

THE MUTUAL INFLUENCE AND CONVERGENCE OF WILLIAM JAMES & SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S PHILOSOPHIES OF RELIGION

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This essay examines the cross-cultural philosophical exchange between Swami Vivekananda and William James beginning with their interactions in the summer of 1896. It explores the initial divergence between Vivekananda's Vedantic Monism and James's pragmatic pluralism, despite their shared values such as the importance of pragmatic verification, the validity of mystical experiences, fideism, and panpsychism. Nevertheless, by the end of their lives both philosophers developed more compatible views. This convergence will be explained through the work of Henry Samuel Levinson and Swami Medhananda, who illustrate how each thinker, in their maturity, embraced a more inclusive view that transcends traditional dualities. Ultimately, James's pantheistic pluralism and Vivekananda's pantheistic cosmopsychism blur the theoretical distinctions between their mature philosophies. It concludes by discussing the convergence of James's and Vivekananda's later works towards similar spiritual inquiries, suggesting that their paths, while initially parallel, rapidly converge

into a shared vision of spiritual and philosophical inquiry. Furthermore, this essay also contextualizes this affinity between Vivekananda and James within the broader story of Indian philosophy on American pragmatism beyond James and Vivekananda. By noting the influence of Vedānta on earlier thinkers, like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, as well as Vivekananda's influence on James, a richer tapestry of the multicultural influences on Classical Pragmatism emerges.



THE MUTUAL INFLUENCE BETWEEN INDIAN AND AMERICAN PHILOSOPHIES

Most genealogies of pragmatism focus either on its European influences (Hamner, Brandom, Misak) or the local and indigenous influences on its development (West, Seigfried, Pratt, McKenna & Pratt, Spencer), but few substantially attend to the influence of Advaita Hinduism on its genesis. The obvious point of contact is the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the American Transcendentalists. In “Emerson and Hinduism,” Russell B. Goodman reminds us that Emerson “lived during the first great period of European Sanskrit scholarship” and even though he did not read *The Bhagavad Gītā* until his forties, he encountered snippets and secondhand accounts of Vedānta, particularly the commentaries of Victor Cousin.¹ Consequently, Albert Spencer argues in *American Pragmatism: An Introduction*, that Vedānta shaped Emerson's favoring of experience over knowledge, a founding tenet of what would become pragmatism (36).

Of course, the most recent, thorough, and sustained examination of Vedānta's influence on Emerson, the poet Walt Whitman, and the origin of American philosophy is Jeremy David Engels's *The Ethics of Oneness*. He argues that *The Gita* and other Hindu texts inspired Emerson and Whitman to develop “philosophies of oneness that challenged the hegemony of liberalism” and to “imagine a different way of life than most Americans had adopted, a life based on

something deeper and richer and more vast than the market and the pleasure of the senses” that “returned Americans’ focus to the ‘high ends’ of life, and ultimately proved a source of comfort and inspiration for generations of Americans to come” (p. 6). Likewise, Scott Stroud carefully elucidates the influence of John Dewey’s pragmatism on Bhimrao Ambedkar, a key author of the Republic of India’s constitution and social reformer, in his recent book *The Evolution of Pragmatism in India*. Finally, Ruth Harris’s insights extend this analysis by showing how Swami Vivekananda’s teachings further complicated these intellectual exchanges, intertwining Indian nationalism with universalist ideas that resonated deeply in the Western psyche. Harris also highlights how Vivekananda’s adaptive methods of teaching to different audiences contributed to the kaleidoscopic nature of his legacy, influencing both spiritual democracy in India and challenging Western prejudices.

Indeed, several scholars appreciate Vivekananda’s Indian influence on American pragmatism during the time between the Transcendentalists and Ambedkar’s studies with Dewey at Columbia, specifically on William James. The first round of articles focuses on how Vivekananda’s introduction of Vedāntic concepts to the West fundamentally shaped the development of transpersonal psychology, particularly in relation to William James. Prem Shankar and Uma Parameswaran argue that Vivekananda’s teachings provided a crucial philosophical foundation for what would later be termed transpersonal psychology—a movement that sought to transcend the limitations of the first three forces in psychology: behaviorism, psychoanalysis, and humanistic psychology. By integrating spiritual dimensions into the understanding of consciousness, Vivekananda’s teachings paved the way for a psychology that embraces the transcendental aspects of human experience, starting with *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Decades later, Norris Frederick shifts focus to the impact of Vivekananda’s ideas on James’s understanding of consciousness. He argues that although James was initially resistant to the mystical and monistic aspects of Vedānta, his continued engagement with Vivekananda’s teachings—especially through practices like yoga and meditation—led him to a more sophisticated appreciation of these concepts and bolstered his openness to mystical experiences.

Likewise, interest in Vivekananda's influence on James is experiencing a renaissance. Sarah Louise Gates examines how Vivekananda's ideas challenged and enriched contemporary Western psychological paradigms, positioning him as a crucial figure in the global exchange of philosophical ideas because his emphasis on self-realization and spiritual awakening offered a counternarrative to the dominant materialist and behaviorist paradigms of the time.

