

TOWARD A NEW HERMENEUTICS OF THE *BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ*: SRI RAMAKRISHNA, SRI AUROBINDO, AND THE SECRET OF *VIJÑĀNA*



Ayon Maharaj

Departments of Philosophy and English, Ramakrishna Mission
Vivekananda University
ayon@alum.berkeley.edu

The *Bhagavad Gītā* has inspired more interpretive controversy than any other religious scripture in India's history. The *Gītā*, a philosophical and spiritual poem of approximately seven hundred verses, is part of the ancient Sanskrit epic, the *Mahābhārata*. In the *Gītā*, the Lord Kṛṣṇa, who appears in the form of a charioteer, imparts spiritual teachings to the warrior Arjuna and convinces him to fight in a just war that entails the slaughter of many of Arjuna's own relatives and loved ones. Śaṅkara, the great eighth-century champion of the Advaita ("nondual") school of philosophy, wrote the first extant commentary on the *Gītā*. In this commentary, Śaṅkara interpreted the *Gītā* strictly in accordance with Advaita philosophy and attempted to refute various possible non-Advaitic readings of the text.

Śaṅkara's influential commentary on the *Gītā* inaugurated a lively debate over how to interpret the *Gītā*'s philosophical teachings that continues to this day. Rāmānuja, the eleventh-century proponent of the Viśiṣṭādvaita ("qualified nondual") school of philosophy, rejected Śaṅkara's Advaitic interpretation of the *Gītā* and claimed that the *Gītā* in fact propounds the philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita. Madhva, the thirteenth-century exponent of the Dvaita ("dualist") school of philosophy, argued—against both Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja—that the *Gītā* teaches none other than Dvaita doctrine. Over the centuries, countless other commentators holding a variety of philosophical and religious positions have claimed the *Gītā* as their own.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, numerous Indian and Western scholars—ranging from B. G. Tilak and Sri Aurobindo to R. C. Zaehner, Robert Minor, and Arvind Sharma—have rightly complained that many traditional commentators on the *Gītā* were guilty of reading their own prejudices and preconceptions into the text.¹ As Minor puts it, commentators such as Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja "believed that their systems of thought must be contained in the *Gītā* and set out to 'find' them there and to claim the *Gītā* as a source of their point of view, even at the expense of the text."² In other words, while traditional commentators claimed to provide a faithful exegesis of the *Gītā*, they often lapsed into the *eisegetic* practice of imposing their own conceptual frameworks onto the text, thereby distorting or falsifying fundamental aspects of the *Gītā*'s philosophical teachings.³

Many recent scholars have rejected this traditional *eisegetic* approach in favor of a more immanent approach to the *Gītā* that strives to understand the text on its own terms. One major consequence of this shift away from *eisegesis* in modern *Gītā*

scholarship has been an increasing attention to a variety of apparent contradictions and puzzles in the *Gītā* that traditional commentators tended to ignore or explain away.⁴ Perhaps the most fundamental puzzle concerns the *Gītā*'s complex views on the nature of God. At various points, the *Gītā* describes Kṛṣṇa as a personal God with numerous attributes. In IV.7–9 (chapter 4, verses 7–9), for instance, Kṛṣṇa declares himself to be an incarnation of God in human form, and in V.29 Kṛṣṇa states that he is the “mighty Lord of all the worlds.”⁵ However, the *Gītā* also accepts the reality of the transcendental “Ātman” (“Self”) propounded in the Upaniṣads, the culminating portion of the Vedas. In II.17–25, Kṛṣṇa asserts in an Upaniṣadic vein that Arjuna's true self is not the empirical body-mind complex but the eternal Ātman that is without form and attributes. Strikingly, despite the fact that the *Gītā* characterizes Kṛṣṇa as a personal God, it also identifies Kṛṣṇa with the formless, impersonal Ātman. As Kṛṣṇa declares to Arjuna in X.20, “I am the Ātman residing in the hearts of all beings.”

To complicate matters further, the *Gītā* also maintains that God is at once immanent in the universe and transcendent to it. In chapters 10 and 11, Kṛṣṇa details the various ways he is manifested in the universe, but in X.42, he points out that he nonetheless remains transcendent to the universe: “I support this entire universe with a minute portion of Myself.” The challenge for the exegete intent on reading the *Gītā* on its own terms is to reconcile the seemingly incompatible aspects of Kṛṣṇa's Godhood without invoking external explanatory frameworks. Remaining strictly within the *Gītā*'s own thought-structure, how can we make sense of the *Gītā*'s central doctrine that God is both personal and impersonal, both with and without form, both immanent and transcendent? While numerous scholars have noted the complexities involved in the *Gītā*'s conception of God, they have not been able to explain adequately its role in the *Gītā*'s philosophical structure as a whole.⁶

I will make the case, however, that Sri Aurobindo's unduly neglected *Essays on the Gita* (1916–1920) constitutes a major advance in *Gītā* scholarship, for it demonstrates that the *Gītā*'s unique doctrine of the impersonal-personal God not only plays a central role in the *Gītā*'s overall thought-structure but also lies at the basis of its syncretic teachings on spiritual practice. Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950), a British-educated Bengali yogi and mystic, was one of the first modern interpreters of the *Gītā* to reject the eisegetic practice of traditional “polemist” commentators, who turned the *Gītā* into “a weapon for dialectical warfare.”⁷ Ironically, Sri Aurobindo himself has sometimes been accused of eisegesis, since it may appear as if he read his own experiences and presuppositions into the *Gītā* instead of taking the text on its own terms.⁸

