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War and Peace in Modern Hindu Thought—Gandhi, Aurobindo, and Vivekananda in Conversation

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Abstract: Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948) and Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950) hold distinct, yet overlapping, positions on the topic of war and peace, violence and nonviolence, and how evil ought to best be confronted. To some extent, the overlaps in their views can be seen as an effect of them basing their respective ideals on a shared foundation of Hindu teaching. More specifically, at least some portion of this overlap can potentially be seen as a function of the influence exerted upon both of these thinkers by the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, who was an inspiration to many modern Hindu thinkers, including both Gandhi and Ghose, as both figures attest. This paper will argue, apart from any historical influence he may or may not have had upon them, that Gandhi's and Ghose's views both, in different senses, comport well with the teaching of Swami Vivekananda. Specifically, the argument will be what could be called the utopian and realist orientations of Gandhi and Ghose, respectively, regarding the topic of violence, and we can find a logical reconciliation in Vivekananda's philosophy of karma yoga: the path to liberation through service to the suffering beings of the world.

Keywords: Hinduism; Hindu philosophy; modern Hindu thought; nonviolence; just war theory; Gandhi; Mohandas K.; Ghose; Sri Aurobindo; Vivekananda; Swami; Vedanta

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1. Gandhi and Ghose on the Question of War and Peace: Thesis and Antithesis

As is the case with any religious tradition that is ancient and commands a wide following, it is next to impossible to state with any accuracy what 'the' Hindu position is on issues related to violence and nonviolence. Any statement about Hindu beliefs regarding violence and nonviolence is going to be a very broad generalization. The most accurate answer to the question, "What is the Hindu view on violence and nonviolence?" is "It depends on which Hindu, or Hindus, you ask, or which Hindu texts you consult." Concerning texts, it also depends upon whose interpretation one consults. Interpretations of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, for example, vary widely on this topic. Mohandas K. Gandhi, for example, who is known for his profound commitment to nonviolence, saw the ideal of nonviolence to be affirmed in this text, while Bal Gangadhar Tilak read it as a justification for revolutionary violence (Gosavi 1983, pp. 45–48). If one must generalize about a tradition as vast and ancient as Hinduism, one can say that Hinduism, on the whole, affirms an ideal of nonviolence, but that it also concedes a limited necessity for violence in practice (Long 2022, p. 14). This is a statement true of both Gandhi and Aurobindo Ghose, though the specifics of what it means in each of their cases, of course, vary.

In terms of modern Hindu thought, specifically, the affirmation of the ideal of nonviolence is most prominently associated with Gandhi, while in contrast to Gandhi, an especially articulate affirmation of the occasional necessity for violence can be found in

the writings of Aurobindo Ghose. To be sure, it would be dangerous to oversimply either Gandhi's or Ghose's positions by using facile labels—to think of Gandhi as affirming a position of absolute nonviolence (which he did not) or to think of Ghose as a warmonger (which he was not). Both are complex and subtle thinkers and the values that unite them are of far greater moment than what divides them. Both of these figures also, of course, varied in their thinking at different points in their complex lives and careers. If we think of Hinduism, again, as, on the whole, affirming an ideal of nonviolence while simultaneously conceding a limited need for violence in practice, this is actually a fair characterization of the positions of both Gandhi and Ghose. It is important to emphasize this point, especially because it has become fashionable on social media of late to mischaracterize Gandhi as an absolute pacifist for rhetorical reasons, and occasionally to set Ghose against Gandhi as though the two were diametrically opposed. In fact, the Gandhi who would disallow violence under all circumstances is a straw man who does not resemble his online caricatures. Similarly, while Ghose was sharply critical of Gandhian nonviolence, and while he actively supported the cause of violent revolution against the British in his youth, his ideal for independent India, rooted in dharmic principles, was not dramatically at odds with Gandhi's. As Robert McDermott explains:

> Like [Mohandas K.] Gandhi. . .Sri Aurobindo [Ghose] was less concerned with political independence than with what India would do with independence; a political solution would be temporary at best if it were not based on a heightened consciousness and the discipline of selfless action. (McDermott 2001, p. 19)

While, however, the deep affinities of Gandhi and Ghose need to be borne in mind, it is also true that they did differ on the topic of violence. While neither thinker was either an absolute pacifist or a raging warmonger, they occupy distinct positions within what could be viewed as a spectrum of possible stances on the topic of war and peace, of violence and nonviolence, in the Hindu tradition. Neither of them stands at either of the extremes of this spectrum, but Gandhi is clearly much closer to one end of the spectrum and Ghose to the other.

One end of this spectrum could be articulated using the very ancient formula, found in the *Mahābhārata*, that *ahiṃsā paramo dharmaḥ*, which can be translated as "Nonviolence is the supreme duty."[1] The other could be articulated using a statement that is not actually derived from the *Mahābhārata*, but which has nevertheless become popular among many Hindus as an addendum to *ahiṃsā paramo dharmaḥ*, namely *dharma hiṃsā tathaiva ca*.[2] This addendum can be translated as "Violence is thus also a duty." The gist of this addendum is that precisely because nonviolence is the ideal state—precisely in order to sustain nonviolent social conditions—violence may occasionally be necessary. What this addendum suggests is not that nonviolence is *not* the ideal state or the supreme duty. What it suggests, rather, is that we live in a highly imperfect world in which the ideal state is extremely difficult to realize without the need for moral compromise. If *ahiṃsā paramo dharmaḥ* is taken as a commitment to absolute non-violence, then *dharma hiṃsā tathaiva ca* is its antithesis, inasmuch as it rejects the idea that ahiṃsā can ever be absolute in this world.

