



Swami Vivekananda and Knowledge as the One Final Goal of Humankind

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Abstract In the opening lines of his essay “Karma-Yoga,” Swami Vivekananda claims that knowledge is the one goal of humankind. It is clear from the context of this claim that Vivekananda means to count knowledge—and spiritual knowledge in particular—as a *final* goal of humankind. His claim, then, is that spiritual knowledge is the *one final goal* of humankind. This claim seems inconsistent, however, with claims in other passages that count spiritual pleasure, freedom, and *mokṣa* itself as additional final goals. One interpretive strategy is to invoke Vivekananda’s kinship with Śāṅkara and count these states as ultimately identical. This interpretive strategy is problematic, however, for at least two reasons. First, several scholars advance convincing arguments against the view that Vivekananda’s nondualism is aligned with Śāṅkara. Second, reading Vivekananda as a nondualist in this context precludes further analysis that might be philosophically productive. The claim that spiritual knowledge is spiritual pleasure, for example, might be analyzed in terms of a part-whole relation. Part of spiritual knowledge is knowledge of the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman*. To know the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman* is to experience it, and to experience the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman* is to attain spiritual pleasure. Part of spiritual knowledge, then, is spiritual pleasure. Other arguments might be advanced in support of the identity of spiritual knowledge and spiritual freedom as well, without simply assuming that Vivekananda disregards distinctions among these states.

Keywords Swami Vivekananda · spiritual knowledge · nondualism · Advaita

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Introduction

In the opening lines of his essay “Karma-Yoga,” Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) claims that knowledge is the one goal of humankind. This claim can be interpreted in different ways. The plausibility of these interpretations, in turn, depends on the plausibility of certain assumptions about Vivekananda’s broader philosophy, and his relationship to Śāṅkara and Advaita Vedānta in particular.

It might seem initially plausible, for example, to take the claim that knowledge is the one goal of humankind to mean that knowledge is the one essential means to *mokṣa*. This reading might seem to contradict Vivekananda’s claim that all four *yogas*—*karma yoga*, *bhakti yoga*, *jñāna yoga*, and *rāja yoga*—are direct means to *mokṣa*. Those who assume that knowledge plays the same role in Vivekananda’s soteriology as it does in Śāṅkara’s, however might simply insist—as Anantanand Rambachan (1994) does—that Vivekananda means to say that the four *yogas* are direct means to the knowledge that liberates.

It is clear from the original context of this claim, however, that Vivekananda means to count knowledge—and spiritual knowledge in particular—as a *final* goal of humankind. Since spiritual knowledge is an essential constituent of the liberated state, this view seems plausible.

Vivekananda’s claim that spiritual knowledge is the *only* final goal of humankind, however, is more controversial. If spiritual knowledge is a final goal because it is an essential constituent of *mokṣa*, then presumably other constituents of *mokṣa*—like spiritual pleasure and spiritual freedom—are also final goals of humankind. Additionally, *mokṣa* itself must be counted as a final goal.

Here, again, it might be tempting to invoke Vivekananda’s kinship with Śāṅkara. Vivekananda repeatedly equates spiritual knowledge, spiritual pleasure, spiritual freedom, and *mokṣa*. If Vivekananda is a nondualist aligned with Śāṅkara—as several authors assume—then he claims that all distinctions are finally illusory. If all distinctions are illusory, then spiritual knowledge, spiritual pleasure, spiritual freedom, and *mokṣa* are identical. If all these final goals of humankind are identical, then knowledge is indeed the only final goal of humankind.

This interpretive strategy is problematic, however, for at least two reasons. First, several scholars advance convincing arguments against the view that Vivekananda’s nondualism is aligned with Śāṅkara. Second, reading Vivekananda as a nondualist in this context precludes further analysis that might be philosophically productive.

The claim that spiritual knowledge is spiritual pleasure, for example, might be analyzed in terms of a part-whole relation. Part of spiritual knowledge is knowledge of the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman*. To know the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman* is to experience it, and to experience the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman* is to attain spiritual pleasure. Part of spiritual knowledge, then, is spiritual pleasure. Other arguments might be advanced in support of the identity of spiritual knowledge and spiritual freedom as well—without simply assuming that Vivekananda disregards distinctions among these states.

Two Interpretations of the Value of Knowledge

Early in his essay “Karma-Yoga,” Vivekananda says, “the goal of mankind is knowledge. That is the one ideal placed before us by Eastern philosophy” (*CW* 1: 29).¹ The first line of this quotation states that human beings ought to pursue the goal of knowledge.² The second line states that knowledge is unique in this regard. Taken together, the two lines seem to say that knowledge is the only goal of humankind.

This claim might be read in at least two ways. The instrumental reading takes Vivekananda to say that knowledge is the *only intermediate* goal of humankind. On this reading, knowledge should be pursued as an intermediate goal, because it is an essential means to the final goal of *mokṣa*. The supreme instrumental value of knowledge derives from the supreme intrinsic value of *mokṣa*.³

The intrinsic reading, in contrast, takes Vivekananda to say that knowledge is the *only final* goal of humankind. On this reading, knowledge should be pursued for its own sake. Moreover, since knowledge is the *only* final goal of humankind, nothing other than knowledge is a final goal of humankind. Consequently, the value of knowledge is entirely intrinsic. Its value does not derive from the intrinsic value of any further, final end to which it is a means, just because there are no other further, final ends.

The instrumental reading might seem more plausible at the outset. First, Vivekananda clearly counts liberation as the highest goal that might be achieved. “What is the goal?” he asks. “The goal of the soul among all the different sects in India seems to be the same. There is one idea with all, and that is liberation” (*CW* 6: 22).⁴ Having outlined the procedures and outcomes of a particular breathing practice, Vivekananda quickly reminds the reader that such techniques “are only the means; the aim, the end, the goal, of all this training is liberation of the soul” (*CW* 1: 140).

Second, it seems obvious that spiritual knowledge, in particular—knowledge of God, the self, and so on—plays an essential role in the realization of *mokṣa*. “Find out the truth about God and about your own soul,” Vivekananda enjoins, “and thus attain to liberation” (*CW* 4: 232). “Without Jnana (knowledge),” he warns, “liberation cannot be ours” (*CW* 8: 3).

¹ Vivekananda makes similar claims at *CW* 3: 20 and elsewhere. In some passages, he references the knowledge—or realization—of God and self, in particular. “The knowledge of Brahman is the one goal of all beings” (*CW* 7: 192). “Realising my own real nature is the one goal of my life” (*CW* 5: 253). Throughout this article, citations to Vivekananda’s *Complete Works* follow this format: *CW* volume number: page number.

² Throughout this article, I treat the claim that “the goal of mankind is knowledge” as a normative claim. It is a claim about what people ought to pursue, rather than what people in fact pursue. The claim here is that knowledge is a *legitimate* or *justified* goal of humankind.

³ More generally, to say that something has instrumental (or extrinsic) value is to say that it has value as a means to further ends. To say that something has intrinsic value is to say that it has value as an end, independent of the value of the further ends to which it is a means.

⁴ Compare *CW* 1: 122.

These quotations imply that spiritual knowledge is both a necessary and sufficient condition of *mokṣa*. If spiritual knowledge is a necessary and sufficient condition of *mokṣa*, however, then spiritual knowledge is the only means to *mokṣa*. And if spiritual knowledge is the only means to *mokṣa*, then it is the only intermediate goal in this sense.

