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Living in the World by Dying to the Self: Swami Vivekananda's Modernist Reconfigurations of a Premodern Vedāntic Dialectic

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Abstract This article is an exploration of the dialectic of this-worldly activism and the practice of self-effacement in Swami Vivekananda's discourses. He often exhorts his audiences to cultivate the vigorous strength to live courageously in the world on the basis of their spiritual conviction that they are rooted in the true self (*ātman*) beyond all spatiotemporal limitations. The boundless *ātman*, to be realized by effacing the egocentric self, would become the imperishable source of their fortitude to live with fearlessness in a world of suffering. Since the *ātman* is not constrained by the egocentric bounds of the "I", to become recentered in its illimitable heart is to move towards a universal morality. Through this return to one's imperishable center of existential gravity, one transcends fear and hatred of the "other" as a radically alien being. While his socioreligious worldview is imprinted with aspects of Advaita as formalized by Śaṅkara, he also occasionally endorses the theocentric visions of Rāmānuja and Madhva and declares that all these Vedāntic pathways point towards the effacement of the ego and the generation of fearlessness.

Keywords Swami Vivekananda · *jīvanmukti* · Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan · Śaṅkara · Rāmānuja

Contemporary forms of Hinduism are often characterized by socially activist engagements with various dimensions of worldly existence and by attempts to situate such engagements within theological worldviews shaped by classical scriptural texts. These characteristics are sometimes presented as the hallmarks of a "Neo-Hinduism" that is said to have emerged around the turn of the twentieth century in conditions of colonial modernity. A point that has been intensely debated

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in the scholarly literature on these dynamic processes is precisely the prefix "neo": should these developments be viewed as alien transplantations on Hindu terrains from Western cosmologies or as contemporaneous expressions of ancient Hindu scriptural texts? In this article, we will approach this somewhat vexed question through an exploration of Swami Vivekananda's (1863–1902) understanding of the relationship between this-worldly activism and the practice of self-effacement. He often exhorts his audiences to cultivate the vigorous strength to live courageously *in* the world based on their spiritual conviction that they are not *of* the world—they are not a bounded egocentric entity because they are rooted in the true self (*ātman*) beyond all spatiotemporal limitations. Therefore, the boundless *ātman*, to be realized by effacing the little self, would become the imperishable source of their existential fortitude to live with fearlessness in a world marked by the ills of transmigration.

The leitmotif of generating strength by becoming decentered from the world and recentered in the *ātman* runs through our discussion of Vivekananda's thought in the three sections of this article. We begin with an overview of the theme, in some premodern Advaita-shaped texts, of "embodied liberation" (*jīvanmukti*) as the state in which the sage remains engaged in teaching disciples but does not accumulate any karmic residues. In many addresses, this state of a radical transparency to the world is presented as the spiritual summit by Vivekananda who urges individuals to undertake the demanding discipline of a deep immersion in worldly engagement concurrently with meditative stability in the *ātman*. Next, since this *ātman* is not spatiotemporally constrained within the egocentric bounds of the "I", progressive centeredness in its illimitable heart is the pathway towards a universal morality. This return to one's imperishable center of existential gravity such that one transcends fear and hatred of the "other" as a radically alien being is Vivekananda's invocation of *jīvanmukti* as embodied and enacted in the world. We will then see that while his socioreligious worldview is strongly imprinted with aspects of Advaita as formalized by Śaṅkara (*ca*. 800 CE), he also occasionally endorses the theocentric visions of Rāmānuja (1017–1137) and Madhva (1238–1317) and declares that all these Vedāntic pathways point towards the effacement of the ego and the generation of fearlessness.

Before we proceed, here is a methodological point. This exploration is primarily an "intellectual history" of the dense dialectic between world affirmation and world negation across some Vedāntic milieus, with the focus on Vivekananda's reworking of this dialectic partly with the idioms that he receives from his *guru* Ramakrishna (1838–86). At the heart of such an exploration lies various exegetical-conceptual complexities relating to these idioms—such as *mokṣa*, *jīvanmukti*, and others—and sociohistorical debates over whether, and to what extent, Vivekananda departed from specific teachings of Ramakrishna (Beckerlegge 2006) and premodern preceptors such as Śaṅkara (Rambachan 1994: 66–75). Without seeking to resolve these ongoing disputes, our conceptual focus here will be on one fundamental Vedāntic question, which continues to recur through diverse forms of Hindu living in the present, as to whether a return-*to*-spirit requires a rejection-*of*-world, and if so, what the existential modality is of this rejection. As Brian A. Hatcher notes, the "quest to harmonize the spiritual truths of Vedānta with modes of worldly activity,

even worldly success, remains a vital factor even in today's manifold expressions of postcolonial and diasporic Hinduism" (2008: 83).

Across premodern Vedāntic systems, we find at least two distinct notions of renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*): (a) monastic living or itinerant existence for individuals who ultimately seek liberation alone, and (b) the surrendering of an inner sense of agency to the divine foundation (*brahman*). While (a) seems to be the liberative pathway par excellence for Śaṅkara (Sawai 1986), the diverse styles of theistic Vedānta affirm distinctive variations on (b) which does not necessarily require a rejection of worldly activity. According to Vaiṣṇava traditions such as the Vallabha *sampradāya*, the meditative relocation of one's agency in Kṛṣṇa, the supreme agent, is itself a form of renunciation (*tyāga*) in which a world-enmeshed individual becomes liberated by living *in* and *with* Kṛṣṇa. The leaders of this *sampradāya* are not ascetics but married householders who trace their patrilineal descent to Vallabha, regarded as an *avatāra* of Kṛṣṇa. While Vallabha seems to have accepted that some individuals may become so filled with the love of Kṛṣṇa that they cannot function in the ordinary world, he did not teach world renunciation as a necessary condition for liberation (Barz 1976: 32). Thus, Peter Bennett argues that in the case of the Vallabha community, "most noticeable is its tendency to express palpably the *bhakti* ideal of selfless loving devotion, not by urging the renunciation of worldly goods and pleasures, but by utilizing all the things of this world considered precious or pleasing to the senses in the service of the deity" (1990: 182).

Such *bhakti*-shaped imaginations of the idea of renunciation complicate the disjunction that is sometimes proposed between the energetic life-affirmation of Vedic people and the cosmic pessimism of their descendants. Therefore, when B. D. Dhawan argues that the "importance given to fun and frolic, dance and laughter, happiness and rejoicing in the lives of [the Vedic] Aryans much belies the subsequent importance to renunciation in the Vedāntic philosophy" (1988: 30), such historical evaluations should be qualified with the observation that several Vedāntic traditions have envisioned the world not as a prison house to be shunned but as a house of mirth to be delightfully inhabited in the light of the divine reality. At the same time, Dhawan's assessment points to a fundamental question that structures Dharma-treatises such as the *Manusmṛti* (*ca*. 200 CE)—whether the adoption of solitary existence is necessary for liberation (*mokṣa*). In some of the early Upaniṣads, the status of the world renouncer was exalted above that of social life, which led to a structural tension within Vedic life-worlds which insisted that individuals perform specific world-directed actions. Therefore, the Dharmaśāstra literature, which seeks to draw the world renouncer back into the folds of social obligation and hierarchical classification, is somewhat ambivalent about the significance or necessity of renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*). The figure of the world renouncer is enfolded under a Vedic canopy by situating asceticism as the fourth stage (*āśrama*) which would temporally succeed two stages of worldly life as a student and as a married householder (Kaelber 1989).

