Nietzsche's Reception of Indian Buddhism

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Abstract: This paper traces Nietzsche's reception of Indian Buddhism through all his known sources on Buddhism as well as through references and allusions to Buddhism in his writings. The sources reveal that Nietzsche was exposed to scholarly work on Buddhism that is quite at odds with his central interpretation of Buddhism as nihilistic, which he seems to have derived from Schopenhauer's assimilation of Buddhism to pessimism and Schopenhauer's mistaken conflation of Buddhism and Brahmanism. Yet, despite his subsequent wholesale repudiation of Schopenhauer and his failure to offer critiques of the contemporary scholarly work on Buddhism, Nietzsche retains his view of Buddhism as nihilistic. This paper explains Nietzsche's adherence to the mistake in terms of his enduring association of Buddhism with Schopenhauer, his creative misprision of Buddhism to fit his own ideas, and his appropriation of key ideas from English anthropology for use as a framework for interpreting religion in general. This framework enabled Nietzsche to pursue an anti-religious agenda, which in turn gave him a distorted view of Buddhism. Nevertheless, Nietzsche's otherwise sympathetic reception of Buddhism demonstrates close affinities with his own philosophy. This affinity coupled with his charge of nihilism makes Nietzsche's reception of Buddhism distinctly ambivalent.

Key words: Buddhism, English anthropology, Nietzsche, nihilism, nirvana, pessimism, religion, Schopenhauer.

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Sources

There are 158 references to the word "Buddhismus" and its variants in 137 textual units in the *Digitale Kritische Gesamtausgabe* of Nietzsche's *Werke und Briefe* (NSDCE). Nietzsche's first recorded reference to an explicitly Buddhist concept is in correspondence from 1865, where he wrote that he and his friend Erwin Rohde called their holiday retreat *nirvana* (Morrison 1997, p. 3). He also attended a lecture course on Buddhism as a student at the University of Bonn in 1865 (Parkes 2000, p. 260). Nietzsche's acquaintance with Indian thought dates back even further, to his school days at Schulpforta, where he was wondering about the Sanskrit words *aham* (I) and *ahamkara* (I-ness) as early as 1861 (Parkes 2000, p. 260). References to Buddhism and Buddhist concepts recur throughout his writings, both published and unpublished, down to 1888.

It was in 1865 that Nietzsche also studied the work of Arthur Schopenhauer for the first time, which is often taken to be the most important source of Nietzsche's views on Buddhism (and on Indian thought more generally). As we will see, Nietzsche was eventually much better informed about Buddhism from other sources and should have left Schopenhauer's views behind. Nietzsche may also have been influenced by Richard Wagner's interest in Buddhism, which was also initially aroused by reading Schopenhauer, and later augmented by Eugene Burnouf's *Introduction à l'histoire du buddhisme indien*, which Wagner first read in 1855 or 1856 and reread throughout his life (Montsalvat). Another spur to Nietzsche's curiosity about Buddhism, and Indian thought more generally, was his professional occupation as a philologist. Guy Welbon has speculated that Nietzsche learned some Sanskrit at Leipzig from Hermann Brockhaus (Wagner's brother-in-law), though there is no evidence of this even in Nietzsche's correspondence with Germany's leading Sanskrit scholars, such as his friends Paul Deussen and Ernst Windisch (Welbon 1968, p. 185).

Nietzsche's library contained a small selection of books on Buddhism and Indian thought. These were: Otto Böhtlingk's *Indische Sprüche*, 2nd ed. 3 volumes (St. Petersburg, 1870–1873); Paul Deussen's *Die Elemente der Metaphysik* (Aachen, 1877); *Das System des Vedanta* (Leipzig, 1883) and *Die Sutras des Vedanta aus dem Sanskrit übersetzt* (Leipzig, 1887); Max Müller's *Essays, II. Beiträge zur vergleichenden Mythologie und Ethnologie* (Leipzig, 1869); Jakob Wackernagel's *Über den Ursprung des Brahmanismus* (Basel, 1877); Hermann Oldenberg's *Buddha. Sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine*