In particular, Chris Zajner presents an interpretation that most closely resembles the conclusion of our current inquiry. Zajner begins by acknowledging that while James admired Vivekananda and found his ideas intriguing, he ultimately rejected what he perceived as the monistic underpinnings of Vedānta; however James's rejection was not only based on philosophical grounds but also deeply influenced by his personal temperament, which favored pluralism over monism. He posits that James's understanding of Vivekananda's Vedānta was primarily shaped by his exposure to *Raja Yoga*, a work that emphasizes the discipline of mental control and the attainment of mystical states. This focus led James to view Vedānta as a system of extreme monism that he found incompatible with his own pluralistic worldview, which emphasized the diversity and unpredictability of experience. Zajner critiques this interpretation, arguing that James oversimplified Vivekananda's philosophy by equating Vedānta with a rigid monism and failing to recognize the broader and more inclusive nature of Vedānta, particularly its emphasis on Karma Yoga—the path of action. Furthermore, Zajner argues that Vivekananda's understanding of Vedānta is not strictly monistic but rather a flexible and adaptable philosophy that accommodates various temperaments and dispositions.

However, Vedantic monism is more nuanced than James realized, and Vivekananda advocates for a non-transcendental, experiential understanding of reality that aligns closely with James's own radical empiricism. Both thinkers, Zajner suggests, share a commitment to the non-transcendence of truth, the importance of personal religious experience, and the practical applicability of philosophy. However, James's failure to fully appreciate the diversity within Vedānta led him to misinterpret it as a philosophy that was fundamentally at odds with his pluralistic outlook. He also

explains the temperamental differences between James and Vivekananda, arguing that James's preference for a pluralistic universe, where real struggle and loss are possible, influenced his rejection of what he perceived as the deterministic and passive elements of monism. He suggests that James associated monism with a certain passivity or withdrawal from the world, which was antithetical to his own active, melioristic temperament. This, Zajner argues, led James to misjudge Vedānta as incompatible with his philosophical goals, when in fact, Vivekananda's teachings, particularly those emphasizing Karma Yoga, are deeply action-oriented and compatible with James's emphasis on active engagement with the world.

This analysis diverges from Zajner's argument in several ways. First, this article emphasizes the eventual convergence of James's and Vivekananda's respective philosophies, particularly their shared commitment to a pluralistic understanding of reality and mystical experiences, whereas Zajner argues that James ultimately rejected Vivekananda's philosophy due to his discomfort with the perceived monistic implications of Vedānta. Likewise, we agree that both thinkers evolved towards a more inclusive worldview and that James misunderstood Vedānta as a rigid, monistic doctrine incompatible with his pluralistic temperament; however, I contend his final introspective works reveal a shift in James's temperament as he faces his own mortality. Third, Zajner rightfully critiques James for not recognizing the practical aspects of Vedānta, such as *Karma Yoga*, which align closely with his own emphasis on meliorism; nevertheless, we conclude that their shared commitment to the authority of personal mystical experience and spiritual practices remains a constant continuity between the two, even if it is not explicit. Thus, Zajner suggests that James's philosophical temperament led him to misinterpret Vivekananda's emphasis on unity as escapist monism, contrasting with this essay's view that both thinkers ultimately acknowledged the unity and diversity of existence. In conclusion, this essay argues for a harmonious convergence between James's and Vivekananda's mature philosophies and that there is not tension but synergy between James's Pantheistic Pluralism and Vivekananda's Pantheistic Cosmoanpsychism.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN VEDĀNTA AND PRAGMATISM

From 1893-1897, Swami Vivekananda, who was trained in Western Philosophy, a disciple of the Hindu mystic Ramakrishna, and an influential social reformer and nationalist prior to Indian Independence, traveled throughout the United States and Europe spreading his vision of religious pluralism and Vedānta philosophy. Coincidentally, these years mark the peak of Classical Pragmatism and two of his most important public lectures were hosted in the centers of pragmatist thought. On September 11, 1893, he addressed the *Parliament of the World's Religions* at the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago and although it is impossible to know if any pragmatists were among the thousands in attendance, the following month Jane Addams invited him to deliver a talk on "The Economic and Social Conditions of India" on October 24, 1893. Indeed, Addams and Vivekananda continued to meet with some regularity before his death in 1902.²

Another point of contact occurred on March 25, 1896, when Vivekananda delivered his lecture, "The Vedānta Philosophy," to the Harvard Graduate Philosophical Club at Dane Hall in Boston, MA. In attendance was William James and Josiah Royce, both of whom had already known Vivekananda for well over a year since he was introduced to the entire philosophy faculty of Harvard on December 15, 1894, on one of the occasions when the Swami was in residence at the home of Sara Chapman Bull, a popular philanthropist, writer, and member of the Cambridge intelligentsia. Indeed, James was probably aware of Vivekananda even earlier, given that his children, Harry and Margaret, attended Vivekananda's lecture "Aspects of Religious Life in India" when the Swami delivered it to the Harvard Religious Union at Sever Hall on May 16, 1894. Like Addams, James continued to meet with Vivekananda until the Swami's death in 1902.³

