Does Monism do Ethical Work?
Assessing Hacker's Critique of Vedāntic and Schopenhauerian Ethics

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In 1961, Paul Hacker published an essay for the journal *Saeculum* entitled "Schopenhauer und die Ethik des Hinduismus", in which he sets out to accomplish a two-fold task. Firstly, the essay provides a meticulously recorded genealogy of an idea, an idea he labels the "*tat tvam asi* ethic".[1] This part of Hacker's brilliant piece details how Arthur Schopenhauer crafted a foundation for ethics, an ethics that followed upon his metaphysics of will, by selectively appropriating and interpreting various passages from the *Upaniṣads*, a few Orientalist glosses on their Vedāntic commentaries and the *Bhagavad Gītā* and then passing these inadequately justified interpretations off as if they originated in classical Indian thought. Hacker shows in the meantime how neo-Vedāntic thinkers who came under the influence of the Schopenhauer disciple Paul Deussen, such as Vivekananda, Tilak, Radhakrishnan and Hiriyanna, in their turn accepted, with some meager qualification, Schopenhauer's interpretation of the "*tat tvam asi*" ethic as a genuine doctrine of classical Vedic teaching.[2] Hacker proceeds to the second aim of his essay, which involves first making clear distinctions between Schopenhauer's "monism of will" and Vedānta's "monism of consciousness", but in the end refuting both as viable bases for ethical discourse given the rejection implicit in any formulation of monism of the individuality and relationship that are necessary to make any meaningful ethical judgments.[3] No attempts will be made here to dispute Hacker's historical claims about the nature of Schopenhauer's appropriation nor the reception of Deussen's ideas among the neo-Vedāntins, as Hacker's well-documented essay has made his claims in these areas more or less indisputable.[4] What I wish to undertake in the present essay is an assessment of Hacker's claim that any monistic ethic, and in particular the

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1   Hacker, Paul: Schopenhauer and Hindu Ethics. In: *Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedanta*. Ed. and transl. by Wilhelm Halbfass. Albany: SUNY Press 1995, 273–318.
2   Ibid., 288–305.
3   Ibid., 277–279; 305–309.
4   In his polemics against neo-Vedāntic proponents, Hacker does not seem to give thinkers such as Radhakrishnan and Hiriyanna enough credit for being able to distinguish between Schopenhauerian and traditional Vedāntic conceptions, and I have addressed these problems elsewhere (Berger, Douglas L.: *"The Veil of Māyā": Schopenhauer's System and Early Indian Thought*. Binghamton: Global Academic Publications 2004, 8–9, 24–25.

Schopenhauerian and Vedāntic "*tat tvaṃ asi*" ethic, is as Hacker so claims, a "logical monstrosity", or whether it has, despite his powerful critiques, any bearing on ethical considerations.[5] To state the position I will argue for in this paper briefly at the outset, Hacker's total dismissal of the possibility for the "*tat tvaṃ asi* ethic" to have any ethical relevance is exaggerated, but he and other critics are right to point out that, in the end, monism as a metaphysical doctrine does next to no ethical work. Monism does not provide us with any principles for distinguishing between acts that should be undertaken, what is moral, from acts that should not be undertaken, what is immoral. Such a lacuna, it seems to me, is a serious shortcoming in any philosophical system.

Most of Hacker's critique of the ethical relevance of the "*tat tvaṃ asi* ethic" is directed at modern Neo-Vedāntic formulations, decrying their dependence on nineteenth century European philosophers rather than on traditional Indian textual sources.[6] In the end, he hopes that such errors will be averted in a near future when "Indian thought will soon outlive the memory of the colonial period and the deep wound which is left in the Indian mind" and "find a new orientation."[7] Traditional Advaita monism, the one so brilliantly articulated and defended by Śaṅkarācarya in particular, cannot according to Hacker support ethical claims since it annuls the individuated personhood that is the only legitimate framework for ethical discourse.[8] Hacker quotes at one point approvingly a suggestion of P. T. Raju that only traditional forms of Indian philosophical theism allow for duality and multiplicity of persons and the reality of relationship, and thus only these doctrines can be elaborated on to support ethically meaningful principles.[9] Hacker himself does not for the most part target these criticisms of the "monism of will" he finds in Schopenhauer's system, but it is surely the case that very similar criticisms are made of Schopenhauer's idea that, since one and the same will is the ground of every individual's being, that realization will elicit compassion in ethical agents.[10] Konstantin Kolenda, Patrick Gardiner, John Atwell and Christopher Janaway have all argued in various fashions that such a construal of ethical motivations as is found in Schopenhauer's monism of will requires degrees of "disinterest", "extension of the concept of self" or "intersubjectivity" that compromises the intelligibility of ethical relationship.[11] The brunt

