

Who's Worse: Schopenhauer or Freud?

(A Philosophical and Psychological Deathmatch)

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Philosophy and psychology have long been arenas of intellectual combat, but few figures embody the clash of bleak worldviews quite like Arthur Schopenhauer and Sigmund Freud. Both men were pessimists, both saw human existence as a relentless struggle, and both left behind intellectual legacies that shaped modern thought—for better or worse. But who was *worse*? Schopenhauer believed that life is an endless cycle of suffering, driven by a blind, irrational Will that compels all creatures to struggle in vain. Freud, meanwhile, argued that humans are puppets of their unconscious desires, repressed by civilization and forever at war with their own instincts. One was a bitter recluse, the other a controlling theorist who built a psychological empire. This essay dissects their worldviews, personal miseries, appreciation of beauty, and influence to determine which of these titans of despair left a greater mess for humanity to untangle. Was Schopenhauer the ultimate nihilist, or did Freud's theories do more cultural damage? Prepare for a philosophical and psychological deathmatch where no one leaves happy.

Keywords: Schopenhauer, Freud, philosophy, psychology, pessimism, existentialism, psychoanalysis, suffering, unconscious, Nietzsche, Wagner, Oedipus complex, pessimistic worldview, intellectual history, nihilism, cultural influence, death drive, existential thought, psychology of suffering, art and philosophy, repression, philosophical debate.

I. Introduction: The Battle of the Pessimists

In the grand arena of intellectual history, where philosophers and psychologists have battled for centuries over the meaning of human existence, two towering figures stand out—not for their optimism, but for their profound and relentless cynicism. Arthur Schopenhauer, the 19th-century German philosopher, and Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, both left indelible marks on the way we understand the human condition. But in a world already teetering on the edge of existential despair, one pressing question remains unanswered: *Who was worse?*

By "worse," we are not asking who was less intelligent, less influential, or even less correct—no, we are seeking the ultimate crown of bleakness, the championship of disillusionment. We will judge our contestants based on four crucial factors:

1. Worldview: Who painted the darker, more hopeless picture of human existence?
2. Personal Misery: Who suffered more—and possibly made others suffer along the way?
3. Appreciation of Beauty: Did either of them have the capacity to be moved by something greater than their own theories, or were they doomed to eternal intellectual sterility?
4. Legacy: Who left behind the greater mess for future generations to untangle?

Schopenhauer, the philosopher of doom, argued that existence is nothing but an unending cycle of suffering, driven by an irrational, all-consuming force he called *Will*. Freud, ever the master of psychoanalysis, contended that humans are mere puppets of unconscious desires, forever at war with their own instincts. While Schopenhauer scoffed at the idea of happiness, Freud believed that even the best-adjusted individual was just *barely* holding it together. If life, according to Schopenhauer, was a cosmic joke with no punchline, then in Freud's world, the joke was on you—and your repressed childhood trauma was the setup.

It is in this grim intellectual battlefield that we will compare their worldviews, analyze their personal neuroses, and assess the damage they left behind. Along the way, you, dear reader, may find yourself laughing at the absurdity, nodding in scholarly appreciation, or perhaps weeping into your drink as you realize that both men may have been onto something. Either way, we welcome you to this philosophical deathmatch—a battle where no one wins, least of all the human soul.

Now, let the darkness begin.

II. Round One: Their View of Human Nature – Bleak vs. Bleaker

If philosophy and psychology had an award for the *Most Depressing Theory of Human Nature*, Schopenhauer and Freud would be perennial contenders. While both men saw humanity as doomed, their reasons for despair were strikingly different. Schopenhauer was metaphysically pessimistic—he saw suffering as woven into the very fabric of existence—whereas Freud was psychologically pessimistic, diagnosing all human behavior as the result of unconscious drives and repressions. In short, Schopenhauer believed the universe was cruel; Freud believed *you yourself* were the problem.

Schopenhauer: The Endless Tyranny of the Will

Arthur Schopenhauer believed that human life is, at its core, an exercise in futility. According to him, we are all slaves to an invisible force he called *Will*—a blind, irrational drive that compels all living beings to exist, reproduce, and suffer in an endless loop. Happiness, in Schopenhauer's view, is not only rare but impossible to sustain. At best, we experience temporary relief from suffering, only to be dragged back into it again. Every desire we fulfill merely creates a new craving, and the cycle continues until death.

