



Vivekananda's Practical Vedanta in Philosophy: Ideas and Thoughts

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Abstract:

This essay examines Swami Vivekananda's reformulation of Vedanta as a practical philosophy of everyday life rather than a discipline reserved for renunciants and scholars. Vivekananda, who carried the teachings of *Advaita Vedanta* to the West following his encounter with Ramakrishna Paramahansa, is widely credited with revitalizing Hindu religious thought in colonial India and establishing what scholars now call Neo-Vedanta. The essay traces how he reworked the classical distinctions among *Dvaita*, *Vishishtadvaita*, and *Advaita* so that the doctrine of the identity between the individual soul and *Brahman* could underwrite a program of social reform addressing untouchability, poverty, and the exploitation of the working classes. It then considers the contemporary resonance of this philosophy, arguing that Vivekananda's emphasis on human dignity and the unity of existence offers conceptual resources, if not solutions, for confronting present-day conflict and social fragmentation. The essay concludes that Practical Vedanta is significant less as doctrinal innovation than as an ethical reorientation of a metaphysical tradition toward collective human welfare.

Keywords:

Practical Vedanta;
Neo-Vedanta;
Advaita Vedanta;
Swami Vivekananda;
social reform

Introduction

Swami Vivekananda occupies a distinctive place among modern Indian thinkers as the figure most responsible for carrying Vedantic philosophy to a Western audience while simultaneously reshaping Hindu religious self-understanding within India. His intellectual formation, as early biographers observe, began not from unreflective piety but from a restless search for evidential grounds of religious experience (Rolland 1929; Nikhilananda 1953). That search led him to Ramakrishna Paramahansa, whose mysticism reoriented Vivekananda's outlook and set him on the path toward becoming the principal architect of what is now termed Neo-Vedanta.

Vivekananda's central philosophical achievement lay in deriving from *Advaita Vedanta* a social philosophy adequate to the conditions of colonial India (Baruah 2017). Rather than treat non-dualism as a purely metaphysical claim about the identity of *Atman* and *Brahman*, he read it as a normative demand: if the self of every person is one and the same undivided reality, then social hierarchy, exclusion, and the degradation of the poor stand in direct contradiction to the deepest truth of Vedanta. This move, from ontology to ethics, is what later commentators have in mind when they describe him as a bridge between traditional Indian spirituality and modern social thought.

As an exponent of Neo-Vedanta, Vivekananda synthesised Vedantic categories with currents of nineteenth-century Western thought, including transcendentalism and a broadly humanist ethics (Tyagananda 2002). One

outcome of this synthesis was his systematisation of the four paths of Yoga, Jnana, Bhakti, Karma, and Raja, as complementary disciplines through which the divine potential inherent in every person might be realised. It is this insistence on realisation through ordinary action and discipline, rather than through withdrawal from the world, that earned him the description of a “Practical Vedantin.” The sections that follow examine, in turn, the doctrinal content of this reformulation, its social and political implications, and its claims on the attention of a contemporary readership confronted by problems Vivekananda did not himself foresee.

The approach taken here is primarily textual and interpretive rather than historical in the archival sense. It draws on Vivekananda’s collected addresses and correspondence, read alongside the secondary literature on Neo-Vedanta, to reconstruct the internal logic by which a classical non-dualist metaphysics was made to yield a program of social reform. This method has its limits. It cannot, on its own, settle questions about the reception of Vivekananda’s ideas among specific audiences, colonial or postcolonial, nor can it determine how far his rhetoric shaped, as opposed to merely reflected, the nationalist and reformist currents of his period. Those questions belong to social and intellectual history proper and are set aside here in favour of a closer reading of the philosophical claims themselves, on the assumption that the coherence, or the tensions, internal to those claims are worth establishing before their historical effects can be properly assessed.

Vivekananda’s Reformulation of Vedanta

When Vivekananda’s work in the United States required an institutional form, he named the resulting organisation the Vedanta Society. The choice was not incidental. It raises the question of what, precisely, he intended by “Vedanta” in a context so distant from the monastic orders of Bengal.

