

Hard Theological Determinism and the Illusion of Free Will: Sri Ramakrishna Meets Lord Kames, Saul Smilansky, and Derk Pereboom

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This essay reconstructs the sophisticated views on free will and determinism of the nineteenth-century Hindu mystic Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) and brings them into dialogue with the views of three western philosophers—namely, the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Lord Kames (1696-1782) and the contemporary analytic philosophers Saul Smilansky and Derk Pereboom. Sri Ramakrishna affirms hard theological determinism, the incompatibilist view that God determines everything we do and think. At the same time, however, he claims that God, in His infinite wisdom, has endowed ordinary unenlightened people with the illusion of free will for the sake of their moral and spiritual welfare. Kames, I suggest, defends a theological determinist position remarkably similar to Sri Ramakrishna's. However, I argue that Sri Ramakrishna's mystical orientation puts him in a better position than Kames to explain why a loving God would implant in us the illusion of free will in the first place. I then show how certain aspects of the views of Smilansky and Pereboom resonate with those of Sri Ramakrishna.

Key words: Sri Ramakrishna; theological determinism; free will; Lord Kames; Saul Smilansky; Derk Pereboom; incompatibilism

The Lord, O Arjuna, dwells in the heart of all beings, revolving them by His *māyā*, as if they were mounted on a machine.

— *Bhagavad Gītā* 18.61¹

It is natural for the sense-organs to feel attraction or aversion toward their respective objects. Do not fall under the sway of these two impulses, for they are enemies on your path.

— *Bhagavad Gītā* 3.34²

These two verses from the *Bhagavad Gītā* embody an apparent tension between free will and determinism. On the one hand, 18.61 seems to uphold an uncompromising theological determinism: God determines everything we do and think, so we are mere puppets in His hands. On the other hand, 3.34 enjoins us actively to resist the lure of sense-pleasures. Such an exhortation, however, seems to imply that it is *within our power* to fight our lower impulses. How are we to reconcile the *Gītā*'s theological determinism with its repeated calls for self-discipline and self-mastery? If God determines everything we do, what sense would it make for us to try to conquer our lower impulses, since we wouldn't even have the free will to exert ourselves in the first place?

The *Gītā* raises in an especially forceful way one major form of the long-standing problem of free will and determinism that has exercised some of the greatest philosophical minds in different parts of the world. My aim here is not to enter into the controversy of how to interpret the *Gītā*'s complex views on this issue.³ Rather, I wish to fast-forward quite a bit in the

history of Indian thought and examine the views of the nineteenth-century Hindu mystic Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886).

Sri Ramakrishna's extensive oral teachings in Bengali—which were carefully recorded by his disciple Mahendranāth Gupta in the *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta* (hereafter *Kathāmṛta*)—address a wide range of philosophical issues, including the nature of God, religious pluralism, the problem of evil, the nature and epistemology of mystical experience, and free will and determinism.⁴ In a recently published book, I examine from a cross-cultural perspective Sri Ramakrishna's views on the first four of these issues.⁵ In this article, I will focus on his sophisticated and timely views on free will and determinism, which have not yet received the sustained attention they deserve.⁶ After reconstructing Sri Ramakrishna's views on this issue, I will bring him into dialogue primarily with three western philosophers—namely, the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Lord Kames (1696-1782) and the contemporary analytic philosophers Saul Smilansky and Derk Pereboom.

Part I reconstructs the four main features of Sri Ramakrishna's position on free will and determinism. As we will see, Sri Ramakrishna unambiguously denied the existence of free will and affirmed hard theological determinism, the view that God determines everything we do and think. I characterize Sri Ramakrishna as a “hard” theological determinist because he rejects any compatibilist attempt to reconcile determinism with free will. At the same time, however, he also repeatedly urged his followers to renounce sense-pleasures and to engage in spiritual practice.⁷ Sri Ramakrishna, I argue, adopts a strikingly original strategy for reconciling hard theological determinism with self-effort. To put it briefly, he claims that God, in His infinite wisdom, has endowed ordinary unenlightened people with the *illusion* of free will for the sake of their moral and spiritual welfare. According to Sri Ramakrishna, an individual's illusion of free will leads her to feel morally responsible for her actions, and this feeling of moral responsibility, in turn, reduces the likelihood of her engaging in sinful actions. As a mystic, Sri Ramakrishna also maintains that all of us will eventually overcome this illusion of free will—either in this life or in a future life—when we have the salvific mystical experience of God as the Doer.

Part II brings Sri Ramakrishna into dialogue with the Scottish philosopher Lord Kames, who defends a theological determinist position remarkably similar to Sri Ramakrishna's. Like Sri Ramakrishna, Kames champions hard theological determinism while arguing that God has endowed us with a “deceitful feeling of liberty,” which makes us feel morally responsible for our actions.⁸ As we will see, however, Kames does not share Sri Ramakrishna's mystical worldview. I argue that Sri Ramakrishna's mystical orientation and his unique theodicy put him in a better position than Kames to explain why a loving God would implant in us the illusion of free will in the first place.

In Part III, I explore how the recent work of Saul Smilansky can help revive the illusionist approach of Kames and Sri Ramakrishna. While Smilansky is not a theological determinist, he defends psychophysical determinism by arguing that libertarian free will is incoherent.⁹ He also argues, however, that we generally act under the *illusion* that we are free and morally responsible for our actions. Moreover, Smilansky makes a powerful case that this illusion of free will is both fortunate and morally necessary, since so many of our personal and moral values would be jeopardized by the knowledge of determinism. Sri Ramakrishna, I argue, would welcome Smilansky's arguments for the necessity of the illusion of free will. At the same time, however, Sri Ramakrishna would reject the atheistic worldview at the basis of Smilansky's position. From Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, Smilansky unjustifiably rules out the possibility of a mystically-grounded theological determinism.

Finally, Part IV further demonstrates the contemporary relevance of Sri Ramakrishna's theological determinism by considering briefly a very recent debate between Derk Pereboom and Timothy O'Connor. While Pereboom defends theological determinism, he departs from Sri Ramakrishna in arguing that widespread belief in determinism would not harm our moral and religious practices. O'Connor argues, in a Ramakrishnan vein, that Pereboom's theological

determinist position suffers from a number of serious problems that could be avoided, or at least substantially mitigated, if Pereboom adopts the illusionist position that God has wisely hidden from us the truth that we are not free.

The overall aim of my cross-cultural venture is not comparison for comparison's sake but philosophical *problem-solving* that draws on the resources of both western and non-western traditions. On the one hand, I hope to demonstrate that Sri Ramakrishna's unique views on free will and determinism contain resources for solving long-standing philosophical problems associated with theological determinism, a position that has been defended not only by numerous Indian philosophers but also by past and contemporary western thinkers. On the other hand, I draw on some of the arguments of recent western philosophers such as Smilansky and William Alston in order to clarify and defend aspects of Sri Ramakrishna's own position.

1 A Reconstruction of Sri Ramakrishna's Views on Free Will and Determinism

Many of Sri Ramakrishna's visitors raised the issue of free will and determinism. In the following passage, Sri Ramakrishna succinctly expresses his overall position on the issue:

It is God alone who does everything. You may say that in that case man may commit sin. But that is not true. If a man is firmly convinced that God alone is the Doer and that he himself is nothing, then he will never make a false step.

It is God alone who has planted in man's mind what the "Englishmen" call free will [*svādhīn icchā*]. People who have not realized God would become engaged in more and more sinful actions if God had not planted in them the notion of free will. Sin would have increased if God had not made the sinner feel that he alone was responsible for his sin.

Those who have realized God are aware that free will is a false appearance. In reality, I am the machine and God is the Operator [*vastutah tīnī yantrī, āmi yantra*], I am the carriage and God is the Driver (*K 376/G 379-80*).

This pregnant passage encapsulates most of the main features of Sri Ramakrishna's subtle position on free will and determinism. I will now explain each of these features in turn, clarifying them when necessary by drawing on other relevant passages from the *Kathāmṛta*.

(HTD1) Sri Ramakrishna subscribes to hard theological determinism.

Sri Ramakrishna makes absolutely clear that he is a theological determinist: "It is God alone who does everything." More specifically, he is a *hard* theological determinist, since he maintains that theological determinism is incompatible with free will.¹⁰ Free will, according to Sri Ramakrishna, is a "false appearance." Indeed, the fact that Sri Ramakrishna ascribes the doctrine of free will to "Englishmen" suggests that he takes the very notion of free will to be a western import that is foreign to the Hindu sensibility.¹¹

The following dialogue between Sri Ramakrishna and the homeopathic doctor Mahendralāl Sarkār indicates that Sri Ramakrishna denied the reality of free will altogether:

DOCTOR: I do not say that the will is absolutely free. Suppose a cow is tied with a rope. She is free within the length of that rope, but when she feels the pull of the rope—

MASTER [SRI RAMAKRISHNA]: Jadu Mallik¹² also gave that illustration [...]. Is it mentioned in some English book? [...] Look here. If a man truly believes that God alone does everything, that He is the Operator and man the machine, then such a man is a

jīvanmukta [one who has achieved liberation while living]. “Thou workest Thine own work; men only call it theirs”¹³ (K 967/G 893).

The western-educated Doctor Sarkār uses the analogy of a cow tied to a stake to illustrate his view that although the will is not “absolutely free,” we nonetheless have limited or partial freedom. Just as a cow tied to a stake is free to roam about within a certain fixed radius but cannot go beyond the length of the rope, human beings have a limited degree of free will, even though they are not free to do anything they like. Tellingly, Sri Ramakrishna asks whether this analogy is mentioned in “an English book.” Rejecting this western-sounding view of limited free will, he affirms the hard theological determinist position that “God alone does everything” and that man is a mere “machine” operated by God. In fact, Sri Ramakrishna would frequently appeal to this analogy of a machine—which should remind us of verse 18.61 of the *Gītā*—in order to drive home his hard theological determinist stance: “I am the machine, God is the Operator” (*āmi yantra, tini yantrī*) (K 132/G 176).¹⁴

Elsewhere in the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Ramakrishna similarly rejects the notion of limited free will: “I say, ‘O Mother, I am the machine and You are the Operator; I am inert and You make me conscious; I do as You make me do; I speak as You make me speak.’ But the ignorant say, ‘I am partly responsible, and God is partly responsible [*katak āmi korchi, katak tini korchen*]” (K 713/G 678-79). Evidently, then, Sri Ramakrishna affirms hard theological determinism, which leaves no scope for even a *partially* free will.

(HTD2) Sri Ramakrishna justifies his hard theological determinism by appealing to his direct mystical experience of God as the Doer and by arguing that our desires, which we did not ultimately choose, impel us to act.

