EXISTENTIALIST VEDANTA: READING VIVEKANANDA WITH CAMUS

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Abstract: Swami Vivekananda, the renowned Hindu philosopher, was one of the greatest expositors of Advaita Vedanta stream of Hindu thought. The traditional scholarship has focused mainly on his intellectual brilliance in harmonizing the different thoughts of various Hindu schools in an Idealist metaphysical system, at the apex of which he placed the Non-Dualism of Vedanta. It is suggested here that this is a flawed way of looking at his philosophy because it ignores the most crucial aspect of his thought, namely its existentialism. The author shows that by using his philosophy of Maya as the pivotal idea, we discover an existentialist side of his thought which has yet to be appreciated. By further understanding the concept of Maya as the "Absurd" of Albert Camus, hitherto unknown facets of Vivekananda come to light that can help us plug the gaps that arise due to the conventional interpretation of his ideas.

INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to reinterpret Vivekananda's philosophy in the light of existentialism. The paper's primary focus is to expose certain loopholes in the traditional interpretation of Vivekananda's teachings, which portrays him as a great exponent of the system of Vedantic metaphysics. The first part shows how this orthodox understanding of Vivekananda's philosophy came into being and the various factors that helped entrench it in the Indian mind. Then the author of this paper points out glaring problems with this approach that need to be addressed. Then the author proceeds to show how the various conflicting strands of his thought can be reconciled if we move away from the dominant approach of viewing Vivekananda as a tremendous Vedantic metaphysician to viewing him as a Vedantic existentialist. The author shows how this approach can better explain the anomalies that beset his philosophy. The author also tries to find echoes of his ideas in modern existentialists like Camus and Sartre, whom he anticipated by half a century.

I. THE HERMENEUTICS OF VEDANTA AND VIVEKANANDA

The general perception of Vivekananda (1863-1902) is that he was a great expositor of the metaphysical system of Advaita Vedanta, the philosophy of non-dualism. Vivekananda established the ideas of Vedanta logically and convincingly proved its superiority to other religious philosophies, both Eastern and Western. This view of Vivekananda projects him as a consummate philosopher and metaphysician who was not only well-versed in the Eastern

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tradition and Western philosophies but was also able to harmonize the teachings of Vedanta with the scientific theories of his day. In the tradition of Indian philosophy, where argumentation and disputation have a long history (Sen, 2006, ix) and the success of a religious system depends on whether the proponent has been able to refute the arguments of his adversaries, Vivekananda is seen as the 19th-century epitome of this established Hindu tradition. His role as a mystic, at least in the popular mind, is subordinate to that of a brilliant exponent of Hinduism who could vanquish his opponents.

It is pertinent to note that these were days of British Imperialism in India. The whole idea of "White man's burden" which rested on the assumption of the inferiority of the colonized countries, was much resented by colonial people, especially India, where two centuries of brainwashing of Indians had led to the counter-reaction known as the Bengal Renaissance, an attempt to reclaim the glory of ancient Indian civilization and its achievements. Vivekananda's formative years were shaped in this milieu. This movement appropriated his later triumphs in the West, in America and England, as vindication of its claims of the greatness of ancient Indian culture and civilization. It acted as a smokescreen for the true interpretation of Vivekananda's thoughts. His astute mind, powerful oratory, and impressive personality were all grist to this mill of cultural pride. This metaphysical Vedanta found its takers in Indian philosophers and mystics throughout the ages. Most Vedantic seers of modern India have a characteristically metaphysical approach to its teachings. Raman Maharshi, for example, bases his ideas on the metaphysics of self, which he considers Vedanta's true purport. (Osborne,2003). Radhakrishnan, perhaps the foremost academic philosopher of Vedanta, explicitly opposes it to humanism and existentialism. (Radhakrishnan, 1984, 102). Given such an overwhelming emphasis on the metaphysical system of Vedanta, it is no wonder that Vivekananda's teachings were considered to be an exposition of Vedantic philosophy in terms of a coherent and systematic explanation of reality.