Unlike Addams, the influence of Vivekananda soon explicitly manifests in James's writing and the Swami becomes an important interlocutor in his late works. In *Talks to Teachers*, James briefly mentions "a number of accomplished Hindoo visitors at Cambridge, who talked freely of life and philosophy" and the obvious benefits of their practice of meditation and yoga since childhood saying, "The good fruits of such a discipline were obvious in the physical

repose and lack of tension, and the wonderful smoothness and calmness of facial expression, and imperturbability of manner... I felt that my countrymen were depriving themselves of an essential grace of character.”⁴ Undoubtedly, Vivekananda was among these accomplished visitors and James’s interest in the practice of yoga, despite his inability to enjoy its physical or spiritual benefits, would continue until his death in 1910.

In fact, his first direct reference to Vivekananda appears in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, where he cites yoga as one form of “methodical cultivation” of “cosmic or mystic consciousness” and defines it as the “the experimental union of the individual with the divine” through “persevering exercise; and the diet, posture, breathing, intellectual concentration, and moral discipline.” James notes that the purpose of this program is to “overcome the obscurations of his lower nature sufficiently” to achieve *samâdhi*. He shares an extended quotation from Vivekananda’s *Raja Yoga* to explain it:

That the mind itself has a higher state of existence, beyond reason, a superconscious state, and that when the mind gets to that higher state, then this knowledge beyond reasoning comes... All the different steps in yoga are intended to bring us scientifically to the superconscious state of samâdhi... Just as unconscious work is beneath consciousness, so there is another work which is above consciousness, and which, also, is not accompanied with the feeling of egoism... There is no feeling of *I*, and yet the mind works, desireless, free from restlessness, objectless, bodiless. The Truth shines in its full effulgence, and we know ourselves—for Samâdhi lies potential in us all—for what we truly are, free, immortal, omnipotent, loosed from the finite, and its contrasts of good and evil altogether, and identical with the Atman or Universal Soul.⁵

Clearly, James possessed a keen scholarly awareness of the connection between the practice of yoga and the state of *samadhi*, but it also should be noted that Vivekananda demonstrated *samadhi* for James during one of their conversations at Sara Bull’s house during the week of October 4, 1894.⁶ Furthermore, James concludes this reference in *The Varieties* by acknowledging that the “Vedantists say that one may stumble into superconsciousness

sporadically, without the previous discipline, but it is then impure. Their test of its purity, like our test of religion's value, is empirical: its fruits must be good for life."⁷

Through this emphasis on practice and impact, James parks Vivekananda very close to his ultimate conclusions that well developed mystical states can be authoritative for the individual who experiences them and that their veracity should be evaluated on how they transform the individual. More importantly, it coheres with his conclusion that the "existence of mystical states absolutely overthrows the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe."⁸ While James carefully states that the noetic content of mystical experiences should only function as hypotheses he also acknowledges that "The supernaturalism and optimism to which they would persuade us may, interpreted in one way or another, be after all the truest of insights into the meaning of life."⁹

Thus, mystical experiences count as noetic evidence for the individual and some hypotheses based on them may be true. Likewise, it seems that James favors *samadhi* attained through yoga as a worthy candidate, and, interestingly, he returns to Vivekananda in his final remarks of the lecture. Once again, he addresses the issue of whether there are alternative states of consciousness and their significance:

Here the over-beliefs begin: here mysticism and the conversion-rapture and Vedantism and transcendental idealism bring in their monistic interpretation and tell us that the finite self rejoins the absolute self, for it was always one with God and identical with the soul of the world. Here the prophets of all the different religions come with their visions, voices, raptures, and other openings, supposed by each to authenticate his own peculiar faith.¹⁰

James frequently used the term "over-beliefs" to refer to the additional, interpretative beliefs that individuals or religious groups adopt to explain or give meaning to mystical experiences, often extending beyond the direct evidence of those experiences to include specific doctrinal or philosophical frameworks. As one who was "not personally favored with such specific revelations," James concludes that even though many of the "over-beliefs" that interpret

mystical experiences insist upon monism, they quickly turn to their pre-existing doctrines and “neutralize one another.” Therefore, following any religious or philosophical explanation is a personal choice based on private experiences, subjective preferences, or pragmatic grounds. However, James believes that mystical experiences do serve as evidence of a more modest claim that “we have in *the fact that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come*, a posit content of religious experience which, it seems to me, *is literally and objectively true as far as it goes.*”¹¹

This leads to James’s pragmatic conclusion that this wider self is real because it has real effects upon the world, and the religions of the world focus on the transactions of the self and society with the real of this wider self. While this pragmatic view of religion is descriptively true, James admits it will not satisfy most traditional metaphysicians or theologians. However, he does ironically believe it is the “deeper way” which he explains as follows:

It gives it body as well as soul, it makes it claim, as everything real must claim, some characteristics realm of fact as its very own. What the more characteristically divine facts are, apart from the actual inflow of energy in the faith-state and the prayer-state, I know not. But the over-belief on which I am ready to make my personal venture is that they exist. The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also; and that although in the main their experiences and those of this world keep discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points, and higher energies filter in.¹²

With regards to Vedānta it remains clear that James insists on resisting any kind of monistic over-belief. He even cites passages from Vivekananda’s “Practical Vedānta” and “The Real and Apparent Man,” lectures in a footnote which deserve some attention.