Vivekananda’s Neo-Vedanta is Advaitic in the sense that it holds *Brahman*, undivided and singular, to be the ultimate reality. Yet it departs from the *Advaita* of Shankaracharya in a decisive respect: rather than treat the dualist and qualified non-dualist schools as errors to be superseded, Vivekananda presented *Dvaita*, *Vishishtadvaita*, and *Advaita* as successive stages of a single unfolding realisation, each valid within its own register of experience. His New Vedanta, in this sense, reconciles rather than refutes; it encourages individuals toward selfless, morally directed action, and it seeks, in the idiom of the period, “social equality and unity for the sake of mankind.” The result is a philosophy that retains the metaphysical rigour of classical *Advaita* while directing it outward, toward the reform of a society Vivekananda judged to be in urgent need of it.

Any assessment of this reformulation should acknowledge a point of scholarly disagreement. Some interpreters read Vivekananda’s harmonisation of the three schools as a genuine philosophical achievement, a demonstration that apparently incompatible metaphysical positions can be integrated within a developmental framework. Others regard it as a rhetorical strategy suited to an era of religious reform and inter-communal appeal, one that softened doctrinal disputes in the interest of a unifying nationalist and humanist project. The present essay does not adjudicate between these readings; both are compatible with the claim, developed below, that Vivekananda’s chief innovation was ethical and pedagogical rather than strictly systematic.

Vedanta and the Upanishadic Inheritance

Hindus differ considerably in ritual practice, forms of worship, and philosophical commitment, yet share, as a common thread, allegiance to the Vedas, held to be eternal truths apprehended by the *Rishis* through refined and disciplined minds. The Upanishads, forming the concluding portion of the Vedic corpus, articulate the theological content on which this allegiance rests, and it is this body of teaching, taken as a whole, that constitutes Vedanta: the end and essence of the Vedas.

Vivekananda’s own estimation of the Upanishads was unequivocal. He described the sages who composed them as minds of a boldness “beyond the conception of the present day,” declaring truths “without any compromise, without any fear,” and he invoked Ramanuja’s judgment that the Upanishads form “the head, shoulders, the crest of the Vedas” (Vivekananda 1907, 1:6). The term Vedanta denotes, strictly, the major surviving schools of Hindu philosophy, *Dvaita*, *Vishishtadvaita*, and *Advaita*, though common usage has narrowed it, over time, to mean *Advaita Vedanta* alone. This narrowing is itself part of the intellectual history Vivekananda inherited and, in his own way, contested.

The Three Schools and Vivekananda's Synthesis

In expounding Practical Vedanta, Vivekananda maintained that *Dvaita*, *Vishishtadvaita*, and *Advaita* are not contradictory systems, even though they differ in how they define God, the universe, the individual soul, and the relations among them. He described the three as marking a gradual ascent of the human mind toward increasingly comprehensive ideals, culminating in the Advaitic recognition of *Brahman* as the single reality in which everything is contained. One system builds upon another, he argued, so that the movement between them resembles an advance from truth to greater truth rather than a rejection of one truth by another: "The old idea was to develop one at the expense of all the rest. The modern way is harmonious development. He who gets the whole must have the parts too. Dualism is included in Advaitism."

This ambition, to render *Advaita* accessible without diluting its core claim, is stated with particular clarity in Vivekananda's correspondence. Writing to Alasinga Perumal, he described his life's work as the task of making "the dry, abstract *Advaita*" into something "living, poetic, in everyday life," of drawing "concrete moral forms" out of an intricate mythology, and of extracting from the discipline of yoga "the most scientific and practical psychology," rendered simply enough that "a child may grasp it" (Vivekananda 1907, 1:340). Contemporaries and later commentators alike attributed this capacity to Vivekananda's rare combination of intellectual rigour and compassionate temperament, a pairing sometimes summarised, not entirely without hyperbole, as the "head of Shankara and heart of Buddha." Without devaluing *Dvaita* or *Vishishtadvaita*, he sought to restate Shankara's *Advaita* in an idiom suited to modern conditions, in keeping with the Vedic affirmation that "truth is one; the wise call it by many names" (Rig Veda 1.164.46).