To be sure, characterizing Gandhi's position as one of *absolute* nonviolence in practice is incorrect. As Douglas Allen has noted:

> Many supporters and critics focus on various passages in Gandhi's writings and turn him into some rigid absolutist, uncompromisingly insisting on Absolute Truth and Absolute Nonviolence. (Allen 2019, p. 27)

As Allen argues, nonviolence is, for Gandhi, an absolute *ideal*. It rests in the realm of absolute truth. We human beings, however, in the cycle of history, the cycle of time, space, and causation, or *saṃsāra*, are in the realm of relative truth. Our *ahiṃsā*, therefore—our

nonviolence in thought, word, and action—is inevitably imperfect. Absolute truths are "regulative ideals." We can be closer to or further away from our ideal, but we must be wary of confusing the relative with the real. As Allen observes, "Much of human egoistic arrogance, violence, and untruth consists in claiming that our relative truths are Absolute Truth." (Ibid., p. 28).

What does it mean to say that Gandhi saw nonviolence in this world as inevitably imperfect? It means that in the practical, relative realm, there could be occasions when violence, while always regrettable and tragic, might be necessary. He believed, for example, that "even in a non-violent State a police force may be necessary. This, I admit, is a sign of my imperfect Ahimsa. I have not the courage to declare that we can carry on without a police force as I have in respect of any army." (Gandhi 1969, p. 11). He also famously wrote that, "Where choice is set between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence. . .I prefer to use arms in defense of honor rather than remain vile witness of dishonor." (Mandela 1999).

At the same time, he was quite clear in his affirmation of the overall superiority of nonviolence over violence, writing the following in his journal *Young India* in 1920:

> I do believe that, where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence. . .But I believe that non-violence is infinitely superior to violence, forgiveness is more manly than punishment. Forgiveness adorns a soldier. But abstinence is forgiveness only when there is the power to punish; it is meaningless when it pretends to proceed from a helpless creature. (Cited by Kapur 2019)

While Gandhi clearly does concede the possibility that in the realm of relative truth, the realm of history, there can and do arise occasions when violent force is needed in order to prevent greater suffering (thus necessitating the existence of a police force and an army), as well as situations in which the choice to be violent might be morally superior to another course of action (such as if that other course were to emanate from cowardice rather than from a genuine conviction in favor of nonviolence), his ideal nonviolence, and his aim is that a nonviolent solution should always be possible, if we are sufficiently creative to discover it. He sees his concession of the need for a police force and an army, for example, as a sign of his "imperfect Ahimsa." This is a contrast with the thought of Aurobindo Ghose, who appears more ready to concede the inevitability of violence.

For Ghose, as for Gandhi, as long as we remain in *saṃsāra*, in the cycle of karma and rebirth, and of time, space, and causation, we shall always fall short of that highest perfection that the ideal of ahiṃsā—of nonviolence in thought, word, and action—expresses. Ghose, however, underscores that violence and warfare are therefore inevitable parts of life. In his words:

> War and destruction are not only a universal principle of our life here in its purely material aspects, but also of our mental and moral existence. . .It is impossible, at least as men and things are, to advance, to grow, to fulfill, and still to observe really and utterly that principle of harmlessness [ahiṃsā] which is yet placed before us as the highest and best law of conduct. (Ghose 1972, p. 39)

Because Ghose views violence as an inevitable part of life in the material world—as "a universal principle of our life here in its purely material aspects"—he "never accepted the centrality of Gandhi's message of 'nonviolence' nor Gandhi's emphasis on voluntary suffering and self-abasement. Sri Aurobindo was not a 'Gandhian.'" (Minor 2003, p. 87). Gandhi, to be sure, saw the limits of ahiṃsā in practice, but was always willing to push the boundaries of what was possible in this regard, to an extent that Ghose did not find acceptable.

The contrast between Gandhi's and Ghose's thinking on this topic is well illustrated by their views on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, a central Hindu text on which both gave extensive commentaries. Gandhi sees the battlefield of Kurukṣetra, on which the *Bhagavad Gītā* is set, as a metaphor for the struggle of life. He is thus able to reconcile the fact that Kṛṣṇa, in this text, enjoins the hero Arjuna to be brave and fight the battle before him with his commitment to the ideal of ahiṃsā. He does not so much address this concern directly at the outset of his commentary but rather sees the ideal of ahiṃsā as emanating naturally from the mode of life outlined by Kṛṣṇa in the remainder of the text (where it is, in fact, mentioned as one of the qualities of one who pursues the path of yoga).[3] As Gandhi explains his approach to this classic text of the Hindu tradition:

> The *Mahābhārata* [of which the *Bhagavad Gītā* forms a portion] is not history. It is a work treating of religious and ethical questions. The battle described here is a struggle between *dharma* and *adharma.* It is a battle between the innumerable forces of good and evil, which become personified in us as virtues and vices. The Kauravas represent the forces of evil, the Pandavas the forces of good. We shall leave aside the question of violence and nonviolence and say that this work was written to explain man's duty in this inner strife. (Gandhi and Desai 2012, p. 27)

