**A Close Examination of Beginningless *Karman* and Vedāntic First Causes**

Abstract: In this paper, I draw attention to various doctrines common to different Vedāntic traditions. In particular, I pay close attention to the doctrine of beginningless *karman*. I also note that this doctrine seems to stand in tension with Leibnizian Cosmological Arguments (LCAs) and Kalām Cosmological Arguments (KCAs). This tension arises because defenders of these arguments argue that an infinite causal regress or an actual infinite cannot be physically instantiated and because the doctrine of beginningless *karman* seems to imply that such a regress or actual infinite can be physically instantiated. I address this tension by showing that not all interpretations of beginningless *karman* involve an infinite causal regress or an actual infinite. I also close this paper by highlighting a few points about Vedāntic traditions that make them more resistant to some objections to LCAs and KCAs.

Keywords: Vedānta, Cosmological Arguments, *Karman*, Philosophy of Religion

The systems of philosophical inquiry and soteriological practice collectively known as Vedānta occupy a prominent role within South Asian intellectual history. There are three canonical Vedāntic texts that are collectively known as the *prasthānatrayī*. These texts are the *Brahmasūtra* (henceforth *BS*) (*c*. 300 BCE – 300 CE), the *Bhagavadgītā* (henceforth *BhG*) (*c*. 500 BCE – 200 CE), and the Upaniṣads (*c*. 800 – 300 BCE). Moreover, there are a variety of Vedāntic traditions, including Vaiṣṇava[[1]](#footnote-1) Vedāntic traditions and Śaivite[[2]](#footnote-2) Vedāntic traditions. While these traditions accept the authority of the abovementioned scriptural texts, they each have their own distinct interpretation of these texts. Nevertheless, different Vedāntic traditions are characterized by certain general features, which are shared across all Vedāntic traditions. One feature is that Vedāntic traditions state that the world is not created *ex nihilo*. Rather, it is produced from pre-existing material (*prakṛti*), which itself is beginningless (*anādi*) (*BhG* 13.19[[3]](#footnote-3)).

What is perhaps the most important feature of Vedāntic traditions is their commitment to the existence of *brahman*. *BhG* 10.8[[4]](#footnote-4) states that *brahman* is “the origin of everything” (*sarvasya prabhavaḥ*) (Schweig 2010, 303). A similar view is found in *BS* 1.1.2,[[5]](#footnote-5) which states that “[*brahman* is that] from which the origin, maintenance, and dissolution of this [universe proceed].” As these verses suggest, *brahman* is the ultimate cause of everything. Hence, *brahman* is often compared or contrasted with Western concepts of God. When discussing *brahman*, there is one important point to bear in mind. Certain Vedāntic traditions, such as the Mādhva Vaiṣṇava tradition, which is based on the life and the teachings of Madhva (*c*. 1238-1317 CE), believe in the existence of a personal *brahman* “with properties” (*saguṇa brahman*). Other Vedāntic traditions uphold the existence of both a non-personal “propertyless” *brahman* (typically referred to as *nirguṇa brahman*) and *saguṇa brahman*.[[6]](#footnote-6) Theologies influenced by Śaṅkara (9th century CE), Caitanya (1486-1534 CE), and Ramakrishna (1836-1886 CE) contain this view (Maharaj 2018, ch. 2). In these traditions, one central point of contention is about which *brahman* is superior to the other, or if one can be shown to be superior to the other at all (Maharaj 2018, ch. 2).

Another doctrine common to all Vedāntic traditions that *BS* 2.1.35[[7]](#footnote-7) describes is *anādi*-*karman*, orbeginningless *karman*. *Karman* refers to a system of consequentiality, according to which actions produce consequences that individuals receive either in the present lifetime or in future lifetimes. Beginningless *karman* refers to the idea that *karmic* processes have no beginning but have gone on eternally. There are different interpretations of beginningless *karman* that one can hold to, and these will be elaborated on shortly. Importantly, certain scholars have raised the charge that the doctrine of beginningless *karman* leads to an infinite regress of causes and effects (Kaufman 2005). In the context of philosophy of religion, this is significant because there are two families of arguments for God’s existence that focus extensively on the plausibility of infinite causal regresses. One family of arguments is the Leibnizian Cosmological Argument (LCA), and the other family of arguments is the Kalām Cosmological Argument (KCA) (I say “family” of arguments because there can be various ways to formulate and defend LCAs and KCAs). In short, these arguments conclude that God exists by arguing that there must be a first cause and that this first cause is God. A crucial component of these arguments is ruling out the possibility of an infinite causal regress (an infinite regress of causes and effects).[[8]](#footnote-8) The LCA and the KCA are relevant in the context of Vedānta because Vedānta is theistic. Thus, if these arguments are sound, and Vedāntins are not committed to an infinite causal regress, then this means that the conclusions of these arguments can support Vedāntic theism by way of supporting theism more broadly. On the other hand, if Vedāntins are committed to an infinite causal regress, then even though the LCA and the KCA have as a conclusion that God exists, this concept of God and the metaphysical commitments associated with it (including the rejection of the possibility of an infinite causal regress) cannot be upheld by Vedāntic theists since these commitments are inconsistent with Vedāntic theism.

