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Pantheism, Natruralism, and Personality

Radoslav A. Tsanoff

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THE Upanishads contain the philosophical and mystical parts of the Vedas or holy scriptures of ancient India and are the principal works of Brahmanic pantheism. Scholars have differed regarding their antiquity. Some have set their date at 600 B.C.; others, about 1200 B.C. or even earlier. The serious study of the Upanishads by Western scholars began during the last century. The outstanding pioneer in this field, the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, declared: "The Upanishads are the most rewarding and elevating reading in the world; they have been the solace of my life and will be that of my death."

Among the numerous English translations made by Hindu and by Western scholars, the following should be especially noted: fifteen Upanishads by F. Max Müller, thirteen by Robert E. Hume, twelve by Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, and ten by Shree Purohit Swami and W. B. Yeats. These works, while including more or less extensive introductory material, are mainly translations without detailed notes or commentaries. Swami Nikhilananda's volumes represent an entirely new undertaking. The two so far published contain his translations of seven Upanishads: Katha, Isa, Kena, Mundaka; Svetasvatara, Prasna, and Mandukya. These are supplied with a general introduction to the Vedas and the Upanishads, systematic essays on the metaphysics and the ethics of Brahmanism, and a running commentary interpreting each verse and each important word in the text. The translation of the Mandukya is followed by Gaudapada's famous commentary. The translated scriptures comprise scarcely one-eighth of the seven hundred pages in the two volumes.


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The detailed exegesis is based upon the interpretation by Sankaracharya or Sankara (eighth century A.D.), the famous mystical philosopher of the Vedanta system of religious meditation. In his critical discussions of disputed points Swami Nikhilananda, while in the main following Sankara, has also presented the alternative interpretations by Ramanuja and other leading Indian philosophers, so that his work is an enlightening review of the main directions of Brahmanic philosophy of religion.

The Veda’s philosophical interpretation of the Upanishads cannot be discussed here in any great detail, but its main principle can be stated briefly. This basic wisdom consists in recognizing, beyond the seeming multiplicity and variety of material and mental existence, the primal and ultimate reality of Brahman. Brahman manifests itself in a world of finite existents, but it comprehends and transcends them all. The inmost reality in each of them, of you and of me, which is called Atman, is one with the universal reality of Brahman. The attainment of this pantheistic insight is the quintessence of wisdom and the summit of perfection and blessedness. To meditate upon this one supreme and saving truth is the chief purpose of the Upanishads.

The careful reader cannot miss the unique value of Swami Nikhilananda’s work. Between a systematic treatise on the philosophy of the Upanishads and a plain translation of the ancient scriptures, he has given us a commentary in which every word in the text is explored for fruitful interpretation. Now, to be sure, some readers may object to this ceaseless exegesis, even though the guide be as persuasive as Nikhilananda or as authoritative as Sankara. Many may prefer to have the original verses presented intact, and will read the text skipping the interpolated explanations. But again and again they will be sure to come upon obscure passages where they will need help and guidance, and so may be glad to listen to the learned Swami’s comments.

In his work as a translator Swami Nikhilananda has sought to combine clear idiomatic English with fidelity to his so frequently
subtle and abstruse Sanskrit original. In difficult passages he has relied on his commentary to clarify the meaning which even a faithful translation would not yield.

The pantheistic interpretation of the Upanishads raises important problems in the philosophy of religion which in a less radical form have perplexed also Christian theologians. Critical Christian orthodoxy has sought to formulate a view of God that would do justice to the ideas of divine transcendence and divine immanence without lapsing into the heretical overemphasis of either one of these two basic principles. The religious mind feels bound to think of God as somehow personal, for personality is the highest and the most perfect type of reality that we can contemplate. But how are we to conceive of God's personality so as neither to negate the ultimate reality of finite persons in a final pantheistic absorption, nor yet to reduce God's personality itself to finitude by sharply distinguishing it too definitely from your personality and mine?

These and other related problems will engage readers of Brahmanic and Christian outlook who, for all their differences, share a fundamentally spiritual view of reality. But they and their religious perplexities will get a response of cold indifference or even scorn from a large part of our modern public that has learned to look on nature and on human character in strictly physical scientific terms. This naturalism of contemporary thought has radical problems of its own. In the name of modern science, naturalistic philosophers have sought to explain human nature and conduct without recognition of any genuinely spiritual principles or values. Bertrand Russell and Eliseo Vivas present two alternative reactions towards the problems raised by the naturalistic doctrines of our time. A discussion of them should prove enlightening in our present common confusion of fundamental ideas.

