Schopenhauer on Christ, Suffering and the Negation of the Will

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## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to illuminate Schopenhauer’s notion of the negation or denial of the will by investigating the figure of the saint within his philosophy. We argue that various discussions in Schopenhauer’s works of the possible role of Christ as exemplar reveals an underlying Christological understanding of self-denial as a model for the saint. The connection between Schopenhauer’s approach to Christ and Kant’s Christology in *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason* is also explored. We note how Schopenhauer builds upon on the Kantian demythologization of the Incarnated Christ in order to uncover the moral and existential spirit that underlies Christianity. In addition, we outline how a recognition of the symbolic importance of Christ for Schopenhauer suggests features of the denial of the will that have been overlooked in the literature, involving the intellectual transcendence of suffering through the cultivation of a state of emotional unresponsiveness. It is argued that this reflects a deeper connection between Schopenhauer’s philosophy and Christian thought than is often recognised.

## **Keywords**

Schopenhauer, Kant, Christology, sainthood, negation of the will

## **1. Introduction**

Anyone familiar with Schopenhauer’s thought will know that he describes the inner essence of reality as endless striving or will (*Wille*).[[1]](#footnote-1) Given that human beings are manifestations of that endless source of yearning and desire, they are tossed back and forth between different desires, the briefest moments of satisfaction and debilitating boredom. Intimate awareness of this circuitry of agony can be aroused by profound suffering, an awareness which in turn can engender a highly unique kind of cognition that might lead to salvation. Such salvation comes in the form of the denial of the will, where intuitive insight overpowers desire and turns the human being into a relative nothing, unmoved by all worldly pleasures and sufferings. Schopenhauer is remarkably sketchy when it comes to unpacking this saintly state of denial of the will. What could possibly be a model for thinking of the Schopenhauerian saint, especially since Schopenhauer emphasizes himself that he is not one?[[2]](#footnote-2)

It would then be prudent to search for models in philosophy and history to provide more content to Schopenhauer’s account of this state of saintliness, and its relationship to passion and suffering. Some suggestions have been made in the literature.[[3]](#footnote-3) Perhaps, Schopenhauer’s sainthood is alike to Stoic resignation towards nature; or to some forms of religious asceticism such as that of Saint Francis; or could it be a Platonic intellectual transcendence of the world of fleeting things; or even intoxication in artistic, alcoholic or narcotic form; or maybe this is nothing less than brute and simple resentment towards existence? It may be natural to look to the ideal advanced by Stoicism, i.e. the Stoic sage, as an approximation for understanding Schopenhauerian self-denial. Stoicism aims for self-abnegation by which the human beings surrenders to the currents of nature: the will of the individual is adjusted to the universal will. In this way, the individual achieves equanimity, and is now free from suffering.

The purpose of this paper is to show, however, that the Stoic sage is not what Schopenhauer had in mind when discussing the saint. A better example is Christ as portrayed in the Gospels. Schopenhauer’s scattered Christological remarks paint a univocally charitable view of the ‘Christian Saviour’ who is elevated above the Stoic sage (and others) for his capacity for, and response to, suffering. This will not only show how Schopenhauer’s philosophy has a Christian pedigree that is often overlooked, but will also shine a helpful light on the value and role of suffering for self-denial. Of course, any postulated influence of Christianity upon Schopenhauer might be thought of as questionable given the, at times harsh, criticism Schopenhauer levels against theism in general. Nietzsche would call Schopenhauer an intuitive atheist, someone for whom “the ungodliness of existence counted […] as something given, palpable, indisputable” (2001: 219 [§357]). Schopenhauer’s attitude towards Christianity is more ambiguous, however. In a note penned when fleeing cholera-infested Berlin in 1832, Schopenhauer claims that his most basic conviction, that life is suffering, came to him in his youth:

When I was seventeen and without learned education, I was taken so by the misery of life like Buddha who when young saw sickness, age, pain and death[[4]](#footnote-4). Speaking loudly and clearly from the world, the truth overpowered those Judaic dogmas also imprinted upon me with the result the conviction that this world could not be the work of an all-good being, but of a devil who had called creatures into being to revel in their misery: this is what the data showed, and the belief that this was so became dominant (2017: 77-78 [89.2-90.1]).