In this paper, my aim is to bring Vedānta into closer dialogue with contemporary philosophy of religion by demonstrating that there are different interpretations of *anādi*-*karman* and that certain interpretations do not commit Vedāntic theists to upholding the possibility of an infinite causal regress. Thus, one of my aims in this paper is to show that proponents of LCAs and KCAs who are not Vedāntic theists cannot show that Vedāntic theism is false through these arguments alone. A related aim is to show that certain Vedāntic theists can employ LCAs and KCAs, as the metaphysical commitments entailed by the premises and the conclusions of these arguments are consistent with these Vedāntic theists’ metaphysical commitments. I also briefly highlight some advantages that certain Vedāntic traditions have over competing theistic views with respect to LCAs and KCAs.

For the most part, I do not focus on one Vedāntic tradition in particular in this paper. Rather, I focus my attention primarily on the different Vedāntic doctrines described so far, especially the doctrine of beginningless *karman*. I will later consider the specific views of one Vedāntic tradition (the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition[[9]](#footnote-9)), as this tradition has an interpretation of beginningless *karman* that is worth mentioning and which I have not found elsewhere. Thus, when I say the phrase “Vedāntic theist,” I have in mind a theist who accepts the above doctrines. A non-Vedāntic theist would thus be a theist who does not accept all the above doctrines (though as I indicate below, certain non-Vedāntic theists may accept some of the above doctrines).

I should also note that certain abovementioned Vedāntic doctrines are found in other Indian traditions. For instance, the concept of *karman* is found in Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and other Hindu religious traditions. In certain cases, this concept of *karman* is associated with non-theistic religious traditions, such as Buddhism and Jainism. In other cases, this concept of *karman* is associated with theistic religious traditions, such as the Hindu tradition known as Nyāya (though it is worth mentioning that the concept of beginningless *karman* is often associated with Vedānta specifically). So, the reasoning in this paper is relevant to other Indic traditions to varying degrees even though I primarily focus on Vedānta and some of its important concepts, texts, and thinkers.

In the following section (“Three Interpretations of Beginningless *Karman*”), I outline different interpretations of beginningless *karman*. Then, in the section “Cosmological Arguments” I will describe LCAs and KCAs in greater depth and examine the implications of the different interpretations of beginningless *karman* for these arguments. In the section “Philosophical Advantages of Certain Vedāntic Views,” I briefly highlight some of the philosophical advantages that Vedāntic theists have with respect to LCAs and KCAs. I then conclude the paper.

**Three Interpretations of Beginningless *Karman***

As indicated earlier, there are three interpretations of beginningless *karman*. One interpretation is that beginningless *karman* entails an infinite causal regress. To see why this is the case, suppose that Bob got punched in the face. According to a common interpretation of *karman*, the reason for this incident is because Bob performed some previous action A1 that had as a *karmic* consequence Bob’s incident. Let us say that A1 is Bob punching Mike in the face. Now, we might ask, why did Bob do A1? One answer is that Bob did A1 because he was in a circumstance C1 and that Bob exercised his will to do A1 in C1. Now, it is not immediately clear that this entails an infinite causal regress. For, suppose that Bob’s choice to do A1 in C1 is not necessitated by C1. In other words, while Bob’s being placed in C1 might be a *karmic* consequence, Bob has the freedom to choose how he responds to being in C1. It may be the case that when Bob was in C1, he had a number of actions available to him that were possible for him to choose and that, as it so happened, Bob decided to choose A1 instead of some other action A1\*.

This being the case, in order for beginningless *karman* to entail an infinite causal regress (instead of there being infinitely many circumstances that arise due to *karmic* consequences, which is not an infinite causal regress but an actual infinite[[10]](#footnote-10) – an important distinction to draw as I will later note), something else is required in the above example.

Specifically, what is required is that when Bob is in C1, Bob is caused to do A1 (punch Mike) due to D1. D1 could stand for various things. For example, it might be the specific disposition that Bob has at the time of doing A1. Or, it might be something else, though for example’s sake, I will take D1 to be a disposition. Moreover, in order for there to be an infinite causal regress in this case, D1 must also have a cause K1, which itself has another cause, which itself has another cause, and so on *ad infinitum*. For instance, suppose that K1 in this case is a particular *karmic* consequence, like Bob having an unpleasant experience at work. This *karmic* consequence could result in Bob acquire a particular disposition D1, which leads him to do A1 in C1 (i.e. punch Mike in a particular circumstance). Additionally, the cause of K1 is that Bob did some previous action A2 in circumstances C2 due to his dispositions D2. Furthermore, the cause of D2 is some other *karmic* consequence K2, which itself was caused by Bob being in a certain circumstance with a certain disposition, which itself has a cause, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

So, if one holds to a view of *karman* such as the above, then one’s view seems to entail an infinite causal regress. Alternatively, it is at the least, conceivable that one could deny that *karmic* consequentiality operates in the manner above. For instance, an individual might be in a particular circumstance in which their choice of action is not caused by any antecedent conditions, in which case, there is no infinite causal regress being appealed to as an explanation for this action.

