The Ethics of Radical Equality: Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan's Neo-Hinduism as a Form of Spiritual Liberalism[1]

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I explore how Swami Vivekananda and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's development of Advaita Vedānta has an enormous impact on Neo-Hindu, and indeed, Indian, self-understandings of ethics and politics. I contend that Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan both conceive of the spirit of Hinduism as a radical form of equality that lies at the heart of an Advaitic (monistic) interpretation of the *Upaniṣad*s. This metaphysical monism of consciousness of self and other in Advaita paves a solid conceptual road to an ethic of radical equality in both the personal and the political spheres. In the political realm, I argue, Advaita for Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan grounds a profound critique of caste hierarchy. I show here how Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan see this enterprise through and mount an inclusive attack on caste. I contend that Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan's conception of Hinduism is a form of what I call "Spiritual Liberalism." That is, it is a view that grounds the equal individual freedom and opportunity of each member of a community to pursue whichever conception of the spiritual good she chooses and with which she most resonates. I contend that this is an evolving implication of the metaphysics of Advaita. My arguments in this chapter are a part of a larger project of building a substantive overlapping consensus on basic political values from different moral, ethical, philosophical, and spiritual comprehensive perspectives (Maritain 1948; Rawls 1993, 1999; Taylor 1999; Peetush 2014).

I also should note that my use of "spiritual" in Spiritual Liberalism is in the modern sense that Charles Taylor (1999) employs it: the spiritual for me concerns questions of ultimate meaning, significance, and purpose—this would include Theistic as well as non-Theistic perspectives. Let me also emphasize that, in my view, Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan's interpretation of Hinduism is *only one type* of a Spiritual Liberalism; in fact, I would argue that Hinduism itself—apart from factions such as Hindutva—is a dynamic and growing family of such interrelated, multilayered and diverse forms of Spiritual Liberalisms. In addition, my concept of Spiritual Liberalism includes many traditions from around the world: for example, Yoga schools, Bhakti movements, Jainism, Buddhism, Sufism, Universalist Unitarianism, and the Bahá'í religion, to list only a few.

How might liberalism, which emerges in seventeenth–eighteenth-century Europe, in part as a political response to the inability of religion to cope with diversity, be related to Hinduism—a movement so far removed historically and culturally? Any purported connection would seem implausible. On the contrary, I demonstrate that the similarities are much stronger than one might think. Indeed, I argue that there are significant points of conceptual and normative overlap between Hinduism and that of liberalism; I explore how such overlap emerges and is solidified in Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan's reading of Hinduism. Minimally, I take liberalism as a normative political philosophy that centers on values such as individual freedom (e.g., of each member of a community to choose and revise her substantive conception of the good), equality, state neutrality, tolerance and respect for diversity, secularism, and basic rights, among other such principles. I understand that the articulation and prioritization of such values has given rise to wide divergences ranging from left liberalism to Neo-Libertarianism (see Rawls 1993; for a brilliant contextual history of liberalism, see Bell 2014). I argue that, in the context and framework of the transcendental and spiritual, Hinduism is similarly grounded on pivotal values such as the freedom of each individual or *jīva* to choose whichever conception of the spiritual good that she decides. Hinduism understands a broad range of diversity and plurality of such views as being equally legitimate and worthy of respect and recognition.

What about equality, however? Is Hinduism not by now understood by its infamous and nefarious connection to caste hierarchy and other kinds of social inequality? To be sure, while casteism is a part of the development of Hinduism, I show here that such hierarchy and inequality are also in fact historically and conceptually contested *within* Hinduism on undeniably key *Hindu* tenets, such as that of Advaita Vedānta, among others; such arguments explicitly emerge as early as the fourteenth century, if not earlier. Indeed, with regard to the metaphysical and normative framework of Hinduism, Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan contend that caste inequality is ethically, socially, economically, and politically inconsistent with the radical equality that critically defines the metaphysical monism of self and other in Advaita Vedānta—an equality that is argued to be a part of the nuclei of historical, religious, and philosophical movements of Hinduism.

I would contend that such a normative reading of Hinduism is often given far too little attention or too easily dismissed, especially in light of criticisms as that made

by philologist Paul Hacker (1995), which I also address in this chapter. I realize, of course, that texts and traditions are internally diverse and contested; they speak with a multiplicity of voices and are formed by histories of conflict and struggle between the powerful and the oppressed; as such I understand that there are no "raw" uninterpreted texts or traditions, free from the histories of such power struggles. In addition, I recognize that various contradictory values and practices always exist in complex historical traditions. In fact, John Locke, the father of liberalism (for many), himself justified the theft of indigenous land on a Liberal basis since Aboriginal peoples did not understand the Liberal notion of private property, John Stuart Mill justified the colonization of India because Indians did not understand the Liberal ideal of individual autonomy, and NeoLiberals continue to interpret liberalism in a manner that allows for the grossest economic inequalities in history, despite John Rawls's convincing arguments that individual freedom is meaningless without basic economic conditions. Now, my point here is that if it is legitimate for Westerners to debate, reconstruct, and rethink the nature and histories of liberalism, for example, the same freedom should be afforded to other traditions as well; such traditions cannot be simply painted with the same facile broad strokes of a brush that hastily glosses over contested and subtle philosophies and histories that must be explored if we are to gain insight into the nuanced complexities of ancient traditions, texts, and self-understandings that are still alive and continue to flourish.

2. THE ETHICS OF RADICAL EQUALITY

Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan recognize (unlike their critics) that Hinduism is not some sort of static or homogeneous doctrine: "Hinduism is a movement, not a position; a process, not a result; a growing tradition, not a fixed revelation" (Radhakrishnan 1988: 92). It is a living, breathing, and growing tradition that contains some of the most diverse philosophical and religious doctrines and practices—defined minimally by its continuance in paying homage to the literature of the Vedas. The history of Hinduism is one of amalgamation, addition, and inclusion, containing a plurality of Theistic and non-Theistic doctrines and practices, explicitly eschewing exclusivist and singular soteriologies. As a living and growing tradition, Radhakrishnan argues that Hinduism is a process, it is a form of becoming; as such, it needs to be continuously interpreted and reinterpreted to account for all that we continue to learn about what it is for sentient beings like us (and not like us) to live together and share *saṃsāra* or this world.

Radhakrishnan urges that we need to "look upon our ancient faith with fresh eyes," as there is "much wood that is dead and diseased and that has to be cleared away" (1988: 92). Indeed, both Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan vehemently attempt to "cut the dead and diseased wood," of caste and gender inequality. They seek a deeper sense of identity in what they see as the underlying principles of Hinduism that cohere with what we have come to learn about basic justice and equality. Against the "cries of conservatives" (Radhakrishnan 1988: 91), when there

is no historical or conceptual precedence, they are willing to construct and create and forge new possibilities for Hinduism. Indeed, as Vivekananda contends, religion is neither beyond the ken of reason nor should it ever be so; this would be to give way to fanaticism and violence (1964–1970: vol. 2, 335). Traditions must change in the face of arguments about basic justice and equality—and thus interpret and justify text and tradition in their best possible light—indeed, this is what it is "to light a candle in the darkness" against fanaticism (Radhakrishnan 1988: 92).

Radhakrishnan and Vivekananda develop the ethical intuitions that emerge from the radical metaphysical equality at the core of Advaita Vedānta. I would contend that monism, in the hands of Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan, provides a significant and lasting contribution to ethical inquiry, not only in India, but also in general. In their thought, metaphysics cannot be separated from ethics, at both an ontological and a conceptual level, and at a psychological or motivational level. What the right thing to do is or the right kind of person to be cannot be separated from the inquiry into the nature of the Good—and this is a metaphysical question, as it is inextricably tied to the nature of Being and the cosmos itself—the former cannot be given a sufficient response without profound reflection on the latter (Radhakrishnan 1914: 168). Although Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan break with tradition in numerous ways, the structure of their ethical reasoning complements ancient Indian philosophy, almost all of which is a response to the ethical question of how to live a life that is free from *duḥkha* or existential suffering. It is assumed that a right understanding of the cosmos (metaphysics, ontology) will give us a right understanding of the Good—this is not unusual, of course, as most ancient Greek philosophy too proceeds in this manner (e.g., Plato, Aristotle)—as philosophy is always to be grounded in the practice of ethics.