I hope to demonstrate, however, that Sri Aurobindo's highly original interpretation of the *Gītā* is, in fact, rigorously immanent to the thought-structure of the *Gītā* itself. Sections I and II below provide the biographical and intellectual background necessary to appreciate the rigor and far-reaching significance of Sri Aurobindo's reading of the *Gītā*. In section I, I discuss some of the key teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, the nineteenth-century Bengali mystic, whom Sri Aurobindo declared to be the “last and greatest” of all the “avatāras” (incarnations of God), “for while others felt

God in a single or limited aspect, he felt Him in His illimitable unity as the sum of an illimitable variety.”⁹ In his recorded teachings, Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly contrasts *jñāna*, spiritual knowledge of the impersonal *Ātman*, with *vijñāna*, a deeper and more intimate realization of God as at once personal and impersonal, at once with and without form, at once beyond the universe and immanent in it.

Section II begins with a discussion of Sri Aurobindo’s account of his formative mystical experiences between 1907 and 1909, which correspond quite closely to the experiences of *jñāna* and *vijñāna* described by Sri Ramakrishna. I then briefly examine Sri Aurobindo’s essay, “The Yoga and Its Objects,” which was written shortly before he started composing *Essays on the Gita*. In “The Yoga and Its Objects,” Sri Aurobindo sketches a spiritual philosophy based implicitly on his own mystical experiences and begins to explore how the perspective of *vijñāna* opened up by Sri Ramakrishna can motivate a new hermeneutic framework for reinterpreting the Indian scriptures, especially the Vedas, the Upaniṣads, and the *Gītā*.

With this background in place, I turn to an examination of Sri Aurobindo’s *Essays on the Gita* in section III. Sri Aurobindo, I argue, makes a convincing case that the cryptic distinction drawn in the *Gītā* between *jñāna* and *vijñāna*—an aspect of the *Gītā*’s philosophy not especially stressed by traditional commentators—holds the hermeneutic key to understanding the *Gītā*’s entire thought-structure. Sri Aurobindo claims that in verses such as VII.2 and IX.1 of the *Gītā*, *jñāna* means the spiritual realization of the impersonal *Ātman*, while *vijñāna* is the higher and more “comprehensive” knowledge of God as at once the impersonal *Ātman*, the supreme Lord pervading the universe, and the transcendent Reality beyond both. I will argue that Sri Aurobindo provides a thoroughly immanent justification of his interpretation of *jñāna* and *vijñāna* in the *Gītā* by situating the concepts within the broader context of the *Gītā* as a whole. In fact, he demonstrates that the concept of *vijñāna*—when properly understood—helps clarify many of the *Gītā*’s most distinctive and puzzling philosophical doctrines, including its seemingly contradictory account of the nature of God.

Section IV gestures toward some of the broader implications of Sri Aurobindo’s radical reinterpretation of *vijñāna* in the *Gītā*. The concept of *vijñāna* not only furnishes the philosophical basis for the *Gītā*’s unique syncretic approach to spiritual practice but also hints at a fresh rationale for religious pluralism that could make a significant contribution to contemporary interreligious dialogue and suggest new directions for comparative theology.

I. Sri Ramakrishna’s Philosophy of Vijñāna

Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886), who reported having had mystical experiences of God in numerous forms throughout his life, has earned a unique place in the history of world religious figures. He practiced—and claimed to have attained perfection in—a variety of Hindu and non-Hindu spiritual and religious disciplines, including Tantra, Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism, Christianity, and Islam. Mahendranath Gupta, a close householder devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, carefully recorded

in Bengali many of the conversations held between Sri Ramakrishna and his devotees during the last five years of Sri Ramakrishna's life.

In his recorded teachings, Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly draws a distinction between two forms of spiritual knowledge, which he calls "*jñāna*" and "*vijñāna*." In a dialogue dated April 5, 1884, he explains this distinction in great detail:

Jñāna is the realization of the *Ātman* through the process of "*neti, neti*," "Not this, not this." One goes into *samādhi* through this process of elimination and realizes the *Ātman*. But *vijñāna* means a deeper and more intimate knowledge of the Supreme Reality [*bīśeṣrūpe jānā*]. Some have heard of milk, some have seen milk, and some have drunk milk. He who has merely heard of it is "ignorant." He who has seen it is a *jñānī*. But he who has drunk it has *vijñāna*, that is to say, a more intimate knowledge of it. After having the vision of God, one talks to Him as if He were an intimate relative. That is *vijñāna*.

First of all you must discriminate, following the method of "*neti, neti*": "He is not the five elements, nor the sense-organs, nor the mind, nor the intelligence, nor the ego. He is beyond all these cosmic principles." You want to climb to the roof; then you must eliminate and leave behind all the steps, one by one. The steps are by no means the roof. But after reaching the roof, you find that the steps are made of the same materials—brick, lime, and brick dust—as the roof. He who is the Supreme Brahman has also become the universe and its living beings and the twenty-four cosmic principles. He who is the *Ātman* has also become the five elements.¹⁰

Sri Ramakrishna's description of *jñāna* and of the means of attaining it is based on Śaṅkara's philosophy of Advaita Vedānta. According to Advaita Vedānta, the sole reality is the nondual *Ātman* or Brahman that lies beyond thought and words, but we remain ignorant of the *Ātman* so long as we cling to this unreal world of names and forms. Hence, through a systematic process of discrimination between what is real and what is unreal, we can attain *jñāna*, suprarational knowledge of our true nature as the *Ātman*. Sri Ramakrishna likens this discriminatory process to climbing a staircase; all the steps have to be left behind, one by one, in order to reach the roof. In Advaita Vedānta, *jñāna* is the highest realization, since there is nothing more to be known once the supreme nondual reality of the *Ātman* is known.

