



SCHOPENHAUER SOCIALLY ENGAGED IN INDIA?: ON VIVEKANANDA'S POSSIBLE INTERPRETATION OF SCHOPENHAUERIAN *TAT TVAM ASI*



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Abstract: This article explores philosophical elements of an unprecedented case in the reception of Arthur Schopenhauer's metaphysics: its use in regard to the social and spiritual transformation in modern India through the German thinker's interpretation by Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). The Indian spiritual leader was a reader of Schopenhauerian philosophy and used the Sanskrit formula *tat tvam asi* (that thou art) not only as the basis of morality, as Schopenhauer did, but also as an imperative for social commitment and engagement. Among the many philosophical questions opened by this influence, we can highlight the following: how was it possible for a prescriptive connotation of an ethics that Schopenhauer conceived only descriptively? Which of Schopenhauer's concepts were involved in this unusual appropriation? In order to present possible foundations for such "Schopenhauerian engagement", we draw on some contemporary readings of his theory of action, especially the proposal of differentiation between small and great ethics.


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Resumo: O presente artigo investiga elementos filosóficos de um caso inédito na recepção da metafísica de Arthur Schopenhauer: a sua aplicação ao contexto de transformação social e espiritual da Índia moderna, por meio da interpretação do pensador alemão por Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). O líder espiritual indiano foi leitor da filosofia schopenhaueriana e fez uso da fórmula sânscrita *tat tvam asi* (isso és tu) não somente como fundamento da moral, tal como Schopenhauer, mas também como um imperativo de comprometimento e engajamento social. Dentre tantas questões filosóficas abertas por essa influência, é possível destacar as seguintes: como teria sido possível uma conotação prescritiva de uma ética que Schopenhauer concebera apenas como descritiva? Quais conceitos de Schopenhauer estiveram implicados nessa apropriação inusitada e de que forma? Em vista de apresentar possíveis fundamentos para tal "engajamento schopenhaueriano", lança-se mão de algumas leituras contemporâneas da sua teoria da ação, em especial da proposta de diferenciação entre pequena e grande ética.

Palavras-chave: Schopenhauer. Vivekananda. *Tat tvam asi*. Compaixão. Engajamento.

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SCHOPENHAUER SOCIALLY ENGAGED IN INDIA?: ON VIVEKANANDA’S POSSIBLE INTERPRETATION OF SCHOPENHAUERIAN *TAT TVAM ASI*

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INTRODUCTION

The *Vedas*, esteemed by Arthur Schopenhauer as the pinnacle of human wisdom, and the *Upaniṣads*, which he hailed as “[...] the greatest gift of this century” (Schopenhauer, 2010, p. 382)³, held profound significance in his philosophical worldview. Despite his deep admiration for Indian wisdom, Schopenhauer argued that the Indian people had mythologized the teaching of the Sanskrit formula *tat tvam asi* (that thou art) because they lacked the necessary intellectual framework to grasp this truth in its pure and inherent form. Schopenhauer believed that only his philosophy could fully elucidate the true meaning of this knowledge as the metaphysical identity of all beings, the process of acquiring it through

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³ In some instances, we refer to *The World as Will and Representation* simply as *The World*. The indication “emp. a.” and “transl. a.” in citations abbreviates “emphasis by authorship” and “translation by authorship”.

intuition and its ethical implications, particularly compassion and asceticism. This speculation had an impact on the reception of Schopenhauer's philosophy between India and the West that transcended the metaphysical-philosophical realm and entered the socio-political and scientific spheres.

A few decades after the publication of Volume I of *The World as Will and Representation*, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), the renowned Indian monk and architect of Modern Indian Nationhood, used the same Sanskrit formula *tat tvam asi* to rethink Hindu morality. Vivekananda was a reader of the German philosopher and likely familiar with Schopenhauer's interpretation of *tat tvam asi*. Whether Schopenhauer directly influenced the religious, social and political engagement the monk promoted through this formula is still debated among contemporary scholars. Paul Hacker, one of the leading indologists of the 20th century, was the first to point out Schopenhauer's influence on Vivekananda's moral principles. In his work *Schopenhauer and Hindu Ethics*, Hacker scrutinized the hermeneutical weaknesses in Schopenhauer's interpretation of *tat tvam asi* and examined its implications for contemporary Hinduism, particularly what he termed "neo-Hinduism". More recently, scholars, like Malhotra (2014), Green (2016) and Maharaj (2020), have pointed out the methodological boundaries and epistemic flaws in Hacker's interpretations. They argue that Hacker's scientific approach, particularly his philological research, could impose limitations that undermine the legitimacy of ideas from other cultural traditions, such as Vivekananda's philosophy. In this article, our aim is not to critique the theoretical or methodological weaknesses of Hacker's theory or the concept of "neo-Hinduism." Instead, we argue for Schopenhauer's and Vivekananda's creative and interpretative capabilities. Despite their different philosophical underpinnings and temporal contexts, both managed to imbue *tat tvam asi* with a new significance. This reinterpretation impacted contemporary Hindu morality and, as far as we can ascertain, the political struggles for India's independence. At the end of our investigation, we will evaluate how much Schopenhauer's interpretation of *tat tvam asi* might have impacted Vivekananda, even though Schopenhauer's ethics lacked a crucial element for this purpose - a prescriptive nature. To achieve this, we must demonstrate the extent to which Schopenhauer's interpretation of *tat tvam asi* - understood as the recognition of the metaphysical identity of all beings - permits forms of engagement that do not rely on prescriptiveness. Moreover, we will analyze how Schopenhauer's ethics transcends mere resignation and social immobility.

