An Encounter between East and West: The Notion of Truth in
William James and Swami Vivekananda

By

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Abstract

William James considered Swami Vivekananda the exemplary example of a monist, and he comes to reject Vivekananda’s philosophy because it ultimately did not suit his active temperament. However, judging from his assessment of Vivekananda’s philosophy, it appears James had a limited understanding of Vedanta. It can be speculated that James’s understanding of Vedanta was mainly the aspect of Raja Yoga (the science of psychic control) – which is evinced by the fact that he disagrees with what he perceives as a lack of ability to justify meliorism and a zestful life. But this understanding leaves out of account Karma Yoga or the active principle of Vedanta – which advocates work as the means to realize the divine. Contra James’s conception, it is more illustrative to understand Vedanta not as a doctrine of extreme ‘monism’, but rather an attitude which cultivates every particular temperament and disposition.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Swami Vivekananda was born in 1863, and grew up in Calcutta. He was a member of a fairly well-to-do family and in his early childhood he learned the stories in the Ramayana and Mahabharata. He would later receive a western style education and attend university in Calcutta. While studying, he learned and mastered English as a second language, History, Mathematics, Logic, Psychology and Philosophy. It was also during his college days that he became familiar with traditional Indian thought and the social movement of the Brahmo Samaj. But Vivekananda’s life was radically altered when he became a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna – a mystic-saint, who provided Vivekananda with the knowledge of the ancient Hindu Vedanta tradition he would later spread to the West. Following the death of Ramakrishna in 1886, Vivekananda and other disciples began an order to practice the life of sannyasins (or mendicants) with the aim of fulfilling their master’s vision of spirituality. Vivekananda was restless however, and travelled throughout India as a wandering monk for a number of years. He became a semi-celebrity during his travels drawing the interest of many potentates and influential people. Most significantly he began a friendship with the Maharaja of Khetri, who would later finance his trips to the West. In 1892, with the news that there would be a World Parliament of Religions to be held in Chicago, Vivekananda saw this as an opportunity to fulfill his mission of spreading the gospel of Indian spirituality. It was through his bright mind, Western education, mastery of English, and incessant energy that he would find himself in America in 1893 lecturing at the World Parliament of Religions.

2 Ibid. 47.
3 The Brahmo Samaj “was the outward expression of an endeavor to liberalize and at the same time conserve the evolved traits of the Hindu race… This movement protested against certain forms and tenets of orthodox Hinduism, such as polytheism, image worship, the doctrine of Divine Incarnations, and the need for a Guru. It offered a monotheistic religion which repudiated all these.” Eastern And Western Disciples, 55. In brief, the Brahmo Samaj was a social movement begun in 1828, which advanced an alteration of religious customs in India.
4 Eastern And Western Disciples, 211.
During his time in America, Vivekananda gave a number of lectures at Harvard where he had the opportunity to meet William James in 1894 and again in 1896. William James would later refer to Vivekananda frequently throughout his works, and he understood him as the paragon of monistic thinkers. Although James grasped Vivekananda’s metaphysical views quite well, and recognized the value of his philosophy, James remained aloof from a thorough understanding of Vedanta. Even though the two thinkers shared a number of important beliefs such as (1) the non-transcendence of all aspects of reality, (2) an emphasis on the need for religion to rely on personal experience, (3) the simplification of philosophical inquiry, and (4) a pluralistic worldview concerning people’s quest for truth, James maintained that Vedanta was suitable only for those with a passive temperament (archetypal of the eastern mindset). However, this characterization is based on an incomplete understanding of the broadness of Vivekananda’s philosophy, and was perhaps a result of James’s projection of his conceptions of the ‘eastern’ type of mind onto Vivekananda. I ultimately aim to show – with an exposition of these two thinkers conception of the notion of truth – that the tenets of their philosophy are not as opposed as James supposed.
Chapter II
The Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda

‘But why cast words into the wind?
All roads are good
And blessed on earth,
And your own road is holy too’

Vivekananda was one of (if not the most) important figures in the re-establishment of the Vedanta philosophy and his personal biography serves as a symbol as to why this occurred. Not only was he given a quasi-western education in the milieu of post-Macaulay colonial India, but he also received an initiation into the ancient philosophy of the Vedanta from his guru, Sri Ramakrishna. Although there were many different strands of Indian thought in circulation at the time, as well as westernized intellectual groups with the goal of modernizing and reviving India, a comprehensive program or ideology was lacking. Unique to Vivekananda which allowed him to provide this program was his exuberant personality, familiarity with the thought and languages of the West (English and French), lack of commitments to formal organizations and most importantly his guruship under Ramakrishna. From this sprang the ideology which Vivekananda believed embodied the teachings of Ramakrishna and the intellectual and spiritual heritage of India: Advaita Vedanta. From the standpoint of Advaita Vedanta, Vivekananda synthesized various strands of Indian thought (as well as Western), to formulate a position which he believed could (and would) serve as the religion of the future; a religion which was all-encompassing, supremely tolerant and scientifically verifiable. The central tenets Vivekananda preached were the necessity of personal realization for spiritual fulfillment, the fundamental unity of all

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religions and systems of thought, the misunderstanding of reality through *Maya* and the means to remove the self-imposed veil of *Maya* – the four yogas.

It is a common trend throughout history in considering religions to distinguish between the so-called ‘inner’ realm of spirituality and the outer customs consisting in ceremonies, scriptures, practices etc. Vivekananda likewise recognizes this difference and this is perhaps the most significant insight he gained from his guru. He draws the distinction using the Sanksrit terms, *shruti* and *smrti*, but applies this distinction to all religions. *Shruti* represents the “eternal principles that are in man and nature”, which can never change⁶; such as the ethical principles found in all religious traditions. And the *smrti* are historical religious practices, which “change with the changes in society”.⁷ Vivekananda relates this distinction with a story Ramakrishna often told, of some men who entered into a mango orchard. They went about measuring the size of the leaves, the lengths of the branches, the colour of the mangoes and noted it down most earnestly. They began to discuss their results, and to inquire into the nature of mangoes. But another man, more sensible than the rest did not care for these things, he simply picked out a mango and began to eat it.⁸ The sagacity of this man resides in his recognition that the studies of the other men are merely subsidiary to a real experience of a mango – something a mere child could have. This story serves as a clear metaphor for the message of realization, later explained by Vivekananda. For Vivekananda there is the “sharpest distinction between talk and realization”⁹, between the outward ornaments of religion, and the earnest experience of God. Although this point may seem straightforward, realization in its truest form is as difficult as it is

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rare, and the quest for this realization is the basis for the remainder of Vivekananda’s interpretation of Advaita Vedanta.

The notion of realization was so central for Vivekananda because it encapsulates the importance of individuality and the development of personal character for Advaita Vedanta. After stripping the phenomenal forms of Maya from oneself, the remaining substance is merely the true Self (Atman), which has the utmost distinction from the commonly conceived self – consisting in its worldly characteristics or attributes. As such, realization may “be said to constitute the central and most outstanding feature of [Vivekananda’s] thought, [for] it is an idea he unfailingly labours in almost every one of his lectures”\(^\text{10}\), and insists upon to make any spiritual progress. Vivekananda’s significance for later developments of Indian thought is also very important on this point, for the term ‘realization’ would become the standard Vedantic translation for the two key concepts of \textit{atmajnana} and \textit{brahmajnana}\(^\text{11}\). The writings which bear the greatest influence on Vivekananda’s thought are certainly the Upanishads, and this notion of realization is thoroughly endorsed therein. The \textit{Kausitaki Upanishad} describes that it is “not the odor that a man should seek to apprehend; rather he should get to know the one who smells it…[and] one should realize: “He is my Self (Atman)”\(^\text{12}\): here the Self is precisely not identified in any relation to the odor. Likewise in the \textit{Katha Upanishad} it is stated “this Self cannot be grasped, by teachings or by intelligence, or even by great learning”\(^\text{13}\), and in the \textit{Svetasvatara Upanishad} that Brahman is “an object rooted in austerity and knowledge of Self”\(^\text{14}\); the outward forms of study are not sufficient. Vivekananda concludes in a very similar manner that “it is only

\(^{10}\) Rambachan, Anantanand. \textit{The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda’s Reinterpretation of the Vedas}. Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press. 1994, 94-5.

\(^{11}\) De Michelis, 129.


\(^{13}\) Olivelle, 387.

\(^{14}\) Olivelle, 417.
he who has realized God, and seen Him, who is religious… if we understand that this realization is the only religion, we shall look into our own hearts and find how far we are towards realizing the truths of religion”\textsuperscript{15}. Verily is it “that man is the measure of all things”\textsuperscript{16}, man is the measure of the truth, and the recognition of the truth in the world can only be had through searching one’s own heart.

**Unity of Religion and Philosophy**

Since the basis of spirituality resides in each individual’s personal ‘realization’, Vivekananda construes an extremely broad and universal notion of religion. True religion for Vivekananda resides in an attitudinal factor, for as long as “you are sincere, says Vedantism, you are sure to be brought to the goal”\textsuperscript{17}, of releasing yourself from the ills of this world. Given this position it does not matter, how or what man worships, for there never really was any worship of anything but the spirit of man\textsuperscript{18}, the divinity which resides in all of us. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and all other religions have the same fundamental focus for Vivekananda, and are but aspects (or perspectives) of the one supreme Truth. It is Vedanta that is thus able to accommodate all of these different systems and more; accepting their partial truth, their inherent value in uplifting individuals and ultimately their necessity. Vivekananda states:

> Ours I have said is the universal religion. It is inclusive enough and it is broad enough to include all the ideals. All the ideals that already exist in the world can be immediately

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{15} Vivekananda, vol. III, 378.
\item\textsuperscript{17} Vivekananda, vol. III, 537.
\item\textsuperscript{18} Vivekananda, vol. VI, 60.
\end{itemize}
included, and we can patiently await for all the ideals that are to come in the future to be taken in the same fashion, embraced in the infinite arms of the religion of the Vedanta\textsuperscript{19}.

Although there has been a focus on Vivekananda’s explanations on religion, the ‘infinite arms of the Vedanta’ extend and encompass much more. Science, the arts, and even manual work are expressions of the Self – and when pursued with an attitude of non-attachment and control – likewise with religion, they lead one to the realization of the divine.

The tendency towards uncompromising sectarianism is the bane of social progress as it subsumes others attitudes or perspectives as wrong. However, it must not be forgotten that the aim is One and the same for all, indeed “that which exists is One; sages [merely] call it by various names\textsuperscript{20}. This attitude is best summed up by the familiar story of the blind men and the elephant. Each man feels the part of the elephant they are next too, and asked to describe the elephant. One man feeling the trunk exclaims ‘it is like a rope’, another feeling its leg claims the elephant is like a stump, another feeling its ear that the elephant is like a large fan\textsuperscript{21}. The humour of the story is that they are all correct in their assessments, but that their quarrel arose from only having a limited perspective. The goal is thus to recognize one’s limited perspective and to extend one’s scope of inquiry – through succeeding stages – and this can only be achieved by an appreciation and respect of all other viewpoints. Even though one may have recognized their own particular path, any form of fanaticism or exclusivity concerning other paths is condemned. It is the peculiar genius of Vivekananda that he is able to expound a position which is both supremely universal in scope – for it applies to all persons – while simultaneously focusing on individuals alone.