Strikingly, however, Sri Ramakrishna departs from the traditional doctrine of Advaita in his insistence that there is a still greater and richer spiritual knowledge, which he calls "*vijñāna*." He points out on several occasions that the notion of *vijñāna*, far from being his own original insight, in fact derives from the classical scriptures, especially the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.¹¹ After attaining knowledge of the nondual *Ātman*, the *vijñānī* ascends to the deeper and more comprehensive insight that God is at once the transcendent *Ātman* and the Supreme Lord, who both rules and pervades the universe. The *jñānī* dismisses the world as unreal, but the *vijñānī* realizes that God—who, in his transcendent aspect, is the formless *Ātman*—"has also become the universe." The *vijñānī*, in Sri Ramakrishna's metaphor, is the one who recognizes that the stairs are made of the same materials as the roof. To the *vijñānī*, as Sri Ramakrishna puts it elsewhere, this universe is a "mart of joy" since it is pervaded by God; to the *jñānī*, on the other hand, the universe is nothing but a

“framework of illusion.”¹² While the *jñānī* has realized only God’s transcendent aspect as the impersonal Ātman, the *vijñānī* has a more intimate and comprehensive knowledge of God as the impersonal-personal Absolute at once transcendent to, and immanent in, the universe.

After realizing the transcendent Ātman, the *vijñānī* returns to the relative plane as a “supreme devotee of God” (*uttam bhakta*).¹³ Whereas the *jñānī* dismisses the universe as illusory, the *vijñānī* sees the universe as God’s “play” or “sport” (*līlā*). As Sri Ramakrishna puts it, “That person has attained ‘ripe’ knowledge [*pākā jñān*] as well as ‘ripe’ devotion [*pākā bhakti*] who, after having reached the eternal [*nitya*], remains with God’s play [*līlā*], and who can again ascend from God’s play to the eternal.”¹⁴ In terms of Sri Ramakrishna’s metaphor of the staircase, the *vijñānī* is able to descend from the roof to the stairs as well as ascend from the stairs to the roof at will. The *vijñānī*—who realizes that God is both personal and impersonal, both with and without form, both immanent and transcendent—revels in all the various manifestations and aspects of God.

It is worth contrasting Sri Ramakrishna’s and Śaṅkara’s respective conceptions of God. From Sri Ramakrishna’s standpoint of *vijñāna*, God is the impersonal-personal infinite Reality that has both *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* aspects but is by no means exhausted by these aspects. Accordingly, Sri Ramakrishna states, “The *vijñānī* sees that He who is *nirguṇa* is also *saguṇa* [*jini nirguṇ, tinī saguṇ*]. . . . The *vijñānī* further sees that He who is Brahman is the Bhagavān, the Personal God [*jini Brahma tinī Bhagavān*].”¹⁵ For Śaṅkara, by contrast, the sole ultimate reality is *nirguṇa* Brahman, so the Personal God (*Īśvara*) is merely *saguṇa* Brahman—that is, *nirguṇa* Brahman associated with the unreal limiting adjunct (*upādhi*) of lordship (*īśvaratva*)—and is hence as unreal as the universe. Śaṅkara, then, would reject the very possibility of *vijñāna* in Sri Ramakrishna’s sense, since both the ontology of the impersonal-personal Supreme Reality and the idea of a spiritual knowledge greater than *ātmajñāna* are incoherent within the framework of Advaita philosophy.

Sri Ramakrishna’s conception of *vijñāna* furnished the philosophical basis for his well-known teaching that all the various religious and spiritual doctrines are legitimate paths leading to the same goal of God-realization:

I say that we are all calling on the same God. There is no need for jealousy and malice. Some say that God is formless, and some that God has form. I say, let one man meditate on God with form if he believes in form, and let another meditate on the formless Absolute if he does not believe in form. That is to say, dogmatism is not good. It is not good to feel that my religion alone is true and other religions are false. . . . I say this because one cannot know the true nature of God unless one realizes Him. . . .

Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Śāktas, Śaivas, Vaiṣṇavas, the Brahmajñānīs of the time of the *ṛṣis* . . . all seek the same Reality. . . . Do you know what the truth is? God has made different religions to suit different aspirants, times, and countries. All doctrines are only so many paths; but a path is by no means God.¹⁶

Sri Ramakrishna stresses here that “one cannot know the true nature of God unless one realizes Him.” For Sri Ramakrishna, only the *vijñānī* who revels in the infinite

aspects and manifestations of God is in a position to appreciate the harmony of all religions. The *vijñānī* sees that God takes a variety of forms and makes different religions to suit the temperaments, capacities, and cultural backgrounds of individual religious and spiritual seekers. It is precisely on the experiential basis of *vijñāna* that Sri Ramakrishna declares that all religions are so many equally valid “paths” to the direct experience of God.

For the purposes of this essay, three aspects of the influence of Sri Ramakrishna on Sri Aurobindo are especially important. First, as we will see in the next section, Sri Ramakrishna’s seminal distinction between *jñāna* and *vijñāna* equipped Sri Aurobindo with the grammar and vocabulary, as it were, to make sense of his own mystical experiences.¹⁷ Second, Sri Ramakrishna’s hint that the notion of *vijñāna* can be found in the Indian scriptures planted the seed for Sri Aurobindo’s ambitious attempt to reinterpret the Upaniṣads and the *Gītā* on the basis of the concept of *vijñāna*. Third, the doctrine of the harmony of all spiritual and religious paths stressed by Sri Ramakrishna helped attune Sri Aurobindo to the *Gītā*’s pervasive syncretism, its attempt to harmonize seemingly irreconcilable spiritual paths and philosophical and theological doctrines.

