-Pâramita der Bauddhen," 187.
- (25.) For the original footnote from 1836, see FR 458.
- (26.) See Urs App, "Schopenhauers Begegnung mit dem Buddhismus," *Schopenhauer-Jahrbuch* 79 (1998), 51.
- (27.) Schmidt, "Über das Mahâjâna und Pradschnâ-Pâramita der Bauddhen," 213.
- (28.) Shigenori Nagatomo, "The Logic of the *Diamond Sūtra*: A is not A, therefore it is A," *Asian Philosophy* 10, no. 3 (2000), 213.
- (29.) Although it is a unique feature of the *Diamond-Sūtra* that it is the only scripture in the voluminous Mahāyāna literature on *prajñāpāramitā* that contains no explicit discourse on emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and never even mentions the term.
- (30.) Schmidt, "Über das Mahâjâna und Pradschnâ-Pâramita der Bauddhen," 187.
- (31.) Ibid., 206.
- (32.) Ibid., 223.

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(33.) Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 38.

(34.) Stephen J. Laumakis, *An Introduction to Buddhist Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 243.

(35.) Douglas Duckworth, "Tibetan Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna", in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, edited by Steven M. Emmanuel (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 104.

(36.) Schmidt, "Über das Mahâjâna und Pradschnâ-Pâramita der Bauddhen," 222.

(37.) *Ibid.*, 225.

(38.) *Ibid.*, 222.

(39.) *Ibid.*, 223.

(40.) *Ibid.*, 222.

(41.) *Ibid.*, 124.

(42.) *Ibid.*, 220. A phrase that recalls Schopenhauer's principle of sufficient reason and the essential relativity of its objects.

(43.) *Ibid.*, 212.

(44.) *Ibid.*, 220.

(45.) *Ibid.*, 224.

(46.) Johann Friedrich Herbart, *Rezension der Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, in *Hermes oder Kritisches Jahrbuch der Literatur*. Drittes Stück für das Jahr 1820, Nr. 7, 131–47. Reprinted in *Jahrbuch der Schopenhauer-Gesellschaft* 6 (1917), 89–117.

(47.) *Jahrbuch* reprint, 109.

(48.) *Ibid.*, 113.

(49.) Schmidt, "Über das Mahâjâna und Pradschnâ-Pâramita der Bauddhen," 226.

(50.) *The Laṅkāvatāra-Sūtra: A Mahāyāna Text*, translated by D. T. Suzuki (London: George Routledge & Sons Ltd., 1932), 40.

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