Gandhi is far from being alone in the Hindu tradition in reading both the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a metaphorical text: an allegory for the spiritual life. In the modern tradition, Swami Jyotirmayananda taps into an earlier practice of reading these texts metaphorically, as illustrated in the fourteenth to fifteenth century *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*. Jyotirmayananda sees the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* primarily as guides to spiritual life and descriptions of the process of God-realization. While Jyotirmayananda does not deny the traditional view that these texts depict events which actually occurred, he does not see the depiction of history, in the conventional sense, as their primary objective. The importance of the texts, for Jyotirmayananda, as for Gandhi, is the moral and spiritual lessons that they impart. This is why, in his view, they have been preserved for so many centuries. Such texts need to be read for multiple levels of meaning. There is the surface, or literal, meaning, in which they depict events such as battles and the kinds of struggles that mortals typically face in the world, but there are deeper levels of moral and spiritual meaning as well that are pertinent for all who seek *mokṣa*: the highest goal of life, as described in the Hindu traditions. Speaking of the *Mahābhārata* specifically, Jyotirmayananda writes:

> In the Indian literary tradition, the *Mahābhārata* is referred to as an 'itihāsa,' which means history. It must be understood, however, that although there is a historical element in scriptures, historicity is not the important aspect. For sages, historical scriptures recounted not only the lives of kings, but the experiences in human life that reveal the mystery of creation and give insight into the spiritual laws of life. The scriptures were written to give you guidelines on the path towards liberation through stories and parables that have profound mystical meaning. The teachings of the *Mahābhārata* are universal. Its wisdom is not merely intended for those interested in Indian history or religion. Like any profound scripture, if the *Mahābhārata* is studied with proper guidance and with the right spiritual perspective, it will inspire all that is good in human personality and lead aspirants to the attainment of the highest goals of human existence. (Jyotirmayananda 1993, pp. 18–19)

Ghose, by contrast, gives greater emphasis to the historicity of the text, while at the same time not denying the spiritual symbolism that is present within it. He strongly rejects, however, a wholesale 'allegorization' or 'spiritualization' of the text. It is important to him that, "The Gita is. . .addressed to a fighter, a man of action, one whose duty in life is that of

war and protection, war as part of government for the protection of those who are. . .at the mercy of the strong and the violent." (Ghose 1972, p. 45).

> Arjuna is the fighter in the chariot with divine Krishna as his charioteer. There is a method of explaining the Gita in which not only this episode but the whole Mahabharata is turned into an allegory of the inner life and has nothing to do with our outward human life and action, but only with the battles of the soul and the powers that strive within us for possession. That is a view which the general character and the actual language of the epic does not justify and, if pressed, would turn the straightforward philosophical language of the Gita into a constant, laborious, and somewhat puerile mystification. The language of the Veda and part at least of the Puranas is plainly symbolic, full of figures and concrete representations of things that lie behind the veil [separating the material and the spiritual planes of existence], but the Gita is written in plain terms and professes to solve the great ethical and spiritual difficulties which the life of man raises, and it will not do to go behind this plain language and thought and wrest them to the service of our fancy. (Ghose 1938, p. 4)

Because Ghose resists the allegorical approach to the *Gītā*, he does not shy away from concluding that the battle of Kurukṣetra was exactly what it appears to be in the *Gītā* and in the wider text of the *Mahābhārata*: a battle, where people were killed, and in which Kṛṣṇa encouraged Arjuna to fight. This is consistent with his belief that violence is an inevitable part of life in this material world, and that the virtuous path is sometimes a path of violence, albeit one carried out under very specific conditions.

2. Gandhi's and Ghose's Approaches Unpacked: Nivṛtti and Pravṛtti

Gandhi's and Ghose's respective approaches to the question of violence and nonviolence, and of war and peace in particular, can both find justification in the wider Hindu tradition of which both are inheritors. Again, if one must generalize about a tradition as vast and ancient as Hinduism, one can say that Hinduism, on the whole, affirms an ideal of nonviolence, but that it also concedes a limited necessity for violence in practice. More specifically, one can find particular strands of the Hindu tradition that focus on the ideal of nonviolence and others that affirm the limited necessity for violence in practice. Gandhi's thought and Ghose's can both be characterized as fitting within this wide tradition, with Gandhi gravitating more toward its former current and Ghose toward the latter.

Ahiṃsā—harmlessness, or nonviolence in thought, word, and action—is closely inked in premodern Hindu traditions to two concepts: the unity of existence and the attainment of the ultimate goal of human life. In the *Dharma Śāstras*, or legal texts of Hinduism, four human aims (*puruṣārthas*) are outlined. These are traditionally listed as follows:

1. *Dharma*: duty, responsibility, and leading a good, moral life.
2. *Artha*: power, wealth, and the means for both enjoying and sustaining life.
3. *Kāma*: sensory enjoyment.
4. *Mokṣa*: liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Mokṣa, the ultimate goal, is in many ways set apart from the other three human aims.[4] Enjoying life, acquiring the means both to enjoy life and to fulfill one's social duties, and the fulfillment of these duties and the acquisition of wealth through morally acceptable methods, are all arguably universal human pursuits. There is nothing specifically Hindu about them, as human beings everywhere pursue these goods. We all want to enjoy ourselves. We all need the means to enjoy ourselves, and, if we may presume the moral universalism that underlies most religious ethical systems, we need to pursue these means in ways that do not harm others or the earth, lest we suffer in the long run (either through the

effects of bad karma, divine punishment, the degradation of society and the environment in which we exist, or some combination of all of these).