1 VIVEKANANDA AND MORAL REINTERPRETATION

Vivekananda, as a leading intellectual, played a foundational role in shaping modern India. His vigorous engagement in social issues was pivotal for India's independence in 1947 and the subsequent drafting of its constitution, which formally abolished caste

discrimination. Through his steadfast dedication to revitalizing Hinduism, Vivekananda offered a fresh perspective on Hindu morality. Modern India's formation, therefore, owes not only to political struggles, but also to essential philosophical principles aimed at uniting the Hindu tradition and its people. Vivekananda's central mission was his fellow Indians' moral and social upliftment, underlining his belief that spiritual reform was a necessary precursor to meaningful social change. Unlike reformers who solely blamed religion - especially regarding caste as merely a religious issue - the Indian thinker argued against the "destruction" of religion, advocating instead for its practical and theoretical adaptation⁴. In his efforts to rejuvenate Hinduism, he revisited tradition, drew insights from Hindu scriptures to address contemporary challenges and engaged in dialogue with the West, integrating elements of European and Christian culture and thought into his philosophical framework

During his travels in the United States, Europe and India from 1893 to 1900, Vivekananda delivered a vast collection of speeches and lectures, which were later compiled by his followers as his *Complete Works*. An analysis of these writings reveals the Indian thinker's persistent quest, starting from his arrival in the United States in 1893, for theoretical foundations that could justify and uphold Indian social reform⁵. His primary goal was to find, within the texts of tradition, the necessary support to underpin morality and, thus, the great mahāvākya, *tat tvam asi* was used for this purpose. *Tat tvam asi* is one of the great sayings (*mahāvākyas* – *mahā* (great), *vākyas* – sentences), within which all the Vedas are contained. The *tat* (that) refers to the one reality, the pure spiritual Brahman. The *tvam* (thou) is the individual soul. And *asi* is the conjugation of the verb "to be" (*art*). In the famous sacred text, the *Chāndogyaopaniṣad*, *tat tvam asi* acts as a call or an exclamation⁶. When properly heard, it promotes awakening from sleep, an awakening to the state where the one is solely Brahman.

⁴ The fear of declining morality, amid the waning of religion and the rise of atheism, led Vivekananda to seek in Vedānta the foundation for religious belief in the modern world. According to him, "The salvation of Europe depends on a rationalistic religion, and Advaita – the non-duality, the Oneness, the idea of the Impersonal God – is the only religion that can have any hold on any intellectual people" (Vivekananda, 2012b, p. 131). This belief was shared by the renowned indologist Max Müller. According to Green (2016), both recognized that, in traditional Advaita, the material world and actions within it do not possess inherent value, as the highest teachings are aimed at liberation (*mokṣa*) from cycles of rebirth (*saṃsāra*), achieved through the recognition that the identity of the individual self is not different from the higher self (*Brahman*).

⁵ In his letters to Alasinga, during his stay in the United States and his travels to Europe, Vivekananda's proactive attitude, towards strengthening his ideals and revitalizing Hinduism, becomes evident. In the letter dated February 17, 1896, Vivekananda (2012d, p. 163) writes about the "work of his life": "The dry, abstract Advaita must become living – poetic – in everyday life; out of hopelessly intricate mythology must come concrete moral forms; and out of bewildering Yogi-ism must come the most scientific and practical psychology – and all this must be put in a form so that a child may grasp it. That is my life's work".

⁶ This text refers to Uddalaka's teachings to his son Śvetaketu about the being (*sat*). The teaching of *sat* requires a change in consciousness, which is why Uddalaka has his son teach himself, consciously including himself in the substance of the universal one. Hence, he evokes nine times: "Thou art That".

However, scholars, like Paul Hacker (1995), argue that, in the Hindu tradition, this formula lacks any inherent moral connotation. Hacker asserts that the moralization of *tat tvam asi* was a result of an erroneous interpretation initially put forth by Schopenhauer, further disseminated by his disciple Paul Deussen and, later, adopted by Vivekananda. According to Hacker, Vivekananda used Schopenhauer's interpretation of *tat tvam asi* to introduce typically Western moral aspects — such as compassion and altruistic action — into Hindu ethics, which were previously not traditionally emphasized. Hacker suggests that Vivekananda's exposure to Schopenhauerian thought through Deussen was pivotal in reshaping Hindu morality. Prior to this encounter, occurring in September 1896, he argues that Vivekananda's writings did not mention *tat tvam asi*, which Hacker critiques as a “pseudo-Vedantic” ethical framework⁷.