\textsuperscript{19} Vivekananda, vol. III, 251-2.  
\textsuperscript{20} Vivekananda, vol. III, 384.  
\textsuperscript{21} Vivekananda, vol. III, 495.
Advaita Vedanta

Vivekananda has been the most thorough exponent of Vedanta philosophy; however he only represents a particular aspect of Vedanta, which is necessary to explain. It is in keeping with his synthesizing project that Vivekananda is drawn to the Advaita perspective of Vedanta. Advaita means ‘non-dual’ and is an attribution to distinguish it from the *dvaita* (dual) and *visishtadvaita* (qualified non-dualism) schools of thought. Advaita is seen as the culmination of Indian thought for Vivekananda, for it proceeds to remove all distinctions and focus on the complete identity of the Self and the One. On the other hand *visishtadvaita* as propounded by Ramanuja rejects the listless speculating of Advaita on the grounds that the *saguna* Brahman (or the Absolute with qualities) “is the highest reading of Brahman we can aspire for”\(^\text{22}\), and the absolute of Advaita is content-less and thus unattainable. Ramanuja stresses the need to posit a deity which can serve as a representation of the ultimate, “joining the mind with devotion to that which is not Brahman, taking it to be Brahman”\(^\text{23}\), is the only means to conceive the divine. The focus on concrete forms is taken further by the *Dvaita* school represented by Madhva, which rejects the symbolic worship of *Ishvara* (of *visishtadvaita*), replacing it with an earnest worship of *saguna* Brahman. For *Dvaita* the distinction between the Ultimate and the Self is real and thus devotion is required as a means to commune with the Absolute. This school has certain appeals, as it is the most available and practicable for the majority of people who are unable to adhere to the abstract ideas prevalent in the *visishtadvaita* – and more so – Advaita schools.

Vivekananda takes a very unique position upon the relationship and status of these various schools within Vedanta. Although a staunch advaitist himself, he believes the Vedanta,

\(^{22}\) Murty, Ram. *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction*. Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 2013, 143.

properly construed, is able to recognize all three as correct and having a proper place in the world. There are salient points in all three, each one having its particular appeal to different people based on their psychology. As:

society exists at the present time, all these three stages are necessary; the one does not deny the other, one is simply the fulfillment of the other. The Advaitist or the qualified Advaitist does not say that dualism is wrong; it is a right view, but a lower one. It is on the way to truth; therefore let everybody work out his own vision of this universe, according to his own ideas.

Herein lies the core of Vivekananda’s interpretation of the truth. Although everyone has their own perspective, this does not necessarily mean each perspective has equal claim to the truth. Although each may have equal value – in that everyone is justified within their stage of psychic evolution – if some are ‘higher’ than others, then they are representative of greater veracity; and the surest sign that a perspective is higher, is its ability to produce logically and scientifically verifiable opinions.

Vivekananda ultimately subscribes to the advaitist position based on its logical consistency and its justification of selfless ethical actions. With the injunction Tat Tvam Asi (thou art that), Vivekananda – much like Schopenhauer before him – provides the explanatory rationale for selfless actions. “Why is it”, he asks:

that everyone says, ‘Do good to others?’ Where is the explanation? Why is it that all great men have preached the brotherhood of mankind, and greater men the brotherhood of all lives? Because whether they were conscious of it or not, behind all that, through all

24 Although Vivekananda himself believes Advaita is the most comprehensive theory.
26 See Karma Yoga: Each is Great in His Own Place. Vivekananda, vol. I, 36.
their irrational and personal superstitions, was peering forth the eternal light of the Self denying all manifoldness, and asserting that the whole universe is but one\textsuperscript{27}.

It does not lie in any psychological predisposition, or rational imperative that the great people of the world have shown the greatest ‘selflessness’, but rather that they recognized Tat Tvam Asi. Although Advaita provides the most evident justification for ethics, it remains to be seen how it is able to explain both the apparent nature of the self, and the apparent existence of the phenomenal world. For if ‘the whole universe is but one’, how is Advaita able to explain the existence of the manifold? It is to the theory of Maya that Vivekananda turns to answer this question, supposing that delusion has come upon us through our own self-identification with the phenomena of this world.

**Maya**

Even though Maya is a very central notion in Vedanta philosophy, it is commonly misunderstood as illusion – that the cosmos is merely illusory\textsuperscript{28}. However, there is a deeper dimension to this idea. It is true that this world is not absolutely real, yet it still exists, and so enjoys a degree of ‘reality’. The world as we experience it is refracted through the mind, and thus is always qualified in a distorted manner. Sankara uses the example of a rope which is confused for a snake in a dimly lit room. When one realizes the rope is really just a rope and not a snake, the snake (as appearance) disappears. Yet when one sees the rope as a snake, the snake does undoubtedly exist in some manner in the mind. But the snake is illusory; all there is ultimately, is the rope\textsuperscript{29}. Though one may comprehend the snake as illusory, it does no good to shut one’s eyes and ignore its reality altogether. How would one ever hope to recognize the rope

\textsuperscript{27} Vivekananda, vol. II, 252.
\textsuperscript{28} Vivekananda, vol. VI, 92.
\textsuperscript{29} Vivekananda, vol. II, 274.
then? Rather one must accept the snake, understand it, and transcend it. Vivekananda sums it up this way:

Maya is then a paradox – real, yet not real, an illusion, yet not an illusion. He who knows the Real sees in Maya not illusion, but reality. He who knows not the Real sees Maya and thinks it real

It is thus that Vivekananda is able to justify the attitude of accepting the lower steps of *dvaita* and *visishtadvaita* – for they were “the same truth, only seen through the glass of Maya, distorted it may be – yet truth and nothing but truth”\(^{31}\), and it is only through them that one can advance to the Advaitic position.

We have seen so far how Vivekananda explains the highest ideal as that of ‘realization’, and the metaphysical nature of our separation from this ideal, yet it remains to be explained how we are to attain this. But for Vivekananda the removal of the metaphysical distinction of ourselves from the Absolute is one and the same process as that of realization. In truth we have not been deluded by anyone but ourselves, “we put our hands over our eyes and weep that it is dark. Take the hands away and there is light; the light exists always for us, the self-effulgent nature of the human soul”\(^{32}\). It is we who have projected the snake unto the rope\(^{33}\). The practical men of this world have sought to improve the phenomenal world by changing it, but Vivekananda recommends they learn a lesson from the theory of evolution. When an animal does not find the environment suitable to itself it does not seek to change the environment, rather

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30 Vivekananda, vol. VI, 92.
33 However, “to ask why Maya came is a useless question, because the answer can never be given in Maya, and beyond Maya who will ask it? Evil creates ‘why’, not ‘why’ the evil, and it is evil that asks ‘why’. Illusion destroys illusion. Reason itself, being based upon contradiction, is a circle and has to kill itself” (VII 67).
it develops and changes its own body\textsuperscript{34}. In fact, who are we to suppose the world needs our help?\textsuperscript{35} It has persisted for eternity after all. We thus all have supreme responsibility for our own development, and only our own, for “good works [only]… do good to the doer, never to any other”\textsuperscript{36}. Although we may have overbearing faith in our own opinion this provides no basis to interrupt another’s progress”. The goal of Vedanta can thus be summed up that:

In this world of many he who sees the One, in this ever changing world he who sees Him who never changes, as the Soul of his own soul, as his own self, he is free, he is blessed, he has reached the goal. Therefore know that thou art He\textsuperscript{37}; Thou art the God of this universe, Tat Tvam Asi… know that every thought and word that weakens you in this world is the only evil that exists. Whatever makes men weak and fear is the only evil that should be shunned. What can frighten you?… stand as a rock; you are indestructible, you are the Self, the God of the universe, say ‘I am Existence Absolute, Bliss Absolute, Knowledge Absolute, I am He’.\textsuperscript{38}

\textbf{Yoga}

As has been stressed, the goal for Vivekananda is to realize the Absolute and perhaps the most significant aspect of his intellectual legacy was the exposition of the means to attain realization. As we have explored “each soul is potentially divine, [and] the goal is to manifest this divinity within”: Vivekananda extrapolates that this is accomplished “by controlling nature, external and internal … either by work, or worship, or philosophy, or psychic control – by one,

\textsuperscript{34} Vivekananda, vol. II, 385.
\textsuperscript{35} Vivekananda, vol. V, 245.
\textsuperscript{36} Vivekananda, vol. VII, 18.
\textsuperscript{37} The designation of ‘He’ is not a gender specific conception of the real Soul. Rather this rendering by Vivekananda is merely in keeping with the gender categories of the 19th century.
\textsuperscript{38} Vivekananda, vol. II, 236.
or more, or all of these”39, and one thereby becomes free. These four methods – work, worship, philosophy and psychic control – are the basis for Vivekananda’s classification of the four yogas. Conceptually the same, though stylistically different from the now popular Hatha yoga, these four yogas are Vivekananda’s categorization of the four main ways to reveal the divine within oneself. Although the goal to be achieved is One – the seeing of unity in diversity40 – the means to realizing this truth will depend fundamentally for each individual on their own particular dispositions. Vivekananda states:

Both the goal and the methods employed for reaching it are called Yoga, a word derived from the same Sanskrit root as the English “yoke”, meaning “to join”, to join us to our reality, God. There are various such Yogas, or methods of union – but the chief ones are – Karma-Yoga, Bhakti-Yoga, Raja-Yoga, and Jnana-Yoga. Every man must develop according to his own nature. As every science has its methods, so has every religion. The methods of attaining the end of religion are called Yoga by us, and the different forms of Yoga that we teach, are adapted to the different natures and temperaments of men. We classify them in the following way, under four heads:

(1) Karma-Yoga – The manner in which a man realizes his own divinity through works and duty.

(2) Bhakti-Yoga – The realization of the divinity through devotion to, and love of, a Personal God.

(3) Raja-Yoga – The realization of the divinity through the control of the mind.

(4) Jnana-Yoga – The realization of a man’s divinity through knowledge.

These are all different roads leading to the same center – God. Indeed, the varieties of religious belief are an advantage, since all faiths are good, so far as they encourage man

40 Vivekananda, vol. II, 175.
to lead a religious life. The more sects there are, the more opportunities there are for making successful appeals to the divine instinct in all men.\footnote{Vivekananda, vol. V, 291.}

It must be kept in mind that the language used by Vivekananda here was very specific to his audience. Although the importance of the Yogas are directed to ‘religion’, this must not be misunderstood as anything but a spiritual realization of the truth – a truth no different than the verities uncovered by science, art, or philosophy.

**Bhakti Yoga**

For Vivekananda, Ramakrishna served as the archetype of Bhakti Yoga. Although Ramakrishna did reveal the principles of Advaita Vedanta to a select number of his disciples – Vivekananda included. The principle of Bhakti Yoga rests on the renunciation or forgetting of personal interests and a devotion of all one’s energies towards a personal god; it being irrelevant which particular god. One’s personal god may be “smaller than a grain of rice, smaller than a mustard seed, smaller even than a millet grain… but it is larger than the earth, larger than the intermediate region, larger than the sky, larger even than all these worlds put together”\footnote{Olivelle, 209.}, for it is a representation and symbol of the universe. But like the other yogas it is uncompromising, “where Rama is, there is no room for any desire – where desire is, there is no room for Rama; these never co-exist – like light and darkness they are never together”\footnote{Vivekananda, vol. III, 99.}, one is either devoted to the lord or Mammon – never both. This form of yoga has the greatest predilection for disaster, as a result of the tendency towards fanaticism on the one hand, as well as a difficulty in identifying a proper object of worship. However, “The one great advantage of bhakti is that it is the easiest
and most natural way to reach the great divine end in view,” since nothing is more simple and common than an act of love and the clear connection between the act of devotion and non-attachment (the uniting thread through the four yogas). It may seem difficult to completely devote oneself to a personal God given the evil and suffering which exists in the world, but echoing the theme of *Maya*, Vivekananda explains:

> It is all really in sport; the universe is His play going on. The whole universe must after all be a big piece of pleasing fun to Him. If you are poor, enjoy that as fun; if you are rich, enjoy the fun of being rich; if dangers come; it is also good fun; if happiness comes it is more good fun.”

In devoting oneself to a personal god, this fun can receive a concrete form.