Or, one might also accept that *karmic* consequentiality involves a sequence of events such as the one mentioned above, but deny that there are any instances of causation taking place (thus making it the case that there are no infinite causal regresses). For instance, in the above example, Bob’s disposition D1 at the time of doing A1 is regarded as being a cause of A1. However, whether or not this is properly viewed as a cause is a contestable point. For instance, one might initially regard D1 to be a cause of A1 in the sense that D1 makes A1 more likely. However, this would involve holding to the probability-raising theory of causation (according to which causes raise the probability of their effects). Thus, to argue that beginningless *karman* entails an infinite causal regress, one must argue for this theory of causation. However, like other theories of causation, the probability-raising theory of causation is controversial, so arguing for it is not straightforward. For instance, suppose that Sally and Mark aim rocks at a window. Sally is a good thrower and has a 90% chance of hitting the window, whereas Mark is a bad thrower and has a 10% chance of hitting the window. They both throw their rocks at the window simultaneously. Suppose that Sally’s rock misses whereas Mark’s rock does not. In this case, Sally’s throw raised the probability that the window would shatter from .1 (the probability that Mark would hit the window) to .91 (the probability that at least one of them would hit the window), and yet, Sally’s throw does not cause the window to break. According to the probability-raising theory of causation, Sally’s rock would be considered a cause of the window breaking – which is a counterintuitive conclusion that challenges this interpretation of causation.

Now, my point here is not to argue definitively against probability-raising theories of causation or to deny that there are other theories of causation that could be employed in the case of Bob. Rather, I merely aim to point out that the view that beginningless *karman* entails an infinite causal regress requires certain controversial assumptions about causation that a Vedāntin need not accept unless there are compelling reasons to do so.

Yet, there might be another reason why beginningless *karman* entails an infinite causal regress. Suppose that the notion of beginningless *karman* entails that there have been an infinite series of universes coming into and out of existence. In this case, if the cause of one universe coming into existence is the dissolution of a previous universe, and this process of universes being produced and destroyed has been occurring without a beginning, then the chain of universes seems to be an infinite causal regress. Still, a Vedāntic theist might contest this. They could argue that the cause of a universe coming into existence is not only the dissolution of a previous universe, but also the *karmic* merits and demerits of individuals – as a Vedāntic theist can hold that the production of a universe is done so by *brahman* with the aim of providing a means for individuals to experience *karmic* consequences. So, consider our universe. One cause of the universe is a previous universe being destroyed, and another cause is the collection of *karmic* merits and demerits that individuals within the universe have. If both these causes have a cause or causes, and this cause or these causes have a cause, and so on *ad infinitum*, then there might be an infinite causal regress.

However, suppose that an individual’s collection of *karmic* merits and demerits is caused by their exercise of free will, and nothing causes this exercise of free will apart from an individual’s possession of free will, which has no further cause beyond *brahman* sustaining this free will. In this case, there is no infinite chain of causes and effects needed to explain this collection of *karmic* merits and demerits. Rather, this collection of *karmic* merits and demerits has a finite causal history. In this case, the universe is not one effect in a chain of infinite causes and effects. Rather, it is one among innumerable universes with a finite causal history that continually come to be produced and be dissolved, but not as part of an infinite chain of universes that are caused by a previous universe and in turn cause another universe. So, here too, if one accepts the second interpretation of beginningless *karman*, then the existence of various universes coming into and out of existence does not necessarily imply an infinite causal regress.

I should repeat that it is not my intention to settle these issues here, but merely to outline possible interpretations of beginningless *karman*. So far, there are two interpretations of *karman* that have been outlined: (1) *karman* is beginningless and entails an infinite causal regress and (2) *karman* is beginningless and entails an actual infinite (as there are infinitely many circumstances that individuals have been placed in due to their *karmic* merits and demerits). One point worth noting here is that the existence of an infinite causal regress entails the existence of an actual infinite (for this regress itself has an actual infinite amount of causes and effects). However, the existence of an actual infinite does not entail the existence of an infinite causal regress (for instance, individuals might have been in infinitely many circumstances, but each of their actions only has a finite causal history).

There is another interpretation one can have ofbeginningless *karman*. One can hold that the system of *karmic* consequentiality, as a type of law-like system present in the world, is without a beginning. However, individuals in the physical world may nevertheless have performed a first action, in which case, this view entails that individuals do not perform infinitely many actions in the physical world and that the actions that they perform in the physical world are not part of an infinite causal regress. So, a third view (3) is that *karman* is beginningless but no actual infinite or infinite causal regress exists.