II. From Jñāna to Vijñāna: Sri Aurobindo’s “The Yoga and Its Objects”

After studying classics at Cambridge University, Sri Aurobindo returned to India in 1893, where he deepened his knowledge of Bengali and Sanskrit, became an active participant in the independence movement, and started practicing Yoga. At this time, he read thoroughly the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna in Bengali and the works of Vivekananda in the original English. In January 1908 he met in Baroda a Yogi named Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, who instructed him in meditation. Sri Aurobindo reported that after three days of training under Lele, he had a “series of tremendously powerful experiences,” which made him “see with a stupendous intensity the world as a cinematographic play of vacant forms in the impersonal universality of the Absolute Brahman.”¹⁸ Sri Aurobindo clarified that these experiences were Advaitic in nature: they revealed to him the nondual reality of the impersonal Ātman and the corresponding unreality of the universe.¹⁹ He also claimed that during his time in Baroda, he made mystical contact with Sri Ramakrishna, who had of course passed away decades earlier. Sri Ramakrishna’s profound influence on Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual development is evident from Sri Aurobindo’s statement to a disciple: “Remember also that we derive from Ramakrishna. For myself it was Ramakrishna who personally came and first turned me to this Yoga.”²⁰

In May 1908, Sri Aurobindo was incarcerated for a year in the Alipore jail for his political activities. Sri Aurobindo claimed to have received instructions in meditation from Swami Vivekananda on an occult plane in his jail cell in Alipore: “Vivekananda in the Alipore jail gave me the foundations of that knowledge which is the basis of our Sadhana [spiritual practice].”²¹ During his imprisonment, Sri Aurobindo also practiced in earnest “the Sadhana of the Gita,” which led him—in his own words—to “realise what Sri Krishna demanded of Arjuna and what He demands of those who

aspire to do His work, to be free from repulsion and desire, to do work for Him without the demand for fruit, to renounce self-will and become a passive and faithful instrument in His hands. . . .”²² His intense practice of the teachings of the *Gītā* in the Alipore jail culminated in what he describes as a transformative mystical experience:

I looked at the jail that secluded me from men and it was no longer by its high walls that I was imprisoned; no, it was Vasudeva [another name for Kṛṣṇa] who surrounded me. I walked under the branches of the tree in front of my cell but it was not the tree, I knew it was Vasudeva, it was Sri Krishna whom I saw standing there and holding over me his shade. I looked at the bars of my cell, the very grating that did duty for a door and again I saw Vasudeva. It was Narayana who was guarding and standing sentry over me. Or I lay on the coarse blankets that were given me for a couch and felt the arms of Sri Krishna around me, the arms of my Friend and Lover. This was the first use of the deeper vision He gave me. I looked at the prisoners in the jail, the thieves, the murderers, the swindlers, and as I looked at them I saw Vasudeva, it was Narayana whom I found in these darkened souls and misused bodies.²³

Notice the striking similarity between Sri Aurobindo’s Alipore experience and what Sri Ramakrishna calls “*vijñāna*.” According to Sri Ramakrishna, the *vijñānī* first attains knowledge of the impersonal Ātman and then achieves the deeper insight that the supreme impersonal-personal God “has become the universe.” Like Sri Ramakrishna’s *vijñānī*, Sri Aurobindo reportedly had the Advaitic experience of the impersonal Ātman under Lele and then, a year later in the Alipore jail, had the mystical experience of Lord Kṛṣṇa pervading the entire universe.

Indeed, in “The Yoga and Its Objects”—a remarkable essay written around 1912—Sri Aurobindo seems to draw implicitly on Sri Ramakrishna’s distinction between *jñāna* and *vijñāna* in order to articulate three fundamental stages in spiritual realization. The first essential stage in spiritual experience, according to Sri Aurobindo, is Advaitic *ātmajñāna*, the knowledge of the “one divine impersonal Existence,” from the perspective of which “the One may seem to be the only reality and everything else *māya*, a purposeless and inexplicable illusion.”²⁴ Clearly, this first stage corresponds to Sri Aurobindo’s experience of the impersonal Ātman under Lele. In the second stage, one exceeds the merely “impersonal realisation” of Advaita and comes to experience “that even the names and forms are *Brahman*.”²⁵ The third and final stage of spiritual realization is “to perceive all things as God,”²⁶ the first glimpse of which Sri Aurobindo seems to have experienced in the Alipore jail:

But the crowning realisation of this yoga is when you become aware of the whole world as the expression, play or Lila of an infinite divine personality, when you see in all, not the impersonal *sad-atman* which is the basis of manifest existence,—although you do not lose that knowledge,—but Sri Krishna who at once is, bases and transcends all manifest and unmanifest existence. . . .²⁷