Upon examining Vivekananda's writings, as underscored by Green (2016), a flaw in Hacker's investigation becomes apparent. Vivekananda does use the formula *tat tvam asi*, in his lecture *The Spirit and Influence of Vedanta*, in March 1896, six months before his personal meeting with Deussen⁸. However, it is crucial to note that, even before this lecture, Vivekananda was already acquainted with Schopenhauer's philosophy and had expressed criticisms of it. In his lecture *The Absolute and Manifestation*, delivered in London in 1896, Vivekananda argues that Schopenhauer's major error was equating *will* with the *thing in itself*. For Vivekananda, “the Absolute”, a term through which he understood Schopenhauer's concept of the *thing-in-itself*, cannot be equated with *will*. He argued that *will* remains a phenomenon, subject to time, space, causality and within the realm of consciousness.

Vivekananda's critical stance towards Schopenhauer's interpretation, as noted by Maharaj (2017, p. 1205), makes him “one of the first commentators to question the adequacy of Schopenhauer's understanding of Vedānta”. Unlike Deussen⁹, who focused on

⁷ Malhotra (2014) and Maharaj (2020) assert that Vivekananda's ethics are not influenced by Western values, but are deeply rooted in the Vedānta tradition. According to Malhotra, Vivekananda's ethics are aligned with Hindu tradition and are based on the concept of our inseparability from Brahman, which inspires love and care for others. Maharaj adds that Vivekananda's ethical conclusions are grounded not in Western values, but in his revered guru's teachings, Sri Ramakrishna.

⁸ After visiting Deussen, Vivekananda wrote an article, praising the German scholar as one of the foremost orientalist of his time. He commended Deussen not only for his insightful exegesis of the *Upaniṣads*, but also for his boldness in critiquing perceived flaws in Indian thought. Four years prior to their meeting, Deussen had delivered a lecture in India, echoing Schopenhauer by suggesting that the principal shortcoming of Vedānta was its failure to recognize *tat tvam asi* as the basis for pure morality. Vivekananda likely became aware of Deussen's lecture and its ethical considerations before their encounter in September 1896, potentially influencing Vivekananda's use of the phrase *tat tvam asi* in his own lecture, *The Spirit and Influence of Vedanta*, delivered in March 1896.

⁹ In addition to presenting in his lecture on February 25, 1893, titled *On Vedanta Philosophy*, the formula *tat tvam asi* as the foundation of ethics, similar to Schopenhauer, Deussen acknowledges, in his book *Allgemeine Geschichte der Philosophie*, that such a formula did not originally underpin Hindu morality. He attributes one of the fundamental errors of the Vedānta system to the purely spiritual nature of the doctrine of universal Ātman. For more on this, refer to Hacker's text *Schopenhauer and Hindu Ethics*.

highlighting the similarities between both theories, Vivekananda disagrees with the notion that Schopenhauer provided the rational clarity necessary to unravel the mysteries of the Hindu tradition. For Vivekananda, these mysteries could only be comprehended through Advaita Vedānta. It is within the framework of Vedānta philosophy that Vivekananda firmly grounds the moral connotation of *tat tvam asi*.

In lectures and courses delivered across the United States and Europe, later compiled into the work *Jñāna Yoga*, Vivekananda explores various aspects of Vedānta and ties them to distinct moral concepts derived from diverse interpretations of *tat tvam asi*. He views this great *mahāvākya* as the very identity of Vedānta and the goal of all Hinduism, emphasizing that, while present in all schools, only Advaita has elucidated it with necessary clarity, thereby uncovering the basis of morality. Vivekananda argues that dualistic schools have failed to grasp the true meaning of the expression *tat tvam asi* by conceiving a personal God whose nature (*tat*) is distinct from human nature (*tvam*). Furthermore, these dualistic schools have also interpreted the Veil of Māyā as mere illusion. According to him, these misunderstandings have hindered the attribution of value to moral action and, consequently, have prevented the necessary social engagement for modern India's social reform.

When attributing to God (*tat*) a nature entirely distinct and separate from the humans' one (*tvam*), the dualistic interpretation formulates a polarized moral doctrine. In this perspective, goodness is ascribed to God, while human actions are associated with evil: "Man alone, therefore, according to this theory, is responsible. God is not to blame. He, the eternally merciful Father, is not to blame at all" (Vivekananda, 2012b, p. 226). In the dualistic conception, evil is perceived as inherent in the human realm, distinct from the divine realm where God resides. Attaining goodness necessitates transcending this worldly existence, achievable through salvation. Salvation in this context liberates individuals from the cycle of death and rebirth, granting entry into a realm characterized by goodness and happiness. This journey typically entails renunciation and detachment from worldly concerns.

Unlike the dualistic schools, Advaita considers only one infinite existence, known by various names, such as the Absolute, Brahman, or God. According to this perspective, this infinite existence manifests as the universe when viewed through the lenses of time, space and causality. Contrary to other schools that argue for opposing natures in the Absolute and the universe, Vivekananda's Advaita conception does not uphold such dualism, where one represents good and the other evil. Instead, good and evil are perceived as varying degrees of the same underlying nature, devoid of intrinsic duality. They are seen as reflections of the Absolute, with higher degrees considered good and lower ones understood as evil. This spectrum of degrees is influenced by one's proximity to or distance from the perception of the Absolute, affected by the concealment caused by the Veil of Māyā.