Gemeinde (Berlin, 1881); and Louis Jacolliot's *Les legislateurs religieux. Manou-Moise-Mahomet* (Paris, 1876). He also borrowed, from the university library in Basel, Martin Haug's *Brahma und die Brahmanen* twice (in 1873 & 1879), and the two volumes of Carl F. Koeppen's *Die Religion des Buddha* in October 1871 (Mistry 1981, pp. 6–17). A note in the *Nachlass* refers to "the Buddhism of Kern", which is probably Johan Hendrik Kern's *Der Buddhismus und seine Geschichte in Indien* (translated by Hermann Jacobi, Leipzig: Otto Schulz, 1882). In a letter to Carl von Gersdorff in 1875, Nietzsche extols the Buddhist scripture *Sutta Nipata*, which he had read in English translation. He later incorporated one of its refrains, "wander alone like the rhinoceros", into *Daybreak* (Morrison, 14). *The Antichrist* and *On the Genealogy of Morals*, together with Nietzsche's correspondence with Deussen, allude to "Samkhya" concepts (NSDC: *AC*, 32; *GM*-3–27; *NF* 1873, 30[2]; *BVN*-1875, 418; *BVN*-1886, 752; *NF*-1887, 11[368]). Nietzsche was demonstrably an active reader of some of his sources, making notations from Oldenberg's book on Buddhism and inscribing marginalia on Deussen's *Das System des Vedanta* (Salome 1894, p. 242n). He also often used quotations from Indian and Buddhist literature and philosophy (Mistry 1981, p. 17).

Schopenhauer's Assimilation of Buddhism to Pessimism

In *The World as Will and Representation*, the text that first set Nietzsche on the path to philosophy, Schopenhauer claims that the only solution to suffering in the world is the complete denial of the will, which he takes to be the solution offered by Buddhism (Schopenhauer 1909, pp. 485–90).

In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer develops a special conception of "the will", which renders his notion of the denial of the will even more nihilistic than it otherwise appears. According to Schopenhauer there is a distinction between the way things appear to us and the way they are in themselves. He glosses this distinction by claiming that even matter has no abiding essence independent of mental perception, a notion he says he derives from a combination of George Berkeley and Vedantic philosophy (Schopenhauer 1909, p. 26). Ideas or representations (*Vorstellungen*) have only relative existence and are in constant flux, while that which they represent is hidden by a veil of deception, called *Maya* in the Vedas.

Yet there is also a pure knowing subject — the thing-in-itself — that gives significance to our ideas (Schopenhauer 1909, p. 239). This

pure subject Schopenhauer calls "the will", and he regarded it as the inner mechanism of the human being and of every blind force of nature. The body he thought of as the objectification of the will (Schopenhauer 1909, p. 27).

Schopenhauer then derived his own ethics from this more-or-less Kantian schema. Schopenhauer claims that the will preys upon itself in a blind striving for existence (Schopenhauer 1909, p. 204). The nature of will is characterized by eternal becoming, leading to a "fearful ennui that paralyses life" (Schopenhauer 1909, p. 226).

Schopenhauer concludes from his analysis of the will that suffering is the essence of life. He sees suffering as an obstacle to the realisation of oneself as will. Because all efforts of will arise from a constant dissatisfaction with its present state, there can be no end to striving; therefore, there can be no end to suffering either (Schopenhauer 1909, pp. 397–398). Life oscillates between pain and ennui (Schopenhauer 1909, p. 401). The only relief from this suffering is the complete denial of the will, though in saying this Schopenhauer trades on the ambiguity between his own special concept of will as ultimate reality, the thing-in-itself, and the ordinary meaning of the term.

Schopenhauer read both Buddhist and Brahmanistic texts through the lens of his own dual-aspect metaphysics and his notion of the will (Monsalvat). As noted, in his metaphysics, Schopenhauer takes everything to have a dual aspect — one apparent through *representation* and the other through *the will*. The will is the thing-in-itself, while representations reveal things as they appear to us. A superficially similar two-aspect metaphysics is also found in the Upanishads, in the distinction between *Brahman* (the supreme, universal, divine ground of all being) and *Atman* (the essence of the human being). In the Upanishads the human being is divided into a lower self and a higher self. The lower self is the impermanent body and personality, while the higher self is the permanent soul, or *Atman*. Ultimately a human being must learn to realise that one's true self is identical with the transcendent self, *Brahman*, since they are aspects of the one absolute reality. Note that, according to the Upanishads, all beings have *Atman*.

For Schopenhauer, the universal will is an aimless, chaotic unity, which becomes fragmented. It is fragmented firstly into a set of abstract Platonic essences and secondly it is fragmented into individual objects, when human beings apply the principle of sufficient reason (and subsequently the principle of individuation). This creates a tripartite ontology of universal will, abstract essences, and individuated objects. In exercising

the will to knowledge, human beings categorize, differentiate, conceptualize and otherwise try to make the universe intelligible by individuating and objectifying appearances. Given that Schopenhauer conceives the will as an aimless, blind, and endless impulse, its individuation results in a Hobbesian "war of all against all" — in short, our quest for knowledge creates universal strife. This vision generates Schopenhauer's pessimism, since this constant strife entails suffering, the only antidote to which is the ascetic denial of the will — a position embraced by some schools of Brahmanism. However, Schopenhauer thought he found confirmation of this pessimism in the Buddhist notions of *dukkha* (conceived as suffering), *anatta* (no self), and *nirvana* (conceived as annihilation). But this was due to his conflation of Buddhist notions with Brahmanistic notions, and especially because of his misconception of the Buddhist notion of *nirvana*.