**Karma Yoga**

Although Bhakti Yoga is the easiest means to see the divine, it is through Karma Yoga – or action – through which most people attempt to do this. Because people have always been obsessed with their desires and become absorbed in their particular attachments, the majority of people set out on life-long quest to fulfill their desires. But for Karma Yoga, as opposed to mere Karma (work), it is the attitude with which the work is undertaken which is of importance. Verily, it does not matter much what the work is. As has been mentioned previously, one can’t actually help the world, all work is merely for the benefit of the doer. The attitude which is required to transform Karma, into Karma Yoga, is unsurprisingly the same as for the other Yogas; that is non-attachment. Selfless action is the ideal, fulfilling one’s duty in the world and not hiding behind any laziness or cowardice. This is the message of the Bhagavad Gita, when

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44 Vivekananda, vol. III, 32.
45 Vivekananda, vol. III, 94.
Krishna confronts Arjuna on the precipice of the battlefield, explains Vivekananda\(^{47}\). The fruits of action are of no importance, for it is the calmed mind which performs action out of righteousness alone which becomes free. The Gita advises, “have no desire for the results of action (14-15)…[and] he who sees in the midst of intense activity, intense calm, and in the midst of intensely ceaseless peace is intensely active [is wise indeed]”\(^{48}\). So long as we live in this world, non-action is not a possibility for us\(^{49}\). As such we are constantly in the position of affecting the world, and inevitably causing some harm to others. Since we cannot avoid acting in the world, it is all of our duties to cause the least suffering and bring the most good into the world we can.

Karma Yoga is concerned fundamentally with the state of this world and our action in it, but with the panoply of personalities which exist, it thereby has an infinite diversity in the manner in which it can be achieved – although it must always be the same attitude. Vivekananda writes:

> Every man would take up his own ideal and endeavor to accomplish it. That is a surer way of progress than taking up other men’s ideals, which he can never hope to accomplish…All men and women, in any society, are not of the same mind, capacity, or of the same power to do things…Let everyone do the best he can for realizing his own ideal\(^{50}\).

Karma Yoga thus represents a microcosm of Yoga itself, allowing an infinite diversity of possibilities, yet aiming at the same goal. The theme of personal realization resurfaces here, for “inspiration is from within and we have to inspire ourselves by our own higher faculties\(^{51}\),

\(^{50}\) Vivekananda, vol. I, 41.
\(^{51}\) Vivekananda, vol. VIII, 49.
nobody else can do our work for us, though they may aid us by removing the obstacles in our way.

**Jnana Yoga**

The classic debate of whether it is better to act in the world, or to merely speculate, is thoroughly discussed in the Vedanta tradition. Although the Bhagavad Gita implores that one must follow their duty, this does not mean that the mere possession of Jnana is not sufficient for realization. With Jnana (knowledge) of the nature of the universe, one is able to rent asunder all the troubles which have befallen the self. As has been discussed, Bhakti and Karma Yoga have special appeal for those unable to appreciate abstract thought – but it is for those who have a predilection for the exercise of the intellect that Jnana Yoga applies. Yet the object of Jnana Yoga is the “same as that of Bhakti and Karma Yoga – the eternal Om – but the method is different, it is Yoga for the strong, for those who are neither mystical nor devotional, but rational”[^52]. The universal appeal of Vivekananda’s interpretation of Vedanta is most evident through this aspect of Yoga. For what is it that the philosophers and scientists of the world have been investigating for so long? They have been discovering the nature of reality, the very same reality which all others in different cultures and eras have been. Vivekananda even recognizes a common result in all rational speculation:

We have first of all to give up this superstition of body; we are not the body. Next we must [give up] the further superstition that we are mind. We are not mind; it is but the ‘silken body’, not any part of the soul… our bodies are symbols of thought behind, and

the thoughts themselves are in their turn symbols of something behind them, that is, the one Real Existence, the Soul of our soul, the Life of our life, Our true Self53.

Through Jnana we lose sight of all variety and recognize only the One which permeates everything. However, we do not lose sight of the manifold world thereby. So long “as we have no knowledge of our real nature, we are beggars, jostled about by every force in nature; and made slaves54, but for the Jnana yogi “whenever anything miserable will come, the mind will be able to say, ‘I know you as hallucination’”55, and experience the passing spectacle untouched. Vivekananda draws this very insightful analogy of what occurs when we achieve Jnana:

Then we will play like the actor who comes upon the stage and plays the part of a beggar. Contrast him with the actual beggar walking the streets. The scene is, perhaps, the same in both cases, the words are, perhaps, the same, but what difference! The one enjoys his beggary while the other is suffering misery from it. And what makes this difference? The one is free and the other is bound. The actor knows his beggary is not true, but that he has assumed it for play, while the real beggar thinks that it is his too familiar state and that he has to bear it whether he wills it or not.56

Jnana Yoga is thus an assured means for non-attachment and a fount for selfless work, for the “secret of Jnana is to give up all and be sufficient unto ourselves”57; and with the knowledge of Tat tvam Asi, this attitude is always a close companion.

54 Vivekananda, vol. II, 324.
57 Vivekananda, vol. VIII, 22.
Raja Yoga

All the types of yoga discussed so far involve some form of concrete intermediary, but the most direct way to achieve realization is through Raja yoga, or the method of psychic control. Vivekananda gained great popularity in the West due to his publication of *Raja Yoga* in 1896 (which contained a translation and commentary on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali) – perhaps because he outlined it in a ‘scientific’ manner (something which the other yogas lacked). Raja yoga is the most direct method because it requires no external aids, “in the analysis of the mind the object and the instrument of analysis are the same thing…the subject and the object become one”\(^{58}\), it is a case of the mind investigating the mind. The issue to be worked out in Raja Yoga is that the mind has identified “itself with its own ephemeral waves, los[ing] sight of the soul and [has] becomes lost in the maze of … Maya\(^{59}\), which can only be solved by ceasing the presence of ‘ephemeral waves’. The mind for Vivekananda is likened oftentimes to the surface of a lake. When something falls in (we receive a sense-impression), a wave and ripples are made on the surface of the water (ideas are formed)\(^{60}\). Initially our mind, composed of *Chitta* (mind-stuff), is the calm, clear lake – but with each attachment we disturb the water into more and more changes. Raja Yoga “is the science that teaches us to stop the *Chitta* from getting into these changes… [and if] you succeed in leading the mind to a perfect state of Yoga, [just once, then] you have mastered all the changes – it is perfectly under your control. After that you may let the mind run about, but it is not the same mind anymore”\(^{61}\). It should thus come as no surprise that Raja Yoga was and has become the popularized version of Yoga, for it most directly exemplifies the “central idea in all this training”, which is the “power of concentration, the power of

\(^{59}\) Vivekananda, vol. VI, 35.  
\(^{60}\) Vivekananda, vol. VIII, 40.  
meditation”⁶². But alas this can be achieved equally well by Raja, Jnana, Karma, or Bhakti – it is up to the particular individual to figure out which suits their own disposition and allows them to practice non-attachment the most earnestly.

**Vedanta or Neo-Vedanta?**

Although Vivekananda’s philosophy undoubtedly has a firm basis in the Upanishads, whether his philosophy is a genuine interpretation of the ancient Vedanta tradition is a matter of scholarly debate. Those that believe Vivekananda’s re-popularization of Indian thought marked a fundamental shift from the orthodox Indian tradition have termed his philosophy ‘Neo-Vedanta’, to signify this reinterpretation or divergence. Although there is no normative ascription to this title, it does signify whether the Vedanta as preached by Vivekananda was a genuine exposition of the ancient sages. In her book *A History of Modern Yoga*, De Michelis argues that “Vivekananda was molded by the formative influence of Neo-Vedanta rather than by Ramakrishna’s Hinduism”⁶³. She substantiates this by pointing towards his intellectual forbears apart from Ramakrishna, as well as the differences in Vivekananda and Ramakrishna’s messages. Although typically underemphasized in biographies, before meeting Ramakrishna, Vivekananda was an adherent of the Brahmo Samaj, a highly intellectualized and westernized society within India aimed at the political and social rejuvenation of the nation. Di Michelis points out that Keshabchandra Sen, an important Brahmo figure, preceded Vivekananda by definitively classifying four orders of devotees (The Bhakti, Jnana, Raja, and Karma)⁶⁴, as well as introduced Vivekananda to the core of Western esoteric thinking. De Michelis argues “by the

⁶⁴ De Michelis, 87.
time [Vivekananda] turned twenty-one he had already assimilated not only the full range of Brahmo teachings, including Sen’s own, but also the latter’s flamboyant style”⁶⁵, and that Vivekananda remained in Sen’s entourage up until his death. With this evidence de Michelis posits that the universalistic trends in Vivekananda’s thought, as well as the focus on personal realization were inheritances from the esoteric atmosphere permeating the Indian intellectual scene at the time. Although there is evidence to support this interpretation of the influences on Vivekananda, it leaves out the fact that Keshabchandra Sen sat at the feet and learned from Ramakrishna⁶⁶. In addition, Vivekananda’s own later attitude and his belief he was carrying forward orthodox Vedanta philosophy as it existed in ages past, sheds doubt on this. He writes as early as 1894:

> I am not sorry, neither glad that [the Brahmo Samaj] died. It has done its work — viz. Social reform. Its religion was not worth a cent, and so it must die out⁶⁷.

Clearly Vivekananda did not have much appreciation for the abstract ideas of Brahmo thought in his later life after meeting Ramakrishna.

De Michelis also argues that Vivekananda strays from the orthodox Hindu system and, more significantly, Ramakrishna himself in his later life. This is most evident in Vivekananda’s focus on Advaita as opposed to the Dvaita worship Ramakrishna commonly preached. As such De Michelis proposes that “a comparison of Vivekananda and Ramakrishna’s positions with regard to Jnana/realization casts doubt on to the reconcilability of their teaching”⁶⁸, because in his lifetime Ramakrishna did not focus on Jnana Yoga. Ramakrishna himself did not accept the

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⁶⁵ De Michelis, 87.
⁶⁶ Eastern And Western Disciples, 140.
⁶⁸ De Michelis, 140.
identity of the S(s)elf and Brahman except while in the state of Samadhi; as soon as one returned
to the phenomenal realm this relation ceases being true. Although this is not wholly
irreconcilable with Vivekananda’s teaching, there certainly is a change in emphasis in
Vivekananda’s writings. Ramakrishna further did not believe that the Jnana Yoga of Advaita was
suitable for householders, which “is in stark contradiction with Vivekananda (and Brahma
 teachings), propounding that everyone should seek Samadhi – based atma- and brahmajnana69,
denoting another example of a shift emphasis. Although Vivekananda also recognized the
dangers of advanced spiritual exercises for the masses, and admits a plurality of methods, he
does seem to alter his focus, towards all individuals possessing the potential to achieve
realization through knowledge. But this shift of focus does not necessarily represent an alteration
of the basic spiritual message, but rather a re-delivery of it to a different audience. It is possible
that the entirety of their lives were for appearances, as it has been noted “Shri Ramakrishna,
while seeming to be all Bhakti, was really all Jnana.; but [Vivekananda] himself, apparently all
Jnana, was full of Bhakti”70

Even though Vivekananda may have adapted the manner he conveyed the message of
Vedanta to western audiences, this may not warrant the appellation of ‘Neo-Vedanta’ to
distinguish it from the more orthodox Vedanta teachings. This would be to presume there ever
existed a canonical Vedanta system in the distant Hindu past, as well as would ignore
developments in Indian philosophy during the medieval period71. It is even possible to argue that
though Vivekananda helped redefine Vedanta’s place in the world and popularize Yoga, he
himself was only one perspective on Vedanta. Within the infinite arms of Vedanta – springing

69 De Michelis, 142.
from its unified kernel, there does not seem to be room for substantial variation or alteration of its form. Even though Vivekananda may have adopted some western notions and synthesized them with the teachings of Ramakrishna, the form with which he cast Vedanta can only be so different from the core of true Vedanta as any other particularization of Vedanta – ancient, or yet to come.
Chapter III
William James’s Notion of Truth

While Vivekananda holds a pluralistic view of the means to achieve the truth, he emphasizes a unified and singular goal. Perhaps this is the reason why James misleadingly referred to the Vedanta system as “the paragon of monistic systems”\(^{72}\), and Vivekananda as “the paragon of Vedantist missionaries”\(^{73}\). This characterization by James, fundamentally misinterprets the depth of the Vedanta system, although it does superficially capture the essence of Vedanta’s ‘over-beliefs’ – the monistic ideal. The reasons for this misunderstanding I shall later expand and speculate upon, but first it is important to establish James’s own understanding of truth. James’s rejection of Vivekananda’s philosophy is particularly interesting because of their startling similarity, as well as the sensitivity of their ideas to their contemporaneous intellectual environment. James and Vivekananda both attempt to ‘simplify’ or bring philosophy to the people directly on terms they could understand and participate in. Both advocate a plurality of means to realize the truth, both emphasize the importance of direct personal experience for religion and both have a this-worldly focus which ignores transcendent explanations.