A preliminary objection to the instrumental reading notes that Vivekananda counts the four *yogas*—*karma yoga*, *bhakti yoga*, *jñāna yoga*, and *rāja yoga*—as means to *mokṣa*. “Freedom of the soul,” he says, “is the goal of all Yogas, and each one equally leads to the same result” (*CW* 1: 55). If the four *yogas* are means to *mokṣa*, however, then knowledge is not the only means to *mokṣa*.

This initial problem might be solved, however, by analyzing the four *yogas* as direct means to liberating knowledge. Rambachan understands Vivekananda in this way: “for the attainment of knowledge as he conceives it, Vivekananda proposes the four *yogas* of *karma*, *bhakti*, *jñāna*, and *rāja*...It is important to note that Vivekananda sees each one of these methods as directly and independently capable of leading to knowledge” (1994: 65).

If the four *yogas* lead to liberation by means of knowledge, then the four *yogas* might only be indirect means to liberation. Knowledge, in contrast, is a direct means to liberation.⁵ The claim that knowledge is the only intermediate goal, then, might be elaborated as the claim that knowledge is the only direct means to liberation. Since knowledge is the only direct means to liberation, knowledge is the one *intermediate* goal of the four *yogas* that Vivekananda takes to contribute to the attainment of liberation.

The initial plausibility of the instrumental reading stands in contrast to the initial implausibility of the intrinsic reading. First, the intrinsic reading implies that *mokṣa* is not a final goal of humankind. Again, if knowledge is the only final goal, then nothing other than knowledge is a final goal. And if nothing other than knowledge is a final goal, then *mokṣa* is not a final goal of humankind. As the quotations I just mentioned—and many others—indicate, however, Vivekananda counts *mokṣa* as the final goal of humankind.

The view also implies either that *mokṣa* has no value at all or that the value of *mokṣa* derives entirely from the intrinsic value of spiritual knowledge. The claim that *mokṣa* has no value at all should seem absurd. Again, Vivekananda explicitly counts *mokṣa* as the final, highest goal of humankind. There is also little evidence, however, that Vivekananda counts *mokṣa* as a means to knowledge. Again, he

⁵ Rambachan is almost perfectly ambiguous on an important matter here. On the one hand, he argues that the elimination of ignorance, in particular, is the essential means to liberation. “For Vivekananda... knowledge alone can confer freedom” (1994: 64). This language of “conferring” freedom implies that knowledge is a means to liberation. In the same passage, he describes the relevant knowledge as the “knowledge that frees” (64). This too implies that he takes there to be an instrumental relation between knowledge and liberation. A person attains knowledge, and this knowledge causes freedom. This suggests that he means to explain the value of knowledge in terms of its instrumental value. On the other hand, Rambachan claims that “knowledge alone is freedom” (63) and “knowledge [is] equivalent to freedom” (65). This suggests that he takes knowledge and liberation to be the same state. If knowledge and liberation are the same state, however, then presumably he assigns intrinsic value to knowledge. (In section four (“Knowledge as a Constituent of *Mokṣa*”) below, I argue for this on the grounds that knowledge is a constituent of *mokṣa*.) Which view Rambachan accepts, however, is crucial to whether he counts knowledge as an intermediate or final goal. If he counts knowledge as intrinsically valuable, then presumably he counts it as a final goal of humankind.

seems to cite knowledge as a condition of *mokṣa*, rather than vice versa. If knowledge is a necessary and sufficient condition of *mokṣa*, then it cannot be that a person attains *mokṣa* before acquiring the relevant knowledge.

All of this suggests that the instrumental reading of the claim that knowledge is the one goal of humankind is more plausible than the intrinsic reading. So initially it seems that Vivekananda means to say that knowledge is the one intermediate goal of humankind, because it is the only direct means to *mokṣa*. For this reason, he enjoins the single-minded pursuit of knowledge.

Swami Vivekananda's Argument for Knowledge as the Final Goal

While the instrumental reading of the claim that knowledge is the only goal of humankind initially seems more plausible than the intrinsic reading, Vivekananda's own argument for this claim implies that he counts knowledge as the only *final* goal of humankind. In the pages that follow the initial claim, Vivekananda considers the relationship between pleasure and knowledge. He argues that the value of pleasure derives from the value of knowledge, rather than vice versa.

Pleasure is not the goal of man, but knowledge. Pleasure and happiness come to an end. It is a mistake to suppose that pleasure is the goal. After a time man finds that it is not happiness, but knowledge, towards which he is going, and that both pleasure and pain are great teachers, and that he learns as much from evil as from good (*CW* 1: 27).

In the first lines of this quotation, Vivekananda claims that pleasure is not especially valuable, because it is impermanent.⁶ He concludes that pleasure is not a goal of humankind.⁷ This first part of his argument can be outlined as follows:

(1)

Premise: Pleasure is impermanent.

Premise: If pleasure is impermanent, then pleasure is not especially important.

Premise: If pleasure is not especially important, then pleasure is not a goal of humankind.⁸

Conclusion: So pleasure is not a goal of humankind.

⁶ Compare *CW* 2: 260.

⁷ This claim too is normative. People ought not see pleasure as a goal of humankind, even though they in fact do. See footnote 2 above.

⁸ It is worth pointing out that this part of Vivekananda's argument assumes that a final goal must be especially important—and perhaps among the most important goals that a person might pursue. This might be true, but it isn't obviously true. In ordinary life, it doesn't seem odd or problematic that a person would pursue some small pleasure, like the pleasure of a leisurely morning walk, for example, for its own sake. Even if this pleasure is not especially important, this does not imply that the person must walk for the sake of some further end (like longevity)—or should not walk at all. This consideration has made me wonder whether Vivekananda does not mean to qualify the word "goal" in the first quotation of the article with "highest" rather than "final." The subsequent part of the passage that discusses pleasure, however, explicitly focuses on the means-end relationship between pleasure and knowledge. This suggests that Vivekananda has the distinction between intermediate and final goals in mind after all.

In the second half of the passage, Vivekananda claims that pleasure—and pain—means to knowledge,⁹ rather than vice versa.¹⁰ This supports the conclusion—stated in the first line of the quotation—that knowledge, rather than pleasure, is the goal of humankind. So this second portion of the argument reads:

(2)

Premise: Pleasure is a means to knowledge.

Premise: If pleasure is a means to knowledge, then knowledge is the goal of humankind.

Conclusion: So knowledge is the goal of humankind.¹¹

This second part of the argument clarifies the first. In the first lines of the passage, Vivekananda does not mean to deny that pleasure might be a valuable goal. On the contrary, since pleasure might be a means to knowledge, pleasure can be seen as an *intermediate* goal, the attainment of which facilitates the acquisition of knowledge. Instead, Vivekananda means to deny that pleasure is a *final* goal of humankind.

This, of course, is just the view that Vivekananda repeatedly attributes to the “utilitarian,” whom he characterizes as a hedonistic consequentialist.¹² “On the utilitarian ground,” he says, “it is good for men to seek for pleasure” (*CW* 2: 170).¹³ The utilitarian claims that the final goal of humankind is pleasure and that nothing other than pleasure is finally valuable. Hence, the person who cites “utilitarian grounds as the basis for morality” adopts the single moral principle of “procuring the greatest amount of happiness to the greatest number” of people (*CW* 1: 182).

On the utilitarian view, knowledge—like everything other than pleasure—is only valuable as a means to the final goal of pleasure. So the view that Vivekananda critiques in this passage analyzes knowledge as an intermediate goal—as a means to pleasure—just as the instrumental reading of Vivekananda’s own claim analyzes knowledge as an intermediate goal—as a means to *mokṣa*.