In his assimilation of Buddhism to his own pessimism, Schopenhauer takes the concept of *nirvana* to be a will to nothingness. But Schopenhauer's interpretation of *nirvana* rests on his conflation of Buddhist notions with Brahmanistic ones. The concept of *nirvana* exists in both Buddhism and Brahmanism, but they are distinct concepts. The Sanskrit term has the same literal meaning in both traditions, of "blowing out" (as of a candle) or "quenching" (as of thirst). However, in Brahmanism it refers to a state of union with the supreme being, Brahman, while in Buddhism *nirvana* is the state of liberation from the cycle of rebirths. The purported means of attaining this state of liberation varies widely with different traditions of Buddhism, but for all of them *nirvana* or *parinirvana* is the highest spiritual state obtainable (I'll return to the distinction between *nirvana* and *parinirvana* later). For example, in Theravada Buddhism *nirvana* results from following the Noble Eightfold Path, through a process of discipline, restraint, mindfulness and meditation, which enables the cessation of craving and clinging, which are the causes of suffering (*dukkha*). In Mahayana Buddhism, on the other hand, *nirvana* can be reached by the Bodhisattva, through spontaneous compassion for all sentient beings and striving for the cessation of all their sufferings.

But even when a counterpart of Schopenhauer's tripartite metaphysics can be found in Buddhism, it need not give rise to pessimism. The Yogacara school of Mahayana Buddhism has its Three Body Doctrine [*trikaya*], as found in the work of Maitreya, Asanga and Vasubandu (Wicks), but this by no means gives grounds for pessimism or denial of the will. The *Dharmakaya*, or truth body, is unlimited; the *Sambhogakaya*, or body of bliss, is a manifestation of clear light; and the *Nirmanaka-*

ya, or created body, manifests in space and time. The motivation for this tripartite doctrine is to bring the transcendent within reach by placing it on the plane of immanence. Rather than viewing individuation as the degeneration into strife of the universal will, the Three Body Doctrine provides a pathway for the individual body to ascend to the ultimate truth body — and is therefore grounds for optimism. As we will see, *nirvana* as the end point of this ascent bears little resemblance to the notions of either *Brahman* or annihilation to which Schopenhauer assimilates it. Within the Yogacara school of Mahayana Buddhism, *nirvana* refers to the ascent to *Dharmakaya*, or the truth body, and promises a pathway from immanence to transcendence. It is a pathway to liberation of the spirit, not to its annihilation.

Nietzsche's Appropriation of Schopenhauer's Views on Buddhism

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche seems to have taken on board Schopenhauer's notion of the will as ultimate reality. His notion of the Apollonian depends upon the principle of individuation, which Nietzsche himself connected, through Schopenhauer, to the "veil of Maja" (Nietzsche, *GT*-1, *GT*-2). His notion of the Dionysian "as rapturous reality [*rauschvolle Wirklichkeit*]" and opposite of the Apollonian "world of dream images" seems very close to Schopenhauer's chaotic, universal will (Nietzsche, *GT*-2). He also followed Schopenhauer in regarding the central tenets of Buddhism to be "its longing for nothingness" and "denial of the will" (Nietzsche, *GT*-21, *GT*-7). Yet he later claimed that even in *The Birth of Tragedy* he had never embraced Schopenhauer's pessimism. In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche claims that "the cadaverous perfume of Schopenhauer" clings to "only a few formulas" in *The Birth of Tragedy* (Nietzsche, *EH-BT*-1). *The Birth of Tragedy* argues that "the Greeks were *not* pessimists" since tragedy affirms life in the face of the horrors of existence (Nietzsche, *EH-GT*-1). There is a puzzle, then, about why Nietzsche should have reasserted in later writings Schopenhauer's mistaken construal of Buddhism as nihilistic, given that Nietzsche believed Schopenhauer "was in error everywhere" (Nietzsche, *EH-GT*-1) and that Nietzsche also had access to better information about the nature of Buddhism (cf. Nietzsche, *NF*-1888, 14 [123]).

Although Nietzsche had read Oldenberg, whose work leaves no doubt that *nirvana* does not equate with nothingness — a view well-grounded in the Pali texts — Nietzsche stuck to the view that *nirvana*

as nothingness is a key reason for regarding Buddhism as a form of nihilism.