In the fourth lecture of “Practical Vedānta,” Vivekananda contrasts the dualistic notion of individual souls with the Buddhist denial of such individuality, and advancing towards the Advaitic resolution that merges the individual with the universal. It delves

into the concepts of the soul's evolution, karma, and reincarnation, emphasizing the unity and oneness of existence as opposed to the separation implied by dualism. The speaker encourages a shift from focusing on personal salvation towards recognizing and fostering the divine nature within all beings, advocating for a life of selflessness and service as the true expression of one's highest self. This perspective is presented as not only a philosophical ideal but as a practical approach to living, highlighting the power of will and the importance of character development in realizing one's true, infinite nature. The lecture ultimately calls for a universal application of these principles, transcending limited individuality for a greater, universal identity rooted in unselfishness and the inherent purity of the soul. Undoubtedly, Vivekananda defends monism in the lecture, but his conclusion is pragmatic and pluralistic. Nevertheless, James quotes an earlier monistic appeal by Vivekananda intended to inspire those in guilt and despair to remember that the true self is infinite and one with God.¹³

Admittedly, "The Real and Apparent Man" is even more monistic. In this lecture, Vivekananda also emphasizes the quest for unity and the understanding of the soul's immortality and oneness with the universe. He argues that behind the changing phenomena of the universe lies the unchanging, singular reality of Brahman. However, Vivekananda also addresses the dualistic and non-dualistic views of the soul, advocating for a realization that transcends these distinctions and recognizes the soul's inherent purity and divinity. He argues that such realization brings about a transformation in perception, leading to universal love, peace, and the dissolution of evil. The lecture concludes with a call for the widespread dissemination of these truths, asserting their power to fundamentally alter human society and individual consciousness towards divine harmony. Again, we find Vivekananda explaining theological distinctions only to conclude that they should not distract the individual from living well, pragmatism, and supporting a pluralistic society.¹⁴

Despite originating from different philosophical assumptions, James and Vivekananda converge more than they diverge with regards to their views on the nature of the self, the pragmatic impact of mystical experiences, and the need for a pluralistic society. Both thinkers emphasize the existence of a deeper, more unified reality

beneath the surface of individual experiences. James, with his pragmatic approach, recognizes the validity of mystical experiences as evidence of a wider self that transcends individual consciousness, suggesting a pluralistic reality where personal and collective dimensions of existence co-exist. Similarly, Vivekananda, through Advaita Vedānta, advocates for the realization of the self's oneness with the universal Brahman, transcending dualistic distinctions between the individual and the absolute. Both agree on the transformative potential of this realization, advocating for a life of selflessness and universal love. Their agreement lies in the acknowledgment of a profound interconnectedness and unity underlying apparent differences, advocating for a harmonious coexistence that acknowledges diversity within a singular, ultimate reality. At this point in time, James remains more naturalistic, but these are the tensions that he devotes the remainder of his work untangling and when he does, he moves even closer to Vivekananda. Conversely, Vivekananda sees monism as the truth, but stresses that this truth should not be asserted at the expense of creating a pluralistic world. Indeed, he too will move closer to James in the remainder of his career by losing his grip on monism even more and clinging more tightly to pluralism as a theological fact, as well as a social goal.

JAMES SHIFTS FROM RADICAL EMPIRICISM TO PLURALISTIC PANTHEISM

As can be seen, the conclusion of *The Varieties* is quite ambiguous, with James validating the noetic veracity of mystical beliefs and accepting them as provisional evidence regarding the self and consciousness, yet still resists acknowledging them as evidence of the over-belief of mystical monism. In *The Religious Investigations of William James*, Henry Samuel Levinson also notes this ambiguity and claims James leaves at least two unresolved problems. First, James clearly rejected “crass supernaturalism” and “Romantic pantheism” because both cherry pick world events as supporting their over-beliefs. The former interpreting certain events as divine intervention, but not others, and the latter for claiming “the whole world was full of soul” while ignoring “those parts of the world that were simply brutal.” But how does James steer between this Scylla and Charybdis without providing his own well drafted route for

legitimate and illegitimate mystical experiences? Second, how can James admit there is a wider and/or super self without the individual either suborning to the Divine or dissolving into the oceanic consciousness of the One?¹⁵ While James answers the first question with pragmatism and the second with both agnosticism and even polytheism, those answers are vague and both questions push James towards the perennial problem of the One and the Many. This philosophical problem becomes his focus and to answer it he stretches his radical empiricism to include not only pragmatic naturalism but also the new pluralistic pantheism he articulates and defends in his late works.