James’s re-conception of truth is a fundamental precursor to these shared attributes of his thought with Vivekanada. Although James contends that his definition of truth is no different than what people commonly think of it as, it remains to this day somewhat perplexing upon first consideration. James favors “a slow shifting in the philosophic perspective”\(^{74}\), away from a


\(^{73}\) Ibid.

\(^{74}\) James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 70.
concretized conception of truth, towards one which is protean and more amenable to the real flux of experience. The normal epistemological picture of the nature of truth is: some factual state of affairs which eternally obtains or holds of ‘reality’, to which our ideas bear resemblance (truth) or difference (falsity). Under this scheme, those ideas which are true, are true in virtue of corresponding to reality – but James points out, this conception of ‘correspondence’ is vacuous, for there is very little which can serve to distinguish a true idea from this supposed ‘reality’.

**Departure from the Correspondence Theory of Truth**

Truth for James is characterized by an idea which is satisfactory – or capable of producing practical consequences – and there are two major aspects to this idea. The first being the inanity of the ‘correspondence’ (static) theory of truth, and secondly his own contribution, of an interminable and living truth. James begins from the basis of sense-experience, which is for him the only possible source for knowledge claims, as the “only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience”⁷⁵. The status of the ideas which are abstracts of this experience thus serve as the focus for any theory of knowledge and how these ideas relate to reality. The juxtaposition of {reality | true ideas} under the correspondence theory of truth falls by the wayside as a meaningless notion on James’s account, for it remains completely ambiguous as to what the sort of significant distinction separates the two. What James sees in the correspondence theory of truth is the supposition of an intermediary realm of truth in between experience and reality, within which true ideas inhabit; but he notes:

> In no case … need truth consist in a relation between our experiences and something archetypal or trans-experiential. Should we ever reach absolutely terminal experiences,

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experiences in which we are all agreed, which were superseded by no new continuation, these would not be ‘true’, they would be ‘real’. They would simply ‘be’, and be indeed the corners, angles, and linchpins of all reality, on which the truth of everything else would be stayed. Only such other things as led to those by satisfactory conjunctions would be ‘true’. Satisfactory connection of some sort with such termini is all that the word truth means.  

In this statement James summarizes the meaninglessness of the reality distinction and hints at his own pragmatic approach. The whole originality of pragmatism consists in its taking flight from the field of experience alone; “it begins with concreteness, and returns and ends with it”; the correspondence theory on the other hand relies on the supposition of a trans-experiential world which can never be meaningfully verified.

Rather than appeal to a transcendent realm of ‘Truth’, James constructs his universe from the basis of sense-experience and follows the manner in which supposedly true ideas arise. What we experience in life is a world which superficially has little coherence, but which can be made understandable through the formation of (abstract) ideas about the world. This is not to surmise there is no actual coherence in ‘reality’ itself, as a supremely incoherent world would be one in which ideas would be useless and pointless, because they would not be able to map experience in any meaningful manner and thus could not exert any productive effects. When an idea is formed about experience it is almost invariably implicit that the idea is capable of being utilized, whether to predict future events or to act on the world to manufacture a particular experience. Those ideas then which “can be made to lead to a sensation”, are considered true. To a certain extent all ‘true ideas’ will enjoy some degree of a-temporality, in that they are applicable across time – and

76 James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 76.
78 James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 76.
it is from this that the cause of the supposed quasi-transcendent status of truth can be understood. Even though James rejects transcendent universalism he maintains the traditional durability of truth by characterizing that which is true as:

The opposite of whatever is instable, or whatever is practically disappointing, of whatever is useless, or whatever is lying and unreliable, of whatever is unverifiable and unsupported, of whatever is inconsistent and contradictory, of whatever is artificial and eccentric, of whatever is unreal in the sense of being of no practical value. Here are pragmatic reasons with a vengeance why we should turn to truth – truth saves us from a world of that complexion.⁷⁹

The true is that which thus allows us to make sense out of the world, and to suppose some form of stable order which can give our mind rest. The only test for the truth of an idea will then be its ability to correctly account for experiences yet to occur. However, this leaves open the issue of how to decide between two different theories which account for the same evidence. From this pragmatist definition of truth, the problem of under-determination as outlined in the Quine-Duhem thesis in the analytic tradition is heralded; although there was no substantial influence of the former upon the latter.⁸⁰

Every abstract theory of the world is likewise a sort of stand-in for experiences which we are missing, but would be valuable to inform us of what future experiences will occur. However, a theory would never be able to fully map reality, unless it were capable to comprehend every aspect of reality (assuming the connectedness of all things), for it would always be vulnerable to error due to the possibility of as yet unexperienced evidence, or future amendment⁸¹. For the

⁸⁰ Webb, 51.
⁸¹ James, The Meaning of Truth, 55.
majority of the time then, our ‘true ideas’ are those which “we might verify if we would take the trouble, but which we hold for the true altho[ugh] unterminated perceptually, because nothing says ‘no’ to us, and there is no contradictory truth in sight”\(^{82}\). Ultimately, the only thing which can shatter our belief in one truth is contradictory evidence or another idea which we have a greater reason to believe in\(^{83}\). Our ‘true ideas’ can thus be seen from here not so much as a guaranteed certainty, but that in fact for a majority of the time “to continue thinking unchallenged is… our practical substitute for knowing in the completed sense”\(^{84}\), in which there is no possibility of error. It is only when one is able to retain confidence in ambiguities that he is able to productively wade through life, and it is in this – in life as it is lived by the common person – that James sees as the confirmation of his notion of truth.

Since truth is eternally open to revision it is not so much a stable conception in-itself, but rather a process which is continually realized, which “grows up endogenously inside the web of experiences”\(^{85}\), itself. James explains the distinction of his view of knowledge from the mainstream of epistemology by emphasizing “knowing as it exists concretely, while the other view only describes its results abstractly taken”\(^{86}\), the one “view ambulatory and the other view saltatory”\(^{87}\). What James is trying to signify by this distinction is the importance of the intermediate experiences which relate the idea to its object. Rather than knowledge consisting in a static true or false, knowing is “made by the ambulation through the intervening experiences”\(^{88}\), which relate or mediate the gap between the act of cognition and the object of knowledge. Just as a claim which states the distance between two objects is only comprehended

\(^{83}\) James, *Pragmatism*, 43.
\(^{84}\) James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 67.
\(^{85}\) James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 55.
\(^{86}\) James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 80.
\(^{87}\) Saltatory here meaning of a stop-and-go nature, rather than a gradual progression.
\(^{88}\) James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 80.
as *meaning* the intermediary spaces between the two, a claim of relation between an idea and ‘reality’ only has *meaning* with reference to experiences in between. Without the intermediate steps (which verify the verity of the knowledge claim), there would be no way to distinguish the object of knowledge from any other phenomena. For example, what else could ‘the stovetop is hot’ mean, other than that if one were to touch it they would be burned, or if they were to use a thermometer it would measure a certain reading? The ‘hotness’ has little to no comprehensibility besides describing experiences which would verify its veracity. To give another example, if one states Julius Cesar existed, the truth of this statement would seem too dependent on both if there was a ‘Julius Cesar who existed’ and the meaning of ‘Julius Cesar’. But if you were to question the statement maker, as to his *meaning* of ‘Julius Cesar’, this can only be understood through how he is able to point to other experiential things (e.g. The person who crossed the Rubicon in history books, a statue etc.), through which his idea is supposed to relate to the historic reality (i.e. to be verified)\textsuperscript{89}. The ontological implications of common language, which support the notion that ‘the Truth’ exists independently of either cognition or reality, do not seem to be justified from the experiential evidence. This re-conception of truth is perhaps the greatest conceptual hurdle which confronts James’s project to rethink the place for truth within philosophy.

It is also significant that for James every act of knowing – which itself is the progenitor of truth – has a pragmatic motive behind it. This further distances James from the traditional epistemological standpoint, as well as his other pragmatist colleagues such as Dewey and Pearce\textsuperscript{90}, since it supposes a knower could not form a *true idea* about reality, unless they had some utilitarian interest in that ideas being true. Although verifiable consequences are the means

\textsuperscript{89} James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 120.  
\textsuperscript{90} Webb, 59.
which ‘create’ the truth of an idea, “good consequences are not proposed by us merely as a sure sign, mark or criterion, by which truth’s presence is habitually ascertained, tho[ugh] they may serve on occasion as such a sign; they are proposed rather as the lurking motive inside of every truth-claim, whether the ‘trower’ be conscious of such a motive, or whether he obey it blindly”\(^{91}\). This is because every act of knowledge only has any particular meaning as far as it is useful or not. If an idea is not useful, then it does not ‘obtain’ of reality, if it is useful for some purpose, then we conclude it does ‘obtain’ – and this is all the verb ‘obtain’ signifies. It is important to note that usefulness or satisfactoriness does not necessarily imply the idea has some intended purpose or use behind it, but merely that the structure the idea can give to experience is itself valuable – at least psychologically.

In contrast to abstract concerns, in the practical state of affairs “a conception is reckoned true by common sense when it can be made to lead to a sensation”\(^{92}\), and thus the veracity of any idea is only of interest to us because of its practicality. Ideas for which truth-value can be attributed, are in all circumstances like fictional entities which have been based off of experience (reality). Even the concepts so ingrained in common sense nowadays such as “the notions of Time and of one Space as single continuous receptacles [or] the distinction between thoughts and things, matter and mind, between permanent subjects and changing attributes; the conception of classes with sub-classes within them”\(^{93}\), are not doubted by James to have been “definite conquests made at historic dates by our ancestors in their attempts to get the chaos of their crude individual experiences into a more shareable and manageable shape\(^{94}\)”. Perhaps an unsettling result of this thesis is the impossibility of the pursuit of truth for its own sake – long the ideal of

\(^{91}\) James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 146-147.
\(^{92}\) James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 76.
\(^{93}\) James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 42.
\(^{94}\) James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 42.
philosophy. But “the destructive force of such talk disappears [when we question]… in what the
intellectual satisfactions consist”⁹⁵ – it consists precisely in the enjoyable experience of finding
continuities in the world.

**Objection Concerning Virtual Truth**

One tempting objection which could be made against James’s notion of truth is the issue
of virtual truth, or to say, truths about reality which are not and never can be known. James
himself uses an example of knowledge about an antediluvian world which clearly elucidates this
supposed issue⁹⁶. If one were to ask if there were a truth about the history of an antediluvian
world, to which there was no knowledge of, would there be a truth about the state of such a
world? To deny this would be to fly in the face of common sense, but to accept it seems to imply
there is a truth which eternally obtains of such a world, or its state of affairs. But James asks “of
what stuff, mental, physical, or ‘epistemological’, is it built? What metaphysical region of reality
does it inhabit?”⁹⁷; if the truth does not consist in the supposed actual real world as it occurred,
or in an act of knowledge which knows the truth, then where is this ‘truth’? James supposes the
only response to this could be “a sort of spiritual double or ghost”⁹⁸, of the reality itself. But
James points out, the supposition of an entity such as this is entirely superfluous. For in the end,
the truth would merely be “what any successful knower *would* have to know *in case he
existed*”⁹⁹; the knower would have his possibilities of knowledge restricted by the facts of the
antediluvian world, and the veracity of his knowledge would be the degree of accord between his
idea and the actual state of affairs. If a step further were taken to imagine a world where a

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⁹⁷ James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 156.
⁹⁸ James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 156.
knower is unconceivable, then the truth of such a world “would not only be non-existent, it would be unimaginable, inconceivable”\textsuperscript{100}. The truth thus subsists in an intermediary space between reality and the act of knowing, but the truth itself is not a distinct entity – no matter how common language may mislead. The truth is both pre-determined by the reality it is of (which exemplifies the recalcitrance of experience to our theories), and it is dependent on the modes of the act of knowing (i.e. the knowers interests in the knowing). With this example James shows that “virtual and actual truth mean the same thing; the possibility of only one answer, when once the question is raised”\textsuperscript{101}, and in order to speak of any truth, the possibility for a knower is requisite.