Indeed, Brian Black (2015b) shows that grounding ethics in metaphysics is widespread in ancient Indian sources. For example, in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (4.4.23), Yāgñavalkya instructs Janaka that knowledge of the true self, or the Ātman as pervading all things, leads to freedom from evil, stain, and doubt. For "he sees the self (Ātman) in himself (Ātman) and all things as the self;" such a person becomes "calm, restrained, withdrawn, patient, composed" (translation from Olivelle 1996; see also Radhakrishnan 2000: 280). This establishes the normative and ethical based on the ontology of the Self: a person who knows the Self, attains the Good. Another fascinating example occurs in the *Mahābhārata* (12.308.128) where Sulabhā in her debate with Janaka makes an explicit argument that knowledge of the ontological nondual nature of the Self leads to a particular ethic of equality (Black 2015a). She criticizes the king: "You see the Self within yourself with the knowledge of the Self. But if you have attained impartiality, why can't you see the Self in others with the same knowledge?" Indeed, if the king were truly "freed from duality," then his treatment of his enemy and friend would be the same. This again grounds the normative and ethical in the metaphysical picture of the nondual nature of the Self and other (see also Arti Dhand 2007 for an interesting commentary on this passage).

A dramatic interpretation that employs Advaita Vedānta specifically as explicitly grounding a particular form of an ethic as a matter of conceptual necessity occurs in

the well-known fourteenth-century hagiography of Ādi Śaṅkara, the *Śaṅkara-Dig-Vijaya* of Mādhava. Andrew Nicholson argues (forthcoming) that the radical ethical implications of Śaṅkara's ontological framework were well-known in medieval India—even if the philosopher Śaṅkara himself did not acknowledge them. In the often-told story, Śaṅkara comes across a *caṇḍāla* (outcaste) and his four dogs. Afraid that he, a brahmin, will be polluted by the potential touch of the *caṇḍāla*, Śaṅkara asks the *caṇḍāla* to move out of the way. The *caṇḍāla* chides him, arguing that Śaṅkara has failed to live up to the ethics of his metaphysical commitments. This story makes explicit that a true understanding of the ontological/metaphysical nature of monism of the Self and other in Advaita makes necessary a particular form of ethics: that of radical equality between self and other, at the level of the phenomenal world to the extent that it requires the obliteration of caste hierarchy. The hunter asks:

> You are always going about preaching that the Vedas teach the non-dual Brahman to be the only reality and that He is immutable and unpollutable. If this is so, how has this sense of difference overtaken you? … You asked me to move aside and make way for you. To whom were your words addressed, O learned Sir? To the body which comes from the same source and performs the same functions in the case of both a Brahmana and an outcaste? Or the Atman, the witnessing Consciousness, which too is the same in all unaffected by anything in the body? How does such differences [sic] as "This is a Brahmana, this is an outcaste" arise in non-dual experience. O revered teacher! Is the sun changed in the least, if it reflects in a liquor pot or in the holy Ganga? How can you indulge in such false sentiments, "Being a Brahmana I am pure; and you, dog-eater, must therefore, give way for me"—when the truth is that the one universal and unblemishable Spirit, Himself bodiless, is shining in all bodies. Forgetting out of infatuation one's own true nature as the Spirit—beyond thought and words, unmanifest, beginningless, endless, and pure—how have you come to identify yourself with the body which is unsteady like the ears of an elephant? If you say that your conduct is meant only for the guidance of the world, even then how can you explain such conduct in the light of the non-dualistic doctrine? Wonderful indeed, is the magic of the great Magician which infatuates the ignorant and the learned alike! (Mādhava 1986: 59–60)

Śaṅkara is then said to be shocked by the truth of these words and takes the outcaste as his teacher. Now of course, being a hagiography, an idealized story, I am certainly not claiming that this actually happened to the historical Ādi Śaṅkara—but this is not somehow critical to my argument in the least. My point is that as early as the fourteenth century in India, we find an explicit philosophical argument in the story that develops the radical ontological identity of Advaitan metaphysics as a basis for radical ethical, social, and political equality: to the point of undermining the caste system. This is no small ethical, social, and political achievement in the history of philosophy, not just in India, but also, in fact, to the entire history of philosophy (including the West). This is one of the first clear ethical arguments for an emancipatory politics—ever.

Indeed, here we see a departure from Ādi Śaṅkara's own view of Advaita, where at the start of the *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, he argues that identification of the phenomenal self with the other (I and thou) superimpose the false characteristics of object on subject, thus creating a phenomenal unity that is the worldly self. This unity of phenomenal self and other, as the worldly self, is what needs to be transcended for Śaṅkara. But the new argument contends that the failure to understand the truth of the self is a failure to understand the unity of persons, where identification of self and other is a potential route to liberation, not an obstruction. This is typical of Neo-Vedānta Monism and it might be argued that, indeed, it was Ādi Śaṅkara who himself had failed to grasp the implications of his own metaphysical framework: that is, how living in the phenomenal world of relationships in *saṃsāra* can be a route to enlightenment, not a roadblock.

Nicolson emphasizes that Ramakrishna, Vivekananda's revered teacher, was rather fond of this story. In fact, let me point out that Vivekananda cites a similar story, and although he does not mention Śaṅkara, he uses this story to illustrate that a brahmin priest who attempts to avoid the low-caste in the street has not really understood Vedānta at all (1964–1970: vol. 1, 427). For if such knowledge were truly grasped it would require virtuous action, that is, virtuous action in *saṃsāra* would be evidence of true understanding. But not just any virtuous action, Advaita necessitates a specific kind of virtuous action: those who were once considered the lowest of the low, at the social and political sphere of society, the outcastes, must be accorded equal respect and seen as none other than the self.

Now, let us look more closely at the philosophical argument that grounds this story. The higher goal of Advaita is to realize the totality of the whole or Being, to see the other as oneself, and oneself as the other. As Radhakrishnan argues: "Vedanta postulates the absolute oneness of all things" (1914: 168). This is a rather radical form of equality as it not only destroys caste hierarchy, but also includes all sentient beings. Radhakrishnan thus quotes from a famous passage of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in which Krishna asserts:

> In a Brahmana endowed with wisdom and humility, in a cow, in an elephant, as also in a dog and dog-eater [*śvapāke*, outcaste], the wise see the same [Ātman]. (Radhakrishnan 1914: 168; *Gītā* 5.18)

The metaphysical and ontological claim of identity of self and other is used to ground the ethical normative claim for this radical form of equality that "requires us to look upon all creation as one" (Radhakrishnan 1914: 169). The integral identity of pure consciousness in self and other gives rise to an ethical precept to treat the other as coequal, in a spirit of *abheda* or non-difference:

> The individual is [therefore] enjoined to cultivate a spirit of *abheda*, or non-difference. Thus, the metaphysics of the Vedanta naturally leads to the ethics of love and brotherhood. Every other individual is to be treated as your coequal, and treated as an end and not a means. (Radhakrishnan 1914: 169)

Referring to the same passage in the *Gītā*, Vivekananda argues that "this is the gist of Vedāntic morality—this sameness for all" (1964–1970: vol. 1, 425–426).