The author contends that this approach, which continues to this day, obscures Vivekananda's uniqueness in Vedantic thought. A careful reading of Vivekananda shows that even though he brings excellent clarity to the Upanishidic thought by approaching it from a scientific viewpoint, there is something unmistakably new in his exposition that was not initially present in the Upanishadic texts. For any discerning reader, it can be seen that the metaphysical doctrines of Vedanta were being supplemented by something that was far more psychological and social than the Upanishads would allow. Vivekananda did not claim any originality for his ideas as he did not want to distance himself from the orthodox teachings. Instead, he blended the two disparate elements so seamlessly that even his followers and disciples sought to see it as merely an extension of ancient metaphysics. His philosophy was seen as one that formed a closed logical system that incorporated the ideas of Upanishads, Sankara, and other Vedantic philosophers.

II. THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN SERVICE AND NONDUALIS

Nevertheless, the view that something in Vivekananda was *sui generis* did not go unnoticed. One of his Western disciples, Sister Nivedita, is most conspicuous by her emphasis on this point. She was an Englishwoman who first heard

Vivekananda when he lectured in England in 1895. She quickly became so inspired by his vision that she eventually became a monk of the Ramakrishna order. In her book *The Master as I saw Him*, she mentions that Vivekanda's ideas of social work and nation-building resulted from his own experiences with India, its history, and culture and did not owe much to tradition, social or philosophical. As she puts it," The shastras, the Guru and the Motherland-are the three notes that mingle themselves to form the music of the works of Vivekananda." (Nivedita, 1967) Of the three, the "motherland" aspect is key to Vivekananda's uniqueness, as the other two are parts of an impersonal heritage. That Nivedita should have emphasized this aspect is no surprise because Vivekananda handpicked her to uplift the women of India**.** However, as her remark shows, she hesitated to believe that there was any rupture between the "shastras" and Vivekananda. She preferred to approach his ideas as an "organization and consolidation "of the central tenets of Hinduism and a reconciliation of the various schools of Vedanta in a synthetic mysticism. There remains a gap, a subtle uneasiness in trying to bridge the space between his role as a reformer and a metaphysician. Nivedita's approach was to turn Vivekananda into a social philosopher with a novel understanding of Indian history and society. A continuity between his reformist zeal and his Vedantic nondualist ideas was simply taken for granted. This underlying tension between Vivekananda has yet to be successfully resolved. Moreover, this cannot be done unless one accepts the fundamental truth that the ideas of Vedanta are genuinely incompatible with the idea of social reform. This truth has been swept under the carpet of casuistry. The general criticism that Indian philosophy, at least in its Vedantic version, was otherworldly has a long history.

Right from the eighteenth century, when Indian philosophy first started becoming available to the Western world, to the nineteenth century, when it became much more well known and discussed, especially by the German romantic philosophers, to the twentieth and our century, the view of Indian philosophy as a world-denying ascetic system that strives for absorption in mystical states to escape the travails of existence has been the preponderant way of understanding eastern thought in general and Hinduism in particular. A philosopher like Albert Schweitzer, a mystic, used the term "Life-negation" to characterize the dominant tone of Indian thought (Schweitzer, 1952). Though there has been some attenuation in that generalized perception, some contemporary Western philosophers have reiterated this aspect of Indian thought. (Blackburn, 1995). There is no denying that the view has substantial merit, making it the Achilles heel of Indian philosophy. The response of most Indian thinkers down the ages was to indulge in sophisticated casuistry to show that this charge was substantially incorrect. However, this inherent conflict between a metaphysical worldview and an ethical system comes out in Vivekananda. On the one hand, he is seen to be advocating a mysticism that would lead to the attainment of the supreme Vedantic goal of realizing the unity of all existence. On the other hand, he passionately advocated the progressive causes of social reform, which demanded intense and passionate involvement to fight against social and political injustice. None who has read Vivekananda and his fiery words can have an iota of doubt that Vivekananda is in his element when he is talking about the latter. The kind of engagement with the world he advocates cannot be accomplished by someone who remains unmoved by the external world, as Vedanta prescribes.