For Sri Ramakrishna, hard theological determinism is not a mere intellectual hypothesis arrived at through reasoning but a spiritual conviction rooted in his own mystical experience of God as the Doer. As he puts it, “There is Someone within me who does all these things through me. [...] I am the machine and God is the Operator. I act as She makes me act. I speak as She makes me speak” (K 132/G 176). Indeed, he would frequently teach that only the “*jīvanmukta*,” one who has achieved liberation while living, realizes that God alone is the Doer: “A man becomes a *jīvanmukta* when he knows that God is the Doer of all things [...]. Where is man’s free will? All are under the will of God” (K 126/G 159).

However, Sri Ramakrishna is also aware that such a mystical justification of theological determinism is unlikely to convince those with a more rational or skeptical temperament. Therefore, he also provides a rational explanation for the non-existence of free will. For instance, on one occasion, Sri Ramakrishna and the renowned playwright Giriścandra Ghoṣ were debating about free will with Doctor Sarkār. In response to Sri Ramakrishna’s assertion that everything is determined by “God’s Will,” Doctor Sarkār claims, “But God has given us free will. I can think of God, or not, as I like” (K 966/G 892). Taking Sri Ramakrishna’s side, Ghoṣ rebuts Doctor Sarkār by appealing to the law of psychophysical causation: “You think of God or do some good work because you like to. Really it is not you who do these things, but your liking of them that makes you do so” (K 966/G 892).

Shortly thereafter, Sri Ramakrishna intervenes in the debate, further elaborating Ghoṣ’s deterministic argument that our desires cause us to act:

In order to do anything, one must have a belief about something and feel joy at the thought of what he believes. Only then does he set about performing the work. Suppose a jar of gold coins is hidden underground. First of all a man must have the knowledge or belief that the jar of gold coins is there. He also feels joy at the thought of the jar. Then he begins to dig. As he removes the earth he hears a metallic sound. That increases his

joy. Next he sees a corner of the jar. That gives him more joy. Thus his joy is ever on the increase (K 966/G 892).

According to Sri Ramakrishna, belief and desire are the motivating forces behind all our actions.¹⁵ We engage in a particular action only when we believe that there is something desirable to be gained from so acting. Sri Ramakrishna also implies that our desires were not *chosen* by us. Therefore, even though we often think we act freely, our actions are, in fact, completely determined by desires that we did not freely choose to have.¹⁶ As a theological determinist, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that God is the ultimate causal source of all our beliefs and desires.¹⁷

Sri Ramakrishna also anticipates a natural objection to his theological determinist position: a person who feels that God does everything could engage in sinful actions and justify them by saying that it is God who *makes* him sin. He raises and responds to this objection in the following passage:

It is God alone who does everything. You may say that in that case people may commit sin. But that is not true. If one truly realizes, “God alone is the Doer, and I am the non-doer,” then he will never make a false step (K 376/G 379-80).

According to Sri Ramakrishna, only people who have realized God internalize fully the truth of hard theological determinism, and these *jīvanmuktas* are incapable of committing sin, since they are conscious instruments of God. To understand why *jīvanmuktas* cannot sin, we need to refer to some of Sri Ramakrishna’s other teachings. Sri Ramakrishna frequently aligns the feeling of doership with egoism, as when he says, “One must altogether renounce egoism [*ahankār*]; one cannot see God as long as one feels, ‘I am the doer’” (K 124/G 174). He also often teaches that the “wicked ego” makes one “worldly and attached to lust and greed [*kāminī-kāñcan*]” (K 121/G 170). For Sri Ramakrishna, then, the feeling of doership stems from egoism, which is itself the seat of such undesirable qualities as lust, anger, and greed, and it is precisely these qualities that frequently lead people to commit sin. The *jīvanmukta*, who has realized that God is the Doer, cannot commit sin because he has eradicated egoism and all the evil qualities rooted in ego that lead to sinful actions. Therefore, although the *jīvanmukta* knows that he has no free will or moral responsibility, he “will never make a false step.”

One might argue, however, that Sri Ramakrishna’s response to this objection is inadequate as it stands. After all, even if enlightened *jīvanmuktas* are incapable of committing sin, unenlightened people can still engage in sinful actions and readily excuse themselves by claiming that God causes them to sin. Sri Ramakrishna responds to this objection by appealing to the third key feature of his position on free will and determinism, which I will now explain.

(HTD3) According to Sri Ramakrishna, even though there is no free will, God has implanted in unenlightened people the *illusion* of free will in order to prevent sin from increasing.

Sri Ramakrishna makes this claim repeatedly, including in the passage already cited above:

It is God alone who has planted in man’s mind what the “Englishmen” call free will. People who have not realized God would become engaged in more and more sinful actions if God had not planted in them the notion of free will. Sin would have increased if God had not made the sinner feel that he alone was responsible for his sin (K 376/G 379-80).

This is perhaps the most strikingly original feature of Sri Ramakrishna’s position on free will and determinism. According to Sri Ramakrishna, God Himself, in His infinite wisdom, “planted” in

ordinary unenlightened people the *illusion* of free will; otherwise, they would have engaged in “more and more sinful actions.” He also explains why the widespread belief in theological determinism among ordinary people would have had such morally disastrous consequences. The sense of free will, Sri Ramakrishna points out, is a necessary condition for the feeling of moral responsibility. Therefore, if ordinary people did not feel that they were free, they would not have taken moral responsibility for their actions—which would have resulted in a massive increase in immoral behavior.

In another passage, Sri Ramakrishna further spells out the harmful social consequences of not believing in free will:

As long as a man has not realized God, he thinks he is free [*tataksan mone hoy āmrā svādhīn*]. It is God Himself who keeps this error in man. Otherwise sin would have multiplied. [*ei bhram tinī rekhe den, tā nā bole pāper vṛddhi hoto.*] Man would not have been afraid of sin. There would have been no punishment [*śāstī*] for it (K 175/G 211).

God keeps the “error” of free will in unenlightened people in order to prevent sin from multiplying. Indeed, Sri Ramakrishna points out that without this sense of free will, the very social institutions of justice and punishment would collapse, since these institutions presuppose moral responsibility, which in turn depends on free will. For Sri Ramakrishna, the *feeling* that we are free—even if, in reality, we are not free—is a sufficient basis for feeling morally responsible for our actions.

Sri Ramakrishna points out elsewhere that the very distinction between good and bad actions depends on the illusion of free will:

A person will have the mistaken belief, “I am the doer,” as long as he has not seen God, as long as he has not touched the Philosopher’s Stone. So long will he feel, “I did a good act” or “I did a bad act.” So long will he believe that there is a distinction between good and bad actions. This awareness of distinction, which is due to God’s *māyā* [delusive power], serves the purpose of running His *māyā*-governed world. But a person can realize God by taking shelter under His *vidyā-māyā* and following the path of righteousness. One who knows God and realizes Him is able to go beyond *māyā* (K 967/G 893).

According to Sri Ramakrishna, the illusion of free will is necessary not only for taking moral responsibility for one’s actions but also for distinguishing between good and bad actions in the first place. Without the illusion of free will, then, morality itself would have no legs to stand on.¹⁸ He also adds that the illusion of free will is built into the very structure of God’s world-*māyā*, so the only way to dispel this illusion is to realize God by going beyond *māyā* through ethical and spiritual practice. Sri Ramakrishna’s reference to “*vidyā-māyā*” requires some clarification. He frequently distinguishes “*avidyā-māyā*” (the *māyā* of ignorance) from “*vidyā-māyā*” (the *māyā* of knowledge). As he puts it, “*Vidyā-māyā* leads one to God, and *avidyā-māyā* away from Him. Knowledge, devotion, compassion, and renunciation belong to the realm of *vidyā*” (K 830/G 776). For Sri Ramakrishna, *avidyā-māyā* encompasses selfish qualities such as lust, greed, and anger that lead one away from God, while *vidyā-māyā* encompasses ethical and spiritual qualities that bring one closer to God. Crucially, both *avidyā-māyā* and *vidyā-māyā* presuppose a distinction between good and bad actions. However, the *jīvanmukta*, who has realized that God is the Doer, transcends both *avidyā-māyā* and *vidyā-māyā*.¹⁹ To the *jīvanmukta*, there is no distinction between good and bad actions, since this very distinction presupposes the feeling of personal doership.²⁰

One might object, at this point, that Sri Ramakrishna’s (HTD3) appears to conflict with (HTD1). On the one hand, (HTD1) maintains that hard theological determinism is true, so no one has free will. Since God is the sole Doer, people do not have any control over their actions. On the other hand, (HTD3) seems to presuppose that people *do* have control over their actions,

since an individual's feeling of moral responsibility can only curtail immoral action if that person actually has control over her actions. In other words, if no one has free will, then how could the presence or absence of the feeling of moral responsibility affect one's actions at all?²¹

However, from Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, hard theological determinism is perfectly compatible with the view that the presence or absence of the feeling of moral responsibility affects one's actions. Although God is the sole Doer, He achieves His purposes *through* the device of the illusion of free will and the consequent feeling of moral responsibility. If we think of our feeling of moral responsibility as an instrument or device through which God Himself acts in the world, then there is no need to assume that an individual has to have control over her actions in order for the presence or absence of her feeling of moral responsibility to affect her actions. An analogy with a billiard ball might help clarify this point. A person playing billiards can make the ball behave in various ways depending on how she strikes the ball with her cue. If I am watching her play and I say, "The ball curved right" or "The ball would have gone into the corner pocket if it had been struck differently," I am obviously not ascribing agency to the ball. Rather, I mean that the player *caused* the ball to act in different ways by manipulating the cue. Similarly, Sri Ramakrishna holds that God causes us to act *through* our feeling of free will and moral responsibility. Therefore, when Sri Ramakrishna makes the counterfactual claim that ordinary people would have committed more sin if God had not implanted in them this feeling of free will, I take him to mean that God would have caused ordinary people to act more sinfully through their knowledge that they are not free.

Sri Ramakrishna's position on free will and determinism also raises another important problem. His view clearly depends on a key distinction between the standpoint of the unenlightened person (the "*ajñānī*") and the standpoint of the enlightened *jīvanmukta*. The *jīvanmukta* knows that God alone is the Doer and that he has, therefore, neither free will nor moral responsibility. However, since the *jīvanmukta* acts as a conscious instrument of God, he is incapable of doing anything immoral. By contrast, the *ajñānī* has the illusion of free will, which makes him feel morally responsible for his actions. What happens, though, when these two standpoints collide? For instance, what if a *jīvanmukta* were to tell an *ajñānī* that free will is actually an illusion and that God alone determines everything we do? Could this lead the *ajñānī* to abandon his belief in free will? And if it did, wouldn't the *ajñānī*'s premature belief in theological determinism have morally and socially disastrous consequences?

In fact, as we have already seen, Sri Ramakrishna frequently taught the truth of theological determinism to his visitors, many of whom *were* presumably unenlightened. On one occasion, for instance, Sri Ramakrishna explains to his visitor—who was a follower of a contemporary religious movement called the Brāhmo Samāj—that God alone does everything. An interesting dialogue then ensues:

BRĀHMO: If it is God that makes me do everything, then I am not responsible for my sins.