Historically, both Vivekananda's and Radhakrishnan's work is, in part, influenced by Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) and Paul Deussen (1845–1919), two German philosophers who explored the ethics nascent in an Advaitic interpretation of the *Upaniṣads*. Two passages that both Schopenhauer and Deussen used to illustrate such an ethic were also from the *Gītā*. The reasoning is as above: if the same Self exists in all, then to harm another is to harm the self in one:

> Alike in all beings
> Existing the Supreme Lord
> Not perishing when they perish
> Who sees him, truly sees. (*Gītā* 13.27)

The realization of metaphysical monism of the Supreme Lord (which Advaitans interpret as Supreme Self), leads to a particular form of ethics:

> For seeing in all the same
> Lord established
> He does not harm the Self by the self [*na hinasy Ātmanā' tmānaṃ*]
> Then he goes to the highest goal. (*Gītā* 13:28)

Importantly, let me note that this interpretation of the ethics of Advaita Vedānta provides a response to moral skepticism about why one should be concerned with the well-being of others; indeed, a key problem that plagues both ancient and modern ethics is why should I care about anyone other than myself. Vivekananda in this regard is swayed by Deussen's work (see Deussen 1930). Such a skepticism is thwarted in this view for the reason that the self of the other is indeed one's own self: they are one. As Vivekananda asserts:

> We have always heard it preached, "Love one another." What for? That doctrine was preached, but the explanation is here. Why should I love every one? Because they and I are one. Why should I love my brother? Because he and I are one. There is this oneness; this solidarity of the whole universe. From the lowest worm that crawls under our feet to the highest beings that ever lived—all have various bodies, but are the one Soul … There is nothing beyond me. Fear ceases, and then alone comes perfect happiness and perfect love. That universal sympathy, universal love, universal bliss, that never changes, raises man above everything. It has no reactions and no misery can touch it; but this little eating and drinking of the world always brings a reaction. The whole cause of it is this dualism, the idea that I am separate from the universe, separate from God. But as soon as we have realised that "I am He, I am the Self of the universe, I am eternally blessed, eternally free"—then will come real love, fear will vanish, and all misery cease. (1964–1970: vol. 2, 414–415)

Such a conception of self establishes a virtuous circle, a true understanding of reality makes necessary, in the strongest possible sense, virtuous action; and, at the same time, virtuous action in *saṃsāra* leads to a true understanding of reality, as it opens one's heart to the same reality in others.

In the last part of this section, I want to consider a number of objections made by Paul Hacker against Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan as being "pseudo-Vedāntins" (1995: 294, 296, 297), as well as against Schopenhauer's and Deussen's interpretations. These objections have gained some currency. I contend that they are deeply misguided. Hacker argues that the above reading of Advaita is absurd; let me note that Hacker often equivocates on just what his criticism means; at times he means that such a reading is (i) philosophically and conceptually absurd, as monists supposedly cannot have any ethical system; indeed, he claims that such a view is a "logical monstrosity"; and, at other times (ii) he means that such a reading is historically unprecedented and thus a historical distortion of the Advaitan school (1995: 305–306). I take issue with both claims here. Let me start with the conceptual claim.

Hacker borrows his conceptual philosophical objection from Albert Schweitzer. Hacker argues that "there is no route from the monism of consciousness to ethics" (1995: 277). Indeed, to found an ethic on "Vedāntic monism of consciousness is a logical impossibility" (Hacker 1995: 305). As the identity of self with consciousness contained in the "logical monstrosity" of *tat tvam asi* [you are that] (Hacker 1995: 306–307) is always "supra-ethical" (Hacker 1995: 305–306). The supposed problem with an ethical reading of Advaita is that "all volition and action are an unreal objective appearance, [thus they] cannot be the basis of my behavior toward another" (Hacker 1995: 277) and "ethical behavior presupposes an interpersonal relationship, which loses its metaphysical justification if individual personhood has no ultimate responsibility" (Hacker 1995: 305).

Let me respond. First, I contend that Hacker's objection presupposes a view of ethics that is unnecessarily narrow and arbitrarily stipulative. It not only distorts ethics as a form of philosophical inquiry but also blatantly gets the history of philosophy plain wrong. A cursory examination of the history of ethics in the West alone shows that ethics is and continues to be understood much more widely as a philosophical examination of what it is to live the Good life in general, what it is to live a meaningful and purposeful life, and what such a life contains—and importantly what constitutes the nature of the Good, metaphysically (see also Ranganathan 2008, 2015). Ethics is not limited to interpersonal moral norms and injunctions. In this there is a long and venerable history in the West alone, which includes Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epictetus, and more recently Charles Taylor, Michael Sandal, and Martha Nussbaum, to name only a few—all fall within such a tradition of ethics. Ethics concerns a multiplicity of questions into the nature of the Good and the Right and such questions are indeed inextricably related to larger metaphysics and ontology.

This brings me to Hacker's/Schweitzer's curious assertion that Vedāntic monism is "supra-ethical," so it cannot be ethical. Given the intimate connection between metaphysics and ethics, it is not clear what this possibly could mean. If there's anything to be learned from the mistakes of the logical positivists in the history of philosophy, it is that indeed, all normative ethical theories are conceptually forced to ground their accounts in some axiomatic metaphysical "supra-ethical" assumptions.

Here is a small list against Hacker's specious argument: Plato, the Good is the Form of the Forms; Aristotle, the good is the natural *telos* toward which a thing aims; Kant, the good is that which conforms to rationality; Bentham and Mill: the good is pleasure/happiness for the most concerned; or, Hacker's own view, the good is whatever is commanded by his Christian (Catholic) God.

Second, I contend that there is no contradiction or "logical impossibility" to be found in grounding an ethics in monism, as Hacker argues. This is an absurd assertion on his part. Indeed, Radhakrishnan consistently and logically defines the good to be that which leads to the monistic unity that underlies diversity:

> All ethical goods, bound up as they are with the world of distinctions, are valuable as means to the end. While self realization is the absolute good, ethical goods are only relatively so. The ethically "good" is that what helps the realization of the infinite, and the ethically "bad" is its opposite. (Radhakrishnan 1999: 614)

Where is Hacker's purported logical inconsistency or "impossibility" here? It does not exist. (Neoplatonists also provide illustrations of solid and consistent monist ethics, see, e.g., Ranganathan 2016. This approach to ethics is also explored in the Indian Pratyabhijñā Philosophy; for more, see Ratie 2009).

Perhaps, however, I have failed to understand Hacker's key objection: the "logical monstrosity" is that ethics presupposes interpersonal relationships and diversity. But the metaphysical identity at the heart of Vedāntic reality, however, does not mean that *saṃsāra* or the phenomenal world of interpersonal diversity and *jīva* do not exist. This confusion rests on, as Radhakrishnan argues, identifying the imperfect and temporal with the absolute. Although *saṃsāra* has its roots in Brahman, it is *not* Brahman. *Aham brahmāsmi* does not mean that I, the phenomenal ego, qua *jīva*, is identical with Brahman (Radhakrishnan 2000: 621–622). Rather, it is the ground of the *jīva*, of which the *jīva* is a reflection; it is *the Ātman* that is identical with Brahman and not the *jīva*. Moreover, from an ontological perspective, even though *saṃsāra* and diversity are *māyā* or "illusion," this does not mean *saṃsāra* is a figment of one's imagination and does not exist—like imagining an oasis in the middle of the desert — *saṃsāra* is not a hallucination. Nor does it mean that the diversity and plurality of *saṃsāra* or the phenomenal world does not exist. *Saṃsāra* is not wholly real or is an "illusion" in the sense that it is merely temporal, limited, and not permanent. That is, it is critical to understand that the real in Advaita is *trikālābādhyam*, that which is permanent, eternal, infinite, and not subject to temporality, but, certainly, *saṃsāra* or the phenomenal world does not meet these conditions (Deutsch 1973: 32–33). The world is an "illusion" in the sense that it will, in fact, be reduced to dust and ashes (see also Radhakrishnan 1959).