The usual response to this has been to point out Vivekananda's philosophy of work which advocates a mode of work in a spirit that differs from ordinary work. Whether he saw his philosophy of work as a bridge between the metaphysics of nondualism and his ideal of service is debatable. In fact, when one looks at his philosophy of work or Karma Yoga, one finds that it is only tangentially connected to the tenets of Advaita Vedanta. Indeed, his existential tendencies are most visible in his Karma Yoga portion, the philosophy of work. It is full of an emphasis on the ability of the human being to shape his destiny by making commitments in this world and honoring them unflinchingly. The key themes like "duty for duty's sake' or the greatness of each at one's own place and many others can easily fit into any existentialist textbook. In traditional Hinduism, *karma Yoga*, most eloquently described in the *Bhagavad Gita*, is synonymous with detachment and resignation to God's will. In Vivekananda's version, he retains these ideas. However, his accent is on the psychological effects of detachment, especially it's capacity to strengthen our capacity to assert our freedom and defy the limitation of circumstances. That is how he understands the detachment of Buddha and Christ. He writes,

> All the actions that we see in this world, all the movements in human society all the works we see around us are simply the display of thought, the manifestation of the will of man; and this will is caused by character and character is manufactured by Karma. The men of mighty will the world has produced have all been tremendous workers---gigantic souls with wills powerful enough to overturn worlds, wills they got by persistent work, through ages and ages. Such a gigantic will was that of a Buddha or a Jesus. (Vivekananda, 1902, 10)

Thus, his idea of service is not merely a means to some higher spiritual state as is usually understood but is an end regardless of the spiritual benefits that might accrue. It is because Vivekananda prioritizes the ideal of authenticity in a Sartrean sense over any spiritual attainment of mystical experience. We find him condemning the Indian elites of his day because they were classic examples of Bad faith, people who had abandoned their old ideas and adopted something radically different from their cultural essence. He praises the conservative orthodox compared to these elites because even though they clung to outdated and misplaced ideas, they had the merit of a wholehearted commitment to a cause that resonated with their culture. Ironically, his reformist zeal was inspired by rationality and Western science. It opposed the orthodoxy, yet he never ceased to admire them and preferred their misguided dogmatism to the imitative liberalism of the Westernized elites of his day for whom he had little respect.

The accepted interpretation of Vivekananda primarily emphasizes this philosophical acumen and metaphysical brilliance, which, as the author of this paper has previously mentioned, are subtly influenced by the colonial mindset which tried to recover its dignity lost under Western Imperialism. The brilliant ways in which Vivekananda was able to prove psychological insight and consistency while at the same time proving how Hindu ideas did not contradict scientific concepts of the day made him the most powerful defender of Hindu spirituality and its beliefs. Vivekananda'a eloquent defence of Hinduism provided a vantage point from which the colonized Hindus could practice reverse snobbery and ridicule the cultures of their imperialist masters since Christian doctrines

could not be assimilated with the 19th-century scientific views as readily as those of Hinduism. This complex web of historical consciousness, cultural identity, and colonial psychology has unfortunately irrevocably influenced the scholarship on Vivekananda from its beginning and continues to do so even today. It has resulted in a one-sided and partial understanding and interpretation of his philosophy. It is ironic since Vivekananda did not attach much importance to the theoretical approach to religion. His emphasis was not on scientific consistency but on the enormous meaningfulness and significance that religion lends to an individual's inner life.

However, it is essential to understand that Vivekananda indulged in such brilliant philosophical expositions for the pragmatic reason that the willingness of the West to accept and understand Hinduism depended on translating the philosophy of Hindu scriptures into a Western and scientific idiom. This use of rationality to uphold ancient truths was merely to rescue Hinduism from the charge of being a mass of superstitions. This project of Vivekananda was then supplemented by another step that either needed to be addressed or misinterpreted. This second was the existentialist move to which the author turns next.