Vivekananda’s claim that “pleasure is not the goal of man,” then, amounts to the claim that pleasure is not the final goal of humankind. If this is the sense of the first words of this passage, then the sense of the full sentence is: “pleasure is not the [final] goal of man, but knowledge [is].” Knowledge, not pleasure, is the final goal

⁹ This claim too is normative. People *ought to* understand pleasure and pain as means to knowledge, rather than vice versa.

¹⁰ Vivekananda immediately notes, however, that pleasure is not even an especially good means to knowledge: “I dare say, in the vast majority of cases, it would be found that it was misery that taught more than happiness, it was poverty that taught more than wealth, it was blows that brought out their inner fire more than praise” (*CW* 1: 27). Here, he makes the seemingly straightforward point that pain often does more to cultivate the personal character of a person than pleasure does. This might seem true in any context, but it seems especially plausible when the relevant knowledge includes the knowledge that the world is more painful than pleasurable, that pleasure is fleeting, and so on.

¹¹ Below, I offer a supplement to this portion of the argument that might make it more convincing. Please see my explanation of subsection (4) below.

¹² See Swami Medhananda’s article “From Good to God: Swami Vivekananda’s Vedāntic Virtue Ethics” in this volume for a careful analysis of Vivekananda’s arguments against utilitarianism.

¹³ Compare *CW* 2: 66.

of humankind. This, of course, is just the sense of the intrinsic reading of the opening passage.

With this clarification in place, the combined arguments from the passage can be outlined as:

(3)

Premise: Pleasure is impermanent.

Premise: If pleasure is impermanent, then pleasure is not especially important.

Premise: If pleasure is not especially important, then pleasure is not a final goal of humankind.

Conclusion: So pleasure is not a final goal of humankind.

Premise: Pleasure is a means to knowledge.

Premise: If pleasure is a means to knowledge, then knowledge is a final goal of humankind.

Conclusion: So knowledge is a final goal of humankind.

Vivekananda's argument for the stronger claim that knowledge is the *one* final goal of humankind is not explicit in this passage, but it might be inferred from what he does say. I mentioned already that Vivekananda directs his argument against the utilitarian. And while the word "utilitarian" might bring up thoughts of (stuffy) academic philosophers, in particular, this should not conceal its widespread appeal.

Indeed, Vivekananda describes utilitarianism as the dominant worldview. Most human beings, and the social institutions they construct, count pleasure as the one and only final goal of humankind—to the exclusion of religious practices like the four *yogas*. "All the sciences," he says,

are for this one end, to bring happiness to humanity; and that which brings the larger amount of happiness, man takes and gives up that which brings a lesser amount of happiness....The ideal of happiness, that which brings man more happiness, is of greater utility to him than these higher things (*CW* 3: 19).

So if Vivekananda's argument in this passage succeeds, then it refutes the most widely held account of the final goal of humankind (namely, utilitarianism). It also establishes that knowledge is a final goal of humankind. This, by itself, does not imply that knowledge is the only final goal. It might be that something other than pleasure—and other than knowledge—is intrinsically valuable. The utilitarian, however, has already abandoned the only other final goal they found plausible (namely, pleasure). Once they have come this far, there is little reason to think they will resist the stronger conclusion that knowledge is the only final end.

The argument might also convince the value pluralist, who allows that there are multiple final goals of humankind but counts pleasure as the most obvious among them. If it turns out that even the most plausible candidate for a final goal (pleasure) is not a final goal after all, then there might be little reason to think that anything—other than knowledge—is a final goal of humankind. This final part of the argument can be outlined to read:

(4)

Premise: Pleasure is not a final goal of humankind. (Conclusion of 1)

Premise: Knowledge is a final goal of humankind. (Conclusion of 2)

Premise: If pleasure is not a final goal of humankind, then nothing other than knowledge is a final goal of humankind.

Conclusion: So nothing—other than knowledge—is a final goal of humankind.

When this final portion of the argument is added to the first two, Vivekananda's full argument for the claim that knowledge is the only final goal of humankind reads:

(5)

Premise: Pleasure is impermanent.

Premise: If pleasure is impermanent, then pleasure is not especially important.

Premise: If pleasure is not especially important, then pleasure is not a final goal of humankind.

Conclusion: So pleasure is not a final goal of humankind.

Premise: Pleasure is a means to knowledge.

Premise: If pleasure is a means to knowledge, then knowledge is a final goal of humankind.

Conclusion: So knowledge is a final goal of humankind.

Premise: If pleasure is not a final goal of humankind, then nothing—other than knowledge—is a final goal of humankind.

Conclusion: So nothing—other than knowledge—is a final goal of humankind.

If knowledge is a final goal of humankind, then knowledge ought to be pursued for its own sake. If knowledge ought to be pursued for its own sake, then knowledge has intrinsic value. Knowledge has value as an end, independent of the value of the further ends to which it is a means.

If knowledge is the only final goal of humankind, then only knowledge ought to be pursued for its own sake. Only knowledge has value as an end, independent of the further ends to which it is a means. So when Vivekananda says, "the goal of mankind is knowledge. That is the one ideal placed before us by Eastern philosophy," he means to say that knowledge is the one and only final goal of humankind. Only knowledge has intrinsic value.

The Permanence of Knowledge

Vivekananda's argument against the intrinsic value of pleasure depends on the claim that pleasure is impermanent. The first part of his argument, again, states that since pleasure is impermanent, pleasure cannot be a final goal of humankind.

If knowledge, in contrast, is a final goal of humankind, then presumably knowledge is permanent. If it isn't permanent, then knowledge is no more plausible a candidate for the final goal of humankind than pleasure is. If knowledge is

impermanent, then the first part of Vivekananda's argument can be adapted to knowledge as well.¹⁴

The claim that knowledge is permanent, however, is only plausible as a claim about what Vivekananda calls "spiritual" as opposed to "secular" knowledge (*CW* 1: 28).¹⁵ As long as knowledge entails true belief, knowledge cannot be false. This means that a person who knows, for example, that a marathon is 42.195 kilometers long, cannot be wrong that a marathon is 42.195 kilometers long.

This doesn't entail, however, that their knowledge is permanent. They might later abandon their belief that a marathon is 42.195 kilometers long as a result of being convinced by inaccurate testimony. Or perhaps, at some time in the future, the person simply forgets the distance of the marathon. Maybe the distance of the marathon is eventually changed to 42 kilometers, for the sake of making it a round number. Then this person would no longer know that a marathon is 42.195 kilometers.

This suggests that knowledge of the ordinary, sensory world is impermanent enough. If the impermanence of something implies that it is not the final goal of humankind, however—as Vivekananda implies in part (1) of the argument above—then secular knowledge cannot be the final goal of humankind.

Spiritual knowledge, in contrast, is often described in terms of a deep, unshakeable conviction that alters an agent's most basic conception of reality to such an extent that it cannot be forgotten—or even doubted. As Swami Medhananda points out, Vivekananda counts those spiritual experiences that result in spiritual knowledge as "self-authenticating." For Vivekananda, "the experience itself has built into it an infallible certitude of its own veridicality" (2022: 184).

Medhananda (2022: 184) cites the following passage in support: "He [God] reveals Himself to the pure heart...then and then only all the crookedness of the heart is made straight. Then all doubt ceases....He must see Him, and that alone can destroy all doubts" (*CW* 1: 13). Once a person comes to know God, the self, and so on, there is no risk that they will lose this knowledge. Nor is there a risk that this knowledge will cease as a result of a change in its object. God and the self, after all, are eternal, unchanging entities.