According to Levinson, James previously resisted pantheism for three reasons: he believed 1) that nature is too plastic to be an expression of God, 2) that the “deterministic character of absolute idealistic pantheism” invalidates “moral judgements or regrets,” and 3) that “allegiance to the logic of identity precluded acceptance of absolute pantheism, which entailed identification of the one with the many.”¹⁶ However, James begins to reconsider pantheism in his *Pragmatism* lectures. First, he postulates that “a pantheistic God might be an ‘Ultimate,’ not an absolute, an ‘extract’ from experience, not ‘the whole.’”¹⁷ Second, he distinguishes between “universes of discourse and universes of operation” which entails that no one universe of discourse, “like Royce’s absolute idealism, “could claim on evidence that the world had any unity of purpose.” Therefore “Pantheism of an absolute sort ended in mystery, or failure to clarify adequately the relationship between the knowledge, purposes, and histories of persons and ‘infinite’ knowledge, purpose, and life.”¹⁸ James also incorporated our social operations into this process of world-unification, arguing that it is through the transactions of our relationships, institutions, and cultures that we move back and forth from “real *chaos*” to “real *reparation*,” however these oscillations are local, particular, and melioristic, not absolute, universal, and teleological (Ibid., p. 205).

James clarifies his pluralistic pantheism even further in *A Pluralistic Universe* by insisting upon an “empirical spiritualism” capable of overcoming cynical materialisms while avoiding a theism that “construed God and man and the world not only as externally related but as alien to one another.” Pantheism permits both this “more intimate form of spiritualism” because it roots humanity in

the “deepest reality in the universe,” does not conflict with “scientific evolutionism,” and is compatible with “social democratic ideals.”¹⁹ Furthermore, this pluralistic pantheism is on full display in two of the last essays that James writes. In “A Suggestion about Mysticism,” James postulates a “cosmic consciousness of indefinite extent to account for “typically” mystical states.”²⁰ This would explain mystical experiences as moments when the threshold of our ordinary consciousness expands to include subconscious memories, psychic phenomena, and other transmarginal experiences. Indeed, Levinson postulates that this new openness was most likely due to at least four exceptional experiences that James documented late in life.²¹

Thus, Levinson rightly highlights the ambiguities and unresolved tensions in James's thought, especially concerning the noetic value of mystical experiences and the challenge of reconciling individual consciousness with a universal or divine consciousness. While his critique underscores James's reluctance to fully embrace mystical monism or provide a clear route between legitimate and illegitimate mystical experiences, these concerns ultimately draw James towards pluralistic pantheism in his late works. Levinson's work also reminds us that James's vague responses to these challenges reveal the inherently tentative and exploratory nature of his pragmatism. James's philosophical project is one of probing and inquiry, where definitive answers are less critical than the process of engaging with the questions themselves. In this light, James's acceptance of pantheism and his exploration of the mystical can be seen as emblematic of his broader commitment to a philosophy that is open-ended, pluralistic, and deeply humanistic. Levinson's critique, therefore, not only deepens our understanding of James but also underscores the importance of maintaining an open, inquisitive stance in philosophical inquiry—a stance that James himself exemplified throughout his life.

Indeed, these traits are on full display in “A Pluralistic Mystic,” where James returns to the mysticism of Benjamin Paul Blood who authored *The Anesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy*, the book which inspired James to experiment with nitrous oxide, ether, and other psychoactive substances to trigger mystical experiences and philosophical realizations. While James mostly articulates Blood's experiences of monistic unity, he cites Blood's conclusions

that mystical experiences often result in “sadness and disenchantment,” that “Certainty is the root of despair,” and that “Nature is miracle all. She knows no laws; the same returns not, saver to bring the different” as evidence that mystical experiences, even ones of unity, can be understood pluralistically and that novelty is a real feature of reality. In response, James famously states:

'Ever not quite!'-- this seems to wring the very last panting word out of rationalistic philosophy's mouth. It is fit to be pluralism's heraldic device. There is no complete generalisation, no total point of view, no all-pervasive unity, but everywhere some residual resistance to verbalisation, formulation, and discursification, some genius of reality that escapes from the pressure of the logical finger, that says "hands off," and claims its privacy, and mean to be left to its own life. In every moment of immediate experience is somewhat absolutely original and novel.²²

This quotation reveals James's commitment to individual personal experience without invalidating the sense of unity present in most mystical experiences. James's pluralistic pantheism accepts that even if the oneness noetically revealed in the mystical experience is a true revelation of ultimate consciousness, the moment we begin to interpret it we tumble back into the pluralistic universe. And this tumble, this re-entry, is not a bad thing, for it is through this return to the individual that we encounter the novel. Therefore, we must remain suspicious not of experiences of mystical monism, but of the subsequent articulation of over-beliefs that seek to gobble up or invalidate either the novelty of our individual experiences or the validity of other religious and philosophical paths. All we can ever know is our path to the mystical, a path that may be intelligible for others who share our temperament or cultural background, but ever not quite sufficient to guide the multitudes.