Admittedly, view (3) as outlined above is problematic. According to most, if not all, versions of a *karman* doctrine,[[11]](#footnote-11) individuals within the physical perform actions via being physically embodied. Now, suppose that there is a first action for a certain individual. We can then ask: was this first action performed while this individual has a physical body? Suppose the answer to this question is yes. We can then ask: how did this individual acquire this physical body, on account of which, it performed its first action? According to a *karman* doctrine, individuals receive their physical bodies in large part due to their *karmic* merits and demerits. However, prior to an individual performing an action, it would have no *karmic* merits or demerits, and so, there would be nothing that would account for why an individual is physically embodied in the first place – thus problematizing this view. One could attempt to avoid this difficulty by maintaining that individuals and the physical world were created at a certain point, but this stands in tension with the Hindu notion of the universe being beginningless (it also stands in tension with *BhG* 2.12,[[12]](#footnote-12) which states that individuals are not created at a certain point but exist eternally). To avoid such problems, suppose we say that the first action an individual performs is not when they are physically embodied. The problem for this view is to explain how an individual can act in a disembodied state and why a self initially exists in this state.

Nevertheless, there is another view concerning beginningless *karman*, according to which (3) can be more plausible to maintain. So far, I have only found a view such as this in the writings of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava guru and theologian A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, so this is the specific view that I will focus on. Prabhupāda interprets the term *anādi* to mean “since time immemorial” – but not without a chronological beginning (Prabhupāda 1998b, 319). Prabhupāda states that individuals were once in a supramundane realm with God and then some of them chose to exercise their free will to come to the physical world (Prabhupāda 1998a, 782). Call this the “doctrine of the fall.” Once individuals reached this world, they would initiate a first action, which would mark the beginning of their *karmic* causal history. Thus, according to this view, individuals’ existence within the physical world is of a finite duration and there are a finite amount of activities that they performed in the physical world. It is beyond the scope of this paper to defend this particular view in depth. For a lengthier defense of this view, see (ISKCON GBC Press 1996; [citation removed to preserve author anonymity]; and [citation removed to preserve author anonymity]).

Now, there are different interpretations that one can hold regarding the doctrine of the fall. On any interpretation of this doctrine, individuals do not perform infinitely many actions in the physical world, and the actions that they perform in the physical world are not part of an infinite causal regress. However, there are differing views one can have concerning the actions in the supramundane realm from which individuals originally came. One view is that individuals perform a first action in the supramundane realm, in which case, there are no actual infinites or infinite causal regresses. This view would avoid the difficulties involved in defending (3), as mentioned above, as the rules of *karmic* consequentiality, which state that individuals should be physically embodied to perform actions, do not apply in the supramundane realm. Thus, this view opens up the possibility of an individual performing a first action without first needing *karmic* merits and demerits (which require having performed actions) to acquire a physical body.

Still, there may be other problems with this view. For instance, this view stands in tension with the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava notion that the actions and playful activities (*līlā*) of *saguṇa* *brahman* (in this case, the deity Kṛṣṇa) are beginningless and eternal – as one would imagine that such beginningless actions and activities have not been started at a certain moment but have always been performed. It is also somewhat strange to envision individuals existing without a beginning (since *BhG* indicates that individuals are not created but have always existed) but then only choosing to initiate a first action at a certain moment (for instance, one can ask the question, what were they doing before this first action, and why did they not perform this action earlier?). Nevertheless, this is not a special problem for this view – for instance, in Christian contexts, if one holds to the view that God exists within time, and they also hold that God creates a first universe, then they are also tasked with explaining why God chooses to initiate a first action when God does and why God does not act earlier. Moreover, the problems facing the proponent of the doctrine of the fall and (3) are arguably less serious than the problems for a proponent of (3) who denies the doctrine of the fall. Whether or not (3) is a defensible view in the context of this doctrine of the fall is a question that can be explored further, and my aim is not to settle this question conclusively, but rather to illuminate this interpretation by pointing to the relevant questions to ask concerning the defensibility of (3).

Another view pertaining to the doctrine of the fall is that individuals perform infinitely many actions in the supramundane realm, but each action is not causally dependent on the performance of a previous action, and so there are no infinite causal regresses. For instance, in this supramundane realm, if an individual decided to sing the glories of God, this action may not have a previous cause, such as the performance of another action or a disposition that itself had a cause. Rather, this decision to sing could be due to a self’s free will, and this free will is simply a part of a self’s uncaused nature, which is intrinsic to it and not caused by external influences (in the physical world, there are external influences that affect individuals’ behavior, but these same influences need not exist in the supramundane realm and indeed one would expect that this realm, which is beyond the physical world, lacks these same types of influences). In this case, the performance of each action can have a finite causal history, which terminates in an individuals’ intrinsic uncaused nature.

A final interpretation is that actions in the supramundane realm are causally dependent on previous actions and that there is no first action, in which case, this interpretation entails that there are infinitely many actions performed as part of an infinite causal regress.

Thus, in the case of individuals who leave a supramundane realm, we can find the same types of views mentioned above: (1) beginningless *karman* entails an infinite causal regress, (2) beginningless *karman* entails an actual infinite but no infinite regress, and (3) beginningless *karman* entails neither an actual infinite nor an infinite causal regress.