Furthermore, it is only from the standpoint of perfect knowledge and experience, from the epistemic perspective that enlightenment affords, that one is able to see the existence of the plurality of *jīva* or *saṃsāra* and the world for what it is truly: none other than pure consciousness or undifferentiated being. But, to the degree that one has not attained realization, nothing changes and one's epistemic perspective is not altered. One continues to live among a diversity of beings, with whom one has

interpersonal relationships. Indeed, the temporality and diversity of *saṃsāra* gives rise to the conditions that make the existence of ethics necessary (Radhakrishnan 1999: 621–623, 625).

But then, ethics in the Advaitan view is purely instrumental and has no intrinsic value—as it is ultimately not real, as Hacker argues. To use the Buddhist metaphor, ethics or dharma becomes the raft that one uses to sail across the sea of *saṃsāra*, but, in the end, it is abandoned when one reaches the shores of *nirvāṇa*. The Neo-Vedānta Monism of Radhakrishnan and Vivekananda, conceptually, is no different (cf. Radhakrishnan 1999: 621–624). One way to express such a worry might be: if ethics is not somehow "absolute," then is not the person who attains *mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa* free to commit any harm whatsoever, since she is "beyond good and evil?"

As Radhakrishnan interprets Śaṅkara, such an objection is also misguided. It fails to understand that enlightenment is not the death of ethics, but the death of the conditions that require ethics in the first place: as self and other are realized to be one. That is, the conditions that require ethics no longer exist in the same sense that, for example, assertions of individual rights are not necessary in ideal conditions of loving relationships; indeed, assertions of one's rights are fallback mechanisms required only when relationships fall apart (that is, rights are to love as ethics is to *mokṣa*). Along the same lines, ethics is not required when one fully realizes self as other and other as self. Radhakrishnan asks us to remember that harm and injury to other arises from action borne of selfish desire, grounded in ignorance, in the clinging of the *jīva* to itself as somehow separate and real—such action is *avidyākāmakarma*—karma that results from *kāmā* or selfish desire, grounded in nescience of having taken the distance between individuals as absolute. Selfish attachment that characterizes such action does not arise for her who has realized the real and understood the falsity of *saṃsāra*; she is dead to vice, as Radhakrishnan contends. She has broken through the distortion of *saṃsāra*. Ethics is like the medicine that one takes for a particular disease, once the medicine cures the condition, it is no longer necessary. Ethics is the medicine to cure the heart of selfish egoism and to help it expand. Radhakrishnan thus argues, "purification of the heart" is a prerequisite for spiritual realization (1999: 625)—the *telos* or end of ethics is to overcome the distance from self to other. Indeed, perfection is not achieved by abandoning the moral law and the practice of virtue, but rather, only "through the gates of law" (634) can perfection or enlightenment be achieved.

Now, as I asserted, Hacker often equivocates on his criticism. In addition to the conceptual claim, he argues that the above reading is historically unprecedented and thus a historical distortion: Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan are "pseudo-Vedāntins," who arrive at their reading through the readings of Schopenhauer and Deussen, the two German scholars who themselves did not understand Advaita and misconstrued it. Hacker's historical claim is problematic, as Nicholson's work shows: as early as the fourteenth century such a reading of Advaita was already familiar, as is explicit in Mādhava's hagiography of Śaṅkara—not to mention that the derivation of ethics from metaphysics is present in the *Upaniṣads* as discussed. Schopenhauer and Deussen did not invent this reading, as Hacker would have it, but he pays no attention to the ramifications of the verse cited earlier.

Hacker is, however, aware of the seventeenth-century monist Nīlakaṇṭha, whose work stands in the way of Hacker's objection that the above ethical reading of *Gītā* verses 13:27–28 is historically unprecedented on the subcontinent before Schopenhauer. To be sure, Nīlakaṇṭha himself seems to give us just such a reading. Quoting Nīlakaṇṭha on the *Gītā* verses in question, "Because he sees that the Self is but one, he does not harm another, just as he does not harm himself; that is, he has compassion for all," Hacker (1995: 286) proposes to rebut the claim of historical precedent by showing that Nīlakaṇṭha's ethical reading is really different from Schopenhauer's. Hacker asserts that Nīlakaṇṭha's view is not the same ethic as propounded by Schopenhauer because "Nīlakaṇṭha does not say that the self of another is in itself my own self, as Schopenhauer and Deussen teach. [Nīlakaṇṭha] looks first at the universal self and concludes from its universality that it is in another as well as in me … there is still a difference" (Hacker 1995: 286).

I contend that Hacker's reasoning makes no sense here. Even if Hacker was right that there is a difference in the manner that Nīlakaṇṭha proceeds in his interpretation of the above *Gītā* verses from Schopenhauer, this does not undermine Nīlakaṇṭha's monistic ethics, both as setting historical precedent or as to the cogency of Nīlakaṇṭha's philosophical and conceptual argument itself. Historically this is indeed a reading of the *Gītā* that conceptually derives ethics from the monism of a universal self, which is prior to Schopenhauer. Furthermore, because the monist Nīlakaṇṭha may proceed differently from Schopenhauer does not show that there is a deep conceptual difference between the two here in any relevant regard. Nīlakaṇṭha's reading of the verses in question remains an ethical reading of the above two passages: to the degree that our selves share some universal property Ω in common, then, it goes without saying the *same* Ω exists in both you and me as the ground of our individual being or the *jīva* in Nīlakaṇṭha's view; it is on account of this property Ω that I derive a normative/ethical stance (i.e., compassion) toward the other. Nīlakaṇṭha consistently argues from the metaphysical to the ethical.

Furthermore, let me for the sake of argument grant Hacker's objection that there is no historical precedent for Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan's interpretation of an ethical reading of Śaṅkara's Advaita—they "took" their reading from Schopenhauer and Deussen, who also happen to misunderstand Śaṅkara. Nīlakaṇṭha too happened to commit this blunder before them. All of these philosophers were engaged in a distortion of history and of "authentic" Vedānta. But let me ask: even if there were no such historical precedent, does this show that such an interpretation is not conceptually, philosophically, and ethically sound? No, it does not. Furthermore, because no one has offered such an interpretation does not mean that such an interpretation should not be offered or welcome. It is true that no judge in America prior to the 1920s interpreted the principle of political equality to include women, but what does that show? Does it show that such interpretations should never have been provided? Does it show that such interpretations are not actually the correct interpretation of the implications inherent in the American constitutional framework? Does it show that future judges were "pseudo-judges"—indeed, as Hacker attempts to expose Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan as "pseudo-Vedāntins"

(Hacker 1995: 294, 296, 297), as inauthentic "Neo-Hindus" to be distinguished from genuine and pure Vedāntins such as Śaṅkara—who, we should remember, lived a thousand years prior.

Indeed, even B. R. Ambedkar, an architect of India's constitution, known to be a critic of Brahmanical Hinduism and a Buddhist, contends that the radical ethical equality that conceptually emerges from the Vedāntic view that we are part of the same cosmic principle has profound ethical, social, and political ramifications. Such radical equality "does not merely preach Democracy. It makes democracy an obligation of one and all":

> Democracy demands that each individual shall have every opportunity for realizing its worth. It also requires that each individual shall know that he is as good as everybody else. Those who sneer at Aham Brahmasmi (I am Brahma) as an impudent Utterance forget the other part of the Maha Vakya namely Tatvamasi (Thou art also Brahma). If Aham Brahmasmi has stood alone without the conjunct of Tatvamasi it may have been possible to sneer at it … this theory of Brahma has certain social implications which have a tremendous value as a foundation for Democracy. If all persons are parts of Brahma then all are equal and all must enjoy the same liberty which is what Democracy means … But there cannot be slightest doubt that no doctrine could furnish a stronger foundation for Democracy than the doctrine of Brahma … to recognize and realize that you and I are parts of the same cosmic principle leaves room for no other theory of associated life except democracy. It does not merely preach Democracy. It makes democracy an obligation of one and all. (Ambedkar 2015)

Ambedkar would also be a "pseudo-Vedāntin" for attempting to develop the nascent ethics at the heart of Advaita on Hacker's account. Hacker's arguments assume that philosophy and culture are somehow closed, monolithic, and unchanging, which is absurd and dangerous. But more pernicious is the implicit normative assumption behind Hacker's arguments: that this is how it should be. On the contrary, philosophy, and the culture of which it is part, are dynamic and vibrant, with porous borders. In fact, this is a good thing: we should be open to learning from others, whether they are our compatriots or not. The implicit insistence on purity and authenticity (whatever these are) that one finds in Hacker's work, on the other hand, is connected to some of the darkest moments in human history, no doubt on Hacker's own soil. That Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan were in part influenced by Schopenhauer and Deussen does not invalidate the importance of their ethical insight, nor that of the two German philosophers.