Thus, James continues to navigate between the acceptance of mystical experiences as evidence of a broader, interconnected reality while avoiding the oversimplification of these experiences into a monistic framework. Yet, he seems less afraid to steer towards monism and more willing to acknowledge that mystical experiences consistently reveal noetic insights that, at the very least, support a collective sense of unity. This pluralistic pantheism further

illustrates his effort to reconcile the individual with the universal, suggesting that the vast, interconnected reality accommodates diverse experiences and perspectives, each contributing to a richer, more nuanced understanding of the whole. This perspective mirrors Vivekananda's teachings, which also emphasize the oneness of existence through the lens of Advaita Vedānta while advocating for a life that recognizes and honors the divine nature within all beings. Both thinkers, therefore, converge on the idea that individual experiences of the mystical can lead to a profound understanding of our interconnectedness, advocating for a worldview that embraces both the uniqueness of personal experiences and the universal bonds that tie all existence together. Their thoughts collectively underscore the importance of balancing individuality with a sense of unity, suggesting that true wisdom lies in recognizing the intricate dance between the many and the One. And as we shall see, Vivekananda becomes more comfortable with admitting pluralism as a theological fact and strengthens his commitment to the position that the ultimate view transcends both pluralism and monism.

VIVEKANANDA SHIFTS FROM VEDĀNTIC MONISM TO PANENTHEISTIC COSMOPSYCHISM

In *Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic Cosmopolitanism*, Swami Medhananda presents Vivekananda as “a cosmopolitan Vedāntin who developed distinctive new philosophical positions through creative dialectical engagement with thinkers in both Indian and Western philosophical traditions.”²³ As has been established, James is one of Vivekananda's Western interlocutors and Medhananda compares the two at length in his chapters on “The Will to Realize” and “Panentheistic Cosmopsychism.” Most importantly, Medhananda charts Vivekananda's own evolution moving first from the “world-negating and quietistic outlook of traditional Advaita Vedānta” to the “Integral Advaita” of his teacher Ramakrishna which more “non-sectarian, world-affirming, and ethically oriented,” until he developed his own cosmopolitan Vedānta which “defended not only a full-blown religious pluralism but also the more radical cosmopolitan ideal of learning from—and even practicing—religions other than our own.”²⁴ It is also important to note that this final transition occurs *after* Vivekananda's first tour of

the United States and his conversations with James. True, Medhananda makes no explicit statements on the influence of James and the pragmatists on Vivekananda's cosmopolitan turn, but it is certainly an inquiry I hope to pursue in a future paper.

However, Medhananda does focus on at least two areas of overlap and potential influence between Vivekananda and James: that religious experience "provides a secure rational foundation for religious faith" and their similar arguments for panpsychism. In his chapter "The Will to Realize," Medhananda contextualizes Vivekananda's understanding of faith within the public correspondence between W.K. Clifford who defended strong evidentialism in "The Ethics of Belief," Thomas Huxley who defended weak evidentialism in "Agnosticism," and James who defended weak fideism in "The Will to Believe."²⁵ At this point, Medhananda digresses to note most of the previously mentioned biographical connections, their extensive conversations in 1896, and James's possession of a well-worn copy of Vivekananda's *Rāja Yoga*, in which he argues that "religion is a rigorous 'science' based on supersensuous experiences that invite verification," and a published transcript of Vivekananda's lecture "The Vedānta Philosophy." Thus, Medhananda argues that Vivekananda must have been an important influence on *The Varieties* due to the previously mentioned citations and because they share the same thesis in favor of the scientific study of religions and the origins of religions in mystical experiences.

Furthermore, Medhananda argues that in his later essays "Reason and Faith" and "Faith and the Right to Believe," James "incorporates three new elements into his justification of religious faith" and that the influence of Vivekananda shaped these modifications. First, James makes a slight shift towards evidentialism by clarifying that mystical experience make it probable that religion is true, not certain. Second, the "the abundant evidence of religious experience" makes likely that "our ordinary experience is only a 'fragment of reality.'" Third, James introduces a "faith-ladder" that outlines "seven steps in the development of faith."²⁶ While one might assume the Swami would dismiss agnosticism, Medhananda argues that Vivekananda insisted that ironically most people, including people who consider themselves among the faithful, are actually agnostic because they *assent* or

believe that God exists, however they do not *know* that God exists because they have not had a mystical experience. In fact, the Vivekananda advocates that it would be better for people to humbly acknowledge this agnosticism rather than to assert conclusively that God does or does not exist.²⁷ This honest agnosticism is nearly identical to the openminded scientific agnosticism that is James's signature brand, especially in his later works, and Medhananda strongly asserts that James owes an unacknowledged debt to Vivekananda for the expanded empiricism found in *The Varieties* as it is also a central focus of Vivekananda's *Rāja Yoga*. Thus, these modifications of faith that occur later in James are anticipated in the work of Vivekananda.