In the lecture *The Vedanta Philosophy*, delivered at Harvard University in March 1896, Vivekananda (2012a, p. 360) presents the moral implications of Advaita philosophy:

According to the Advaita philosophy, then, this differentiation of matter, these phenomena, are, as it were, for a time, hiding the real nature of man; but the latter really has not been changed at all. In the lowest worm, as well as in the highest human being, the same divine nature is present. The worm form is the lower form in which the divinity has been more overshadowed by Maya; that is the highest form in which it has been least overshadowed. Behind everything the same divinity is existing, and out of this comes the basis of morality. Do not injure another. Love everyone as your own self, because the whole universe is one. In injuring another, I am injuring myself; in loving another, I am loving myself. From this also springs that principle of Advaita morality which has been summed up in one word — self-abnegation. The Advaitist says, this little personalised self is the cause of all my misery. This individualised self, which makes me different from all other beings, brings hatred and jealousy and misery, struggle and all other evils. And when this idea has been got rid of, all struggle will cease, all misery vanish. So this is to be given up. We must always hold ourselves ready, even to give up our lives for the lowest beings. When a man has become ready even to give up his life for a little insect, he has reached the perfection which the Advaitist wants to attain; and at that moment when he has become thus ready, the veil of ignorance falls away from him, and he will feel his own nature. Even in this life, he will feel that he is one with the universe.

Self-abnegation is presented as the fundamental principle of morality, derived from the awareness that “[...] behind everything the same divinity is existing” (Vivekananda, 2012a, p. 360). Vivekananda underscores that Māyā serves as the barrier to direct perception of the Absolute, yet he emphasizes that it should not be narrowly labelled as a mere illusion. In lectures, such as *Maya and Illusion*, *Maya and the Evolution of the Conception of God*, and *Maya and Freedom*, delivered in London in 1896, Vivekananda argues that Māyā simply denotes the way in which the universe exists. The misinterpretation of Māyā as illusion perpetuates stereotypes about Hinduism, portraying it as fixated on the supernatural, socially irresponsible and fatalistic. Malhotra (2014) further critiques the Western understanding of *mithyā* as an illusion, noting that this misinterpretation contributes to the misconception that Hindu philosophy views the world as fundamentally unreal. According to Malhotra, *mithyā* refers to something that is real, but contingent, existing in dependence upon something else — in this case, Brahman.

In *Vedanta as a Factor in Civilisation*, Vivekananda connects the advancement of Vedānta to the discovery of its ethical basis. According to him, the conception of God directly influences morality. Understanding that God is not merely personal or separate from us, unlike the view held by dualists, enabled a fresh perspective on ethics. The rejection of a

dualistic worldview legitimizes moral action, portraying it not merely as a consequence of salvation, but as the pathway to it¹⁰.

2 TAT TVAM ASI AS A MORAL IMPERATIVE

In the lectures and courses delivered upon his return to India, Vivekananda elevated *tat tvam asi* to a moral imperative, stressing its prescriptive nature to propel spiritual and social reform in his homeland. In a speech in Lahore on November 12, 1897, titled *The Vedanta*, he underscored the pressing need for a national mobilization rooted in a morality centered on love and service to others. Vivekananda proclaimed that the truth embodied in *tat tvam asi* must be steadfastly practiced to fortify the entire nation. Thus, he placed his hopes for India's future on the practical application of *tat tvam asi*, driven by compassion and love, expressed through selfless service. He emphasized that this service should transcend even spirituality, stressing that the focus should be "[...] bringing down of the Advaita into the material world. First bread and then religion. We stuff them too much with religion, when the poor fellows have been starving. No dogmas will satisfy the cravings of hunger" (Vivekananda, 2012c, p. 517).

It is important to note, therefore, a significant development for our analysis: Vivekananda departs from traditional quietism, presenting a modern perspective on Vedanta soteriology. The typical quietism of dualistic Vedanta should be set aside for India to strengthen itself as a nation. The monk's conviction was so strong that he would make exhortations, such as: "[...] the time has come when this Advaita is to be worked out practically" (Vivekananda, 2012c, p. 512). To this end, the renunciation of the self should not be understood as this world's renunciation, but rather as renunciation of personal interests. The labor should be for the nation's benefit, with the call for the people to serve the country:

Therefore, young men of Lahore, raise once more that mighty banner of Advaita, for on no other ground can you have that wonderful love until you see that the same Lord is present everywhere. Unfurl that banner of love! "Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached". Arise, arise once more, for nothing can be done without renunciation. If you want to help others, your little self must go (Vivekananda, 2012c, p. 515).

¹⁰ According to Vivekananda (2012a, p. 379), "[w]hile the Vedanta philosophers solved that question, they at the same time discovered the basis of ethics. Though all religions have taught ethical precepts, such as, 'Do not kill, do not injure; love your neighbour as yourself,' etc., yet none of these has given the reason. Why should I not injure my neighbour? To this question there was no satisfactory or conclusive answer forthcoming, until it was evolved by the metaphysical speculations of the Hindus who could not rest satisfied with mere dogmas. So the Hindus say that this Atman is absolute and all-pervading, therefore infinite. There cannot be two infinities, for they would limit each other and would become finite. Also each individual soul is a part and parcel of that Universal Soul, which is infinite. Therefore in injuring his neighbour, the individual actually injures himself. This is the basic metaphysical truth underlying all ethical codes".