This textual resolution did not, however, always translate into social reality—according to tradition, Śaṅkara renounced the world in his early life, and this paradigm-founding renunciation was the existential template for various premodern Advaita monastic lineages. In these settings, the pathways of ritual action (*karma*)

and devotional service to a deity (*bhakti*) were usually regarded as a preliminary preparation for, but not as directly productive of, the summit of contemplative self-realization (*jñāna*). If the latter alone points, albeit apophatically, towards the one Brahman without name and form, the former is entangled in the domains of multiplicity, impermanence, and suffering. Therefore, the tension between life-*in*-the-world and life-*beyond*-the-world that recurs through the Dharmaśāstra texts persists in debates in Advaita-shaped milieus over the role of karmic activity—is social engagement an independent pathway towards liberation or is it (only) a subsidiary of the meditative serenity which facilitates liberation?

World Engagement and World Renunciation in Hindu Milieus

We begin our study of the reconfigurations, across the frontiers of modernity, of this tension between the quest for liberation (*mokṣa*) and worldly life with an examination of these two modalities in the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. Several figures associated with the Ramakrishna movement have argued that social engagement in the form of active service to humanity (*sevā*) is a spiritual discipline which has roots or precedents in premodern Hindu traditions. Swami Ghanananda, for instance, reflects this view when he claims that Vivekananda had "poured old wine into new bottles" (cited in Beckerlegge 2006: 64). The crucial debate, of course, relates to the degree of emphasis that is to be placed on the continuities *or* the discontinuities between the "old wine" of classical archetypes and the "new bottles" of Vivekananda's reformulated Vedānta. Vivekananda himself strikes a note of discontinuity when he claims that his attempt to mobilize the people through a Vedānta that would be concretized in and through social milieus was "a thing that was never undertaken before in our country" (*CW* 6: 264).[1] Swami Lokeswarananda reflects this emphasis in his description of the reaction of onlookers to young monks during the plague in 1898 in Calcutta: "A band of monks…tended the sick and removed the dead bodies.…This was a sight they (the witnesses) had never seen before.…They had known monks…who concerned themselves only with spiritual affairs. Monks who cared for the physical well-being of others, they had never known" (cited in Beckerlegge 2006: 62).

However, scholars have occasionally noted that while the official position of the movement is that Vivekananda was a faithful interpreter of Ramakrishna's ideal of humanitarian service, some early followers of Ramakrishna critiqued Vivekananda's socially engaged pathways as simply Western importations (Nikhilananda 1953: 128). Ramakrishna's own views on the relationship between the quest for the divine and "good works" for the world do not call for an institutionalized organization which would actively seek out instances of suffering as contexts for spiritual growth. Instead, he cautioned his disciples: "Don't go out of your way to look for such works. Undertake only those works that present themselves to you and are of pressing necessity—and those also in a spirit of detachment" (Gupta 1974:

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

72). According to Ramakrishna, the primary aim should be to realize that the divine reality is the supreme agent of whom human beings are the worldly instruments, and he believed that activities directed at social amelioration could become a distractive quest for personal name and fame. Therefore, one must first seek the divine reality in everything with an intense desire for the divine vision and step on pathways of social engagement only if empowered by divine grace: "Helping others, doing good to others—this is the work of God alone, who for men has created the sun and moon, father and mother, fruits, flowers, and corn" (Gupta 1974: 641). However, while Ramakrishna regarded philanthropic activities largely as financial transactions which could take individuals away from an inner spiritual transformation, he approved of a "sattvika humanitarianism" in which an individual gives to others by envisioning them as embodiments of the divine reality (Beckerlegge 2006: 109). Consequently, if a householder "gives in charity in a spirit of detachment, he is really doing good to himself and not to others. It is God alone that he serves—God, who dwells in all beings" (Gupta 1974: 641). Ramakrishna's religious worldview has been characterized as a form of panentheism, in which the *vijñānī* sees the divine presence as encapsulating, enveloping, and encompassing all humanity, and this world-affirming vision becomes for Vivekananda the foundation for the practice of actively serving human beings by regarding them as concrete manifestations of the divine presence (*śivajñāne jīver sevā*) (Maharaj 2020b).

These conceptual and institutional tensions between spiritual discipline aimed at liberation and organized social engagement also appear in the views of some of the leading figures of the Ramakrishna Mission. After the death of Vivekananda, Swami Brahmananda, to whom the leadership passed, tried to shift the balance of the activities of the Mission more towards the contemplative aspect: "Keep at least three fourths of your mind in God. It is enough if you give one fourth to service" (Isherwood 1986: 328). The following statement by Lokeswarananda expresses a similar exhortation: "If a man spends all his time praying, is he to be condemned because while he is trying for his own liberation he is doing nothing for others? According to Hinduism, such a man is doing more good to society than a so-called social worker can do.…In silence, he shapes the destinies of other people" (1980: 18). However, in his presidential address at the Ramakrishna Math and Mission Convention of 1926, Swami Shivananda argued that any attempt to set apart the "contemplative" and the "activist" dimensions of the movement was "distinctly against the ideal of Swamiji" (Beckerlegge 2006: 33). Indeed, the annual *General Reports* of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission highlight social activities under the categories of medical service, educational work, activities for young people, work for women, spiritual and cultural work, relief and rehabilitation work, and so on. Given the involvement of the Mission in a wide range of enterprises which are also undertaken by the Indian nation-state through its secular agencies, some members of the movement stress the need to distinguish between humanitarian service undertaken as a spiritual discipline and government-sponsored social service. Swami Vireswarananda, for instance, argues that Vivekananda's message "cannot be evaluated in terms of philanthropy or social service, for fundamentally it is a spiritual one" (cited in Beckerlegge 2006: 54).

This emphasis on *sevā* not simply as a "worldly" project of social amelioration but as a purifying process which enables spiritual progress appears in some other modern Hindu contexts. We encounter the cautionary reminder that such *sevā* can become a subtle way of affirming one's egocentric attitudes towards a world that is viewed as standing in need of one's philanthropic intervention—rather, one should perform *sevā* as a spiritually purgative exercise in which one becomes a self-effacing agent involved in helping humanity. Thus, when Ramana Maharshi, whose teachings reflect certain motifs of classical Advaita Vedānta, was asked about how aspirants after spiritual freedom should respond to social ills, his reply was that one should first attend to self-reform, and social reform would take care of itself if their self-reform was successful. Indeed, Ramana's response to the question as to whether one should try to help the world parallels Ramakrishna's views: "The Power that created you created the world as well. If God created the world it is His business to look after it, not yours" (Osborne 1962: 87). In any case, it would be a mistake to believe that great-souled individuals do not help the world, for through their silence they accomplish what cannot be accomplished by social workers who can offer only material help (Osborne 1962: 39). However, when we do help others, we should do so without egoism (*ahaṅkāra*) and without the thought that we are helping an individual who is in some way inferior to us. We should assist them as a means of worshiping the divine reality in them: "You are not helping anybody else, but only yourself" (Osborne 1962: 88).

The resonances in these views across modern Hindu traditions on the soteriological significance of service to humanity can be explained partly through their conceptual affiliation to some form of Advaita. According to the Advaita traditions rooted in Śaṅkara, the distinction between "bondage" and "liberation" is not a metaphysically real one, because the ultimate transpersonal reality (*nirguṇa* Brahman) is never subject to any empirical imperfection. The Self is not an agent, it never transmigrates, and it is eternally free; it only takes on the appearance of being an agent due to the superimposition on the Self of the mind as an illusory adjunct. However, though final liberation (*mokṣa*) is attained only through knowledge (*jñāna*) of nonduality, Veda-structured action is a subordinate means in that it can purify individuals and prepare them for the realization of Brahman. In response to the objection that it is a contradiction to assert that knowledge both depends on and does not depend on the performance of Vedic sacrifices, Śaṅkara replies, in his commentary on *Brahmasūtra* 3.4.26, that the performance of *dharma*-rooted duties in the stages of life does help in the emergence of knowledge by removing impurities, but once this knowledge has arisen, it leads to liberation without depending on such duties (Śaṅkara 1981–83, 7: 738). In other words, Śaṅkara wishes to preserve the efficacy of ritual practice in everyday life, without, however, elevating it to the status of the primary instrument for attaining the highest good (Ram-Prasad 2000: 17).