So the knowledge that Vivekananda considers permanent is spiritual knowledge—knowledge of god, the self, and so on. He says, "when knowledge itself comes, all illusions vanish, and man finds it is all nothing but Atman. I am that One Existence. This is the last conclusion" (*CW* 3: 21). This last conclusion, in turn, is permanent.

In his "Bhakti-Yoga" lectures, Vivekananda compares the value of secular and spiritual knowledge. He says, "the gift of spirituality and spiritual knowledge is the highest....The next gift is secular knowledge, as it opens the eyes of human beings

¹⁴ This version of the argument would read:

Premise: Knowledge is impermanent.

Premise: If knowledge is impermanent, then knowledge is not especially important.

Premise: If knowledge is not especially important, then knowledge is not a goal of humankind.

Conclusion: So knowledge is not a goal of humankind.

¹⁵ Vivekananda uses this terminology in several places (*CW* 3: 4, 3: 133, 4: 433–34, and so on). In "Raja-Yoga," Vivekananda describes the distinction in terms of "metaphysical and transcendental knowledge" (*CW* 1: 183).

towards that spiritual knowledge” (*CW* 5: 267–68). Here Vivekananda says explicitly that the value of secular knowledge derives from the value of spiritual knowledge. Secular knowledge is only valuable insofar as it contributes to the attainment of spiritual knowledge. Secular knowledge is a means to the final goal of spiritual knowledge. With this distinction in mind, Vivekananda’s argument reads:

(6)

Premise: Pleasure is impermanent.

Premise: If pleasure is impermanent, then pleasure is not especially important.

Premise: If pleasure is not especially important, then pleasure is not a final goal of humankind.

Conclusion: So pleasure is not a final goal of humankind.

Premise: Pleasure is a means to spiritual knowledge.

Premise: If pleasure is a means to spiritual knowledge, then spiritual knowledge is a final goal of humankind.

Conclusion: So spiritual knowledge is a final goal of humankind.

Premise: If pleasure is not a final goal of humankind, then nothing—other than spiritual knowledge—is a final goal of humankind.

Conclusion: So nothing—other than spiritual knowledge—is a final goal of humankind.

Knowledge as a Constituent of *Mokṣa*

The spiritual knowledge that Vivekananda claims is the one final goal of humankind is just the knowledge that the proponent of the instrumental interpretation has in mind in their analysis of the opening passage. On the instrumental reading, spiritual knowledge, in particular, is an essential means to liberation. Its unique instrumental value derives entirely from its relation to the final, intrinsically valuable goal of *mokṣa*.

I suggested above that the proponent of the instrumental reading might justify the claim that spiritual knowledge is the only direct means to *mokṣa* by noting that the person who possesses spiritual knowledge attains liberation. Anyone without spiritual knowledge is not liberated. This implies that spiritual knowledge is both a necessary and sufficient condition of liberation. If spiritual knowledge is a necessary and sufficient condition of liberation, then spiritual knowledge is the only direct means to *mokṣa*. And if spiritual knowledge is the only direct means to *mokṣa*, then it is the only intermediate goal in this sense.

The same claims that seem to support the instrumental reading, however, support the claim that spiritual knowledge has intrinsic value. Again, the person who has spiritual knowledge is liberated, and anyone without spiritual knowledge is not liberated. If any state without spiritual knowledge is not a state of liberation, however, then knowledge is an essential *constituent* of the liberated state.

If the liberated state of *mokṣa* is a final goal—as the instrumental interpretation assumes—and if spiritual knowledge is an essential constituent of the liberated state, then spiritual knowledge too is a final goal. It is not a goal that a person ought

to pursue merely as a means to *mokṣa*. Instead, it is a goal that a person ought to pursue as an essential constituent of *mokṣa*.

Consider an analogy. Suppose a person has the goal of being a better student. To be a better student, they must (among other things) learn to write well-organized essays. So the student adopts the goal of learning to write well-organized essays. The student might explain that they are working on writing well-organized essays “in order to be a better student.” This way of talking suggests that the student counts writing well-organized essays as a means to being a better student.

Writing well-organized essays, however, is an essential constituent of being a better student. To write well-organized essays *is to be a better student*. It is not a mere means to this goal, distinct from the goal of being a better student. If the student conceives of the relation between writing better organized essays and being a better student in this instrumental way, then they misunderstand the relation—and misunderstand what it means to be a better student.

Likewise, the person who pursues *mokṣa* must attain spiritual knowledge in order to attain *mokṣa*. The attainment of spiritual knowledge, however, is not a mere means to the final goal of *mokṣa*, distinct from the final goal of *mokṣa* itself. Instead, to acquire spiritual knowledge is to attain (at least some part of) *mokṣa*. Vivekananda explains, “we and He [Brahman] are one. Every one is but a manifestation of that Impersonal, the basis of all being, ...and liberation *consists in* knowing our unity with this wonderful Impersonality” (*CW* 3: 129; emphasis added). To say that liberation “consists in” spiritual knowledge is to say that spiritual knowledge constitutes *mokṣa*.

This second argument for the claim that spiritual knowledge is a final goal of humankind might be outlined as follows:

(7)

Premise: Any state without spiritual knowledge is not a state of liberation.

Premise: If any state without spiritual knowledge is not a state of liberation, then spiritual knowledge is an essential constituent of *mokṣa*.

Conclusion: So spiritual knowledge is an essential constituent of *mokṣa*.

Premise: *Mokṣa* is a final goal.

Premise: If *mokṣa* is a final goal and if spiritual knowledge is an essential constituent of *mokṣa*, then spiritual knowledge is a final goal.

Conclusion: So spiritual knowledge is a final goal.

Other Final Ends

The arguments that I have outlined thus far reference two distinct criteria for a final goal of humankind. First, they imply that a final goal must be permanent. Pleasure does not meet this criterion, but spiritual knowledge does. Second, they imply that any essential constituent of *mokṣa* is a final goal, since *mokṣa* is itself a final goal. Spiritual knowledge meets this criterion as well.

The same arguments, however, imply that there are final goals other than spiritual knowledge. First, consider the criterion of permanence. Vivekananda argues that

pleasure cannot be a final goal because pleasure is impermanent. Pleasure is impermanent, in turn, because the objects of pleasure are impermanent. Some objects of pleasure, however, are permanent. The person who takes pleasure in the self, for example, takes pleasure in a permanent object. So pleasure in the self need not be impermanent.

Indeed, Vivekananda draws the distinction between earthly pleasures and spiritual pleasures by contrasting the impermanence of earthly pleasures with the permanence of spiritual pleasures.

The nature of the Soul is bliss, peace, unchanging....All pleasures of the senses or even of the mind are evanescent; but within ourselves is the one true unrelated pleasure, dependent upon nothing. [The Self] is perfectly free, it is bliss....The pleasure of the Self is what the world calls religion (*CW* 7: 11).

Earthly pleasures are fleeting, just like their objects. The same is not true, however, of joy in the eternal self.

Vivekananda warns against the common mistake of conflating earthly pleasure with spiritual pleasure.

Do not confound it with that human bliss. There is that great error: We are always mistaking the love that we have—this carnal, human love, this attachment for particles, this electrical attraction for human beings in society—for this spiritual Bliss. We are apt to mistake this for that eternal state, which it is not (*CW* 4: 211).¹⁶

Most people pursue earthly pleasures with the hope that they will attain lasting pleasure. “Happiness, we see, is what everyone is seeking for, but the majority seek it in things which are evanescent” (*CW* 2: 83). Only spiritual pleasure, however, is permanent.