**Charge of Protagorean Relativism**

One common objection which has been made against the pragmatist notion of truth – for which James preferred the wider or more encompassing name of *Humanism*\textsuperscript{102}– is that it justifies any person to take their own ideas about reality as true, regardless of how nonsensical they may seem to others.\textsuperscript{103} It is essentially to accuse James of justifying Protagoras’s statement “that in all things man is the measure”\textsuperscript{104}. However, this is to fundamentally misunderstand the basis on which the truth is established in James’s theory. People are not simply free to formulate a truth about the world whichever way they like; any ideas they wish to have of it are rigorously restricted by the experienced reality which faces them. Although it is the case that “truth may well consist of opinions, and does indeed consist of nothing but opinions, tho[ugh] not every

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\textsuperscript{100} James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 157.  
\textsuperscript{101} James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 60.  
\textsuperscript{102} James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 38.  
\textsuperscript{103} James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 46.  
\textsuperscript{104} Plato, *Theatetus*, 179.
opinion need be true”\textsuperscript{105}, because there is a wealth of experience which can be appealed to verify the plausibility of an idea. Further, no person would ever willingly believe in an idea unless it was supposed to be useful for them, as “the concrete truth \textit{for us} will always be that way of thinking in which our various experiences most profitably combine”\textsuperscript{106}. Since truth is based upon one’s own personal interest, someone who willingly fabricates ‘truth’ would not stand up long against the pressure of reality which overpowers their conceptions. Although this objection does not show the value of truth is degraded in James’s picture, it does highlight that the truth is based on probabilities and can only ever be approximated or nearly approached. It is this aspect of truth, its interminable character which does indeed demote it from an ethereal ideal to a more mundane level in accord with everyday life. However practical James’s notion of truth may be, it is somewhat questionable if the removal of this ideal conception of the Truth, would better prepare people to investigate the world.

\textbf{Objectivity of Truth}

A further major implication of James’s notion of truth is the impossibility of any absolutely objective or ‘God’s eye’ view of the world. Rather, every knowledge-claim is contextualized, and has some mediating characteristics at the core of its nature. James returns to actual experience to verify this idea, and points out that “to begin with our knowledge grows only in spots”\textsuperscript{107}; which is to say we only grow a limited number of our ideas of what is true at a time, while keeping the remainder of our beliefs in place. For example, while reading a book on magnetism one’s ideas on physics change while the rest of one’s opinions on other matters remain the same. This emphasizes for James that the totality of the world cannot be adequately

\textsuperscript{105} James, \textit{The Meaning of Truth}, 145.
\textsuperscript{106} James, \textit{The Meaning of Truth}, 47.
\textsuperscript{107} James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 82.
appreciated as a whole, and can only ever be considered in various aspects. However, even though all knowledge exists as contextual, this in no way attenuates the objectivity of truth. This is because the objectivity of the pragmatist’s truth means “an ideal set of formulations towards which all opinions may in the long run of experience be expected to converge”\textsuperscript{108}, although they may never in fact completely do so. But to delve further into his arguments would take the matter off truth of track into his arguments for a pluralistic universe which are not of issue here.

**Ambiguous Truth**

James paints a picture of a world consisting of only certain ‘perspectives’ on the truth, which form a continuously more coherent sketch through additional experience. An appeal to the actual evidence of experience for James quickly confirms that very few people actually live in the rationalistic and abstract world of arm-chair philosophers, with metaphysical assumptions such as singular entities existing independently of each other, or Absolute Space and Time. Rather “the great majority of the human race never use these notions, but live in plural times and spaces\textsuperscript{109}, which prove ambiguous in actuality. For example, the location of the local grocery store is not a determinate ‘location’ within an objective space (such as a map), but rather exists as a relative distance to other places of interest. James sees the move of rationalism towards overly hypostatized concepts as bordering on detachment from the very material on which they are based – the pluralistic world of actual experience. He writes:

> Radical Empiricism and Pluralism stand out for the legitimacy of the notion of some:
>
> each part of the world is in some ways connected, in some other ways not connected with

\textsuperscript{108} James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 143.
\textsuperscript{109} James, *Pragmatism*, 87.
its other parts, and the ways can be discriminated, for many of them are obvious, and
their differences are obvious to view.\footnote{110}

A sojourn through experience will evince that ‘truth’ is rarely clear or distinct, perhaps there may
“after all be a possible ambiguity in truth”\footnote{111}.

James labours to argue against the rationalist scheme in which all ‘things’ are clearly
discrete entities having a truth associated with them which absolutely obtains. But even if such a
world did exist, it would be beyond the possibilities of the human mind and as such a practically
useless realm. Thus it is dangerous to maintain the truth/falsity dichotomy as it perpetuates the
errors of excessive reasoning which takes away from the evidence of real life. James notes “the
commonest vice of the human mind is its disposition to see everything as yes or no, as black or
white, its incapacity for discrimination of intermediate shades”\footnote{112}, the intermediate shades which
alone comprise our reality. James hits hard here at any rationalist stance towards the notion of
natural forms, an attitude he sums up when he states:

all that we are required to admit as to the constitution of reality is what we ourselves find
empirically realized in every minimum of finite life. Briefly, it is this, that nothing real is
absolutely simple\footnote{113}.

Everything which is real (experience) is connected and indiscernible from its others in some
form, and the abstract entities which are extracted from reality enjoy as much reality as a bank-
ote note possesses real value.

\footnote{110}{James, A Pluralistic Universe, 41.}
\footnote{111}{James, Pragmatism, 94.}
\footnote{112}{James, A Pluralistic Universe, 40.}
\footnote{113}{James, The Meaning of Truth, 135.}
At this stage we have reached a point where the nature of true ideas can be gleaned. They are, in short, abstractions taken from reality, which if used could produce practically satisfactory consequences. They distinguish themselves from reality by being more exact and distinct, and of unique use, because they impose a form of consistency and order on an otherwise incoherent experience. The greatest error which could occur from this stage however – and is the one ‘rationalism’ has enmeshed philosophy in since the time of Plato – is to mistake these abstractions for a higher reality. Abstract ideas can be useful “so long as their original fiction does not get swallowed up in the admiration and lost… and made a means of diminishing original experience”\textsuperscript{114}, a sentiment which would treat the illusion interpretation of maya very severely. The ‘true ideas’ have no metaphysical existence in themselves, rather they are a mere fiction – though based on reality, they lack an experiential import on their own. However, it is interesting to note that the abstract ideas can be taken for reality, and yet produce satisfactory consequences. Thus this erroneous rationalistic conception can contain some truth. This situation is significant and will be returned to, as it is very important for James’s discussion on monism and underpins his rejection of it in favour of pluralism.

The abstract concepts of the mind therefore serve to represent reality, “in the sense of being substitutable for it in our thinking because it leads to the same associates, or in the sense of ‘pointing to it’ through a chain of other experiences that either intervene or may intervene”\textsuperscript{115}. Instead of groping one’s way blindly through the jungle of experience, concepts provide some sunshine to help guide one’s path. With the insight that ‘true ideas’ only serve as stand-ins for our missing experiences James concludes that:

\textsuperscript{114} James, \textit{The Meaning of Truth}, 135.
\textsuperscript{115} James, \textit{The Meaning of Truth}, 75.
Truth lives, in fact for the most part on a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs ‘pass’, so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them. But all this points to direct face-to-face verifications somewhere, without which the fabric of truth collapses like a financial system with no cash-basis whatever. You accept my verification of one thing, I yours of another. We trade on each other’s truth. But beliefs verified concretely by ‘somebody’ are the posts of the whole superstructure.\textsuperscript{116}

James’s appeal to a common sense view of the truth is perhaps at its greatest force in this analogy. If someone were to question how they know many of the things they presume to rely on every day, they would discover a web of confidence in other people’s claims upon the truth. One rarely ever receives direct verification themselves of how things work, and one’s confidence in many aspects of society is maintained simply because it has always seemed to work seamlessly. As soon as the machinery of a working society appear to vacillate, people’s confidence falters in the institutions once presumed to faithfully convey truth – the structure threatens to collapse.

\textsuperscript{116} James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 100.
Chapter IV
The Relationship between James and Vivekananda

“The paragon of all monistic systems is the Vedanta philosophy of Hindostan, and the paragon of Vedântist missionaries was the late Swami Vivekananda who visited our shores some years ago. The method of Vedântism is the mystical method.”

William James has been praised as one of the most open-minded philosophers in the late 19th century, as he showed an earnest interest in any aspect of human experience, even those typically considered outside the purview of academic discourse. Séances, mind cures, psychic powers and Asian religions are some of the phenomena he had a lifelong acquaintance and interest in. Coincident with James’s rise to intellectual fame in the 1890’s was the beginning of the active career of Swami Vivekananda who arrived on the shores of North America in 1893. The Swami was on his way to present at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago on behalf of the Hindu spiritual tradition, which would later lead to his interaction with William James.

Following his presentation at the Parliament where he gained instant acclaim and renown, Vivekananda travelled around the northern United States giving further presentations on the

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117 James, Pragmatism, 74.
118 His familiarity with Indian thought specifically can be traced back to at least March of 1870 where he writes in his diary concerning the death of his close cousin, Minnie Temple: “By that big part of me that’s in the tomb with you, may I realize and believe in the immediacy of death! May I feel that every torment suffered here passes and is as a breath of wind – every pleasure too… Time is long… One human life is an instant… Minnie, your death makes me feel the nothingness of all our egotistical fury… Use your death (or your life, it’s all one meaning) tat tvam asi.” (March 22, 1870) This journal entry clearly shows James had some familiarity with Indian thought at this time. However Leary has argued that this reference to the tat tvam asi found in the Chandogya Upanishad is most likely taken from James’s reading of Schopenhauer who uses the phrase often. Leary even argues that James internalizes this injunction - tat tvam asi – so much that it has a fundamental role in his significant personal crises of 1870. In his account of his personal crises he notes “That shape am I, I felt, potentially” Leary, 5. This is not a far cry from the loose English translation of tat tvam asi to “This art thou”. In his interpretation of James’s personal crises he surmises James’s shock was due to the merely contingent factors which distinguish him from the ‘epileptic patient with greenish skin, entirely idiotic’. The serious philosophical importance this Vedanta phrase had on James’s thought at this time is thus not in much doubt.
thought and spiritual lessons of the Hindu people\textsuperscript{119}. In May of 1894 Vivekananda visited Boston and Cambridge and gave three lectures to the Harvard Religious Union, covering the religions of India and stressing the fundamental unity of all religions\textsuperscript{120}. It is most likely that his message of religious unity and self-determination would have resonated with William James himself, given his attitudes towards religious toleration and future anti-imperialist stances. In March of 1896 Vivekananda gave a talk on \textit{The Vedanta Philosophy} covering the philosophical aspects of the Vedanta system at Harvard, this time to the Harvard Graduate Philosophical Society\textsuperscript{121}. On both of these occasions James and Vivekananda had the opportunity to meet\textsuperscript{122}, an interaction which most likely had an impact on the thought of both thinkers. Vivekananda would later refer to James as “A very nice man! A very nice man!”\textsuperscript{123}, and De Michelis has claimed that “James’s psychological speculations … must have played an inspirational role in Vivekananda’s” thought\textsuperscript{124}. James would also look back to reference Vivekananda extensively in his Gifford lectures in Edinburgh in 1901, and place Vivekananda as the stand-in for the most superb example of a ‘monistic’ thinker.