Although somewhat exaggerated and self-indulgent, Schopenhauer’s note reveals something striking about his relationship to religion. For one, he is highly dismissive of religious superstition when it engenders optimism, i.e. the belief that life is good (indeed, has intrinsic value) and abounds with (future) happiness. This is the topic central to Schopenhauer’s dealings with religion in the early notebooks, an attitude that becomes more charitable when coming closer to the publication of *The World as Will and Representation* (1818/19; hereafter WWR1) and given some nuance particularly in later supplements to WWR1. Schopenhauer came to believe early on that religions do not necessarily engender optimism, and that Christianity and Hinduism especially can cultivate a proper, more pessimistic, composure towards reality. However, Schopenhauer is always of two minds when it comes to Christianity – a duality wonderfully orchestrated by the dialogue between Philalethes and Demopheles in *Parerga and Paralipomena: Volume 2* – and so he would differentiate early on between, on the one hand, ‘contemporary’ and, on the other hand, ‘authentic’ or ‘true’ Christianity, which has a more pessimistic orientation (see especially WWR1: 479-483).[[5]](#footnote-5)

In order then to investigate Schopenhauer’s relationship to Christianity, particularly in relation to its impact upon his account of the denial of the will, we will first consider Schopenhauer’s views concerning the example given by Christ (section 2) and then examine how this shaped his understanding of the relationship between sainthood and suffering (section 3). We will argue that the example of the suffering Christ in the Passion narrative offers a vision of sainthood in which one remains intellectually aware of one’s suffering, whilst being emotionally unaffected by it, and this model may help to resolve some of the puzzles surrounding this aspect of Schopenhauer’s philosophy.

## **2. Christ as Example**

On the face of it, it seems obvious that Schopenhauer would frown upon faith in an individual who claims divine descent and promises justification, and yet he recycles something of the Christian tradition’s thinking concerning Christ in terms of a moral exemplar. We shall see that Schopenhauer offers a surprisingly positive evaluation of some of the Christological tradition, though with his own secular twist.

His approach to the figure of Christ ought to be appreciated within a view of the innovations in Christology throughout the 18th century, most clearly detailed in the second part of Kant’s *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason* (1793) – a piece of writing that was famously condemned by the theological censor.[[6]](#footnote-6) Here, Kant argues that legislative reason spontaneously generates an archetype (*Urbild*) of moral perfection, which can be recognized in a historical example (*Vorbild*) of exemplary moral conduct. If this is so, an individual is justified in having faith in this example on transcendentally-moral grounds. Applied to Christianity, this means that human beings recognize a transcendental and universal ideal of moral perfection in the historical figure of Jesus. The function of this moral example is not to teach new moral duties, but to enliven “practical faith in this Son of God (so far as he is represented as having taken up human nature); the human being can thus hope to become pleasing to God … [such a human being is enabled to] believe and self-assuredly trust that he … [will] follow this [archetype’s] example in loyal emulation” (1996a: 104-105 [62]). Moral examples serve to cultivate resolve that human beings can live up to the moral ideal – if Jesus can do it, so can we! Elsewhere, Kant reiterates that “a good example (exemplary conduct) should not serve as a model but only as a proof that it is really possible to act in conformity with duty” (1996b: 593 [480]).

For Kant, Jesus Christ serves as one example of moral perfection that might cultivate moral resolve.[[7]](#footnote-7) In this way, his approach to Christ can be seen as a development of Socinianism, a theological movement originating in Poland in the 16th century and later spread widely across Europe. One of the key claims of this movement was that Christ’s saving role is limited to providing an example of moral dedication to those who follow him. Connected to this distinctive understanding of the atonement is a demythologizing of the figure of Christ, undermining the Incarnation and seeing him as a simple human being, just like us.[[8]](#footnote-8) Kant elaborates upon this simple model by arguing that practical reason is able to recognize a potential historical realization of the moral archetype lying within reason in the person of Jesus. As McCall notes, this account leaves Kant in a strictly agnostic position concerning the reality of the Incarnation: “None of this means that this ideal humanity *hasn’t* been instantiated. Nor does [Kant] strictly deny that this could have been produced in some supernatural or miraculous manner. It only means that, for Kant, the notion of an actual, historical incarnation of this ideal is utterly beside the point” (2016: 216). It is also worth noting that Kant builds upon the theological trend of demythologization by arguing that an incarnated Christ (that is, a Christ who is both divine and human) would undermine the soteriological role that the example provided by Jesus of Nazareth could play. If Jesus were in any sense divine or ‘superhuman’, then he would be unable to break the moral law, and so the “consequent [moral] distance from the natural human being would then again become so infinitely great that the divine human being could no longer be held forth to the natural human being as *example”* (1996a: 106 [64]). In order for Jesus to play the requisite role of moral example, then, we must understand Christ as fully human, a claim which places him firmly outside of Christian orthodoxy on this point.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In a similar spirit, Schopenhauer writes that “we should always interpret Jesus Christ universally, as the symbol or personification of the negation of the will to life, not as an individual, according to either his mythological history in the Gospels or the presumably true history that grounds it” (WWR1: 480).[[10]](#footnote-10) Schopenhauer is not interested in corroborating or even dismantling the Christological narrative as a historical or theoretical doctrine. Instead, he aims to uncover the moral[[11]](#footnote-11) and existential spirit that underlies Christianity in order to assess its effect on human psychology. This was a common feature of Christology in the theological tradition, featuring in the work of figures as diverse as Augustine, Luther, Meister Eckhart and Jakob Böhme. Schopenhauer is willing to go beyond these influences, however, by characterizing all elements of Christianity not in accordance with pessimism as Judaic mythology or mere wrapping: “The doctrine of original sin (the affirmation of the will) and redemption (negation of the will) is really the great truth that makes up the core of Christianity; the rest of it is mostly only wrapping, coverings and appendages” (*ibid.*).[[12]](#footnote-12) The value of Christianity lies in the core “Christian myth”, as Schopenhauer sees it, namely, “a rebirth in Jesus Christ as a consequence of the effect of grace, which allows a new person to arise and the old to be abolished” (WWR2: 694).[[13]](#footnote-13) Such a myth can be used as allegory to reflect fundamental pessimistic truths about the world and the possibility of our salvation, in a manner that satisfies our natural need for metaphysics in a palatable way suitable for the general public: as Schopenhauer puts it, “[truth] cannot appear naked before the people” (WWR2: 183). Core Christian doctrines, such as the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, that may be impossible to grasp are a reflection of the allegorical nature of religion. Such potentially nonsensical commitments are, he argues,