Mokṣa, however, is a good that is specific to the Hindu traditions and to the related Buddhist and Jain traditions alongside which Hinduism has existed historically. It stems from a distinctive value system from the first three human goals: an orientation toward life known in the Hindu tradition as *pravṛtti*, or 'world-affirming'. Mokṣa, on the other hand, stems from a *nivṛtti*—a 'world-denying' or 'world-negating'—orientation. What 'world-denying' means in this context is not some hostility or aversion to the world as such, but a renunciation of or detachment from worldly goods due to their ephemeral nature, which leads them to be unsatisfactory as ultimate goals or aims. This idea is captured well in the First Noble Truth of the Buddhist tradition: that conventional or worldly forms of experience all involve *dukkha*, or suffering. This means suffering both in the usual sense of the world—as arising from unpleasant or painful experiences—but also the suffering of separation from that which is pleasant. Such suffering is inevitable if we are attached to worldly goods as the source of our happiness.

Both Theravāda Buddhism and Jainism are strongly nivṛtti oriented traditions. A shift occurs in the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhist traditions toward the idea that one can experience liberation even in the midst of worldly life, as illustrated in the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* (See Strong 2008, pp. 181–87). The nivṛtti stream of Hinduism can be found in such texts as the *Upaniṣads* and the *sūtras*, or root texts, of such *darśanas*, or systems of philosophy as Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and Vedānta. Ahiṃsā is enshrined in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra* as the first of the *yamas*, or moral restraints, which collectively constitute the first *aṅga*, or 'limb,' of his 'eight-limbed' (*aṣṭāṅga*) system of Yoga. It being listed at the start of the yogic path is consistent with the concept of *ahiṃsā paramo dharmaḥ*: ahiṃsā is the supreme duty.

The centrality of the practice of ahiṃsā to the path to mokṣa is articulated, particularly in the non-dualistic traditions of Hinduism, as stemming from the ultimate unity of existence. As articulated by a contemporary adherent of non-dualism, Pravrajika Vrajaprana, a member of the Ramakrishna Order:

> Unity is the song of life, it is the grand theme underlying the rich variations that exist throughout the cosmos. Whatever we see, whatever we experience, is only a manifestation of this eternal oneness. The divinity at the core of our being is the same divinity that illumines the sun, the moon, and the stars. There is no place where we, infinite in nature, do not exist. (Vrajaprana 1999, p. 60)

If all beings are one, then we owe to one another the same love and respect that we would wish to be shown to ourselves. In short, non-duality provides a metaphysical basis for the Golden Rule. To again cite Vrajaprana, "Love your neighbor as yourself because your neighbor *is* yourself." (Ibid., p. 14). As she further elaborates:

> Love, sympathy, and empathy are the affirmation of this truth; they are a reflexive response because they mirror the reality of the universe. When we feel love and sympathy we are verifying–albeit unconsciously–the oneness that already exists. When we feel hatred, anger, and jealousy we separate ourselves from others and deny our real nature which is infinite and free from limitations. (Ibid., p. 39)

As an essential virtue on the path to liberation, nonviolence is generally associated in the classical Hindu tradition with the path of the renouncer, who has given up family and other social ties in the name of focusing on the quest for spiritual freedom. In time, though, as seen in both the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition and in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the idea that a householder might also attain mokṣa begins to gain ground. The householder, by definition, is someone enmeshed in worldly life and worldly duties—that is, in dharma (and the other two 'worldly' human aims of wealth and sensory enjoyment). What one

sees commended in Mahāyāna texts and the *Bhagavad Gītā* is the renunciation of an inward variety (See Marcaurelle 1999). Arjuna is thus enjoined by Kṛṣṇa to take up his duty of fighting the unjust, but to do so with detachment (*vairāgya*) and with no hatred or enmity in his heart.

It is the bifurcation between the performance of a duty that is, on the face of it, violent, and the deeper nivṛtti ethos of the path to mokṣa that gives Gandhi his opening for interpreting the *Gītā* as a text of nonviolence. When presented with the idea of fighting one's enemies—in a literal, and not a metaphorical, sense—but doing so without hatred and with detachment regarding whether one is victorious or not, a very natural reaction might be to ask, "How is that possible?" Gandhi suggests that this is not, in fact, impossible: that if one actually lives according to the philosophy taught by Kṛṣṇa, practicing renunciation of the fruits of action (*karma-phala-vairāgya*), one will naturally become nonviolent. One will perceive the deeper oneness connecting oneself with all other beings, including one's opponents, and find oneself experiencing love, sympathy, and empathy for them, as described by Vrajaprana. Violence will become unthinkable for such a person, who has been transformed by the practice of the inner renunciation of temporary worldly identifications and the embrace of nonduality as a way of life.

Ghose's thought, however, on the topic of violence and nonviolence is more rooted in the pravṛtti strand of the Hindu tradition. While this strand of the tradition also upholds nonviolence as the highest ideal, it also recognizes, quite frankly, that we do not live in a world of spiritual aspirants. We live in a world shot through with ignorance and desire. Until they experience the dawning of spiritual consciousness–*mumukṣutva*, or the desire for liberation–most beings seek their good only in worldly things: in external objects and conditions. This leads many of these beings to resort to violence. This, in turn, requires further violence in order to protect those who would prefer to live a peaceful life. Without defensive violence, so the argument goes, the violence of those who pursue their ends *adharmically*, or unjustly, would destroy the conditions that make any peaceful (including spiritual practice) possible.