Buddhism as Historical Parallel and Psychological Symptom

Nietzsche's primary interests in Buddhism were as (i) an historical phenomenon and (ii) as a psychological symptom. He was particularly drawn to the idea that there were close parallels between the crisis of religion and values in nineteenth-century Europe and the crisis of religion and values in ancient India to which he saw Buddhism as a response. No doubt his view that India at the time of the Buddha was in a state of malaise was influenced by the descriptions in Oldenberg's and Müller's books (Morrison 1997, p. 54). Since Nietzsche's main preoccupation as a thinker was with the contemporary crisis of values, he sought in Buddhism possible solutions. He also sought in the emerging popularity of Buddhism in nineteenth-century Europe signs of diseases of the spirit, where interest in Buddhism was a symptom of disease. Therefore, his attitude towards Buddhism was always at best ambivalent, and perhaps predisposed him to forget that he continued to reinforce some of Schopenhauer's errors about it.

In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche (2000, p. 596; *GM*-3-*27*) noted a parallel between the process by which the Christian adherence to the value of truth ultimately leads to the declaration of the death of God (in the name of truth) on the one hand, and on the other hand, the process by which Buddhism arose in India:

> The same evolutionary course in India, completely independently of ours, should prove something: the same ideal leads to the same conclusion; the decisive point is reached five centuries before the beginning of the European calendar, with Buddha; more exactly, with the Sankhya philosophy subsequently popularized by Buddha and made into a religion.

With respect to Christianity, Nietzsche's point is that the postulation of God is undone in the end by unremitting pursuit of truth, the value of which had originated in "the confessional subtlety of the Christian conscience translated and sublimated into the scientific conscience, into intellectual cleanliness at any price" (Nietzsche 2000, p. 596; *GM*-3-27). Likewise, the fables of divinity in ancient Indian religion were undone by the Buddhist insistence on truth and through the sceptical interrogation of prevailing religious dogmas, which resulted in the denial of a transcendent God. Even in

the passage quoted above, however, Nietzsche errs in his representation of Sankhya philosophy as continuous with Buddhism. Although it was consistent with Schopenhauer's assimilation of Buddhism to Brahmanism, Oldenberg and Müller had already argued persuasively — in the very texts in Nietzsche's library — that there is no warrant for this assimilation (Morrison 1997, p. 8). So, although Nietzsche may or may not have been right that the pursuit of truth with religious zeal resulted in exposing religious beliefs to be false, Nietzsche seems to have lacked that same rigour in his assertions about Buddhism.

Not only did Nietzsche perceive a parallel between European atheistic scepticism and ancient Buddhist scepticism, but he also saw a parallel in the nihilism they faced. On the one hand this nihilism arose from a multiplicity of dogmatic religious claims and competing secular claims, whose chaotic clamour left many people disoriented. On the other hand, nihilism resulted from sceptical attacks on established religious values, since scepticism failed to invent new values to replace the old. In this way, Buddhism could be seen as both a cause of nihilism and a symptom of it. It was a symptom insofar as it was one of the many competing systems of belief clutched at by those desperate for axiological orientation in an ocean where the death of God had wiped away the horizon (Nietzsche, *FW*-125); and it was a cause insofar as it had subverted established beliefs without substituting alternative values.

Nietzsche regarded Buddhism, in addition, as a *response* to nihilism, since through its maturity and clear-sightedness, it recognized the loss of values it had helped precipitate. However, this response was itself nihilistic because instead of substituting new, life-affirming values, Nietzsche claimed that Buddhism merely showed people how they could live without values. It was itself "a nihilistic withdrawal from [existence], a desire for nothingness…" (Nietzsche 2000, p. 528; *GM*-2-21).

In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche (2000, p. 468; *GM*-1-6) draws an implicit distinction, finally, between Brahmanism and Buddhism:

> …the entire antisensualistic metaphysic of the priests that makes men indolent and overrefined, their autohypnosis in the manner of fakirs and Brahmins — Brahma used in the shape of a glass knob and a fixed idea — and finally the only-too-comprehensible satiety with all this, together with the radical cure for it, *nothingness* (or God — the yearning for a *unio mystica* with God is the desire of the Buddhist for nothingness, Nirvana — and no more!).

Here Buddhism is taken to be a radical cure for Brahmanism (and the whole "metaphysic of the priests") but its price is nihilism. Nietzsche no longer seems to be following Schopenhauer in coming to this conclusion, by conflating Buddhism and Brahmanism. But he does follow Schopenhauer in taking *nirvana* to be a yearning for nothingness. This, too, is despite the fact that such an interpretation of *nirvana* is explicitly rejected, on the basis of sound argument, by Oldenberg, though rather more ambivalently by Müller (Morrison 1997, p. 45). For one thing, Nietzsche failed to distinguish between *nirvana* and *parinirvana* (where the prefix "pari" means complete or full). Although the two terms are sometimes used synonymously in Buddhism, when they are distinguished *nirvana* refers to the attainment of "enlightenment" or "awakening" [*bodhi*], whereas *parinirvana* refers to the state attained at the death of one who has achieved enlightenment (Morrison 1997, pp. 52–6). While Nietzsche sometimes seems to have recognized *nirvana* as the attainment of "actual and *not* merely promised *happiness on earth*" (Nietzsche 1990, p. 166; *AC*-42), since Buddhism does not promise, it delivers, at other times he equated *nirvana* with a nihilistic will to nothingness by means of cultivating an "absence of desire" (Nietzsche 1990, p. 166; *AC*-42).