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5 Hacker, 306.
6 Ibid., 279–305.
7 Ibid., 308–309.
8 Ibid., 306.
9 Ibid., 306–307.
10 These arguments can be found most forthrightly articulated in Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation*, I. Transl. by E. F. J. Payne. New York: Dover Publications 1966, 365; 372–373 and *On the Basis of Morality*. Transl. b E. F. J. Payne. Providence: Beghan Books, 1995, 142–147.
11 See Kolenda, Konstantin: Schopenhauer's Ethics: A View from Nowhere. In: *Schopenhauer: New Essays in Honor of his 200th Birthday*. Ed. by Erich von der Luft. Lewiston: Edwin Mellon Press 1988, 247–256, 254–255; Gardiner, Patrick: *Schopenhauer*. Bristol: Theommes Press 1963, 276–

of the critique of the kinds of monism Hacker finds in both Schopenhauer and in Advaita Vedānta is that they demote individuality and relationship to a status of "unreality", subordinating these to a transcendent unity of all things in either will or consciousness, and therefore render ethics ultimately insignificant, or itself "unreal". Consequently, any monism, whether it be that of Schopenhauer or a Westernized neo-Vedānta, that makes pretensions to being ethically meaningful cannot deliver on these pretensions, for they marginalize or undermine any robust notion of personhood and relation that are the very conditions of ethically significant principles.

There are several alternative ways of addressing Hacker's trenchant criticism, each of which may achieve some modest degrees of success. The first strategy of rebutting Hacker's attacks on monism as fundamentally unethical may be strictly exegetical. This strategy could point out that merely labeling the systems of either Schopenhauer or Śaṅkarācarya as pure monisms which reject the significance of individuality and relationship is too simplistic a reduction of their principles. For Schopenhauer's part, what he writes about seeing through "the veil of *māyā*", those Kantian forms of sensibility that constitute individuation, and seeing the other as grounded in the same metaphysical will as I and therefore feeling compassion for him or her, fits into a larger context of his discussions of ethical character and motive. Schopenhauer believed that each individual was the bearer of a Kantian "intelligible character" that made them susceptible to a certain set of motives to act, either egoistic or altruistic in varying degrees.[12] Schopenhauer, not finding it necessary to quibble with the "ethical propositions" or guidelines for conduct of ethical systems, which he opines are pretty much the same everywhere in any event, wants therefore to find the "ethical foundation" of philosophy, or the insight that would give people the most authentic motive to act compassionately rather than egoistically.[13] What he claims, in the relevant passages, so lucidly articulated that one wonders how authors in the secondary literature have so poorly understood them, is that the realization that every person is grounded in the same will cause an agent to make "less of a distinction" between himself and another, and that the boundaries normally taken to be absolute between self and other can be breeched "to a certain extent".[14] Indeed, Schopenhauer takes special pains in *On the Basis of Morality* to prevent the misconception that seeing through the principles of individuation entails that they are no longer there, for we cannot exist, he says, inside another's skin, but

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277; Atwell, John: *Schopenhauer: The Human Character.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1990, 122–123; Janaway, Christopher: *Self and World in Schopenhauer's Philosophy.* Oxford: Clarendon Press 1989, 282–283.

12 *The Word as Will and Representation I*, 287–292; 362–373.