Sri Aurobindo’s account of the “crowning” spiritual experience, I would suggest, draws implicitly on Sri Ramakrishna’s notion of *vijñāna*. For Sri Aurobindo, as for Sri Ramakrishna, spiritual experience culminates in the realization that the entire universe is the “play or Lila” of the infinite God, who is at once personal and impersonal,

at once immanent in the universe and transcendent to it. Just as Sri Ramakrishna's *vijñānī* sees the world as a "mart of joy," Sri Aurobindo claims that from the highest spiritual standpoint the "whole world . . . appears to us in a changed aspect, as an ocean of beauty, good, light, bliss, exultant movement on a basis of eternal strength and peace."²⁸ And just as Sri Ramakrishna describes *vijñāna* as "ripe" *jñāna* as well as "ripe" *bhakti*, Sri Aurobindo describes this culmination of spiritual experience as at once a "complete knowledge, the knowledge that sees God in all things" and a "complete bhakti, which accepts all things with joy."²⁹

In other words, Sri Aurobindo's characterization of the final stage of spiritual experience in "The Yoga and Its Objects" seems to be a retroactive conceptualization of his own experiences of *vijñāna*, especially his realization of Kṛṣṇa's all-pervasiveness in Alipore. In this essay, however, he conspicuously refrains from making any autobiographical references to his own spiritual experiences, as if to block preemptively the charge that his account of the three stages of spiritual experience is merely subjective. Instead, Sri Aurobindo refers continually to passages from the ancient scriptures—especially the Vedas, the Upaniṣads, and the *Gītā*—to corroborate his claims. One of his most telling scriptural references is to the seventh *mantra* of the Īśā Upaniṣad, which he translates as follows:

When all created things become one with a man's self by his getting the knowledge (*vijnana*), thereafter what bewilderment can he have or what grief, when in all things he sees their oneness?³⁰

[*yasminsarvāṇi bhūtānyātmaivābhūtvijānataḥ tatra ko mohaḥ kaḥ śoka ekatvamanupaśyataḥ*]³¹

In a subtle interpretive move, Sri Aurobindo translates *vijānataḥ* as the phrase "his getting the knowledge" and then notes parenthetically that this "knowledge" is none other than *vijñāna*, deriving this substantive—which is nowhere found in the Īśā Upaniṣad itself—from the Sanskrit participial *vijānataḥ*. Notably, he neither attempts to elaborate or justify his use of the term "*vijñāna*" nor invokes the term anywhere else in the essay. What Sri Aurobindo implies, however, is that his own earlier account of the culminating stage of spiritual experience—which, as we have seen, comes remarkably close to Sri Ramakrishna's conception of *vijñāna*—can be traced to the Īśā Upaniṣad.

Sri Aurobindo's isolated reference to *vijñāna* in "The Yoga and Its Objects" proves to be a decisive one, for it provides an early hint that Sri Aurobindo would go on to develop and amplify Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy of *vijñāna* into a full-blown immanent hermeneutic paradigm for reinterpreting the early Indian scriptures.³² Indeed, in his 1909 essay, "Karmayoga," Sri Aurobindo calls for a "more perfect synthesis" of the Upaniṣads than Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta and tellingly adds: "It is such a synthesis embracing all life and action in its scope that the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda have been preparing."³³

I would suggest that "The Yoga and Its Objects" is an especially rich document for understanding some of the fundamental interpretive principles governing Sri Au-

robindo's subsequently published *Essays on the Gita*. Toward the end of "The Yoga and Its Objects," Sri Aurobindo expresses his conviction that "the best philosophy is that which admits the truth of all philosophies and gives each its right place."³⁴ In the following sections, I will argue that this commitment to philosophical inclusivism deeply informs his sustained attempt in *Essays on the Gita* to interpret the *Gītā*'s philosophy in a syncretic and immanent manner that avoids pigeonholing it into a particular, exclusionary philosophical school such as Advaita or Viśiṣṭādvaita.

"The Yoga and Its Objects" outlines two key doctrines that play a crucial role in the groundbreaking hermeneutic paradigm developed in *Essays on the Gita*. First, Sri Aurobindo's distinction in "The Yoga and Its Objects" between Advaitic knowledge of the impersonal Ātman and the still greater realization of the transcendent-immanent God informs his highly original interpretation of the distinction between *jñāna* and *vijñāna* in the *Gītā*. As we will see, Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of the concept of *vijñāna* in the *Gītā* helps resolve many of the puzzles and apparent contradictions in the *Gītā*'s philosophical teachings. Second, Sri Aurobindo repeatedly emphasizes in "The Yoga and Its Objects" that God is "at once personal and impersonal, finite and infinite, self-limiting and illimitable, one and many."³⁵ I hope to demonstrate that Sri Aurobindo's conception of God as an impersonal-personal infinite Being lies at the basis of his searching reinterpretation of the key doctrine of the Puruṣottama, the "Supreme Person," in chapter 15 of the *Gītā*. Departing from traditional commentators such as Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, Sri Aurobindo argues in *Essays on the Gita* that the divine Puruṣottama at once includes and exceeds the impersonal Ātman-Brahman.

III. Sri Aurobindo's Immanent Hermeneutics of Vijñāna in Essays on the Gita

Recent scholars have largely ignored Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita*, perhaps in part because it seems easy to dismiss as a flagrant case of eisegesis. Minor, for instance, makes the sweeping assertion that Sri Aurobindo took his own mystical experiences as "the highest authority and the first interpretive principle" for understanding the Indian scriptures, including the *Gītā*.³⁶ As I hope to demonstrate, however, Minor's simplistic assumption that Sri Aurobindo's "first interpretive principle" is his own spiritual experience hardly does justice to the hermeneutic subtlety and sophistication of Sri Aurobindo's project in *Essays on the Gita*.