the only adequate way of allowing common sense and crude understanding to *feel* something that would otherwise be incomprehensible to it, namely that religion is fundamentally about a completely different order of things… This is the spirit in which Augustine and even Luther seem to me to have grasped the mysteries of Christianity (*ibid*.).

The figure of Christ, then, must be understood as playing both a functional and revelatory role for the religious believer through symbol or allegory, insofar as it makes the idea of the negation of the will comprehensible to those who are unable to more directly comprehend fundamental truths.

Schopenhauer views the advent of Christianity in the Western world as having a fundamental impact upon the spiritual and intellectual possibilities available for the people who heard the gospel message. He writes,

although Christianity was essentially teaching only what all of Asia had already known for a long time and much better, this was nonetheless a great and novel revelation for Europe, and the spiritual direction of the European people was completely changed as a result. For it disclosed to them the metaphysical meaning of existence (WWR2: 721).

Due to the doctrine of original sin and the example of Christ, found in the Christian tradition, the people of Europe were able to see the world in a more realistic manner than previously: they were taught to

look away from the narrow, impoverished and ephemeral earthly life and to stop viewing it as an end in itself, but rather to view it as a state of moral worthiness, severe renunciation and denial of one’s own self… That is, it taught the great truth of the affirmation and negation of the will to life, in the guise of allegory (WWR2: 721f.).

Since Christ serves as the ‘personification of the negation of the will’, some of the traits of the persona of Christ that is not ‘mere wrapping’ can provide further content to ideas concerning life-negation. Though Schopenhauer does refer to the “ancient Sanskrit works” as presenting a superior picture of the will to life, he is clear that Christianity only falls short this regard insofar as contains some remnants of Jewish doctrine,[[14]](#footnote-14) as a reflection of the fact that the “sublime author of Christianity had to adapt and accommodate himself, in part consciously and in part perhaps even unconsciously to this Jewish doctrine” (WWR1: 458). If we were able, though, to pick out the “purely ethical component[,]... the exclusively Christian element” (*ibid*.) of Christianity, then we would have a view of the possibility of the negation of the will and its salvific potential to rival that provided by ancient Indian texts.

Schopenhauer’s appreciation of the example of Christ found in the Gospels is found very early on in his notes, prior to the writing of the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation*. In an early note from 1814, he refers to “the expiatory death of Jesus” as “a superlative, exceedingly profound doctrine of Christianity, [that is] true in the strictest sense” and particularly stresses Christ’s exemplarist role:

the conduct, teaching and death of Jesus Christ [expresses] the eternal supernatural side, freedom, the salvation of man, and are undeniable evidence of this. Now whoever is a human being is as such not only Adam but also Jesus; he can consider himself as the former but also as the latter (MR1: 93f).

In the following year, we find him reflecting upon the symbolism of the cross. In this note, his thoughts are occasioned by coming across a coffin in a museum in Dresden that contains both imagery from Christianity, in the form of a cross, and pagan mythology, including “bacchanalia” and even “a satyr having intercourse with a goat” (MR1: 369). Both sets of imagery, Schopenhauer argues, presents a different perspective upon death, though both are true in their way. Whilst the bacchanalia reflects the ongoing cycle of nature continuing beyond the death of the individual, the cross reveals the fundamental prevalence of suffering in this life, and the possibility of the will being extinguished. He writes that, from the perspective of the cross,

there is in exchange for death only one consolation, namely that, just as the phenomenon of the will-to-live must come to an end, this will itself can freely come to an end. If the will itself has ended... then death is no longer a suffering, because a will-to-live no longer exists. This consideration is the Christian tendency and is indicated by the crucifix (MR1: 370f.).

Such positive reflections upon the symbolic power of the Gospel message continues through the notes and into the published works.