The Buddha himself was rather cagey about specifying the state of *parinirvana*, claiming such a description is beyond the "range of designations" [*adhivacana-patha*], the "range of language" [*nirutti-patha*], the "range of concepts" [*paññatti-patha*], the "sphere of understanding" [*pañña-avacana*], and the "circling of *samsara*" (cited in Morrison 1997, p. 46). Yet the *Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, about the Buddha's own attainment of *parinirvana*, characterizes it as an eternal state of happiness and purity in which the true self is fully discernible and accessible (Yamamoto 1975, p. 62). That is very different from being annihilated — as indeed Buddha's caginess implies, since there is nothing ineffable about annihilation. *Nirvana*, then, properly understood, gives no grounds for accusing Buddhism of *being* nihilistic.

We now return to Nietzsche's regard of Buddhism as a *symptom* of nihilism. He toyed, at one stage, with advocating a "European Buddhism" — not in order to redress the vacuum of values, but because it would act as a tuning fork to sound out decadent natures, in the manner he suggests for "*sounding out idols*" by means of a hammer (Nietzsche 1990, p. 31; *GD-Vorwort*). That is, those attracted to a European Buddhism would be exposed by "that famous hollow sound

which speaks of inflated bowels" (Nietzsche 1990, p. 31; *GD-Vorwort*).

However, not all symptoms are of disease. Nietzsche also took "the philosophical pessimism of the nineteenth century as a symptom of a higher power of thought, of a more victorious fullness of life than had found expression in the philosophies of Hume, Kant, and Hegel" (Nietzsche, *NW-Antipoden*). According to Nietzsche (1982, pp. 669–670; *NW-Antipoden*), "Every art, every philosophy can be considered a cure and aid in the service of growing or declining life". Such a cure

> ...always presupposes suffering and sufferers. But there are two kinds of sufferers: first, those who suffer from the *overfullness* of life and want a Dionysian art as well as a tragic insight and outlook on life — and then those who suffer from the *impoverishment* of life and demand of art and philosophy, calm, stillness, smooth seas, or on the other hand, frenzy, convulsion, and anaesthesia. Revenge against life itself — the most voluptuous kind of frenzy for those so impoverished! Wagner responds to this dual need of the latter no less than Schopenhauer: they negate life, they slander it, hence they are my antipodes.

Buddhism, however, sits uneasily with both these characterisations. On the one hand, Nietzsche often characterises it in terms of stillness and calmness, which is far from the frenzied Dionysian outlook. On the other hand, Nietzsche also identifies it as a force that explicitly counters "revenge against life" (Nietzsche, *NF* 1888, 24[1]). Such mixed "symptoms" indicate a complex site of emergence and a struggle over the interpretation of values.

Another way in which Buddhism could be construed as a symptom is *physiologically*. Nietzsche came to think that ideas and affects were sublimated physiological conditions, which in turn were caused by diet, exercise, air quality and climate. He subjected himself to regimens of walking, abstention from alcohol, and the pure air of the alps. He attributed the moral decline of India at the time of the Buddha to poor diet, based on too much rice. Similarly, he speculated that perhaps "the modern European discontent is due to... alcoholic poisoning... worsened by the effects of stuffy cellar air and the poison of stove fumes in German living rooms" (Nietzsche 1974, p. 186; *FW*-134). Buddhism, however, was *not* itself caused by poor diet but arose as an antidote to the depression, "excessively acute sensitivity", "refined susceptibility to pain", and "over spiritualization" which were symptoms of physiological deficiencies (Nietzsche, *AC*-20). The Buddha prescribed hygienic measures to combat these, including:

> ...life in the open air, the wandering life; moderation and a careful diet; caution as far as liquor is concerned; caution when it comes to all affects that create bile or raise the blood temperature; no *worrying* about yourself or other people (Nietzsche, *AC*-20).

This Buddhist concern with dietetics was a symptom of a physiological need, just as nineteenth century interest in diets — both physical and spiritual — indicated unmet needs.