Again, this outlook also affirms the ultimate value of nonviolence. It allows for violence only as a concession to the inevitable fact that there will always be some beings who misguidedly pursue their good violently, thus requiring the larger society to defend itself. The goal in classical Hindu thought is not to create a world without violence, for this is seen as being simply impossible in the realm of saṃsāra. Part of living in a world where not all beings are enlightened is the possibility of violence. The goal, rather, is to contain violence: to limit it as much as humanly possible. This was done in ancient India by making legitimate violence the province of a particular class of human beings: the Kṣatriya or warrior community. As Ghose explains:

> Indian civilisation. . .made it its chief aim to minimise the indidence and disaster of war. For this purpose it limited the military obligation to the small class who by their birth, nature, and traditions were marked out for this function and found in it their natural means of self-development through the flowering of the soul in the qualities of courage, disciplined force, strong helpfulness and chivalrous nobility for which the warrior's life pursued under the stress of a high ideal gives a field and opportunities. (Ghose 1972, p. 47)

The Hindu epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, are almost entirely preoccupied with the actions of members of this community. The Kṣatriya code of honor, or dharma, is outlined in these texts, as well as in the *Dharma Śāstras*. This code involves elements that would be familiar to anyone conversant with Just War philosophies in other traditions such as Christianity and Islam (Balkaran and Dorn 2012, pp. 659–90). This is the literary and cultural context in which the *Bhagavad Gītā*, a portion of the *Mahābhārata*, is set.

It is through this lens that Ghose interprets the *Bhagavad Gītā*: not as a metaphor for a spiritual journey in which ahiṃsā is accepted as an absolute guiding principle, but as an historical account of a war that was entirely justified in order to uphold dharma, and from which it was wrong for Arjuna to shrink. While Ghose certainly sees the message of the *Gītā* as universal, and in that sense, as containing lessons that can be extended to the struggles of life more generally, the specific duty in which Arjuna is engaged is not looked upon by him as being particularly problematic or in need of being explained as an allegory or superseded through a universalized practice of ahiṃsā. It is simply one of the duties that befalls those in the material world who are in a position to stop force with force.

3. A Further Contrast: Gandhi's Utopianism and Ghose's Realism

While it would again be dangerous to oversimply either Gandhi's or Ghose's positions by using facile labels—for both are complex and subtle thinkers and the values that unite them are of far greater moment than what divides them—the poles of the conversation on violence and nonviolence toward which each gravitates, respectively, might be tentatively labeled as *utopian* and *realist*.

First, what do we mean when we employ these terms? In the limited context in which I intend to use these terms, what I mean by *utopianism* is the conviction that it is possible through human action to realize our highest deals within this world itself.

Gandhi, it could be argued, was not a utopian in this sense, given his understanding of this world as the relative realm, only guided by an imperfect vision of the absolute. However, his push to realize the absolute ideal as much as possible in practice certainly places him in proximity to such Western utopian thinkers as Leo Tolstoy, with whom he shared a correspondence in the 1890s, during his sojourn in South Africa.[5] If we look again at his comments regarding the necessity of an army and police force, he writes, "Of course, I can and do envisage a State where the police will not be necessary. But whether we shall succeed in realizing it, the future alone will show." (Gandhi 1969, p. 11). To be sure, he does qualify this utopian aspiration with his expression of doubt about whether his ideal of a nonviolent state will ever actually be realized. However, his aspiration—his vision—certainly has utopian overtones.

Similarly, by referring to Ghose's *realism*, I am referring to the conviction that, based on historical human behavior, people are most likely to continue to behave as they always have done, which means that, even if it is mitigated by the right social conditions, some amount of violence should be treated as inevitable, and a wise society will prepare for this eventuality by maintaining a group of persons with the training to suppress violence with violence whenever necessary. This is a reflection of the ancient Indian tradition of aiming not so much for the elimination as for the minimization and the containment of violence, as reflected in the *Dharma Śāstras*, the epics, and such texts as Kauṭilya's *Ārtha Śāstra* (See Trautmann 2016).

As with Gandhi, though, qualifications must be made in this regard. While the view that Ghose typically expresses is one that accepts the inevitability of violence, in his *Essays on the Gita*, he affirms that, "A day may come, *must surely come*, we will say, when humanity will be ready spiritually, morally, socially for the reign of universal peace; meanwhile the aspect of battle and the nature and function of man as a fighter have to be accepted and accounted for by any practical philosophy and religion." (Ghose 1972, p. 45).

As mentioned previously, the Hindu tradition as a whole tends to maintain the tension between these two—utopianism and realism—by affirming an ideal of nonviolence while also conceding a limited necessity for violence in practice.

Is there a way, though, for utopianism and realism to be resolved into a synthesis? The need for such a synthesis is suggested by the inadequacy of each approach on its own:

an inadequacy of which both Gandhi and Ghose were aware, as is illustrated by the fact that Gandhi tempered his utopianism with a degree of realism, while Ghose softened his hard-headed realism with a hint of utopian hope.

4. Inadequacy of Either Utopianism or Realism in Isolation

What is the inadequacy to which I am referring? In the spirit of the Jain doctrine of *anekāntavāda*, or the non-one-sidedness of reality (to which Gandhi subscribed), my argument, briefly, is that both utopianism and realism capture important truths, but neither on its own is quite sufficient to address the question of violence and nonviolence satisfactorily. A synthesis of the core insights of both, rather, is needed (See Gandhi 1981).

The limitation of utopianism is suggested by the realist approach. From a traditional Hindu perspective, the realm of saṃsāra does not exist to be perfected. It is, in its very nature, imperfect. It is the realm of suffering (duḥkha), as well as the realm of violence (hiṃsā). This is precisely why the ultimate goal is to escape from it: to achieve mokṣa. Trying to perfect the world, from this perspective, is therefore wrongheaded, and likely to lead only to greater suffering. Indeed, Gandhi agrees that the aim of perfecting the world is extremely difficult and that it requires great self-sacrifice. The willingness to sacrifice oneself for this goal is indeed a cornerstone of his philosophy.