So far, I have outlined three interpretations of beginningless *karman*. Here, I should note that I am not claiming that these are all interpretations that have been historically defended by Vedāntins – these are merely what I take to be the various conceivable ways that one can interpret Vedāntic texts.[[13]](#footnote-13) I will now show the relevance of these interpretations of beginningless *karman* to LCAs and KCAs.

**Cosmological Arguments**

LCAs center around the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR). There are various formulations of the PSR, and the plausibility of one’s formulation of the LCA will depend on one’s formulation of the PSR. Roughly, however, the PSR states that every contingent fact has some explanation. For instance, the contingent fact of Radha eating oatmeal for breakfast this morning has an explanation, namely, that she had a desire to eat this food for breakfast. Some defenders of the PSR maintain that every contingent fact has some explanation, but hold that this does not need to be a contrastive explanation (Pruss 2009, 58-60). For instance, a contrastive explanation for Radha’s eating oatmeal would explain why Radha ate oatmeal and not, say, toast or cereal. In this context, these defenders would maintain that according to their formulation of the PSR, all we require as an explanation for Radha’s choice to eat oatmeal is that she desired to eat oatmeal – not a more detailed explanation explaining why Radha ate oatmeal instead of toast or cereal.

I find the above formulation of the PSR to be the most plausible, and so I will focus on LCAs that rely on this formulation. If this version of the PSR is granted, then one can reason as follows. Take the collection of all contingent things. Call this the Big Conjunctive Contingent Fact (BCCF). Now, according to the PSR, because the BCCF is a contingent fact, it requires some explanation. Let us call this explanation q. According to the PSR, q cannot be a contingent fact, because if q is a contingent fact, then it is itself a part of the BCCF and hence does not explain it. According to the PSR, q cannot be a contingent fact with no explanation either. So, q must be a non-contingent fact, and defenders of the LCA attempt to argue that ultimately, the explanation of q terminates in God, a necessary being.

Following (Pruss 2009, 25-26), this argument can be formulated as follows:

1. Every contingent fact has an explanation.
2. There is a contingent fact that includes all other contingent facts.

Therefore,

1. There is an explanation of this fact.
2. This explanation must involve a necessary being.[[14]](#footnote-14)
3. This necessary being is God.

Conclusion: God exists.

Premises 1-4 are justified on the basis of the reasoning above – here, premises 1 and 5 are the most controversial. The truth of premise 1 depends on the truth of the PSR. Premise 4 also arguably follows from the PSR, as the only options one seems to have to explain the BCCF are that there is either (a) a necessary being, or (b) a contingent fact that has no explanation.[[15]](#footnote-15) However, (b) is ruled out by the PSR, and so (a) is the only option one has. Premise 5 is controversial because there any many conceivable candidates for a necessary being, including a naturalistic[[16]](#footnote-16) necessary being (Rasmussen and Leon 2019), apart from God, and so there is a gap to be bridged – one requires further reasons for thinking that this necessary being would in fact be God.

In this paper, my primary concern is not evaluating whether or not LCAs succeed (or to try to bridge the above gap). Rather, I am interested in exploring the implications of LCAs for the Vedāntic traditions. One such implication is that LCAs do not require ruling out the possibility of an infinite regress of contingent causes and effects. For, suppose that there was an infinite regress of contingent causes and effects. According to the PSR, this would not eliminate the need to invoke the existence of a necessary being – for one still requires an explanation for this infinite causal regress in terms of a non-contingent, or necessary, being that is not itself a part of this regress. To see this, suppose that Q is the conjunction of all the contingent causes and effects in this infinite causal regress. According to the above reasoning, if the PSR is true, then Q still requires an explanation in terms of a necessary being (just as the BCCF needs to be explained by a necessary being). In other words, the PSR does not show that infinite causal regresses are impossible. The PSR only shows that the existence of an infinite regress of contingent causes and effects must still be explained by a necessary being. This is a notable point because it indicates that the metaphysical commitments entailed by the premises and conclusions of LCAs are consistent with forms of Vedāntic theism that uphold the possibility of an infinite causal regress.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Having discussed LCAs, I now turn my attention to KCAs. KCAs involve the following two premises:

1. Everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence.
2. The universe began to exist.

Conclusion: The universe has a cause.

In addition, defenders of KCAs also need additional premises to establish that this cause is God and that the cause of this universe is not itself part of a beginningless temporal series of events. Specifically, defenders of KCAs attempt to rule out the possibility that universes are being continually produced and destroyed in a beginningless series of causal events – if this were the case, then one potential cause of our universe is one of the causes in this beginningless series, and this need not be a supernatural cause of the universe. So, in order to argue for a supernatural cause of the universe, all such natural causes need to be ruled out.