MASTER [SRI RAMAKRISHNA] (with a smile): Yes, Duryodhana also said that. "O Krishna, I do what Thou, seated in my heart, makest me do." If a man has the firm conviction [*thik viśvās*] that God alone is the Doer and he is His instrument, then he cannot do anything sinful. He who has learned to dance correctly never makes a false step. One cannot even believe in the existence of God until one's heart becomes pure" (K 185/G 220).

The Brāhmo points out a seemingly disturbing consequence of theological determinism: if we do not have free will, then we would not be morally responsible for our sins. Unruffled, Sri Ramakrishna responds that only one who has realized God can have the "firm conviction" that "God alone is the Doer," and such a person "cannot do anything sinful." From Sri

Ramakrishna's perspective, the Brāhmo's worry is unfounded because it is impossible for an unenlightened person truly to believe in theological determinism. Indeed, Sri Ramakrishna makes the startling claim that even belief in God's existence requires purity of heart and mind. His reasoning seems to be as follows: so long as our mind is impure, our thoughts and feelings will revolve around sense-pleasures rather than God, thereby preventing us from believing that God exists. Sri Ramakrishna's claim bears affinities with Blaise Pascal's suggestion that if one is unable to believe in God's existence, one should endeavor to convince oneself "not by increase of proofs of God, but by the abatement of the passions."²²

According to Sri Ramakrishna, the psychological requirements for believing in theological determinism are even more stringent than those for believing in God's existence. Genuine belief that God alone does everything, he insists, requires nothing less than the direct experience of God. On one occasion, Sri Ramakrishna's disciples asked him: "Sir, is it not then in human hands to practice spiritual disciplines? A person might simply say, 'Whatever I do is according to God's will.'"²³ Sri Ramakrishna tellingly responded as follows: "What good does it do to say that? One may say, 'There is no thorn, no pricking'; but one still cries out when one's hand is pricked by a thorn."²⁴ From Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, so long as I have not realized God, even if I *profess* to believe that God alone is the Doer, I cannot help but *feel* that I am the doer.

Sri Ramakrishna's striking claims that only a *jīvanmukta* can believe that God is the Doer and that only one with a pure heart can believe in God's existence, I would argue, indicate that he would have rejected what contemporary epistemologists call "doxastic voluntarism"—the view that we can adopt beliefs at will—at least with respect to beliefs about God's existence and theological determinism.²⁵ Indeed, some recent philosophers have provided arguments against doxastic voluntarism that can be marshaled in support of Sri Ramakrishna's position. William Alston, for instance, has made a convincing case that it is "not within our power" simply to *choose* to believe that God exists "in the face of the lack of any significant inclination to suppose it to be true."²⁶ As Alston (1988: 268) points out, what might *seem* to be a case of forming a belief in *p* is often something quite different: "S may be seeking, for whatever reason, to bring himself into a position of believing *p*; and S or others may confuse this activity, which can be undertaken voluntarily, with believing or judging the proposition to be true."

For Sri Ramakrishna, merely *professing* the belief that God exists or that God is the Doer should not be confused with *actually* believing that God exists or that God is the Doer. Alston's argument against doxastic voluntarism provides a helpful way of fleshing out, and defending, Sri Ramakrishna's distinction between actual belief and the mere profession of belief. We can think of an unenlightened person's hypothetical profession of belief that God is the Doer as an *attempt* to bring herself into a position to believe that God is the Doer. However, according to Sri Ramakrishna, we can only *believe* that God is the Doer after purifying our minds through intense ethical and spiritual practice and attaining the direct mystical realization of God as the Doer through God's grace.²⁷

At this point, it is worth revisiting briefly the paradox of free will and determinism in the *Gītā* with which I opened this essay. Sri Ramakrishna's (HTD3), I would suggest, hints at a promising strategy for reconciling the *Gītā*'s theological determinism with its frequent call for self-effort.²⁸ The crucial word "*māyā*" in 18.61 of the *Gītā* indicates that God determines everything we do through His delusive power of *māyā*. Under the spell of *māyā*, we are unable to recognize the truth that God actually makes us act as if we were mere machines. In support of such a Ramakrishnan approach to the *Gītā*, we could point to 3.37:

While actions are being done entirely by the *gunas* of Nature [*prakṛtī*], one who is deluded by egoism thinks, "I am the doer."²⁹

This verse from the *Gītā* comes remarkably close to Sri Ramakrishna's claim that "a person will have the mistaken belief, 'I am the doer,' as long as he has not seen God" (K 967/G 893). Sri Ramakrishna helps us see that the *Gītā*'s central notion of the delusive power of *māyā* may hold the hermeneutic key to reconciling its theological determinism with its emphasis on self-discipline and spiritual practice. While this is not the occasion for in-depth *Gītā* exegesis, I believe it is well worth exploring the potentially significant implications of Sri Ramakrishna's perspective on free will and determinism for Indian scriptural hermeneutics.³⁰

(HTD4) Certain divinely commissioned people known as "*īśvarakoṭis*," after realizing that God is the Doer, are capable of attaining the even greater state of "*viññāna*," the pantheistic realization that there is nothing but God.

Sri Ramakrishna's stance on free will and determinism is significantly complicated by his oft-repeated teaching that "*īśvarakoṭis*"—a spiritual elite consisting only in "incarnations of God and those born as a part of one of these incarnations" (K 800/G 749)—are able to attain the pantheistic mystical experience of "*viññāna*," which is even greater than the *jīvanmukta*'s realization of God as the Doer.³¹ According to Sri Ramakrishna, the *viññānī* realizes that "it is Brahman that has become the universe and its living beings" (K 51/G 104). It is clear that Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on *viññāna* were based on his own mystical experience. As he puts it, "The Divine Mother has kept me in the state of a *bhakta*, a *viññānī*" (K 391/G 393).³² From the *viññānī*'s standpoint, God Himself sports in the form of unenlightened and enlightened people as well as everything else in the universe. Theological determinism is compatible with—and, in some of its forms, even presupposes—the view that God is different from His creatures. The *viññānī*, however, sees that there is nothing but God and, consequently, that His creatures are nothing but different guises of God Himself. Therefore, while the *jīvanmukta* realizes the truth of theological determinism, the *viññānī* exceeds even the *jīvanmukta*'s realization by partaking of God's own absolute freedom, since the *viññānī* knows that he himself is God in a particular form.³³

Therefore, in order to understand Sri Ramakrishna's complex views on free will and determinism, we have to distinguish the standpoints of the *ajñānī*, the *jīvanmukta*, and the *viññānī*. While the *ajñānī* mistakenly believes that he is free and morally responsible for his actions, the *jīvanmukta* realizes that God is the Doer and that he is merely God's instrument. The *viññānī*, however, realizes that he and everyone else are different forms of God Himself. Since the *viññānī* knows that he is not different from God, God's freedom becomes his own.

2 "The Deceitful Feeling of Liberty": Kames in the Eyes of Sri Ramakrishna

As far as I am aware, the only western philosopher to defend a position on free will similar to Sri Ramakrishna's is the Scottish philosopher Lord Kames. In the first edition of his essay "Liberty and Necessity" (1751), Kames advocates the hard theological determinist view that since God determines everything we do, there is no free will. At the same time, however, he also makes the radical—and, to some of his contemporaries, shocking and impious—claim that God, in His infinite wisdom and benevolence, has endowed us with a "deceitful feeling of liberty," which makes us feel morally responsible for our actions.³⁴

In this section, I will summarize Kames's unique theological determinist position and identify major points of affinity and divergence between his views and those of Sri Ramakrishna. On the one hand, I suggest that some of Kames's arguments in favor of theological determinism and illusionism resonate with, and lend support to, Sri Ramakrishna's own arguments. On the other hand, I mount a Ramakrishnan critique of Kames's position by arguing that Kames fails to provide a convincing explanation of why God has endowed us with a "deceitful feeling of

liberty” in the first place. On this basis, I contend that Sri Ramakrishna’s mystically grounded position on free will has a major philosophical advantage over Kames’s view.

Like Sri Ramakrishna, Kames appeals to the law of psychophysical causation in order to prove that we have no free will:

When a being acts merely by instinct and without any view to consequences, every one must see that it acts necessarily. Though not so obvious, the case comes to the same where an action is exerted in order to bring about some end or event. This end or event must be the object of desire; for no man in his senses who uses means in order to a certain end, but must desire the means to be effectual: if we do not desire to accomplish an event, we cannot possibly act in order to bring it about. Desire and action are then intimately connected; so intimately, that no action can be exerted where there is no antecedent desire: the event is first the object of desire, and then we act in order to bring it about. This being so, it follows clearly, that our actions cannot be free [...]. Our desires obviously are not under our own power, but are raised by means that depend not upon us. And if our desires are not under our power, neither can our actions be under our power (Kames 2005 [1779]: 104).³⁵

Kames’s reasoning here is strikingly similar to Sri Ramakrishna’s. According to Sri Ramakrishna, we are not really free, since it is our desires that lead us to perform certain actions rather than others. Similarly, Kames argues that our desire, which is “not under our own power,” causes us to act in order to achieve the object of desire. Since we are not free to choose our desires, we are also not free to choose how to act, because our actions are caused by those very desires.

Kames stages a subtle dialectic between “advocates for liberty” and “advocates for necessity” in order to motivate his own unique position on free will (Kames 1751: 195-6). He begins by acknowledging the powerful intuition that moral approval and disapproval presuppose the freedom to have acted otherwise. As he puts it, “we accuse and blame others, for not having acted the part they *might* and *ought* to have acted, and condemn ourselves, and feel remorse, for having been guilty of a wrong we *might have* refrained from” (Kames 1751: 194). On the basis of this intuition, advocates for liberty argue that the doctrine of determinism precludes moral responsibility, which presupposes the freedom to have done otherwise. Without moral responsibility, the entire edifice of morality would collapse: “Man is no longer a moral agent, nor the subject of praise or blame for what he does” (Kames 1751: 195).

Kames then rehearses how “advocates for necessity” respond to this formidable objection. They argue, according to Kames, that our moral sentiments of approval and condemnation are “immediate and instinctive” and do not depend at all on “reflection on the liberty or necessity of actions” (Kames 1751: 196). In other words, our moral judgments of approval and disapproval do not presuppose the freedom to have done otherwise. It is worth noting that Kames’s account of this position anticipates, in certain respects, P.F. Strawson’s compatibilist argument in his now classic essay, “Freedom and Resentment” (1962).³⁶ According to Strawson (2008: 7), moral responsibility is constituted by morally “reactive attitudes”—such as resentment, guilt, condemnation, and gratitude—which are so deeply rooted in human nature that the belief in determinism would not affect or diminish them in any way.