The fact that these physiological needs were not being met, and were indicated only in sublimated forms, was also symptomatic of a loss of instinct, which led to human beings becoming mired in error. Nietzsche thought he had seen through the metaphysical distinction between the real and apparent world, which he took to underpin religious belief (Cf. Nietzsche, *GD-Welt-Fabel*). Nevertheless, he thought that metaphysical assumptions have value — as symptoms of "passion, error and self-deception" (Nietzsche, *MA*-9). Nietzsche ultimately came to see "all judgments, value judgments on life" as "never being true" but having "value only as symptoms" — and that the consensus of the wise means only that the wise were "in *physiological* agreement" (Nietzsche, *GD-Sokrates*-2). That is, Nietzsche came to see all philosophy as a form of autobiography in which the value judgments expressed reveal something about the bodies of their authors — e.g. whether they are sanguine, bilious, melancholic or phlegmatic, or perhaps something about the state of their bowels or diets. Metaphysics, then, was merely an indication of a psychological or physiological state and Nietzsche (2000, pp. 686–687; *EH-Weise*-6) saw in the Buddha "a great physiologist" who had the same insight:

> Anger, pathological vulnerability, impotent lust for revenge, thirst for revenge, poison-mixing in any sense — no reaction could be more disadvantageous for the exhausted: such affects involve a rapid consumption of nervous energy, a pathological increase of harmful secretions — for example, of the gall bladder into the stomach. *Ressentiment* is what is forbidden *par excellence* for the sick — it is their specific evil — unfortunately also their most natural inclination. His "religion" should rather be called a kind of *hygiene*, lest it be confused with such pitiable phenomena as Christianity: its effectiveness was made conditional on the victory over *ressentiment*. To liberate the soul from this is the first step toward recovery. "Not by enmity is enmity ended; by friendliness enmity is ended": these words stand at the beginning of the doctrine of the Buddha. It is *not* morality that speaks thus; thus speaks physiology.

The physiological antidote to modern nihilism required, according to Nietzsche, recognition that thoughts, affects, judgments and values are basically physiological. This recognition would enable us to reconnect with our instincts, which could be used to identify life-affirming and life-denying attitudes. A fundamental instinct in this respect is *disgust*, signalled by *nausea*. Nausea operates at the level of sensuous instinct and is only later sublimated into the language of evaluation. Using our noses or tastebuds to evaluate something, to be repulsed by a smell or a taste, to feel it turn our stomachs, operates at the physiological level and is more direct and honest than evaluations made in the cerebral recesses of the brain.

Nausea also connects us directly to our affects, which for Nietzsche (as for Hume) are what *motivate* our actions. Nausea warns us against possible contamination, usually *before* we ingest something harmful or poisonous. It is a discriminating instinct, which actively guides our behaviour with respect to our health. But Nietzsche did not want merely to rehabilitate our physiological instinct for nausea. Once we've achieved that, he wanted to extend it metaphorically to include intellectual discernment, so that we could develop the capacity to be disgusted at life-denying, weak and sick forms of life. This metaphorical extension is enabled by those aesthetic sensibilities that cause us to turn away from what is unwholesome, and which amount to a capacity for making value judgments. This in turn Nietzsche took to be the basis for making moral judgments (Nietzsche, *NF*, 12[155]). Nausea, then, is a guide by means of revulsion at what might be harmful to our health and also by means of distaste for whatever offends our aesthetic or proto-ethical sensibilities (cf. Tevenar).

Buddhism also advocates meditating on disgust and revulsion — a practice referred to as *asubha bhavana* [meditation on foulness] (Obeyesekere 1985, p. 141). Its intent is to produce non-attachment to sensual pleasures, in order to eliminate lust, greed and corporeal addictions and to realize the transitoriness of the body and the world. This in turn leads to an understanding of emptiness [*sūnyatā*], which is to be understood as a denial of the substantial and independent existence of all phenomena. Attachment to ephemeral phenomena is one of the main causes of *dukkha* [suffering], so meditating on disgust is an antidote to this attachment. In other words, there is some functional parallel in the ways Nietzsche and Buddhism deploy disgust in order to motivate ethical judgment in the service of life, though there is no textual evidence that Nietzsche was familiar

with this form of Buddhist meditation. Of course, had Nietzsche been familiar with the practice of *asubha bhavana* he may well have decried it as life-denying, since it is aimed in the first instance at generating disgust with one's own body, and therefore its practitioners might be lumped with "the despisers of the body" (Nietzsche 2000, pp. 146–147; *Za-1-Verächter*). A further important difference is that Nietzsche's cultivation of nausea is aimed at reinstating our instinct for sniffing out degeneracy in the characters of others, while meditation on foulness is aimed at turning us off our own corruption. But *asubha bhavana* shares with Nietzsche's cultivation of nausea the insight that value judgments can be physiologically motivated in the ultimate service of life.