An individual who becomes fully stabilized in liberating knowledge is said to attain *jīvanmukti*: such an individual has received instruction in the Upaniṣads, and has realized, even while embodied, the essential nonduality (*advaita*) of the finite self with the supreme Self. However, since Advaita maintains that we cannot speak, in the ultimate analysis, of "degrees" of liberation, the notion of *jīvanmukti* creates a

conceptual problem: on the one hand, gaining knowledge of Brahman is said to be concurrent with the attainment of liberation (*sadyomukti*), but, on the other hand, the liberated individual's body, which is associated with duality, continues to linger. As Śaṅkara points out, in his commentary on *Brahmasūtra* 3.3.32, liberation is simultaneous with right insight (*pratyagdarśana*), noting that the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* text says: "thou *art* that" and not: "you will become that" after death (Śaṅkara 1981–83, 7: 671). His own response to this problem is that an individual is truly bodiless (*aśarīratva*) even in the state of embodiment, for embodiment is caused by ignorance which leads to the identification of the not-self with the true self. Therefore, bodilessness refers to an inner detachment produced by knowledge and not the physical absence of a body (Balasubramanian 1974: 197–98). Consequently, the liberated sage lives with the body and yet is not subject to the constraints of transmigratory existence, in the manner of a snake which casts off its skin and does not identify itself with it anymore. Employing a metaphor that was extensively utilized by later commentators, he argues, in his commentary on *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.14.2, that the delay in final release is only so long as one's karmic residues are not exhausted till the final dropping of the body, in the same way that an arrow, once released from its bow, continues to move till its momentum is exhausted (Śaṅkara 1981–83, 9: 401). Śaṅkara argues, in his commentary on *Brahmasūtra* 3.3.32, that the liberated individual (*jīvanmukta*) can take on another body if they have a commission from the gods to teach the Vedas. The liberated beings will continue to be embodied, moving from one body to another, under the momentum of their *prārabdha karma* (Śaṅkara 1981–83, 7: 669). A further reference to this question can be found in his commentary on *Bhagavadgītā* 4.19–20 where he argues that actions performed by knowers of the Self are, in fact, nonactions, since they are endowed with the realization of the actionless Self. However, even if for the sake of world maintenance (*lokasaṁgraha*) they remain engaged in actions, they do not really perform any actions, because they are not attached to those actions and their results (Śaṅkara 1981–83, 6: 128–29). The *Yogavāsiṣṭha* (*ca*. 1100 CE) points to Janaka as an example of such a *jīvanmukta* who was able to attend to the affairs of the state, never too joyous or sorrowful, because his mind was rooted in the truth and he saw the Self in all beings (Mitra 1998: 226).

Moreover, in these Advaitic traditions, the teacher is often presented as such a *jīvanmukta* who knows Brahman as the ultimate reality and who compassionately instructs disciples in this truth. In his commentary on the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, Śaṅkara argues that when individuals suffering from delusory thoughts such as "I am happy," "I am wise," and "I am righteous" are liberated from attachment to worldly objects by a teacher who is extremely compassionate (*paramakāruṇika*), they reach their true home and become contented and happy (Śaṅkara 1981–83, 9: 400–401). The metaphysical basis for this compassion is the omnipresence of the timeless Self in all finite reality, for, as Śaṅkara notes in his commentary on *Īśa Upaniṣad* 6, one experiences revulsion for that which is believed to be bad and different from oneself, but for one who sees only the pure Self as the substratum of everything there can be no object to be hated (Śaṅkara 1981–83, 8: 14). The *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, sometimes attributed to Śaṅkara, repeats this theme and presents

the teacher as an ocean of compassion (*dayā-sindhu*) who can rescue the disciple from worldly existence (Grimes 2004: 68). Just as the moon cools, of its own accord, the sun-scorched earth, it is the very nature (*svabhāva*) of these great beings to remove the ills of others (Grimes 2004: 78). The author of the *Jīvanmuktiviveka* (*ca*. 1300 CE) develops this line of thought in noting that when through the exercise of compassion (*karuṇā*) for all miserable beings, an individual who is straining towards *jīvanmukti* feels that they too, like oneself, should experience no pain, the mind becomes clear. Quoting the verse: "May all be happy in the world, may all be free from disease, may all see what is auspicious, may all be free from grief," the author states that the *yogī* seeking *jīvanmukti* should generate friendliness (*maitrī*) towards all and see their happiness as their own (Śāstrī and Ayyaṅgār 1935: 65; my translation).

In recent decades, a significant amount of scholarly discussion has been devoted to the theme of the coherence and the plausibility of the concept of *jīvanmukti* (Nelson 1996). As a way of making sense of the *jīvanmukta*'s continuing physical embodiment, some post-Śaṅkara traditions invoked the notion of a trace of ignorance (*avidyā-leśa*) which the *jīvanmukta* is said to possess. However, the presence of this remnant or residuum suggests that the state of complete disembodied liberation (*videhamukti*) is, in some sense, superior to that of *jīvanmukti*. Moreover, since the *jīvanmukta* is free from the egocentered idioms of "I", it would seem that a *jīvanmukta* does not have a distinctive phenomenology, since a *jīvanmukta* cannot entertain thoughts such as "*I* am reading this article" or "*I* am compassionately teaching students about Brahman." Again, the *jīvanmukta* is aware that world-bound individuals are ultimately unreal, and so it is not immediately clear towards *whom* the *jīvanmukta* exercises compassionate engagement. If I know that I am hallucinating a pink elephant in my visual field, I will usually not be motivated to seek to ride it into town; likewise, insubstantial appearances are arguably too "thin" in ontological depth to underpin "thick" forms of social activity (Framarin 2009). These conceptual instabilities in the Advaita account of *jīvanmukti* emanate from the deeply paradoxical claim that the *jīvanmukta*, who is one spatiotemporally located individual, somehow *is* the non-spatiotemporally limited infinite. Some premodern figures such as Maṇḍana Miśra (*ca*. 800 CE) and Madhusūdana Sarasvatī (*ca*. 1600 CE), in fact, envisioned the *jīvanmukta* as a pilgrim on the way towards the final summit, and "either implicitly or explicitly endorsed *videhamukti*" (Hedling 2020: 292). On one occasion, Vivekananda echoes this viewpoint when he indicates to a disciple: "My settled view [*siddhānta*] is that *videhamukti* is the highest state." Interestingly, he goes on to clarify that he does not seek anymore liberation through the dissolution of the physical body, and, in fact, if there remains a single individual who is not liberated (*amukta*), he will not seek his own liberation (Abjajananda 1964: 7–8). He writes in this vein in a letter in 1897: "Another truth I have realised is that altruistic service only is religion, the rest…are madness—even it is wrong to hanker after one's own salvation" (*CW* 6: 395).