It is at this juncture that Kames intervenes in the debate. On the one hand, Kames believes that rigorous philosophical inquiry leads inexorably to the conclusion that we have no free will (Kames 1751: 202). On the other hand, he argues that the proto-Strawsonian account of moral responsibility advocated by proponents of necessity is seriously defective, since it fails to account for the undeniable fact that our moral sentiments *are* based on belief in the freedom to have done otherwise. A man feels remorse, for instance, because he believes that “he might have forborn to do the ill thing” and is, therefore, “justly blameable” (Kames 1751: 197).

Kames reconciles these opposing positions in an ingenious and elegant manner. The only way to honor fully both sides of this debate, he argues, is to embrace the view “that tho’ man, in truth, is a necessary agent, having all his actions determined by fixed and immutable laws; yet that, this being concealed from him, he acts with the conviction of being a free agent” (Kames 1751: 202). Like Sri Ramakrishna, Kames claims that although we do not actually have free will, we act under the *illusion* that we are free. Also like Sri Ramakrishna, Kames argues that God has wisely and benevolently endowed us with the illusion of free will in order to promote moral behavior and to ensure the overall welfare of His creatures (Kames 1751: 204). As Kames puts it, man must *believe* that he is free “in order to attain the proper improvement of his nature, in virtue and happiness” (1751: 204).

Strikingly, both Kames and Sri Ramakrishna defend this view by means of a counterfactual argument. According to Sri Ramakrishna, “sin would have increased” if God had not implanted in people the illusion of free will (K 376/G 379-80). Similarly, Kames sketches an elaborate counterfactual scenario meant to illustrate the moral poverty of a world in which everyone knows, and acts in accordance with, the truth that God determines everything they do. In the first edition of “Liberty and Necessity,” Kames emphasizes the morally disastrous consequences of acting without the illusion of freedom. Kames (1751: 206) argues that without the feeling of free will, we would not have any moral sentiments, which are “so useful to men in their moral conduct.” Although we might still love virtue, feelings of moral approval and disapproval would entirely vanish:

We could feel no inward self-approbation on doing well, no remorse on doing ill; because both the good and the ill were necessary and unavoidable. There would be no more place for applause or blame among mankind: none of that generous indignation we now feel at the bad, as persons who have abused and perverted their rational powers: no more notion of accountableness for the use of those powers: no sense of ill desert, or just punishment annexed to crimes as their due; nor of any reward merited by worthy and generous actions. All these ideas, and feelings, so useful to men in their moral conduct, vanish at once with the feeling of liberty (Kames 1751:205-6).

According to Kames, the moral sentiments depend on having a sense of moral accountability, which in turn requires the feeling that we were free to have acted otherwise. Therefore, if we did not feel that we were free, we would not have had any moral sentiments. For instance, we would not feel regret for having done something bad, since we would know that we could not have avoided committing that bad action. Likewise, we would not praise those who engaged in good actions, since we would know that they could not have acted in any other way. The notion of moral desert would also have no legs to stand upon, so it would make no sense to claim, for instance, that a criminal *deserved* to be punished. Kames (1751: 206) adds, a bit later, that the sense of moral obligation—that we *ought* to perform certain actions as a matter of duty—would also not exist, since moral obligation presupposes “a power in the agent over his own actions.” In sum, then, Kames claims that our entire moral life would have been jeopardized if God had not endowed us with the mistaken belief in free will.

In the third edition of “Liberty and Necessity” (1779), Kames further elaborates this counterfactual scenario, arguing that without the illusion of free will, “the *ignava ratio* [lazy reason] [...] would have followed.”³⁷ That is, without the belief that we act freely, we would become idle and no longer strive to achieve anything noble or great. We would have “no motives to action, but immediate sensations of pleasure and pain” (Kames 1779: 121). Our lives would hardly be different from the lives of “brutes,” since we would only be driven by instinctive impulses (Kames 1779: 121). I think Sri Ramakrishna would have welcomed Kames’s detailed counterfactual arguments for the necessity of the illusion of free will.

Well aware that his unusual position on free will might spark controversy, Kames

anticipated three serious objections to his view.³⁸ First, one might object that a “deceitful feeling of liberty” is not an “honourable foundation” for virtue (Kames 1751: 207). Kames cleverly rebuts this objection by arguing that his doctrine, on the contrary, throws a “peculiar sort of glory” around virtue by showing that God introduces an “extraordinary machinery” for its sake (Kames 1751: 210). The fact that God has gone so far as to implant in us a deceptive feeling of freedom for the sake of fostering moral behavior shows how much God values and honors human virtue. As Kames puts it, God has endowed us with the illusion of free will precisely in order for conscience to have “a commanding power” and for virtue to be “set as on a throne” (Kames 1751: 211).

Second, Kames addresses the objection that he represents God “as acting deceitfully by his creatures” (Kames 1751: 211). The fact that God deceives us into believing that we are free seems to impugn either His omnipotence or His perfect goodness. If God has to implant in us a deceitful feeling of liberty in order to promote virtuous behavior, then it seems that God is limited in power, since a truly omnipotent God would have been able to establish virtue without resorting to deception. On the other hand, if God *could* have established virtue without resorting to deception but chose to deceive us anyway, then He would not be perfectly good, since a truly loving God would have chosen not to deceive His creatures.

Kames responds to this formidable objection by making two main arguments. First, he claims, in a Lockean vein, that there is an element of deception in our perception of external objects as well, since we are led mistakenly to ascribe secondary qualities such as color to the objects we perceive, even though such secondary qualities do not actually inhere in those objects. If God deceives us into thinking that we are free, He also deceives us into thinking that we perceive secondary qualities in external objects. It is arbitrary, Kames (1751: 212) argues, to object to divine deception in the former case but not in the latter case. Second, he (1751: 214) claims that the objection “amounts to no more, than that the Deity cannot work contradictions.” It was “fit and wise,” Kames (1751: 214) reasons, for God to have established “universal necessity” as the plan of the universe, since a universe in which everything was “desultory and contingent” would be a much less perfect one. At the same time, it was also “fit and wise” for God to have endowed us with a “sense of liberty,” in order for us to “think and act” as free agents (Kames 1751: 214). Moreover, since universal necessity is the real plan of the universe, this sense of liberty *had* to be a “deceitful” one (Kames 1751: 214). The fact that God cannot make 2+2 equal to 5 does not impugn His omnipotence, since even an omnipotent God cannot work contradictions. Similarly, the fact that God has endowed us with a deceptive feeling of free will does not impugn His omnipotence, since it is not logically possible to reconcile universal necessity with the feeling of free will in any other way.

Third, one might object that if the illusion of free will is so essential to morality, then why did God endow us “with so much knowledge, as to unravel the mystery” (Kames 1751: 214)? Why did God enable some of us to gain insight into the truth of determinism through philosophical reasoning? Would it not have been better for God to have kept all of us permanently deluded into thinking that we were free? Kames’s answer to this objection is twofold. He begins by arguing in Strawsonian fashion that even if we were to gain philosophical insight into the truth of determinism, we would still act *as if* we were free, since our philosophical conviction would be overridden by the deeply-rooted *feeling* of our freedom. As Kames puts it, “Upon the system of liberty we do, and must act: and no discoveries, made concerning the illusive nature of that feeling, are capable of disappointing, in any degree, the intention of the Deity” (Kames 1751: 215-6).

Kames (1751: 215) further argues that a “good consequence” results from the philosophical discovery that free will is an illusion. This discovery, he claims, furnishes us with a very powerful argument from design in favor of God’s existence. The fact that there is no free will but we *feel* that we are free constitutes very strong evidence of design in the universe, from which we can infer “a wise designing cause”—namely, God (Kames 1751: 217). Somewhat

surprisingly, Kames (1751: 217) then provocatively speculates that our occasional insight into the truth of determinism also provides “some *augurium*, some intimation” that man is “designed for a future, more exalted period of being; when attaining the full maturity of his nature, he shall no longer stand in need of artificial impressions, but shall feel and act according to the strictest truth of things.” This utopian speculation tempers somewhat Kames’s proto-Strawsonian naturalism about the moral sentiments: while the illusion of free will and moral responsibility is deeply rooted in human nature *as it is presently constituted*, humanity may eventually evolve to the point where such an illusion is no longer necessary. Kames (1751: 218) even suggests that living in accordance with the truth of determinism is a more desirable state of affairs, since it is a sign of “maturity” that one can live well and morally without any illusions.

Predictably, Kames’s “Liberty and Necessity” sparked considerable controversy when the first edition was published in 1751. The Scottish clergyman George Anderson (1753: 78) went so far as to accuse Kames of atheism, since “it is atheism to think that GOD is a false and deceitful being.”³⁹ Anderson was so outraged that he urged the Church of Scotland to excommunicate Kames for his blasphemous views, but the Church decided against excommunication.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, Kames felt compelled to temper his views considerably. In fact, in the third edition of “Liberty and Necessity” (1779), Kames dropped the language of deceit altogether in order to dodge the charge that he made God into a deceiver. It seems likely, however, that this significant change in the third edition represents less a radical change of view than a concession to his critics.

In sum, there are three main similarities between the positions of Kames and Sri Ramakrishna. First, both Kames and Sri Ramakrishna combine hard theological determinism with the thesis that God has endowed us with the illusion of free will. Second, both of them argue against the reality of free will by appealing to the law of psychophysical causation. Third, both defend the moral necessity of the illusion of free will by means of counterfactual arguments.

However, there are also significant differences in their respective approaches to free will. Kames seems to suggest that philosophical inquiry is the only way to gain knowledge of determinism. However, his philosophical arguments—which establish, at best, that there is no free will—provide justification of determinism but not *theological* determinism. In other words, there is a significant lacuna in Kames’s philosophical defense of theological determinism, since he fails to justify his assumption that God determines everything we do. Sri Ramakrishna follows Kames in arguing against the reality of free will by appealing to the law of psychophysical causation. Unlike Kames, however, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that we can gain knowledge of God as the Doer only through direct mystical experience. Sri Ramakrishna, then, provides an ultimately mystical justification of theological determinism.

Sri Ramakrishna and Kames also part ways on the issue of doxastic voluntarism. Many of Kames’s statements suggest that he was a doxastic voluntarist. Kames (1751: 203) claims that although one may be led to adopt a belief in determinism through philosophical inquiry, one’s conduct will still be guided by “feelings which would arise from power over his own actions.” Kames (1751: 203) furnishes the example of someone who believes that he has no free will and who commits an unethical act. According to Kames (1751: 203), even if this person were to try to absolve himself of any guilt or wrongdoing by reasoning that he could not have done otherwise, “his remorse will subsist.” For Kames, then, we may have a genuine belief that we have no free will but this belief can never uproot our more deeply rooted *feeling* that we are free and morally responsible.