III. MAYA AS THE ABSURD IN VIVEKANANDA'S VEDANTA

A *metaphysical system* is a magnificent structure based on principles that bring coherence to all aspects of reality. It is indeed a masterpiece of human ingenuity, and those who can erect foolproof metaphysics go down in the history of philosophy as the greatest minds of an age. Plato, Aristotle, Leibniz, Spinoza, and Hegel are a few such luminaries in the history of philosophy. The ancient Hindu philosophy of Vedanta comprises numerous concepts in the various Upanishads. Even though the significant Upanishads are all considered part of the Vedantic school, there is nothing like homogeneity between the teachings of these Upanishads. Worse still, several strands of thought need to be more easily harmonized within a single Upanishad. The hermeneutics of Upanishads is indeed an exceedingly complex and multi-layered exercise. It is sometimes difficult to believe that different parts of the same Upanishad have come from a single pen. There are thematic differences galore. One often finds a part explicating a cosmological problem suddenly, followed by another discussing ethical issues. The imagery and symbolism make it even more challenging to find the true import of the text. Thousands of years of textual exegesis through innumerable scholars and sages still need to be answered. Given such complexity, combining such diverse strands under the umbrella of Hinduism itself becomes a virtue of this religion (Smart, 1978). The scattered ideas of Hindu philosophy seem like an invitation for a keen and acute mind to tie them together. Vivekananda's brilliance was to connect the different strands of Upanishads through certain key ideas. These ideas, picked from the great sayings or the *Mahavakyas* of different Upanishads, are freed from bondage, the unity of all reality, and the inward divinity of human life. From these few key ideas, Vivekananda was able to find an underlying unity not only between the various Upanishads but also between the various historical schools of Vedanta, which he redefined as gradual stages in the progression towards Sankara'a Advaita Vedanta or Non-Dualism, the culmination of Hindu philosophy. Thus, Vivekananda undoubtedly accomplished

an extraordinary feat by creating a sound logical system out of the Upanishads. However, in his explanation of Upanishads, metaphysical consistency is one aspect of a much larger project. To neglect this bigger picture by becoming enamored by the grandiose idealistic structure has been the error that posterity has fallen into concerning Vivekananda. To truly understand the philosophy of Upanishads that he was proposing and its existentialist bent, one must begin with his lectures on Maya delivered in London in 1895. The reason for this is that Vivekananda himself considered them to be his most important ideas. In the words of Sister Nivedita,

> He always considered, for his own part, that his greatest intellectual achievement…had consisted in his lectures on Maya. (Sister Nivedita, 1967, 26)

Thus, in Vivekannada'a's own estimation, these culminated his thinking on Vedanta. The pivotal point around which these lectures revolve is his very repudiation of this pursuit of consistency which the human mind is forever striving for. Here we find Vivekananda undermining his metaphysical structure, so dear to the traditionalists, intending to show that the simultaneous demand of our logical part for this consistency and the refusal of nature to grant it is woven into the fabric of human existence, which he termed Maya. There is something unique and almost anomalous about these lectures because Vivekananda seems to be undoing his previous attempts to wield the Upanishadic concepts in a system, averring that such system building itself is part of the dilemma of the human condition. He talks about how the human mind is condemned to remain forever dissatisfied with all its intellectual strivings. In a series of most evocative and brilliant examples in one of these lectures, he says this: "We are all going to death and yet this tremendous clinging on to life exists. Somehow, we do not know why, we have to cling on to life; we cannot give it up. And this is Maya!". (Vivekananda, 1902, 57)

Here we find a volte-face. Maya is not being portrayed as an impediment, an illusion, or an obstacle to be done away with-it is the condition for knowledge, the basis on which a new life, an essence, has to be created. In the Sartrean formula of "Existence precedes Essence," Maya stands for the former, a contradictory multiplicity, not a vacuous nothingness. Nothing of this sort is available in any preceding Vedantic philosophies. The great Shankaracharya was satisfied to call Maya an inherent power of Brahman. Moreover, his solution was to go beyond Maya to merge with Brahman. Not so in Vivekananda. He accepts Maya as a "statement of fact" which cannot be wished away. Contrary to popular interpretation, he is not showing us an escape route to come out of the clutches of Maya. Instead, he insists that this is an unavoidable human condition, the statement of fact, the ultimate futility of all attempts to arrive at a final state of benediction. Having built a coherent structure of Vedantic metaphysics, Vivekananda shows an incompleteness that bedevils all systems. This subtle pointer escaped the notice of most Hindu philosophers interested in reading a watertight and foolproof metaphysical system in his ideas. His doctrine of Maya is the last word in his intellectual system-building efforts. From here on begins the real Vivekananda, the existentialist one. Faced with this ultimate despair that is bound to be a part of human existence, what should be our response? How to

we proceed from the existence of Maya to create an essence? Let us hear Camus now and then revisit Vivekananda. Camus says,

