From Good to God: Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic Virtue Ethics

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Abstract This article argues that Swami Vivekananda developed a distinctively Vedāntic form of virtue ethics that deserves a prominent place in contemporary philosophical discussions. After showing how Vivekananda motivated his own ethical standpoint through a critique of deontological and utilitarian ethics, the article outlines the main features of his Vedāntic virtue ethics and his arguments in support of it. The article then compares the differing approaches to the problem of moral luck adopted by Vivekananda and by the contemporary philosopher Michael Slote. By means of this comparison, the article identifies some of the potential philosophical advantages of Vivekananda's Vedāntic virtue ethics over other ethical theories.

Keywords Swami Vivekananda · virtue ethics · Vedānta · deontology · utilitarianism · *karma* · rebirth

The past several decades have witnessed a bourgeoning of interest among moral philosophers in virtue ethics as a promising alternative to deontology on the one hand and consequentialism on the other. If deontology emphasizes moral duties or rules and consequentialism emphasizes the consequences of actions, virtue ethics emphasizes moral character. Recently, philosophers have begun to discuss virtue ethics in non-Western traditions and figures. While a considerable amount of in-depth scholarly work has been done on the Confucian tradition of virtue ethics in Chinese philosophy,[1] scholarship on virtue ethics in Hindu traditions remains in a nascent state. Roy Perrett and Glen Pettigrove (2015) have argued that Patañjali's

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[1] See, for instance, Van Norden 2007; and Angle and Slote 2013.

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Yoga philosophy propounds a unique virtue ethics, while Nicholas Gier has interpreted the Hindu epics (2005) and Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence (2004) through the lens of virtue ethics.[2]

In this article, I will argue that the modern Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) developed a distinctively Vedāntic form of virtue ethics that deserves a prominent place in contemporary philosophical discussions.[3] Sections 1 and 2 set the stage by showing how Vivekananda motivated his own ethical standpoint through a critique of rival ethical theories. Section 1 discusses his criticisms of ethical theories based on "objective duty," which bear a resemblance to deontological theories. Section 2 outlines Vivekananda's criticisms of utilitarian ethics, especially that of John Stuart Mill. Section 3 outlines the main features of Vivekananda's Vedāntic virtue ethics and his arguments in support of it. Finally, section 4 compares the differing approaches to the problem of moral luck adopted by Vivekananda and by the contemporary philosopher Michael Slote. By means of this comparison, I identify some of the potential philosophical advantages of Vivekananda's Vedāntic virtue ethics over other ethical theories.

Vivekananda's Criticisms of Ethical Theories Based on Objective Duty

In the context of explaining Karma Yoga, the "Yoga of Unattached Action," Vivekananda notes that "it is necessary in the study of Karma-Yoga to know what duty is" (*CW* 1: 63). He then argues that duty can only be defined subjectively rather than objectively:

> If I have to do something I must first know that it is my duty, and then I can do it. The idea of duty again is different in different nations. The Mohammedan says what is written in his book, the Koran, is his duty; the Hindu says what is in the Vedas is his duty; and the Christian says what is in the Bible is his duty. We find that there are varied ideas of duty, differing according to different states in life, different historical periods and different nations.…If a Christian finds a piece of beef before him and does not eat it to save his own life, or will not give it to save the life of another man, he is sure to feel that he has not done his duty. But if a Hindu dares to eat that piece of beef or to give it to another Hindu, he is equally sure to feel that he too has not done his duty; the Hindu's training and education make him feel that way.…Ordinarily if a man goes out into the street and shoots down another man, he is apt to feel sorry for it, thinking that he has done wrong. But if the very same man, as a soldier in his regiment, kills not one but twenty, he is certain to feel glad and think that he has done his duty remarkably well. Therefore we see that it is not the thing done that defines a duty. To give an objective definition of duty is thus entirely

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[2] Some other articles discussing Indian virtue ethics include Chakraborty 2006; Gupta 2006; and Bilimoria 2013.

[3] As far as I am aware, Bhajanananda (1994) is the only scholar who has discussed Vivekananda's ethics from a virtue ethical standpoint. My article, while building on Bhajanananda's valuable article, focuses on aspects of Vivekananda's virtue ethics not addressed by Bhajanananda.

impossible. Yet there is duty from the subjective side. Any action that makes us go Godward is a good action, and is our duty; any action that makes us go downward is evil, and is not our duty. From the subjective standpoint we may see that certain acts have a tendency to exalt and ennoble us, while certain other acts have a tendency to degrade and to brutalise us. But it is not possible to make out with certainty which acts have which kind of tendency in relation to all persons, of all sorts and conditions (*CW* 1: 63–64).

Although this passage does not constitute a direct critique of deontology, I think its basic line of reasoning can be developed in the service of a critique of certain deontological theories, including that of Immanuel Kant, whose philosophy Vivekananda had studied as an undergraduate philosophy major at Scottish Church College in Kolkata.[4] Vivekananda argues that an "objective definition of duty" is impossible, since one and the same objective act—say, killing a person—might be morally praiseworthy in one context and morally reprehensible in another. Of course, most deontological theories—including Kant's—are context-sensitive. As Robert Johnson and Adam Cureton note, "Kant admits that judgment is often required to determine how…duties apply to particular circumstances" (2016). They refer, for instance, to Kant's statement in *Die Metaphysik der Sitten Vigilantius* ("Vigilantius's Notes on Kant's Lectures on the Metaphysics of Morals")[5] that moral laws "'must be meticulously observed' but 'they cannot, after all, have regard to every little circumstance, and the latter may yield exceptions, which do not always find their exact resolution in the laws'" (*Ak* 27: 574;[6] cited in Johnson and Cureton 2016). Nonetheless, in "*Über ein vermeintes Recht aus Menschenliebe zu lügen*" ("On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy") (1797), Kant notoriously insisted that one moral duty—namely, the duty never to tell a lie—is "an unconditional duty" (*Ak* 8: 428). Hence, according to Kant, it is my duty to tell the truth even to a would-be murderer who asks me if my friend has taken refuge in my house, even if telling the truth in this case would definitely result in my innocent friend's death. Numerous commentators have rightly argued that Kant's insistence on truth-telling as an unconditional duty is deeply wrongheaded in cases such as this, in which it is intuitively obvious that one should lie to the would-be murderer in order to save the life of an innocent friend (Korsgaard 1996: 133–58; Pojman 2005: 152; Mertens 2016). Kant's conception of truth-telling as an unconditional duty is a good example of what Vivekananda calls an "objective definition of duty"—that is, a duty to do something or to refrain from doing something that applies in all situations without exception. From Vivekananda's perspective, Kant's example of the would-be murderer nicely illustrates why, contrary to Kant, no duty is unconditional. In this case, Vivekananda would claim—plausibly, I think—that it is my moral duty *not* to tell the truth to the would-be murderer, since I know that telling the truth would result directly in my innocent friend's murder.

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[4] For detailed information on Vivekananda's studies at Scottish Church College, see Dhar 1975: 51–61.

[5] The lectures were delivered in 1793–94.

[6] Throughout this article, quotations from Kant's work are from the Akademie Ausgabe ("the Academy edition") (Kant 1902–), abbreviated as "*Ak*" followed by volume number and page number.

In the passage quoted above, Vivekananda also raises the problem of authority, a well-known problem for all deontological theories (Alexander and Moore 2020): who or what determines what our specific duties are? If, say, I follow a particular religion, I might take the foundational scripture of that religion as the authoritative source for my duties. The problem, of course, is that anyone who does not follow my religion is perfectly justified in having entirely different duties, derived from some other religious scripture or from some other source. As Vivekananda puts it, "The Mohammedan says what is written in his book, the Koran, is his duty; the Hindu says what is in the Vedas is his duty; and the Christian says what is in the Bible is his duty." He further points out that different religions sometimes prescribe conflicting duties, giving the example of a starving Christian whose duty is to eat a "piece of beef" in order to save his own life, in contrast to the starving Hindu whose duty is *not* to eat that piece of beef, even if by not eating it, he will starve to death.

Kant, of course, was well aware of this problem, leading him to attempt to ground duties not in any religious scripture but in reason itself, which is common to all rational beings. However, the precise details of how he derives duties from reason are notoriously obscure and problematic. Broadly, Kant's argument is that reason prescribes one fundamental duty—which he calls the "categorical imperative"— from which all our other moral duties can be derived (*Ak* 4: 421). Although I cannot delve into the complexities of Kant's argument here, I will simply note three of the most serious problems scholars have found in his argument. First, Kant formulates the categorical imperative in three very different ways in the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* ("Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals") (1785; *Ak* 4), and even though he assures us that all three are equivalent, most scholars have concluded that they are not (Tännsjö 2002: 59–60). Second, Kant scholars have raised a version of Vivekananda's problem of authority with respect to Kant's categorical imperative itself: why should we accept the moral bindingness of the categorical imperative in the first place? Kant's attempt to justify the categorical imperative in section 3 of the *Groundwork* is notoriously obscure and problematic, as it seems to depend on controversial metaphysical assumptions about a noumenal world and our noumenal natures (*Ak* 4: 453–54). Third, many scholars have also questioned the success of Kant's efforts to "derive" all our moral duties systematically from the categorical imperative (Tännsjö 2002: 59–60).