Vivekananda's alignment of the self-realized individual with the figure of the *bodhisattva* in Mahāyāna Buddhism is echoed in Shivananda's observation in 1926 that Ramakrishna had admonished Vivekananda "to forego the selfish enjoyment of

Samadhi [meditative absorption] and dedicate his life to the welfare of the many" (cited in Beckerlegge 2006: 33). Moreover, it reflects the emergence of socially activist forms of Advaita from around the turn of the twentieth century. While the view that *jīvanmukta*s, because of their mental disassociation from the fruits of action, can be socially engaged—as a teacher or a king—is present in some of the premodern Hindu literature, such engagement was not usually enjoined as a necessary concomitant of this-worldly existence. However, in some modern Advaita-shaped contexts, activism directed towards social amelioration is presented more robustly as a condition for, or an expression of, the attainment of liberating insight. Contemporary Advaitins sometimes speak of *jīvanmukta*s as liberated beings who are altruistically engaged in such activism for the sake of the preservation of world order (*lokasaṁgraha*), while they are themselves without any desires (Fort 1998: 181). Thus, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan argues that "activity…is not inconsistent with the truth of non-dualism. The liberated, even when alive, are lifted above the sense of egoity, and so above the sway of the law of karma, and they act, filled with the vision of the most high" (1931: 644). While this is fundamentally the argument in the *Vivekacuḍāmaṇi* and the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, Radhakrishnan strikes a distinct note when he argues, in his commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*, that "two conditions are essential for final salvation, (i) inward perfection attained by intuition of self, (ii) outer perfection possible only with the liberation of all. The liberated souls which attain the first condition continue to work for the second" (1960: 219). Radhakrishnan's argument that the liberation of an individual is possible only through the liberation of all moves the figure of the *jīvanmukta* in the direction of the *bodhisattva* who vows to remain compassionately engaged in the world till all are enlightened (Maharaj 2020a). L. K. L. Srivastava similarly presents the *jīvanmukta* as an individual who is animated by love for all human beings and who renders service to all. More strikingly, he argues that the *jīvanmukta* is not fulfilled if they do "not do good to others or [do] not strive for removing woes and sufferings from the world" (Srivastava 1990: 25).

In his addresses, Vivekananda too creatively extends, and occasionally reworks, premodern Vedāntic worldviews to speak of the cultivation of an "active nonactivity" where an individual remains engaged in the world by relinquishing egocentric dispositions. By drawing on the *Bhagavadgītā*, the declaration *tat tvam asi* ("thou art that") from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, and such scriptural materials, he declares weakness to be the cardinal sin that has reduced humanity to a state of inactivity, indolence, and misery. He repeatedly exhorts his audiences to remain vigorously engaged in the world, while envisioning the world as a moral stage where they would negate the egoistic pulls of the "I" and realize their rootedness in the metaphysically independent, immutable, and imperishable *ātman*. While these exhortations are often structured by Advaita-shaped or Advaita-resonant idioms, he occasionally indicates that what is existentially crucial is not scriptural exegeses or metaphysical disputations on the Vedāntic spectrum—ranging across Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, and Dvaita—but the conviction that the *ātman* is the inexhaustible reservoir of strength. In his religious vision structured by the principle of *karma* and reincarnation, these multiple Vedāntic streams, and indeed the different religious

traditions of the world, are diverse pathways along which individuals will arrive someday at the one goal.

Swami Vivekananda Between the Householder and the Renouncer

As we have seen, the dialectic of being-in-the-world and world renunciation is central to premodern Vedāntic traditions. The renouncer worldviews were initially sharply opposed to Vedic sacrificial milieus and pitted wilderness against village life, celibacy against marriage, and ritual inactivity against ritual performance (Olivelle 1992: 46), while the polystranded textures of the *Bhagavadgītā* seek to forge a middle path through its motif of living in social systems but performing action with an internal detachment. Inheriting, as well as creatively reconfiguring, these experiential tensions, Vivekananda, whose writings inspired Radhakrishnan as a college student, often spoke of a Practical Vedānta. Unlike the earlier Advaita which he claimed had been lived only on the spiritual planes by monks in forests, his socially oriented Vedānta would be worked out in the multiple domains of everyday living in the world (*CW* 3: 427). Even more firmly, he defines his this-worldly Vedānta in these terms: "Throw away everything, even your own salvation, and go and help others" (*CW* 3: 431). In orientating Vedāntic discipline towards the liberation of all humanity, he was also drawing on the world-affirming dimensions of the teachings of Ramakrishna: "A hollow piece of drift-wood somehow manages to float; but it sinks if even a bird sits on it. But Nārada and sages of his kind are like a huge log that not only can float across to the other shore but can carry many animals and other creatures as well" (Gupta 1974: 434–35). This style of Vedāntic living is "practical" in that it shows us that meditative calmness in the eternal *ātman* and intense activity in the world are not opposed but are deeply interrelated (*CW* 2: 292–93). In fact, service to human beings is not only a purifying means towards liberation but also is an essential prerequisite for one's liberation: "only by doing good to others…one attains to one's own good, and it is by leading others to Bhakti [devotion] and Mukti [liberation] that one attains to them oneself" (*CW* 6: 266). These statements have to be read in the context of his attempts to apply the dictum *tat tvam asi* to social ethics. He argues that the "expression of oneness is what we call love and sympathy, and it is the basis of all our ethics and morality. This is summed up in the Vedanta philosophy by the celebrated aphorism, Tat Tvam Asi, 'Thou art That'" (*CW* 1: 389).

In other words, a moral form of life is an ongoing enactment of the realization that the individual self is, at the deepest metaphysical level, one with the Self which underlies all beings. Echoing the premodern Vedāntic cosmologies we discussed in the previous section, Vivekananda presents the perfected sage who has attained the "living freedom" of *jīvanmukti* as ready even to give up their worldly existence for a tiny insect and as no longer deluded by the world which is reenvisioned as rooted in infinite being, consciousness, and bliss (*CW* 1: 364–65). Thus, while for Śaṅkara, ritual actions are efficacious to the extent that they are a preparatory stage for the attainment of liberating self-knowledge, Vivekananda widens the scope of such action to include organized *sevā* directed towards the amelioration of the material

distress of people. Exhorting people to help the starving, the dying, and the destitute, he notes that individuals need to find bread before they can seek the divine reality: "Throw aside your scriptures in the Ganges and teach the people first the means of procuring their food and clothing, and then you will find time to read to them the scriptures" (*CW* 7: 183).

However, occasionally he can also articulate Ramakrishna's theocentric vision of a world animated by the divine presence: "Who works? Whose work?… It is God Himself.…Neither I nor thou nor you—it is all He the Lord, all One" (*CW* 6: 371). By learning to see human beings as instantiations of divinity, we should serve the world by regarding such service as a pathway towards realizing that all beings—self and other—are enfolded in the divine foundation and without any sense of superiority (Maharaj 2020b: 179–80). In this vein, he argues that the reason why we work for the world is seemingly to help the world, but, in truth, such activities "help ourselves.…We cannot deny that there is much misery in it; to go out and help others is, therefore, the best thing we can do, although in the long run, we shall find that helping others is only helping ourselves" (*CW* 1: 75). He cautions his listeners against condescending styles of doling out charity to the poor and trying to quantify their benevolence in terms of concrete outputs in a world that is subject to decay and change: "One mighty wind in five minutes can break all your buildings up. What shall we do then? One volcanic eruption may sweep away all our roads and hospitals and cities and buildings. Let us give up all this foolish talk of doing good to the world. It is not waiting for your or my help; yet we must work and constantly do good, because it is a blessing to ourselves" (*CW* 1: 76–77). If we undertake philanthropic gestures with the view that the deplorable conditions of the world need our intervention, such engagement could be shaped by a covert selfishness which is "insinuating itself in the form of virtue" (*CW* 1: 89–90). Rather, without foregrounding the "I" in such humanitarian activity, we should serve the world by cultivating the sense that it does not depend on our generosity, so that we are able to selflessly work towards its amelioration without the expectation that it will recognize our contribution. In other words, by learning to envision the world as a "moral gymnasium" (*CW* 1: 80), we should view the multiple contexts of suffering across it as purgative crucibles within which we may become spiritually fortified to help humanity without seeking any reward.