What Minor ignores is Sri Aurobindo's conscious attempt to avoid eisegesis and to understand the *Gītā*'s philosophy on its own terms. I will make the case that Sri Aurobindo's spiritual experiences—far from serving as the basis for eisegesis—in fact led him to adopt a rigorously *immanent* hermeneutic approach to the *Gītā* that deserves to be recognized as a watershed in *Gītā* scholarship. In particular, Sri Aurobindo's spiritual experiences attuned him to the centrality of the concept of *vijñāna* in the *Gītā*, which he identified as the hermeneutic key to elucidating the *Gītā*'s distinctive thought-structure.

The term "*jñāna*," which appears much more frequently in the *Gītā* than the term *vijñāna*, often means direct realization of Ātman-Brahman or God. In IV.39,

for instance, Kṛṣṇa asserts: “having attained Knowledge [*jñānaṃ*], one soon attains supreme Peace.” Śaṅkara plausibly glosses *jñāna* in this verse as “full realization” (*samyagdarśana*) of the Ātman, which results in the goal of liberation from transmigratory existence.³⁷

At five places in the *Gītā*—III.41, VI.8, VII.2, IX.1, and XVIII.42—the term *jñāna* is paired with the term *vijñāna*, hence raising the question of the precise distinction between the two terms.³⁸ In III.41, for instance, Kṛṣṇa describes desire as “the destroyer of *jñāna* and *vijñāna*” (*jñānavijñānanāśanam*), and in IX.1, Kṛṣṇa promises to impart to Arjuna “*jñāna* combined with *vijñāna*” (*jñānaṃ vijñānasahitam*). The Sanskrit prefix “*vi-*” typically functions as an intensifier; etymologically, then, *vijñāna* would be a deeper or more comprehensive form of knowledge than *jñāna*. This poses a problem for Śaṅkara, however, since Śaṅkara’s Advaita philosophy does not admit the possibility of a knowledge superior to *ātma-jñāna*. Hence, in his commentary on those verses in the *Gītā* that distinguish between *jñāna* and *vijñāna*, Śaṅkara glosses *jñāna* as mere intellectual understanding of the Self and *vijñāna* as full-blown spiritual realization of the Self. In his commentary on III.41, for instance, Śaṅkara defines *jñāna* as theoretical knowledge about the Self “derived from the scriptures and a teacher,” while he defines *vijñāna* as “the full experience of that knowledge” (*viśeṣataḥ tadanubhavaḥ*).³⁹

However, Śaṅkara’s interpretation of the distinction between *jñāna* and *vijñāna* in the *Gītā* is not entirely convincing. First, the internal evidence in favor of his interpretation of the terms is slim. Second, he fails to provide a convincing rationale for interpreting *jñāna* as scriptural knowledge at certain places (such as in III.41) and as complete spiritual realization of the Ātman at other places (such as in IV.39). Third, and perhaps most fundamentally, Śaṅkara leaves himself open to the charge of eisegesis, since his Advaitic bias leads him to foreclose summarily the possibility that *vijñāna* is actually a greater form of spiritual realization than realization of the Ātman.

Most subsequent commentators have not fared much better than Śaṅkara in explaining satisfactorily the distinction between *jñāna* and *vijñāna* in the *Gītā*. Rāmānuja, in his commentary on VII.2, claims that *jñāna* is knowledge of God’s essence (*mad-viśayam idaṃ jñānam*) while *vijñāna* is knowledge of what distinguishes God from all the things in the universe (*vijñānaṃ hi viviktākāra-viśayam jñānam*).⁴⁰ However, Rāmānuja’s idiosyncratic reading of *vijñāna* as knowledge of God’s distinction from the universe seems to stem more from his eisegetic concern to fit the concept within the parameters of his Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophy than from a genuine attempt to understand *vijñāna* in the context of the *Gītā*’s own thought-structure.

Recent scholars have continued to puzzle over the distinction between *jñāna* and *vijñāna* in the *Gītā*. As Minor points out, recent Western translators of the *Gītā* not only disagree about the meanings of *jñāna* and *vijñāna* but also about “which knowledge is higher and which is lower.”⁴¹ Nonetheless, it is fair to say that the majority of recent scholars—including R. C. Zaehner, Franklin Edgerton, W. J. Johnson, and Minor—adopt a reading akin to Śaṅkara’s interpretation of III.41, taking *jñāna* as intellectual or rational knowledge and *vijñāna* as direct realization or insight.⁴²

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and David White, by contrast, reverse the priority of the terms, interpreting *vijñāna* as mere intellectual knowledge and *jñāna* as full-blown spiritual knowledge.⁴³

Among recent commentators, Swami Tapasyananda alone interprets *jñāna* and *vijñāna* in the *Gītā* explicitly in terms of Sri Ramakrishna's understanding of the terms. Rejecting Śaṅkara's interpretation of VII.2, Swami Tapasyananda glosses *jñāna* as "simple knowledge" of God and *vijñāna* as "special knowledge" of God.⁴⁴ According to Swami Tapasyananda, *jñāna* is the spiritual realization of God as the ultimate reality, accompanied by the conviction that the universe is a "mere appearance, a false presentation to be rejected."⁴⁵ *Vijñāna*, Swami Tapasyananda claims, is a still "higher illumination,"⁴⁶ the realization that God has become everything in the universe:

This perception of the whole creative process as a divine play in which the Lord Himself becomes the Jīva, the Jagat (world) and their master—the playmates, the play things and the player—is the Vijñāna or the special knowledge spoken of here in verse two. This is in agreement with Sri Ramakrishna's teaching on the Vijñāni.⁴⁷

Curiously, Swami Tapasyananda does not refer to Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of the *Gītā* anywhere in his book. While Swami Tapasyananda is the first and (as far as I am aware) only commentator to interpret *vijñāna* in the *Gītā* explicitly in terms of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on *vijñāna*, Sri Aurobindo—I will argue—interpreted the concept of *vijñāna* in the *Gītā* in a similar manner nearly seven decades before Swami Tapasyananda, although Sri Aurobindo did not explicitly refer to Sri Ramakrishna anywhere in *Essays on the Gita*.