3. THE HELL DANCE OF DEMONS: THE POLITICS OF CASTE OPPRESSION

I have argued that equality is a fundamental ethical principle in Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan's Hindu ethics founded on metaphysical monism—a principle expressed in earlier material from the Indian tradition. Such an ethic saturates the

social and the political realms; it is no surprise that such a view would be used to dismantle structural forms of domination and oppression. In this section, I show how this Neo-Advaitan construction is used by Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan to challenge all forms of oppression, including that of women and lower castes; I then consider an objection to my interpretation.

Vivekananda argues that the "two evils" of India are the "trampling on the women, and grinding of the poor through caste restriction" (1964–1970: vol. 6, 335). He contends that distinctions of privilege and superiority based on "sex, caste, wealth, learning" are "gateways to hell" and the "aim" and "end" of religion is to "obliterate all such fictions and monstrosities" (1964–1970: vol. 4, 357–358). He repeatedly rails against the caste system through the span of his life as an unjust "social institution" (1964–1970: vol. 1, 22); for caste is in complete opposition to Vedānta and to unity of Brahman (1964–1970: vol. 5, 197–198) and a barrier to self-realization (1964–1970: vol. 8, 139), for in "religion there is not caste" (1964–1970: vol. 1, 22) since "all beings, great or small, are equally manifestations of God" (1964–1970: vol. 1, 424) and "the soul has neither sex, nor caste" (1964–1970: vol. 4, 357–358; see also vol. 1, 423, 425–426; vol. 3, 211, 212; vol. 4, 340–341, 423, 425–426; vol. 6, 369, 495–496; vol. 7, 34; vol. 8, 205, 136, 139). In fact, in a letter in 1897, Vivekananda contends that caste is the root of ignorance and *māyā*, that it is "madness" and "the hell-dance of demons" grounding "oppression and persecution":

> In my views … much perversion has supervened—one attributeless absolute Brahman, I see … the conviction is daily gaining on my mind that the idea of caste is the greatest dividing factor and the root of Maya; all caste either on the principle of birth or of merit is bondage. Some friends advise, "True, lay all that at heart, but outside, in the world of relative experience, distinctions like caste must needs [sic] be maintained." … [*ellipsis in original*] The idea of oneness at heart (with a craven impotence of effort, that is to say), and outside, the hell-dance of demons—oppression and persecution—ay, the dealer of death to the poor, but if the Pariah be wealthy enough, "Oh, he is the protector of religion!" … I am a Shudra, a Mlechchha … It is in the books written by priests that madnesses like that of caste are to be found, and not in books revealed from God. (Vivekananda 1964–1970: vol. 6, 393–395)

How did such a heinous form of oppression infect India? Vivekananda believes the caste system was a degenerate form of a social and economic division of labor or "guilds," which was originally intended to limit the excesses of competition between various jobs (1964–1970: vol. 2, 515–516). "Original caste" or "jati," as guild or job, had nothing to do with ideas of superiority and privilege, but this system "degenerated into iron-bound casts [castes]" (1964–1970: vol. 2, 508). The oppressive features of the castes system are a result of two insidious factors. First, the privilege and superiority that are attached to certain guilds or jobs. Second, one of the most pernicious aspects of the caste system is its hereditary nature, which suffocates individual freedom, for "as soon as a child is born, he knows that he is born a slave: slave to his caste" (1964–1970: vol. 3, 516). Citing the now well-known *Puruṣa-Sūkta* in the *Ṛgveda*, Vivekananda argues that the earliest reference to the caste system in India does not

indicate either heredity or superiority as a part of the original system in the Vedas (1964–1970: vol. 6, 211); in contrast, castes/guilds/jobs in society are compared to various parts of a functioning human body as a part of an organic whole: from the mouth come the Brahmins who are the scholars/priests; from the arms, the warriors or Kṣatriya; from the belly, the Vaiṣyas; and from the feet, the Śūdras or laborers. Radhakrishnan also elaborates that on such an organic model, each member of a community is "indispensable to the whole," as the whole is integral to each, thus ruling out the idea of power and the privilege of the few (1988: 76).

Indeed, Radhakrishnan argues that the *Vajrasūcika Upaniṣad* undermines any caste distinction based on birth. What determines whether one belongs to the priestly or scholarly class is not pedigree of brahmanical ancestry. First, the Upaniṣad argues that brahamanas have come from "many [even non-human] species among creatures"; for example, Jāmbuka was from a jackal—something utterly revolting to Brahmanical purity (Radhakrishnan 1999: 936). Second, religious duties do not confer the title. Third, and most importantly, a brahmana is one who is distinguished by virtue, character, and wisdom. This opens the doors to any individual, whatever be their birth, to becoming a brahmana:

> [2] The Brahmana, the Ksatriya, the Vaisya and the Sudra are the four classes (castes). That the Brahmana is the chief among the four classes is in accord with the Vedic texts … In this connection there is a point worthy of investigation. Who is, verily, the Brahmana? … Is he the class based on birth? [5] Then (if it is said) that birth (makes) the Brahmana, it is not so, for there are many species among creatures, other than human, many sages are of diverse origin … Among these, despite their birth, there are many sages, who have the highest rank, having given proof of their wisdom. Therefore birth does not (make) a Brahmana. [9] Then, who, verily is the Brahmana? He who, after, directly perceiving … the Self … becomes rid of the faults of desire, attachment, etc., and endowed with qualities of tranquility etc., rid of the states of being, spite, greed, expectation, bewilderment, etc., with his mind unaffected by ostentation, self-sense and the like, he lives. He alone who is possessed of these qualities is the Brahmana. This is the view of the Vedic texts and tradition, ancient lore and history. The accomplishment of the state of the Brahmana is otherwise impossible. (*Vajrasūcika Upaniṣad* 2000: 935–938)

Vivekananda contends that it was the *smṛtis* (remembered texts), the *purāṇas* (mythologies), and "priestcraft" of the Brahmins that contributed to the degeneration of the caste guild system, which attempted to divide tasks and limit the excess of competition. The "distinctions of caste and the like have the invention of our modern sapient Brahmins" (1964–1970: vol. 6, 247), guided by "economical consideration" to justify and "defend that form of religion which made their existence a necessity of society and assigned them the highest place in the scale of caste" (1964–1970: vol. 6, 160). He contends that such arguments are specious as they are only meant to "uphold the privileges of certain portion of the community," for "those who have an advantage want to keep it, and if they find an argument, however one-sided and crude, they must cling to it."

Although the caste system may have restrained the excesses of economic rivalry, "there is a great evil: it checks individuality. I will have to be a carpenter because I am born a carpenter; but I do not like it." It robs the downtrodden of the good of equality and individual choice and is a "[blight] upon the race." The oppression of individual choice obstructs social and economic progress, for such progress depends on competition, for competition "makes everything alive" (1964–1970: vol. 3, 515–516). Thus, the "modern caste distinction is a barrier to India's progress. It narrows, restricts, separates. It will crumble before the advance of ideas" (1964–1970: vol. 5, 197–198). This rigid oppressive caste system "is now filling the atmosphere of India with its stench, and it can only be removed by giving back to the people their lost social individuality"—freedom from being a "slave to society." Indeed, the demise of the modern caste system, according to Vivekananda, must come as India progresses as a result of economic competition and desire for growth, as individual freedom is a "pre-condition" for such growth. This is the reason for Brahmin shoemakers and wine-distillers, or *śūdra* entrepreneurs. The modern Indian government neither prohibits anyone from pursuing any kind of livelihood nor should it. The result will be many thousands, from all castes alike, rising to the top instead of "vegetating at the bottom" because of an antiquated and oppressive system:

> Caste is simply a crystallized social institution, which after doing its service is now filling the atmosphere of India with its stench, and it can only be removed by giving back to the people their lost social individuality. Every man born here [America] knows that he is a man. Every man born in India knows that he is a slave of society. Now, freedom is the only condition of growth; take that off, the result is degeneration. With the introduction of modern competition, see how caste is disappearing fast! No religion is now necessary to kill it. The Brâhmana shopkeeper, shoemaker, and wine-distiller are common in Northern India. And why? Because of competition. No man is prohibited from doing anything he pleases for his livelihood under the present Government, and the result is neck and neck competition, and thus thousands are seeking and finding the highest level they were born for, instead of vegetating at the bottom. (1964–1970: vol. 5, 22–23)

Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan's argument that caste hierarchy is antithetical to the equality at the heart of Advaitan metaphysics is without doubt the case. Furthermore, Vivekananda's insight that hierarchical caste distinctions are grounded and motivated by hidden economic relationships of power and domination, and that the powerful will "cling" to any argument, however specious, to hold on to power, is also without doubt the case.

Let me now consider an objection against my interpretation of Vivekananda. Jyotirmaya Sharma argues that Vivekananda was indeed a casteist, as well as suggesting that he was a "Hindu supremacist." Sharma grounds his arguments on particular statements that Vivekananda made, such as, "Let Jati have its sway; break down every barrier in the way of caste and we [India] shall rise" (2013: 178) and that "caste is good, that is the natural way of solving life" (2013: 182). I think that Sharma's interpretation is problematic since it fails to adequately take into account the meaning and context of these remarks of Vivekananda.

While Sharma certainly cites Vivekananda that modern caste is a "degenerate" form of *jati* or occupation "filling the atmosphere of India with its stench" (2013: 176), his argument fails to account for why exactly it is degenerate for Vivekananda. This is since modern caste "prevented the free action of *jātī* [occupation, guild]," that is, it prevents individuals from freely choosing their own occupation, which is critical for Vivekananda—this is the reason that in this particular context, Vivekananda immediately argues that "any crystallized custom or privilege or hereditary class in any shape really prevents caste (*jātī*) from having its sway." What Sharma's argument does not pay sufficient attention to is that, for Vivekananda, the modern caste or guild system is oppressive *because* it limits and "checks" an individual's freedom to pursue what he or she may be good at, not to mention other forms of "monstrosities" for which it is responsible, such as making one a "slave to society." In addition, when Vivekananda says that we should give full sway to caste, (i.e., choice of occupation) as America has done, what he means is that when people are free to compete economically, then "thousands" are "finding the highest level they were born for, instead of vegetating at the bottom." If these sentiments do not count in support of a Liberal democratic order with a free economy where individuals can live as free equals, I am not sure what would.

Furthermore, while it is true that Vivekananda makes the particular statement that "caste is good, that is the natural way of solving life" (Sharma 2013: 182; original in Vivekananda: vol. 3, 244–246), this remark is made in the context of Vivekananda's objection that we need to democratize Vedānta and make it accessible to all equally against caste hierarchy—as it is done by Krishna in the *Gītā*. As such, Vivekananda explains how the caste system was and should be conceived of as he thinks it was originally: a division of labor that facilitated mutual cooperation among equal members of a society—not a rigid hereditary structure without choice that impedes growth, or prevents individuals from learning the truths of Vedānta. Indeed, each—from "fisherman to philosopher"—should be able to access it, for there should be "no privilege for any one, equal chances for all." Vivekananda asserts this in the same breath as Sharma quotes him supposedly approving of a rigid caste hierarchy (1964–1970: vol. 3, 244–246).

Furthermore, Sharma points out that brahminhood is an ideal for Vivekananda (2013: 179). But Sharma pays little attention to the fact that since Vivekananda makes brahminhood open to *any person* who is a lover of God, it is no longer a matter of privilege, power, or heredity—which are the key reasons why the caste system is oppressive in the first place—as Vivekananda asserts: "Caste is a state, not an iron-bound class, and every one who knows and loves God is a true Brahmin" (1964–1970: vol. 2, 508). Moreover, Sharma makes little of the fact that while Vivekananda might extol brahminhood as defined above, the latter constantly derides brahaminhood in the sense of a rigid social category consistently throughout his life. In sum, I would contend that Sharma's argument fails to pay sufficient attention and give due recognition to the fact that Vivekananda repeatedly and forcefully rejects and condemns the institution of caste as a social and economic institution based on power and privilege, a "gateway to hell" of enforced slavery that must die if India is to make social, economic, ethical, and spiritual progress.

The terrible reality of caste in India still exists today. It is not unlike the situation that blacks find themselves in America: although there are laws against discrimination, and there are affirmative action plans at many levels of society, indeed in the very constitution of law itself, blatant racism continues to plague social consciousness, as is evident in the economic disparity between blacks and whites, not to mention the heinous policing system in America. On the other hand, huge strides continue to be made in social equality, in both America and India. What is clear, though, is that the caste system must be challenged not only on the basis of global Liberal–democratic norms of equality, but also, as Vivekananda had originally argued a hundred years ago, "growth must proceed from within"—as such challenges must resonate with the spirit and consciousness of the Indian imagination (1964–1970: vol. 5, 197–198). Indeed, I contend that, as Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan, Tilak, and Gandhi, among many others, have argued, such discrimination and hierarchy is indeed the hell dance of demons—it is against the very foundation of key Advaitan self-understandings that the same Self or Ātman exists in each and all.

4. NEO-HINDUISM AS SPIRITUAL LIBERALISM

I will argue that both Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan conceive of Hinduism as a form of what I call Spiritual Liberalism, grounded in the radical equality and individual freedom at the heart of Advaita. Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan are acutely aware that religion, while it can be a force for the good of all beings, it can equally be, as history shows, a force for conflict, unimaginable suffering, and "horror." Indeed, Vivekananda argues that "nothing has bred more bitter enmity" and "bloodshed" than religion. As we know, Liberalism in the West develops from the European Wars of Religion.

Notwithstanding the current utter barbarism of Hindutva postindependence, Radhakrishnan notes that the history of Hinduism is relatively free from the kind of pervasive religious persecution one finds, for example, as a result of the Islamic conquests of Europe and Asia or the Crusades of Christianity. In contrast, India has a comparatively strong precedent of religious tolerance. While the Jews were being persecuted elsewhere, for example, India gave them official patronage in the Hindu Kingdom of Cochin, where they were given a self-governing district (indeed, some of the oldest tribes of Israel lived in India, free from religious domination); Christians arriving in the fifth century, the Muslims in the eighth century, and the Zoroastrians fleeing from Islamic persecution in the tenth century were welcomed and given religious freedom to practice. This continued postindependence, with the acceptance of Tibetan Buddhists in India fleeing from religious persecution at the hands of Maoist China (Radhakrishnan 1988: 41; Parekh 2008; Peetush 2015). Let me emphasize again that the point here is not to deny that sectarianism or violence did not exist in India or that Vivekananda or Radhakrishnan would somehow deny the brutality of Hindu religious extremism, including the bringing down of the Babri Masjid and the pogroms in Gujarat, or anything of the like. The point is that

while religious tensions existed in India prior to British colonization, they were, in comparison, significantly to a lesser degree than in other parts of the world.

Radhakrishnan and Vivekananda contend that the reasons for this ultimately have to do with the conceptual nature of the philosophies and practices that originated in India. Radhakrishnan argues that Hinduism's solution to religious conflict and approach to diversity is to recognize the plurality of *mārga*s or paths as being equally legitimate to spirituality—each *jīva* is unique and different from any other, and thus one ought to be free to pursue whichever conception resonates most with her individual being. Furthermore, this account of Hinduism recognizes that the various paths are each "irreducible to the terms of the other," but seeks to establish the "unity of religion not in a common creed but a common quest" (Radhakrishnan 1988: 42). That is, rather than insist on a singular and exclusive doctrine of religious truth, this account focuses on a common search for the spiritual good. For indeed, as far back as the *Ṛgveda*, it is asserted: *ekaṃ sad viprā bahudhā vadantyaghniṃ yamaṃ mātariśvānamāhuḥ*, or that the wise speak of what is one in many ways (*Ṛgveda* 1.164.46, *[Vedic Edition]* 2011). And, as both Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan point out, in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Krishna, an *avatāra*, when reflecting to Arjuna, on the issue of which path or *mārga* is best for enlightenment professes:

> *Ye yathā māṃ prapadyante tāṃs tathaiva bhajāmyaham* [In whichever way men take refuge in me, I love them. All men, Arjuna, follow my path] (*Gītā* 4.11)

Indeed, during the time of the *Gītā*, a multiplicity and rich and deep pluralism of philosophical thought and practice existed: asceticism, Buddhism, the Jaina path, Brahmanical ritualists, Sāṅkhya dualists, yogic practitioners, atheists, and many more. Krishna proclaims that the multitudes of divergent paths are all potential paths to the realization and emancipation from the wheel of *saṃsāra*. Indeed, Vivekananda opens his address to the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 by quoting verse seven of the *Śiva Mahimnaḥ Stōtram*:

> As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee. (1964–1970: vol. 1, 4)

Quoting a South Indian folksong, Radhakrishnan uses the same metaphor:

> Into the bosom of the one great sea
> Flow streams that come from Hills on every side,
> Their names are various as their springs,
> And thus in every land do men bow down
> To one great God though known by many names. (1988: 35)

Each river, each *mārga*, has its place in *saṃsāra* and leads to perfection, but none are reducible to any other. Indeed, each is only a partial glimpse of the totality of the ultimate truth (Radhakrishnan 1988: 22–23). One's ideas of God are always incomplete, they are always in the becoming, as they are only ever a partial

representation of an ultimate reality distilled through one's heart and mind, colored by one's biases, culture, time, and place. Thus, as Vivekananda contends, no one religion can encompass the universal and whole truth, each is only a fragment of the totality of being, for each "takes up one part of the great universal truth, and spends its whole force in embodying and typifying that part of the great truth" (1964–1970: vol. 3, 365). Indeed, the "truth may be expressed in a hundred thousand ways, and that each of these ways is true as far as it goes" (1964–1970: vol. 2, 383). But each is as necessary as the other, for each suits the particular needs of specific *jīva*s or individuals. Hence, one must not simply tolerate others' views, but rather, one must recognize each *mārga* as an equally legitimate path to spirituality. As such, Vivekananda asserts:

> Our watchword, then, will be acceptance, and not exclusion. Not only toleration, for so-called toleration is often blasphemy, and I do not believe in it. I believe in acceptance. Why should I tolerate? Toleration means that I think that you are wrong and I am just allowing you to live. Is it not a blasphemy to think that you and I are allowing others to live? I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian's church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhist temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his Law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the Light which enlightens the heart of every one. (1964–1970: vol. 2, 373–374)

I would argue that what defines this conception of Hinduism as paradigmatically a form of Spiritual Liberalism is not simply the recognition of a diversity of spiritual goods as legitimate, but, as critically, its insistence on individual freedom: each *jīva* must be free to choose whichever conception of the spiritual good resonates most with her being. Recall that the self of Advaita, qua *jīva*, is distinctly unique: each individual in *saṃsāra* has a specific set of needs, capacities, abilities, likes, and dislikes; these are the *guṇa*s or characteristics that contribute to her identity. Moreover, each individual lives in the context of a particular history, religious, and cultural framework, all of which dialectally influence her sense of individuality, identity, and self-understanding. As such, it is understood that the form of the sacred that will appeal to one will depend on her particular being, her particular personality and psychology, and her interests and training (Radhakrishnan 1988: 20–21, 32). As Radhakrishnan points out, when a pupil approaches a spiritual teacher in India, the teacher asks him about his *iṣṭadevata*, the form of the divine that resonates with him most, as "every man has a right to choose that form of belief and worship which most appeals to him" (1988: 34). Just as the medicine one takes depends on one's needs and particular condition, so too with one's spiritual condition. Thus as Rāmakṛṣṇa (1836–1886), Vivekananda's teacher, who was central to the Hindu renaissance in his combination of Advaita with Bhakti or devotion, asserts:

> As a mother, in nursing her sick children, gives rice and curry to one, and sago and arrowroot to another and bread and butter to a third, so the Lord has laid out different paths for different people suitable to their natures … Dispute not.

As you rest firmly on your faith and opinion, allow others the equal liberty to stand by their own faiths and opinions. (quoted in Abhedânanda 1903: 73–74)

Thus, the ethical and political ideals of equal recognition and respect of others, and certainly toleration of diversity and difference, are therefore intrinsic to the very nature of this metaphysical account of the legitimacy of a plurality of *mārga*s or paths toward spirituality. Liberation and salvation, or *mokṣa*, *nirvāṇa*, or kaivalya—emancipation from the ever-turning wheel of *saṃsāra*—comes to each through individual effort on her own chosen path. In this view then, the idea that there is only one true path or religion is intrinsically flawed. Given her uniqueness, each individual must thus have the equal liberty to work out her own salvation in her own way, in her own time, with the form of the divine that best suits her. An individual cannot thus be coerced to follow a path that is not of her making, or a god not of her choosing. This not only is a violation of her personal integrity and individual autonomy, but also will not work, for she is a *jīva* unlike any other, and requires a path that is suited for her individual well-being. In pursuing the common quest of the spiritual good, we must thus respect the diversity of ways of attaining such a goal, as each *mārga* is as necessary as another, since ultimately each *mārga* must be walked by an individual, and no one can walk the path of another, nor should she be so required or forced.

Given our different needs, it only makes sense that questions of ultimate meaning and significance must resonate with our individual being, what matters most to us, what appeals most to us—indeed, what we most need. This conceptual framework accounts for the diversity and heterogeneity, both doctrinally and in practice, that one finds in contemporary India and among practicing Hindus. Such religious pluralism is evident in most Hindu homes, where, for example, a daughter may be devoted to Krishna, the son to Mother Kālī, the father to Gaṇeśa, the mother to Veṇkaṭeśvara, the grandmother to Hanuman, and the grandfather to the Buddha. Furthermore, it certainly is not out of the ordinary to find icons of non-Hindu deities, gods, saints, and the like, statues of Jesus, or mother Mary. In fact, some Hindus claim themselves as Hindu-Muslims, and Muslim-Hindus; Salam Girassia Rajputs have both a Hindu and a Muslim name for every member of their community; Shirdi Sai Baba, a Sufi-Hindu saint is revered in both Hindu and Muslim homes (he regularly admonished those who attempted to pigeonhole his spirituality to either Hindu or Muslim). Nor do many Hindus find it problematic to pray in a church, or a mosque, or a synagogue, as Vivekananda himself professes. In a world filled with sectarian and religious violence, such openness is a good thing indeed.