The argument turns partly on the claim that while we can indeed help the world in a relative sense by alleviating some immediate form of suffering, we cannot absolutely eradicate from it all instances of suffering. Our fragile existences are buffeted by the variable winds of pleasure and pain, and no enduring happiness is to be found in these temporal domains while we compete for worldly resources (*CW* 1: 111–12). Therefore, doing good to others with mercy and sympathy should be practiced as a mode of self-abnegation in which the world is seen as rooted not in the "I" but in God. In the end, service to the world should culminate in the gift of liberating wisdom: "First of all, comes the gift of food; next is the gift of learning, and the highest of all is the gift of [spiritual] knowledge. We must harmonise these three ideals in this Math [at Belur]" (*CW* 7: 159). The "greatest benefactor" of humanity is the individual who imparts spiritual knowledge, for everyday forms of knowledge can only temporarily satisfy our physical wants such as hunger while it

is spiritual strength that enables us to rise above the misery of the world. Next to this form of help is the gift of learning, which is "a far higher gift than that of food and clothes" for those who are in a state of ignorance dwell in darkness and their lives are shrouded in suffering. Third in this order is physical help, which should not be mistakenly viewed as the only type of assistance we can render to the world. Summarizing this discussion, Vivekananda says that the "help which tends to make us strong spiritually is the highest, next to it comes intellectual help, and after that physical help" (*CW* 1: 52–53).

In this way, Vivekananda retains Śaṅkara's emphasis on self-knowledge as the culminating point of worldly action: the help that we offer to others should be understood as a moral exercise through which we become strengthened spiritually (*CW* 1: 77). Invoking the teachings of the *Bhagavadgītā*, he notes that by performing all actions with an attitude of disinterestedness, the householder can become centered in the life of the spirit, so that like the lotus leaf that is not touched by water even as it grows in water, they are *in* the world, but they are not *of* the world. By considering their worldly life as a form of "worship" of God, they will selflessly serve humanity without any thought of worldly gain and seek to emulate God who remains always engaged in the world without any attachment (*CW* 1: 12, 59–60). Against the view that renouncers (*sannyāsin*s) are superior to individuals whose habitats are the social world, he states that "to be an ideal householder is a much more difficult task than to be an ideal Sannyâsin; the true life of work is indeed as hard as, if not harder than, the equally true life of renunciation" (*CW* 1: 62). Such God-centered householders are the spiritual centers of social existence, and they would acquire wealth and spend it for the material benefit of others. Indeed, "the householder who struggles to become rich by good means and for good purposes is doing practically the same thing for the attainment of salvation as the anchorite does in his cell when he is praying" (*CW* 1: 46).

In the manner of king Janaka, extolled in various premodern texts such as the *Pañcadaśī*, the *Aṣṭāvakragītā*, the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, and others, these God-rooted householders too can give themselves entirely to the world without any expectation of reward and remain engaged in the world without generating any further bondage to it. The crucial point, then, is not whether one lives within or beyond social milieus, but whether one has cultivated the spiritual discipline of *karma yoga*—those who have attained perfection on this pathway have mastered the secret of work, and even as they walk through a noisy city filled with traffic, their mind remains as calm as if they were in a cave (*CW* 1: 34). Such individuals would seek to overcome not only evil karmic actions but also good karmic actions, for both these modes of being-in-the-world generate forms of bondage. By performing actions with an internal sense of detachment, evil dispositions will be gradually subdued by good dispositions, and at the spiritual summit the karmic momentum of good dispositions too will dissolve so that worldly activities will leave behind no trace on the self. By generating an attitudinal distance from the world within which one remains engaged in work, one practices nonattachment as the spiritual equipment on one's journey towards perfection: "Work as if you were a stranger in this land, a sojourner; work

incessantly, but do not bind yourselves; bondage is terrible. This world is not our habitation, it is only one of the many stages through which we are passing" (*CW* 1: 56). Without becoming entangled in transactional calculi, the individual on the path of *karma yoga*, as they steadily progress towards *jīvanmukti*, remains an unperturbed center of self-collected agency. They remain deeply immersed in worldly activities while negating the misconception that they are a discrete individuality disconnected from the divine root. Thus, Vivekananda declares: "First kill your self and then take the whole world as yourself" (*CW* 1: 88). By developing self-control and recovering their true independence in the *ātman*, they move beyond enslavement to the world—such individuals alone are "fit to live well in the world" (*CW* 1: 92).

Central to these visions of spiritual perfection is a Vedāntic metaphysics of the human person—since at the living root of each individual is the immutable *ātman*, they must overcome all frailties associated with their corporeal existence. He calls upon his audiences to overcome their sense that they are weak beings who are in thrall to the trials and tribulations of worldly life. While each individual is potentially divine, this intrinsic divinity has become encrusted with various worldly misconceptions, and as these external encasements are removed one's intrinsic perfection becomes fully expressed (*CW* 1: 291–92). We would then realize that we embody the "absolutely free Existence" which is beyond all constrictions and all transformations (*CW* 1: 337). When we properly become decentered from worldly absorption and recentered in the absolute, we would understand that "strength is life, weakness is death. Strength is felicity, life eternal, immortal; weakness is constant strain and misery: weakness is death" (*CW* 2: 3). Therefore, to all world-bound individuals the Vedas announce the gospel of fearlessness, for fear is a sign of weakness which is not becoming of individuals who are expressions of the imperishable *ātman*. In our ignorance, we do not understand that finitude is the refraction of the infinite through the prisms of time, space, and causation, so that the world has been generated out of freedom, is currently in bondage, and is progressing towards the primordial freedom (*CW* 1: 95–96). He presents the system of yogic discipline too as structured by the quest for expansion into universal freedom in which the practitioner, by understanding that the physical external world is an expression of the subtle internal world, can conquer the former by mastering the latter. By exercising psychic control over inner spaces, such an individual overcomes their bondage to the natural domain and the whole world becomes their servant (*CW* 1: 257–58).

The universality of the *ātman* is, then, the metaphysical foundation of a boundless freedom which Vivekananda presents as the origin, the basis, and the telos of all beings, sentient and insentient, in the world. Crucially, as we have seen, the pathway towards this freedom is an expansion of the self that is concurrent with the negation of the "I" and its limited circle of acquisitive dispositions. As an individual gradually transcends the constrictions of "me and mine," they are able to progress towards that complete freedom of "absolute unselfishness" which is "infinite expansion" (*CW* 1: 109–10). To return to the motif of Practical Vedānta, the universality of the *ātman* also inspires and infuses our moral living—because the spiritual center of gravity lies not in psychophysical individuality but in the *ātman*, all other-regarding virtues are structured by the processes of the negation of the ego. Therefore, he often notes that the pathways of *jñāna*, *karma*, and *bhakti* ultimately converge on a self-effacing life

where the fabrics of one's finitude are reorientated and surrendered to the divine reality. For instance, noting that even if some religious individuals are "horrified at the idea of an Impersonal God," their moral principles too are shaped by the ideal of self-abnegation (*CW* 1: 84–85). That is, even in the case of theological systems structured by a divine command ethics, their forms of morality teach the renunciation of the little "I" and the realization of the sense of the presence of the Supreme Being in oneself, every other self, and the whole physical world. Thus, while someone following the pathway of *jñāna* may comprehend the metaphysical falsity of the "I" and give up egocentric *karma* quite readily, others on the pathway of *bhakti* may learn to envision God in everything and arrive at the summit of self-effacement where they utter "Thy will be done" and do not retain anything for themselves (*CW* 1: 86–87). Indeed, the practitioner of *karma yoga* does not have to espouse any particular metaphysical worldview relating to God and the soul—if they can practice selflessness in every form of activity, they are addressing the same problem that the *jñānī* does on the path of reasoning and the *bhakta* does on the path of devotional love (*CW* 1: 111). In other words, along these different pathways, individuals can progress towards the goal of attaining a nonegocentric unity with the whole world such that they are no longer confined to their insular domains shaped by the concerns of their finite self. Notwithstanding this convergence, the route of *jñāna*, which is structured by reiterated negations (*neti*, *neti*), is more arduous than that of *karma*, in which one works through the bondage of the world precisely to overcome this bondage. In the former, one deconstructs the misconceptions associated with the "I" through critical reasoning, and in the latter, one remains actively engaged in various activities while gradually becoming nonattached to these very activities (*CW* 1: 98).