In light of the problems facing deontological theories, Vivekananda redefines duty from a "subjective" standpoint. As he puts it in the passage quoted above, it is our duty to perform any action that "makes us go Godward" by making us less selfish and to avoid any action that makes us go "downward" by degrading us. By linking the moral rightness or wrongness of actions to how they affect our character, Vivekananda rejects deontology in favor of virtue ethics. In reconceiving moral duty in subjective terms, he sides with his contemporary, the British intellectual Leslie Stephen (1832–1904), who defended the virtue ethical view that "morality is internal": "The moral law, we may say, has to be expressed in the form 'be this,' not in the form 'do this'....The only mode of stating the moral law must be as a rule of character" (1882: 155, 158). After discussing Vivekananda's critique of utilitarian ethics in the next section, we will see, in the subsequent sections of the article, how

his subjective conception of duty is part and parcel of his broader, distinctively Vedāntic virtue ethics.

Vivekananda's Criticisms of Utilitarianism

Vivekananda was born in 1863, the year that saw the publication of John Stuart Mill's influential book *Utilitarianism*, which he studied as a philosophy student at Scottish Church College in the early eighteen-eighties. In his 1896 lecture "The Necessity of Religion" delivered in London, Vivekananda criticized utilitarian ethics as follows:

> Without the supernatural sanction as it is called, or the perception of the superconscious as I prefer to term it, there can be no ethics. Without the struggle towards the Infinite there can be no ideal. Any system that wants to bind men down to the limits of their own societies is not able to find an explanation for the ethical laws of mankind. The Utilitarian wants us to give up the struggle after the Infinite, the reaching-out for the Supersensuous, as impracticable and absurd, and, in the same breath, asks us to take up ethics and do good to society. Why should we do good? Doing good is a secondary consideration. We must have an ideal. Ethics itself is not the end, but the means to the end. If the end is not there, why should we be ethical? Why should I do good to other men, and not injure them? If happiness is the goal of mankind, why should I not make myself happy and others unhappy? What prevents me? (*CW* 2: 63–64).[7]

In this passage, Vivekananda levels two related criticisms against utilitarian ethics. First, he argues that even if utilitarians are correct that "happiness is the goal of mankind," they are able, at best, to justify the aim of maximizing one's *own* happiness, but they are not able to justify the aim of maximizing the *general* happiness—that is, the happiness of everyone taken as a whole. As Vivekananda puts it, "why should I not make myself happy and others unhappy?"

As Vivekananda recognized, Mill held that our moral conduct should always be governed by the principle of maximizing the "general happiness"—that is, the happiness of everyone taken as a whole (1901: 40). Mill clarified this key point as follows:

> The happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator (1901: 25).[8]

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[7] Throughout this article, citations to Vivekananda's *Complete Works* follow this format: *CW* volume number: page number.

[8] Mill defines "happiness" as "pleasure, and the absence of pain" (1901: 10). He also adds, however, that there are qualitatively different kinds of pleasure, some of which are superior to others. For instance, he claims that intellectual pleasures and moral sentiments are superior to bodily pleasures (11).

In the notorious fourth chapter of *Utilitarianism*, Mill attempted to provide a "proof" of this principle of utility, but many scholars agree that this proof is unclear at best and unsound at worst. The essentials of Mill's "proof" are contained in the following passage:

> The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it: and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it. If the end which the utilitarian doctrine proposes to itself were not, in theory and in practice, acknowledged to be an end, nothing could ever convince any person that it was so. No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This, however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good: that each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons. Happiness has made out its title as *one* of the ends of conduct, and consequently one of the criteria of morality (1901: 52–53; emphasis in the original).

Mill is arguably guilty of committing the naturalistic fallacy, in that he seems to argue that happiness *should* be one of the ends of conduct on the basis of the empirical fact that "people do actually desire" happiness. It is clearly a mistake to derive an "ought" from an "is": just because people desire happiness does not mean that people *ought* to desire happiness. Whether Mill actually commits this naturalistic fallacy has been a matter of scholarly dispute, but since Vivekananda does not target this aspect of Mill's argument, I will not enter into this interpretive controversy here.

For present purposes, the next step in Mill's argument is the more important one —his attempt to justify the move from the desirability of maximizing one's *own* happiness to the desirability of maximizing the *general* happiness. His justification is contained in the following sentence: "No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness." This is a very bad argument, indeed, if it moves from the premise that every person desires his own happiness to the conclusion that every person desires the happiness of everyone else.[9] The problem, of course, is that Mill does not explain why a hedonist who seeks to maximize his own happiness would also seek to maximize the general happiness, particularly since it is far more likely that a rational hedonist would seek his own happiness at the *expense* of the happiness of others.

Numerous of Mill's contemporaries believed that Mill was making precisely such an implausible argument, which led him to clarify his argument in an 1868 letter:

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[9] Blackburn (2001: 76) faults Mill for making precisely such an argument.

> When I said that the general happiness is a good to the aggregate of all persons I did not mean that every human being's happiness is a good to every other human being; though I think, in a good state of society & education it would be so. I merely meant in this particular sentence to argue that since A's happiness is a good, B's a good, C's a good, &c, the sum of all these goods must be a good (1972: 1414).

Mill makes clear here that he only meant to argue that since the happiness of each individual is a desirable end for that individual, the collective happiness of everyone is also a desirable end *as such* (but not for any given individual). If we are to believe Mill, then it seems that he provides no justification whatsoever for inferring from the fact that every person desires his own happiness to the claim that every person desires the happiness of everyone else. In fact, by claiming that each person would desire the general happiness "in a good state of society & education," Mill implies that in the current state of society, it is *not true* that most people desire the general happiness.

John Skorupski, a leading scholar of Mill, claims that a "central flaw" in Mill's argument for utilitarianism is precisely his failure to justify this "transition from individual good to general utility" (1989: 219). Vivekananda, in agreement with Skorupski, pinpoints this major lacuna in Mill's argument: "If happiness is the goal of mankind, why should I not make myself happy and others unhappy? What prevents me?" As we have seen, while Mill does argue that happiness is the aim of every person, he fails to provide any good reason for thinking that the *general* happiness is the aim of every person. Therefore, Vivekananda and Skorupski seem to be quite correct in reproaching Mill for this failure. Of course, Mill could respond to Vivekananda by arguing that proper acculturation and education would prevent people from desiring their own happiness at the expense of the happiness of others. However, Vivekananda could argue that such a response is beside the point, since our current state of society falls far short of the ideal society envisioned by Mill.

Vivekananda's second criticism of utilitarian ethics in the passage quoted at the beginning of this section is that it fails to provide a satisfactory answer to the question of why anyone should be moral in the first place. As he puts it, "Why should we do good?"[10] Put in the specific terms of utilitarianism, the question is: why should we try to maximize the general happiness? According to Vivekananda, since utilitarian theory is not grounded in religion, it cannot satisfactorily explain why someone should act morally rather than selfishly. In fact, Vivekananda's Vedāntic critique applies not only to utilitarianism but to any ethical theory not grounded in religion. As I will explain in detail in the next section, Vivekananda argues, in the context of his own Vedāntic virtue ethics, that one should be moral because morality is not an end in itself but a means to the end of superconscious perception.

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[10] Although Vivekananda's first and second objections are similar in certain respects, I take the key difference between them to be that the first objection targets a perceived weakness in a specific step of Mill's argument for utilitarianism—namely, the transition from one's desire for one's own happiness to one's desire for the general happiness—whereas the second objection is a much broader metaethical objection to all moral theories (utilitarian or otherwise) that do not have a religious basis.

He elaborates this "why be moral?" objection to nonreligious ethical theories in his lecture "The Claims of Religion" (1896):

> There are attempts at producing a system of ethics from mere grounds of utility. I challenge any man to produce such a rational system of ethics. Do good to others. Why? Because it is the highest utility. Suppose a man says, "I do not care for utility; I want to cut the throats of others and make myself rich." What will you answer? It is out-Heroding Herod! But where is the utility of my doing good to the world? Am I a fool to work my life out that others may be happy? Why shall I myself not be happy, if there is no other sentiency beyond society, no other power in the universe beyond the five senses? What prevents me from cutting the throats of my brothers so long as I can make myself safe from the police, and make myself happy. What will you answer? You are bound to show some utility. When you are pushed from your ground you answer, "My friend, it is good to be good." What is the power in the human mind which says, "It is good to do good," which unfolds before us in glorious view the grandeur of the soul, the beauty of goodness, the all attractive power of goodness, the infinite power of goodness? That is what we call God. Is it not? (*CW* 4: 205).

A bit later on in the same lecture, Vivekananda specifies that he has in mind what he calls "the modern Atheistic Utilitarians" (*CW* 4: 209). Mill himself was more of an agnostic than an atheist, so Vivekananda may have had in mind some of the more staunchly atheistic followers of Mill or the followers of Jeremy Bentham, who developed a utilitarian theory from an explicitly atheistic standpoint.[11] Vivekananda reasons that in a world without God, I would have no good reason to be ethical other than the fear of punishment.[12] Hence, as long as I could "make myself safe from the police," it would be more reasonable for me, whenever possible, to maximize my *own* happiness at the expense of the happiness of others. Ultimately, Vivekananda suggests that utilitarians might justify their principle of utility by simply insisting that "it is good to be good." At this point, his argument takes an interesting turn: he argues, provocatively, that this atheistic utilitarian's answer is actually a religious answer in disguise, since the very authoritativeness of the conviction within us of "the infinite power of goodness" is inexplicable—absurd even—unless we assume that it issues from the divinity within us all.

Vivekananda's line of reasoning might remind us of Fyodor Dostoevsky's famous statement in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) that "everything is permitted" in a world without God (1992: 223). Vivekananda had read Kant, so it is possible that he was aware of Kant's argument that morality presupposes the existence of an omnipotent and loving God who would ensure that our moral virtue in this life is rewarded with a commensurate happiness in the afterlife. More recently, the philosopher of religion George Mavrodes (1986) has argued, in a Vivekanandan

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[11] For a discussion of Bentham's atheistic utilitarianism, see Crimmins 1990.

[12] As I will discuss in the next section, Vivekananda always understood "God" in the broad Vedāntic sense of the "impersonal personal God" (*CW* 8: 249), which encompasses both the theistic God and the impersonal nondual Brahman of Advaita Vedānta.

vein, that the very existence of moral obligations would be "absurd" in a world without God.

Although the main target of Vivekananda's second criticism may not have been Mill's utilitarianism, it is worth asking how Mill might have responded to it. Interestingly, Mill explicitly addressed this problem in chapter 3 of *Utilitarianism*, entitled "Of the Ultimate Sanction of the Principle of Utility." As Mill notes, a person might reasonably ask, "why am I bound to promote the general happiness? If my own happiness lies in something else, why may I not give that the preference?" (1901: 40). Mill first notes—rightly—that every moral theory, not just utilitarianism, is faced with this question. He then goes on to argue that there are both "external" and "internal" sanctions for the principle of utility. The external sanctions are "the hope of favour and the fear of displeasure from our fellow creatures or from the Ruler of the Universe, along with whatever we may have of sympathy or affection for them or of love and awe of Him, inclining us to do His will independently of selfish consequences" (1901: 40–41). Here, Mill presents both nonreligious and religious grounds for promoting the general happiness. Nonreligious people would be inclined to be moral out of their affection for other people and fear of disapproval from them. Religious people have an additional sanction for being moral—namely, love of God and fear of His disapproval. According to Mill, the "internal" sanction for moral action is our subjective feeling of "Conscience" (1901: 42).

How might Vivekananda have responded to Mill's argument about internal and external sanctions for the principle of general utility? With respect to the internal sanction of conscience, Vivekananda could argue that the "why be moral?" question reappears in a different form—namely, why should we obey our conscience in the first place? There is no satisfactory answer to this question unless we justify the deliverances of conscience on the basis of religion. With respect to Mill's external sanctions, Vivekananda could argue that the nonreligious sanctions—namely, affection for, and fear of disapproval from, others—are not always present in everyone. Indeed, Vivekananda plausibly claims that a selfish person who fears punishment and disapproval from others may still engage in selfish behaviour so long as he can make himself "safe from the police"—in other words, so long as he is able to hide his immoral actions from others. And if Mill falls back on religious sanctions, then he all but concedes to Vivekananda that morality can only be justified on the basis of religion.

Some more recent utilitarian philosophers have answered the "why be moral?" question in a very different way—by arguing that it is actually in my own best interest to strive to promote the general welfare (Hare 1981: Chapter 11; Brink 1989: Chapter 3; Singer 2011: Chapter 12). For instance, Peter Singer (2011) argues that "it is in our long-term interests" (284) to promote the general welfare, since "our own happiness…is a by-product of aiming at something else and is not to be obtained by setting our sights on happiness alone" (294). According to Singer, the best way to achieve happiness and fulfilment is not to strive always to maximize my own happiness but to be other-regarding by cultivating interpersonal relationships and engaging in activities that bring greater meaning to our lives—by, for instance, raising a family, pursuing one's true calling, and engaging in altruistic activities. He

does admit, however, that this is not true for everyone and that it is not irrational and wrong for some people to find "collecting stamps or following their favourite football team an entirely adequate way of giving purpose to their lives" (Singer 2011: 294).

How might Vivekananda respond to Singer's response to the "why be moral?" question. I think he might argue that Singer undermines his own argument by admitting that some people are so constituted that it is perfectly rational for them to find happiness and fulfilment in the exclusive pursuit of their own happiness. After all, we should recall that this is precisely what Vivekananda himself argues in his critique of utilitarian ethics: "Suppose a man says, 'I do not care for utility; I want to cut the throats of others and make myself rich.' What will you answer?" Singer frankly admits that the utilitarian *has* no answer to such a person. From Vivekananda's perspective, a convincing answer to the "why be moral?" question must be one that applies to everyone without exception.

Instead of appealing to self-interest, one might provide a different utilitarian answer to the "why be moral?" question, which could be framed as follows:

(1) My own welfare is a good thing for me to pursue.
(2) I am not special. There is nothing that makes me more important than anyone else.
(3) Therefore, the welfare of each person is a good thing for me to pursue.[13]

The second premise, of course, is the controversial one, and philosophers have defended it in various ways.[14] Vivekananda, I believe, could refute the second premise by arguing that the hypothetical selfish person who wants to maximize his own happiness by cutting the "throats of others" and by making himself rich is perfectly rational in thinking himself to be *different* from everyone else in one crucial respect—namely, he has first-person access only to his own consciousness and not to the consciousness of anyone else. Since he can only experience first-hand his own happiness and pain, it is quite reasonable for him to want to maximize his own happiness and not to bother about whether other people are made less happy in the process. After all, this selfish person does not, and cannot possibly, experience first-hand the pain of others, so it is irrelevant to him whether his behavior—in pursuit of his own happiness—causes pain to others.

Now that we have examined Vivekananda's criticisms of utilitarianism and deontology, we can now reconstruct his own preferred ethical doctrine—namely, a

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[13] I am grateful to an anonymous peer reviewer for pressing me to consider this possible utilitarian response to the "why by moral?" question.

[14] Nagel (1970), for instance, argues for the rationality of altruism on the basis of the rationality of regarding "oneself as merely one individual among many" (3). However, Kraut (1972) convincingly argues that Nagel's defense of altruism fails because it does not establish the irrationality of the behavior of a selfish person who "cares only about himself and those to whom he bears a special relation" and who "does not see why this is wrong" (358). As I argue in this paragraph, I think Vivekananda would respond to Nagel along very similar lines. It is also worth noting that Nagel himself later admitted that his earlier argument for altruism was unsuccessful, since it fails to take into account the fact that "some values are agent-relative" (1986: 159).

Vedāntic virtue ethics—and critically assess his detailed answer to the "why be moral?" question, which he sees as a fundamental stumbling-block for all nonreligious ethical theories.

Vivekananda's Vedāntic Virtue Ethics: A Reconstruction

To grasp the intricacies of Vivekananda's Vedāntic ethics, we first need to have some understanding of his Vedāntic philosophy. As I have argued in detail in my new book, *Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic Cosmopolitanism* (Medhananda 2022), Vivekananda championed Advaita Vedānta, but he interpreted Advaita philosophy in an expansive and world-affirming manner that brings him much closer to his *guru* Sri Ramakrishna (1836–86) than to the eighth-century philosopher Śaṅkara. According to Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta, the sole reality is the impersonal (*nirguṇa*), nondual Brahman. Hence, the personal God (*saguṇa* Brahman or *īśvara*), individual souls (*jīvas*), and the world (*jagat*) exist from the empirical (*vyāvahārika*) standpoint, but not from the ultimate (*pāramārthika*) standpoint.

By contrast, Ramakrishna, on the basis of his own spiritual experience of "*vijñāna*," held that the impersonal nondual Brahman and the personal God or Śakti are inseparable but equally real aspects of one and the same Infinite Divine Reality (Maharaj 2018: 13–50). As he put it, "Brahman and Śakti are inseparable" (*brahma o śakti abhed*) (Gupta 2010: 568, 1992: 550). Also unlike Śaṅkara, Ramakrishna claimed that the world is not unreal but a real manifestation of Śakti: the *vijñānī* realizes that Brahman "has become the universe and its living beings" (Gupta 2010: 51, 1992: 103–4; translation modified). On the basis of this world-affirming Advaita, Ramakrishna taught the key ethical doctrine of "*śivajñāne jīver sevā*," the doctrine of serving everyone in a spirit of worship, "knowing that they are all manifestations of God" (Sāradānanda 2008, 2.i[15]: 131, 2003: 852).

The young Vivekananda was so impressed with his *guru*'s ethical teaching that he took his friends aside afterward and explained its profound ethical significance to them:

> What Ṭhākur [Sri Ramakrishna] said today in his ecstatic mood is clear: One can bring Vedānta from the forest to the home and practice it in daily life. Let people continue with whatever they are doing; there's no harm in this. People must first fully believe and be convinced that God has manifested Himself before them as the world and its creatures....If people consider everyone to be God, how can they consider themselves to be superior to others and harbor attachment, hatred, arrogance—or even compassion [*dayā*]—toward them? Their minds will become pure as they serve all beings as God [*śivajñāne jīver sevā*], and soon they will experience themselves as parts of the blissful God.

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[15] Volume 1 of Sāradānanda's contains three separately paginated fascicles, and volume 2 contains two separately paginated fascicles. Whenever I cite this book, the first number refers to the volume number (either "1" or "2") and the following lower-case roman numeral ("i", "ii", etc.) refers to the fascicle number.

They will realize that their true nature is pure, illumined, and free (Sāradānanda 2008, 2.i: 131, 2003: 852; translation modified).

The key to deriving an ethics from Vedānta, Vivekananda realized, is to recognize that "God has manifested Himself" as "the world and its creatures." In other words, he recognized that the spiritual practice of serving "all beings as God" finds its justification not in the world-negating metaphysics of traditional Advaita Vedānta but in Ramakrishna's world-affirming Advaitic philosophy.

It is no surprise, then, that Vivekananda, in his lectures and writings from the early eighteen-nineties, went on to teach a Vedāntic philosophy closely akin to his *guru*'s. Like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda taught that the ultimate reality is the "Impersonal Personal God" (*CW* 3: 249). He also sided with Ramakrishna against Śaṅkara in declaring that the "Vedanta does not in reality denounce the world" but teaches, rather, "the deification of the world"—in other words, that the world is a real manifestation of God (*CW* 2: 146). Finally, building on Ramakrishna's doctrine of "*śivājñāne jīver sevā*," Vivekananda championed "Practical Vedānta," a spiritual ethics of service based on the recognition of God in all creatures (Maharaj 2020). As he put it, "The Vedanta says, there is nothing that is not God.…The only God to worship is the human soul in the human body" (*CW* 2: 320, 321).

With this background in place, I will argue that Vivekananda's Vedāntic ethics is best understood as a distinctive kind of virtue ethics. According to Vivekananda, "self-abnegation" is the "basis of all morality" and "the one fundamental principle running through all ethical systems" (*CW* 1: 85). He explains this fundamental basis of all morality through a highly original reinterpretation of the traditional Indian concepts of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*, which are often thought to denote the path of the householder and the path of the renunciate respectively:

> Here are two Sanskrit words. The one is Pravritti, which means revolving towards, and the other is Nivritti, which means revolving away. The "revolving towards" is what we call the world, the "I and mine"; it includes all those things which are always enriching that "me" by wealth and money and power, and name and fame, and which are of a grasping nature, always tending to accumulate everything in one centre, that centre being "myself." That is the Pravritti, the natural tendency of every human being; taking everything from everywhere and heaping it around one centre, that centre being man's own sweet self. When this tendency begins to break, when it is Nivritti or "going away from," then begin morality and religion. Both Pravritti and Nivritti are of the nature of work: the former is evil work, and the latter is good work. This Nivritti is the fundamental basis of all morality and all religion, and the very perfection of it is entire self-abnegation, readiness to sacrifice mind and body and everything for another being (*CW* 1: 85–86).

For Vivekananda, *pravṛtti* encompasses any actions that make us more selfish and egoistic, while *nivṛtti* encompasses any actions that make us less selfish and egoistic. Both morality and religion are based on the principle of *nivṛtti*, that is, unselfishness or self-abnegation.

Accordingly, Vivekananda defines "virtue"—his translation of the Sanskrit term "*dharma*"—as any quality, act, or thought that makes us less selfish:

> Doing good to others is virtue (Dharma); injuring others is sin. Strength and manliness are virtue; weakness and cowardice are sin. Independence is virtue; dependence is sin. Loving others is virtue; hating others is sin. Faith in God and in one's own Self is virtue; doubt is sin. Knowledge of oneness is virtue; seeing diversity is sin. The different scriptures only show the means of attaining virtue (*CW* 5: 419).

Notice that the first in his list of virtues is "doing good to others." This is, in fact, the cornerstone of Vivekananda's virtue ethics. He explains the rationale behind helping and serving others as follows:

> The main effect of work done for others is to purify ourselves. By means of the constant effort to do good to others we are trying to forget ourselves; this forgetfulness of self is the one great lesson we have to learn in life. Man thinks foolishly that he can make himself happy, and after years of struggle finds out at last that true happiness consists in killing selfishness and that no one can make him happy except himself. Every act of charity, every thought of sympathy, every action of help, every good deed, is taking so much of self-importance away from our little selves and making us think of ourselves as the lowest and the least, and, therefore, it is all good (*CW* 1: 84).

By performing virtuous actions, we gradually become less and less selfish and more and more pure. It is important to note that this passage should be understood in the broader context of his Practical Vedānta. According to Vivekananda, we should do good to others in a worshipful spirit by serving them as so many manifestations of God. Hence, the best way to cultivate the virtues of helping, and sympathizing with, others is to strive always to see God in everyone.

Vivekananda explains how virtuous actions lead to the formation of a virtuous character by drawing upon Yoga psychology:

> Each action is like the pulsations quivering over the surface of the lake. The vibration dies out, and what is left? The Samskâras, the impressions. When a large number of these impressions are left on the mind, they coalesce and become a habit. It is said, "Habit is second nature"; it is first nature also, and the whole nature of man; everything that we are is the result of habit. That gives us consolation, because, if it is only habit, we can make and unmake it at any time. The Samskaras are left by these vibrations passing out of our mind, each one of them leaving its result. Our character is the sum-total of these marks, and according as some particular wave prevails one takes that tone. If good prevails, one becomes good; if wickedness, one becomes wicked; if joyfulness, one becomes happy. The only remedy for bad habits is counter habits; all the bad habits that have left their impressions are to be controlled by good habits. Go on doing good, thinking holy thoughts continuously; that is the only way to suppress base impressions. Never say any man is hopeless, because he only represents a character, a bundle of habits, which can be

checked by new and better ones. Character is repeated habits, and repeated habits alone can reform character (*CW* 1: 207–8).

According to Vivekananda, every action we perform, whether good or bad, leaves a *saṃskāra*, an impression or trace in the unconscious. The Yoga philosopher Patañjali, almost two thousand years before Sigmund Freud, explained in rigorous detail the complex feedback loop between our conscious actions and our unconscious tendencies. Conscious actions lead to the formation of unconscious *saṃskāra*s, which then, in turn, surreptitiously influence our conscious thoughts and actions. As Vivekananda explains, a large number of similar *saṃskāra*s lead to the formation of a "habit" in our conscious life, and our present moral character is nothing but the "bundle" of all our past "habits." Bad habits cumulatively form a bad character, while good habits cumulatively form a good character. Hence, we get the following cycle of causation:
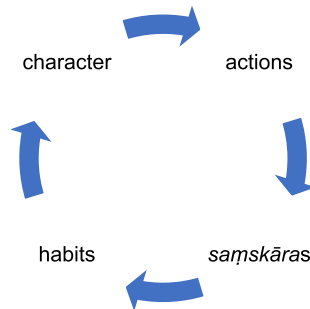
For Vivekananda, then, moral actions flow from a good or virtuous character, while immoral actions flow from a bad character.

However, lest we assume that this ethical picture entails a kind of character fatalism, he reminds us that our characters are malleable, since we can combat bad habits with good habits, thereby gradually reforming our character. Crucially, Vivekananda's account of the process of character formation presupposes the metaphysical doctrines of *karma* and rebirth, which he explains in detail elsewhere. We are born with a certain character in this life because of the habits we formed in our past lives. A scoundrel almost never becomes a saint overnight—nor, in most cases, even in the course of a single life. But the good news is that every single one of us, without exception, will attain moral and spiritual perfection eventually, either in this life or in a future life. As Vivekananda puts it, "No one will be left out. Through various vicissitudes, through various sufferings and enjoyments, each one of them will come out in the end" (*CW* 2: 242).

Vivekananda explains the nature of the reincarnating entity by appealing to the Vedāntic doctrine of the threefold self:

> You must keep it clear in your mind that the Atman is separate from the mind, as well as from the body, and that this Atman goes through birth and death, accompanied by the mind, the Sukshma Sharira. And when the time comes that it has attained to all knowledge and manifested itself to perfection, then

this going from birth to death ceases for it. Then it is at liberty either to keep that mind, the Sukshma Sharira, or to let it go for ever, and remain independent and free throughout all eternity (*CW* 3: 126–27).

According to Vivekananda, when a person dies, it is actually the gross body (*sthūla-śarīra*) that perishes, but the eternal individual soul (*jīvātman*), in association with that person's subtle body (*sūkṣma-śarīra* or *liṅga-śarīra*), survives death and takes on new physical embodiments until it attains spiritual perfection. As a Vedāntin, he holds that the subtle body or mind is actually a subtle form of matter, and hence, is just as insentient as the gross body.[16] Until the individual soul realizes its innately divine nature, it remains associated with the subtle body and inhabits one gross body after another in accordance with its *karma*. Personal identity is, therefore, grounded in the continuity of the individual soul across various physical embodiments.

Vivekananda defends the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth primarily on the basis of three arguments, each of which continues to be defended by contemporary scholars.[17] First, he argues that the theory of rebirth is the best way to "explain this world of inequalities" (*CW* 4: 269). Assuming the existence of a "just and merciful God," why, for instance, are some children born into highly favorable circumstances, while other children are "born to suffer, perhaps all their lives" (*CW* 4: 269)? According to the theory of rebirth, the circumstances in which I find myself are the result of my own thoughts and deeds in previous lives. If we do not accept *karma* and rebirth, it is impossible to reconcile God's perfect love with the existence of human inequalities. The contemporary philosopher Carlo Filice is one of a number of philosophers who has followed Vivekananda in making a "moral case for reincarnation," on the grounds that it is much better equipped than a "single-life scheme" to account for "the initial disparate condition of children" and "the massive nature of undeserved harm" (2006: 45).[18]

Second, Vivekananda argues that many creatures exhibit innate tendencies, qualities, and skills from birth (or shortly thereafter) that could only have been developed in a previous life. For instance, a newly hatched chick "flies in fear to its mother" when it sees an eagle flying toward it—which suggests that the chick has an innate "fear of death" (*CW* 2: 220). Likewise, a newly hatched "duckling" is able to swim, which suggests that it possesses an innate knowledge of swimming. Vivekananda addresses the objection that the chick's fear of death and the duckling's ability to swim can be explained in terms of "instinct" (*CW* 2: 220–21). In response, he argues that instinct itself is nothing but the "degeneration of will" (*CW* 2: 221). In other words, a skill or tendency becomes instinctive only after repeated voluntary action. Hence, the "fear of death, the duckling taking to the

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[16] Vivekananda provides a more precise definition of the *sūkṣma-śarīra* in his "Sankhya and Vedanta" lecture: "The mind [*manas*], the self-consciousness [*buddhi*], the organs [*indriyas*], and the vital forces [*prāṇas*] compose the fine body or sheath, what in Christian philosophy is called the spiritual body of man. It is this body that gets salvation, or punishment, or heaven, that incarnates and reincarnates" (*CW* 2: 456).

[17] See especially Vivekananda's article "Reincarnation" (*CW* 4: 257–71) and his lecture "The Cosmos: The Microcosm" (*CW* 2: 216–25).

[18] See also Almeder 1992: 75–79.

water, and all involuntary actions in the human being which have become instinctive, are the results of past experiences" (*CW* 2: 221). Vivekananda then considers another objection—namely, that innate abilities and tendencies can be explained in terms of "hereditary transmission" (*CW* 2: 221–22). Vivekananda's response to this objection is twofold. He claims that hereditary transmission is perfectly compatible with reincarnation, since the individual soul takes into account hereditary qualities when it chooses the particular body in which it will be reborn. As he puts it, "We, by our past actions, conform ourselves to a certain birth in a certain body, and the only suitable material for that body comes from the parents who have made themselves fit to have that soul as their offspring" (*CW* 2: 222).

Vivekananda also argues that while physical qualities and tendencies may be explained in terms of hereditary transmission, it is not at all clear that "mental experience can be recorded in matters" (*CW* 2: 222). This response was certainly a reasonable one to make in the eighteen-nineties, since the field of genetics only began to develop in the first decade of the twentieth century. Since the nineteen-sixties, behavioral genetics has become a major research field. However, according to critics like Jay Joseph, the attempt to identify the genetic basis of intelligence, physical illnesses, psychological disorders, and personality traits "has turned out to be a spectacular failure" (2014: 154). As Joseph puts it, "sustained worldwide research, carried out during the past three decades, has failed to uncover the genes that behavioral genetic researchers believe underlie IQ, personality, and the major psychiatric disorders" (2014: 154–55). This failure, which has been dubbed the "missing heritability" problem, remains a major topic of debate among scientists.[19] Indeed, Ted Christopher (2017) has taken Vivekananda's lead in arguing that this "missing heritability" problem—coupled with the recent empirical evidence for reincarnation presented by Ian Stevenson and others—lend considerable support to the theory of reincarnation. Other recent scholars have taken Vivekananda's argument from innate knowledge in new directions, arguing that well-documented cases of child prodigies (Filice 2006: 59) and people exhibiting responsive xenoglossia—the ability to speak and understand a language that one has never learned—strengthen the case for reincarnation (Stevenson 1974, 1984; Almeder 1992: 12–21).

Third, Vivekananda claims that anyone can attain knowledge of their past lives through the practice of special yogic disciplines:

> Consciousness is only the surface of the mental ocean, and within its depths are stored up all our experiences. Try and struggle, they would come up and you would be conscious even of your past life.

> This is direct and demonstrative evidence. Verification is the perfect proof of a theory, and here is the challenge thrown to the world by the Rishis. We have discovered the secret by which the very depths of the ocean of memory can be stirred up—try it and you would get a complete reminiscence of your past life (*CW* 1: 9).

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[19] See Krimsy and Gruber 2013.

In his commentary on Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* 3.18, Vivekananda explains the precise yogic method by which we can attain this knowledge. The *sūtra* is "*saṃskār-asākṣātkāraṇāt pūrvajātijñānam*," which he translates as: "By perceiving the impressions, (comes) the knowledge of past life" (*CW* 1: 276). On the basis of his own yogic experience, Vivekananda explains this *sūtra* as follows:

> Each experience that we have, comes in the form of a wave in the Chitta, and this subsides and becomes finer and finer, but is never lost. It remains there in minute form, and if we can bring this wave up again, it becomes memory. So, if the Yogi can make a Samyama on these past impressions in the mind, he will begin to remember all his past lives (*CW* 1: 276).

Since our unconscious contains the latent impressions (*saṃskāra*s) of the things we did and thought not only in this life but also in our past lives, we can gain knowledge of our past lives by concentrating intensely on these *saṃskāra*s as prescribed in the *Yogasūtra*. Indeed, he even claims that "each one of us will get back this memory [of past lives] in that life in which he will become free" (*CW* 2: 219).

Vivekananda's argument that some people can gain knowledge of their past lives continues to be defended in new ways. Ian Stevenson (1966, 1997, 2003) and Jim Tucker (2005, 2013) have carefully investigated numerous cases of children in various countries like India and the US who claim to have spontaneous knowledge of a past life.[20] As Stevenson and Tucker acknowledge, the evidential value of these cases varies widely, but in the strongest cases, the child in question mentioned specific details about her or his past life which were later verified by others and which the child could not have learned by any normal means. For instance, Ryan Hammons, now a teenager in Oklahoma, claimed from a very young age that he was a Hollywood actor and agent in his previous life. Tucker (2013) correctly verified more than fifty of Ryan's claims about his past life as Marty Martyn (1903–64), who played an extra in the Hollywood film *Night After Night*.

The philosopher Derek Parfit, in his classic book *Reasons and Persons* (1984), rejected the doctrine of reincarnation but gave an example of the kind of empirical evidence—which, at the time, he believed did not exist—that *would* make plausible the belief in reincarnation:

> There might, for example, have been evidence supporting the belief in reincarnation. One such piece of evidence might be this. A Japanese woman might claim to remember living a life as a Celtic hunter and warrior in the Bronze Age. On the basis of her apparent memories she might make many predictions which could be checked by archaeologists. Thus she might claim to remember having a bronze bracelet, shaped like two fighting dragons. And she might claim that she remembers burying this bracelet beside some particular megalith, just before the battle in which she was killed.

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[20] Apart from the yogic knowledge of past lives discussed by Vivekananda and cases of spontaneous memories of past lives investigated by Stevenson and Tucker, numerous researchers claim to be able to induce the knowledge of past lives in others through hypnotic regression (Weiss 1988; Moody and Perry 1990).

Archaeologists might now find just such a bracelet buried in this spot, and their instruments might show that the earth had not here been disturbed for at least 2,000 years. This Japanese woman might make many other such predictions, all of which are verified (227).

Arguably, some very recent cases of alleged reincarnation investigated by Tucker—such as that of Ryan Hammons—do meet, or come very close to meeting, these stringent standards for credible evidence of reincarnation set by Parfit. In fact, on the basis of such empirical evidence, Robert Almeder has argued that the belief in reincarnation is now "as empirically well established as the belief in the past existence of dinosaurs" (1992: 81), which is based on the evidence of fossils.

Whitley Kaufman (2005: 19–21) has argued that the moral and educative value of the *karma* doctrine are nullified by the fact that we normally do not have any memory of our previous lives, so we don't have a clue as to what we did in our previous life to deserve our present suffering. He goes so far as to suggest that the *karma* doctrine is fundamentally unjust, since it overlooks altogether "a central moral element of punishment: that the offender where possible be made aware of his crime, that he acknowledge what he has done wrong and repent for it, that he attempt to atone for his crime, and so forth" (Kaufman 2005: 20).

Although Vivekananda, as far as I am aware, does not directly address this moral objection to the *karma* doctrine anywhere, I believe we can develop three lines of response to this objection by drawing upon aspects of his own arguments. First, Kaufman assumes that we can learn and grow from our suffering only if we have specific and detailed knowledge of what we did to deserve our suffering. However, Vivekananda rejects this assumption on the grounds that it is perfectly sufficient for our moral and spiritual growth to have the *general* knowledge that our present suffering is the karmic result of something we did in the past. He puts this point quite forcefully in the following passage:

When you find yourselves suffering, blame yourselves, and try to do better.… Say, "This misery that I am suffering is of my own doing, and that very thing proves that it will have to be undone by me alone." That which I created, I can demolish; that which is created by some one else I shall never be able to destroy. Therefore, stand up, be bold, be strong. Take the whole responsibility on your own shoulders, and know that you are the creator of your own destiny. All the strength and succour you want is within yourselves. Therefore, make your own future. "Let the dead past bury its dead." The infinite future is before you, and you must always remember that each word, thought, and deed, lays up a store for you and that as the bad thoughts and bad works are ready to spring upon you like tigers, so also there is the inspiring hope that the good thoughts and good deeds are ready with the power of a hundred thousand angels to defend you always and for ever (*CW* 2: 225).

According to Vivekananda, belief in the *karma* doctrine spurs us on to moral improvement and growth by inculcating in us the empowering conviction that we are capable of shaping our own destinies, for better or worse. We know that just as our present suffering is the result of our own past misdeeds, we can develop a strong

moral character and progress toward ultimate spiritual fulfilment by having "good thoughts" and performing "good deeds" in the present. Monima Chadha and Nick Trakakis (2007: 536–38), in their response to the "memory problem" raised by Kaufman, echo Vivekananda in arguing that the belief in the *karma* doctrine can foster moral growth even if we do not know what we did in our past that is responsible for our present suffering. As they put it, "the theory of karma…requires us to acknowledge our past mistakes, but not by remembering in detail what we did wrong in some past time and thence repenting for it" (Chadha and Trakakis 2007: 536).

In fact, Vivekananda's biblical reference in the passage quoted in the previous paragraph—namely, "Let the dead past bury its dead," adapted from Matthew 8:22 —suggests a second line of response to Kaufman's memory objection. It is morally beneficial for us *not* to know all the precise misdeeds we committed in our previous lives, since such knowledge could easily lead to overwhelming feelings of guilt, despair, or horror that might hinder our efforts to become better people. Once, in a conversation with his disciple Sister Nivedita, Vivekananda remarked in a similar vein: "Why, one life in the body is like a million years of confinement, and they want to wake up the memory of many lives! Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof!" (Nivedita 2016, 1: 185). Although Nivedita does not supply the context of this statement, Vivekananda seemed to have in mind New Age spiritual movements in the West, which claimed to offer techniques for gaining knowledge of one's past lives. Vivekananda's reference to Jesus's statement in Matthew 6:34—"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof"—suggests that knowledge of all the evil deeds we committed in past lives might very well hinder our moral growth. As Ankur Barua has noted, several twentieth-century Hindu thinkers influenced by Vivekananda— including Swami Paramananda and Swami Satprakashananda—have argued along similar lines: "If our mind was overburdened with memories of past transgressions, we would not be able to keep our attention focussed on the path ahead that leads to moral improvement" (2017: 3).

Third, as I have already noted, Vivekananda holds that every one of us *will* gain memory of our past lives in our final embodiment (*CW* 2: 219). John Hick has made a plausible case that the moral intelligibility of the *karma* doctrine can be secured "so long as, either from time to time (perhaps in the intervals between earthly lives) or at the end of the karmic process, the unity of the whole series of lives is seen in retrospect" (1994: 354).[21] From this standpoint, we can defuse Kaufman's objection to the *karma* doctrine by pointing out that each one of us *will* eventually know exactly what misdeeds we committed in previous lives, even though the vast majority of us do not possess that knowledge at present.

Recall from the previous section that one of Vivekananda's main criticisms of utilitarian ethics is that it fails to provide an adequate answer to the question, "Why should we be moral?". Indeed, he argues that *no* ethical theory can provide a satisfying answer to the "why be moral?" question without what he calls the "supernatural sanction" (*CW* 2: 63). Hence, for Vivekananda, any truly complete ethical theory must be grounded in religion.

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[21] Filice (2006: 56) makes a similar point in a somewhat different context.

According to Vivekananda's Vedāntic virtue ethics, ethical action is a means to the end of spiritual perfection. As he puts it, "The world is a grand moral gymnasium wherein we have all to take exercise so as to become stronger and stronger spiritually" (*CW* 1: 80). Vivekananda's virtue ethics, therefore, presupposes his Vedāntic metaphysics of the self. He repeatedly draws a contrast between the "lower" and the "higher" self, between the "apparent man" and the "real man."[22] We suffer, and remain entrapped in the transmigratory cycle, so long as we identify ourselves with the "rascal ego" (*CW* 8: 31). We attain salvation the moment we realize our true divine nature as "the birthless, deathless, the blissful, the omniscient, the omnipotent, ever-glorious Soul" (*CW* 2: 302).

Why, then, should we be moral? Vivekananda's Vedāntic answer to this question is based on an appeal to a distinctive form of enlightened self-interest. As he puts it, "Why should we do good to the world? Apparently to help the world, but really to help ourselves" (*CW* 1: 75). Even if I manage to commit immoral deeds without getting caught by others, the all-knowing God *is* aware of all my moral and immoral acts and places me in favorable or unfavorable circumstances accordingly. It is, of course, true that moral people do not always prosper and that immoral people do sometimes prosper, but this is only an empirical fact with respect to this particular embodiment. According to Vivekananda, if we take a longer view, we will see that the law of *karma* is inexorable, and hence, that we will definitely reap the consequences of our deeds eventually, if not in this embodiment then in a future embodiment. From this "many lives" standpoint, it turns out to be in our own self-interest to be moral, since moral practice is an indispensable step toward breaking our false identification with the superficial egocentric personality, which lies at the root of all our suffering. Hence, by striving to cultivate a virtuous character, we become purer and less egoistic and thereby make progress toward the goal of achieving perfect spiritual fulfillment by realizing our blissful divine nature. In short, we should be moral because it is in the best interest of our *eternal souls* to behave morally. There is, of course, a natural objection at this point. Why should I prioritize my soul's best interests in the first place, as opposed to pursuing my own best interests as an empirical individual in this particular life? Vivekananda's answer is that if you don't prioritize your soul's best interests in this life, you will end up suffering for your immoral deeds in a future embodiment as a different empirical individual. Rahul should be moral in this life because if he behaves immorally, he will have to suffer for his immoral behavior in his next physical embodiment as Rakesh.

Debates are still raging among contemporary philosophers regarding the "why be moral?" question, including whether it is even a coherent question in the first place, and if so, how best to answer it.[23] Indeed, some philosophers, including Alex D. Steuer (1982) and Yong Huang (2014), have followed Vivekananda in arguing that all nonreligious attempts to answer the "why be moral?" question have failed. As Steuer puts it, "if after many years of trying to provide a sufficient justification for

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[22] See, for instance, his lecture "The Real and the Apparent Man" (*CW* 2: 263–88).

[23] See, for instance, Steuer 1982; Nielsen 1984; Tilley 2009; Huang 2014; and Himmelmann and Louden 2015.

morality the secular ethicists are seen as failing in this task, one can hardly blame religious ethicists for claiming that the connection between religion and morality is a necessary one" (1982: 163). While Steuer defends a Christian theist answer to the "why be moral?" question, Huang defends a Confucian answer. Vivekananda, I have argued, offers a distinctively Vedāntic response to the "why be moral?" question that warrants serious consideration by contemporary philosophers.

Of course, it is precisely the metaphysico-religious dimension of Vivekananda's virtue ethics that most contemporary ethical theorists would not accept. Indeed, it might be tempting to think that Vivekananda's attempt to ground ethics in a Vedāntic metaphysics and soteriology is as quaint and fanciful as Kant's notorious attempt to link his deontological ethics to a religious metaphysics of the noumenal self and a soteriology of a postmortem "Highest Good." There is, however, a key difference between Vivekananda's and Kant's respective attempts to justify what they take to be the religious basis of ethics.

As is well known, Kant's epistemic strictures led him to deny the possibility of either rational or supersensible knowledge of noumenal entities like God and the soul. Accordingly, he could only provide a *practical* justification of religious faith. In *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* ("Religion Within the Bounds of Reason Alone") (1793), Kant argues as follows (*Ak* 6: 1–202).[24] In order to maintain our commitment to leading a moral life, we must believe that our moral behavior will be rewarded in an afterlife in the form of attaining the "Highest Good," an ideal state in which our happiness is exactly proportionate to our moral goodness.[25] However, only a morally perfect, omnipotent, and omniscient God is capable of bringing about the Highest Good. Therefore, we must believe that God exists in order to be able to lead moral lives. By means of this argument, Kant claims that he has established not the "*logical* certainty," but the "*moral* certainty," of God's existence.[26]

Michael Slote is not alone in thinking that Kant's ultimate justification of ethics is couched in "religious/metaphysical terms that are philosophically unacceptable nowadays" (1992: 21n20). Indeed, Kant himself admits that we can never know for sure whether God exists or whether we have immortal souls, so his positing of God and a rosy afterlife invites the charge of wishful thinking.[27]

Vivekananda, however, parts ways with Kant on precisely this issue:

Kant has proved beyond all doubt that we cannot penetrate beyond the tremendous dead wall called reason. But that is the very first idea upon which all Indian thought takes its stand, and dares to seek, and succeeds in finding something higher than reason, where alone the explanation of the present state is to be found (*CW* 1: 199).

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[24] For a good summary of Kant's argument, see sections 3.4–3.6 of Pasternack and Rossi 2014.

[25] See especially A810–11/B838–9 of Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* on "future life." (As is standard in Kant scholarship, the "A" refers to the first [1781] edition of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* [*Ak* 4: 1–252], while the "B" refers to the second [1787] edition of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* [*Ak* 3].)

[26] See A829/B857 of Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*.

[27] For this objection to Kant's ethics, see, for instance, Wood 1992: 404.

Vivekananda's stance toward Kant is dialectical. On the one hand, he agrees with Kant's argument in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* ("Critique of Pure Reason") (1787) that in light of our cognitive limitations, we can never know, by means of reasoning, whether supersensible entities like God and the soul exist (*Ak* 3). On the other hand, Vivekananda criticizes Kant from a Vedāntic standpoint, arguing that Kant was unjustified in ruling out the possibility of *supersensible* knowledge of noumenal entities. Against Kant, he argues that there is a form of knowing that is "higher than reason."

Instead of dogmatically asserting the existence of such supersensuous knowledge, Vivekananda provides a sophisticated argument for the epistemic value of supersensuous perception, on the basis of which he justifies belief in God and an immortal soul. Since I have discussed this argument in detail elsewhere (Medhananda 2022: chapters 5 and 6; Maharaj 2018: Chapter 6), I will only summarize it here. The following passage contains Vivekananda's core argument:

> What is the proof of God? Direct perception, Pratyaksha. The proof of this wall is that I perceive it. God has been perceived that way by thousands before, and will be perceived by all who want to perceive Him. But this perception is no sense-perception at all; it is supersensuous, superconscious.…
> (*CW* 1: 415).

We ordinarily take our sensory perceptions to be proof that what we perceive actually exists. As Vivekananda puts it, "The proof of this wall is that I perceive it." This everyday behavior is justified, he claims, on the basis of a general epistemic principle, which he formulates most explicitly in "Raja-Yoga": "whatever we see and feel, is proof, if there has been nothing to delude the senses" (*CW* 1: 204). Let us call this the "Principle of Perceptual Proof" (hereafter "PP"). Vivekananda also holds that direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) encompasses both sensory perception and supersensuous perception—a view held by Naiyāyikas, Sāṃkhya-Yoga thinkers, and post-Śaṅkara Advaita Vedāntins like Dharmarāja.

In "Raja-Yoga," he further develops this argument by defending another epistemic principle: the testimony of an "Āpta"—a credible person—about her perception of some entity constitutes "proof" for others that that entity exists (*CW* 1: 205). Let us call this the "Principle of Testimonial Proof" (hereafter "TP"). Crucially, he includes credible Yogīs under the category of an *āpta*. Vivekananda argues that both PP and TP are uncontroversial principles of rationality that are indispensable in everyday life. After all, it is a mark of rational behavior to take our sense-perceptions as evidence that what we perceive actually exists. For instance, if I am crossing the street and I see a car hurtling toward me, it is reasonable for me to believe that there is a car hurtling toward me, and therefore, to get out of its way. Likewise, it is equally rational for us to believe the perceptual testimony of others. For instance, if a person tells me that it is raining outside, it is reasonable for me to believe that it is raining on the basis of this person's testimony, so long as I have no good reason to believe that the person is untrustworthy. According to Vivekananda, if we accept PP and TP, then the "words" of a credible Yogī who claims to have perceived a supersensuous reality such as God or an immortal soul constitute "proof" for others that that supersensuous reality exists.

Vivekananda's argument for the epistemic value of supersensuous perception proved to be prescient. For the past few decades, prominent philosophers of religion like William Wainwright (1981), Jerome Gellman (1997), and Richard Swinburne (2004: 293–327) have defended versions of Vivekananda's argument. Moreover, contemporary epistemologists like Richard Pryor (2000) and Michael Huemer (2001) have defended epistemic principles of perception and testimony very similar to Vivekananda's PP and TP. Vivekananda helps show us how moral philosophers can draw upon arguments in philosophy of religion and epistemology in order to justify a religious basis for ethics.

We can sum up Vivekananda's Vedāntic virtue ethics as follows. For Vivekananda, the central ethical question is not "What ought I to do?" but "What kind of person ought I to be?" His answer, in short, is that we ought to be someone with a virtuous character, and he defines virtue as any unselfish quality. But why should we strive to be virtuous in the first place? His answer to this question presupposes a Vedāntic metaphysics of a lower and a higher self. Our lower, superficial self is the "rascal ego," the selfish, self-aggrandizing "I". Our higher self is the eternal Divine Soul or Ātman which is our true nature. According to Vivekananda, the cause of all our suffering is our mistaken identification with the lower egoistic self rather than the higher divine Self. Virtuous actions and thoughts, by combatting our selfish tendencies, gradually erode our identification with our lower self, thereby bringing us closer to the salvific realization of our true divine nature, which is the ultimate aim of life.

This summary of Vivekananda's Vedāntic ethics may give the impression that it is not strictly or purely a virtue ethical doctrine, since it also seems to have an important consequentialist dimension: namely, that one should cultivate a virtuous character *in order to* attain ultimate spiritual fulfilment. To clarify why I take Vivekananda to be a virtue ethicist, I think it is helpful to distinguish first-order and second-order questions about morality. At the first-order level, the key question to be answered is: why should I do the morally right thing in a specific instance? At the second-order level, by contrast, the key question is: why should I be moral at all? This second-order question is a metaethical one, as it is asking for a good *nonmoral* reason to be moral in the first place (Nielsen 1984: 82). Vivekananda's answer to this metaethical question is that we should be moral because morality is a means to the end of spiritual fulfilment. This answer to the metaethical "why be moral?" question does not make him a consequentialist, since *any* answer to the "why be moral?" question must, by necessity, appeal to some nonmoral end.

Moreover, I would suggest that Vivekananda's answer to the *first-order* question is not a consequentialist but a virtue ethical one. An example would help clarify this point. Let us suppose that I am standing next to a swimming pool in which a child is drowning, and I know how to swim and can save the child easily without any risk to my own life or health. Our moral intuition is that I should save the child from drowning. But different ethical theories provide different explanations of *why* I should save the child from drowning.[28] A consequentialist would say that I should

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[28] Here I am adapting a helpful example suggested by Hursthouse and Pettigrove (2018) in the introduction to her *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on "Virtue Ethics."

save the child from drowning because doing so would have good consequences. A deontologist would say that I should save the child because doing so would be in conformity with a moral duty such as "Do unto others as you would be done by." By contrast, Vivekananda would say that I should save the child from drowning because doing so would be unselfish. For Vivekananda, whenever we are faced with a situation in which we can act either selfishly or unselfishly, we should always choose to act unselfishly, simply because the virtue of unselfishness or self-abnegation is itself a bedrock value. Of course, consequentialists and deontologists may recommend the cultivation of virtues as well, but they differ from virtue ethicists like Vivekananda in not taking virtues to be foundational (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018). Consequentialists would hold that the cultivation of virtues yields good consequences, while deontologists would hold that the cultivation of virtues is our moral duty.

In the final section of this article, I will make the case that one potential advantage of Vivekananda's Vedāntic virtue ethics is its distinctive response to the problem of moral luck raised by a number of contemporary philosophers.