Indeed, this distinction between permanent and impermanent objects is the same basis of Vivekananda’s distinction between spiritual and secular knowledge. “Generally,...knowledge is divided into two classes, the Aparâ, secular, and the Parâ, spiritual. One pertains to perishable things, and the other to the realm of the spirit” (*CW* 4: 433–34). Spiritual knowledge is knowledge of what is permanent. Likewise, spiritual pleasure is pleasure in what is permanent. God and the self, then, might be the objects of both a person’s spiritual knowledge and their spiritual pleasure. As a result, neither spiritual knowledge nor spiritual pleasure need be impermanent. “What becomes of a man when he attains perfection? He lives a life of bliss infinite. He enjoys infinite and perfect bliss, having obtained the only thing in which man ought to have pleasure, namely God, and enjoys the bliss with God” (*CW* 1: 13). If spiritual pleasure is permanent, however, then spiritual pleasure, like spiritual knowledge, meets the first criterion of a final goal of humankind.

There are also good reasons to think that spiritual pleasure meets the second criterion of a final goal. Vivekananda often repeats the Upaniṣadic description of God and self in terms of *sat, cit, ānanda*—“Existence-Knowledge-Bliss” (*CW* 1: 58,

¹⁶ Compare *CW* 2: 83, 4: 128.

3: 12).¹⁷ The most straightforward reading of these passages implies that the liberated person experiences the eternal Brahman and *ātman* in terms of permanent knowledge *and bliss*. Any state that lacks this knowledge or bliss is not the liberated state.¹⁸

If any state that lacks spiritual bliss is not a state of *mokṣa*, however, then spiritual bliss, like spiritual knowledge, is an essential constituent of *mokṣa*. If spiritual pleasure is an essential constituent of *mokṣa*, however, and if *mokṣa* is itself a final goal, then spiritual pleasure is a final goal. This argument parallels argument (7) above.

(8)

Premise: Any state without spiritual pleasure is not a state of liberation.

Premise: If any state without spiritual pleasure is not a state of liberation, then spiritual pleasure is an essential constituent of *mokṣa*.

Conclusion: So spiritual pleasure is an essential constituent of *mokṣa*.

Premise: *Mokṣa* is a final goal.

Premise: If *mokṣa* is a final goal and if spiritual pleasure is an essential constituent of *mokṣa*, then spiritual pleasure is a final goal.

Conclusion: So spiritual pleasure is a final goal.

If spiritual pleasure is a final goal of humankind, however, then spiritual knowledge is not the only final goal of humankind, as Vivekananda seems to claim.

Another promising candidate for a final goal of humankind is spiritual freedom.¹⁹ Vivekananda draws a distinction between earthly freedom and spiritual freedom that parallels his distinctions between earthly and spiritual knowledge and earthly and spiritual pleasure. “That sort of freedom which we can feel when we are yet in the phenomenal,” he says, “is a glimpse of the real but not yet the real” (*CW* 5: 287). Bodily freedom is inevitably limited—and perhaps entirely illusory. Spiritual freedom, in contrast, is eternal and real.

Vivekananda employs at least two distinct conceptions of freedom. In some passages, he characterizes freedom in terms of the absence of afflictions. He says, for example, that the ignorant person “can get freedom within a certain limit—if he can get rid of the bondage of hunger or of being thirsty” (*CW* 5: 288–89). Such a person is free in the sense that they are free from the afflictions of hunger and thirst. More generally, a person is free in this sense insofar as they avoid unwanted circumstances.

Even the person who is free from afflictions, however, is not free in a second sense. In his essay, “How to Become Free,” Vivekananda says,

all things in nature work according to law. Nothing is excepted. The mind as well as everything in external nature is governed and controlled by law. Internal and external nature, mind and matter, are in time and space, and are

¹⁷ See *CW* 6: 91, 7: 20, 8: 156, among many others.

¹⁸ I reconsider those passages that describe *ātman-brahman* as *sat-cit-ānanda* in some detail in section six (“The Identity of Spiritual Knowledge, Pleasure, Freedom, and *Mokṣa*”) below.

¹⁹ Vivekananda uses this term at *CW* 1: 336–37, 3: 148, and 3: 238.

bound by the law of causation. The freedom of the mind is a delusion (*CW* 6: 92).

Since every mental or bodily action is determined by its antecedent causes, no action is free. No one could ever do other than they do. “The will can never be free,” Vivekananda argues, “because it is the slave of cause and effect” (*CW* 6: 84).

Even the person who is free from hunger and thirst is not free in this latter sense, just because the actions that led them to their current circumstances were determined by their antecedent causes. According to Vivekananda, a more robust, libertarian freedom, which allows an embodied person to perform either one action or some other action, is simply impossible.

The true self, however, is free in this second sense. “The soul,” Vivekananda says, “is beyond all time, all space, all causation. That which is bound is nature, not the soul” (*CW* 6: 93). Since the soul is immaterial and eternal, time, space, and causation do not constrain it. “The solution of the Vedānta,” Vivekananda explains, “is that there is freedom inside—that the soul is really free—but that that soul’s actions are percolating through body and mind, which are not free” (*CW* 5: 290). This suggests that the actions of the self, independent of the mind and body, are not determined by antecedent causes. Once these actions issue in mental or bodily actions, however, they are constrained by cause and effect, time, space, and so on, and are therefore unfree.

Vivekananda refers to this freedom of the self as spiritual freedom. Spiritual freedom, like spiritual knowledge and spiritual pleasure, is permanent. In explaining *bhakti yoga*, Vivekananda reports that “one single moment of the madness of extreme love to God brings us eternal freedom” (*CW* 3: 31). Outlining Vedānta more broadly, he says, “the fundamental principle is that there is eternal freedom for every one. Every one must come to it” (*CW* 5: 282). So the realization of spiritual freedom lasts forever.

Moreover, any person who attains spiritual freedom is liberated, and any state devoid of spiritual freedom is not the liberated state. This suggests that spiritual freedom, like spiritual knowledge and spiritual bliss, is an essential constituent of *mokṣa*. Indeed, Vivekananda sometimes translates the words *mukti* and *mokṣa* simply as “freedom.” “What is...worth having? Mukti, freedom” (*CW* 3: 127). When asked elsewhere, “What is Mukti?,” Vivekananda answers, “Mukti means entire freedom” (*CW* 5: 317).

If spiritual freedom is an essential constituent of *mokṣa*, however, and if *mokṣa* is a final goal, then spiritual freedom is also a final goal of humankind. And if spiritual freedom is an additional final goal of humankind, then spiritual knowledge is not the only final goal of humankind, as Vivekananda seems to claim.²⁰

The most obvious candidate, however, for an additional final goal of humankind is *mokṣa* itself. This claim hardly requires defense. As I mentioned in the first section of the article (“Two Interpretations of the Value of Knowledge”), Vivekananda repeatedly refers to liberation as the final goal of humankind. Indeed, the claim that *mokṣa* is a final goal of humankind is a premise in the argument for

²⁰ The argument for this conclusion will parallel argument (7) and (8) above.

the claim that knowledge is a final goal of humankind! The final premise of that argument, remember, reads: “If *mokṣa* is a final goal and if spiritual knowledge is an essential constituent of *mokṣa*, then spiritual knowledge is a final goal.”

The plausibility of the claim that spiritual knowledge is a final goal of humankind, then, depends essentially on the claim that *mokṣa* is a final goal of humankind. The fact that spiritual knowledge is an essential constituent of *mokṣa* only entails that spiritual knowledge is a final goal because *mokṣa* is a final goal.