> From the moment absurdity is recognized, it becomes a passion, the most harrowing of all. But whether or not one can live with one's passions, whether or not one can accept their law, which is to burn the heart they simultaneously exalt, that is the whole question. (Camus, 1960, 27)

It is this intense psychological stance, this "living with one's passion," that Vivekananda exemplifies. He affirms that with his own free will and rationality, an individual can accept this contradictory aspect of the human condition while simultaneously committing himself to an uphill struggle against it; indeed, the struggle itself lends meaning to our existence. The psychological tilt once again is reminiscent of Camus when he says,

> It is a matter of living in that state of the absurd. Everything considered, a determined soul will always manage. (Camus, 1960, 43)

What is Vivekananda's whole philosophy but this adamantine determination to conquer nature? This glorification of willpower, of which Vivekananda's own life was a perfect example, is the result of a continual confrontation with Maya against which the Self is to affirm itself perpetually. The accurate translation of Maya should be the Absurd, not the traditional one of Illusion. In fact, Sister Nivedita comments on precisely this difficulty of translation. She says:

> It is evident that the word does not simply refer to the Universe as known through the senses but also describes the tortuous, erroneous and the self contradictory character of that knowledge. (Sister Nivedita, 1967, 27)

In the words of Vivekananda,

> This is a statement of fact, not a theory that this world is a Tantalus' Hell, that we do not know anything about this universe; yet at the same time we cannot say that we do not know." (Vivekananda, 1902, 82)

These preceding words emphatically show that Vivekananda considered all the rationality and rigor in expounding the metaphysical system of Vedanta to be nothing but an exercise in the realm of Maya.

It is remarkable how close Vivekananda comes to Camus and how much he anticipates his ideas. Furthermore, the similarity does not stop here. Just like Camus recommends a Sisyphean struggle against the presence of the Absurd, Vivekananda recommends a continual affirmation of the Self against Maya. Just like Camus makes his Sisyphus contend with the brute fact of the Absurd, Vivekananda makes the human being assert his freedom despite encountering the facticity of Maya. Vivekananda prefers the Vedantic metaphysics not because it accurately describes reality or because of its harmony with science but because the Vedantic viewpoint has a liberating effect that steers our attention away from the limitations that attend our existence towards the possibilities that are offered to us. The key to Vivekananda's ideas is his insistence that this optimism of Vedanta makes it an ideal help in his struggle to achieve authenticity in his

encounter with the absurd, in shaping an essence out of his existence. Most Vivekananda scholarship tends to focus on the consistency aspect of his philosophy as if the foremost preoccupation of Vivekananda in his Vedantic expositions was to sound logical and scientific. It is a hermeneutical error because we conflate his mode and style of expression for his motivation and intention or, even worse, his philosophy. This error can be avoided if we remember that the age and milieu in which Vivekananda worked needed an adequate idiom in which he could express his avant-garde views. Sister Nivedita talks about these problems when she says,

> …It is only by reading these carefully that an idea can be formed of the difficulty of the task he undertook, in trying to render the conception in modern English. Throughout the chapters in question we feel that we are in the presence of a struggle to express an idea which he is clearly apprehended, in a language which is not a fit vehicle for it. (Sister Nivedita, 1967, 42)

Here we have a vivid first-hand account from Vivekananda's foremost disciple herself of the difficulties that Vivekananda faced. These difficulties arose because Vivekananda was making a sharp departure from the logical metaphysics of the Upanishads on which he had been most eloquently lecturing so far without any problem. Nevertheless, because Vivekananda clearly understood that the ultimate message of Upanishads had to do with the psychological and existential aspects of human existence, not the metaphysical and ontological ones, he eventually struggled. His dilemma was two-fold. He was anticipating the existentialists by half a century and speaking in an era where Victorian science and utilitarianism reigned supreme; one could only forsake the metaphor of scientific rationality at the risk of being misunderstood or ridiculed.