13 *On the Basis of Morality*, 68–69.

14 *The World as Will and Representation I*, 372–373; *On the Basis of Morality*, 143–144.

we can act *as though* our respective individualities were unimportant.[15] That is to say, as long as there is a world, in Schopenhauer's view, it will be both will and representation, and as long as both constitute the world, relationships will always be between individuals who bear some axiologically significant relation to one another precisely because, firstly, they are both will and, secondly, they are both individuals.[16] Compassion then is merely an ethical motive that changes an individual's perspective, it is not some metaphysical force that abolishes all constitutive difference, so to call Schopenhaurian ethics monistic is quite clearly an oversimplification. One could make a similar case with regard to the Advaita of Śaṅkara. Indeed, it would be gross oversimplification of Advaita to represent it as simply a monistic doctrine, since it does not deny the concrete physical reality of the world nor the epistemological and material relations of the self (*ātman*) with the world, but only maintains that this innermost self is not differentiated. *Ātman* is spoken of repeatedly by Śaṅkara as not only an indispensable condition of perceptions,[17] but also as the apprehender and discriminator of different types of perceptions, such as the external or the dream perception.[18] In fact, the all-important principle of *adhyāsa* in Śaṅkara, the idea that our mistaken associations of identity with the physical characteristics of our bodies or the emotional states of our minds derives from a "misplacement" of "mispredication" of empirical concepts on the *ātman*, requires that external reals exist, for if they did not, the "mispredication" would not make sense.[19] For Śaṅkara and other Advaitins after him, the ontological status of the world was not unreal (*asat*), but rather "indeterminable" (*anirvacanīyakhyāti*) in terms of its systematic characterization even though it is apparent (*avabhāsa*) to the senses and cognition. Obviously, it is the concrete existence of the material world that also allows us as individuals (*jiva*) to have bodies, move about and behave as physical and moral

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15 *On the Basis of Morality*, 143–144; 147.

16 I have made these same arguments in a more detailed fashion in Berger, 207–208.

17 "*vijñānaṃ vijñānamityabhyupagacchatā bahyaírtha stambhaḥ kuḍyamityevaṃjatiyakaḥ kasmān-nābhyupagamyata iti vaktyavyaṃ // vijñānamanubhūyata iti cet bhāyoípyarthoínubhūyata eveti yu-katmabhyupagantum //*" *Brahmasūtrbhāsya* II: 2: 28.

18 "*nābhāva upalabheḥ na kalvabhāva bāhyasyāthosyādhyavasātum śakyate // kasmāt upalabheḥ // upalabhyate hi pratipratyayaṃ bahyoírtaḥ stambhaḥ kuḍyaṃ ghataḥ pata iti // na capalab-hyamānasyaiva-bhāva bhavitumarhati //*" *Brahmasūtrbhāsya* II: 2: 28. It is ironic in our present context that these are all arguments Śaṅkara levels against Vijñānavāda Buddhists, who he believes, falsely, to hold a kind of "monism of consciousness" that denies the reality of physical objects.

19 Śaṅkara's major explication of *adhyāsa* can be found in its special commentary that opens the *Brahmasūtrbhāsya*. The translation of *adhyāsa* here as "misplacement" or "mispredication" is found in the late Yadav. B. S. "Mispredicated Identity and Postcolonial Discourse". *Sophia* 39 no. 1 (March-April 2000), 38–131; 84. It was Daya Krishna who first noted, quite correctly, that the notion of *adhyāsa* as Śaṅkara articulated it required not a non-dualist but a thoroughly dualist ontology, one very close to that of Sāmkhya (see his *Indian Philosophy: A Counter-Perspective*. Delhi: Motilal-Banarasidass 1994, 156-163).