Likewise, the fact that spiritual pleasure and spiritual freedom are essential constituents of *mokṣa* only entails that they are final goals because *mokṣa* is a final goal.²¹ So the claim that *mokṣa* is a final goal of humankind is the least controversial of the claims advanced in this article. Indeed, the second argument for the intrinsic value of knowledge (argument [7] above) counts the intrinsic value of *mokṣa* as a basic assumption for which no argument is needed.

If spiritual knowledge is the only final goal of humankind, however, then spiritual pleasure, spiritual freedom, and *mokṣa* itself are not final goals of humankind. This seems implausible. The same arguments that support the conclusion that spiritual knowledge is a final goal of humankind support the conclusion that spiritual pleasure and spiritual freedom are final goals of humankind. Moreover, these arguments are only convincing if *mokṣa* is a final goal of humankind. All of this suggests that the claim that spiritual knowledge is the only final goal of humankind is implausible.

The Identity of Spiritual Knowledge, Pleasure, Freedom, and *Mokṣa*

One interpretive strategy, at this point, is to assume that the quotations and arguments from the last section (“Other Final Ends”) refute the claim that Vivekananda counts spiritual knowledge as the only final goal of humankind. If this is the most plausible interpretation, then those passages in which Vivekananda seems to assert that spiritual knowledge is the *only* final goal of humankind must be ignored or reinterpreted.

An alternative interpretation, however, retains the literal meaning of these passages without contradicting the status of spiritual pleasure, spiritual freedom, and *mokṣa* itself as final ends. According to this alternative interpretation, Vivekananda counts spiritual knowledge, spiritual pleasure, spiritual freedom, and *mokṣa* as identical.

In his discussions of the Upaniṣadic descriptions of Brahman and *ātman* as *sat-cit-ānanda*, Vivekananda argues that existence, knowledge, and bliss are identical. “The Vedanta says that the Soul is in its nature Existence absolute, Knowledge absolute, Bliss absolute. But these are...one, not three, the essence of the Soul” (*CW* 2: 457). *Sat*, *cit*, and *ānanda*, he says, constitute a single essential quality of the self.

²¹ These premises, again, read: “If *mokṣa* is a final goal and if spiritual pleasure is an essential constituent of *mokṣa*, then spiritual knowledge is a final goal” and “If *mokṣa* is a final goal and if spiritual freedom is an essential constituent of *mokṣa*, then spiritual knowledge is a final goal,” respectively.

The liberated person sees this single, unified quality as identical with *ātman-brahman*. Vivekananda explains that “when this little puny consciousness is gone for ever, that which is the Reality behind shines, and we see it as the One Existence-Knowledge-Bliss, the one Atman, the Universal” (*CW* 3: 22). “The ‘One only’ Brahman,” he says, is the “Akandha-Sachchidānanda, the undivided Existence-Knowledge-Bliss” (*CW* 3: 58). These passages emphasize that *sat-cit-ānanda* is one quality, rather than three. They also count *sat-cit-ānanda* as identical with *ātman-brahman*—of which *sat-cit-ānanda* is ordinarily predicated.

If existence, knowledge, and bliss are identical, however, then there is no contradiction between the claim that knowledge is the one final goal of humankind and the claim that spiritual pleasure is a final goal of humankind. If spiritual knowledge and spiritual pleasure are identical, then spiritual pleasure is a final goal of humankind just because spiritual knowledge is a final goal of humankind and vice versa. The two are one and the same state.

Moreover, the identity of existence, knowledge, and bliss entails that absolute existence, too, is a final goal of humankind. The identity of these qualities and *ātman-brahman*, in turn, implies—unsurprisingly—that *ātman-brahman*, too, is a final goal of humankind. And yet, none of these final goals, Vivekananda argues, is finally distinct from any of the others.

This interpretation is supported by other passages in which Vivekananda equates spiritual knowledge and spiritual pleasure. “Knowledge is the one goal,” he says, “and is really the highest happiness that we know” (*CW* 3: 20). To attain the final goal of spiritual knowledge is to attain the final goal of spiritual pleasure, and vice versa, not because one causes the other, but because the two are equivalent. “I would call it Bliss, which is the same as eternal knowledge—and that is our goal” (*CW* 4: 211).

In other passages, Vivekananda describes spiritual pleasure and spiritual freedom as equivalent. “We say that it is freedom that we are to seek, and that that freedom is God. It is the same happiness as in everything else... The real happiness is God. Love is God, freedom is God” (*CW* 5: 288). The identity of these qualities, in turn, is established by their identity with Brahman—the same identity that obtains between spiritual knowledge and Brahman—and *ātman*.

In another passage, Vivekananda discusses freedom as if it is part of the unified state of *sat-cit-ānanda*.

The soul is one with Freedom, and the soul is one with Existence, and the soul is one with Knowledge. The Sat-Chit-Ānanda—Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute—is the nature, the birthright of the Soul, and all the manifestations that we see are Its expressions, dimly or brightly manifesting Itself (*CW* 2: 193–94).

Here Vivekananda suggests that existence-knowledge-bliss is equivalent to existence-knowledge-freedom. He implies that spiritual freedom and spiritual pleasure are interchangeable. If spiritual freedom and spiritual pleasure are identical, then this formulation is straightforward. The passage also implies that spiritual freedom, like spiritual knowledge and spiritual bliss, are identical with *ātman*—and Brahman.

If the qualities of spiritual knowledge, spiritual pleasure, and spiritual freedom are identical, however, then the claim that spiritual knowledge is the one final goal of humankind is consistent with the claim that spiritual freedom is a final goal of humankind. Indeed, if the qualities of spiritual knowledge, spiritual pleasure, and spiritual freedom are equivalent, then the claim that spiritual knowledge is the one final goal of humankind is consistent with the claim that spiritual freedom is the *one* final goal of humankind.

This is a significant merit of the account, since Vivekananda describes spiritual freedom as the “one goal” of humankind more often than he describes spiritual knowledge as the one goal. Consider the following passages:²²

Freedom is the *one goal* of all nature, sentient or insentient (*CW* 1: 109).

That is the *one goal* that the soul has; and all the succeeding steps through which it is manifesting, all the successive experiences through which it is passing in order to attain to that goal—freedom—are represented as its births (*CW* 6: 23).

We see that the whole universe is working. For what? For salvation, for liberty; from the atom to the highest being, working for the *one end*, liberty for the mind, for the body, for the spirit (*CW* 1: 99).

What is practical religion, then? Utilise the things of this world and the next just for *one goal*—the attainment of freedom (*CW* 4: 241).

If the passages that claim that knowledge is the one final goal of humankind are to be ignored or reinterpreted, then these parallel claims about freedom must be ignored or reinterpreted as well. If, instead, these passages are read in the context of Vivekananda’s claim that spiritual knowledge, pleasure, and freedom are identical, their literal meanings can be retained.

If these qualities are also identical with *ātman-brahman*, in turn, then they are identical with *mokṣa* as well, just because the realization of *ātman-brahman* is the attainment of *mokṣa*. So the claim that knowledge is the only final goal of humankind is consistent with the claim that *mokṣa* is a final goal of humankind. It is even consistent with the stronger claim that *mokṣa* is the only final goal of humankind. These claims, in turn, are consistent with the claims that spiritual pleasure is the only final goal and that spiritual freedom is the only final goal.