Russell has been one of the most versatile and increasingly prolific philosophical writers of our time. The editor of this Diction-
ary of Mind, Matter and Morals\(^2\) has gleaned its grains of wisdom from more than one hundred books and articles published by Russell since 1900, and they cover an encyclopedic range of topics. The selections have been assembled alphabetically, which many readers will judge to be ill-advised. Had the chosen passages been arranged topically, the great variety of Russell's pithy comments would have reinforced each other and progressively enlightened the reader. In their alphabetized dispersion in this volume—coming and going and returning without topical order—they delight or shock the reader but leave him confused: "Discontinuity-Disjunction-Dissection-Divorce-Dogma; Similar-Simultaneity-Sin-Slave Labor Camps...". The reader should take the trouble to classify the selected passages under four or five broad heads: perhaps logic, mathematics, and epistemology; science, metaphysics, and religion; ethics and social-political philosophy; history of philosophy. If he then proceeds to read this anthology thus topically rearranged, he will better appreciate Russell's versatility, his originality, his critical power, and also some of his limitations.

Russell's mind is revealed in this anthology as alert to growth and change in all fields of knowledge, and suspicious of any dogmatic final commitments. He calls his philosophy "logical atomism or absolute pluralism" and boldly declares: "The universe is all spots and jumps, without unity, without continuity, without coherence or orderliness or any of the other properties that governs love." So he has been an avowed revisionist and reformer of formal traditions. A famous pioneer in modern mathematical logic, he has been equally radical in many other fields of philosophical thought. He has been generally regarded as a sharp realistic critic of the idealistic tradition in philosophy, inclined towards materialism, but he has repeatedly drawn back from the final, unequivocal materialistic conclusions. "Matter is less ma-

terial and mind less mental, than is commonly supposed." His philosophy expounds the latest advances in mathematics and physical science, but he is keenly aware of many problems with which we cannot deal scientifically but which are imperative and cannot be renounced. He refuses to entrust these problems to the theologians; for them and for their established religions Russell expresses undisguised scorn. "The three human impulses embodied in religion are fear, conceit, and hatred." His ethical-social radicalism has aroused much opposition. The present reviewer prefers, instead of taking up sharply controversial topics, to conclude on a positive note with a fine epigram typical of Russell at his best: "Without civic morality communities perish; without personal morality their survival has no value."

But how are we to do full justice to the values of our moral life? How are we to take moral issues and alternatives seriously? The crisis which faces us all on a world-wide scale today has accentuated this basic problem of human understanding. Professor Eliseo Vivas' book, _The Moral Life and the Ethical Life_, is timely and very significant as an eloquent expression of this perplexity in the modern naturalistic temper, and of the deeply felt need for a more adequate reinterpretation of human character. This volume is the record of a philosophical conversion. For many years Professor Vivas had adhered to naturalism, but now he tells us why he finally rejected it to advocate a radically different, and in his judgment truer, account of human personality and spiritual values.

Six varieties of modern naturalism are distinguished by the author. His criticism of them is both acute and sharp. It is most extensive in dealing with the interest theory of Santayana and Perry and with the instrumentalism of John Dewey. But the general reader will be impressed by the basic conclusion which the author emphasizes: the naturalistic description of the human animal does not recognize man's characteristic moral activities and

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his moral-spiritual problems. If you ascribe our so-called morality to this or that set of animal factors in our nature, then how are we to answer, or what are we to understand by, the moral question: "What ought we to do in this or that situation?" Professor Vivas is thus "primarily concerned with the data of the moral life, the actions and choices and judgments of men, and how these bring men face to face with the truth about their evil selves and, through self-knowledge, point to their ethical salvation."

Vivas describes his own general position as "axiological realism"—that is to say, he regards the values of our moral life as spiritual realities which we can discover, and which we must acknowledge if we are to realize ourselves truly. Values have the characteristic of "requiredness"; they have imperative authority, demanding our loyal pursuit and adoption of them. The right hierarchical organization of values is essential to moral insight; the resolute espousal of these values, with due distribution of emphasis, is the heart of moral decision and moral activity. To the exposition of these characteristics of man's experience the author devotes the second part of his book, "The Moral Life."

The third and concluding part of the volume is entitled "The Ethical Life." Here Vivas explores the abysses of evil and the summits of perfection in human lives. What is the supreme value which we must recognize in men, lest we perish spiritually? It is the intrinsic value of men as persons, the value which each man possesses as spirit. The root of evil is found in our disregard of the moral claims of our fellowmen. The fullness of our own ethical life requires our respect for the unique worth of our neighbor as a person. This ethical emphasis on the supreme value of personality is, of course, an essential truth of the Christian gospel. It points beyond morality to religion, to the divine source of our spiritual freedom and to the goal of our salvation.