agents (*katṛ*). But this realm of empirical reality is not the one in which the Advaitin is interested, it is not the paramount truth (*paramārtasatya*) but rather only consists of truth relevant to "common business" or "common law" (*vyavahāra*). Now, just as the *ātman* should not be confused with the *jiva*, according to Śaṅkara, so the paramount truth of ultimate selfhood cannot be intermixed or have any intelligible implications for day-to-day life and all its transactions and ethical relations.[20] This means that ethical relations that have been defined and mandated by the tradition of *dharma* retain all of their force with respect to the social world; the transcendental unity of *ātman* has for Śaṅkara no ethical implications in the sense that it does not affect one's social responsibilities at all if one is still participating in society. If this analysis of Schopenhauer's and Śaṅkara's metaphysics is accurate, then Hacker's characterization of their philosophies as variant forms of "monism" that are both ethically irrelevant is false from the start. It would be better to understand Schopenhauer and Advaita Vedānta as "double-aspect essentialisms".[21] That is to say that, for both Schopenhauer and Śaṅkara, while the ultimate reality lies beyond description and thus differentiation, making it an essential unity, the world is known in two distinct ways, as will and representation for Schopenhauer and as *paramārthasatya* and *vyavahārasatya* for Śaṅkara. Consequently, the mere assertion that the world has a unitary essence does not marginalize the importance of ethical relationship, but rather leaves its importance intact in both Schopenhauer's world as representation and in Śaṅkara's world as common law. From this angle, Hacker's attack on the alleged "logical monstrosity" of Schopenhauer's and Śaṅkara's "monistic ethics", since it is mistaken about the supposed "monism" of both, loses its force.

Perhaps, however, this strictly exegetical or apologetic approach does not give Hacker's critique of Schopenhauer and Vedānta the full weight it deserves. After all, Hacker's critique does not merely lie on the level of accurate textual interpretation, but on the level also of philosophical truth. We might wonder with Hacker whether or not either Schopenhauer or Śaṅkara actually provide is with ethical principles that can withstand critical appraisal. There are in fact good reasons to believe that they do not. In the case of Schopenhauer, we have in many respects a quite poignant case made that the unity of will, once it is seen as lying at the root of all beings, will evoke compassion for all other beings from the person who gains the insight, and will in turn foster selfless service to others.[22] There are at least two serious problems with this view however. The first is

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20 See the *Taittrīyopaniṣadbhāsya*, II: 6, 1.

21 This is how Schopenhauer's philosophy was astutely explained by John E. Atwell in *Schopenhauer on the Character of the World: The Metaphysics of Will*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1995, 21–25.

22 *On the Basis of Morality*, 143–144.

that, while many ethically praiseworthy deeds may surely ensue from a feeling of compassion, it is possible for people to perform ethically praiseworthy actions merely on principle while feeling no compassion or for people who feel an inordinate degree of compassion for another person to act in ethically questionable ways on their behalf.[23] This would entail that a compassionate motive and ethical behavior do not always coincide, and this would undermine compassion as the sole and invariant ethical motive Schopenhauer believes it to be.[24] The other problem is that Schopenhauer, with a very sparse number of textual exceptions, does not generally believe that compassion will affect people who already possess a morally "bad" character.[25] Compassion may explain for him why an already ethical person behaves in the ways they do, but compassion does not, given his appropriation of the Kantian notion of "intelligible, unalterable character," have any transformative power, and so it cannot really be recommended or exhorted. In the case of Śaṅkara, we may ask, along with classical scholastic and modern Indological commentators, if there is anything ethically valuable in his refusal to allow the doctrine of the transcendental unity of all beings to translate into a call for social reform. Śaṅkara, in leaving the operations of conventional reality untouched by the perfection and purity of the self, wholeheartedly endorses the inequities of caste mandated by Brāminical tradition. He echoes the voices of Manu and Gautama's *Dharmaśāstra* that *śūdras* who hear the Vedas being preached should have their ears injected with molten lead,[26] and he gives a full-blown defense of the exclusive right (*adhikāritā*) of only "twice-born" classes to enjoy the opportunity of studying the scriptures that are the key to liberating knowledge.[27] It was the Viśiṣṭādvaitin Rāmānuja who first astutely charged that Śaṅkara's teachings about the transcendental identity of all selves could not lend any kind of moral support to the *vaṇa* system.[28] Of course, Rāmānuja launches

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23 Versions of this objection have been finely posited by D. W. Hamlyn: *Schopenhauer*. London/ Oxford, 1980, 135 and Atwell (1990), 109–112.