Nondualism and the Identity of Spiritual Knowledge, Pleasure, Freedom, and *Mokṣa*

It might be tempting to appeal to Vivekananda’s nondualism to explain his claim that spiritual knowledge, spiritual pleasure, spiritual freedom, and *mokṣa* are identical. Indeed, the fact that Vivekananda seems to count these states as identical might be taken as evidence that he asserts a form of nondualism aligned with Śāṅkara, according to which all distinctions, at the highest level, are simply illusory.

²² In each quotation, the emphasis on “one goal” or “one end” is added.

The interpretation of Vivekananda as a Śāṅkara nondualist²³ is well established. Swami Satprakashananda, for example, claims that both Śāṅkara and Vivekananda “realized the Supreme Being (Brahman)...This state is the acme of spiritual experience, the immediate apprehension of the ultimate Reality as Pure Consciousness *undivided and undiversified*...Śāṅkara and Vivekananda were avowed Advaitists (nondualists)” (1978: 23–24; emphasis added).

According to Nalini Devdas, “in every section [of Vivekananda’s writings], the *Upaniṣad* carries the *sādhaka* [aspirant] through the stages of *Dvaita* and *Viśiṣṭādvaita* in order to prepare his mind for the ultimate truth of Non-dualism [Advaita]” (1968: 14). She explains nondualism, in turn, as the view that “all things that fall within empirical consciousness are pragmatically real but ultimately unreal projections on the non-dual, quality-less Brahman” (Devdas 1968: 12).

In support of this interpretation, Devdas (1968: 13) cites Vivekananda’s essay “Steps of Hindu Philosophic Thought.” In this essay, Vivekananda seems to narrate a history of Vedānta that includes three stages, each of which is superior to the one before it. The first stage of Vedānta is a dualist, Dvaita conception of the relationship between God and the world. It asserts that God created the world but counts the world as materially distinct from God (*CW* 1: 394).

The second stage corresponds to the qualified nondualism of Viśiṣṭādvaita. On this view, God creates the universe from his own substance, rather than from some distinct substance or substances (*CW* 1: 400). In this sense, God and the universe are the same thing. And yet, there are real qualitative differences between God and the world. The world changes, for example, but God always remains the same. This second stage, Vivekananda says, “represents a higher stage of religious development” than the first (*CW* 1: 401).

The third stage of Vedānta denies that God can be identical with a changing, impermanent world. Devdas seems to take this to mean that Vivekananda counts the changing, impermanent world as an illusion that disappears upon attaining liberation (*CW* 1: 402). Vivekananda summarizes, “these are the three steps which Vedānta philosophy has taken, and we cannot go any further, because we cannot go beyond unity... You cannot go beyond this idea of the Absolute” (*CW* 1: 403).

Vivekananda seems to make the same point in a number of other passages. In his lecture “Vedānta In Its Application to Indian Life,” for example, he says:

the one fact I found is that in all the Upaniṣads, they begin with dualistic ideas, with worship and all that, and end with a grand flourish of Advaitic ideas....One is the fulfilment of the other; one is the building, the other is the top; the one the root, the other the fruit, and so on (*CW* 3: 233–34).

Here, Vivekananda suggests that the Upaniṣads, too, count nondualism as the highest realization.

²³ I use the phrases “Śāṅkara nondualist” and “Śāṅkara Advaita” to distinguish the kind of nondualism that Śāṅkara asserts from the forms of nondualism that others assert. Especially important here is the distinction between Śāṅkara nondualism and what Medhananda describes as Vivekananda’s “Integral Advaita.” According to Medhananda, Vivekananda’s Integral Advaita accepts the claim that everything is Brahman, but allows both that the world is a real manifestation of God and that the personal conception of God is just as real as the impersonal conception. See Medhananda 2022, especially Chapter two.

If Vivekananda means to say that the highest realization is nondualism as Śaṅkara analyzes it, then his claim that spiritual knowledge, spiritual pleasure, spiritual freedom, and *mokṣa* are identical is easily explained. If Vivekananda is a nondualist of this sort, then he asserts that all distinctions are finally illusory. If all distinctions are finally illusory, then the distinctions between spiritual knowledge, spiritual pleasure, spiritual freedom, and *mokṣa* are ultimately illusory. The person who attains spiritual knowledge attains spiritual pleasure, spiritual freedom, and *mokṣa* as well, just because there is no difference among these states. This argument might be written as follows:

(9)

Premise: All distinctions are illusory.

Premise: If all distinctions are illusory, then the distinctions between spiritual knowledge, spiritual pleasure, spiritual freedom, and *mokṣa* are illusory.

Premise: If the distinctions between spiritual knowledge, spiritual pleasure, spiritual freedom, and *mokṣa* are illusory, then these states are identical.

Conclusion: So spiritual knowledge, spiritual pleasure, spiritual freedom, and *mokṣa* are identical. They are one and the same state.

This kind of explanation of Vivekananda's position should seem unsatisfying, however, for at least two reasons. First, many scholars reject the characterization of Vivekananda as a Śaṅkara nondualist. Jeffrey D. Long, for example, allows that certain passages in Vivekananda "suggest that the three main forms of Vedānta correspond to ascending levels of consciousness, with [Śaṅkara]²⁴ Advaita at the top" (2008: 62). Against this interpretation, he argues that the broader Ramakrishna tradition—including Ramakrishna (1836–86), Vivekananda, and others—aims to reconcile these competing interpretations of scripture, rather than endorse one and reject the others (Long 2008: 52).

Long's primary argument against the Śaṅkara Advaitin interpretation of Vivekananda, however, cites the centrality of the role of *bhakti* (devotion) in the broader Ramakrishna tradition. Essential to *bhakti*, he claims, is "the reality of the Lord—the Supreme Personality of Godhead—and the distinction between the Lord—the Supreme Being—and His devotees" (Long 2008: 53–54).

Śaṅkara Advaita, however, denies both that God is personal in any sense and that the distinction between God and individual people is real. At the ultimate level, God is not immanent, according to Śaṅkara's nondualism. God has no form, personality, and so on. Any relationship to such a figure is based on basic conceptual mistakes about the nature of Brahman. Śaṅkara's Advaita also insists that all distinctions are illusory. So the distinction between God and the individual person is illusory. If such distinctions are essential to *bhakti*, however, then it cannot be that the Ramakrishna tradition simply asserts the ultimate truth of the nondualism that Śaṅkara endorses.

Medhananda also rejects the Śaṅkara Advaitin interpretation of Vivekananda. He notes that Vivekananda repeatedly criticizes Śaṅkara for his selective, "text-torturing" strategy in interpreting scripture (2021: 18). Indeed, in the lecture

²⁴ Long, like most scholars, equates Advaita and Śaṅkara Advaita. See footnote 23 above.

“Vedanta in its Application to Indian Life”—which I referenced in support of the Advaitin reading of Vivekananda above—Vivekananda says:

the Advaitic commentator, whenever an Advaitic text comes, preserves it just as it is; but the same commentator, as soon as a dualistic text presents itself, tortures it if he can, and brings the most queer meaning out of it. Sometimes the “Unborn” becomes a “goat,” such are the wonderful changes effected. To suit the commentator, “Aja” the Unborn is explained as “Ajâ” a she-goat (*CW* 3: 233).

If Vivekananda accepts Śaṅkara’s conclusions, however, then he has little reason to reject Śaṅkara’s exegetical work in reinterpreting passages that seem to contradict Śaṅkara nondualism.