For Sri Ramakrishna, by contrast, believing that God is the Doer requires nothing less than the direct mystical experience of God.⁴¹ He would therefore reject Kames’s claim that we can adopt a belief in determinism merely on the basis of philosophical reasoning. From Sri Ramakrishna’s perspective, the Kamesian philosopher who has not experienced God but who claims to believe that God is the Doer is guilty of self-deception. At best, such a person is *trying*

to think and act in such a way that he will eventually be able to believe in the truth of theological determinism. However, we must not confuse the *desire* or the concerted *effort* to believe that God is the Doer with the *belief* that God is the Doer. Take Kames's example of the man who commits an unethical act and tries to justify his behavior by claiming that he was not free to have done otherwise. In contrast to Kames, Sri Ramakrishna would argue that this man does not actually believe that he has no free will, since he has not realized God. For Sri Ramakrishna, one who has realized God knows that God is the Doer but is incapable of taking a "false step," while one who has *not* realized God must take moral responsibility for his actions, since he cannot help but think and act under the (mistaken) belief that he is free. Therefore, Sri Ramakrishna would maintain that Kames's hypothetical person who believes in determinism and does something unethical does not, and cannot, exist.

Moreover, I would suggest that Sri Ramakrishna's mystical orientation puts him in a better position than Kames to rebut the single most serious objection to their shared theological determinist position. As Kames frames the objection, the view that God has endowed us with the illusion of free will implies that God is a deceiver—which would impugn either God's goodness or God's omnipotence. Kames's primary strategy for rebutting this objection was to bite the bullet by admitting that God *does* deceive us while arguing that it was, in fact, "fit and wise" for Him to have deceived us, since it is only through this deception that God is able to reconcile the truth of determinism with our feeling of freedom. As we have seen, Kames's response to the objection failed to convince his contemporaries like Anderson, who argued that the view that God deceives us amounts to nothing less than atheism. Indeed, Kames himself eventually dropped the language of deception in the third edition of "Liberty and Necessity," perhaps because he felt that his argument for God as a benign deceiver was weak or inadequate.

From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint, however, Kames was too quick to repudiate his original position. The weakness in Kames's (1751: 214) response to the God-as-deceiver objection is that he failed to provide adequate justification of his claim that it was "fit and wise" for God to have endowed us with a "sense of liberty." Kames might protest that he *did* provide such a justification through his counterfactual arguments for the morally disastrous consequences of not believing in free will. However, would it not have been wiser and more benevolent of God not to have created us with the propensity to sin in the first place? After all, even if we assume the truth of theological determinism, God could have created us as morally perfect creatures. In that case, we would have avoided sin by our very nature, so the artificial contrivance of the illusion of free will would have been unnecessary.

Sri Ramakrishna, I would suggest, provides a fuller and more convincing explanation than Kames does of why God has endowed us with the illusion of freedom in the first place. To appreciate fully Sri Ramakrishna's explanation, we have to take a brief detour into his theodicy—his subtle account of why an omnipotent and loving God permits so much evil and suffering in this world. Indeed, the question of why God would deceive unenlightened people into thinking that they are free could itself be seen as a form of the problem of evil, since the state of being deceived could be considered an evil, or at least an undesirable state, in its own right.

I provide a detailed reconstruction and cross-cultural discussion of Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy in the seventh and eighth chapters of my forthcoming book (Maharaj 2018). For present purposes, I will only summarize the key aspects of Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy that bear directly on the issue of why God has endowed us with the illusion of free will. In response to a neighbor who raises the problem of evil, Sri Ramakrishna articulates what I call a "saint-making" theodicy:

NEIGHBOR: Why has God created wicked people?

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: That is Her will, Her play [*līlā*]. In Her *māyā* there exists *avidyā* as well as *vidyā*. Darkness is needed too. It reveals all the more the glory of light. There is no

doubt that anger, lust, and greed are evils. Why, then, has God created them? In order to create saints. [*mahat lok toyer korben bole.*] One becomes a saint by conquering the senses. Is there anything impossible for one who has subdued his passions? He can even realize God, through Her grace (K 36-37/G 97-98).⁴²

According to Sri Ramakrishna, God permits evil in the world “[i]n order to create saints.” Just as a game is played with certain fixed rules, God’s world-*lila* has, as it were, certain rules built into it that have profound theodical implications. In particular, since God has created this world as an environment for saint-making, evil is as necessary to the world as good. As Sri Ramakrishna puts it, darkness “reveals all the more the glory of the light.” In other words, it is through the experience of good and evil, both in the world and in ourselves, that we gradually learn to combat our own evil tendencies—such as “anger, lust, and greed”—and to cultivate ethical and spiritual virtues that are necessary to realize God. Good and saintly people serve as role models who inspire us to emulate them by exercising self-control and engaging in ethical behavior and spiritual practice. On the other hand, the evil we encounter in the world serves as a kind of mirror that reflects the evil tendencies lurking within our own hearts. Evil people and the unethical actions they commit lead us to recognize the horrific consequences of evil and motivate us to try to eliminate our own selfish and evil tendencies. In a world without evil, this “game” of saint-making would not even get off the ground, since everyone would be saintly from the outset and hence there would be no evil tendencies to overcome.

Since Sri Ramakrishna accepts the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth, he maintains that the saint-making process is a journey that spans many lifetimes. As he puts it, “When a man has performed many good actions in his previous births, in the final birth he becomes guileless” (K 840/G 783). Crucially, he also repeatedly affirms the doctrine of universal salvation in the specific context of theodicy: “[e]verybody will surely be liberated” sooner or later, either in this birth or in a future birth (K 37/G 98). If some people are ultimately deprived of salvation, then God could still be accused of partiality and cruelty. However, a striking feature of God’s “game” of saint-making is that everybody wins eventually. The doctrine of universal salvation, therefore, plays a key role in Sri Ramakrishna’s theodicy: the infinite good of spiritual salvation that awaits *all* of us outweighs the various finite evils of this life. In fact, as I have discussed elsewhere, some recent philosophers of religion such as John Hick have argued that any theodicy that does not uphold universal salvation is doomed to fail.⁴³ According to Hick, the traditional theistic conception of God as both omnipotent and perfectly good entails the doctrine of universal salvation. On the one hand, God is not perfectly good if He does not “desire to save all His human creatures”; on the other hand, God is not perfectly omnipotent if He *does* desire to save everyone but is unable to do so.⁴⁴ I believe Sri Ramakrishna would have welcomed Hick’s argument for the necessity of universal salvation on the basis of God’s omni-attributes.

Sri Ramakrishna’s saint-making theodicy also explains why a loving and omnipotent God has endowed us with the illusion of free will. According to Sri Ramakrishna, everyone without exception will eventually realize God and thereby gain the knowledge that God is the Doer. Therefore, the illusion that we are free is a necessary, but temporary, condition that will eventually be overcome. Moreover, God deceives us into thinking that we are free precisely in order to make saints of us all. The feeling that we are free and morally responsible for our actions spurs us on to engage in ethical behavior, which will take us closer to the goal of God-realization which awaits us all. For Sri Ramakrishna, then, God’s deception is a benign one that will help us achieve our own inevitable and eternal salvation.

Since Kames accepts neither the doctrine of universal salvation nor the possibility of mystical knowledge of God, this Ramakrishnan strategy for responding to the God-as-deceiver objection is not available to him. Instead, Kames can only gesture vaguely toward a utopian future state in which we are no longer deluded into thinking that we are free, yet he fails to explain how we might arrive at that state. Moreover, Kames’s surprising admission that our

delusion of freedom is ultimately an undesirable one undercuts, to a certain extent, his own earlier arguments for the moral necessity of this delusion. Sri Ramakrishna's mystical worldview allows him to adopt a more consistent and philosophically cogent position on free will. For Sri Ramakrishna, the temporary illusion of free will is a necessary basis for engaging in the ethical and spiritual disciplines that will bring us slowly but surely to the blissful state of *jīvanmukti*, upon the attainment of which we will shed all our illusions and gain the salvific knowledge that God is the Doer.

At this point, one might ask, why didn't God simply create us as saints from the outset? Why did God choose to play *this* particular cosmic "game"—involving the law of *karma* and the telos of saint-making—which entails so much suffering for Her creatures? In fact, one of Sri Ramakrishna's visitors asked him precisely this question: "But this play of God is our death" (K 437 / G 436). Tellingly, Sri Ramakrishna responds by appealing to the pantheistic standpoint of *vijñāna*: "Please tell me who you are. God alone has become all this—*māyā*, *jīvas*, the universe, and the twenty-four cosmic principles" (K 437 / G 436). As a *vijñānī*, Sri Ramakrishna affirms that God Himself sports in the form of the various *jīvas*, so all the suffering endured by *jīvas* is actually God's own playfully *self-inflicted* "suffering." Sri Ramakrishna, then, provides an ultimately pantheistic justification of God's *līlā*: the problem of evil is only a problem for those who mistakenly think that they are different from God.

However, his hard theological determinist position also raises another form of the problem of evil: if God is the Doer, then isn't God ultimately responsible for all the evil in the world? Since I discuss this issue in detail elsewhere, I will only very briefly summarize Sri Ramakrishna's position here.⁴⁵ I believe Sri Ramakrishna would have responded to this objection by pointing out that his saint-making theodicy is perfectly compatible with hard theological determinism, since the saint-making process by which we grow ethically and spiritually is valuable in spite of the fact that we are not free. Recently, the philosophers Derk Pereboom and Nick Trakakis have defended precisely such an argument.⁴⁶ As Pereboom (2016: 125) puts it, "the development from cowardice to courage, from immorality to morality, from ignorance to enlightenment, is valuable, even if these processes are wholly causally determined by God. [...]" Arguably, then, Sri Ramakrishna could still appeal to his saint-making theodicy in spite of his commitment to hard theological determinism. While God *is* ultimately responsible for all the evil in the world, His benevolent purpose in permitting—and, indeed, *causing*—us to sin and suffer is to make saints of us all and to grant each one of us eternal salvation.

3 In Defense of Illusionism: Triangulating Kames and Sri Ramakrishna with Smilansky

Most contemporary analytic philosophers discussing the issue of free will and determinism defend some form of compatibilism, the view that determinism—whether or not it is true—is compatible with the sort of free will necessary for moral responsibility.⁴⁷ A minority of them defend incompatibilism, the view that determinism is *not* compatible with the free will necessary for moral responsibility. Robert Kane, for instance, argues for the existence of libertarian free will—that is, a kind of metaphysically deep free will that is not compatible with determinism.⁴⁸ We are fortunate that we are free in the libertarian sense, Kane argues, since without such freedom, we would not be morally responsible for our actions. Some philosophers, by contrast, defend incompatibilist (or "hard") forms of determinism. For instance, Derk Pereboom⁴⁹ defends hard theological determinism, while Galen Strawson⁵⁰ defends hard naturalistic determinism.

In his provocative study, *Free Will and Illusion* (2000), Saul Smilansky intervenes in this long-standing debate between compatibilists and incompatibilists by emphasizing the importance of the illusion of free will. Smilansky's novel approach to the free will debate, I would suggest,

helps bring out the philosophical significance and contemporary relevance of the illusionist views of Kames and Sri Ramakrishna. Rejecting the “monistic” assumption that compatibilism and incompatibilism are mutually exclusive alternatives, Smilansky argues for a “Fundamental Dualism” that incorporates the “partial insights” of both compatibilism and hard determinism (Smilansky 2000: 94, 145).