24 I have argued that the root of this problem lies in Schopenhauer's insistence on correct metaphysical insight as the prerequisite to any compassionate motive, so that, on his view, when we feel compassion for the other, we do not so much want to alleviate their specific circumstances of suffering or the specific injustice that occasions it, as we want to help her because we know we are essentially the same type of creature (Berger, 208–209). It seems then, as far as Schopenhauer is concerned, the only ethical thing to do is to be a Schopenhauerian, to see the world in the way he does. In this sense, Schopenhauer wants to slough off consequentialism much too quickly.

25 *On the Basis of Morality*, 193.

26 *Brahmasūtrabhāsya*, I: 3, 38.

27 See the *Brihadāranyakopaniṣadbhāsya*, I: 4, 6; II: 4, 5. In this regard, Francis Clooney, S.J. points out that the Advaita position on the origin of *brahmajijñāsā* or the "desire to know *brahman*" is an extension and not a rebuttal of the Mimāṃsā, in that the Advaitins claim that, while there was no strict causal prerequisite for the origin of this desire, it is nurtured and disciplined only within the exclusive realm of religious learning and textual study available to "twice-born" castes (*Theology after Vedānta: An Exploration in Comparative Theology*. Albany: SUNY Press, 119–152.

28 *Śrībhāsya* on *Brahmasūtrabhāsya*, I: 3, 34–38.

into this polemic in the first place because he wants to defend the divinely-mandated caste system against what he considers to have been the dangerous possibility of Śaṅkara's having given a metaphysical justification for undermining it. All the same, Śaṅkara's general position that the realization of ultimate self-hood puts one beyond all society, and conversely, that society need change none of its iniquitous practices even in view of the transcendental equality of all selves, cannot help but strike one as outrageously morally irresponsible, and this inconsistency has been a source of no small measure of embarrassment to Śaṅkara's defenders of both past and present.[29] So even though Hacker's characterization of Schopenhauer's and Śaṅkara's systems as "monisms" may be misleading, it would appear he nonetheless had good grounds for believing that these two philosophical worldviews offer us nothing in the way of ethical goods. This very failure, furthermore, may well be directly tied, as Hacker argues, to the metaphysical claims of the respective systems.

It is here that the magic of hermeneutics might intervene. Hacker himself traced the widening rings of influence Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion, which followed from the impact classical Indian thought had on him, worked on neo-Vedāntins like Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan and Hiriyanna. At what certainly originated in the suggestions of Deussen to Vivekananda in 1896, contemporary devotees of Śaṅkara began to revisit Śaṅkara's "monism" as a doctrine that could infuse virtues of tolerance and love for all beings and would lead to intellectual and religious harmony, national and international unity and underwrite democratic socialism.[30] The revised view of the ethical relevance of Śaṅkara's Advaita was exemplified for neo-Vedānta in Vivekananda's vow to create an international and "practical Vedānta" through the Ramakrishna Mission, and in the statesman Radhakrishnan's conviction that "Śaṅkara's philosophy was essentially democratic."[31] It was far less important for such revivalists to peruse the texts of Śaṅkara on the relation of the idea of *ātman* to social issues, and where they did, they took an extremely apologetic tone, than to revisualize Advaitic "monism" as lending legitimacy to very different socio-political projects than that of the master. A rather significant number of scholars have argued, taking this line of thought even farther, that the fusion of Advaita metaphysics with the social program of an India headed by the neo-Vedāntic *bhadraloka* granted both the Indian Independence Movement as well as contemporary forms