Medhananda also accepts Long’s argument that the Śaṅkara Advaitin interpretation contradicts Vivekananda’s explicit aim of harmonizing scripture. Vivekananda’s elevation of the study of primary texts over sectarian commentaries was inspired by Ramakrishna’s personal example, living a life that synthesized a variety of systems and practices (Medhananda 2021: 11–12). Indeed, Vivekananda says that his teacher was “as ardent a dualist, as ardent an Advaitist, as ardent a Bhakta, as a Jnani” (*CW* 3: 233). The claim that Vivekananda simply upholds Śaṅkara nondualism, then, overlooks contrary evidence.

On Medhananda’s (2021: 17) reading, Vivekananda takes scripture to prescribe a wide range of complementary practices and doctrines. Vivekananda claims that the various *yogas*, for example, are equally effective in bringing about the attainment of God (Medhananda 2021: 16). Only *jñāna yoga*, however, leads directly to liberation on the Śaṅkara Advaitin view. For Vivekananda, God “is best conceived as both personal and impersonal, both with form and without form, both immanent in the universe and beyond it, and infinitely more besides” (2021: 15).

Another reason to resist the Śaṅkara nondualist explanation, at this point, is that it precludes further investigation. Philosophical inquiry depends on distinctions. Since Śaṅkara’s nondualism denies distinctions, it tends to collapse philosophical inquiry. In the current context, the assumption of Śaṅkara nondualism dismisses Vivekananda’s reasons both for emphasizing these particular goals and for claiming that these goals are finally identical. So there are at least two reasons to consider how the identity of these states might be justified without reference to Śaṅkara’s nondualism.

An Alternative Explanation of the Identity of Spiritual Knowledge, Pleasure, and Freedom

In the remainder of this article, I want to consider alternative strategies for explaining Vivekananda’s claim that spiritual knowledge, spiritual pleasure, spiritual freedom, and *mokṣa* are identical. For now, I only outline two arguments that might be part of this larger project. I leave the development of additional arguments to future papers—and perhaps other scholars.

First, consider the claim that spiritual knowledge and spiritual bliss are identical. For Vivekananda, spiritual knowledge is knowledge of one's own nature as *ātman-brahman*. Vivekananda claims that *ātman-brahman* has the nature of eternal bliss. "The nature of the Soul," Vivekananda says, "is bliss, peace, unchanging" (*CW* 7: 11). So to attain spiritual knowledge is to know the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman*.

Since the bliss of *ātman-brahman* is eternal, nothing causes it. Instead, the attainment of spiritual knowledge is more like a discovery of the bliss of *ātman-brahman*: "That Supreme Bliss fully exists in all, from Brahmā down to the blade of grass. You are also that undivided Brahman. This very moment you can realise if you think yourself truly and absolutely to be so. It is all mere want of direct perception" (*CW* 5: 393). Vivekananda explains that the liberated person comes to know the bliss of *ātman-brahman* by means of the direct perception of the bliss of *ātman-brahman*. To know the nature of *ātman-brahman*, then, is to experience the bliss of *ātman-brahman*. To experience the bliss of *ātman-brahman*, in turn, is just to attain spiritual pleasure. This argument might be outlined as follows:

(10)

Premise: Spiritual knowledge is knowledge of one's own nature as *ātman-brahman*.

Premise: *Ātman-brahman* has the nature of eternal bliss.

Conclusion: So spiritual knowledge is knowledge of the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman*.

Premise: Knowledge of the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman* is the experience of the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman*.

Conclusion: So spiritual knowledge is the experience of the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman*.

Premise: The experience of the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman* is the attainment of spiritual pleasure.

Conclusion: So spiritual knowledge is the attainment of spiritual pleasure.

This argument seems to establish that spiritual knowledge is spiritual pleasure. Not all spiritual knowledge, however, is knowledge of the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman*. The liberated person attains spiritual knowledge of the full nature of *ātman-brahman*. So the knowledge that *ātman-brahman* is eternal bliss does not exhaust spiritual knowledge. Instead, it might be said that a certain part of spiritual knowledge—namely, the knowledge of the bliss of *ātman-brahman*—is identical with spiritual pleasure. Argument (10) might be rewritten to reflect this:

(11)

Premise: Spiritual knowledge is knowledge of one's own nature as *ātman-brahman*.

Premise: Part of the nature of *ātman-brahman* is eternal bliss.

Conclusion: So part of spiritual knowledge is knowledge of the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman*.

Premise: Knowledge of the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman* is the experience of the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman*.

Conclusion: So part of spiritual knowledge is the experience of the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman*.

Premise: The experience of the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman* is the attainment of spiritual pleasure.

Conclusion: So part of spiritual knowledge is the attainment of spiritual pleasure.

This version of the argument can also be reversed, to establish that the attainment of spiritual pleasure is part of spiritual knowledge.

(12)

Premise: The attainment of spiritual pleasure is the experience of the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman*.

Premise: The experience of the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman* is knowledge of the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman*.

Premise: Part of the nature of *ātman-brahman* is this eternal bliss.

Conclusion: So knowledge of the eternal bliss of *ātman-brahman* is part of knowledge of the nature of *ātman-brahman*.

Premise: Knowledge of the nature of *ātman-brahman* is spiritual knowledge.

Conclusion: So the attainment of spiritual pleasure is part of spiritual knowledge.

While these arguments do not establish that spiritual knowledge is the only final goal of humankind, they imply that spiritual pleasure is not a second final goal of humankind, distinct from the final goal of spiritual knowledge. Instead, spiritual pleasure is a constituent of spiritual knowledge, in much the same way that spiritual knowledge, pleasure, and freedom initially seemed to be constituents of *mokṣa*.

I don't know whether arguments might be developed for the additional identity claims that Vivekananda asserts. One final suggestion, though, concerns the relation between spiritual knowledge and spiritual freedom. Spiritual knowledge is knowledge of the nature of *ātman-brahman*. To know the nature of *ātman-brahman*, in turn, is to be free from an important kind of ignorance. This freedom from ignorance relating to the nature of *ātman-brahman* is central to the spiritual freedom that Vivekananda describes. Hence, spiritual freedom is a part of spiritual knowledge, just as spiritual pleasure is a part of spiritual knowledge. On this reading, spiritual freedom is not a second final goal of humankind, distinct from the final goal of spiritual knowledge.

Concluding Remarks

When Swami Vivekananda claims that knowledge is the one goal of humankind, he means to say that spiritual knowledge is the one *final* goal of humankind. Other goals, however, like spiritual pleasure, spiritual freedom, and *mokṣa* itself, seem to meet the criteria that establish spiritual knowledge as a final end.

Vivekananda repeatedly says that spiritual knowledge, pleasure, freedom, and *mokṣa* are identical. One explanation of this identity appeals to Vivekananda's

commitment to Śāṅkara nondualism. If all distinctions are finally illusory, then the distinctions between spiritual knowledge, pleasure, freedom, and *mokṣa* are merely apparent. If, at the highest level, everything is one and the same thing, then spiritual knowledge, pleasure, freedom, and *mokṣa* are identical.

This reply assumes, however, that Vivekananda is a Śāṅkara nondualist. This dubious assumption must be set aside in order to develop what might be a more promising alternative. The identity between spiritual knowledge and spiritual pleasure, in particular, might be analyzed in terms of a part-whole relation. Part of spiritual knowledge is knowledge of the bliss of *ātman-brahman*. To know the bliss of *ātman-brahman* is to experience it. And to experience the bliss of *ātman-brahman* is to attain spiritual pleasure. An alternative argument might be developed for the identity of spiritual knowledge and spiritual freedom as well.

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