However, behind all such rationality and scientific afterthought, one can hear the echoes of the doctrine of Maya, the ultimate absurdity of it all. The true voice of Vivekananda is heard when he talks about human self-affirmation, which he repeatedly voices. He repeatedly talks about never losing faith in oneself, being fearless, and conquering nature. The traditional interpretation of these is that Vivekananda is first exhorting his listeners to achieve a nonduality through yoga. Then they will achieve these psychological qualities. That is not the case. Maya vitiates all such spiritual efforts. There is no final merging with Brahman in a state of samadhi that will automatically lift us out of bondage because some strange alchemy would have transformed us so much that we will suddenly find ourselves endowed with these psychological attributes. That is a false reading of Vivekananda. Maya ensures we remain bound by the vision of such a chimerical world. This light at the end of the tunnel mentality is how Maya works. Vivekananda is saying there is a tunnel all the way down. The light will have to be struck right now, forged from the power of self-will, of self-affirmation. There is no light outside which is going to greet us. So, what looks like pessimism and despair is the cause for us to affirm our existence, resolutely face the absurdity into which we are thrown, and create a new essence for us in the process. Our struggle and suffering alone will enable us to create our essence as if out of nothing. As Sister Nivedita interprets it,

> All have sought to turn life into a battle field rather than a ball room. All have striven to make man strong for death rather than for life. (Sister Nivedita, 1967, 28)

IV. SPINOZIST VIVEKANANDA AND THE NIETZCHEAN VIVEKANANDA

Vivekananda affirms two things, the infinite absurdity of all human efforts and the remarkable ability of the self to make this struggle meaningful. It is where Vivekananda makes a masterly existential turn on Vedanta. The philosophy of nondualism does not call for the change of our mental perception to that of unity. It calls for this non-dualistic outlook to be affirmed because it can blunt the edge of Maya as a human condition.

That is why we find Vivekananda forever exhorting his followers to make a psychological change. This relationship between the metaphysics of Vivekananda and his existentialist positions has several ramifications. It gives Indian thought, for the first time, a push away from religiosity, both ritualistic *Karma Kanda* or philosophical *Jnana Kanda*. As is well known, the relationship between religion and philosophy is very close in Hindu thought and a blurring of distinction between the two is not uncommon. Indian philosophy in general and Hindu thought in particular is an entangled web of several cultural strands some of which privilege religiosity over philosophy while others take the opposite stand. Nevertheless, what unites them is the teleological emphasis, a stance that views them all as paths towards the goal of liberation from bondage, of the attainment of Mukti or Kaivalya or Nirvana. Vivekananda too has been sought to be assimilated under this teleological schema. The most visible quotes of Vivekananda that are used by his followers emphasize this goal seeking aspect of Advaita Vedanta. However, Vivekananda makes a subtle adjustment to this goal seeking view; he transfers it from the metaphysical realm to the psychological realm and it is the latter that he privileges. The worth of all metaphysical attainments is conditional on its ability to bestow strength to life, a Nietzschean move. The one thread that runs through all his pronouncements is –strength, fearlessness and unselfishness- all psychological attributes that he privileges over the metaphysics of the Upanishads. This also gives us a clue how Vivekananda's philosophy of social service is one with his non-Dualist metaphysics. He attempts to rescue spirituality from the nihilism that engulfs it if it remains true to the metaphysics of non-dualism. For this Vivekananda advocates a reconstruction of the world view based on reason and free will and ethical commitments to others in the society. The passivity that is implicit in the Advaitic solipsism is thus overcome. Without this psychological turn, Vivekananda may appear to be advocating the subjective Idealism of Berkeley, a position with which Shankara's Advaita Vedanta has great affinity. But even a staunch admirer of Eastern philosophy like Schopenhauer, who ironically was one of the few Western philosophers that Vivekananda invoked repeatedly in defence of Vedanta, considered Berkeley's subjective Idealism to be so impractical that he believed it fit for a lunatic asylum. (Schopenhauer, 1965, 36). Vivekananda's interpretation of Vedanta appropriates the idealistic metaphysics to arrive at a standpoint that can provide the best psychological leverage for intense activity.

Thus, he comes up with the idea of practical Vedanta, which accomplishes this reconciliation without abandoning the Upanishadic principles. Instead of abandoning the world as illusory as traditional Vedanta construes it under the principle of Maya, Vivekananda shifts the emphasis from an illusory nature of reality to an illusory *manner* of apprehending reality, and it is the latter that he brings to the fore. It is such a radical departure that it shakes the foundations of Hindu metaphysics to the very core. It seems almost heretic. However, the genius of Vivekananda was to appropriate the Advaitic ontology for his existentialist purpose. The world as an illusion becomes the reason for which it has to be made real through ethical commitments. The world as impersonal has to be made intensely and existentially personal through psychological affirmations. There is an interplay that takes place between impersonal metaphysical principles and personal free will. It is how *freedom* is defined by him-not as a metaphysical substance that pervades all reality but as a psychological response to the challenges that the limitations of the body, mind, and spirit impose on us, a response of affirmation of the infinite resource within us that is called into being by the very act of affirmation. That is why Vivekananda gives the mantra of repeating to us continuously the infinitude that exists within us. He says,

> Men are taught from childhood that they are weak and are sinners. Teach them that they are glorious children of immortality, even those that are the weakest in manifestation. Let it ring day and night in your minds like a song. That is the truth. The infinite strength of the world is yours. (Vivekananda, 1902, 49)

The conventional interpretation of Vivekananda misses this point. Vivekananda employs the concept of liberation or "Mukti" as an existentialist stance towards living- a human and personal response to the limitations of an impersonal universe that threatens to capture and annihilate our inner freedom.

Advaitic metaphysics without Vivekanandian existentialism becomes as much a bondage, albeit a higher one, than the bondage that it seeks to replace. The traditional scholars ignored this subtle negation of freedom embedded within the metaphysics that promises liberation to its adherents. In a desire to seek continuity with the hallowed Hindu past, Vivekananda's followers were only too eager to gloss over his several radical departures from the established tradition. For the devout, he becomes transfigured into an ancient sage immersed in Brahmic consciousness, as some of his famous image's attest. For the nationalists, he became a figure who vanquished the false superiority of their colonial masters. For the scholars, he became a consummate metaphysician who reconciled the oppositions between the various schools of Vedanta. Each appropriated him in their own way and tried to color his thought in light of their own assumptions. It was never perceived that there was an unassimilable core of him which owed its origin to the uniqueness and originality that Vivekananda brings to Vedanta. In this, he was truly ahead of his age because there was nothing in conventional European, American, or Indian thought that reflected what he was saying. Existentialism lay half a century ahead. That is indeed one of the reasons why he has been so misunderstood. The idiom in which he spoke was always interpreted in light of Enlightenment and Romanticism, the two philosophical movements still competing for dominance in the West.

To a certain extent, it was a massive struggle for Vivekananda himself because there was no way he could communicate the novel approach which he brought to Hindu thought without translating it into the prevalent idioms. The naturalism he brought to Hinduism was one aspect of that transition he struggled to make. (Kumar, 2016) This naturalistic interpretation of religion in general and Vedanta, in particular, was only his initial first move to align religion with modern thought. However, to have stopped at it would have made human existence a victim of impersonal universal principles, however grandiose and elevated. His second move was to inject a healthy dose of humanism into religion so that the human would regain its sovereignty. Instead of interpreting human liberation as a mechanistic outcome of specific spiritual practices, he made it a self-posited reality. In his naturalistic phase, he glorifies reason, extolling the scientific method and approach (Kumar, 2016). The limitations that fetter us can be overcome by reason, and for a discipline that promises us ultimate liberation, bypassing reason would be fatal for its project. Hence naturalism. However, a reason to bind ever more subtly but equally strongly. Religion is not another science. It is far superior to it because it is a new series of affirmations of human independence, the free will which rises above reason. In this direction, Vivekananda steers religion away from science towards existentialism. So, what we have is a Spinozist Vivekananda followed by a Nietzschean one. The traditional interpretation of his thought focuses solely on the former.

CONCLUSION

There needs to be a revision in our understanding of Vivekananda's philosophy. By half a century, his anticipation of existentialist themes needs to be recognized to appraise his ideas properly. The dialectical interplay of impersonal principles and personal will is the key to understanding the true import of his teachings. So far, the impersonal principles aspect of his philosophy has been held to be of sole importance, leading to an interpretation of Vivekananda as a builder of metaphysical systems. The neglect of the other aspect of his teachings, despite the abundance of the aspects of his side, has led to a lopsided appreciation of his philosophy. A course correction in this regard is necessary. There is a risk of betraying his philosophy's essence and spirit if his existentialist side is not considered.

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