James’s openness to appreciate the thought of the East is widely evidenced by his references – most notably in ‘\textit{The Varieties of Religious Experience}’ – to eastern religious figures and thinkers. But even though James had a serious interest in Vivekananda’s style of mysticism – going so far to briefly practice yoga himself – and accorded Vivekananda the

\textsuperscript{119} However, as Vivekananda laments, much of his time was spent correcting listeners regarding their misconceptions of India. It is of significance that on his second visit to America he does not wear his turban, to reduce others perception of him as a mere curiosity. Eastern And Western Disciples, 434.
\textsuperscript{120} Eastern And Western Disciples, 447.
\textsuperscript{121} James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 167n.
\textsuperscript{122} Frederick, 38.
\textsuperscript{124} De Michelis, 173.
laudatory position as “the paragon of Vedantist missionaries”\textsuperscript{125}, he appears to have fundamentally misinterpreted the Swami’s message – or at least to have been unaware of his larger worldview\textsuperscript{126}.

One of the most significant impacts Vivekananda had on James however, was his work \textit{Raja Yoga}\textsuperscript{127} – which was published in 1896. In \textit{Raja Yoga}, Vivekananda presented the ancient science of psychic control, developed from the second century B.C. sage Patanjali. This work was of interest to James personally, perhaps, because of his overly active disposition. But this work most likely garnered his attention because of the intellectual atmosphere of the time, for James noted he “live[d] surrounded by an enormous body of persons who are most definitely interested in control of states of mind”, craving, indeed, “a sort of psychological science which will teach them how to act”\textsuperscript{128}; and this is precisely what Vivekananda presented in \textit{Raja Yoga}. James’s interest in this aspect of Vivekananda’s thought went so far that he even agreed to write a preface for the print edition. However, because James was taking too long to present his contribution and his introduction “would be of no use in England”\textsuperscript{129}, it was decided to go ahead with the publication without his preface. The notion of psychic control would ultimately disagree with James’s personal disposition, who concluded his temperament seems rebellious for any

\textsuperscript{125} James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 74.
\textsuperscript{126} James provides his understanding of Vivekananda as “The paragon of all monistic systems is the Vedanta philosophy of Hindostan, and the paragon of Vedāntist missionaries was the late Swami Vivekananda who visited our shores some years ago. The method of Vedāntism is the mystical method. You do not reason, but after going through a certain discipline you see, and having seen, you can report the truth … Observe how radical the character of the monism here is. Separation is not simply overcome by the One, it is denied to exist. There is no many. We are not parts of the One; It has no parts; and since in a sense we undeniably \textit{are}, it must be that each of us \textit{is} the One, indivisibly and totally.” James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 74.
\textsuperscript{127} \textit{Raja Yoga} is the practice of controlling the psychic forces.
\textsuperscript{129} Vivekananda, vol. IX, 85.
such discipline. Later in 1905 he would write to Lutoslawki, a fellow philosopher with a sincere belief in the value of practicing yoga, that:

I knew Vivekananda, when he was here, I have read both his book and the one on *Hatha Yoga* [postural exercises], and did then try (some 6 years or 7 years ago) to practice some of the breathing exercises. But I am a bad subject for such things, critical and indocile, so it soon stopped.

James’s interaction with Vivekananda’s thought – though initially earnest – was quickly dropped because it was unsuitable to his personality. And since “whatever temperament a professional philosopher is, he turns, when philosophizing to sink the fact of his temperament”, it seems probable that James’s rejection of Vivekananda’s philosophy as a whole, in favour of pluralism, was a product of this temperamental difference.

The encounter between James and Vivekananda was a significant one for both figures, by providing James with a representation of his temperamental antithesis, and to supply Vivekananda with evidence of Western interest and appraisal for Vedanta. However, Norris Fredrick has noted that Vivekananda’s “followers do not discuss the context of [James’s comments], nor the differences that James had with Vivekananda’s philosophy”. Although Fredrick notes that the temperamental differences between the two thinkers was grasped adequately by James, he provides an incomplete picture of the Vedanta philosophy, by only looking at how James understood it – rather than its true message. As a result of this, he has

\[^{130}\text{William James Letter to Lutoslawki, Oct 25, 1905, The Correspondence of William James, Vol. 11, 105.}\]

\[^{131}\text{It is interesting to note that Vivekananda never wrote a book on *Hatha Yoga*. It seems probable that James was simply referring to a different book not by Vivekananda, or that he was confused by another book written by one of Vivekananda’s disciples.}\]

\[^{132}\text{William James to Lutoslawki, Nov 24, 1905, The Correspondence of William James, Vol. 11, 114.}\]

\[^{133}\text{James, Pragmatism, 6.}\]

overestimated the real philosophical disagreement between the two philosophers, and has misrepresented the thought of Vivekananda through James’s incomplete understanding of its entirety.

**Similarities in Worldview**

Though James and Vivekananda came from very different intellectual and personal backgrounds they share a number of similar philosophical views. The pluralist-monist dichotomy established by James is perhaps misleading as they both advocate (1) the non-transcendence of all aspects of reality, (2) an emphasis on the need for religion to rely on personal experience, (3) the simplification of philosophical inquiry, and (4) a pluralistic worldview concerning people’s quest for truth. With these shared principles, there is little room to give a substantially different answer to James’s question; “what concrete difference will its [pluralism or monism] being true make in any one’s actual life?”

**Non-Transcendence of Truth**

Vivekananda is ultimately a disciple of the advaita (non-dualism) tradition of Vedanta, the essence of which is that there is no substantial separation between one’s Self and the Real Self – the Atman. All manifestation (of experience), is fundamentally the perception of Reality, only refracted through Maya, which “is a kind of mist that has come between us and the Truth.”

Maya has a very similar connection to Kant’s distinction between noumena (thing-in-itself) and phenomena. Amplified from the 8th century advaita sage Sankara, Vivekananda states, “everything that has a form, everything that calls up an idea in your mind, is within Maya; for

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135 James, *Pragmatism*, 97.
everything that is bound by the laws of time, space, and causation\textsuperscript{137} is within \textit{Maya}\textsuperscript{138}. From this position, Vivekananda can thus follow through with the claim that there are no transcendent entities – that “all differences in this world are of degree, and not of kind\textsuperscript{139}. Everything which is real is experienceable, and everything which is other than ‘The Truth’, is not the experience of some substantially different entity, but rather the experience of “the same truth … only wrongly perceived”\textsuperscript{140}. This picture of the non-transcendence of any reality is very much in accord with James’s innovative understanding of the relationship between experience – true ideas – and reality.

James begins his philosophical method with his approach of radical empiricism, which is the supposition that all that which is real, is what is experienceable. In addition, anything which is experienced is valid material for rational investigation, but anything which is beyond experience is unverifiable and thus meaningless in philosophical discussion. Consequently he excludes “the hypothesis of trans-empirical reality at all”\textsuperscript{141}. With this position James is attacking the correspondence theory of truth, whereby our ‘true ideas’ are in some way distinct, yet in some form resemblances of \textit{Reality} itself. But for James this distinction is to suppose the existence of a transcendent truth, which ultimately has no pragmatic meaning. If the Truth is simply the world as it exists objectively, then it cannot exist independently, as there is no meaningful manner to distinguish it from reality itself \textit{as it is}. But as James points out, reality means nothing other than experience. Ultimately, James writes:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{137} It is interesting to note that Sankara precedes Kant with this identification. Vivekananda states “It was Shankara who first found out the idea of the identity of time, space, and causation with Maya, and I had the good fortune to find one or two passages in Shankara's commentaries … So even that idea was here in India” (vol III, 342).
\item \textsuperscript{138} Vivekananda, vol. II, 112.
\item \textsuperscript{139} Vivekananda, vol. II, 299.
\item \textsuperscript{140} Vivekananda, vol. III, 423, 422.
\item \textsuperscript{141} James, \textit{Essays in Radical Empiricism}, 99.
\end{itemize}
In no case … need truth consist in a relation between our experiences and something archetypal or trans-experiential. Should we ever reach absolutely terminal experiences, experiences in which we are all agreed, which were superseded by no new continuation, these would not be ‘true’, they would be ‘real’. They would simply ‘be’, and be indeed the corners, angles, and linchpins of all reality, on which the truth of everything else would be stayed. Only such other things as led to those by satisfactory conjunctions would be ‘true’. Satisfactory connexion of some sort with such termini is all that the word truth means.\textsuperscript{142}

The truth, or the real, is thus no different from the make-up of our experience. Though we may not always have ‘true ideas’ about reality because of the fallibility of our cognition, our conceptions contain some grain of truth – in so far as they allow us to predict or bring about future experiences.

The objectivity of reality still remains under this conception, because it retains a sense of its recalcitrance to our conceptions. The truth is clarified as “an ideal set of formulations towards which all opinions may in the long run of experience be expected to converge”\textsuperscript{143}. Our ideas relate to the truth not “as black or white”, but rather as “intermediate shades”\textsuperscript{144}, passing more or less into accordance with the ambiguous facts of experience, yet “responsible to later points of view than itself”\textsuperscript{145}. James considers the truth therefore as something never actually static, but which is developed through more precise formulations. Vivekananda on the other hand was once asked ‘what is truth?’, he replied “Truth… is one and absolute. Man travels constantly

\textsuperscript{142} James, \textit{The Meaning of Truth}, 74.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid. 143.
\textsuperscript{144} James, \textit{A Pluralistic Universe}, 40.
\textsuperscript{145} James, \textit{The Meaning of Truth}, 55.
towards it, from truth to truth, and not from error to truth”\textsuperscript{146}, and states elsewhere the soul passes only “from a lower truth to a higher truth”.\textsuperscript{147} The truth for both William James and Vivekananda is thus only a process of refinement, to polish our perceptive capacities.

**Personal Religious Realization**

It is because something is only made true when it becomes *real* that James concludes in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that religious beliefs can only be confirmed by one’s own spiritual experiences. In this work James was looking for the progenitor of all religious customs – the bedrock of all religious rituals, customs, and institutions, and “the original experiences which were the pattern setters to all this mass of suggested feeling and imitated conduct”\textsuperscript{148}. James finds this bedrock only in individuals’ particular mystical experiences, and therefore is only able to relegate the truth of spiritual matters to these experiences themselves\textsuperscript{149}. But since these experiences are necessarily private they are unavailable to the mass of the people. They can share their experiences, but their accounts are not enough on their own to be presented as ‘The Truth’. Since the probabilistic truth of pragmatism is not good enough in spiritual matters (for it is not certain enough to bet one’s entire existence on, contrary to what Pascal argues in his famous wager), the real basis of religion can only depend on direct personal experiences. He agrees with Vivekananda very much on this mystical point as James notes:

\textsuperscript{146} Eastern And Western Disciples, 283.
\textsuperscript{147} Vivekananda, vol. VI, 103.
\textsuperscript{148} James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 15.
\textsuperscript{149} While James later sought to understand the basis of religion, Vivekananda had stated that just “as each science has its particular method of investigation, so is this Raja-Yoga the method of religion.” Vivekananda, vol. VIII, 154. Vivekananda held that Raja-Yoga was the basis of all religion. This could also provide a further reason James had interest in Vivekananda’s *Raja-Yoga*.
The method of Vedântism is the mystical method. You do not reason, but after going through a certain discipline you see, and having seen, you can report the truth.\textsuperscript{150}

This distinction between the mere outward forms of religion and the real seed of personal realization is a major theme in Vivekananda’s philosophy as well. Indeed, realization may “be said to constitute the central and most outstanding feature of [Vivekananda’s] thought, [for] it is an idea he unfailingly labours in almost every one of his lectures”\textsuperscript{151}. James’s comprehension of reality as experience, and the true as what allows a useful mediation of that experience, thus provides a solid philosophical support for Vivekananda’s focus on personal realization.