In short, by becoming recentered in the *ātman* which is immovable and is eternally at peace, one gradually becomes victorious over the miseries of everyday life, with the conviction that the *ātman* cannot be fragmented or dispersed in the whirlpools of worldly activity. This hermeneutic reworking of Vedāntic themes reflects the contemporary exercises of various other figures on modernist landscapes such as Radhakrishnan, Mahatma K. Gandhi, and others, who envisioned the pursuit of meditative stability and sociopolitical activism as two densely interrelated moments of an individual's spiritual progress. For Vivekananda, the development of a supreme detachment is the foundation of all yogic disciplines—the root of attachment is the sense of egoity, and once its tentacles have been severed an individual can freely move in and through the world without becoming tethered to it. Highlighting this crucial point, he notes: "The binding link of 'I and mine' is in the mind. If we have not this link with the body and with the things of the senses, we are non-attached, wherever and whatever we may be. A man may be on a throne and perfectly non-attached; another man may be in rags and still very much attached" (*CW* 1: 101).

Swami Vivekananda and the Consilience of Vedāntic Pathways

These visions of perfection are sketched against the backdrop of cosmological cycles through which individuals are gradually moving towards the spiritual summit with different perspectives ranging from "the lowest fetishism to the highest

absolutism" (*CW* 1: 332). Depending on their birth and location in different religious traditions, which represent distinct stages of progress, these pilgrims will employ different symbolic forms as tools with which they approach the peak. This journeying should be seen not as a transition from utter falsity to truth, but from a lower expression of truth to a more adequate embodiment of truth. While some of the hardier climbers may have no need for this equipment it is vital for others, and this religious diversity is grounded in the supreme unity at the foundation of humanity: "The Hindus have discovered that the absolute can only be realised, or thought of, or stated, through the relative, and the images, crosses, and crescents are simply so many symbols—so many pegs to hang the spiritual ideas on. It is not that this help is necessary for every one, but those that do not need it have no right to say that it is wrong" (*CW* 1: 17). Because these diverse formations are inspired by the one God of humanity, we should view their variations not as contradictories but as products of different prisms through which the one light of truth is multiply refracted into different colors (*CW* 1: 18). This cosmic vision is the blueprint for attitudes of generosity and hospitality towards the followers of other religious traditions—since these different religious forms of life constitute progressive stages of humanity towards spiritual truth, individuals who inhabit one form should not condemn individuals in another form. Vivekananda repeatedly emphasizes that this truth is to be directly experienced in the here and now, and such an intuitive contact is the true goal of our worldly pilgrimages. Therefore, religion should not be reduced to a matter of bookish knowledge or scholastic disputations: "The end of all religions is the realising of God in the soul. That is the one universal religion. If there is one universal truth in all religions, I place it here—in realising God. Ideals and methods may differ, but that is the central point" (*CW* 1: 324–25). In other words, the heart of the religious life is God-realization, and it enfolds multiple pathways which are to be envisioned not as antagonistic but as supplementary to one another: "It does not matter whether one approaches the destination in a carriage with four horses, in an electric car, or rolling on the ground. The goal is the same" (*CW* 1: 468).

Against the backdrop of our discussion so far, we turn to the vexed topic of the shape of the Advaita that Vivekananda propounds in his lectures (Sharma 1998: 69–72). While his Vedāntic viewpoint is sometimes depicted as "Neo-Advaita," he was himself aware that the idioms of Advaita shaped the ethos of only a small proportion of Hindus (*CW* 2: 238) and noted that the term "Vedānta" should not be exclusively identified with Advaita because it includes systems such as the Viśiṣṭādvaita of Rāmānuja (*CW* 3: 229). Declaring himself to be a disciple of Ramakrishna whose very life was a living commentary on the Upaniṣads, he says that it is his mission in life is to show that the Vedāntic systems are not contradictory but are complementary, and they gradually lead the way towards the supreme realization indicated in Advaita by the declaration *tat tvam asi* (*CW* 3: 323–24). For Ramakrishna, both the Advaita sage (*jñānī*) and the theistic devotee (*bhakta*) may arrive at the supreme state of the seer (*vijñānī*) who knows "that the Reality which is nirguna, without attributes, is also saguna, with attributes" (Gupta 1974: 30). As we will see, the "Advaita" that Vivekananda configures too is an expansive horizon on which negations of egocentric individuality can be performed either through a meditative deconstruction of the "I" or

through a loving surrender of the "I" to the divine beloved—both the pathways of *jñāna* and *bhakti* lead to the one summit of fearlessness, vigor, and strength. Thus, noting that many people dislike his "preaching Advaitism," he replies that, in truth, he does not preach any ism other than the truth of the "wonderful idea of the soul—its eternal might, its eternal strength, its eternal purity, and its eternal perfection" (*CW* 3: 242–43). The reconciliation or harmonization across Vedāntic pathways that he presented, in the footsteps of Ramakrishna, would avoid the "torturing" of texts that both Advaita and dualistic commentators had inflicted on scriptural passages in the attempt to align them with their own metaphysical standpoints (*CW* 3: 233).

On the one hand, Vivekananda often presents a Śaṅkara-shaped understanding of absolute reality as the transpersonal ground (*nirguṇa* Brahman) which encompasses and sublates notions of personal divinity. He notes that the personal God—that is, the divine reality as entirely distinct from the world—is "the highest reading that can be attained to, of that Impersonal [Being], by the human intellect. So that the Personal God is true as much as this chair is true, as much as this world is true, but no more. It is not absolute truth" (*CW* 1: 377–78). All finite beings—extending to the personal God—are multiple manifestations of the infinite reality which is beyond all conceptions of personality. More concretely, he presents religious truth as unfolding through three progressive stages—first, we see God "in the far beyond"; next, we envision God as the omnipresent reality in whom we live; and finally, we recognize that we *are* divine in our truest depth (*CW* 1: 330–31). In this vein, he says that the ancient composers of the Vedic verses rejected monotheism as too human a viewpoint and not sufficiently philosophical and transcendental. The notions of God as the supreme ruler or the moral guide cannot be an adequate explanation for the world, for it implies that God is, at best, a cosmic architect who must work on, and work with, preexisting materials. Pointing to the design argument, he notes that its flaw is that it configures God as a builder externally related to the materials such that God's operations are limited by the nature of these materials. In this way, the ancient sages stopped looking for the divine reality in the visible world, and plunging into their existential depths, they discerned the divine reality as the innermost presence in their heart. Thus, they developed their Vedānta which declares that the physical cosmos reflects the human self, such that if one can know this spiritual reality everything else becomes known (*CW* 1: 346–56).

Thus, laying out a progressive sequence from dualism to the qualified nondualism of Rāmānuja to the Advaita of Śaṅkara, he writes: "The monistic Vedanta is the simplest form in which you can put truth. To teach dualism was a tremendous mistake made in India and elsewhere" (*CW* 2: 199). If in the first worldview, God is external to the world, in the second worldview, the natural world and the finite selves constitute the body of God. The truth of these two worldviews culminates in nondualism: "This is the last word of the Vedas. It begins with dualism, goes through a qualified monism and ends in perfect monism" (*CW* 2: 252). While in dualism, the first stage of religion, God and the human self are eternally separate, in Viśiṣṭādvaita the human self is a part of God, such that while it retains its individuality it is both "separate and not separate" from God. At this stage, the question arises, from an Advaita perspective, as to whether we can meaningfully speak of "parts" of the infinite. If, per impossibile, the infinite could

be divided, such partition would generate a multiplicity of infinities, and since these would mutually limit one another, each would be reduced to finitude. Many of these critiques of Vedāntic systems other than Advaita follow this logic of the nonfinite: if there is an ontological distinction of some kind between God *and* the world with its multiplicity of selves and physical entities, the world has to be viewed as an enumerable "part" over and above God, in which case the infinity of God is negated. The conjunction in this world picture is logically superfluous from an Advaitic viewpoint which regards selves and material objects as only seemingly unfolded out of the intrinsically indivisible *ātman*. Thus, Vivekananda arrives at an Advaitic conclusion: "Infinity can only be one, undivided. Thus the conclusion will be reached that the infinite is one and not many, and that one Infinite Soul is reflecting itself through thousands and thousands of mirrors, appearing as so many different souls. It is the same Infinite Soul, which is the background of the universe, that we call God. The same Infinite Soul also is the background of the human mind which we call the human soul" (*CW* 2: 430–31). Just as the one sun appears to us to have become fragmented into multiple suns when it is refracted through millions of water drops, the indivisible Being appears to us to have become divided into multiple finite selves. This seeming division into various forms of empirical beings is our human apprehension of the Self when we view it through the matrices of space, time, and causation (*CW* 3: 7–8).