At the same time, there is something deeply dissatisfying about realism as well. As I have argued elsewhere, if we do not at least attempt to create a nonviolent world, if we dismiss such a goal as an impossibility, we will simply replicate the evils of the past (See Long 2006). If, in the name of avoiding utopianism, we do not make any improvement in the world at all, we have arguably failed in a vital moral duty. Indeed, if we look realistically at the trajectory of human history at the present moment, there is every reason to fear that we might destroy ourselves, and perhaps all life on this planet. To be sure, if one accepts the larger Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist cosmology of karma and rebirth, there is the reassurance that, if this world were to be destroyed, all souls would simply take rebirth elsewhere and continue their journey to liberation. However, there is something profoundly irresponsible about this stance, if we utilize it to justify giving up on the effort to make the world a better place. Indeed, such a course of action would be karmically disastrous. Even if we concede that some amount of violence and suffering will always characterize life in saṃsāra, certainly we are capable of creating a world better than the one in which we currently reside, with its genocides, its abuses and tortures of innocent beings, and the selfishness and shortsightedness that fuel all of these behaviors.

I would like to suggest that a synthesis of utopianism and realism can be found in the thought of another modern Hindu figure upon whom both Gandhi and Ghose have drawn as an inspiration: Swami Vivekananda.

5. Swami Vivekananda as an Inspiration to Both Gandhi and Ghose

Swami Vivekananda (1853–1902) is well known as the pre-eminent disciple of the Hindu sage Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836–1886) and as the first Hindu teacher to have a large following in the Western world. With his speeches at the World Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893, and his establishment of the first Vedanta Society in New York in 1894, he brought Hindu thought to the consciousness of many Americans who would otherwise have known nothing about it. With his establishment of the Ramakrishna Mission, he founded "one of the largest Hindu institutions in the world. In just 2012–2013, they provided relief to half a million; welfare to 3.6 million old, sick, and destitute people; medical services to 8 million through 15 hospitals, 125 dispensaries, 60 mobile medical units, and 953 medical camps; spent US$40 million on education for 329,000 students; and

financed development projects benefitting 4.3 million rural and tribal people." (*Hindu Press International* 2014).

Vivekananda was an inspirational figure to many, including Gandhi and Ghose, both of whom spoke and wrote of their admiration for Vivekananda himself and his teacher, Sri Ramakrishna.

Gandhi, in fact, attempted to visit Swami Vivekananda in 1902, during a visit to Calcutta to attend a meeting of the Indian National Congress. The swami, unfortunately, was on his deathbed and could not receive visitors (Lelyveld 2011, pp. 50–51). Regarding Vivekananda's teacher, Sri Ramakrishna, Gandhi writes:

> The story of Ramakrishna Paramahansa's life is a story of religion in practice. His life enables us to see God face to face. No one can read the story of his life without being convinced that God alone is real and that all else is an illusion. Ramakrishna was a living embodiment of godliness. His sayings are not those of a mere learned man but they are pages from the Book of Life. They are revelations of his own experiences. They, therefore, leave on the reader an impression which he cannot resist. In this age of scepticism Ramakrishna presents an example of a bright and living faith which gives solace to thousands of men and women who would otherwise have remained without spiritual light. Ramakrishna's life was an object-lesson in ahimsa. His love knew no limits, geographical or otherwise. May his divine love be an inspiration to all.[6]

Of Swami Vivekananda, Gandhi said the following at an event held at Belur Math, the monastic headquarters of the Ramakrishna Order (the order of monks that Vivekananda established in 1897):

> I have come here [Belur Math] to pay my homage and respect to the revered memory of Swami Vivekananda, whose birthday is being celebrated today [6 February 1921].[7] I have gone through his works very thoroughly, and after having gone through them, the love that I had for my country became a thousandfold. I ask you, young men, not to go away empty-handed without imbibing something of the spirit of the place where Swami Vivekananda lived and died. (Sarvabhutananda 1983, p. 350)

Author Romain Rolland, an early biographer of Sri Ramakrishna, underscores the unity of the messages of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, and Gandhi, specifically with regard to their shared ideal of interreligious harmony:

> I was glad to hear Gandhi…quite recently…remind his brethren of the International Fellowships, whose pious zeal disposed them to evangelize, of the great universal principle of religious 'Acceptation,' the same preached by Vivekananda…At this stage of human evolution, wherein both blind and conscious forces are driving all natures to draw together for 'cooperation or death', it is absolutely essential that the human consciousness should be impregnated with it, until this indispensable principle becomes an axiom: that every faith has an equal right to live, and that there is an equal duty incumbent upon every man to respect that which his neighbour respects. In my opinion, Gandhi, when he stated it so frankly, showed himself to be the heir of Ramakrishna. There is no single one of us who cannot take this lesson to heart. The writer of these lines—he has vaguely aspired to this wide comprehension all through his life—feels only too deeply at this moment how many are his shortcomings in spite of his aspirations; and he is grateful for Gandhi's great lesson—the same lesson that was preached by Vivekananda, and still more by Ramakrishna —to help him to achieve it.