5. THE LIMITS OF RADICAL EQUALITY: NEO-HINDUISM AS A SUBSTANTIVE DOCTRINE

One of the arguments often made against Neo-Hinduism conceived of along these lines is that it is not nearly as open and tolerant as Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan make it out to be. Radhakrishnan claims that Hinduism solves the problem of religious conflict by recognizing a plurality of "quests" toward the spiritual as all

legitimate—as each *jīva* is different and thus ought to be free to choose the conception of God that resonates most with her individual being. This view, however, is *itself* a comprehensive and substantive doctrine of the spiritual good. It is not consistent with all quests as it makes out. On one hand, Advaita excludes singular theories of salvation, which proclaim themselves as the only path to the spiritual good. But Advaita conceives of such paths as being equally as good as any other path— something these views themselves deny since they understand themselves as the sole possessors of the truth. On the other hand, while this account purports to include a diversity of paths as being "equally" good, such as Sāṅkhya dualism, for example, they are equally good insofar as they lead to the same destination. Thus the Rome to which all roads lead is built on the foundations of (Neo-)Vedānta Monism—this is the spiritual ocean of pure consciousness in which all rivers merge. In effect then, it is not really the sameness of quest that ends up being important to such a conception of Hinduism, but sameness of *destination*.

Sharma makes this objection in his case against Vivekananda as a "Hindu supremacist." The essence of Sharma's criticism is that Vivekananda's recognition of spiritual diversity is only "limited to the externals." The universal faith that Vivekananda has in mind is "the Vedāntic ideal of Oneness and the Universal Soul," which "would ultimately prevail" in any purported recognition of diversity of religious perspectives (Sharma 2013: 233).

Let me respond. Indeed, there is one Neo-Advaitan Rome to which all roads lead, but that is a city of immense splendor whose multiplicity is roaring with a diversity of citizenry and the broadest spectrum of perspectives, spiritualities, and practices. It is not the city of an exclusivist and singular monotheism, where those with differing perspectives are condemned and forever lost beyond its walls. The Neo-Advaita of Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan is firmly grounded in a sense of epistemic and metaphysical humility: each spirituality is only one aspect of the immeasurable grandeur of the totality of Being—that each, by itself, is unable to fathom. Diversity and difference represent the horizon, the breadth, and the richness, of the human experience of the divine, which is plural. Each experience develops an aspect that the other does not, and as such, cannot be abbreviated as a form of the other. Neo-Advaita is thus pluralistic: it admits a deep and wide range of the diversity of perspectives of the spiritual good, firmly grounded in the view that no one viewpoint embodies all that is legitimate or worthy. Such a view founds not simply mere tolerance or putting up with others, but, as Vivekananda asserts above, profound respect and recognition of others' perspectives and spiritualities. We are urged to see others with a sense of epistemic humility: our perspectives are but mere representations of the entirety and wholeness of Being. They are *saguṇa* Brahman as opposed to *nirguṇa* Brahman—Brahman perceived through our eyes, endowed with qualities, as opposed to Brahman in-it-self. Contrary to Sharma, there is nothing in this conception that would lead one to becoming a "supremacist" in the likes of the Ku Klux Klan or the Nationalist Socialist Party of Germany; in fact, it is quite the opposite.

And, while it may be true that Hindutva Right-wingers have misappropriated Vivekananda for their nefarious purposes, it is not an argument against him. The

Maoist government of China misappropriated Marx, but I would certainly be loath to claim that Marx was a Maoist.

Furthermore, while I think that one certainly needs to acknowledge that such a conception of Hinduism is indeed a substantive comprehensive doctrine that can account only for a certain range of a plurality of divergent spiritual goods, no one view can accommodate all visions of the spiritual good, nor should it attempt to. In fact, there is often confusion when Neo-Hinduism is seen as embracing all differences, but it cannot nor should it. Neo-Advaita is, in effect, an overlapping consensus of comprehensive views of *reasonable* spiritualities—I would argue that Hinduism itself develops in this way. There are basic limits—as any form of Liberalism by its egalitarian foundation excludes the views of racists, sexists, homophobes, ableists, and other forms of discrimination (see Rawls 1993, 1999), so must any form of Spiritual Liberalism. The parameters of what constitute legitimate goods open to spiritual pursuit are conceptually constrained. For this very reason, Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan argue against caste hierarchy and gender inequality as contradictory to the radically egalitarian conceptual foundation and basis of Advaita. But these are not the only things they argue against.

The equal individual freedom of each *jīva* is not an absolute good; each individual's freedom is constrained by others' equal right to such freedom: thus, Vivekananda is explicit that "fanaticism" has no part to play in *any* religion; this also flows from the equality of each at the heart of his interpretation of Advaita. Apart from caste hierarchy, Vivekananda often criticizes fanaticism as the "most dangerous of all diseases," as the root of "bigotry," "sectarianism," and "horror." He argues that "nothing has deluged the world with more blood than religion" in this regard (Vivekananda 1964–1970: vol. 2, 360; vol. 1, 4). Historically and conceptually, the idea that there is a singular and exclusive path to the one true God has lead not only to intolerance, but also to violence and murder: for not only is it ever enough to posses the truth for fanatics and fundamentalists, but also others, nonbelievers, must be made to believe the "truth" too or die. Radhakrishnan contends such intolerance "is written in letters of blood across the history of man" (1988: 40). As caste hierarchy and gender abuse have no place in any religion, neither does fanaticism; it too must be weeded out in *whichever* religion it occurs.

Indeed, Vivekananda argues that religion is not outside the bounds of reason or ethics, it is not outside public scrutiny, nor should it ever be so (1964–1970: vol. 2, 335). Religious views are not immune to ethical criticism as much as any other views and beliefs are not so immune. Beliefs and practices that unconfusedly and unmistakably infringe on basic ethical values cannot and should not be regarded as legitimate (cf. Peetush 2014, 2015). We have learned much about what it is to be human, to suffer, and to flourish and thus have a solid basis for making such decisions: While beings differ in many regards, we still share basic needs, such as food, shelter, nurturance, love, the opportunity for social and cultural engagement, play, and meaningful work. The boundaries of toleration are reached when beliefs and practices undermine the most basic of such needs. No matter to which culture

or religion a person belongs, she suffers when she is starved, raped, tortured, and taken from her family and community.

Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan insist on unity around basic ethical norms, and rightfully so: these constitute the limits of any form of diversity whether in spirituality or politics (in this regard, see also Maritain 1948). Advaitan Neo-Hinduism on this conception is only one such form of a Spiritual Liberalism. That is, although equality and freedom here are in fact grounded in a substantive view of the self and other, that of the *jīva* in an ocean of *saṃsāra*, both Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan admit that equality and freedom have *equally* solid grounding in other metaphysical and spiritual commitments, such as, for example, in the Jain principle of *anekāntavāda* or multisidedness, or the Buddhist principle of *pratītyasmutapāda* or interconnectedness, or the love at the center of Christ's teaching, or the mercy and compassion of the Koran.

6. CONCLUSION

I have argued here that Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan draw out and develop what Śaṅkara himself did not: the ethics of a radical equality at the heart of Advaita in its full glory. This development continues to have deep resonances in the family of interrelated and myriad streams and tributaries of Neo-Hinduism. I have shown how this internally grounded and scathing critique of caste makes possible an ethic of radical social and political equality. This is the candle in the darkness that Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan light. Its flame is a spark of unity, of the conviction that we are *all* on the same spiritual road, asking the same ultimate questions about meaning and significance—each with a different response: including theists, atheists, dualists, monists, and materialists. The pluralism and diversity of life cannot be stifled by the few who claim to be sole possessors of a singular and exclusivist truth; this can only lead to more conflict and strife as history shows, time and again. Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan recover principles of equality and individual freedom already inherent in a (Neo-)Vedānta Monism of pure consciousness, and establish a conception of Neo-Hinduism as a form of Spiritual Liberalism: indeed, the equal individual freedom of each member of the community to pursue whichever spiritual good with which she most resonates is integral to a world that shines with such brilliant splendor and diversity.

NOTE

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