In this lecture, Vivekananda finally achieves what he aspired since his arrival in America: to propose a social reform through a spiritual reform. At the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1893, he stated that “[...] the crying evil in the East is not religion — they have religion enough — but it is bread that the suffering millions of burning India cry out for with parched throats” (Vivekananda, 2012a, p. 32). Thus, as we observe, he delivers incisive criticisms of the practice of offering religion to a starving population, deeming it an insult. He also questions the religious laws and practices that, in his view, perpetuated misery in India.

Clearly, Vivekananda was committed to national social reform and, as Hacker pointed out, the new Hindu morality was associated with nationalism. However, Hacker failed to recognize — while also failing to situate Vivekananda's encounter with Schopenhauer's thought — the innovative nature of the Indian leader's thinking. Vivekananda not only establishes the Sanskrit formula as the foundation of morality, as proposed by Schopenhauer, but also uses it as a basis for social engagement. The prescriptive nature of *tat tvam asi*, however, is a unique interpretation to the Indian thinker, which Schopenhauer would hardly endorse. In the German thinker's view, such a prescriptive nature would only be possible by inverting the power of will and reason, establishing that will would be at the service of reason and not the other way around. Thus, in general terms, Vivekananda would indeed have had to deny that the will is the essence, assuming it to be subordinate to consciousness.

As a result, and based on Vedānta philosophy, Vivekananda transformed *tat tvam asi* into a moral imperative with social implications. Considering this, had Schopenhauer known of such developments, it is likely he would have criticized Vivekananda's morality, just as he rejected Kantian morality, viewing it as disguised theological morality. Schopenhauer would position himself critically towards Vivekananda's moral considerations for the same reasons he rejected Kant's ethics, notably because the notion of duty has “[...] its origin in theological morals, and remains a foreigner in philosophical morals until it has produced a valid certification from the essence of human nature or that of the objective world” (Schopenhauer, 2009, p. 127).

The establishment of the will, as an unteachable individual essence, prevents the prescriptive nature of morality. *Velle non discitur* (will cannot be learned), insisted Schopenhauer in harmony with Seneca. The crucial primacy of the will and desire over reason, over self-consciousness (*Selbstbewusstsein*, as recorded in Chapter 19 of Volume II of his *magnum opus*)¹¹, and over actions, thus prevents any incursions by rationality that determine the moral value of actions. Noteworthy here is that the ethics could support and establish the basis of

¹¹ In Chapter 19 of Volume II of *The World*, Schopenhauer listed twelve arguments (*Argumenten*) or proofs (*Belege*) of what he considered his main dogma (*Hauptdogma*), the primacy of the will over self-consciousness. It can be said that these 12 proofs, published in the Supplements of 1844, serve as a kind of synthesis of the 106 found in various notebooks of his Posthumous Manuscripts, enumerated with some interruptions over approximately fifteen years, from 1826 to 1840. It

morality, yet it cannot make it act. And it is for these very reasons that we question whether Vivekananda's interpretation, which socially engages with *tat tvam asi*, has involved a clear distortion — or was it an intentional alteration? — of Schopenhauer's metaphysics of ethics.

3 NUANCES OF SCHOPENHAUERIAN COMPASSION

The concept of compassion in Schopenhauer's work presents nuances that prevent us from assuming it as a simple mystery that abruptly arises when an individual rush to the aid of someone in danger or suffering; and, thus, that it would be merely an impulse (as are also egoism and malice) that, without being prescribed, could also not be assumed as a planned or practiced action. There are several degrees of *Mitleid* (compassion) which, although they do not establish a *prescriptive ethics*, nevertheless can indicate a *suggestive ethics*. Without disregarding the metaphysical assumptions mentioned above, it is still possible to propose motives for this unteachable volitional character. This understanding could indeed support a form of Schopenhauerian ethical engagement, rooted in his interpretation of *tat tvam asi*. The use of this formula and the inferences drawn from it constitute the very definition of compassion proposed by the philosopher.

The most developed definition of compassion, according to Schopenhauer, can be found as such:

[...] wholly immediate *sympathy* (*Theilnahme*, also 'participation'), independent of any other consideration, in the first place towards another's *suffering*, and hence towards the prevention or removal of this suffering [...]. This compassion alone is the real basis of all *free* justice and all *genuine* loving kindness. [...] As soon as this compassion is alert, the well-being and woe of the other is immediately close to my heart, in just the same way, though not always to the same degree, as only my own is otherwise: therefore the distinction between him and me is now no longer an absolute one. This process is certainly worthy of astonishment, and indeed *mysterious*. It is in truth the *great mystery of ethics* [...] (Schopenhauer, 2009, p. 200-201, emp. a.).