Regarding karma yoga in particular, which would become a central focus for Gandhi, and which we will discuss in the next section of this paper, Vinoba Bhave (1895–1982), a close associate of Gandhi and, in many ways, his intellectual heir, also points out the continuities between the thought of Swami Vivekananda and that of Gandhi:

> Swamiji [Vivekananda] made us see the truth that *tattva-jñana* [the knowledge of metaphysical principles], which had no place in our everyday relationship with our fellow beings, and in our activities was useless and inane. He, therefore, advised us to dedicate ourselves to the service of daridra-Narayana (God manifested in the hungry, destitute millions) to their uplift and edification. The word daridra- Narayana was coined by Vivekananda and popularized by Gandhiji. (Ibid., pp. 473–74)

Finally, author Will Durant, quoting from Swami Vivekananda, makes the following comment:

> "The first of all worship is the worship of those all around us...These are all our gods—men and animals; and the first gods we have to worship are our own countrymen." It was but a step from this to Gandhi.[8]

Ghose claimed that, during his time in jail for his anti-colonial activities, he was actually visited by Swami Vivekananda (who had by this time passed his way, or left his body, as the saying goes in the Hindu tradition), who passed teaching to him on the nature of consciousness (Purani 1978, p. 209). Writing of Vivekananda's influence not only upon himself but upon others as well, Ghose says:

> Vivekananda was a soul of puissance if ever there was one, a very lion among men, but the definite work he has left behind is quite incommensurate with our impression of his creative might and energy. We perceive his influence still working gigantically, we know not well how, we know not well where, in something that is not yet formed, something leonine, grand, intuitive, upheaving that has entered the soul of India and we say, 'Behold, Vivekananda still lives in the soul of his Mother and in the souls of her children.'[9]

6. Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic Synthesis: The Philosophy of Karma Yoga

One of Vivekananda's most distinctive teachings was his philosophy of karma yoga. While the concept of karma yoga is ancient (and is indeed a prominent theme of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, its third chapter in particular), Vivekananda takes this concept beyond its earlier implications of fulfilling one's duties (one's *dharma*) selflessly (including, prominently, ritual duties) and links it explicitly to service of the poor and suffering beings of this world. While he may not have been the first to draw this out explicitly, he certainly played a pivotal role in making it a central theme of modern Hindu thought.[10] In the words of scholar Ruth Harris, Vivekananda "wanted more than pious devotions, insisting instead that service to one's fellow human beings *was* the ultimate service to God". (Harris 2023, p. 1041).

According to Vivekananda's thought, there are many yogas, or paths to liberation. In reality, there are as many yogas as there are beings on the way to the ultimate goal. However, these yogas tend to cluster into four forms, based on the psychology and the spiritual needs of their practitioners. These are the yogas of action (karma yoga), of knowledge (jñāna yoga), of devotion (bhakti yoga), and meditation (the dhyāna yoga, more popularly known as raja yoga).

Again, the idea of the four yogas is not new or unique to Vivekananda. Vivekananda's contribution, however, is to emphasize the idea that the four yogas are "direct and independent" paths to mokṣa, "and, accordingly, that all the Yogas have equal salvific efficacy".[11]

Though warrant can be found for this perspective in premodern Hindu sources (such as *Bhagavad Gītā* 5:4), it is a real departure from more traditional articulations of the yogas, in which it is more typical for one of the yogas to be seen as supreme—as the one yoga that actually leads to mokṣa—and the others as preparatory or purificatory practices. Śaṅkara, for example, and the Advaita tradition of Vedānta, typically takes jñāna yoga to be the one path to mokṣa, and paths such as karma yoga and bhakti yoga to be ways of preparing for it. Thinkers in the various theistic systems of Vedānta, however, such as Rāmānuja, Madhva, Caitanya, and others, see bhakti yoga as the path to mokṣa, and the other paths as ways of preparing for (and cultivating) bhakti.

With his yogic pluralism, Swami Vivekananda both builds upon the teaching of his master, Sri Ramakrishna, but also paves the way for subsequent Hindu pluralistic thinkers such as Gandhi and helps to inspire pluralistic thinkers in the West, such as John Hick (Maharaj 2018, pp. 117–52).

Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of karma yoga in many respects could be seen as a logical link between the perspectives of Gandhi and Ghose. Specifically, it endorses the pursuit of the utopian goal of improving the world while at the same time acknowledging that the world is an inherently imperfect place. Indeed, Vivekananda affirms that the very purpose of the world, as a realm of 'soul-making,' the place from which we pursue the path to liberation, is in part fulfilled through its very imperfection, and that our efforts to perfect are part and parcel of the spiritual path.

All the yogas function through attenuating, in various ways, the egotism thatr is the core issue that binds us to the cycle of rebirth, according to Vivekananda's interpretation of Vedānta (See Long 2024, pp. 144–51).

Jnāna yoga does this through the cultivation of Self-knowledge: that is, the knowledge that our true Self is not the ego at all, which is a mere construct, but the eternal *ātman* that is ultimately one with all beings. This is the path of nondual awareness.

Bhakti yoga does it through cultivating the attitude of absolute dependence upon God, the Supreme Being, in whatever form one finds to be the most compelling (one's *iṣṭa devatā*, or 'chosen form of divinity'). This is the path of theistic religion, such as found in Hindu devotional traditions like the Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, and Śākta traditions, and in the Abrahamic religions.

Raja yoga does it by calming the mind—and with it, the ego—enabling the true Self to be experienced directly. Vivekananda identified this path with the teachings of the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali.