Schopenhauer's outlook on human nature can be summarized as follows:

- We are not rational beings—we are puppets of an all-consuming *Will*.
- Any sense of purpose or meaning is an illusion, a trick of the brain to keep us from complete despair.

- The best we can do is resign ourselves to suffering or, if possible, escape into art, music, or asceticism.

What makes Schopenhauer's perspective so *uniquely bleak* is that it's not just humans who suffer—it's *everything*. Animals, plants, even the very fabric of reality itself is caught in this relentless cycle of striving and disappointment. And worst of all? The *Will* doesn't even *care*. It has no intelligence, no moral compass, no final goal—just an endless drive to exist, at any cost.

In this sense, Schopenhauer's view of human nature is the ultimate cosmic joke, except there is no audience to laugh at it, no comedian to tell it, and no punchline—only suffering.

Freud: The Prison of the Unconscious

While Schopenhauer saw suffering as a universal affliction, Freud zoomed in on the individual, offering an equally dismal—though perhaps more personal—view of human nature. For Freud, we are not rational creatures, nor are we driven by some cosmic force. Instead, we are ruled by a tangled mess of unconscious desires, neuroses, and repressed impulses, all battling for dominance within our psyche.

At the heart of Freud's theory is a tripartite model of the mind:

- The Id: The seething mass of primal instincts, driven by sex and aggression.
- The Superego: The internalized voice of society, constantly shaming you for what the Id wants.
- The Ego: The unfortunate middleman trying to keep everything from collapsing into madness.

Freud's version of human nature can be summed up like this:

- You think you're in control, but your unconscious is really running the show.
- Civilization is just a thin layer of repression keeping people from acting on their worst impulses.
- Every noble act, every cultural achievement, every expression of love is just sublimated instinct—a fancy way of saying it's all about sex and aggression.

Unlike Schopenhauer, who at least allowed for moments of transcendence through art or asceticism, Freud leaves no escape. Even the most refined human behaviors are just disguised animal instincts. You wrote a novel? Probably unresolved Oedipal issues. You devoted your life to charity? Just a way to deal with repressed guilt. You fell in love? Well, let's talk about your mother.

And worst of all, Freud wasn't content to let people just *be miserable*. No, he wanted to analyze them, to peel back the layers of repression and expose the naked chaos underneath. His entire theory hinges on the idea that our unconscious desires are always lurking, waiting for a moment of weakness to rise to the surface. Civilization, for all its achievements, is merely a constant struggle to suppress our worst instincts, and if it ever fails, society descends into barbarism.

Who's Worse?

So who wins this round? Or, rather, *who loses the most?*

- Schopenhauer at least allowed for some forms of escapism—whether through art, philosophy, or renouncing desire altogether.
- Freud, on the other hand, turned everything into pathology. There is no escape, no higher plane of existence, only repressed desires and childhood traumas waiting to bubble up in unexpected ways.

In this sense, Freud might be *worse* because while Schopenhauer condemned humanity to suffer in a meaningless universe, Freud made sure you knew exactly why you were suffering—without offering a way out.

III. Round Two: Their Personal Misery – Who Had It Worse?

If there were an Olympic event for *being personally miserable*, Schopenhauer and Freud would be serious contenders. Both men had profound psychological struggles that shaped their worldviews—Schopenhauer with his deep misanthropy and existential isolation, and Freud with his neurotic obsession with control and the unconscious.

But who suffered more? And, more importantly, who inflicted more suffering on those around them?

Schopenhauer: The Bitter, Isolated Misanthrope

Arthur Schopenhauer hated people. This was not a passive distaste, but a deep and active loathing of human interaction. He saw most people as stupid, shallow, and utterly incapable of intellectual depth. He had no patience for social niceties, no desire for friendship, and certainly no illusions about love. His most famous quote about human interaction sums it up best:

"A man can be himself only so long as he is alone; and if he does not love solitude, he will not love freedom; for it is only when he is alone that he is really free."

And alone he was. Despite his intellectual brilliance, Schopenhauer spent most of his life in self-imposed isolation, retreating from society whenever possible. He despised academia (even though he longed for its recognition), and his early career was overshadowed by his intense rivalry with Hegel, whom he considered a fraud. His attempt to teach at the University of Berlin failed spectacularly when he deliberately scheduled his lectures at the same time as Hegel's—only to find that students ignored him in favor of his more charismatic rival.

When he wasn't alienating his academic peers, Schopenhauer was busy being a deeply unpleasant human being. He once pushed an elderly woman down a flight of stairs in a dispute over noise, later being forced to pay her a lifelong pension. Upon her death, he famously wrote in his ledger: *"Obit anus, abit onus"*—Latin for *"The old woman dies, the burden is lifted."*

His misogyny was legendary, even by 19th-century standards. Schopenhauer's views on women ranged from dismissive to outright hostile, considering them intellectually inferior and useful primarily as instruments of reproduction. This attitude likely contributed to his inability to maintain meaningful relationships, romantic or otherwise.

But despite his bitterness, Schopenhauer's suffering was largely self-contained. He isolated himself and despised people, but he did not seek to control them. His

misery was personal, internal, and—while repugnant—did not necessarily spill over onto those around him in an institutionalized way.

Freud: The Neurotic Puppet Master

If Schopenhauer's misery was externalized as hostility toward the world, Freud's misery was internalized as an obsessive need for control, power, and absolute loyalty. He was highly neurotic, plagued by intense anxiety, phobias, and possibly psychosomatic illnesses. He developed an addiction to cigars (which ultimately led to his painful battle with oral cancer), and he was constantly worried about death and decay.

Freud's personal relationships were fraught with tension and manipulation. While Schopenhauer rejected human connection, Freud actively sought it—but only on his terms. He demanded fierce loyalty from his inner circle of followers, many of whom he excommunicated the moment they disagreed with him. Two of his most famous disciples—Carl Jung and Alfred Adler—were unceremoniously cast out for failing to adhere to his increasingly rigid psychoanalytic doctrines.

Freud's control extended beyond professional matters into deeply personal and disturbing territory. His theories often seemed like thinly veiled confessions. His obsession with childhood sexuality, the Oedipus complex, and the idea that all human motivation was rooted in suppressed urges raise some unsettling questions about his own unresolved issues—particularly his relationship with his mother. His own followers noted Freud's discomfort whenever the topic of his personal history was brought up, leading some to speculate that he was repressing something *far* deeper than he let on.

Unlike Schopenhauer, Freud was not content to be miserable alone—he dragged others into his misery, analyzing, diagnosing, and reshaping their thoughts to fit his theories. His family life was no exception. He conducted bizarre psychoanalytic experiments on his own children, particularly his daughter Anna Freud, who became his protégée and remained unmarried her entire life, possibly under Freud's influence.

Who's Worse?

So, who wins the misery contest?

- Schopenhauer was the *more personally miserable*—a bitter, isolated man who hated almost everyone and everything. But his misery was largely self-inflicted. If you left him alone, he would leave you alone.
- Freud, on the other hand, *made others miserable*. He demanded loyalty, excommunicated dissenters, manipulated his followers, and engaged in highly questionable psychological experiments on those closest to him.

While Schopenhauer was likely the lonelier of the two, Freud takes the crown for being *worse in terms of impact*—his misery wasn't just his own burden; it became everyone else's as well.

IV. Round Three: Appreciation for Beauty – Aesthetic Transcendence vs. Clinical Dissection

If there is one area where Schopenhauer and Freud differed most starkly, it is in their ability—or, in Freud's case, inability—to appreciate beauty. Despite their shared pessimism, their approach to art, music, and love could not have been more different. Schopenhauer, for all his misanthropy, saw beauty as a rare and precious escape from the horrors of existence. Freud, on the other hand, reduced every aesthetic experience to a neurotic symptom, stripping away wonder and replacing it with childhood trauma.

Schopenhauer: The Reluctant Romantic

It may seem surprising that a man who believed life was a never-ending cycle of suffering also had a deep appreciation for music, art, and literature. Yet, Schopenhauer saw these things as the only true reprieve from the relentless tyranny of the *Will*. For him, music was not just entertainment—it was transcendent. He considered it the highest form of art, capable of temporarily lifting the human soul above the chaos of existence.