Indeed, Sri Aurobindo goes even further than Swami Tapasyananda by showing how the concept of *vijñāna*—interpreted implicitly in Sri Ramakrishna's sense—helps illuminate the overall thought-structure of the *Gītā*. The first six chapters of the *Gītā*, according to Sri Aurobindo, focus primarily on the necessity of *jñāna*, the realization of the impersonal Ātman (p. 305). For Sri Aurobindo, chapter 7 adds a decisive new dimension to the *Gītā*'s progressively unfolding thought-structure by shifting focus to *vijñāna*, a richer form of spiritual knowledge that includes and exceeds the knowledge of the impersonal Ātman. Sri Aurobindo's rendering of VII.1–2 is telling:

Hear how by practising Yoga with a mind attached to me and with me as *āśraya* (the whole basis, lodgment, point of resort of the conscious being and action) thou shalt know me without any remainder of doubt, integrally, *samagraṃ māṃ*. (VII.1)

I will speak to thee without omission or remainder, *aśeṣataḥ*, the essential knowledge [*jñāna*], attended with all the comprehensive knowledge [*vijñāna*], by knowing which there shall be no other thing here left to be known. (VII.2; p. 266)

Departing starkly from all the traditional commentators on the *Gītā*, Sri Aurobindo interprets *jñāna* as "essential knowledge" and *vijñāna* as "comprehensive knowledge." "Essential" knowledge, according to Sri Aurobindo, is the knowledge of one's own essence as the impersonal nondual Ātman, "the one immutable Self and silent

Spirit” (p. 264). Sri Aurobindo interprets *vijñāna* as the more “comprehensive” or “integral” realization that “the Divine Being is all” (p. 266). *Vijñāna*, for Sri Aurobindo, at once includes and surpasses *jñāna*: if the Divine Being “is known integrally in all his powers and principles, then all is known, not only the pure Self, but the world and action and Nature” (p. 266). In other words, the knowledge of the non-dual Ātman, far from being the summit of spiritual experience, serves as the necessary foundation for *vijñāna*, the still greater realization of God as at once impersonal and personal, at once immanent in the universe and beyond it.⁴⁸

Sri Aurobindo’s interpretation of the distinction between *jñāna* and *vijñāna* in the *Gītā* clearly echoes his earlier account of the three stages of spiritual realization in “The Yoga and Its Objects”—an account, as we have seen, that was itself based implicitly on Sri Ramakrishna’s distinction between the *jñānī*’s knowledge of the impersonal Ātman and the *vijñānī*’s deeper and more intimate realization of God’s all-pervasiveness. Hence, it may seem that Sri Aurobindo remains vulnerable to the charge of eisegesis: How can we be sure that Sri Aurobindo is not simply interpreting the *Gītā*’s doctrines in light of Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings and his own personal spiritual experiences? A careful reading of Sri Aurobindo’s *Essays on the Gita*, however, will reveal that Sri Aurobindo provides an immanent contextual justification of his interpretation of *vijñāna* in the *Gītā*.

In fact, I will argue that one of Sri Aurobindo’s most original and significant insights into the *Gītā* is his recognition that the concept of *vijñāna*—when properly understood—is the hermeneutic key to understanding the *Gītā*’s thought-structure as a whole. It would require an entire book to do justice to Sri Aurobindo’s elaborate and nuanced discussion of the various ways that *vijñāna* informs many of the fundamental metaphysical and theological doctrines of the *Gītā*. In the remainder of this essay, I will attempt the more modest task of sketching the main lines of Sri Aurobindo’s sustained effort to establish the precise meaning and significance of *vijñāna* in the *Gītā*. As we shall see, Sri Aurobindo’s immanent hermeneutics of *vijñāna* helps account for the *Gītā*’s unusual conception of God as the impersonal-personal Puruṣottama, its privileging of *bhakti*, and its syncretic approach to spiritual practice.

Sri Aurobindo’s general interpretive strategy throughout the *Essays on the Gita* is to determine the meaning of a given term on the basis of its broader context. Accordingly, Sri Aurobindo first shows that his interpretation of *vijñāna* in VII.2 as “comprehensive knowledge” coheres well with the surrounding verses, VII.1 and VII.3. In VII.1, as we have already seen, Arjuna is assured that by taking refuge in Kṛṣṇa, he will know Kṛṣṇa “*samagram*,” which means “fully” or “integrally” (in Sri Aurobindo’s translation). For Sri Aurobindo, the “integral” knowledge of God mentioned in VII.1 provides a crucial clue to the meaning of “*vijñāna*” in the next verse. Whereas *jñāna* is knowledge of the impersonal Ātman, *vijñāna* is a more comprehensive knowledge of the impersonal-personal God.