\textbf{Practicality of Philosophy}

Vivekananda’s philosophical mission was more encompassing than simply spreading the wisdom of Vedanta to both the East and West. When he initially travelled to the World Parliament of Religion in Chicago in 1893, he had a subsidiary project in mind than merely expound the unity of all religions. He intended to raise funds in order to support social work in India to help bring it out of its state of national torpor. To this effect the early period of the Swami’s time in America consisted in travelling throughout the northern United States\textsuperscript{152} giving paid lectures. Since his work consisted in giving public lectures in both the West and in India, his message explained the Vedanta in terms the people could understand. His use of allusions and relatable examples abound, and he explains in his lectures entitled \textit{Practical Vedanta}:

If it be absolutely impractical, no theory is of any value whatever, except as intellectual gymnastics. The Vedanta, therefore, as a religion must be intensely practical. We must be

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\textsuperscript{150} James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 74. \\
\textsuperscript{151} Rambachan, 94-5. \\
\textsuperscript{152} The Swami presented as far south as Memphis, Tennessee at this time. Eastern And Western Disciples, 453.
\end{flushleft}
able to carry it out in our very lives … It has to be made practical, to be made simple (the higher truths are always simple), so that it may penetrate every pore of society.\footnote{Vivekananda, vol. II, 291, 358.}

What is the value of religion, or philosophy, or even science, if it is not capable of changing people’s lives? Unless the truth is communicated in a style people can understand, in ways they can engage with, what is the point? Here we see a very close echo of James’s conclusion in the Varieties of Religious Experience that religious beliefs are to be judged by their fruits, not their roots.\footnote{James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, 25.} They are to be judged by whether the consequences of the belief are good for life, and not whether the belief is supposedly in accord with the ultimate nature of reality.

James explains this idea even more explicitly, as for him truth consists only in its pragmatic value – an idea’s ability to positively impact one’s life. Hare notes:

“It was one of James’s most profound convictions that a metaphysical treatise, unlike a scientific treatise, should be something its readers can live by … such a system is ultimately pointless, James felt, if it does not express a Weltanschauung, an attitude towards life, a picture of the universe, whose general implications can be emotionally as well as intellectually grasped by readers.”\footnote{A quotation from Peter Hare in the Introduction to James’s Some Problems of Philosophy, xvii.}

James expresses this sentiment through his commitment to a certain ‘thickening up’ of the philosophical discourse,\footnote{James, A Pluralistic Universe, 149.} by relating philosophical terms back to actual experiences. To the chagrin of James, philosophy appeared to have been derailed due to the excessive tendency towards ‘rationalism’. For him, this susceptibility was to consider “the actual peculiarities of the world … as entirely irrelevant to the content of truth”\footnote{James, A Pluralistic Universe, 149.}, a tendency James pithily refers to as

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\footnotesize
154 James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, 25.
155 A quotation from Peter Hare in the Introduction to James’s Some Problems of Philosophy, xvii.
156 James, A Pluralistic Universe, 149.
157 James, A Pluralistic Universe, 149.
\end{flushright}
'vicious abstractionism'\textsuperscript{158}. However, abstract ideas can still be useful “so long as their original fiction does not get swallowed up in the admiration and lost… and made a means of diminishing original experience”\textsuperscript{159}. 

Likewise, Vivekananda’s mission was to bring Vedanta to all people, not just intellectuals. The central notion of the attitudinal focus of Vedanta is that “the four Vedas, sciences, languages, philosophy, and all other learnings are only ornamental”\textsuperscript{160}; real learning only consist in that which enables us to reach the truth. Vivekananda analogizes:

There is a thorn in my finger, and I use another to take the first one out; and when I have taken it out, I throw both of them aside; I have no necessity for keeping the second thorn, because both are thorns after all.\textsuperscript{161}

In so far as the abstractions of philosophy, science, etc., help towards this goal they are good; but they themselves are a mere means to an experiential end.

**Plurality of Truths**

Since James adheres to both pragmatism and radical empiricism, he is committed to the position that there may always be different perspectives on the truth. In so far as this is the case, each person is responsible only to the experiential evidence as it presents itself to them, and to act on it accordingly. James even goes so far as to note that philosophical positions are more often outcomes of one’s temperament, rather than the other way around – the intellect is subservient to the will. This position is further developed in his *The Will to Believe*, where James lays out an argument to defend people’s justification in particular beliefs, in confrontation with

\textsuperscript{158} James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 135.
\textsuperscript{159} James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 135.
\textsuperscript{160} Vivekananda, vol. VII, 455.
\textsuperscript{161} Vivekananda, vol. I, 55.
inconclusive evidence.\textsuperscript{162} Because of the panoply of different perspectives and experiences of the human race, James conceives the universe as fundamentally in some form inchoate. Since “possibilities may be in excess of actualities”\textsuperscript{163}, the world may very well be ambiguous in itself, a notion Bromhall has termed James’s “probabilistic underdeterminism”\textsuperscript{164}. It is thus inevitable for James that the approach to realizing the truth will always vary from individual to individual. He notes:

That theory will be most generally believed which, besides offering us objects able to account satisfactorily for our sensible experience, also offers those which are most interesting, those which appeal most urgently to our aesthetic, emotional, and active needs…[on the other hand] a philosophy whose principle is so incommensurate with our most intimate powers as to deny them all relevancy in universal affairs, as to annihilate their motives at one blow, will be even more unpopular than pessimism…This is why materialism will always fail of universal adoption, however well it may fuse things into an atomistic unity, however clearly it may prophesy the future eternity. For materialism denies reality to the objects of almost all the impulses which we most cherish… [ultimately] the inmost nature of reality is [always] congenial to powers which you possess.\textsuperscript{165}

\textsuperscript{162} James later faced many issues with this particular idea, one being his use of the phrase ‘Will to Believe’ as opposed to what he later admitted he should have used, ‘Right to believe’. James was attempting to argue against an agnostic conclusion, whereby one must withhold belief in anything unless there is sufficient evidence to do so. James counters by arguing that one does have the right to believe, as the act of believing is necessary to life as well sometimes is the precondition for the facts becoming true.

\textsuperscript{163} James, \textit{The Will To Believe}, 118.


\textsuperscript{165} James, \textit{Principles of Psychology}, vol.2, 940.
James further classifies two broad generalizations of the powers which people typically are disposed to possess – the ‘tender-minded’ and the ‘tough-minded’, the former tending towards passivity, the latter towards action.

Even though Vivekananda emphasizes the One goal which is to be reached, the characterization of approaches based on dispositions is echoed in Vedanta. In every person there are three forces, rajas (activity), tamas (inertness), and sattva (equilibrium), and in different people these forces vary in proportion166. In accord with these tendencies one of the four yogas167 will be more suitable for some – for a person restless by nature, Karma yoga (work) is the ideal; for the calm intellectual type, Jnana yoga (wisdom) is suitable. However, these classifications are better understood as overlapping ‘spheres of existence’, which can vary within individuals themselves over time. Ultimately, one’s temperamental disposition underlies one’s conception of the world and the manner to engage with it. James categorizes two main types (tender-minded/tough-minded), and Vivekananda four (Raja yoga – mental control and Bhakti yoga – devotion, being the other two).

Through these shared attitudes of pluralistic truths, religious, political, or cultural conflicts would fall by the wayside. What is good for oneself is not necessarily good for others; the most one can do is present their opinion, but in the end leave it up to others for their own development. James characterizes the issues surrounding this as ‘a certain blindness’ to other people’s lives and concerns, he writes:

We are doomed, by the fact that we are practical beings with very limited tasks to attend to, and special ideas to look after, to be absolutely blind and insensible to the inner

feelings, and the whole inner significance of lives that are different from our own. Our
opinion of such lives is absolutely wide of the mark, and unfit to be counted at all.\footnote{James, Essays in Religion and Morality, 99n.}

Our consideration of other’s lives is always clouded by our own concerns and singular
perspective. Although the ideal of a unified picture of the world is tempting, a realistic
appreciation for the necessity of multiple perspectives is the only way to address the ubiquitous
veil of Maya (or subjective enframing), which shields us from any all-encompassing purview.

However, the main differentiating factor between the philosophies of James and
Vivekananda lies in the possibility of entirely removing this subjective factor of experience.
James argues that since knowledge and truth are by their nature always contextual, and mediated
by the knowers’ interests in the object of knowledge, that a completely clear, objective view is
impossible – he states:

\begin{quote}
radical empiricism allows that the absolute sum-total of things may never be actually
experienced or realized in that shape at all, and that a disseminated, distributed, or
incompletely unified appearance is the only form that reality may yet \[achieve\].\footnote{James, A Pluralistic Universe, 25.}
\end{quote}

However, even though James has the weight of empirical evidence to support his position, an
acceptance of an Absolutist position is not necessarily untenable within his own scheme.
Vivekananda does not actually adopt the straw-man position of ‘Monism’ which James attributes
to him. Rather the Vedanta notion of \textit{advaita} (non-dualism) explicitly differentiates itself outside
of the Monism-Dualism distinction. For Vivekananda “God [or the Absolute] is more than
known”\footnote{Vivekananda, vol. II, 133.}, he is our very essence and of whom it can only be said we understand when we
realize ‘Thou art That’, that God and I are identical. With this realization, God becomes real \textit{to}
us – it is the Oneness in which we are ‘Existence Absolute’\textsuperscript{171}, itself. Knowledge is not an actual function at this stage for the object and subject are identical. From this it can be seen that the \textit{advaita} position of non-dualism is not necessarily opposed to James’s scheme. The monistic formulation of Vivekananda is merely an ideal conception, used to uplift people to reach the goal of realization. The departure James takes from Vivekananda is due to his lack of familiarity with the nuances of \textit{advaita}, but also perhaps his own lack of experiential\textsuperscript{172} or temperamental rationale, to believe in Absolutism as a more satisfying \textit{Weltanschauung} than a belief in an ultimately disjointed universe – a pluriverse.

\section*{James’s Disagreement with Vivekananda}

When James wrote that Vivekananda was the paragon of Vedantist missionaries and hence the paragon of monists, he was not necessarily according praise to Vivekananda, as Fredrick has elucidated, but rather he was attempting to draw a distinction between the monist frame of mind and the pluralist. The distinction between these two is very significant, for James argues that whether or not the universe is One or many, is the “deepest and most pregnant question” in philosophy\textsuperscript{173}. The debate on this question has been long and convoluted, and in sardonic despair James concludes:

\begin{quote}
The world is indubitably one if you look at it one way, but as indubitably is it many, if you look at it in another. It is both one and many – let us adopt a sort of pluralistic monism\textsuperscript{174}.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{171} Vivekananda, vol. II, 236.
\textsuperscript{172} James acknowledges that his “own constitution shuts me out from their[mystical experiences] enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of them only at second hand”. James, \textit{The Varieties of Religious Experience}, 301.
\textsuperscript{173} James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 141.
\textsuperscript{174} James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 14.
A sort of pluralistic monism which allows individuals the right to believe in either side they deem is more suitable to their situation. Since there is no definite answer to the question of the One and many, James shifts his sight to a pragmatist approach which considers the question considering only its practical consequences. The ‘truth’ for each of us will in the long run be “the expedient in the way of our thinking, much as the good is the expedient in the way of our behavior”\textsuperscript{175}. Even though the evidence to confirm either monism or pluralism is lacking, most people are not willing to wait until all the evidence is in, and so it is most expedient to commit to a specific belief. It is towards the satisfaction of certain psychological needs that the belief in either a monistic or pluralist universe resides – and James argues the decision is fundamentally one of temperament.