Finally, Medhananda argues that the pansychism present in the psychological works of James overlaps with the panentheistic cosmopsychism that Vivekananda articulates in his late work. Indeed, the conclusion of my thesis is that Vivekananda's late panentheistic cosmopsychism is not only different than the mystical monism that James rejects, it is also quite similar to his late pluralistic pantheism. Again, Medhananda contextualizes Vivekananda's cosmopsychism against the backdrop of turn of the century discussions which include James. He begins with John Tyndall's proto-clarification of what David Chalmers would later call "the hard problem of consciousness" (i.e. Is our subjective experience of consciousness reducible to neurophysiology?) as well as T.H. Huxley's epiphenomenalist answer, Clifford's panprotopsychism, and the version of pansychism that James articulates in "Are We Automata?," and *The Principles of Psychology*.²⁸ James argues that Darwinian evolution rules out the sudden emergence of consciousness that Huxley's epiphenomenalism required and leaned towards Clifford's conclusion that "*If evolution is to work smoothly, consciousness in some shape must have been present at the very origin of things.*"²⁹ In fact, Medhananda notes that James later explicitly labels his position to be "pluralistic pansychism" and clarifies this position in *Essays on Radical Empiricism* when he asserts that "both mental and physical states derived from pure experience."³⁰

In comparison with Levinson, Medhananda is making the more conservative claim that pansychism only makes a claim about consciousness whereas pantheism makes a claim about divinity.

Clearly, neither panpsychism or pantheism perfectly overlaps with the mystical monism that James rejects in *The Varieties*, but it is much closer to the version of Vedānta that Vivekananda defended during his travels in America. Furthermore, it may be identical to the cosmopsychism that Vivekananda develops through his conversations with James and his engagement with Western philosophy. Medhananda claims that this development results from Vivekananda's integration of three sources: Sāṃkhya psychology, Advaita Vedānta, and the teaching of Ramakrishna. Medhananda starts with the latter, and claims that the guru maintained a "crucial distinction between two fundamental stages of spiritual realization, which he calls "*jñāna*" and "*vijñāna*." He describes their difference as follows:

According to Ramakrishna, *jñāna* is the Advaitic realization of one's true essence as the impersonal nondual Brahman, which is "immovable, immutable, inactive, and of the nature of Pure Consciousness (*bodha-svarūpa*)" (K 430 / G 430). The *jñānī* feels that Brahman alone is real and that everything else is unreal. However, Ramakrishna maintained that some rare souls, even after attaining *brahmajñāna*, can go on to attain the even greater state of *vijñāna*, a more intimate and expansive realization of God as the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality that has become everything in the universe. According to Ramakrishna, "The *vijñānī* sees that the Reality which is impersonal (*nirguṇa*) is also personal (*saguṇa*)" (K 51 / G 104). Hence, while the Advaitic *jñānī* dismisses Śakti (the personal God) as unreal, the *vijñānī* realizes that "Brahman and Śakti are inseparable" (K 568 / G 550). Moreover, while the *jñānī* dismisses the world as unreal, the *vijñānī* looks upon the world as a real manifestation of God. As Ramakrishna put it, "God, as Consciousness, has become the entire universe of the living and non-living" (*tini caitanyarūpe carācar viśve vyāpta hoye royechen*) (K 283 / G 300).³¹

In simplest terms, we could say that *jñāna* is monistic whereas *vijñāna* is "a panentheistic form of cosmopsychism, according to which everything in the universe is one and the same Divine Consciousness manifesting in various forms."³² Indeed, when we take this mystical revelation from Ramakrishna and combine it with the religious pluralism that Vivekananda already practiced, a

syncretism emerges that no longer resembles the mystical monism that James once feared.

By highlighting Vivekananda's philosophical evolution, Medhananda positions him as a bridge between Eastern and Western thought traditions at the turn of the twentieth century. Indeed, Medhananda meticulously documents Vivekananda's journey from traditional Advaita Vedānta to a more inclusive, cosmopolitan Vedānta, due to his commitment to religious pluralism and the embrace of diverse spiritual practices. These are commitments shared by James and reinforced during their time together and mutual appreciation of each other's work. By focusing on the intersections between Vivekananda and James, Medhananda enriches our understanding of both thinkers and underscores the significance of cross-cultural intellectual exchange to the development of American pragmatism. However, while Medhananda's work is invaluable, a critical analysis reveals a need for further exploration into Vivekananda's acceptance of pluralism as a core aspect of his mature philosophy of religion. Medhananda's portrayal suggests that Vivekananda's cosmopolitan Vedānta, with its emphasis on religious pluralism and ethical orientation, represents not just a philosophical stance but a practical framework for living in a diverse world. This underscores the importance of acknowledging Vivekananda's vision of a pluralistic spiritual landscape, where different paths are not only recognized but celebrated as avenues towards the divine.