Shankara had summarised *Advaita* in the formula "Brahma Satyam, Jagat Mithya, Jivo Brahmaiva Naaparah": *Brahman* alone is real, the universe is only apparent, and the individual soul, *Atman*, is not different from *Brahman*. Vivekananda's interpretation placed its emphasis differently. He stressed the identity of *Atman* and *Brahman*, *Jiva-Brahma-Aikyam*, as a means of affirming the divinity latent in each individual soul, while giving comparatively little weight to the doctrine of the world's illusoriness. This emphasis was neither accidental nor merely rhetorical. Vivekananda wanted the teaching of the Upanishads to cease being a *Rahasya*, a secret withheld from the impoverished and subordinated masses of India, who remained bound by superstition and centuries of social convention. Wherever he spoke, he reminded his audiences of their inherent divinity, addressing them, in the language of the Upanishads, as *Amritasya Putrah*, heirs to immortality. He wanted people to cultivate, in his own phrase, "muscles of steel and nerves of iron," so that fear might be banished from their conduct of life.

This selective emphasis has occasioned some scholarly debate. Interpreters closer to the *Advaita* tradition in its classical form have sometimes questioned whether a philosophy that sets aside the doctrine of the world's illusoriness can still properly be called *Advaita*, rather than a distinct, more world-affirming variant developed under colonial-era pressures toward social engagement. Vivekananda would likely have accepted the second half of that description without regarding it as a criticism: his stated aim, after all, was reinterpretation suited to modern conditions rather than antiquarian fidelity to Shankara's system in every particular. The more interesting question, for present purposes, is not whether this reinterpretation remains *Advaita* in some strict technical sense, but why the shift in emphasis proved so effective, historically, as a vehicle for social reform. Part of the answer lies in the way it converts a metaphysical claim about non-difference into an argument with immediate ethical force: if the beggar and the Brahmin share a single undivided Self, no ritual hierarchy can coherently rank one above the other.

Practical Application: Selfhood, Dignity, And Social Ethics

Vivekananda's speeches return repeatedly to a small number of closely related claims. Religion, he insisted, is "the manifestation of divinity already existing in man," while superstition ranks among humanity's most persistent adversaries (Vivekananda 1907, 1:124). Human beings, he argued, stand on "the glory of their own soul, the infinite, the eternal, the deathless," a soul immune to the instruments that pierce, the fire that burns, and the water that dissolves ordinary things, and before whose reality the categories of space and time themselves lose their hold. He connected this metaphysical claim directly to a practical psychology of self-belief: "We want *Shraddha*, we want faith in our own selves," he told one audience, adding that it was precisely the loss of this faith that had brought the nation "to ruin." Realisation, on his account, was not confined to ascetics. The conceptions of Vedanta, he urged, "must come out to work at the bar and the bench, in the pulpit, and in

the cottage of the poor man"; the fisherman who grasps his own spiritual nature becomes, by that very fact, a better fisherman, and the same holds for the student and the lawyer (Vivekananda 1907, 1:52).

The four paths of Yoga through which this realisation proceeds are best understood as complementary rather than hierarchical, each suited to a different temperament. *Jnana Yoga*, the path of knowledge, proceeds through philosophical discrimination between the real and the apparent; *Bhakti Yoga*, the path of devotion, cultivates realization through love directed toward a personal conception of the divine; *Karma Yoga*, the path Vivekananda arguably emphasized most in his public addresses, locates realization in selfless action performed without attachment to its results; and *Raja Yoga* systematizes the psychological and meditative disciplines by which the mind is brought under conscious control. Vivekananda's innovation was not to invent these paths, each has ample precedent within earlier Vedantic and Yogic literature, but to present them as a unified curriculum available to a modern audience regardless of vocation or temperament, and to insist that none of the four required withdrawal from ordinary social life.