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29 The best review of these issues can be found in Wilhelm Halbfass' *Tradition and Reflection: Explorations in Indian Thought*. Albany: SUNY Press 1991, 377–386.
30 See Malhotra, S. L.: *Social and Political Orientations of Neo-Vedantism*. Delhi: Motilal Banrasidass 1970, xii or Golwakar, M. S.: *Bunch of Thoughts*. Bangalore 1966, 5, and more recently Puligandla, Ranakrishna: *That Thou Art: The Wisdom of the Upanishads*. Freemont, Ca.: Asian Humanities Press 2002, xiii-xvi; 118–123.
31 Radhakrishnan, Sarvapali: *History of Philosophy: Eastern and Western*. Vol. 1. London: Kegan Paul 1952–1953, 447.

of Indian nationalism their basic ideological character, employing traditional forms of "Hindu inclusivism" to unite and yet "Hinduize" the national Indian community.[32] Taking a kind of Rortyan pragmatist view of the issue at hand then, one may argue that it matters less that Schopenhauer or Śaṅkara have succeeded in offering us a "true" picture of how the transcendental unity of all beings ought to carry over into social practices than that their alternative systems lend themselves to hermeneutic appropriations that can be employed in socially and ethically relevant ways. If Hacker is right, that is, in claiming that Schopenhauer's articulation of the "*tat tvam asi* ethic", through Deussen, did inspire Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan, and perhaps along with them Gandhi, to create, mobilize and achieve the goals of a robust Indian nationalism, than one could hardly conclude either hermeneutically or pragmatically with Hacker that this uniquely modern construal of Vedānta could have no socio-ethical relevance, for it manifestly has. If what matters in interpretation is not the privileging of some nebulous conception of "authorial intention" but rather how readers understand, appropriate and use texts, then the "*tat tvam asi* ethic" can have whatever degree of socio-ethical relevance that its interpreters can compellingly construe it to have.

Even were we to accept these qualifications or mitigations of Hacker's critique of Schopenhauer's and Śaṅkara's systems, that Hacker both mistakenly characterizes them as "monisms" and that he does not take the hermeneutic and pragmatic socializations of these systems seriously enough, it seems to me that a certain core of Hacker's attack on the "*tat tvam asi* ethic" remains both correct and fundamentally significant. This core claim is that "the idea that ultimate reality is a Universal One is always supra-ethical in the end", and thus, "there is no true ethics; good and evil have no truly metaphysical relevance" when personal existence is ontologically diluted to the realm of either mere representation or mere convention.[33] Hacker is still in this insistence more attached to the presupposition that ethics must follow from metaphysics and that "personhood" and "individuality" must be "ultimately real" in order to be ethically relevant than I. He is, ironically enough, still buying in to a basically Schopenhauerian assumption. Even so, he is right in representing Schopenhauer as claiming that ethics are, given the ultimate unity of all beings, "ultimately irrelevant" and in depicting Śaṅkara as maintaining that the enlightened sage is no longer bound by socio-ethical relations. Such a dimunition of the importance of personhood and relationship, whether it is affected by a form of "monism" or "double-aspect essentialism" or any other metaphysics, does proportionally strip away the degrees of intensity to which ethical relations normally grip human beings in their

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32 Two of the most outstanding examples of this line of thought can be found in the work of Yadav (2000) and Gerald James Larson: *India's Agony over Religion.* Albany: SUNY Press 1995.

33 Hacker, 306.

experience. I would go one step farther than this still. The kind of dimunition of personhood we are confronted with in the "*tat tvaṃ asi* ethic" is followed upon by a conspicuous absence of moral principles that would serve as guidelines to conduct. The fact that Schopenhauer simply does not care to talk about such principles, and the fact that the neo-Vedāntins so blithely gloss over moral principles with terse *Upainiṣadic* slogans leaves us bereft of any evaluative tools for distinguishing, say, a morally praiseworthy compassionate act from a morally pernicious compassionate act, or for distinguishing between a socially iniquitous program that follows from the unity of *ātman* and a socially responsible program that could build the transcendent unity of the self into a program of solidarity and equality. And without these tools allowing for the full valorization of personhood and relationship as well as evaluative principles that would allow us to differentiate between good and bad undertakings, the systems of Śaṅkara, Schopenhauer and neo-Vedānta do not in the end do any satisfying ethical work.