Thus, Vivekananda's mature philosophy, as articulated through Medhananda's lens, challenges us to move beyond narrow interpretations of spirituality and religion. It invites us to consider the transformative potential of embracing pluralism, not as a compromise, but as a deeper realization of the oneness that Vivekananda saw underlying all spiritual traditions. In this light, Medhananda's work is a call to action for contemporary scholars and practitioners to delve deeper into Vivekananda's teachings, exploring their implications for interfaith dialogue, spiritual practice, and the quest for a more inclusive and compassionate world. Indeed, it opens up avenues for further inquiry into the essence of Vivekananda's pluralism that are beyond the scope of our current inquiry. By emphasizing the importance of acknowledging this aspect of Vivekananda's thought, we not only pay homage to his

legacy but also recognize the enduring relevance of his vision in addressing the spiritual and ethical challenges of our time. Medhananda's work, therefore, is not just a scholarly endeavor but a timely reminder of the rich possibilities that emerge by acknowledging the plurality of paths leading to the divine.

CONVERGENCE

In conclusion, we must ask first what the theoretical differences are between pluralistic panpsychism, pluralistic pantheism, and pantheistic cosmopsychism, and more importantly what are the pragmatic differences? If we accept James as a pluralistic panpsychist, then we can say his late metaphysics is incompatible with cosmopsychism since we could live in a universe of conscious experience but not one in which the divine exists; however, if we accept James as a pluralistic pantheist the differences blur. Indeed, we find that while the two are not identical, both worldviews can incorporate the other. If the pluralistic pantheist admits that consciousness is pervasive, that the possibility of an ultimate consciousness exists, that mystical experiences are the best evidence of this ultimate consciousness, and that there are multiple valid systems of explanations for that experience, then Vivekananda's pantheistic cosmopsychism would certainly be among those valid systems of explanation. Likewise, if the vision of pantheistic cosmopsychism is true, it implies that every being is a novel manifestation of the divine on its own journey, that these individuals cannot be expected to accept as true the insights revealed in mystical experiences unless they are experienced first-hand, that scientific and spiritual inquiry into these phenomena should be encouraged, that *Raja Yoga* is one well-worn path among many towards these experiences, and that the majority of faiths reveal valid insights useful for all, then the lived experience of pantheistic cosmopsychism does not differ from either the pluralistic pantheist who has not experienced *vijñāna* or from the one who has.

Thus, the interplay between Swami Vivekananda and James serves as a testament to the enduring relevance of James within an interdisciplinary framework, bridging Eastern and Western philosophical traditions. This essay has traced their journey from distinct philosophical starting points—Vivekananda's Vedantic Monism and James's pragmatic pluralism—towards a harmonious

convergence that underscores the interconnectedness of the individual and the universal. By emphasizing the transformative power of mystical experiences, validated through pragmatic verification, their combined legacy enriches our understanding of self and consciousness. This convergence not only deepens our appreciation for the philosophical contributions of James and Vivekananda but also highlights the fruitful outcomes of cross-cultural philosophical dialogue. It showcases how interdisciplinary approaches can offer profound insights into the nature of reality, demonstrating that the exchange between different cultural philosophies is vital for the continued exploration of philosophical truths. Most importantly, this essay affirms the significance of James's work and American pragmatism as part of a global philosophical discourse, advocating for the importance of ongoing cross-cultural dialogue in the pursuit of understanding the complex tapestry of human thought and experience.

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NOTES

¹ Goodman, 626-627.

² October 7, 1894, Cambridge, MA: Meets with Vivekananda while he is in residence with Sara Chapman Bull. December 16, 1895, New York: Addams attends his *Bhakti Yoga* lectures. November 27, 1899, Chicago: Vivekananda visits Hull House. August 13, 1900, Paris: Addams visits Vivekananda while in residence with Mr. and Mrs. Frank Leggett, in Hohner.

³ March 29, 1896, Cambridge: James has lunch with Vivekananda at his home on 95 Irving St., August 13, 1900; Paris: James visits Vivekananda while in residence with Mr. and Mrs. Frank Leggett in Hohner.

⁴ James, *Talk to Teachers*, 755-756.

⁵ *The Varieties*, 361; *Raja Yoga*, 92-96.

⁶ Hohner & Kenny, Vedanta Society of Northern California.

⁷ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 361.

⁸ James, 385.

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- ⁹ James, 386.
¹⁰ James, 460.
¹¹ James, 460.
¹² James, 463.
¹³ Vivekananda, "Practical Vedānta," 159-166.
¹⁴ Vivekananda, 1; "The Real and Apparent Man," 122-133.
¹⁵ Levinson, *The Religious Investigation of William James*, 165-166.
¹⁶ Levinson, 202.
¹⁷ Levinson, 202.
¹⁸ Levinson, 203.
¹⁹ James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 249.
²⁰ James, "A Suggestion about Mysticism," 259.
²¹ James, 260.
²² James, "A Pluralistic Mystic," 1312-1313.
²³ Medhananda, *Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic Cosmopolitanism*, 1.
²⁴ Medhananda, 8-9.
²⁵ Medhananda, 265-268.
²⁶ Medhananda, 270-272.
²⁷ Medhananda, 273.
²⁸ Medhananda, 305-308.
²⁹ Medhananda, 309; *The Principles*, 149; emphasis in original.
³⁰ Medhananda, 309.
³¹ Medhananda, 312.
³² Medhananda, 313.