In agreement with compatibilists, Smilansky (2000: 54) claims that our everyday practices of moral approbation and disapprobation—which depend only on local rather than ultimate forms of control—would not be affected significantly by the truth of determinism. At the same time, however, he charges the compatibilist position with “shallowness,” since if determinism were true, we would not be ultimately responsible for our actions and, therefore, we would not *deserve* to be praised or blamed for any of our actions in the deep sense of the word. As Smilansky (2000: 46) puts it, “In the end, even if we ‘freely’ do what we want in compatibilist terms, what we want, our desires and beliefs, is not ultimately something we *choose*: in a deterministic picture there was no real opportunity for us to be people who do otherwise.”

Smilansky argues that illusionism best reconciles the partial insights of compatibilism and hard determinism. In a nutshell, illusionism is the position that while there is no free will or moral responsibility in the ultimate sense, we necessarily act under the *illusion* that we are free and morally responsible for our actions. Smilansky’s illusionist position is clearly committed to the hard determinist thesis that we have, in reality, neither free will nor moral responsibility. At the same time, however, illusionism has a crucial quasi-compatibilist dimension: our feelings of moral responsibility and moral approval and disapproval are compatible with the truth of determinism, since only the *illusion* of free will—and not the *reality* of free will—is a necessary precondition for having these moral sentiments.

Like Kames and Sri Ramakrishna, Smilansky (2000: 163) argues that our entire moral life would be jeopardized if we did not act under the illusion that we were free. Moral praise and blame depend on the belief that we are morally responsible for our actions, and moral responsibility, in turn, depends on the reality of free will. For instance, when we blame someone for having committed an immoral act, we assume that the person was free *not* to have performed that action. If we were to find out that the person was *not* free to have done otherwise, we would be much less likely to consider her blameworthy for her action. Therefore, according to Smilansky, moral approval and disapproval, as well as the entire system of justice and punishment, are based on the belief in free will.

Moreover, without the illusion of free will, people would not feel remorse for anything they did, since they would not feel morally responsible for their actions. Smilansky (2000: 174) provides a helpful example: “Say that we want a man to blame himself, feel guilty, and even see that he deserves to be punished. Such a person is not as likely to do all this if he has internalized the ultimate perspective, according to which, in the actual world, nothing else could in fact have occurred [...]” Smilansky’s point here is a subtle one. Even without the belief in free will, this hypothetical person could still feel *bad* about what he did, since he can recognize that his action has resulted, say, in the harm of another person. However, such a person would not feel blameworthy or remorseful for what he did unless he believed that he was free to have done otherwise.

Smilansky further defends his illusionist position by specifying two serious dangers in coming to know that we are not free. First, if I knew that my actions were not free, then I could always excuse myself for having committed some immoral act, since I would know that I could not have acted in any other way. Such an attitude, Smilansky (2000: 153) argues, could open the floodgates to immoral behavior. Sri Ramakrishna, we should recall, makes a very similar argument: without the illusion of free will, we would not feel morally responsible for our actions, and we would, therefore, be more likely to act immorally. As Sri Ramakrishna puts it, “Sin would have increased if God had not made the sinner feel that he alone was responsible for his sin” (*K* 376/*G* 379-80). Second, Smilansky (2000: 153) claims that the knowledge that we are not free

would make us recognize the “impossibility of the achievement of moral worth [...] which may make effort seem pointless.” This danger, which Smilansky’s aptly calls the “Danger of Worthlessness,” should remind us of Kames’s “*ignava ratio*,” the lazy reasoning that justifies inaction on the basis of determinism. Without the illusion of free will, we might lose the motivation to act altogether, since we would know that nothing we do—no matter how good—would be morally praiseworthy in a deep sense. In agreement with Kames and Sri Ramakrishna, Smilansky (2000: 153) argues that all of these factors “reduce the arsenal of morality and increase the potential threat to moral behaviour.”

Smilansky’s illusionist approach helps bring out the contemporary relevance of the views of Kames and Sri Ramakrishna. By recognizing the moral and practical necessity of the illusion of free will, we can cut across long-standing debates between compatibilists and incompatibilists on the question of free will and determinism. Moreover, Smilansky’s detailed account of the morally disastrous consequences of not believing that we are free strengthens Sri Ramakrishna’s and Kames’s counterfactual arguments for the necessity of the illusion of free will.

However, Smilansky parts ways with Kames and Sri Ramakrishna in subscribing to naturalistic determinism rather than theological determinism. Indeed, Smilansky’s naturalism leads him to adopt a bleak and even tragic picture of the human condition. For Smilansky (2000: 247), it is fundamentally tragic that so much of life’s meaning and value depend on the illusion of free will. At the same time, however, knowing the truth of determinism is a “curse,” since the reality of life is so bleak and depressing (Smilansky 2000: 169). Smilansky entertains the possibility that there could be “Unillusioned Moral Individuals” (UMIs)—that is, exceptional individuals who continue to act morally even though they have freed themselves of the illusion of free will and moral responsibility (Smilansky 2000: 246-50). These UMIs, who have realized (presumably through philosophical reflection) the incoherence of libertarian free will, would lead noble and heroic lives while deliberately hiding the truth of determinism from others, since these UMIs would know that the widespread loss of belief in free will would have disastrous moral and societal consequences. The UMI would possess a “sense of the moral tragedy of the situation, the widespread necessity for illusion, dishonesty, and injustice [...]” (Smilansky 2000: 247). However, Smilansky leaves open the question whether being a UMI is even a psychological possibility. If it were the case that “libertarian assumptions are constitutive conditions of personhood,” then it would not even be possible to be stripped entirely of our illusions about free will while remaining sane and psychologically stable (Smilansky 2000: 249).

It is worth noting that Smilansky never even considers the possibility of theological determinism. Smilansky argues—on philosophical grounds—that the concept of libertarian free will is incoherent, and he simply takes for granted that God does not exist. Therefore, the only position left available to him is naturalistic determinism. This is precisely where Sri Ramakrishna would raise an objection: while he would likely agree with Smilansky’s philosophical argument for the incoherence of libertarian free will, he would point out that Smilansky is unjustified in assuming that God does not exist. I have argued elsewhere that Sri Ramakrishna frequently defended the rationality of belief in God’s existence by appealing to the argument from religious experience: the fact that many people, including himself, claim to have experienced God makes it reasonable to believe that God exists.⁵¹ Contemporary philosophers of religion continue to debate whether, and the degree to which, the argument from religious experience succeeds. For the purposes of this essay, it is not necessary to discuss the many thorny issues involved in this debate. I wish only to point out that Smilansky never even considers arguments for God’s existence, such as the argument from religious experience. From Sri Ramakrishna’s perspective, then, Smilansky unjustifiably rules out the possibility of theological determinism.

Sri Ramakrishna’s theological determinism leads him to adopt an essentially hopeful mystico-religious worldview that contrasts sharply with Smilansky’s tragic atheistic worldview. According to Sri Ramakrishna, God has endowed us with the illusion of free will in order to foster ethical and spiritual virtues that help bring us closer to God. Crucially, he maintains that

everyone without exception will eventually (either in this life or in a subsequent life) overcome this illusion by attaining God-realization and thereby know the truth that God alone is the Doer. By contrast, Smilansky raises serious doubts about whether it is even psychologically possible to become a full-blown UMI. Moreover, while Smilansky claims that the knowledge of determinism would be a “curse,” Sri Ramakrishna claims that the mystical knowledge of God as the Doer is nothing less than the blissful, salvific state of enlightenment awaiting us all. Finally, I think Sri Ramakrishna would find overblown Smilansky’s (2000: 172) argument for the need of UMIs to hide the truth of determinism from the deluded masses. Since Sri Ramakrishna rejects doxastic voluntarism, he maintains that no one can truly believe that God is the Doer without having the direct mystical experience of God. From Sri Ramakrishna’s standpoint, the illusion of free will is so deeply rooted in human nature that there is simply no danger that unenlightened people might start to behave as if they were not free.

4 Theological Determinism With or Without Illusionism?

Although theological determinism is not a popular position among contemporary philosophers, it still has a few champions—the most prominent being Derk Pereboom. Pereboom (2016: 114) defends theological determinism by arguing that it “provides an uncontested way to secure a strong notion of divine providence, one according to which everything that happens, including human decisions, is exactly in accord with God’s providential will.” According to Pereboom, belief in theological determinism is compatible with many of our moral and religious practices. For instance, while the theological determinist rejects the notion of desert-based moral responsibility, she could still engage in the practice of moral blame and praise, which can be justified on the “forward-looking” grounds that it diminishes “dispositions to immoral behavior” and strengthens “dispositions to moral action” (Pereboom 2016: 117). Unlike Sri Ramakrishna, then, Pereboom defends a theological determinism without the illusionist thesis that God has endowed us with the illusion of free will.

I think Sri Ramakrishna would have welcomed Pereboom’s efforts to defend theological determinism by thinking through the implications of divine providence. However, Sri Ramakrishna—along with Kames and Smilansky—would reject Pereboom’s assumption that the belief in free will is not necessary for the vast majority of people. From Sri Ramakrishna’s perspective, Pereboom underestimates the extent to which our everyday beliefs and practices depend on the assumption of free will. Without the illusion of free will, people would be more inclined to engage in unethical behavior and less likely to strive to cultivate ethical and spiritual virtues.

Interestingly, in his recent article “Against Theological Determinism,” Timothy O’Connor raises several serious objections to Pereboom’s theological determinist position and argues, in a Ramakrishnan vein, that theological determinism is much more plausible when combined with the illusionist thesis that God has deliberately hidden the truth of determinism from us for the sake of our own moral and spiritual welfare.⁵² Two of O’Connor’s criticisms of Pereboom’s position are especially relevant for our purposes.⁵³ First, O’Connor (2016: 134) claims that belief in theological determinism would undermine, or at least diminish, the religious practices of “confessing and repenting of sin and seeking divine aid in the struggle against it.” Arguably, these religious practices presuppose the feeling of moral responsibility for our actions, in which case these practices would be incompatible with the belief in theological determinism. Referring specifically to Christian religious practice, O’Connor (2016: 137) observes, “We acknowledge our responsibility for our past failures and commit ourselves to cooperate with God’s grace in turning from those wrongful practices, to struggle against ‘the sin that so easily entangles.’” However, O’Connor (2016: 138) goes on to add that even if these Christian practices of confession and repentance could be shown to be compatible with the absence of

moral responsibility, they would still involve “scaled-back moral attitudes” that would “diminish our sense of moral personhood when we encounter or seek to communicate with God.” O’Connor’s argument can easily be extended to encompass other theistic religions such as Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism: since all of these religions inculcate ethical and spiritual practices that arguably presuppose at least the feeling—if not the reality—of moral responsibility, these practices would be threatened or diminished by the belief in theological determinism. Where Sri Ramakrishna differs from both Pereboom and O’Connor is in his rejection of doxastic voluntarism. Pereboom and O’Connor seem to assume that we can adopt a belief in theological determinism more or less at will, and they then proceed to assess the moral and religious consequences of holding this belief. Sri Ramakrishna, by contrast, maintains that we cannot really believe that God is the Doer until we have the direct mystical experience of God. Nonetheless, Sri Ramakrishna would agree with O’Connor that many of our ethical and religious practices presuppose the feeling of moral responsibility for our actions.