Later on, we read an insistence on the mysterious character of compassion, with which we note that compassionate action is mysterious in its purity: "Every wholly *pure good* deed, every fully and *truly disinterested* help that has, as such, the distress of others exclusively as its motive, is really a *mysterious* action, a *practical mysticism*" (Schopenhauer, 2009, p. 255, emp. a.)¹². It is not insignificant that Schopenhauer defined such compassion as both a process and a mystery at the same time. As a mystery, it denotes identification assumed to be was primarily through his insistence on this primacy of the will that the philosopher achieved a highly impactful reversal in Western philosophy and culture, particularly in distinguishing between the realms of the rational and the irrational.

¹² In *Parerga and Paralipomena*, we read in the same vein: "[...] every entirely disinterested benefit is a *mysterious action*, a *mysterium*: and so to give an account thereof, men have had to resort to all kinds of fictions" (Schopenhauer, 2015, p. 219, emp. a.).

unfathomable by reason; as a process, it seems to be explainable in its dynamics of emergence and long-term application in different degrees and situations. As a mystery, it is basically confined to an individual scope, as an individual's impulse; as a process, it can denote an expansion with broad reach, which makes it a collective action – especially when it occurs in terms of charity, justice and other virtues, not necessarily just these “cardinal” ones.

The interpretation recently proposed (Debona, 2020, 2022) to read Schopenhauer's theory of action from a differentiation between great and small ethics¹³, in addition to combating the common view that reduces such ethics to a matter of resignation through disinterested compassion and the denial of the will, aims to value the less or not at all instantaneous aspects of compassion (though not only that). We understand that this differentiation can be pertinent to the question that drives us here. To this end, we need to consider the adjective “great” for this ethics due to basically two characteristics: it would be a mysterious phenomenon in terms of compassion and rare in terms of asceticism.

For the first characteristic, the elementary foundation that leads Schopenhauer to understand the only action of moral value in the sense of a “great event”, the “great mystery of ethics” (Schopenhauer, 2009, p. 201), is the observation and description of what generally predominates in the individuals' actions, that is, egoism and malice to the detriment of compassion, the fundamental reason for the philosopher's distrust of human character in general. Understood from this premise, compassion presents itself as a phenomenon that, even though it is an everyday occurrence, would be in complete contradiction to what is expected in advance from individual wills, which are naturally insatiable and, ultimately, eager to conquer materials for their assertions at the expense of denying the others' will. The “beginning of mystic” would concretely occur in this unusual contradiction in episodes where, for example, the torturer suddenly feels compassion for the tortured, a moment when it is as if they become the same person. This immediate and selfless recognition of the self in the others' suffering, repeatedly exemplified by the German thinker with accounts of hunters of non-human animals, would abruptly and practically attest to the unity of the universal will and the misperception of individual difference.

Regarding the second characteristic mentioned, a significant ethics could be recognized, in the horizon of quietism and asceticism, as elements of the theory of the denial of will, due to one of the components of a characterology that distinguishes “great men”, fundamentally identified as “great characters” who negate the will, from “small men”, who affirm the will. The first group, beyond being the “great men” identified in the figure of genius and considered deniers of the will in the realm of the metaphysics of beauty, would

¹³ Similarly, though not using the same terms or arguments, Malter (1991) proposed the differentiation between “Ethics I” and “Ethics II”; Aramayo (2011) asserted the existence of a “provisional morality” in Schopenhauer, which could somehow resemble the idea of a small ethics; and Kossler (1999, 2020) defended the differentiation between “empirical ethics” and “metaphysical ethics” of compassion.

be illustrated by the figure of the “overcoming of the world” (*Weltüberwinder*). When this “overcoming” emerges, its ethical significance is precisely classified by the philosopher as “[...] the *greatest*, most important and most significant appearance that the world can show” (Schopenhauer, 2010, p. 412, emp. a.). The rare ability to achieve this transformation would primarily belong to saints, generally considered as “great souls” (*großen Seelen*) (Schopenhauer, 2010, p. 411-412). These “superior souls” indeed represent a great ethics due to the rarity and radical nature of resignation, regardless of whether the denial of will arose after a lifetime of engagement in combating the world’s sufferings.

Restricting ourselves to the characteristic of mystery and immediacy of compassion, we understand that, at least to some extent, Schopenhauer’s interpretation of *tat tvam asi* would help delineate this great ethics. This is because it was precisely the implicit mysterious nature in the Vedic maxim that justified its adoption by the philosopher of will. The reception was clearly expressed by the thinker in the following terms:

The readers of my *Ethics* know that with me the foundation of morality rests ultimately on the truth that has its expression in the Veda and Vedanta in the established mystical formula *tat tvam asi* (this are thou) which is stated with reference to every living thing, whether man or animal, and is then called the *Mahavakya* or *Great Word* (Schopenhauer, 2015, p. 219, emp. a.; see also Schopenhauer, 2009, p. 254).

In other words, for Schopenhauer, *tat tvam asi* would somehow refer to something “grandiose”, including through the valorization of the adjective “great”. This valorization, moreover, can be noted not only in the interpretation of the “great word” of Hinduism, but also in the context of the foundation of the denial of will, where the philosopher, in acknowledging the rarity of asceticism as a (even more) great event, interprets what interests him most about Christianity as two *great* truths (Schopenhauer, 2010): the dogmas of original sin and the grace of redemption.

However, alongside his great and titanic ethics, Schopenhauer would also articulate a small ethics. This would be defined insofar as the character of the ethical agent is not constantly beholden to random motives, but acts in a mediated manner — that is, “mediated” by the expedients of intellectual education, life experiences, including debates, deliberations and social interactions. There would not only be a compassionate subject’s individual sphere facing another (unique) subject, who presents themselves immediately as a sufferer, or of an ascetic subject whose resignation is occasioned by the vision of the “whole of life”, where the world’s general suffering — therefore vague and abstract — allows for quietude (absence of motive). The horizon of non-immediate and non-quietist or non-resigned action, implicit mainly in Schopenhauer’s *On the Basis of Morals*, because it fundamentally deals with a non-prescriptive relationship between character and motives of action, can be sustained in the following sense: Schopenhauer’s theory of character does not categorize anyone as *wholly*

compassionate, *wholly* egoistic, or *wholly* malicious, but rather considers that each individual possesses a certain portion of the three *Grundtriebfedern* (egoism, malice and compassion). While intellect is not paramount, it remains crucial as the tool that directs action. While intellect is not essential, it remains pivotal as the tool guiding action. According to a Schopenhauerian metaphor, if one cannot dissuade cats from their inclination towards rats, one can still “[...] show the egoist that by giving up small advantages he will attain greater ones; or the malicious man that causing someone else’s sufferings will bring greater sufferings upon himself” (Schopenhauer, 2009, p. 240). It is in this sense that Schopenhauer’s ethics of compassion would not only be descriptive, but also suggestive. It could suggest various motives to any characterological tendencies.

The great and the small ethics are not conflicting because one occurs immediately, as a mysterious identification, while the other occurs mediately, as an unfolding through reflections and debates. On the contrary, they complement each other due to the following dynamics in Schopenhauer’s theory of action: on one hand, the subject who acts compassionately (a) achieves a comprehensive understanding of life as a whole, in terms of *tat tvam asi*; on the other hand, they can (b) “reserve” this knowledge in the form of an abstract principle, applying it with the help of a memory of compassionate feelings whenever motives and occasions demand it. It was precisely to defend this reasoning that Schopenhauer used the medical metaphor of bile and liver to suggest the idea of an intellectual or rational reservoir (*das Behältnis, das Réservoir*) that preserves the source of morality¹⁴.

The thesis can also be understood in the following sense, as exemplified by the philosopher himself: “[...] one person helps another and runs to his assistance [...], after *long deliberation* and *difficult debate*, the great-hearted British nation gives up 20 million pounds sterling to buy the negro slaves in its colonies their freedom” (Schopenhauer, 2009, p. 218, emp. a.). If there is a “mysterious process” at the foundation of compassion, there seems to be little mystery in this latter case. “Long deliberation” and “difficult debate” do not align with any immediate and abrupt action, but with deliberative processes and principles (Janaway, 2009, p. xxxiv). In line with this are the various condemnations of social injustices provided by Schopenhauer in Volume II of *The World* and also in Volume II of *Parerga and Paralipomena*, perhaps even more relevant to our general question, as they address themes of misery, exploitation and social cruelties — largely similar to India’s social reality in which Vivekananda would have engaged with *tat tvam asi*. Indeed, the condemnations of millions of black slaves’ misery, forced and gruelling labor, extreme social inequality, rural exodus,

14 The metaphor is elaborated as follows: “For although *principles* and *abstract cognition* in general are in no way the original source or prime basis of all morals, yet they are indispensable for a moral life, as the container, the reservoir [*das Behältnis, das Réservoir*] in which the disposition that has risen out of the source of all morality, which does not flow at every moment, is stored so that it can flow down through supply channels when a case for application comes. Thus in the moral sphere things are as they are in the physiological, where e.g. the gall bladder is necessary as *reservoir for the products of the liver* [*die Gallenblase, als Réservoir des Produkts der Leber, nothwendig ist*] [...]” (Schopenhauer, 2009, p. 205-206, emp. a.).

etc. (cf. Schopenhauer, 2018, §46; Schopenhauer, 2015, §125) contrast starkly with the quietist reading that suggests the will negates itself spontaneously and that suffering leads to redemption, yielding to resignation and social immobility.

Therefore, although mysterious, Schopenhauer's compassion is not merely abrupt and episodic assistance. Realized through the virtues of justice and charity, it also unfolds as engagement or praxis of active compassion, in various forms and without being prescriptive, such as solidarity and the pursuit of combating injustices¹⁵. This is a typical interpretation of what is now known as "Schopenhauerian left" (Lütkehaus, 2007; Durante, 2018), arguing that "Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion cannot be reduced to a faltering charity that always arrives late and only knows how to alleviate" (Lütkehaus, 2007, p. 27). The social - and even political - dimensions of compassion are possible to the extent that it, as "[...] the source of all morality" (*Quelle aller Moralität*, Schopenhauer, 2009, p. 206), is understood as a *réservoir* to be used in various works. With it, one can simply give alms to the hungry, but also "[...] establish an NGO for refugees or animal protection, create a project, or engage politically to, for example, assist the government in combating hunger and preventing forced migrations [...], combat various types of social suffering such as poverty, labor exploitation [...]" (Debona, 2022, p. 73). Schopenhauer himself seems to have encouraged this type of engagement when, in a dialogue with his testamentary executor Julius Frauenstädt, to counter Frauenstädt's alleged impertinence in combating suffering on the grounds of not hindering the spontaneous negation of will, he affirmed: "Notwithstanding all attenuations and placations of suffering, there will ever be enough misery in the world to lead to resignation" (Schopenhauer, 1971, p. 114, transl. a.). As we can see, there is a clear possibility of a "Schopenhauerian engaging", as the philosopher himself admits, in various forms of combating suffering and social oppression. How this engagement may occur is an open question.

CONCLUSION

Nevertheless, was it this type of reading that led Vivekananda, via Schopenhauer, to socially and politically engage the *tat tvam asi*? Or better yet: did Vivekananda consider these nuances of Schopenhauer's theory of action to supposedly engage compassion through his interpretation of *tat tvam asi*? According to what we have argued, possibly not, because, although the Indian thinker was a reader of Schopenhauer, at no point did his work entail a

¹⁵ In another passage from *On the Basis of Morals*, we read the following: "On closer consideration of the process of compassion [...] are *two clearly separated degrees* to which the suffering of another can immediately become my motive, i.e. determine me to acting or refraining. It can do so, first, only to the degree that, working against egoistic or malicious motives, it *prevents me* from causing a suffering to the other, in other words bringing about what is not yet the case, and myself becoming the cause of someone's else pains; then it can do so to the higher degree where compassion, having *positive effect*, impels me to *active help* [...]. It is the natural, unmistakable, sharp line between the negative and the positive, between *non-harming and helping*" (Schopenhauer, 2009, p. 203-204, emp. a.).

detailed investigation of Schopenhauer's concept of compassion as *tat tvam asi* and its specific details. His fundamental concern was not to be a researcher of Schopenhauer, much less to be a meticulous reader of the "Buddha of Frankfurt's" work. Vivekananda's goal was rather to re-signify and provide a practical and applicable status to the morality of his time, with a greater purpose of India's spiritual and political reform. Vivekananda, far from confessing the influence — which, if it had indeed occurred, we could call a "two-way" influence between India and the West — of Schopenhauer's interpretation of *tat tvam asi*, asserts that the discovery of the basis of ethics occurs through the progress of Vedānta itself. After all, for him, "Advaita and Advaita alone explains morality" (Vivekananda, 2012c, p. 508). The non-dualism and the non-illusory nature of Māyā, inherent in Advaita Vedānta, would have allowed the understanding of the basis of morality, a basis that he himself dared to transform into an imperative to engage and mobilize the Hindu people, making the Sanskrit formula, the great *Mahavakya*, a "mighty banner of Advaita" (Vivekananda, 2012c, p. 515). Such an imperative, as seen, was not or could not have been postulated by Schopenhauer, for whom the defense of a prescriptive character of ethics is unsustainable. It would have indeed been a flagrant distortion of Schopenhauerian morality by Vivekananda, despite his intellectual alignment with the Orientalist and founder of the Schopenhauer-Gesellschaft, Paul Deussen, to transform a descriptive ethics into a commandment of *tat tvam asi* as compassion.

However, this by no means implies that it is impossible to socially and politically engage with Schopenhauerian ethics. On the contrary. Our investigation outlines to what extent and with which elements Vivekananda's interpretation might have been shaped if he had intended to apply Schopenhauer's Westernized interpretation of the 'great Vedic word' to India's socio-political-religious context. Finally, we argue that, rather than the generic elements of Schopenhauer's metaphysics of will, as interpreted by Vivekananda and possibly adapted for specific practical and political purposes, they are the most specific elements that could have been employed to engage with *tat tvam asi*. These most specific elements, profiling the so-called small ethics, do not suppose a prescriptive character of morality to function as the basis of his social engagement; nor are they elements that, in general, make up the German thinker's proper metaphysical apparatus, with its characteristic, in the ethical plane, of the disinterested identification of a single individual with another who suffers. Instead, they configure the most empirical apparatuses and, in this case, precisely because of that, broader and more directable dimensions of his theory of action, of dimensions of the ethics of compassion capable of deliberations, ponderations, projects and debates, including public and political ones.

To the reader willing to escape reductionism, it becomes clear that the aforementioned forms of engagement *from* Schopenhauer's ethics, beyond the mysterious abrupt action inherent in one of the forms of his notion of compassion, can be ensured to the extent that we understand that compassion spontaneously elicited can be stored in a sort

of “intellectual reservoir”, which then preserves the source of morality to be used in the most diverse situations, whether these are mere everyday occasions or large socio-political projects, like Vivekananda’s ones, to reform the India of his time. Here, it is neither about social immobility and resignation, justified in great ethics by the spontaneous and individual denial of the will, nor about their opposite, which would be solidarity and engaged actions, resulting from a prescriptive framework. A suggestive ethics, rooted in the immediate knowledge of all suffering beings’ metaphysical identity, as interpreted by Schopenhauer through *tat tvam asi*, does not need to abandon its origins to manifest in various forms of action, including social and political ones.

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