To rule out the above possibility there are, broadly, three different types of arguments that can be employed. The first type of argument argues, on empirical grounds, for the untenability of scientific models that state that universes are being produced and destroyed in a beginningless series of events (Craig and Sinclair 2009, 125-181). The second type of argument argues that actual infinites cannot be physically instantiated[[18]](#footnote-18) (thus ruling out the type of beginningless series mentioned above) (Craig and Sinclair 2009, 106-115). The third type of argument argues for causal finitism, which is the thesis that every causal chain is finite (in other words, this view maintains that infinite causal regresses are not possible) (for a contemporary defense of this view, see Pruss 2018).

Call the first type of argument E (empirical) arguments. Call the second type of arguments NAI (no actual infinite) arguments. Call the third type of argument NIR (no infinite regress) arguments. Crucially, a NAI argument will entail that there are no infinite causal regresses (as an infinite causal regress involves the instantiation of an actual infinite), but a NIR argument will not entail that there are no actual infinites (for even if infinite causal regresses are impossible, it might be the case that actual infinites are possible).

Depending on how an E argument is formulated, its conclusion can be consistent with certain interpretations of beginningless *karman*. If the conclusion of an E argument is that it is impossible for universes to be continually produced and destroyed in a beginningless series *in the absence of supernatural intervention*, then the conclusion of this E argument is that such a series is impossible in a naturalist worldview but not in a theistic worldview, such as a Vedāntic worldview. So, this conclusion is consistent with all interpretations of beginningless *karman*. Call this type of E argument an E1 argument.

If the conclusion of an E argument is that it is impossible for universes to be continually produced and destroyed in a beginningless series *full stop* – *even in the absence of supernatural intervention*, then call this an E2 argument[[19]](#footnote-19) – The conclusion of an E2 argument is inconsistent with the first interpretation of beginningless *karman*, as this interpretation seems to entail the existence of such a series. One caveat is that when any of these interpretations of beginningless *karman* are paired with the doctrine of the fall, the existence of such a series may be avoided – in either of these cases, while there might be actual infinites or infinite causal regresses in the supramundane realm, there might still be finitely many universes being produced and destroyed in the physical world, as the series of these universes may not exist without a beginning but start when the first individual or group of individuals decide to leave the supramundane realm and come to the physical realm. Thus, there are various interpretations of beginningless *karman* that are consistent with the conclusions of various E arguments.

The conclusion of an NAI argument is inconsistent with the first two interpretations of beginningless *karman* – for both entail actual infinites. Here, appealing to the doctrine of the fall does not provide a Vedāntin with a means to make their view consistent with the conclusions of NAI arguments when they uphold either of the first two interpretations of beginningless *karman*, as even with doctrine of the fall, these interpretations state that there is an infinite causal regress of actions in the supramundane realm (in the case of the first interpretation of beginningless *karman*) or infinitely many actions in the supramundane realm (in the second interpretation of beginningless *karman*).

The conclusion of an NIR argument is inconsistent only with the first interpretation of beginningless *karman*. Here, again, appealing to the doctrine of the fall in the case of this first interpretation does not provide a Vedāntin with a means to avoid an infinite causal regress, as even with this doctrine there would still be an infinite causal regress of actions in the supramundane realm.

So, unlike the case with LCAs, there are ways to defend KCAs which involve arguments whose conclusions are inconsistent with certain interpretations of beginningless *karman* discussed in this paper. Nevertheless, the third interpretation of beginningless *karman* is compatible with all the above arguments used to defend the KCA. Moreover, the conclusions of E1 arguments are consistent with all interpretations of beginningless *karman*. Thus, Vedāntic theists who hold to the first interpretation of beginningless *karman* can defend the KCA by employing E1 arguments, but not E2, NAI or NIR arguments. Vedāntic theists who hold to the second interpretation of beginningless *karman* can defend the KCA by employing E1 arguments (and arguably, E2 arguments if they hold to the doctrine of the fall) and NIR arguments, but not NAI arguments. Vedāntic theists who hold to the third interpretation of beginningless *karman* can defend the KCA by employing E1 arguments (and arguably, E2 arguments if they hold to the doctrine of the fall), NAI arguments and NIR arguments.

It should be noted, however, that if a Vedāntic theist holds to the second interpretation of beginningless *karman* due to a commitment to anti-realism about causation (on this view, the Vedāntic theist would deny that their view entails an infinite causal regress because they deny that causation is a structural feature of the world), this causal anti-realism undermines the KCA’s causal principle (its first premise), which seems to require causal realism. Nevertheless, as far as I am aware, there are no Vedāntic doctrinal commitments to causal anti-realism, and so the point remains that there are various ways for a Vedāntic theist to defend KCAs, even if some Vedāntic views stand in tension with KCAs.

Hence, non-Vedāntic theists who defend KCAs have further work to do if they wish to show that KCAs provide reasons for belief in their conception of God (instead of a Vedāntic conception of God). Vedāntic theists have a similar challenge as well (in arguing for their view over competing views).

**Philosophical Advantages of Certain Vedāntic Views**

As we have now seen, certain Vedāntic views have some philosophical disadvantages relative to non-Vedāntic views insofar as KCAs are concerned – given certain Vedāntic views’ commitments to actual infinites or to infinite causal regresses, certain Vedāntins may not use NAI or NIR arguments, and the conclusions of these arguments are inconsistent with certain Vedāntic views. However, it is worth noting that these disadvantages are absent in the case of the third interpretation of beginningless *karman*.