Second, O’Connor argues that belief in theological determinism would adversely affect how we relate to God. He (2016: 139) observes: “When, for example, I struggle to participate in my own sanctification and pray for God’s grace, can I coherently think all the while that where I fail, I was unable to do otherwise and bear no responsibility, and furthermore that God’s ‘secret,’ all-things-considered will was that I *should* fail in that very instance?” O’Connor calls into question the very coherence of Pereboom’s position by suggesting that it may not even be psychologically possible for us to believe in theological determinism while engaging in religious practices such as prayer, which seem to presuppose a sense of moral responsibility.

In the concluding paragraph of his article, O’Connor (2016: 140) makes the insightful observation that many of the problems in Pereboom’s theological determinist position “are, in part, practical problems that flow from *believing* in theological determinism.” He then makes a provocative suggestion that brings us full circle to Sri Ramakrishna:

Drop the belief [in theological determinism], and part of the problem goes away, even if it is true. Since I take myself to be fallible in philosophical matters, I assign some small credence to Pereboom’s position being correct. And that leads me to wonder whether, if Pereboom *is* right, God, in his artful providence, may have seen to it that all of us find it so very natural to believe falsely that we *are* free and morally responsible precisely in order to circumvent the problems associated with knowing the truth (O’Connor 2016: 140-1).

O’Connor suggests here that Pereboom’s theological determinism would be much more plausible on the assumption of illusionism. In other words, even if theological determinism is true, God would have very good reasons to hide this fact from us. We can further develop O’Connor’s intriguing suggestion by drawing not only on Smilansky’s arguments for the necessity of believing in free will but also on the unduly neglected views of Kames and Sri Ramakrishna, who were the first to work out in detail how theological determinism can be combined with illusionism.

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Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Vedānta, and he serves as a section editor for the *International Journal of Hindu Studies*.

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- ¹ “*īśvaraḥ sarvabhūtānāṃ hr̥d̥deśe ’rjuna tiṣṭhati | bhr̥māyan sarvabhūtāni yantrārūdhāni māyayā.*” Sri Aurobindo, *Bhagavad Gīta and its Message: With Text, Translation and Sri Aurobindo’s Commentary*. Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Light Publications, 1995 [1938], 284. In this article, all English translations of verses from the *Gītā* are my own.
- ² “*indriyasyendriyasyārthe rāgadveṣau vyavasthītau | tayorna vaśam āgacchet tau hyasya pariṅthanau*” (Sri Aurobindo 1995 [1938]: 65).
- ³ Of course, one way to reconcile the apparently conflicting strains in the *Gītā* is to argue that 18.61 does not, in fact, affirm a thoroughgoing theological determinism. On this reading, even though God determines much of what we do, we still have *enough* free will to engage in the kind of ethical and spiritual disciplines enjoined by the *Gītā*. The interpretive challenge for proponents of this reading would be to prove that the deterministic-sounding statements in the *Gītā* are not as deterministic as they seem. Under (HTD3) in Part I of this essay, I briefly outline a different interpretive strategy—based on Sri Ramakrishna’s illusionist approach—that takes the deterministic passages in the *Gītā* at face value. For interesting discussions of the *Gītā*’s views on free will and determinism, see Arvind Sharma, “Fate and Free Will in the Bhagavadgītā,” *Philosophy East and West* 15, no. 4, (1979): 531-37; Duk-Joo Kwak and Hye-chong Han, “The Issue of Determinism and Freedom as an Existential Question: A Case in the *Bhagavad Gītā*,” *Philosophy East and West* 63, no. 1, (2013): 55-72; and M.V. Nadkarni, *The Bhagavad-Gītā for the Modern Reader: History, Interpretations, and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2017), 230.
- ⁴ For Swami Vivekananda’s and Sārādā Devī’s praise of the accuracy of Gupta’s work, see Mahendranāth Gupta, *Śrīśrīrāmakaṣṇakathāmṛta: Śrīma-kathita* (Kolkata: Udbodhan, 2010 [1897-1932]), v-vi. Throughout this article, whenever I refer to the *Kathāmṛta*, I will make parenthetical citations in the body of the essay, first citing the page number of the Bengali original (abbreviated “K”) and then citing the page number of Swami Nikhilananda’s English translation (abbreviated “G”), whenever available. See Mahendranath Gupta, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1992 [1942]). I sometimes modify Nikhilananda’s translation of the *Kathāmṛta*.
- ⁵ Ayon Maharaj, *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality: Sri Ramakrishna and Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- ⁶ Those who wish to situate Sri Ramakrishna’s views on free will and determinism within the broader context of his overall philosophical worldview should consult chapter 1 of my book, *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality*, where I argue that Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophy is best characterized as “Vijñāna Vedānta,” a nonsectarian philosophy—rooted in the spiritual experience of what he calls “*vijñāna*”—that harmonizes various apparently conflicting religious faiths, sectarian philosophies, and spiritual disciplines. As a *vijñāni*, Sri Ramakrishna holds that the Infinite Divine Reality is both personal (*saguṇa*) and impersonal (*nirguṇa*), both with and without form, both immanent in the universe and beyond it. Sri Ramakrishna’s Vijñāna Vedānta differs from Advaita Vedānta in two key respects. First, while Advaitins conceive the ultimate reality as only *nirguṇa*, Sri Ramakrishna takes the ultimate reality to be *nirguṇa*, *saguṇa*, and more besides. Second, while Advaitins take the universe to be unreal, Sri Ramakrishna takes the world to be a real manifestation of *Śakti*, the personal and dynamic aspect of the Infinite Reality.
- ⁷ As far as I am aware, Arindam Chakrabarti is the only scholar who has discussed Sri Ramakrishna’s views on free will and determinism. See Chakrabarti’s two articles, “The Dark Mother Flying Kites: Sri Ramakrishna’s Metaphysic of Morals,” *Sophia* 33, no. 3, (1988), 14-29, and “Why Pray to God who can Hear the Ant’s Anklets?: Prayer, Freedom and Karma,” in *Sri Ramakrishna’s Ideas and Our Times: A Retrospect on His 175th Birth Anniversary*, eds. Swarup Roy, Jatisankar Chattopadhyay, Swami Shastrajananda, Sandipan Sen, (Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2013), 155-78. Chakrabarti’s interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna’s position in his 2013 article comes close to mine: “We are not really free, but undeniably have been hardwired to feel free” (Chakrabarti 2013: 177).

- 8 Lord Kames, *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion: Part I* (Edinburgh: R. Fleming, 1751), 207.
- 9 See Saul Smilansky, *Free Will and Illusion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 56-73, and Saul Smilansky, “Free Will, Fundamental Dualism, and the Centrality of Illusion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, ed. Robert Kane, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 490-91.
- 10 For a helpful discussion of soft and hard forms of theological determinism, see section 3 of Leigh Vicens’s article, “Theological Determinism,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/>; last accessed on 29 August 2017). An anonymous reviewer asks whether Sri Ramakrishna’s position might not be “an unusual type of compatibilism.” If we take compatibilism to be the view that free will is compatible with determinism, then I would argue that Sri Ramakrishna is *not* a compatibilist, since he explicitly *denies* the reality of free will. However, as I make clear in Part III of this article, Sri Ramakrishna’s hard theological determinist position does have a compatibilist “flavor,” since he maintains that the *illusion* of free will and the consequent feeling of moral responsibility are, indeed, compatible with theological determinism. On my interpretation, then, Sri Ramakrishna is an incompatibilist who nonetheless affirms the compatibility of theological determinism with the feeling of moral responsibility—a feeling based, however, on the illusion, rather than the reality, of free will. Of course, if we take the compatibility of determinism with the *illusion* of free will to be sufficient for a position to count as compatibilist, then Sri Ramakrishna could be considered a compatibilist, but I think this designation would be misleading.
- 11 Sri Ramakrishna was likely unaware of the fact that numerous classical Indian philosophers did, in fact, discuss the issue of free will, and that Naiyāyikas definitely *accepted* the reality of free will. See eds. Matthew R. Dasti and Edwin F. Bryant, *Free Will, Agency, and Selfhood in Indian Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 12 Jadu Mallick was a wealthy householder who frequently visited Sri Ramakrishna.
- 13 The last quoted sentence is a line from a popular Bengali devotional hymn to Kālī, “*Sakālī tomāri icchā*.”
- 14 Interestingly, Sri Ramakrishna himself later employed the analogy of a cow tied to a post in conversation with his disciples. He begins by unambiguously affirming hard theological determinism: “Is there any free will for anyone? Everything happens and will happen by God’s will.” See Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, trans. Swami Chetanananda (St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 2003), 150. For the original Bengali, see Svāmī Sāradānanda, *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇalīlāprasāṅga*, vol. 1 (Kolkata: Udbodhan, 2008 [1919]), second fascicle, 6. Crucially, Sri Ramakrishna then explicitly mentions the cow-post analogy to illustrate the point that ordinary people have the *illusion* of free will, even though they are not really free. As he puts it, “God has given some power [*śakti*] to human beings and has allowed them to use that power, however they wish, within the limits of that power. That is why people think they are free” (Saradananda 2003: 150; Sāradānanda, *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇalīlāprasāṅga*, vol. 1, second fascicle, 7). I have modified Chetananda’s translation, since I find it misleading in this case.
- 15 As Dasti points out, Naiyāyikas agree with Sri Ramakrishna that knowledge and desire are the causes of bodily actions, but they arrive at the opposite conclusion that there *is* free will. See Matthew Dasti, “Nyāya’s Self as Agent and Knower,” in Dasti and Bryant (2014: 112-36). For instance, Dasti schematizes the Naiyāyika Viśvanātha’s analysis of the process terminating in bodily action as follows: “Cognition (of some act as worthy of being performed) → intention (*vikāryā*) → volition (*prayatna*) → bodily action (*karman; cēṣṭā*)” (Dasti 2014: 115). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention.
- 16 For an excellent discussion of Sri Ramakrishna’s argument for determinism, see Chakrabarti (2013: 23-4).
- 17 One might object along Frankfurtian lines to Sri Ramakrishna’s argument against free will. Distinguishing first-order desires from second-order desires, Harry Frankfurt claims, “the statement that a person enjoys freedom of the will means [...] that he is free to want what he wants to want.” Harry G. Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of the Person,”

Journal of Philosophy 68, no. 1, (1971), 15. Against Sri Ramakrishna, the Frankfurtian could argue that we *do* sometimes have a *second-order* desire to have a certain first-order desire, in which case it seems wrong to say that we are never free to choose our desires. However, as Alfred Mele and numerous other philosophers have argued, Frankfurt's theory of second-order desires succumbs to an infinite regress. See Alfred Mele, *Autonomous Agents: From Self-Control to Autonomy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 145-6. We have to ask whether we were free in forming our second-order desire to have our first-order desire. If it turns out that at some point along the chain of higher-order desires, we did not freely form that desire, then the first-order desire still turns out *not* to have been freely chosen in the ultimate sense. I think Sri Ramakrishna could rebut Frankfurtian objections to their deterministic position by appealing to this problem of infinite regress: even if we *chose* (at the second-order level) to have a certain first-order desire, that choice itself will turn out to have been causally determined by forces beyond our control at some earlier point in the chain of higher-order desires.