As a result of his active temperament James prefers to adopt a pluralistic view of the universe, and comes to reject the ‘monism’ in Vivekananda’s philosophy. This is because he does not see it as the most compatible explanation of the universe, given the facts of experience. For James, there is nothing more pervasive to experience than the fact that it refuses to conform to our conceptions and expectations of it. Further, James sees a pluralistic conception of the universe as encumbering many of the same attributes as a monistic one, without introducing “all those tremendous irrationalities into the universe”\textsuperscript{176}, such as the problem of evil – with its attendant protracted debates throughout history. But, James does acknowledge the value of the monistic worldview, and its raison d’être; as:

\begin{center}
The peace and rest, the security desiderated at such moments is security against the bewildering accidents of so much bewildering finite experience … it imparts a perfect 
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{175} James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 106.
\textsuperscript{176} James, \textit{A Pluralistic Universe}, 57.
The notion that ultimately all of finite experience is rooted in a tightly fitting, rational, ordered and unified Being is extremely uplifting indeed. The reassurance it brings allows us to drop the “strenuous mood and take a moral holiday”¹⁷⁸, and provides us rest from our struggles with the world. But for James personally, this emotional benefit is not worth the interminable philosophical issues it brings in its wake. Ultimately pluralism can allow a supremely finite god perhaps; but there must always be “some of it [which] remain[s] outside of the largest combination of it ever made”¹⁷⁹, which can account for evil, for the strife and conflict in the world – its apparent incompleteness.

It must be noted however that James does not argue that pluralism is necessarily the correct conception of the universe – but rather from his own personal standpoint, pluralism is best able to explain the phenomena of experience and motivate a virtuous life¹⁸⁰. It is because of this that James states “the history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments”¹⁸¹, between those favouring activity and others preferring passivity.¹⁸²

Just as there exists the dichotomy of monism – pluralism, James notes two types of temperaments, the ‘tender-minded’ and the ‘tough-minded’. The former interested in principles to rationalize the world and the latter interested in facts. The former rationalistic and the latter of an empiricist bend. Yet “no one can live an hour without both facts and principles, so it is a

¹⁷⁷ James, *Pragmatism*, 140, 76.
¹⁷⁸ James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 57.
¹⁸⁰ Bromhall, 74.
¹⁸¹ James, *Pragmatism*, 11.
¹⁸² Although James usually maintains language suggesting passivity, it would be better to understand the distinction as one between activity and contemplation.
difference rather of emphasis”\textsuperscript{183}, than a black and white caricature of certain individuals – they are rather tendencies of character. James lists the characteristics of the tender-minded as rationalistic (going by ‘principles’), idealistic, optimistic, religious, free-willist, monistic, and dogmatical. Whereas the tough-minded are contrarily empiricist (going by ‘facts’), sensationalistic, materialistic, pessimistic, irreligious, fatalistic, pluralistic, and skeptical\textsuperscript{184}. What James attempts to articulate through this dichotomy is to explain the pragmatic rationale for why monism or pluralism ought, or tends, to be favored by different individuals.

The tender-minded temperament James often associates with the sick-soul, or that is to say those who need to be coddled from the harsh facts of experience\textsuperscript{185}. It is for those who have been overwhelmed by the world, and need someplace where they can rest. The tough-minded are those full of vigour, and eager to face the challenges of the world. Apart from the ‘rational absurdities’ which monism tends to lean into, James also has issues with the anti-melioristic attitude inherent in monism. Since, for the monist the world is already complete, rational, and perfect, it is not incumbent on the individual to undertake any endeavors and it is thus hard to justify any melioristically motivated action\textsuperscript{186}. But for James, this conclusion is simply an escape from the difficulties of the world. It is like withdrawing into the safety of a monastery to ignore the facts of the world, and James concludes “the hindoo and buddhists, for this is essentially their attitude, are simply afraid, afraid of more experience, afraid of life”\textsuperscript{187}\textsuperscript{188}. Apart from the gross generalization here, James is attempting to clearly articulate the temperament which adheres to a

\textsuperscript{183} James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 12.
\textsuperscript{184} James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 13.
\textsuperscript{185} James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 140.
\textsuperscript{186} James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 144.
\textsuperscript{187} James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 140.
\textsuperscript{188} Again, James espouses a negative attitude towards the contemplative mindset. This relates to the distinction between passivity and contemplation noted earlier. Rather than understand the monistic attitude as a fear of life, it would be better to understand it as a disposition to study and contemplate life.
monistic doctrine, for after all, “the whole monistic pyramid … [seems to be] a product of will far more than one of reason”\(^{189}\). Assuming this characterization of ‘monism’ is accurate of Vivekananda’s philosophy, then it would appear James has elucidated a very profound insight into the origin and perpetuation of diverse beliefs (most significantly religious ones). Although enlightening, it is ultimately wrong to pin this epithet to Vivekananda. This is because *advaita* Vedanta is more encompassing than mere ‘monism’, and it may perhaps be entirely compatible with James notion of a ‘pluralistic monism’.

**Potential Reconciliation of Their Views**

James uses Vivekananda to exemplify what he envisions as a ‘monist’, whereas he sees himself as the pure example of a pluralist. In this categorization he was looking for a “view that can be clearly identified with the tender-minded type which is rationalistic, monistic, and optimistic”\(^{190}\), and Fredrick agrees that “Vivekananda’s philosophy and statements perfectly fit the bill”\(^{191}\). Although all of these characteristics can fit into Vedanta, the further implications James draws from them – such as dogmatic Absolutism and the denial of meliorism – are a simplification and misapprehension of Vivekananda’s true position.

James chooses to believe in a pluralistic universe because he sees it as fulfilling the justification and impetus for an active life, and the most significant practical difference which James views between the two outlooks of monism and pluralism is their attitude towards meliorism. With monism everything in the world is already saved, salvation is inevitable. But with pluralism “salvation [is] neither inevitable nor impossible”\(^{192}\), it is an open question to

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\(^{189}\) James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 67.

\(^{190}\) Frederick, 49.

\(^{191}\) Frederick, 49.

\(^{192}\) James, *Pragmatism*, 137.
which the individual can seriously respond. It is to live in a world where the question ‘can I improve the world?’ has an affirmative response. But in no way should it be supposed that our favouring of either a monistic or pluralistic scheme is one decided by the intellect. In “the end it is our faith and not our logic that decides such questions”, and James refuses “the right of any pretended logic to veto [his] own faith”\textsuperscript{193}, that everything is not saved in the end. James is “willing that there should be real losses and real losers”\textsuperscript{194}, “that there are genuine sacrifices somewhere”\textsuperscript{195}, and that these facts about experience are more precious than the peace and comfort which an Absolute provides.

But to conclude that Vivekananda denies meliorism is to misconceive his philosophy. Even though salvation is inevitable, meliorism is highly relevant within the Vedanta tradition, for there is no reason to remain in the bondage of this world, if by practicing the yogas you can be made “free in a moment”\textsuperscript{196}. The emphasis on meliorism may even be greater in the Vedanta than in James’s scheme, for it eschews any despair – for you can truly liberate yourself at any time. Activity, personified in James’s temperament, is thus truly compatible with Vivekananda’s philosophy – and certainly his personality as well\textsuperscript{197}. Yet Vivekananda is also too uncritical for James. After all, he contends that Vivekananda’s use of “Atman is emotional and spiritual altogether”\textsuperscript{198}, not scientific. But again, this is to only consider Vedanta from its \textit{Raja Yoga} aspect. Rather in \textit{Karma Yoga} one “is purifying the mind by means of work”\textsuperscript{199}, and \textit{Jnana Yoga}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{193} James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 142.
  \item \textsuperscript{194} James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 142.
  \item \textsuperscript{195} James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 141.
  \item \textsuperscript{196} Vivekananda, vol. II, 251.
  \item \textsuperscript{197} In Rolland’s Biography of Vivekananda he writes: “He was energy personified, and action was his message to men… He went so far in his aversion to passivity… as to say, “above all, be strong! Be manly! I have respect even for one who is wicked, so long as he is manly and strong; for his strength will make him some day give up his wickedness, or even give up all work for selfish ends, and will then eventually bring him into the Truth”. Rolland, 4.
  \item \textsuperscript{198} James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 131.
  \item \textsuperscript{199} Vivekananda, vol. VIII, 152.
\end{itemize}
– the cultivation of knowledge – is only “for the strong, for those who are neither mystical nor devotional, but rational”\textsuperscript{200}. It speaks to the universality of Vedanta that it is able to agree even with its detractors unaware of all its facets.

It is also improper to understand Vivekananda’s philosophy as a form of dogmatic Absolutism. Vedanta does indeed claim universal validity, but it also excludes no opinions or perspectives from its purview. Fredrick writes “If I am a Christian who thinks that God’s sacredness lies in God being totally other than humans, then according to Vivekananda, my belief is false”\textsuperscript{201}. But, following the Vedanta standpoint, this belief may be a lower manifestation of truth, but such a belief is certainly not false. The truth of such a belief in God, would be evaluated in a similar manner which it would through James’s pragmatic approach – namely, its practical benefits. Vivekananda even clearly recognizes the \textit{necessity} for a plurality of people’s experiences and dispositions. For him:

religion can never be fixed forever in certain texts, under whatever form they may appear. It progressed. If it stopped for a single instant, it died. His universal ideal was always in motion.\textsuperscript{202}

With this sentiment he is in accord with James, who contends “it is hopeless to look for a literal agreement amongst mankind”\textsuperscript{203}. But Vivekananda’s mindset is to not lose faith in this unity\textsuperscript{204}.

\textsuperscript{200} Vivekananda, vol. VIII, 3.
\textsuperscript{201} Frederick, 45.
\textsuperscript{202} Rolland, 83.
\textsuperscript{203} James, The Will to Believe, 89.
\textsuperscript{204} Vivekananda departs from James on the degree of epistemic certainty that is possible of this unity however. Vivekananda states: “The whole universe is one existence. There cannot be anything else. Out of diversities we are all going towards this universal existence. Families into tribes, tribes into races, races into nations, nations into humanity - how many wills going to the One! It is all knowledge, all science — the realisation of this unity.” (Vol. VIII, 138-139).
Deep down, he always contends, there must be unity. Perhaps this may be a mere belief before all of the evidence is in. But even James acknowledges that one must not wait for conclusive evidence in cases of faith. For Vivekananda who supposedly has the experiential evidence to affirm his belief however, it may be a more concretely justified faith. But for those without similar mystical experiences as Vivekananda, their beliefs should fall to whatever scheme is the most workable framework for interfaith harmony.

In the end a potential reason for the misconception James has of Vedanta may be because of the manner in which Vivekananda emphasizes specific aspects of his message while he was in the West. This is evident considering Vivekananda often advocated activity while in India to raise the people out of their national torpor, and while in the West, he responded to the demand for a theory on the control of the mind. This was an indispensable result of his general conception of the state of the world at the time, which was that the West was too encumbered with activity (rajas), and in India the people were too inert (tamas). Perhaps it was because Vivekananda emphasized the aspects of Raja Yoga and Jnana Yoga while he was in the West, that James formed this docile conception of him. It also perhaps may have been a projection of James’s preconceived impressions of the thought and disposition of the Indian people onto Vivekananda.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has provided an overview of the interaction between William James and Swami Vivekananda, two figures who figure prominently in religious discussion in the late 19th century.

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205 For Vivekananda discovering unifying conceptions was the entire principle of all the sciences, and that all “knowledge was the finding of unity in diversity”. Vivekananda, vol. III, 439.
century. With the growing trend of pluralistic approaches to religion it is important to revisit their conceptions of this issue and the extent to which different religious beliefs can be harmonized. Although their positions were very closely aligned on how to mediate a unified approach to radically varying spiritual and philosophical beliefs, James maintained a fundamental disagreement with Vivekananda. Although this relationship has been discussed recently in the literature, there has been an inadequate grasp on the manner in which James’ disagreement is unfounded. The philosophy of Vivekananda is able to subsume the panoply of different approaches to a virtuous life, while admitting a singular unified goal. This unified goal has the added benefit of providing a radical confidence in one’s capacities and the correctness of one’s belief, even with insufficient evidence. It would therefore appear that James’s reticence to accord Vivekananda a more thorough consideration was due to his perception of Vivekananda’s philosophy through the all-too colonial mindset of a complacent, world-weary ideology. Even one of the staunchest anti-imperialist’s in the America of his times was vulnerable to ‘a certain blindness’. But this does not detract from the efforts he made to address these shortcomings – shortcomings only surpassed through improved recognition, collaboration, and dialogue.
Bibliography