As I shall now argue, Vedāntic traditions do nevertheless have some philosophical advantages relative to non-Vedāntic traditions insofar as LCAs and KCAs are concerned. Specifically, Vedāntic traditions are more resistant to what can be termed the “competing principles” objection to both LCAs and KCAs.

The competing principles objection is as follows. One reason (but not the only reason) given in defense of the PSR and the KCA’s causal principle the inductive support that each principle enjoys. For instance, defenders of the PSR argue that induction supports this principle because so far, we have not observed any contingent facts or states of affairs that lack an explanation. Similarly, defenders of the causal principle argue that induction supports this principle because we have not observed anything that begins to exist and yet lacks a cause. In both cases, there is a class of things (contingent facts and states of affairs in the case of the PSR, and things that begin to exist in the case of the causal principle), and in our observations of the things that belong to this class, we observe that all these things have a common property (“having an explanation” in the case of contingent facts and states of affairs and “having a cause” in the case of things that begin to exist). Thus, we infer that all the things that belong to this class have this property.

However, certain non-Vedāntic conceptions of God, such as certain Christian conceptions of God, conflict with certain principles that induction supports in a similar way. One principle is the Principle of Material Causality (PMC), which states that “all things that have a beginning have a *material* cause as well” (Rasmussen and Leon 2019, 33). Here, a material cause is the thing out of which another thing is made. So, the material cause of a table is the wood that it is made out of. The reason why the PMC conflicts with certain non-Vedāntic conceptions of God is because the PMC is inconsistent with certain understandings of creation *ex nihilo* that hold that God creates the world without a material cause, as certain Christians state. So, if a theist holds to this notion of creation *ex nihilo*, they face a challenge in defending LCAs or KCAs. This is because induction supports the PMC in a manner similar to how it supports the PSR and the causal principle. Specifically, we observe a class of things (concrete things) and see that every thing that belongs to this class of things has a common property (“having a material cause” in this case). Since induction supports the PSR, the KCA’s causal principle, and the PMC in a similar way, a non-Vedāntic theist must provide reasons for accepting the PSR or the KCA’s causal principle on the basis of inductive support while also rejecting the PMC even though it enjoys similar inductive support.

In contrast, the Vedāntic theist has no such challenge to face here. For Vedāntic theists, the world is not created *ex nihilo*, as mentioned earlier. Hence, Vedāntic theists can also hold to the PMC and so it is not a competing principle that one needs to argue against.

Certain non-Vedāntic conceptions of God, such as Christian conceptions of God, also conflict with a principle that can be termed the Principle of Embodied Mind (PEM), which states that every mind is embodied. This principle, like the PSR, the KCA’s causal principle, and the PMC, enjoys strong inductive support. This is because here too, we observe a class of things (namely, minds) and observe that all of them have a common property (namely, having a body), thus licensing an inductive inference to the conclusion that all minds have a body. However, the PEM conflicts with the non-Vedāntic concepts of God that hold that God is a disembodied mind, such as Christianity. For instance, Swinburne states that among God’s properties are “being a person without a body (that is, a spirit)” (Swinburne 2016, 1). In contrast, there are various Vedāntic traditions that hold that God has a supramundane body, as opposed to being disembodied, such as the Vaiṣṇava traditions.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Such Vedāntic traditions can uphold the PEM since there is also no challenge of having to demonstrate why one should accept the PSR or KCA’s causal principle on the basis of inductive support, while also rejecting the PEM, which enjoys similar inductive support. Thus, at least in this regard, certain Vedāntic traditions have an advantage over certain non-Vedāntic religious traditions.

**Conclusion**

As we have now seen, the relationship between Vedānta and cosmological arguments is complex due to the different interpretations of beginningless *karman*. While all three of the interpretations of beginningless *karman* are consistent with the metaphysical commitments of the premises and the conclusions of LCAs, these interpretations are not all consistent with the conclusions of different types of arguments that can be employed to defend KCAs. Nevertheless, there are ways to selectively employ these arguments in a manner that enables proponents of each interpretation of beginningless *karman* to defend KCAs. In the case of certain interpretations however, fewer arguments will be able to be employed, making for a weaker case for one’s defense of KCAs. Nevertheless, Vedāntic traditions do have advantages over non-Vedāntic religious traditions with respect to cosmological arguments, insofar as these Vedāntic traditions are more resistant to conflicting principles like the PMC and the PEM.