This democratisation of spiritual authority carried immediate social consequences. Vivekananda directed sustained criticism at the exploitation practiced by sections of the priestly, princely, and commercial classes, and expressed corresponding sympathy for the poor, the oppressed, and particularly the *Shudras*, whose subordination he regarded as a betrayal of Vedanta's own premises (Baruah 2017). He opposed untouchability and cognate practices as a matter of principle rather than expedience: if every person possesses the same divine nature, then no ritual or social distinction can legitimately deny anyone equal respect and opportunity. These commitments fed into the broader current of Indian nationalism, less by supplying a political program than by cultivating the self-confidence and collective dignity on which such a program might later be built.

It is worth noting, briefly, an interpretive tension internal to this project. Vivekananda's *Advaita* implies, in its strict form, that ultimate reality is undifferentiated and that social distinctions belong only to the phenomenal order. Critics have asked whether such a metaphysics can, without qualification, ground a program of social action addressed to the phenomenal order it treats as provisional. Vivekananda's own answer, implicit throughout his speeches, was that the very provisionality of social hierarchy is what licenses its dismantling: because caste and poverty have no ultimate reality, they possess no claim on human conduct that cannot be overridden by the deeper truth of a shared, undivided selfhood. Whether this resolves the tension to the satisfaction of a systematic philosopher is a separate question from whether it succeeded, historically, as a rhetoric of reform; the latter is amply documented, the former remains debated.

A further complication concerns the political uses to which this reform rhetoric has subsequently been put. Vivekananda's language of national self-confidence and spiritual heritage has been invoked, in the century since his death, by movements with commitments quite different from his own emphasis on universal human dignity and inter-religious respect. This afterlife of his ideas falls outside the scope of the present essay, but it is worth flagging as a caution against reading Practical Vedanta as a self-interpreting text whose contemporary applications follow automatically from its nineteenth-century formulation. The gap between Vivekananda's stated commitments and their later appropriation is itself a legitimate object of study, even if it cannot be pursued here.

Vedanta and Contemporary Crisis

Vivekananda envisioned Vedanta as a resource capable of addressing conditions of spiritual exhaustion, and successive generations of interpreters have extended that claim to the specific crises of their own moment (Tater n.d.). The present period offers no shortage of candidates: territorial conflict, religious fundamentalism, violations of human rights, environmental degradation, and widening economic disparity all coexist with, and are in some respects compounded by, rapid advances in science and technology. The paradox is familiar enough to bear restating briefly rather than at length: material and technical capacity have expanded rather than resolved the sense of insecurity that accompanies a world drawn closer together without being drawn into deeper mutual understanding.

The relevance claimed for Vedanta in this setting rests on a specific philosophical wager. Its central teaching, that the self of one person is not, at the deepest level, separate from the self of another, is offered less as a solution to any particular conflict than as a reorientation of the attitude from which solutions might be sought. Vivekananda's often-cited exhortation, "Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is achieved," functioned in his own usage as a call to this reorientation rather than to any specific policy (Vivekananda 1907, 1:6).

Whether such a reorientation can bear the practical weight later commentators have placed upon it, addressing pollution, weapons proliferation, and entrenched economic inequality, is a question Vivekananda's texts raise more directly than they answer. What can be said with more confidence is that his diagnosis, locating the deeper cause of conflict in a failure of attitude rather than in the mere scarcity of resources, anticipates a line of argument later developed, in different registers, within both religious ethics and critical theory.

Vivekananda's own formulation drew on the Isha Upanishad's opening verse, that all that moves in this changing world should be enveloped by the Lord, to argue that Vedanta does not counsel withdrawal from or denial of the world but rather its deification: seeing the world rightly, as pervaded by a single reality, rather than renouncing it as illusory or worthless (Vivekananda 1907, 1:124). This distinction, between denying the world and re-seeing it, is central to what makes his Vedanta practical rather than ascetic. He offered a capsule statement of the position in one of his best-known formulations: each soul is potentially divine, and the goal of life is to manifest that divinity by controlling nature, external and internal, through work, worship, psychic discipline, or philosophy, alone or in combination; doctrines, rituals, books, and temples are, on this view, secondary to that end (Vivekananda 1907, 1:124). The claim echoes the Upanishadic teaching *Tat Tvam Asi*, "that thou art," which Vivekananda took as shorthand for the identity of the individual and the absolute, *Jiva-Brahma-Aikyam*.