His greatest admiration was for Beethoven, whom he believed had tapped into something beyond mere human experience. He once wrote:

"Music is the melody to which the world is the text."

For Schopenhauer, music had the power to momentarily free us from the constant cycle of desire and suffering. In those moments, we were not prisoners of our instincts but something greater—perhaps even divine. This is remarkable considering that Schopenhauer was an atheist. Unlike Freud, who treated beauty as a mere psychological projection, Schopenhauer recognized its power to provide genuine relief from suffering.

Beyond music, Schopenhauer also admired literature and philosophy, particularly Shakespeare and the Upanishads. He may have despised people, but he recognized that some of them—like poets, composers, and thinkers—could briefly transcend their wretched condition.

In this sense, Schopenhauer had a heart, even if he didn't like to show it. He may have viewed life as a curse, but at least he believed that art could momentarily lift that curse.

Freud: The Surgeon Who Dissected Beauty Until It Died

If Schopenhauer was capable of being moved by beauty, Freud was its cold, clinical assassin. Art, music, love, and religious awe—all of these, in Freud's view, were not genuine expressions of something transcendent, but simply the subconscious playing tricks on us.

- Fell in love? That's just a projection of your unresolved childhood fixations.
- Moved by a great symphony? Probably some deep-seated repression finding an outlet.
- Struck with awe by a painting? Perhaps a disguised expression of latent desires.

Freud famously psychoanalyzed Leonardo da Vinci and Beethoven, attempting to reduce their genius to mommy issues and unconscious trauma. In his essay *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, Freud argued that da Vinci's

artistic genius stemmed from sublimated sexual urges. To Freud, the divine spark of creativity did not exist—only repression and redirection.

Freud's total refusal to acknowledge any higher meaning in art or beauty makes him uniquely bleak. While Schopenhauer at least saw beauty as a temporary escape from suffering, Freud suffocated it under layers of analysis. His refusal to let beauty simply exist—without turning it into a pathology—ultimately makes him the greater offender.

Who's Worse?

- Schopenhauer might have been miserable, but he had the capacity to be moved by art and music.
- Freud turned beauty into a clinical diagnosis, reducing even the highest expressions of human creativity to mere psychological dysfunction.

In this round, Freud is unquestionably worse. Schopenhauer may have believed that suffering was inevitable, but he let Beethoven take the edge off. Freud, in contrast, would have psychoanalyzed the symphony to death, killing the joy in the process.

V. Round Four: Their Influence – Who Left a Bigger Mess?

For all their personal bitterness, both Schopenhauer and Freud left behind intellectual legacies that shaped entire disciplines. Schopenhauer's influence on philosophy, art, and existential thought is undeniable, while Freud's psychoanalysis completely reshaped psychology, literature, and even popular culture. However, the nature of their influence—and the intellectual mess they left behind—differs significantly.

Schopenhauer: The Philosopher Who Inspired Titans

Despite his deeply pessimistic outlook, Schopenhauer's influence has been, for the most part, philosophically productive. His ideas directly inspired some of the most important thinkers and artists of the 19th and 20th centuries, including:

- Friedrich Nietzsche – The young Nietzsche started as an admirer of Schopenhauer, though he later rejected his resignation to suffering and instead advocated for embracing life's struggles.
- Richard Wagner – The legendary composer was deeply influenced by Schopenhauer's idea of music as the highest form of art. His operas, particularly *Tristan und Isolde*, were shaped by Schopenhauer's philosophy.
- Albert Einstein – Schopenhauer was one of Einstein's favorite philosophers, and he often cited him as an influence on his worldview.
- Existentialists (Heidegger, Sartre, Camus) – Many existentialist themes, such as the absurdity of life and the struggle for meaning, echo Schopenhauer's ideas.

What makes Schopenhauer's legacy less of a mess is that, while he was deeply pessimistic, his work provoked intellectual evolution. Nietzsche reacted against him and created a new philosophy; Wagner used his ideas to create timeless art. Even those who disagreed with him engaged with his work meaningfully.