In fact, in *Parega and Paralipomena,* Schopenhauer’s judgment of the ideal promoted in the New Testament is so positive that he claims that the ideas found there “must somehow be of Indian origin”: though quite an implausible claim on the face of it, as evidence he points to its “thoroughly Indian ethics which takes morality to the point of ascetics, its pessimism and its avatar” (PP2: 404). Schopenhauer points specifically to the example of Christ as an aspect of true, pessimistic religion found in the New Testament, referring to the doctrine as “salvation by an avatar” (*ibid*.), which for him is a key aspect of Hinduism that gives insight into the need for resignation and negation of the will. In the days of Romanticism, it was not uncommon for philosophers and philologists to point out the intimate connections between Christianity, Greek mythology and Indian mythology (e.g. Friedrich Hölderlin, Georg Friedrich Creuzer and F.W.J. Schelling).

Part of the power of the Gospel narrative lies in Jesus standing as a representative for the world and for humankind more specifically, and thus the manner of his suffering and death becomes a symbol for the need to find salvation through a certain kind of ascetic escape. From this distinctively Christian perspective, seeing the world through the Gospel narrative thus allegorically reveals the irredeemable wrongness of this world, and the need to go beyond it: “The world is no longer an end, but a means; the kingdom of eternal joys lies beyond it and beyond death. Renunciation in this world and directing all hope to a better one are the spirit of Christianity” (PP2: 405). Schopenhauer even goes as far to suggests that Jesus’ teachings and example are a reflection of his education “by Egyptian priests whose religion was of Indian origin” (PP2: 407), and that, due to this upbringing, he may have quite consciously styled himself as an avatar-like figure.

As stated earlier, Schopenhauer’s philosophy also has a natural kinship to Stoicism, which is a doctrine that seeks to provide equanimity in the face of suffering through insight. Indeed, Schopenhauer appears at first univocally appreciative of Stoicism, which provides a guide to a way of life with reduced suffering: “The *Stoic Sage* presents in an ideal form the most complete development of *practical reason* in the true and authentic sense of the word, the highest peak a human being can attain using only reason” (WWR1: 103); he even calls Stoic ethics “a very valuable and estimable attempt to adapt that great privilege of humanity, reason, to an important and salutary end, namely that of raising us above the suffering and pain every life encounters” (WWR1: 107). Schopenhauer objects to Stoicism, however, on the basis that Stoicism promotes virtue (rational *apatheia*) for its capacity to lead towards happiness, not because of its intrinsic value.[[15]](#footnote-15) This becomes evident by what Schopenhauer calls the ‘inner contradiction’ of Stoicism, namely that it recommends suicide when the sufferings of an individual cannot be born with equanimity, which means that in the end Stoicism merely aims at happiness through self-renunciation while, according to Schopenhauer, self-renunciation should be an end in itself. He writes that through Stoic *apatheia* “we are still very far from achieving anything perfect in this respect, where the correct use of reason is really able to eliminate all burdens and sufferings of lie and lead to bliss” (WWR1: 108).

After discussing his objection to Stoicism, Schopenhauer makes a remark on the subject of the Stoic sage somewhat clumsily placed in the oft skipped closing lines of the first book of WWR1. This paragraph merits quoting at length:

The inner contradiction, mentioned above, that affects Stoic ethics even in its basic idea, can also be discerned in the fact that the Stoics were never able to present their ideal, the Stoic sage, as a living being with inner poetic truth; he remains stiff and wooden, a mannequin that no one can engage with and who does not himself know what to do with his wisdom. His perfect composure, peace and bliss really contradict the essence of humanity, so that we are unable to form any intuitive representation of him. How completely different they seem, next to the Stoic sage, those who the wisdom of India sets before us and has actually brought forth, those voluntary penitents who overcome the world; or even the Christian saviour, that splendid figure, full of the depths of life, or the greatest poetical truth and highest significance but who, with perfect virtue, holiness and sublimity, nevertheless stands before us in a state of the utmost suffering (WWR1 108-109 – our emphasis).

Throughout this dense construction, there are five elements Schopenhauer attributes to the Christian saviour either positively or *a contrario*: human beings can engage Christ (not the Stoic sage); Christ is full of life (not in perfect composure, peace and bliss); we are able to form an intuitive representation of Christ; Christ has perfect virtue, holiness and sublimity; the image of Christ is one of utmost suffering. With the combination of these five elements, Schopenhauer is convinced that Christ can serve as an exemplar of denial of the will. This implies that these elements are central to understanding what is involved in denial of the will to life and so are, in a manner of speaking, illustrative clothing for the naked body of self-denial.

One puzzle arising from this concerns the reconciliation of the claim that Christ has a fullness of life, with the representation of perfect virtue in forms of extreme suffering. One must simply think of images of the crucifixion to know that Christ suffered terribly throughout this ordeal. What makes Christ a moral exemplar, therefore, is not the absence of suffering but the fact that Christ remains unresponsive to suffering: he does not fight off his captors, he does not broker a deal to escape his death, nor does he call his followers to violence. This is not equanimity but acceptance of suffering. However, Schopenhauer claims that Christ both accepts suffering and keeps perfect, intellectual composure. Christ suffers and is aware of the suffering of himself and others, but he remains emotionally unresponsive towards suffering. This becomes probably most apparent in the motif of the Crucifixion. The exemplar of Christ in this most trying of circumstances can provide insight into the true bliss that lies in denial of the will: the suffering saviour is a pathway to denial of the will. The suffering and slowly dying deity of Christianity is an exemplar of negation of the will, and so are many of Christian and Eastern saints or ascetics. In the following section, we will go on to consider how lessons from Christology, particularly reflections upon the suffering Christ, can help solve interpretive puzzles concerning Schopenhauer’s account of the denial of the will, including questions concerning the suffering saint.

## **3. Suffering and Sainthood**

Christ is a moral example of profound suffering to which he is emotionally unresponsive. Ideally, this is how human beings all should be. In this, Schopenhauer’s philosophy is ultimately eudaemonist, i.e. he seeks a way to avoid suffering which, in his philosophy, is tantamount to pursuing happiness.[[16]](#footnote-16) Indeed, what ultimately makes the denial of the will the ‘emeritus highest good’ (as Schopenhauer calls it at WWR1: 428) is that it most ably avoids suffering,[[17]](#footnote-17) though this does not mean Schopenhauer would be altogether dismissive of the redemptive potential of suffering. In fact, in some of his notes he attacks Stoicism because it merely hardens the heart against suffering, whereas suffering can aid work for the redemption of human beings from the will.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The example of Christ on the cross exemplifies the possibility of enduring great suffering with emotional unresponsiveness, the difficulty of sustaining such a state, and an achievable final escape from the suffering world we find ourselves in. We can follow this process through the main events and sayings of Christ on the cross, as described in the Gospel accounts. To begin with, we have a group of sayings that reveal Christ as emotionally unresponsive to the great suffering he is undergoing at the beginning of his execution, including pleading with God to not punish his tormentors (Luke 23:34), arranging for his mother to be looked after following his death (John 19:26-7), and promising paradise to one of the criminals being crucified alongside him (Luke 23: 43). We also have one of the most controversial passages in the Gospels to consider, namely, Jesus’ cry of despair from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). As Tuckett argues, this famous ‘cry of dereliction’ should be taken seriously as a reflection of a burst of Christ’s feelings of abandonment on the cross: “He has been abandoned by all his friends, condemned by all human agencies, and now he feels himself abandoned even by God himself. Any reading of the text should not water down or dilute the starkness and harshness of the narrative Mark presents” (2001: 920). However, despite this cry, we find Christ having resigned himself properly to his suffering and apparent abandonment in the moments prior to his death: at the end of the narrative in John, Christ has the presence of mind to ask for a drink in order to fulfil a prophecy from the Psalms (John 19:28), and then calmly dies, stating, “it is finished” (John 19:30), whilst Luke has Christ proclaiming, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Taking the Gospel accounts of Christ on the cross together, then, we can see different aspects of Schopenhauer’s account of the journey towards resignation and negation of the will on display. We find, within the narrative, something of the paradoxical state of the road to resignation, including both emotional neutrality and ongoing struggle. However, Christ ultimately becomes a stellar Schopenhauerian saintly model, as he undergoes the perfect death, having overcome the struggle shown in the ‘cry of dereliction’ to give himself up perfectly to his suffering and death.

Understanding the redemptive potential of suffering is problematic due to an interpretive difficulty in WWR1, namely that when Schopenhauer introduces the denial of the will in § 68, he clearly connects it to suffering but when he comes to his final picture of the saint in § 71, that saint appears to be beyond suffering. In § 68, Schopenhauer makes two points with regard to the relationship of the saint to suffering. First, most human beings can only come to denial of the will through “the personal *experience* of suffering” (WWR1: 463), whilst a minority can attain this through recognition of the ubiquity of suffering alone. Second, when the state of the denial of the will is reached, we “must not think that, after cognition has become a tranquilizer of the will and given rise to the negation of the will to life, it will never falter and that it can be relied upon like inherited property. Rather, it must constantly be regained by steady struggle” (WWR1: 462). This implies that not only is personal and profound suffering necessary for attaining the state of denial of the will, it is also paramount for maintaining the denial of the will. As such, it stands to reason that the saintly ascetic is kept in a constant state of suffering. This seems to conflict with some of Schopenhauer’s well-known descriptions of ascetic denial, mostly from § 71, such as that the image of the saint gives us “a peace that is higher than all reason, we are shown that completely calm sea of mind, that profound tranquillity, imperturbable confidence and cheerfulness” (WWR1: 486).

A proper Christological reading of Schopenhauerian denial of the will can clarify this paradox. As we will show, the saint is intellectually aware of suffering (which also allows him to be compassionate towards others) but emotionally unresponsive to suffering. The transition from affirming to denying life is of a truly radical nature, which Schopenhauer illustrates by means of Christian imagery:

Christian doctrine symbolizes *grace*, the *negation of the will*, *redemption*, in the form of God become man, who, being free from all sinfulness, i.e. from all life-will, cannot have arisen from that most decisive affirmation of the will as we did, and cannot have a body like ours, which is to say a body that is nothing but concrete will through and through, appearance of the will (WWR1 479).

Despite the radical nature of the change, the process by which this transition takes effect is one of a gradual nature. Roughly speaking, there are five consecutive steps to move from egoism, over virtue, to self-denial. First, the hitherto egoist individual is permeated with moral insight by becoming aware of the unity between different individuals, which makes them porous to universal suffering: “No suffering is foreign to him anymore” (WWR1: 447). This porosity to the suffering of others leads to the second step, which is the recognition of the omnipresence of suffering as such: “Wherever he looks, he sees the sufferings of humanity, the sufferings of the animal kingdom, and a fleeting, fading world” (WWR1: 448). Third, the recognition of the omnipresence of suffering builds up a tension between the essence of the individual, i.e. will to life, and the newly acquired cognition: “Given what he knows about the world, how could he affirm this very life by constant acts of will, binding himself ever closer to it, embracing it ever more tightly” (WWR1: 448). This means that the individual is disgusted by their very essence, because the very nature of reality does not warrant affirmation of that reality.

We then come to the fourth step, wherein that knowledge may become so powerful that it is capable of annulling the will to life: “A recognition of the whole, of the essence of things in themselves such as we have described, becomes the *tranquilizer* of all and every willing” (WWR1: 448). Finally, the will to life might re-emerge when the vivacity of the awareness that tranquilizes the will dies out: “The temptations of hope, the flatteries of the present, the sweetness of pleasure, the well-being that falls to our personal lot amid the distress of a suffering world ruled by chance and error, all this pulls us back and fastens our bonds once more” (WWR1: 448).[[19]](#footnote-19) Therefore, saints keep themselves in a state of awareness of suffering so that they do not relapse into the affirmation of life. This whole transition is ultimately a move from egoism to virtue to asceticism:

The phenomenon in which this is revealed is the transition from virtue to *asceticism*. Specifically, he is no longer satisfied with loving others as himself and doing as much for them as for himself; instead, he has conceived a loathing for the essence that is expressed as his own appearance, the will to life, the kernel and essence of that world he recognizes as a miserable place (WWR1: 449).

In order then that the will does not re-emerge, the saint “cheerfully sides with everyone hostile to the expression of the will that is his own person” (WWR1: 451), which means that the saint welcomes such things as chastity, poverty and denial of their bodily needs.

Schopenhauer’s description of denial of the will seems like an abstract, mythology-free, account of the asceticism that one finds in many religions. Indeed, Schopenhauer recognizes that asceticism is “the enviable life of a great many saints and beautiful souls among the Christians, and even more among the Hindus and Buddhists, as well as among practitioners of other faiths” (WWR1: 452). However, we should not overlook the very specific Christian, even Christological, elements in denial of the will. Schopenhauer signals this when he uses clear Christological terms when discussing resignation as a sacrifice: “Sacrifice means resignation in general, and the rest of nature must wait to be redeemed by human beings, who are both priest and sacrificial victim” (WWR1: 450). The idea of being priest and victim at the same time resembles the Christological theme of martyrdom where Christ’s self-chosen sacrifice can redeem humanity of its (original) sinfulness. Applied to Schopenhauer, the persona of the saint is the redeemer of the world, not because it would be singularly effective in humanity’s redemption, but due to the fact that it provides a model of emulation for other human beings: one of outward calm and profound, inner mystical zeal. Following this, Schopenhauer quotes Meister Eckhart as expressing the same idea, by connecting the figure of Christ with the themes of sacrifice and resignation, and emphasizing the exemplarist impact of the Passion narrative upon the believer: “I confirm this with Christ, since he says: and I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me (John 12:32). So the good men should carry all things up to God, their first origin” (WWR1: 450). The references to Christ being ‘lifted up from the earth’ can be taken as not only referring to the ‘ascension’ of Jesus to heaven after the resurrection, but also the literal lifting up of Jesus on the cross. In this manner, Schopenhauer connects his account of the denial of the will with the example of Christ on the cross, acting as an exemplar of sacrifice and resignation.

That model for emulation, as Schopenhauer thinks of Christ’s moral function as an exemplar, is not someone who vigorously and powerfully engages life. The redemption of life lies not in works but in the grace that releases human beings from their attachment to works. The saint is then not someone who has overcome suffering through zeal and now stands victorious, but someone who has intellectually transcended suffering. For this reason, Schopenhauer is not particularly impressed by the feats of self-styled great individuals (such as Napoleon) who conquer the world, but more so by, e.g., Francis of Assisi who is free from the world: “We will not let the permanent majority of the vulgar and insipid prevent us from acknowledging that the greatest, most important and most significant appearance that the world can show us is not someone who conquers the world, but rather someone who overcomes it” (WWR1: 456). Such individuals who overcome the world are not released from suffering; on the contrary, they tend to be represented in terms of the most profound suffering. Through the embrace of suffering, they can work as a moral exemplar because they give cause for those still trapped in the affirmation of life to re-evaluate their composure towards suffering. Human beings become envious of the apparent calm of the saint in times of profound suffering, which enlivens a desire within these individuals to become as the saint. The saint can therefore not be altogether radically different from the average person (reflecting Kant’s view, discussed earlier, that an effective moral exemplar such as Christ cannot be viewed as fundamentally different from a normal human being). Schopenhauer describes the “inner joy and true heavenly peace” of those who have denied life and adds that “when we behold this person with our eyes or in our imagination, we cannot help feeling *the greatest longing*, since we acknowledge that this alone is in the right and infinitely superior to everything else” (WWR1: 461). The longing is intensified by the realisation that this path to salvation is one that is open to us, at least in principle. One is potentially receptive to grace regardless of what they are able to do in the world: we can give ourselves up in resignation, and thereby achieve the negation of the will within ourselves.

## **4. Conclusion**

How does this Christological reading of the saint as a moral exemplar provide further information of the denial of the will? Schopenhauer tends towards hyperbole, which makes for enjoyable reading but can obscure the nuance of his argument. At several points, Schopenhauer would describe the composure of the saint towards the world in terms of utter indifference. One rather eloquent example reads as follows:

He gazes back calmly and smiles back at the phantasm of this world that was once able to move and torment his mind as well, but now stands before him as indifferently as chess pieces after the game is over, looking like discarded masks the morning after Carnival, although their forms taunted and disturbed us the night before (WWR1: 462).

Schopenhauer is then adamant that the state of saintly nothingness is a totally and radically altered state of being, something which he likes to illustrate with Christian theological notions such as “catholic transcendental alteration”, “being born again” or “the effects of divine grace” (WWR1: 477). However, the outward bliss of the saint might hide a wealth of inner life. From the viewpoint of one still entangled in the will to life, the inner life of the saint cannot be appropriately described. The reason for this is that philosophical language is at a loss for describing something beyond its conceptual capacities: “As long as we are ourselves the will to life, we can only recognize and indicate that last thing negatively, because here in particular, Empedocles’ old principle that like can only recognize like deprives us of all cognition” (WWR1: 485). Whilst the world becomes for those who have achieved negation of the will a ‘relative nothing’, this is only from our standpoint, those who are still enmeshed in the individual will and the world as representation. There is no reason to believe that the world in fact becomes nothing for such a person; rather, we just cannot describe or comprehend it from our current position. At one point, Schopenhauer does in fact provide a more positive description of the state of denial of the will, for which he makes use of religious concepts such as “Ecstasy, rapture, enlightenment, unity with God” (WWR1: 485), though he shows unwillingness to even go as far as using these labels to try to picture what it would be like for an individual to negate the will. However, turning to these concepts of a particularly Christian and mystical shows that the denial of the will leads to something he recognized in the example of Christ and was understood through the lens of Christian mystics like Eckhart and Böhme.

The difficulty of understanding Schopenhauer’s saint as the highpoint of denial of the will is evidenced by the vastly diverging models that have been used for understanding the saint. While not aiming for a complete description of sainthood, this contribution has shown that Schopenhauer was influenced by Christian reflections upon self-denial, suffering and salvation through the exemplar provided by Christ. He took a Christological understanding of self-denial as a model for the saint, which shows how there is a remarkable distance for him between Stoic equanimity and Christian self-denial. The most important element in this is that Schopenhauerian self-denial does not release one from suffering but merely engenders indifference to suffering: suffering as such is unavoidable, but our emotional response to suffering can be overpowered. Part of this transition to asceticism can be achieved by moral examples, among which Schopenhauer singles out the Christian Saviour as a particularly apt example.

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1. Schopenhauer’s works are referenced by pagination of the *Sämmtliche Werke* edition. Abbreviations are mentioned in the bibliography. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In a letter to Julius Frauenstädt of September 12, 1852, Schopenhauer admits that he had previously mistreated Frauenstädt. Without offering much of an apology, Schopenhauer quips that he might “have fathomed and taught what a saint is, but [he] never said that [he] was one” (Schopenhauer 1978: 282). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Julian Young calls the saint a “Christ-like figure”, a figure akin to “Mahatma Gandhi” or even an “overman” (2005: 188-191); Robert Wicks notes the distance with Stoicism and rightly thinks in terms of either Christian Quietism or Upanishadic enlightenment (2008: 133-138); John Atwell stresses the saint’s indifference to suffering – in himself as in others – and stresses how the ascetic relinquishes his individual will in favor of an general will (1995: 157-159); Gerard Mannion suggests that Schopenhauer’s soteriology ends up in a surrogate proto-postmodern religion (2003: 278-281). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Worth noting is that Schopenhauer’s father died, presumably of suicide, when Arthur was seventeen years old. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Janaway also discusses Schopenhauer’s dualist approach to Christianity, distinguishing between the pessimistic ‘ascetic meaning’ and the optimistic ‘theistic meaning’ for the world provided, respectively, by the doctrines of creation and of grace (see 2017: 360f.). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For an account of the troubled history of publication of Kant’s *Religionsschrift*: Kuhn (2001: 362-366). For discussion of its challenge to Kant’s philosophy: Shell (2009: 25). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kant’s account of the role of Christ as example is explored in more detail in Head (2018: 227-232). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A summary of the main claims of Socinianism with regard to the figure of Christ can be found in Erickson (2013: 716f.). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Stephen Palmquist read Kant’s reflections here as a full-fledged Christology which allows for the belief in the divinity of Christ: Stephen Palmquist, ‘Could Kant’s Jesus be God?’ *International Philosophical Quarterly* 52 (2012) 421-437. Nathan Jacobs and Chris Firestone read this as Kant’s search for a Platonic ideal of perfection: Chris Firestone and Nathan Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant’s Religion* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), chapter six. Christopher Insole reads this somewhere between Palmquist and Jacobs/Firestone, namely as a Christianized Platonism: Christopher Insole, *The Intolerable God. Kant’s Theological Journey* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016. We will not take sides within this discussion and only emphasize that the main feature of Kant’s Jesus, as everyone agrees, should be his humanity, suffering and good will, not a potential divine descent. Further discussion can be found in Vanden Auweele (2019: 178-182). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Schopenhauer’s appreciation of the symbolic power of Christ on the cross is reflected in his view that the figure of the “emaciated Christ on the cross” is a particularly suitable subject in a painting for representing the negation of the will to life (see WWR2: 478). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Given the context of Schopenhauer’s system, we construe ‘moral’ in a broad sense, as encompassing both his ethics of compassion and his soteriology concerning the negation of the will. Such a construal is apt as compassion and denial of the will are viewed by Schopenhauer as being on a continuum, with the latter the result of an intensified and broader experience of the suffering than that which engenders compassionate actions. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Schopenhauer’s distinction between the mere wrapping of the dogma of faith and the inner core of a religion recalls Kant’s imagery in *Religionsschrift* of the narrow sphere of pure rational religion within the wider sphere of a given historical faith. See Kant (1996a: 64 [12]). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. It is due to the figure of Christ that Schopenhauer speaks of “the spirit of the Old Testament [being] diametrically opposed to that of the New Testament” (WWR2: 713). Though he does concede the pessimistic tenor of the doctrine of original sin and the Fall, he argues that these ideas “[stand] in the Old Testament like something outside of the main work” (*ibid*.). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For Schopenhauer, Judaism can primarily be characterised as a system of belief that is both “realism and optimism” (PP2: 402), and is thus, in both respects, fundamentally opposed to the idealist and pessimistic truths espoused by the metaphysics of will. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The somewhat ambivalent treatment of Stoicism in Schopenhauer’s philosophy is discussed in Head (2016: 92-107). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ever since this was pointed out by Ernst Cassirer, this has become an issue of little contention (1974: 442). While eudaemonism usually means the pursuit of happiness, such a pursuit also includes the overt avoidance of pain. To pursue satisfaction, Schopenhauer teaches, is to invite suffering. This means that happiness is more appropriately gained through lulling the will to sleep, rather than pursue the objects of the will. Satisfaction breeds dissatisfaction, self-denial breeds true happiness. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. There is some debate about what is meant by emeritus. Most readers assume this to be a ‘second best’ highest good or the best that can be achieved: e.g. Migotti (1995: 643–660); Reginster (2012: 349–366). For a different point of view: Janaway (2016: 649–669) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See, e.g., Schopenhauer (2017:73-74 [81.2-82.1]) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Schopenhauer is quite clear that moral virtues are ideally a preparation for the denial of the will to life: “The phenomenon in which this is revealed is the transition from virtue to *asceticism*. Specifically, he is no longer satisfied with loving others as himself and doing as much for them as for himself; instead, he has conceived a loathing for the essence that is expressed as his own appearance, the will to life, the kernel and essence of that world he recognizes as a miserable place” (WWR1 449). Whether this implies that the saint is equally unmoved by the suffering of others and therefore devoid of compassion, is a difficult question to answer.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-19)