Dukkha, Nirvana, Anatta and Pessimism

Nietzsche seems to have followed Schopenhauer in taking the Buddhist concept of *dukkha* to mean that all life is suffering, and that the only antidote is a denial of the will to live by seeking *nirvana* (understood as annihilation). It is not hard to see, then, why he should have regarded Buddhism as ultimately nihilistic. However, both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer were mistaken to charge Buddhism with pessimism. *Dukkha* is often better translated as "dissatisfaction" and can refer to nothing more than the anxiety caused by the fact that the universe is in a state of constant flux and that nothing has an immutable or determinate nature. Yet this accords precisely with Nietzsche's Heraclitean vision and his own feelings of dissatisfaction over what he takes to be the mistaken conventional views about ontology. One of the primary causes of *dukkha* is the tension between the actual state of flux and our false beliefs that some things endure, including ourselves. According to Buddhism, all things are conditioned by causes [*sankhara*], are impermanent [*anicca*] and are without self [*anatta*]. The good news, according to the Buddha, is that we can overcome *dukkha* by realizing the true nature of reality by understanding the causes of suffering and by realising a state of detachment, or emptiness [*sunyata*], and eventually achieving a state of *nirvana* — which literally translates as "blowing out". In the Buddhist context, this refers to blowing out the fires of greed, hatred and delusion.

A key to the achievement of *nirvana* in Buddhism is the realization of *anatta* [no self]. This is not an annihilation of the self, but a realization that the idea of a substantial, enduring self is a fiction — just as Nietzsche believed. We need to rid ourselves of the delusion of sub-

stantial selfhood by a process of *self-overcoming*. This process requires an understanding of the ephemeral and conditioned nature of all things and the emptiness of conventional concepts, and introduces physiological regimes aimed at managing one's affects, honing one's instincts, and reordering one's drives in the service of life-affirmation. *Nirvana* amounts to the cessation of *dukkha* not from self-annihilation, but through the fulfilment of one's potential — including the potential for joy. As Govinda (quoted in Morrison 1997, pp. 34–35) has pointed out,

> ...of the 121 classes of consciousness which are discussed in Buddhist psychology, sixty three are accompanied by joy and only three are painful, while the remaining fifty five classes are indifferent. A stronger refutation of pessimism than this statement is hardly possible.

We might also note that the epithets traditionally applied to the Buddha in the Pali canon do not indicate degeneracy, weakness or mildness. Common epithets include: the elephant, the lion, and the bull (Morrison 1997, p. 36). These are much more like the epithets Nietzsche gives himself, or the *Übermensch*.

Nietzsche and English Anthropology

Despite Buddhism being demonstrably life-affirming, even according to Nietzsche's sources, and despite its being in many respects parallel to his own attempts to revalue values by addressing human psychology and physiology, Nietzsche persisted in regarding it as a form of nihilism. Of course, he was much better disposed towards Buddhism than he was to other forms of nihilism, including his much-loathed Christianity, which he took to be premised on self-deception (Nietzsche, *AC*-20). Buddhism, at least, he thought to be "realistic" and "*positivistic*" in substituting a "war against *suffering*" for the Christian "war against *sin*" (Nietzsche, *AC*-20), which enabled it to prescribe physiological antidotes rather than priestly mystification.

The influence of Schopenhauer's mistaken conflation of Buddhism, Brahmanism and his own pessimistic philosophy cannot alone account for Nietzsche's continuing view that Buddhism is nihilistic, though perhaps it contributed. After all, many of Nietzsche's references to Buddhism mention Schopenhauer in the same breath (Elman 1983, p. 684). Robert Morrison has argued

that the answer lies instead in Nietzsche's anthropology and his views on the origins of religion (Morrison 1997, pp. 52–59). Nietzsche's understanding of Buddhism as a "passive nihilism" drew on ideas to be found in the work of the English anthropologists and ethnologists John Lubbock, Edward Burnett Tylor and Walter Bagehot (Thatcher 1983, pp. 293–295). Inspired by Charles Darwin's theories about the origin of species, Lubbock (a neighbour and friend of Darwin) and Bagehot sought naturalistic origins for contemporary civilization, including the origins of religious beliefs. Lubbock ascribed the origin of religion to the dream experiences of the "savage", who considers "the events in his dreams to be as real as those of his waking hours, and hence he naturally feels that he has a spirit which can quit the body" (quoted from Lubbock in Thatcher 1983, p. 297).

Nietzsche used almost identical phrasing in *Human, All-Too-Human* 5, where he also elaborated Lubbock's thesis that dreams are the origin of the "two-world hypothesis" in metaphysics. This idea was then supplemented by Bagehot's notion of "survivals", which are defined as

> ...processes, customs, and opinions, and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved (quoted in Thatcher 1983, p. 295).