Sri Aurobindo’s interpretation of *vijñāna* as “comprehensive knowledge” also helps account for Kṛṣṇa’s somewhat cryptic statement in VII.3, which has taxed the interpretive ingenuity of commentators. Sri Aurobindo translates VII.3 as follows:

[A]mong thousands of men one here and there strives after perfection, and of those who strive and attain to perfection one here and there knows me in all the principles of my existence, *tattvataḥ*. (p. 266)

[*manuṣyāṅṅāṃ sahasreṣu kaścidyatati siddhaye yatatāmapī siddhānām kaścīnmām vetti tattvataḥ*]⁴⁹

Puzzlingly, VII.3 seems to assert that the attainment of “perfection” (*siddhi*) is not tantamount to achieving the *summum bonum* of full knowledge of God. Faced with this puzzle, Śaṅkara denies the natural reading of “*yatatāmapī siddhānām*” (“of those who strive and attain to perfection”), which clearly refers to those who have not only strived for perfection but have actually attained it. Śaṅkara claims that the so-called “perfection” of these strivers is not to be taken literally: they are called “perfect,” he claims, only in the weak sense that they are *striving* for perfection, even though they have not yet attained full-blown perfection.⁵⁰ On the basis of this questionable reading, Śaṅkara goes on to assume that “full” or “comprehensive” (*tattvataḥ*) knowledge of God is simply *ātmajñāna*, the realization of the nondual Ātman. As a result of his eisegetic bias, Śaṅkara not only weakens the meaning of the word “perfection” in VII.3 but also denies the force of *tattvataḥ*, which suggests that the highest spiritual perfection consists not merely in the knowledge of the impersonal Ātman but in the knowledge of the impersonal-personal God in all His fullness.

Sri Aurobindo’s reading of VII.3 not only is far more convincing than Śaṅkara’s but also shows how VII.3 flows naturally from VII.1 and VII.2. Unlike Śaṅkara, Sri Aurobindo takes VII.3 literally: even among those strivers who have actually *attained* “perfection,” only a few achieve what he calls “integral knowledge” of God (p. 266). Sri Aurobindo is the first commentator to recognize that the notion of knowing God “*tattvataḥ*”—which he renders as knowing God “in all the principles” of His existence—refers back to the “integral” (*samagram*) knowledge of God in VII.1 and to the “comprehensive knowledge” (*vijñāna*) of God in VII.2. Sri Aurobindo’s contextual approach allows him to honor the crucial distinction Kṛṣṇa draws in VII.3 between two stages of spiritual “perfection.” From Sri Aurobindo’s perspective, the “strivers” referred to in the second line of VII.3 have indeed attained the “perfection” of *ātmajñāna*, knowledge of the impersonal Ātman, but only a tiny minority of those *jñānīs* go on to attain the greater perfection of *vijñāna*, the “integral” or “comprehensive” knowledge of the impersonal-personal God. According to Sri Aurobindo’s paraphrase of VII.3, *vijñāna*—the “integral knowledge” of God—is “a rare and difficult thing,” even rarer than Advaitic *ātmajñāna* (p. 266).

For Sri Aurobindo, the doctrine of *vijñāna* introduced in VII.1–3 is the indispensable foundation for the philosophical and theological ideas developed in the remaining twelve chapters of the *Gītā*. The rest of chapter 7 of the *Gītā* begins to elaborate what Sri Aurobindo calls the “comprehensive knowledge” (p. 271) of the *vijñānī*—the knowledge that, as VII.7 states, “all that exists” in the universe is “strung” on God “like pearls upon a thread.” Sri Aurobindo reads VII.15–19 as strong evidence that Kṛṣṇa takes the “integral knowledge” of *vijñāna* to be a higher spiritual ideal than the knowledge of the impersonal Ātman. In VII.17, Kṛṣṇa declares that the “*jñānī*, who is

ever in Yoga and endowed with one-pointed devotion [*ekabhaktiḥ*], excels” (p. 284). Throughout the first six chapters of the *Gītā*, *jñāna* almost invariably means *ātmajñāna*, knowledge of the impersonal Ātman. Hence, it is striking that Kṛṣṇa describes the *jñānī* as a supreme devotee of God in VII.17. From Sri Aurobindo’s perspective, this unique *jñānī* endowed with *ekabhaktiḥ* is none other than the *vijñānī*, who ascends from the knowledge of the impersonal Ātman to the integral realization of the impersonal-personal God pervading the universe.

Accordingly, Sri Aurobindo interprets VII.19 as a paean to what he calls the “bhakti with knowledge” of the *vijñānī*:

At the end of many births, the man of knowledge attains Me. Very rare is the great soul who knows that Vasudeva is all that is.

*[bahūnāṃ janmanāmante jñānavānmāṃ prapadyate vāsudevaḥ sarvam iti sa mahātmā sudurlabhaḥ]*⁵¹

Śaṅkara, eager to fit the *Gītā*’s teachings into the framework of Advaita, glosses *vāsudevaḥ*—a name for Kṛṣṇa—as “the inner Ātman” (*pratyagātmā*), thereby reducing the patently theistic realization of God described in VII.19 to the *jñānī*’s realization of the impersonal Ātman.⁵² Sri Aurobindo, by contrast, strives to honor the theistic cast of VII.19: the *jñānavān*, he argues, has clearly ascended from the *jñānī*’s knowledge of the Ātman to the *vijñānī*’s “integral knowledge” of “the Divine as all things”—an integral knowledge described throughout the chapter (p. 285). Sri Aurobindo recognizes that the emphasis in VII.19 on the extreme rarity of attaining this “bhakti of an integral knowledge” (p. 284) recalls the distinction made in VII.3 between the “perfection” of *ātmajñāna* and the still greater “perfection” of *vijñāna* attained by only a chosen few. Militating against Śaