Introduction

Swami Medhananda

> What am I? Asiatic, European, or American? I feel a curious medley of personalities in me.
>
> —Swami Vivekananda (1897; *CW* 8: 395)[1]

For too long, scholars have tended to view colonial Indian philosophers as "Neo-Hindus" or "Neo-Vedāntins," whose work was shaped to a large extent by Western sources. Some of these scholars have gone so far as to claim that the work of colonial Indian thinkers is, accordingly, "inauthentic," philosophically deficient, or of merely historical interest.[2]

    A growing number of scholars, however, have begun to challenge this reductive "Neo-Hindu" approach, arguing that it not only overlooks the various indigenous Indian sources upon which colonial Indian thinkers drew but also misrepresents the subtle dynamics of their creative, critico-constructive engagement with both Western and Indian thought.[3] These scholars have defended a more fruitful and nuanced "cosmopolitan" approach to colonial Indian thinkers. As Nalini Bhushan and Jay L. Garfield (2017) put it, colonial philosophers such as Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, and K. C. Bhattacharyya exhibited a distinctively "cosmopolitan consciousness"—an intensely creative and agential philosophical

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

[2] See, for instance, Hacker 1995: 229–336; Raghuramaraju 2006: 7–8; and Daya Krishna 2006 (personal communication cited in Bhushan and Garfield 2017: 10–11).

[3] See Hatcher 2004: 201–3; Bhushan and Garfield 2017; Ganeri 2017; Madaio 2017; Barua 2020; Maharaj 2020; and Medhananda 2020: 3–6.

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intelligence that thrived on engaging a global intellectual community. Adopting this new cosmopolitan hermeneutic approach, scholars have begun to make a compelling case that the work of colonial Indian philosophers contains a plethora of ideas, insights, and arguments that contemporary philosophers—working in mainstreams fields such as metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of religion—cannot afford to ignore.

In the case of Vivekananda, scholars have recently begun to reassess his thought and legacy from a cosmopolitan perspective. James Madaio (2017) has deftly traced the prevalent "Neo-Vedāntic" interpretation of Vivekananda—adopted by Paul Hacker and his followers—to a problematic tendency to equate Advaita Vedānta with Śaṅkara's Advaita philosophy, as expounded in his Sanskrit commentaries on the Upaniṣads, *Bhagavadgītā*, and *Brahmasūtra*. Madaio shows, however, that Vivekananda drew upon not only Śaṅkara's Sanskrit commentaries, but also a wide range of later Advaitic texts, including *Jīvanmuktiviveka*, *Pañcadaśī*, *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, and *Aparokṣānubhūti*. From this broader perspective, Vivekananda can be seen as a sophisticated "cosmopolitan theologian," who was rooted in a broadly Advaitic tradition but who was also able to question or revise inherited ideas and to bring Vedāntic ideas into creative and fruitful dialogue with contemporary Western thought currents (Madaio 2017: 9–10).

Other scholars have shown that Vivekananda innovatively reinterpreted the traditional Advaitic doctrine of *māyā* in a realist manner (Bhushan and Garfield 2017: 217–23; Medhananda 2022: 43–68). In Vivekananda's hands, *māyā* is not a principle of "illusion" but a doctrine that combines the phenomenological thesis that this world is "full of contradictions" with the metaphysical thesis that the world is fully real but dependent on Brahman for its existence. Swami Medhananda's recently published book, *Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic Cosmopolitanism* (2022), offers a sustained interpretation of Vivekananda as an innovative cosmopolitan thinker whose Vedāntic positions make valuable contributions to contemporary philosophical debates concerning consciousness, spiritual experience, arguments for God's existence, and the interrelation of faith and reason.

The six contributors to this special issue explore numerous other dimensions of Vivekananda's cosmopolitan thought that have not yet received the sustained attention they deserve. In "Religions as Yogas: How Reflection on Swami Vivekananda's Theology of Religions Can Clarify the Threefold Model of Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism," Jeffery D. Long aims to shed new light on Vivekananda's theology of world religions. After identifying the strengths and limitations of Alan Race's well-known threefold typology of views on religious diversity, Long explores how Vivekananda's doctrine of the harmony of religions can help nuance and expand Race's typology. Long argues for a differentiation of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism on three levels: the level of truth, the level of salvation, and the level of social interaction. Vivekananda's theology of religions, Long claims, is inclusivist with regard to truth and pluralistic with regard to both salvation and social interaction. He thereby challenges and problematizes the mainstream scholarly interpretation of Vivekananda as an Advaitic "hierarchical inclusivist."

In "Hindu-Christian Dialogue on the Afterlife: Swami Vivekananda, Modern Advaita Vedānta, and Roman Catholic Eschatology," Michael Stoeber provides an in-depth comparative discussion of afterlife beliefs in Roman Catholic theology and modern Advaita Vedānta, with a particular focus on the thought of Vivekananda. At the level of philosophical anthropology, both Advaita Vedānta and Roman Catholicism adopt a tripartite conception of the person. According to Roman Catholic theology, the person is constituted by a physical body, spirit, and soul, which correspond in certain (but not all) respects to the physical body, the subtle body, and the divine Ātman in Advaita Vedānta. Stoeber also fruitfully compares Catholic conceptions of purgatory with Vedāntic notions of temporary heavens and hells. Stoeber then provocatively argues that the existence of extreme suffering poses a problem not only for the Catholic doctrine of eternal damnation but also for retributive conceptions of *karma* and rebirth in Vedāntic thought. At the same time, however, he identifies parallels between Vedāntic soul-making paradigms of rebirth and Catholic ideas of sanctifying purgatory.

In "From Good to God: Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic Virtue Ethics," Swami Medhananda argues that Vivekananda developed a Vedāntic form of virtue ethics that deserves a prominent place in contemporary philosophical discussions. Vivekananda motivated his own virtue ethical theory by identifying problems with two rival ethical theories—namely, utilitarian ethical theories and ethical theories based on "objective duty," which bear a resemblance to deontological theories. Medhananda then outlines the main features of Vivekananda's Vedāntic virtue ethics and his arguments in support of it. According to Vivekananda, moral actions flow from a good or virtuous character, while immoral actions flow from a bad character. Moreover, whatever we do and think generates unconscious tendencies (*saṃskāra*s), which in turn coalesce into habits, which gradually shape our character. Medhananda concludes his article by arguing that Vivekananda's approach to the problem of moral luck—which has been widely discussed in contemporary ethics—has certain philosophical advantages over the approach of the contemporary philosopher Michael Slote.

In "A Religion 'Based Upon Principles, and Not Upon Persons': The Heart of the 'Strategic Fit' of Swami Vivekananda's Promotion of Vedānta?," Gwilym Beckerlegge adopts a novel methodology—namely, the SWOT matrix used in the study of effectiveness of organizations—for explaining the positive reception of Vivekananda's message during his visits to the United States and England. According to Beckerlegge, Vivekananda maximized the "strategic fit" of his teachings by addressing from a Vedāntic standpoint some of the most important Christian theological concerns of the late nineteenth century. Instead of promoting his *guru* Ramakrishna as a divine "competitor" to Jesus, Vivekananda emphasized "principles" over "persons" and drew upon Advaita Vedānta to highlight the "most intensely impersonal" nature of Vedānta.

In "Living in the World by Dying to the Self: Swami Vivekananda's Modernist Reconfigurations of a Premodern Vedāntic Dialectic," Ankur Barua explores the dialectic in Vivekananda's thought between self-denial and social activism. According to Vivekananda, we can act fearlessly in the world only by realizing our true nature as the divine Self (*ātman*), which is ever pure and free. When we see

the one Self in all beings, we can be actively engaged in the world without getting ensnared by selfish impulses and worldly attachments. Arguing against the "Neo-Vedāntic" thesis that Vivekananda's ethical activism was shaped primarily by Western thought currents, Barua traces Vivekananda's Vedāntic philosophy of social activism to premodern Vedāntic ideas that were mediated to him by his *guru* Ramakrishna.

In "Swami Vivekananda and Knowledge as the One Final Goal of Humankind," Christopher Framarin provides an analytical examination of Vivekananda's pregnant claim in "Karma-Yoga" that knowledge is the one final goal of humanity. The interpretive challenge is to reconcile this claim with Vivekananda's claims in numerous other passages that spiritual pleasure, freedom, and *mokṣa* are also final goals of humanity. Notably, Framarin resists the temptation—to which many other scholars have succumbed—to reconcile all these claims by arguing that Vivekananda, as a follower of Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta, simply *equated* the states of knowledge, pleasure, freedom, and liberation. Noting that several recent scholars have identified significant philosophical differences between Vivekananda and Śaṅkara, Framarin explores alternative arguments in support of the identity of spiritual knowledge, spiritual pleasure, and spiritual freedom that do not elide the distinctions among these states.

It is hoped that these six contributions will help pave the way for future work on the cosmopolitan thought of Swami Vivekananda and encourage scholars to eschew the "Neo-Vedāntic" hermeneutic paradigm in favor of more nuanced and fruitful approaches to colonial Indian philosophers that do justice to the originality, creativity, and sophistication of their thought.

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