On the other hand, even as he presents such a graduated scale of spiritual progression, he occasionally indicates that it is not the metaphysical system of dualism that he opposes but the association between an ontological distinction of God and humanity, on the one hand, and an experiential sense of weakness on the part of the devotee, on the other hand. Thus, responding to the charge that he was preaching too much of Advaita and not enough dualism, he notes that while he is himself aware of the spiritual ecstasy that infuses the experience of love in dualistic worldviews, the present time is not for shedding more tears of joyful devotion. What people need is the vigorous strength and the robust faith in their existential capacities which can be promoted by Advaita's declaration of the fundamental unity of all being (*CW* 3: 190). The notion of a personal God who is to be loved and worshiped does have great soothing power, but eventually it brings weakness which generates a train of miseries (*CW* 2: 197–98). Because some people are taught from childhood that they are sinful and miserable beings, they have forgotten that they have an inexhaustible source of strength through their connaturality with the *ātman* which is never entangled in webs of weakness. By steadily becoming stabilized in the *ātman*, they should instead acquire the transcendental strength which is the medicine for all worldly diseases and live energetically on moral pathways of altruistic concern for humanity. Indeed, if a millionth part of human beings were to meditatively reflect for a few minutes on all beings as expressions of the indivisible divinity, the world would be transformed within half an hour—all hatred will be dispelled, and we would see and feel the divine presence in everything (*CW* 2: 287). The equivalence between the sense of a nondualist presence of divinity and the gospel of strength is clearly enunciated in this delineation of Advaita: "You are the whole of that Absolute, and so are all others, because the idea of part cannot come into it. These divisions, these limitations, are only apparent, not in the thing itself.…

If you think you are bound, bound you will remain; if you know that you are free, free you are" (*CW* 1: 419). More tersely, he declares: "There is only one sin. That is weakness" (*CW* 1: 479) and "God is not to be reached by the weak. Never be weak. You must be strong; you have infinite strength within you" (*CW* 4: 11).

Therefore, cutting through the religious mists associated with weeping for a personal God, an individual on the path of Advaita would not bow before any finite potentate but salute only the eternal *ātman* which is illimitable strength. Because the little self is dead, and in its place stands the immutable *ātman*, the whole world becomes transfigured, so that it is no longer a prison house of misery but is suffused with goodness, beauty, and love (*CW* 2: 286). Once again, theistic forms are not to be denounced as entirely erroneous or worthless but are to be viewed as constitutive of the purgative processes—stretching across vast cosmological aeons—of the removal of the encrustations that have become contingently deposited on the *ātman* without, however, contaminating its intrinsic purity: "It is only a question of time, and time is nothing in the Infinite. It is a drop in the ocean. We can afford to wait and be calm" (*CW* 1: 421). By traversing diverse religious forms across multiple lifetimes, one arrives, in a cosmic homecoming, at the unmoving center of one's true self—always pure, perfect, and sorrowless. Therefore, while beliefs and practices shaped by dualistic notions of God are common among unreflective people, the follower of the Advaita path would not quarrel with them, for theists too are proceeding towards the one common goal of humanity (*CW* 2: 141–42). This is because although the notion of a personal God is "only the beginning" (*CW* 2: 104) of Vedāntic spirituality, it is not to be completely rejected but should be reinforced through the invocation of the indivisible *ātman* which is without any personalist forms. While Advaita accepts personalist conceptions of the divine reality such as the ruler of the world, it also endorses a "higher phase" of these conceptions "which is personal-impersonal" (*CW* 3: 336). Thus, while the religious vision that Vivekananda announces is rooted in the nonpersonal *ātman*, it encompasses vast numbers of descents of God (*avatāra*), particular forms through which God is worshiped (*iṣṭa*), and so on (*CW* 3: 183). Since these personalist conceptions are multiple pathways through which the *ātman* is concretely expressed in the world, these limited conceptions are not negated but are given their true ontological significance: "Thus we preserve the personal and do not destroy it.…We cannot prove the individual by any other means but by referring to the universal, by proving that this individual is really the universal. If we think of the individual as separate from everything else in the universe, it cannot stand a minute" (*CW* 2: 333).

In short, what is vital is not the precise detail of the metaphysical structure of a Vedāntic worldview but its conceptual resources which can structure habits of living fearlessly in the world. He acknowledges that there are some doctrinal disagreements across Vedāntic spectra: while theistic forms hold that the finite self is contingently subject to contraction and expansion, according to Advaita, the *ātman* is not inflected by such processes. Nevertheless, the "way of reconciliation" that he proposes reminds their adherents that they all agree that the spiritual center is intrinsically perfect, and on this common ground they may develop energetic styles of living in the world: "Pretty much the same thing in effect. The one may be a more logical statement than the other, but as to the result, the practical conclusions, both

are about the same" (*CW* 3: 191). From the perspective of such "practical" consequences of Vedāntic metaphysics, Vivekananda sketches, as we have seen, two moral pathways for negating the "I" and living robustly in the world—one shaped by the idioms of Advaita and the other shaped by the idioms of devotionalism. One should seek to cut through the encrustations of the little "I" sedimented over the *ātman*, and by realizing that the *ātman* in one human being is not ontologically distinct from the *ātman* in another human being and indeed in any other living being, one would extend universal love and sympathy towards all beings (*CW* 1: 384–85). By dying to the "I" and concurrently becoming stabilized in the *ātman*, one progressively becomes fearless because there is no longer the misconception that there is a radically disjointed other out there. Instead, by reenvisioning every individual as an expression of infinite existence, consciousness, and bliss, we would help them to fully realize and enact this inner divinity in their worldly living.

Skillfully addressing the anxiety that Advaita calls upon us to efface our much-prized individuality, he notes that we are not yet truly individuals, for one becomes an individual not by attaching oneself to perishable goods but by becoming recentered in the nondivisible ground of being. As one's intrinsic boundlessness is progressively manifested more clearly, one becomes a nondividual who "can say, 'I am in everything, in everybody, I am in all lives, I am the universe,' [and] then alone comes the state of fearlessness" (*CW* 2: 80–81). Therefore, this-worldly engagement and Advaitic transpersonalism are compatible: indeed, only through liberation from egoism, attachment, and fear is ethical behavior possible. In other words, as we have seen several times in this article, the "I-sense" is the source of egocentricity, and ethical action is possible when individuals, as nondividuals, view the world not as composed of radically alien entities but as rooted in a transcendental unity. Returning to the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, we read that such is the spiritual vision of the perfected sages who, whether or not they are engaged in activity, are devoid of the I-conceit, and see the three worlds as their own self. Though they are in the midst of phenomenal existence, they are tranquil (*śānta*) and they remain cool (*śītala*) while dealing with all things (Mitra 1998: 176–77).

Alternatively, one can follow the path of cultivating supreme *bhakti* in which one is intoxicated by a maddening thirst to see God. Thus, we read in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* that when the cowherd women were riven with grief because of their separation from Kṛṣṇa, they lost all sense of individuality and felt that they had themselves become Kṛṣṇa (*CW* 3: 281–82). The spiritual gravitation of God's love draws out such devotees from within the circle of the "I" marked by worldly individuality and reorientates them towards the divine beloved. Such God-intoxicated individuals, thoroughly suffused with *bhakti*, have transcended the transactional logic where one seeks something from God in return for their love of God—they love God wholeheartedly with their sense of being a distinct "I" entirely dissolved in the universality of God's love (*CW* 2: 50–53). By progressively learning to call upon God as one's father, mother, friend, and beloved, an individual may reach the spiritual summit where all sense of difference between lover and beloved is dissolved (*CW* 2: 326). If this perfect lover, who self-effacingly envisions the world as suffused with divine love, were bitten by a serpent, this serpent itself would be regarded by them as a messenger sent

by the beloved (*CW* 3: 76). Crucially, because such a lover has cut through the parochial conceptions of the "I" which views itself as disconnected from the rest of the world, they have also overcome fear: "So long as there is the least spark of fear in you there can be no love there" (*CW* 3: 88–89). Thus, pointing to the traditional dispute between the proponents of *jñāna* who posit *bhakti* as an instrument, and the proponents of *bhakti* for whom *bhakti* is both the instrument and the goal, Vivekananda declares that this is "a distinction without much difference" for true love and true knowledge cannot be separated (*CW* 3: 34). Therefore, unlike the classical template of Śaṅkara's Advaita in which theistic *bhakti* is regarded as ultimately unreal (*māyā*) from the transcendental (*pāramārthika*) viewpoint, Vivekananda's "Advaita" seems to be a more expansive category pointing to that dynamic consilience of perfect *jñāna* and perfect *bhakti* which casts out all fear and motivates vigorous living in the world. While in Śaṅkara's commentarial texts, *karma yoga* and *bhakti yoga* are propaedeutic to the realization of nonduality through *jñāna yoga*, Vivekananda occasionally presents them as independent pathways towards liberation. For instance, he argues that the "Yogas of work, of wisdom, and of devotion are all capable of serving as direct and independent means for the attainment of Moksha" (*CW* 1: 93) and that *Bhagavadgītā* 4.11 teaches that all spiritual pathways lead to liberation (Medhananda 2021: 17).

Concluding Remarks

We return to a theme with which we started this article: the significance of renunciation on the pathway to liberation. In Swami Vivekananda's synthesis of Vedāntic streams, the call of the spirit and an individual's response along worldly routes to this call are deeply interrelated spirals of a cosmic loop. Thus, in a lecture delivered in London on October 27, 1896, entitled "God in Everything," he offers his exegeses of several verses from the *Īśa Upaniṣad* and argues that "renunciation" of the world is to be properly understood as its "deification"—the world is to be envisioned as rooted in and enveloped by the divine. By discerning the divine *in* finite reality—including one's social relations—one would be ceaselessly engaged in work and yet remain unchained to the world (*CW* 2: 144–54).

This creative exposition of an ancient scriptural motif to a Western audience indicates that the shifts across premodern and modern Hindu worlds are more fine-grained than the characterization of "Neo-Hinduism" as *either* an abrupt break with earlier Hindu traditions *or* an unfolding of what was always already contained in them would allow. Classical and medieval Advaita do not usually present social activism as a necessary prerequisite for or an enactment of the realization of one's essential nonduality with the ultimate, and even when they speak of helping people, they strike a muted note about the universality of this outreach. In these Advaita traditions, the "deindividuation" of the ego was not usually taken in the activist direction of organized projects for engaging with socioeconomic inequalities. While scholars continue to debate the extent to which Śaṅkara himself was critical of caste hierarchies, the later Advaitic traditions did not systematically apply the notion of the insubstantiality of empirical categories to dismantle these social structures (Rambachan 2006). While emphasizing that ritual action is not the primary

instrument for liberation, these traditions promoted such action, structured by the categories of caste and gender, to the extent that it is a preparatory stage for the attainment of self-knowledge. Therefore, the shifts from Śaṅkara to Vivekananda should be placed on a continuum of discontinuities as well as continuities. Through a set of complex psychobiographical routes that include his firsthand experiences of material impoverishment during his travels through India, his reflections on the teachings he had received from Ramakrishna, the socioeconomic shifts brought about by colonial interventions and so on, Vivekananda transformed a traditional Hindu motif of individual charitable acts performed by householders to that of sustained, planned, and systematic intervention as a proper response to human suffering. At the same time, as we have seen, he embodied certain experiential tensions between the call of the spirit and the demands of the world that were mediated to him from premodern Vedāntic milieus by Ramakrishna. Thus, Amiya P. Sen notes that he continually struggled "at reconciling what appear to be polar opposites, a radical, this-worldly approach to human existence and an extremely abstract viewpoint in which life and its several problems were insubstantial and transitory" (2000: 101).

To this extent, Paul Hacker is correct in noting that the statement of nonduality, *tat tvam asi*, was not systematically applied to the domain of social ethics in classical Advaita (Halbfass 1995: 215). However, the term "Neo-Hindu," as employed by Hacker and some other scholars, characterizes these post-nineteen hundred Hindu universes largely as imitative responses to Western influences or derivative products triggered by Western stimuli. The recent scholarship on Vivekananda and figures such as Radhakrishnan, Sri Aurobindo, and others eschews the notion of "Oriental passivity" that structures these readings and emphasizes the role of native agency in creatively reworking Western notions towards formulating modernized Hindu templates (Madaio 2017). Thus, in tracing the relationship between *jīvanmukti* and social engagement, we have noted varying degrees of emphasis on worldly service, starting from Śaṅkara's view that the *guru* compassionately teaches Vedāntic truth to a disciple, to the claim in certain premodern texts that kings such as Janaka could rule without accumulating karmic residues, to Ramakrishna's call to realize the divine within oneself before engaging in service to humanity, to Vivekananda's organization of a group of monks dedicated to *sevā*, to certain tensions within the Ramakrishna Order over the relative prioritization of contemplation and action, and to Radhakrishnan's depiction of the *jīvanmukta* as a *bodhisattva*. That this relationship remains an intensely debated topic can be seen from two quotations which embody opposing conclusions. In a study of the Ramakrishna movement, Krishna Prakash Gupta argues that "Vivekananda's reformulated Vedanta was Western only in appearance; in essence, it was Hindu both in terms of demands it set upon the reformed sannyasins and the specific mode in which it could institutionalize itself in the Indian society" (1974: 29). In contrast, in a wide-ranging study of Advaita notions of *jīvanmukti*, Andrew O. Fort notes that all religious traditions undergo changes and that it is legitimate, even good, to introduce social service to the classical

notion of *jīvanmukti*. However, he adds that "it is still important to note that this idea is a reinterpretation—even a distortion—of the views of Śaṅkara and his followers. It is a greater break with the past than admitted or might first seem apparent" (Fort 1998: 173).

While there is no quantitative procedure for determining precisely when a historical transition in a religious tradition is essentially a rearticulation of, or a clear departure from, an established archetype, we have argued in this article that the truth of the matter lies somewhere between such polarized representations of the shifts across modernity. Vivekananda works with, and develops on some modernist landscapes in India and the West, the styles of vernacularized Vedānta that he receives from Ramakrishna. Thus, his Vedāntic vision interweaves self-knowledge (*jñāna*) and devotional practice (*bhakti*) and defies straightforward categorization into the worldviews associated with premodern preceptors such as Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. Reinforcing the teachings of his *guru*, he institutionalizes through the Ramakrishna Mission the Vedāntic claim that the individual who becomes established in the true self also becomes perfectly able to undertake self-effacing service to the world.

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