18 An anonymous reviewer asks, "So what, then, would be the problem with a massive increase in sin?" Answering this question requires an understanding of Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy, which I outline at the end of Part II of this paper. In brief, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that God created this world as an environment conducive to ethical and spiritual development so that everyone will eventually—in this life or a future life—attain salvation. The illusion of free will and the consequent feeling of moral responsibility, therefore, serve God's purpose of leading everyone to the goal of saintliness and salvation.

19 An anonymous reviewer points out that Sri Ramakrishna's claim that *vidyā-māyā* leads to God seems to contradict his claim that there is no real distinction between good and bad actions. For Sri Ramakrishna, these claims do not contradict each other because *vidyā-māyā* represents spiritually beneficial qualities that are nonetheless based on the mistaken feeling of doership, which leads one to make a distinction between good and bad actions. However, the *jīvanmukta*, who has realized God with the help of *vidyā-māyā*, knows that God is the Doer and thereby transcends even *vidyā-māyā*, which presupposes doership. Therefore, the *jīvanmukta* also realizes that there is actually no distinction between good and bad actions.

20 It might help to clarify Sri Ramakrishna's view by identifying parallels in the *Gītā*, a scripture he knew well. Sri Ramakrishna's concept of *vidyā-māyā* corresponds quite closely to the "*sāttvika*" qualities—such as detachment and humility—described at various points in the *Gītā*, including 18.26. Sri Ramakrishna's God-realized *jīvanmukta* corresponds to the saint "who has transcended the three *guṇas*," described in *Gītā* 14.22-27. In other words, the *Gītā* maintains that *sāttvika* qualities are indispensable aids on the path to God-realization but that the knower of Brahman transcends even these *sāttvika* qualities. Similarly, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that *vidyā-māyā* is essential for attaining God-realization but that the *jīvanmukta* transcends *both avidyā-māyā* and *vidyā-māyā*.

21 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

22 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. W.F. Trotter (Mineola, NY: Dover Pascal 2003, [1670]), 68.

23 Saradananda (2003: 150-51). For the original Bengali, see Sāradānanda, *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇalīlāprasāṅga*, vol. 1, second fascicle, 6-7.

24 Saradananda (2003: 150-51). For the original Bengali, see Sāradānanda, *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇalīlāprasāṅga*, vol. 1, second fascicle, 6-7.

25 For a good overview of doxastic voluntarism, see Rick Vitz, "Doxastic Voluntarism," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/>; last accessed on 29 August 2017).

26 William Alston, "The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification," *Philosophical Perspectives* 2, (1988), 266-67.

27 An anonymous reviewer asks whether doxastic voluntarism is "*prima facie* incompatible with determinism." I think the reviewer is correct that in the ultimate sense, Sri Ramakrishna—as a hard theological determinist—would deny voluntarism in any form, doxastic or otherwise. However, the point I am making here is that Sri Ramakrishna would have rejected even *local* forms of doxastic voluntarism. That is, he would not accept the view that people are able to

- adopt a belief in God's existence at will, where "at will" means something like "through an immediate mental resolve that may nonetheless have God as its ultimate cause."
- 28 No scholar of whom I am aware has attempted to reconcile the *Gītā*'s views on free will and determinism in this manner. However, the broader issue of an apparent tension between divine agency and human effort has been a long-standing concern in Indian theistic traditions such as Śrīvaiṣṇavism. For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Patricia Mumme's study, *The Śrīvaiṣṇava Theological Dispute: Maṇavālamāmuni and Vedānta Deśika* (Madras: New Era Publications, 1988).
- 29 "prakṛteḥ kriyamāṇāni guṇaiḥ karmāṇi sarvaśaḥ | abhīkāravimūḍātmā kartāham iti manyate" (Sri Aurobindo 1995 [1938]: 66).
- 30 I explore elsewhere how other teachings of Sri Ramakrishna can help motivate a new hermeneutic framework for interpreting the *Gītā*. See Ayon Maharaj, "Toward a New Hermeneutics of the *Bhagavad Gītā*: Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Aurobindo, and the Secret of *Vijñāna*," *Philosophy East and West* 65, no. 4, (2015): 1209-33.
- 31 For a detailed discussion of Sri Ramakrishna's account of *vijñāna* and its far-reaching philosophical implications, see chapter 1 of my *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality*. I call Sri Ramakrishna's worldview "panentheistic," since he views the world as a real manifestation of Śakti while maintaining that the Infinite Divine Reality—which is not only the personal Śakti but also the impersonal Brahman—is also *beyond* the universe. Recently, panentheism has become a central topic in theology and the philosophy of religion. For a survey of different versions of panentheism, see Loriliai Biernacki and Philip Clayton, *Panentheism across the World's Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 32 For further evidence that Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on *vijñāna* are based on his own mystical experiences, see sections I and III of chapter 1 of my *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality*.
- 33 Chakrabarti (2013: 26-8) provides a good discussion of this point. Sri Ramakrishna's *vijñāna*-based worldview bears striking affinities with the philosophy of Kaśmīri Śaivism. For a helpful discussion of some of these affinities, see Swami Tadananda, "Kashmir Shaivism in the Light of Sri Ramakrishna's Teachings," *Prabuddha Bharata* 116, no. 1, (2011): 86-91. An anonymous reviewer asks whether Sri Ramakrishna might have been influenced by Kaśmīri Śaivism. I discuss some of the philosophical influences on Sri Ramakrishna in chapter 1 of my *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality*. While Sri Ramakrishna was influenced by the philosophy of Tantra, there is no evidence that he was aware of Kaśmīri Śaivism. Sri Ramakrishna's first guru was a Vaiṣṇava Tāntrika named Bhairavī Brāhmaṇī, so he was likely aware of the main tenets of Tāntrika philosophy, some of which coincide with the tenets of Kaśmīri Śaivism.
- 34 Lord Kames, *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* (Edinburgh: R. Fleming, 1751), 207. As I will discuss later in this section, Kames dropped the language of "deception" in the third edition of "Liberty and Necessity" (1779) in order to avoid theological controversy. In this section, I will focus mainly on the first edition of "Liberty and Necessity," but I will also sometimes discuss arguments from the third edition when relevant. For helpful discussions of the differences between the first and third editions of Kames's "Liberty and Necessity," see Mary Catherine Moran, "Introduction," in Kames (2005: xv-xvii), and Suderman (2015: 219-22).
- 35 Lord Kames, *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion: Corrected and Improved, in a Third Edition* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005 [1779]), 104.
- 36 Peter F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," reprinted in Peter F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Routledge, 2008), 1-28.
- 37 Kames (2005 [1779]: 121), 121. As an anonymous reviewer helpfully points out, Kames's notion of an "*ignava ratio*" echoes the well-known objection to the fatalist doctrine of the ancient Stoics. As Dorothea Frede has shown, while Stoics were, arguably, determinists of a sort, they also admitted some degree of individual choice in our ability to choose how to respond to a given circumstance. See Dorothea Frede, "Stoic Determinism," in *Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, ed. Brad Inwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 179-205. Accordingly, the Stoic position is probably best understood as a compatibilist one, and the standard Stoic response to the "lazy reason" objection—which can be traced to Chrysippus—is, therefore, quite different

- from the route taken by Kames and Sri Ramakrishna, who appeal to the *illusion* of free will. For helpful accounts of the Stoic response to the “lazy reason” objection, see Frede (2003: 202-05) and David Forman, “Leibniz and the Stoics: Fate, Freedom, and Providence,” in *The Routledge Handbook of the Stoic Tradition*, ed. John Sellars (London: Routledge, 2016), 866-7.
- 38 For reasons I make clear later in this section, I outline here the objections discussed in the first edition of Kames’s “Liberty and Necessity” (1751).
- 39 George Anderson, *An Estimate of the Profit and Loss of Religion Personally and Publicly Stated: Illustrated with References to Essays on Morality and Natural Religion* (Edinburgh, 1753).
- 40 Jeffrey M. Suderman, “Religion and Philosophy,” in *Scottish Philosophy in the Eighteenth Century, Volume I: Morals, Politics, Arts, Religion*, eds. Aaron Garrett and James A. Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 220-22.
- 41 It should be added that Sri Ramakrishna did believe that philosophical arguments, such as the one based on the law of psychophysical causation discussed in (HTD2), could produce some degree of intellectual conviction about the truth of determinism. However, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that the full-blown belief that God is the Doer requires mystical experience.
- 42 Christians tend to refer to God as “He,” but Sri Ramakrishna most often referred to God as “She,” since he looked upon God as the Divine Mother or *Śakti*.
- 43 See section III of chapter 8 of my book (Maharaj 2018).
- 44 John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, second edition (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010 [1977]), 342.
- 45 See sections IV and V of chapter 7 of my book (Maharaj 2018).
- 46 Derk Pereboom, “Libertarianism and Theological Determinism,” in *Free Will and Theism: Connections, Contingencies, and Concerns*, eds. Kevin Timpe and Daniel Speak (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 125. Nick Trakakis makes a similar argument in his article, “Does Hard Determinism Render the Problem of Evil Even Harder?,” *Ars Disputandi* 6, (2006), 247-49.
- 47 Some prominent compatibilist accounts of free will and moral responsibility include Frankfurt (1971: 5-20); R. Jay Wallace, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Michael McKenna, *Conversation and Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Dana Nelkin, *Making Sense of Freedom and Responsibility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- 48 Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- 49 See Derk Pereboom’s three works in particular: *Living without Free Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); (2016).
- 50 Galen Strawson, *Freedom and Belief*, second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 51 See chapter 6 of my book (Maharaj 2018).
- 52 Timothy O’Connor, “Against Theological Determinism,” in *Free Will and Theism*, eds. Kevin Timpe and Daniel Speak (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 132-141.
- 53 A major objection raised by O’Connor which I do not address here concerns the implications of theological determinism for the problem of evil. I defend Sri Ramakrishna’s theological determinism against this objection at the end of Part II of this article and, in much greater detail, in chapter 7 of my book (Maharaj 2018).