Now, I wish to highlight some of the implications of this paper. The first is that it illustrates that Vedāntic theists can employ popular contemporary arguments for the existence of God. This paper also illustrates that it is not enough for non-Vedāntic theists to defend cosmological arguments and try to bridge the gap from a necessary being to their conception of God by refuting naturalism – they also need to bridge this gap further by arguing against Vedāntic traditions. The same goes for Vedāntic theists as well. Thus, both types of theists must respond to the other in bridging this gap. Moreover, in certain respects, Vedāntic theists have advantages over non-Vedāntic theists. However, this advantage is not necessarily decisive – there are many other factors to consider in the context of evaluating arguments for and against a religious tradition, and cosmological arguments are just one factor. Nevertheless, the points discussed in this paper do (in my view) highlight that non-Western concepts of God are deserving of more attention by philosophers of religion.

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1. Vaiṣṇavism is a Hindu religious tradition that is centered on devotion to the deity Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa. Notable Vaiṣṇava Vedāntic traditions include the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta tradition of Rāmānuja (*c*. 11th century CE), the Dvaita Vedānta tradition of Madhva (*c*. 1238-1317 CE), the Śuddhādvaita tradition of Vallabha (1479-1531 CE), and the Acintya Bhedābheda Vedānta tradition of Caitanya (1486-1534 CE). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Śaivism is a Hindu religious tradition that is centered around the deity Śiva. One notable Śaivite Vedāntic tradition is the Śivādvaita Vedānta tradition established by Appaya Dīkṣita (16th century CE). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *prakṛtiṃ puruṣaṃ caiva viddhy anādī ubhāv api* / *vikārāṃś ca guṇāṃś caiva viddhi prakṛti-sambhavān* // (Schweig 2010, 312). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *ahaṃ sarvasya prabhavo mattaḥ sarvaṃ pravartate* / *iti matvā bhajante māṃ budhā bhāva-samanvitāḥ* // (Schweig 2010, 303). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *janmādyasya yataḥ* / In this paper, all references to the *BS* are retrieved from the online data of Sanskrit literature known as GRETIL: <http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. One might also encounter the view that personal *saguṇa* *brahman* is “propertyless” (*nirguṇa*) in the sense that it has no physical properties. So, in certain contexts, “*nirguṇa*” can be predicated of personal *brahman*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *na karmāvibhāgād iti cen nānāditvād upapadyate cāpy upalabhyate ca* / [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Although it should be noted that the LCA only needs to rule out the possibility of an infinite causal regress that is not explained by a necessary being. This is an important point that I will later revisit. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism is a Vaiṣṇava tradition that is based on the life and the teachings of Caitanya (1486-1534 CE). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. An actual infinity is contrasted to a potential infinite. A potentially infinite process is a process that increases without limit. An actual infinite is an infinite that occurs all at once. If there were an infinitely large hotel that had as many rooms as there were natural numbers, the rooms of this hotel would be an actual infinite. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I opt to use the term *karman* doctrine over *karman* theory to illustrate that for Vedāntic traditions, *karmic* consequentiality is as a doctrine and not a theory (which might be well-supported by data but carries the connotation of a lack of certainty). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *na tv evāhaṃ jātu nāsaṃ na tvaṃ neme janādhipāḥ* / *na caiva na bhaviṣyāmaḥ sarve vayam ataḥ param* // (Schweig 2010, 286). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. One might argue that in a Vedāntic context, one should not depart from the views of one’s predecessors in one’s Vedāntic tradition. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address these types of issues, but I will briefly note that Vedānta is a dynamic and continually evolving tradition, and various Vedāntins have taken the philosophical liberty to creatively interpret Vedāntic texts even within restricted doctrinal contexts. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Pruss’s formulation of this premise states that this explanation must involve a necessary being, but one could argue that this explanation could be a necessary fact as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. One might also try to argue that in explaining the BCCF, no further explanation is required above and beyond explaining each fact in the BCCF. If this is the case, then explaining the BCCF via (a) or (b) is not needed. However, this line of reasoning has been objected to by Alexander Pruss (Pruss 1998). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate whether or not Pruss’s objections succeed, it is nevertheless worth highlighting that the line of response highlighted here is, at the least, controversial. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Naturalism is difficult to precisely define and is not a singular philosophical position *per se*, but a family of views with common features. Here, I take the most important feature shared by various naturalistic views is the rejection of any type of supernatural, or non-spatiotemporal, entity such as God, fairies, and so on. A naturalist also believes that the causal history of the world includes no supernatural causes. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. On caveat is that *brahman* should exist of metaphysical necessity; however, though modal reasoning (reasoning about what is possible, impossible, or necessary) is not common if present at all in Indian philosophy, many Vedāntic theists who have thought about *brahman*’s modal status will likely maintain that this is the case. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. One might arrive at this conclusion by arguing that actual infinites are not possible. However, one might also get this conclusion by arguing that even if actual infinites are possible in some contexts, they cannot be physically instantiated. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. To my knowledge, I am not aware of any proponent of the KCA putting forth an E2 argument. Nevertheless, I mention it because it is, at the least, conceivable that a defender of the KCA might offer one and because the distinction between E1 and E2 arguments helps refine the conceptual landscape of discourses pertaining to KCAs. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Granted, one might argue that the notion of an embodied God presents its own challenges. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this issue further, however. For a defense of an embodied God, see (Sydnor 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)