The ideal of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, the world as one family, occupies a comparable place in Vivekananda's diagnosis of contemporary disunity. Applied to present conditions, it implies neither a specific institutional remedy nor a naive faith in moral suasion, but a claim about the ultimate ground on which any durable remedy would have to rest: that mutual hostility between nations, religions, and communities rests on a metaphysical error about the separateness of selves, an error Vedanta exists, in Vivekananda's account, to correct. This is a strong claim, and one that a contemporary reader may reasonably wish to hold at some distance from questions of institutional design, resource distribution, and political power, which a metaphysical reorientation alone cannot settle. Vivekananda's framework is best read, accordingly, as supplying a necessary but not sufficient condition for the kind of world order it envisions.

Two further caveats bear mention. First, the diagnosis of conflict as rooted in a metaphysical misapprehension of the self-risks understating the material and institutional dimensions of the crises it addresses; economic disparity, in particular, has structural causes that a change in attitude, however sincere, does not by itself remove. Second, the appeal to Vedanta as a distinctively Indian contribution to global peace, a framing present in some of the popular literature on this theme (Tater n.d.), sits uneasily beside Vivekananda's own insistence that the truth in question is universal rather than the property of any single civilisation. A more cautious formulation would hold that Vedanta supplies one among several available vocabularies for articulating the unity of human interest, rather than a uniquely privileged solution unavailable to other traditions. This qualification does not diminish the force of Vivekananda's central insight so much as situate it more modestly within a plural field of ethical and religious resources addressed to comparable ends.

Conclusion

The discussion above suggests that Vivekananda's Practical Vedanta effected a significant reorientation of a metaphysical tradition. Vedanta ceased, in his hands, to be the preserve of monks and recluses and became instead, in principle, a guide applicable to any life, a claim already implicit, as he frequently observed, in the Bhagavad Gita's teaching that duty performed in the world is compatible with spiritual realisation. Its central proposition, that the human soul is divine, finds expression in the Upanishadic phrase *Tat Tvam Asi* and in Vivekananda's insistence that every person possesses a perfect, eternal Self distinct from body and mind. Because all strength derives from this Self, he urged self-belief as something close to a religious obligation: to disbelieve in oneself, on his account, is effectively to disbelieve in the divine nature immanent within every person.

The practical stakes of this claim are not merely doctrinal. A person convinced of the reality of an eternal, undivided Self has, on Vivekananda's account, less occasion for fear, doubt, or despair, and correspondingly greater capacity for courage and self-reliant action. This is the sense in which Practical Vedanta functions as an ethic of dignity and responsibility rather than a program of otherworldly consolation, and it is offered, explicitly, to all people without regard to background, race, sex, or religious affiliation.

A further, related commitment concerns the relation among religions. Vivekananda held that religious traditions, despite considerable variation in outward form, converge on a shared spiritual truth, and he read the Vedas, the Ramayana, and the Bhagavad Gita as variations on a single ethical core: love, compassion, and service to others. This conviction underlies the ideal of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* and finds a distant institutional echo in Article 51 of the Constitution of India, which directs the state to foster respect for international law and the peaceful settlement of disputes, a provision later commentators have read as continuous with this older civilizational ideal, even if the constitutional text itself does not invoke Vedanta directly.

Taken together, these commitments do not amount to a finished political philosophy, and it would overstate the case to treat Practical Vedanta as a blueprint for institutions such as a global parliament or world government, aspirations occasionally attributed to this tradition in popular commentary. Its significance lies elsewhere: in the reorientation of a sophisticated metaphysical inheritance toward the dignity of ordinary life, and in the demonstration that non-dualist philosophy, often associated with renunciation, could instead ground an ethics of engagement, self-respect, and social responsibility. Vivekananda's Practical Vedanta remains, on this reading, less a settled doctrine than an unfinished invitation: to test the claim that the deepest truth about the Self is also the surest foundation for how one ought to live among others.

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