Finally, karma yoga serves this function through the practice of selfless service: by subordinating our selfish desires to the effort of working for the welfare of all beings. In Vivekananda's words:

> *Karma Yoga. . .is a system of ethics and religion intended to attain freedom through unselfishness, and by good works. The Karma Yogi need not believe in any doctrine whatever. He may not believe even in God, may not ask what his soul is, nor think of any metaphysical speculation. He has got his own special aim of realising selflessness; and he has to work it out himself. Every moment of his life must be realisation, because he has to solve by mere work, without the help of doctrine or theory, the very same problem to which the Jnani applies his reason and inspiration and the Bhakta his love.*. (Vivekananda 1979, vol. 1, p. 111)

Why should we help others? Why should we work to make the world a better place? According to Vivekananda, karma yogis do such work not out of a sense that they can thereby solve all of the world's problems, but in a spirit of gratitude, because the suffering beings of the world have given us an opportunity to advance spiritually by serving them. As Vivekananda's explains:

> Our duty to others means helping others, doing good to the world. Why should we do good to the world? Apparently to help the world, but really to help ourselves. . .If we consider well, we find that the world does not require our help at all. This world was not made that you or I should come up and help it. (Vivekananda 1979, vol. 1, p. 75)

Vivekananda's statement that "This world was not made that you or I should come up and help it" is shocking if one is not attentive to the larger philosophical context in which it occurs. At the same time, it is of a piece with Ghose's perspective that saṃsāra is, by its very nature, imperfectible.

At the same time, though, Vivekananda argues, as a Gandhian would, that we do have a duty to put our selfish desires aside and serve the world. We are thereby, however, serving ourselves, on the spiritual plane.

Even more shockingly, Vivekananda states that: "This world is perfect. We may be perfectly sure that it will go on beautifully well without us, and we need not bother our heads wishing to help it." (Ibid., p. 76). What he is saying here is that it is not the world that is need of repair, it is ourselves, but the act of repairing the world, pursued selflessly, is precisely how *we* will be repaired.

The seeming imperfection of the world can be likened to the exercise equipment in a gym. We do not lift weights, ultimately, because those weights need to be moved, but to strengthen our muscles. We do not run on a treadmill to try to get somewhere, except metaphorically, to get to good health. Exercise equipment is there so we can do the work we need to do in order to realize our goal of health. Vivekananda uses this very same image: "The world is a grand moral gymnasium wherein we have all to take exercise so as to become stronger and stronger spiritually." (Ibid., p. 80). To quote Swami Atmarupananda, a contemporary monk of the Ramakrishna Order, "Life is problem-solving."[12] We may indeed solve specific problems, such as hunger, poverty, or sectarian conflict, but to expect the world to be free from problems, especially due to our own efforts, is not only cosmically arrogant but it is also to expect the wrong thing from a world that is here for our spiritual advancement. The seeming imperfection of the world is part of its perfect design. "This world is like a dog's curly tail, and people have been striving to straighten it out for hundreds of years; but when they let it go, it has curled up again. How could it be otherwise?" (Vivekananda 1979, vol. 1, p. 79). The world is perfectly imperfect.

7. Conclusions: Practical Implications of the Vedāntic Synthesis

Vivekananda's approach to the question of utopianism versus realism is an example of what Swami Medhananda has called a "soul-making theodicy", ultimately derived from the teaching of Swami Vivekananda's own teacher, Sri Ramakrishna (Maharaj 2018, pp. 292–304). In practical terms, what it suggests is an adoption of a Gandhian approach toward serving the world, but rooted in a classical Hindu understanding, closer to that of Ghose, of saṃsāra as a realm of inevitable suffering. Acceptance of the inevitable nature of suffering in the material world arguably has the psychological effect, for the Gandhian activist, of alleviating the sense that one has the duty of bearing the burden of the entire world on one's shoulders—an attitude that can not only lead to the phenomenon of burnout, but which is also, on analysis, a hubristic one. Swami Vivekananda's perspective injects humility into this equation.

At the same time, the idea that the pursuit of the perfection of the world, even if it is ultimately not attainable, is itself a means toward self-perfection takes one out of the defeatist mentality that can follow from giving up on the utopian project altogether. Karma yogis become, as it were, 'utopian realists', expending all effort possible to improve the world, but at the same time inwardly realizing that, as the *Gītā* teaches, it is not finally we

ourselves who do any action at all, for the fruits of our action are not ours, but are finally in the hands of God.

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Notes

1 *Mahābhārata* 13.117.37. Translation mine.
2 See, for example, the article by AdikkaChannels (n.d.), which simply takes for granted that *dharma hiṃsā tathaiva ca* is part of the original verse which contains *ahiṃsā paramo dharmaḥ*.
3 See *Bhagavad Gītā* 13:7. (Sargent 2009, p. 535).
4 Indeed, some *Dharma Śāstras* only speak of the first three as human aims, setting mokṣa apart as a separate category. See, for example, *Manusmṛti* 2.13 and 12.38. (Doniger and Smith 1991, pp. 18, 282).
5 Gandhi is characterized as a utopian by, for example, (Fox 1989). For the influence of utopian literature on Tolstoy, (see Alekseeva 2020).
6 From Gandhi's foreword to (Rolland 1977, p. xi).
7 The celebratory event at which Gandhi spoke these words occurred on 6 February 1921, but Vivekananda's actual birthdate is 12 January.
8 (Durant 1954, vol. I, p. 618). The selection from Swami Vivekananda is from his *Complete Works* (Vivekananda 1979, vol. 3, p. 202).
9 (Ghose 1938), cited in (Sarvabhutananda 1983, pp. 435–36).
10 Swaminarayan (1781–1830), for example, a prominent Hindu teacher of the early modern period and a contemporary of the reformer Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833), also emphasized *seva*, or selfless service, including, much as Swami Vivekananda would a century later, concrete "humanitarian projects. . .ranging from digging wells to serving the ill". (BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha n.d.)
11 (Medhananda 2022, p. 78). Swami Medhananda is the monastic name of Ayon Maharaj, whose work is cited in the next footnote.
12 Personal communication, February 1, 2014.

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