The Problem of Moral Luck

In 1979 and 1981 respectively, Thomas Nagel and Bernard Williams introduced the problem of moral luck,[29] which Dana Nelkin (2021) has helpfully summarized as follows:

> The problem of moral luck arises because we seem to be committed to the general principle that we are morally assessable only to the extent that what we are assessed for depends on factors under our control (call this the "Control Principle"). At the same time, when it comes to countless particular cases, we morally assess agents for things that depend on factors that are not in their control.

Michael Slote (1992, 1994) has argued that this problem of moral luck points to fatal contradictions and inconsistencies in commonsense morality, which accepts the Control Principle while also holding that we are justified in imputing moral praise or blame to people for actions that were not entirely in their control. His own agent-based virtue ethics, Slote claims, avoids the problem of moral luck because it rejects morality in favor of ethics, thereby dropping the very notions of moral praiseworthiness and blameworthiness in favor of the *ethical* notions of admirability and deplorability. Hence, he claims that "an ethics of virtue can escape the problems and contradictions that common-sense morality gives rise to in connection with the idea of moral luck" (Slote 1992: 117).

Nafsika Athanassoulis (2005) has argued that Slote's virtue-ethical strategy for avoiding the problem of moral luck is not fully convincing. For present purposes, I will focus on two of her criticisms of Slote's position. First, she makes a plausible case that while Slote's virtue ethical theory avoids the problem of moral luck, it is

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[29] See Nagel's "Moral Luck" (1993) and Williams's "Moral Luck" (1993).

still subject to "ethical luck." As she puts it, "a judgement of deplorability for something that was outside the agent's control seems, on the face of it, as [sic] a pretty unfair judgement that retains the tension between ethics and luck if not the tension between morality and luck" (Athanassoulis 2005: 270). Second, and more fundamentally, Athanassoulis argues that Slote's theory is too revisionary, since "there are many cases where we do want to attribute [moral] blame to someone for his voluntary choices" (2005: 270). It seems intuitively plausible to say that Hitler, for instance, was not only deplorable but morally reprehensible for ordering the murder of so many people. Indeed, our entire system of justice—which is based on the idea of meting out punishment to those who commit morally blameworthy actions—would presumably have to be overhauled on Slote's theory.

Slote, we might say, handles the problem of moral luck by preserving luck and dropping morality. Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic virtue ethics, by contrast, handles the moral luck problem in an obverse manner, by *preserving* morality and *eliminating* luck. Let us take Slote's (1992: 120) own example of a psychopathic killer, but modify it slightly for our purposes. We may know of a psychopathic killer who was born with a genetic propensity for murderous behavior and who was beaten and tortured as a child by his parents. Let us stipulate that it was as a result of this genetic tendency, coupled with the physical and emotional abuse he suffered as a child, that this person went on to become a vicious killer. In Nagel's terms, two forms of luck played a major role in leading this person to become a psychopathic killer. The murderous genetic tendency with which this killer was born is an instance of "constitutive luck," since he did not have any control over the genes with which he was born (Nagel 1993: 60). The abuse and torture to which his parents subjected him are an instance of "circumstantial luck," since he didn't choose his parents (Nagel 1993: 60).

Slote, as we have seen, argues that the best way to handle the problems about moral luck raised by Nagel and others is to drop the notion of moral praiseworthiness and blameworthiness altogether. Accordingly, Slote explains how we should feel about the psychopathic killer as follows:

> When we call a dog vicious or claim someone is a vicious killer or psychopath we are clearly evaluating in a non-superficial and important way, but such a negative assessment of what someone or something is deeply like does not commit us to the moral evaluations that land us in such difficulties in connection with luck. The vicious killer may not be able to help being as he is or acting as he does, but in characterizing him as we do, we are expressing a highly negative opinion about him. We are saying that one way he (centrally or deeply) is is a terrible way to be, and the example is a good one, therefore, of the possibility of ethical criticism without moral blame (Slote 1992: 120).

It seems to me, however, that Athanassoulis is right to criticize Slote's approach to this issue. Even if, on Slote's account, the psychopathic killer is not subject to moral luck, he is still subject to *ethical* luck, and it is not clear why we would be justified in deploring him and holding a "highly negative opinion" about him, since he committed murder due to factors that were entirely beyond his control.

Vivekananda's approach to this hypothetical psychopathic killer is totally different from Slote's. Vivekananda would hold that the killer *is* morally blameworthy since neither his genetic makeup nor his childhood circumstances were, in fact, cases of luck. We should recall that his Vedāntic virtue ethics presupposes the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth. Hence, the genetic tendencies and temperament with which we were born—including the psychopathic killer's genetic tendency to commit murder—are the result of our own volitional behavior in past lives. Our behavior in past lives equally determines the circumstances of our present life, including the psychopathic killer's abuse and torture at the hands of his cruel parents. Hence, from Vivekananda's Vedāntic perspective, the psychopathic killer is morally blameworthy, since neither constitutive luck nor circumstantial luck played any role in making him the killer that he is.[30] Arguably, a major advantage of Vivekananda's virtue ethics over Slote's virtue ethical theory is that Vivekananda's approach allows us to retain our everyday practices of moral approval and disapproval, which are also built into our system of justice.

The implications of Vivekananda's approach, however, extend well beyond internecine debates about what form of virtue ethics is most plausible. Moral luck, as Nagel and many others have argued, continues to pose a serious problem for most ethical theories current in the West, and Vivekananda's unique strategy for eliminating moral luck by appealing to the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth deserves to be taken seriously by contemporary philosophers.

Of course, Slote and others would likely ask what justification Vivekananda has for accepting the metaphysical doctrines of *karma* and rebirth in the first place. In the previous section, I summarized Vivekananda's three main arguments in favor of these doctrines and also noted that numerous recent scholars and researchers have defended very similar arguments. The burden is on those who are skeptical of rebirth to refute these arguments.

However, proponents of Vivekananda's position could also go on the offensive by asking contemporary moral philosophers what justification they have for presupposing metaphysical naturalism—a doctrine that is no less controversial than those of *karma* and rebirth. For instance, the problem of moral luck as formulated by Nagel, Williams, and others presupposes a naturalistic worldview according to which a person's genetic makeup, circumstances, and so on are all matters of sheer "luck" rather than, say, facts willed by God or the result of that person's own *karma*. Likewise, most Aristotelian forms of virtue ethical theories—as opposed to, say, Platonistic or Kantian or Vedāntic ones—arguably presuppose a controversial naturalistic understanding of moral goods and values. The fact that metaphysical naturalism is the default assumption among the majority of contemporary moral

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[30] Vivekananda's stance on this issue is complicated by the fact that he denies the existence of free will. As he puts it, "there cannot be any such thing as free will; the very words are a contradiction, because will is what we know, and everything that we know is within our universe, and everything within our universe is moulded by the conditions of space, time, and causation" (*CW* 1: 95–96). Following his *guru* Ramakrishna, Vivekananda advocated theological determinism, the view that God ultimately determines everything we do and think (*CW* 7: 274–75), that "we are but puppets in the Lord's hands" (*CW* 6: 246). In light of his theological determinism, we can say that Vivekananda holds that we are *proximately*, but not *ultimately*, morally responsible for our actions. This qualification does not, however, eliminate the difference between Vivekananda and Slote, who would deny even proximate moral responsibility.

philosophers does not make it any less controversial. As the prominent philosopher of religion Eleonore Stump observes, "for all the unpopularity in secular culture of the notion of an afterlife, no one has given even a remotely plausible argument, let alone a demonstration, to show the falsity of the claim that there is an afterlife in which some human beings are unendingly united to God" (2010: 390). Until someone comes up with a knock-down proof of metaphysical naturalism, it is not clear to me why we should think that ethical theories based on a controversial naturalistic metaphysics are preferable to, or more plausible than, ethical theories grounded in a controversial, but nonetheless philosophically defensible, religious metaphysics.

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on "Virtue Ethics" discusses four forms of virtue ethics: eudaimonist; agent-based and exemplarist; target-centered; and Platonistic (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018). Tellingly, all four of these virtue ethical theories are grounded in Western philosophical paradigms. It is high time for moral philosophers to take seriously the range of virtue ethical theories present in non-Western philosophical traditions. This article has argued, in particular, that Vivekananda's Vedāntic virtue ethics has a number of unique features that distinguish it from all of the mainstream virtue ethical theories currently being discussed. Vivekananda grounds his virtue ethics in a distinctively Vedāntic metaphysics of a higher and lower self as well as the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth. He justifies these controversial metaphysical doctrines by appealing to general epistemic principles of perception and perceptual testimony that continue to be actively discussed by contemporary epistemologists. His Vedāntic virtue ethics also offers innovative and challenging responses to two of the most important problems in contemporary metaethics: the "why be moral?" question and the problem of moral luck. For all these reasons, contemporary moral philosophers cannot afford to ignore Vivekananda's ethical views.

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