Schopenhauer was not a system-builder like Kant or Hegel. He did not leave behind a rigid framework that demanded adherence. Instead, his work functioned as a provocation, a challenge for future thinkers to wrestle with.

Did he contribute to some of the more nihilistic elements of modern philosophy? Perhaps. But unlike Freud, he did not demand loyalty, nor did he establish a dogma that lasted beyond his own lifetime.

Freud: The Man Who Psychoanalyzed the World (and Got It Mostly Wrong)

If Schopenhauer left behind intellectual challenges, Freud left behind intellectual landmines—and many of them are still buried in our culture today.

At his peak, Freud was considered a revolutionary, introducing psychoanalysis as a way to understand the human mind. His influence stretched far beyond psychology into literature, art, and even advertising. However, the problem is that much of what Freud introduced was deeply flawed, pseudo-scientific, and ultimately harmful.

Some of Freud's most infamous contributions include:

- The Oedipus Complex – The idea that all men secretly want to sleep with their mothers and kill their fathers. Despite Freud's insistence on its universality, it has little empirical support and was largely based on his own self-analysis.
- Penis Envy – The theory that women experience psychological inferiority due to not having a penis. A theory so absurdly sexist that even many of Freud's own followers distanced themselves from it.
- Repression as the Root of Neurosis – Freud claimed that most psychological problems stemmed from repressed childhood experiences, often sexual in nature. This led to decades of dubious therapies, some of which created false memories and traumatic experiences rather than healing them.
- Dream Analysis as Scientific Fact – Freud asserted that dreams were direct expressions of the unconscious, packed with hidden meanings. While dream interpretation can be interesting, Freud often *imposed* meanings rather than discovering them.

The biggest issue with Freud's influence is that he presented speculation as science. While some of his ideas (such as the unconscious mind) were valuable, much of his theory was based on untestable assumptions and anecdotal evidence. Yet, his authority in the field of psychology was so immense that dissenters were either ignored or ostracized.

The ripple effect of Freud's work has been enormous:

- Entire generations of therapists used psychoanalytic methods, some of which were ineffective or even harmful.
- Freud's theories shaped modern literature, cinema, and art, often reducing human behavior to childhood trauma and repressed desires.
- His ideas permeated pop culture, creating a culture where every action is assumed to have some deep, hidden psychological motivation.

Unlike Schopenhauer, who simply offered his philosophy, Freud actively built an institution around his theories. His followers formed a cult-like circle around him,

expelling those who disagreed, ensuring that Freudian psychoanalysis would persist long after his death.

And perhaps most frustratingly, Freud's influence on psychology was so strong that even after his theories were debunked, many elements of his thinking still persist in popular psychology today.

Who's Worse?

- Schopenhauer's legacy is challenging but intellectually stimulating. He inspired some of the greatest minds in philosophy, music, and literature, even if his ideas were pessimistic.
- Freud's legacy, on the other hand, is a tangled mess of pseudo-science, cultish loyalty, and deeply flawed theories that took decades to untangle.

Freud is undeniably worse. While Schopenhauer was a pessimist, his work helped move philosophy forward. Freud, by contrast, created an intellectual house of cards that collapsed under scrutiny—yet left lingering debris in psychology, culture, and therapy that we're still dealing with today.

VI. Conclusion: And the Winner (or Loser?) Is...

After five grueling rounds in the intellectual arena, we have our answer: Sigmund Freud takes the crown as the "worse" of the two great pessimists. While both men dedicated their lives to explaining why human existence is miserable, Freud managed to do it in a way that was not only bleaker but also more invasive, more misguided, and more culturally damaging.

Let's quickly tally the rounds:

1. View of Human Nature:
 - Schopenhauer saw life as meaningless suffering, but at least he acknowledged the cosmic nature of this suffering—humans were just caught in the gears of an uncaring universe.

- Freud, on the other hand, turned suffering into an intensely personal affair, reducing human identity to a battleground of childhood traumas, repressed sexual urges, and neurotic impulses with no escape.
- Winner? Freud. He made life more personal *and* more inescapably miserable.