The basis for Nietzsche's critique of Christianity was that, while it emerged as a "slave revolt" in morals that revalued all values, its subsequent normalization meant that modern society is now saddled with values, beliefs and attitudes that are fundamentally life-denying. We require another revaluation of values, based on current needs, instead of persisting with these Christian "survivals".

One problem with Buddhism as a solution is that it is tainted with "survivals" from its own origins. As Nietzsche (2000, p. 566; *GM*-3-17) asserted in *On the Genealogy of Morals*:

> ...the main concern of all great religions has been to fight a certain weariness and heaviness grown to epidemic proportions. One may assume in advance the probability that from time to time... a *feeling of physiological inhibition* is almost bound to seize on large masses of people, though, owing to their lack of physiological knowledge, they do not diagnose it as such: its "cause" and remedy are sought and tested only in the psychological-moral domain

> (this is my most general formula for what is usually called a "*religion*"). Such a feeling of inhibition can have the most various origins: perhaps it may arise from the crossing of races too different from one another… or from an injudicious emigration — a race introduced into a climate for which its powers of adaptation are inadequate (the case of the Indians in India).

In other words, there is a suggestion here that not only does "crossing of races too different from one another" or "an injudicious emigration" cause "a physiological inhibition", but so too might a crossing of ideas that are too heterogeneous. Despite the fact that Buddhism arose in similar historical circumstances to those of nineteenth-century Europe, it is an alien system whose ideas may well provoke as much illness as they cure.

Another problem with Buddhism, as a means to revalue modern European values, is that all customs and traditions — especially religious ones — carry enormous inertia. Given this stranglehold by tradition on values, how is it possible to change them? The answer, for both Nietzsche and Lubbock, is: by means of insanity, either real or feigned. Even the examples Nietzsche used to illustrate this are taken from Lubbock:

> The means of becoming a medicine-man among the Indians, a saint among Christians of the Middle Ages, an angecok among Greenlanders, a Pagee among Brazilians, are the same in essence: senseless fasting, continual abstention from sexual intercourse, isolation in a wilderness, ascending a mountain or a pillar, "sitting on an aged willow that looks out upon a lake", and thinking of absolutely nothing but what may give rise to ecstasy or mental derangements (translation quoted in Thatcher 1983, p. 305; *M*-14).

While such ascetic practices might be necessary to engender the madness required to infuse a culture with new values, those practices are intrinsically life-denying. The path offered by Buddhism, too, is an ascetic one, albeit not as extreme as the sorts of asceticism rejected by the Buddha in his quest for enlightenment. Not only does Buddhism retain traces of asceticism, but it also retains traces of the "two-world hypothesis" — perpetuated in its meditational practices aimed at liberating the practitioner from the conditioned world of *samsara* to the unconditioned state of *nirvana*. This is also reflected in the doctrine of "two truths" found in Mahayana Buddhism: relative truth and absolute truth, which could easily slip towards the founding metaphysical distinction of religion — between appearance and reality.

Conclusion

Nietzsche's assessment of Buddhism as a form of nihilism may be unwarranted, but his engagement with it gives us insight into his own thought processes. It also reveals how close some of his original ideas came to reproducing Buddhist ideas. The affinities between Nietzsche and Buddhism are now more striking than their differences, though only if we abstract them from the forms of life in which they are embedded. These affinities include Nietzsche's famous concept of eternal recurrence, which has clear parallels with the cyclical nature of time in Buddhist notions of reincarnation and *karma*; the notion of self-overcoming as the means to spiritual growth; Nietzsche's criticism of the spirit of revenge, which as he pointed out in *The Antichrist* is one of the main features of Buddhism, which he also acknowledges is opposed to antipathy and *ressentiment*; Nietzsche's practices of meditative solitude and dietetics, also practiced by his (enlightened) character Zarathustra; the avoidance, by both Nietzsche and the Buddha, of *moralizing* that suffering is caused by sin (cf. Elman 1983, p. 681); the Buddha's breaking down of the "I" or self into five "aggregates" and the affinities with Nietzsche's analysis of the "I", or subject, into a multiplicity of drives; Nietzsche's reference to himself as having had the potential to be "the Buddha of Europe: though admittedly an antipode to the Indian Buddha" (Nietzsche, *NF*-1882, 4[2]); and, as we have seen, Nietzsche's insistence, like the Buddha's, that physiological causes often underlie mental phenomena.

Nietzsche's misconception of Buddhism as pessimistic and nihilistic was the result of the early influence of Schopenhauer, which persisted because of his habitual association of Schopenhauer and Buddhism; the use of a framework drawn from the English anthropologists for understanding religion in general; and perhaps most of all, because of the creative nature of "great geniuses", who, in Kierkegaard's words "cannot really read a book; when they read they always develop themselves more than they understand the author" (Kierkegaard 2007, BB:46).

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