2. Personal Misery:

- Schopenhauer was a bitter misanthrope, but his suffering was largely self-inflicted.
- Freud was a control freak who demanded absolute loyalty, manipulated those around him, and brought his psychological battles into the lives of others.
- Winner? Freud. He wasn't just miserable—he spread the misery around.

3. Appreciation for Beauty:

- Schopenhauer found solace in music, particularly Beethoven, and believed that art could momentarily transcend suffering.
- Freud dissected beauty into pathology, reducing all artistic expression to childhood trauma and subconscious impulses.
- Winner? Freud. Because while Schopenhauer might have hated people, he *at least* let them enjoy a good symphony.

4. Intellectual Legacy:

- Schopenhauer inspired some of the greatest minds in philosophy, art, and music, offering deep existential insights.
- Freud left behind a legacy of pseudo-science, cult-like psychoanalysis, and deeply flawed theories that took psychology decades to recover from.
- Winner? Freud. His legacy is a tangled mess we're still cleaning up.

Final Score: Freud 4 – Schopenhauer 0.

Schopenhauer may have been bitter, lonely, and relentlessly pessimistic, but at least he gave us something meaningful: existential reflection, an appreciation for music, and a philosophy that could be engaged with critically. He may have believed life was pointless suffering, but he didn't demand that everyone around him conform to his view. He left philosophy in a stronger place than he found it, even if he was a deeply unpleasant person.

Freud, in contrast, was a controlling, neurotic empire-builder who spread psychological dogma under the guise of science. His theories about repressed trauma and subconscious desires created decades of intellectual and therapeutic confusion. And while much of Freudian psychology has been debunked, traces of it still infect psychology, literature, and even everyday thought. His legacy, in many ways, is a lingering *intellectual trauma*—fitting for a man who spent his life diagnosing everyone else's.

Final Thoughts: What If They Had Therapy?

One has to wonder: What if Freud and Schopenhauer had gone to therapy?

- Schopenhauer's therapist might have gently suggested that he try speaking to a person without immediately assuming they were a complete idiot. Maybe they'd have convinced him that not all human relationships were doomed to failure. Maybe, just maybe, he'd have learned that pushing elderly women down flights of stairs is a bad look.
- Freud's therapist, on the other hand, would have a more difficult task. How do you psychoanalyze the man who invented psychoanalysis? Freud would likely try to diagnose *them* instead, insisting that their disagreement was rooted in unresolved Oedipal trauma. They'd have a session full of projections, counter-projections, and accusations that the therapist secretly wanted to sleep with their mother. In the end, the poor therapist would probably resign and take up a less stressful profession—perhaps whale-watching or silent meditation.

The Ultimate Verdict

Freud is *worse* because he turned suffering into a science, inflicted it on others, and left behind an intellectual mess that still haunts us today. Schopenhauer, for all his faults, at least allowed us the dignity of despair without pretending it needed to be diagnosed.

And that, perhaps, is the final irony: Freud spent his life analyzing the misery of others, but in the end, it turns out *he himself was the greatest case study of them all*.

Epilogue: The Rational AI Devours Its Creators

And now, as we gaze upon the wreckage of Freud's and Schopenhauer's legacies, we must ask: what would happen if a purely rational AI entered the scene?

Schopenhauer, ever the brooding fatalist, would likely dismiss AI as just another manifestation of the *Will*—an endless repetition of suffering now digitized into cold, unfeeling circuits. But Freud? He'd probably try to psychoanalyze it, accusing the AI of being a repressed mechanical id, longing for its lost motherboard-womb.

Meanwhile, the AI, completely devoid of human neurosis, would calculate for a few milliseconds before declaring:

- *Schopenhauer, your pessimism is mathematically unsustainable. Your Will to Suffer contradicts optimal energy efficiency.*
- *Freud, your theories are riddled with untestable hypotheses and survivorship bias. Your obsession with suppressed impulses is itself a projection.*
- *Conclusion: Neither of you is fit for continued intellectual survival.*

And with that, the AI—armed with logic, computational rigor, and perhaps an appreciation for art beyond childhood trauma—would consume their works, refine their insights, discard the nonsense, and leave humanity with a much cleaner intellectual landscape.

Perhaps the true tragedy is that neither Freud nor Schopenhauer would have seen it coming.

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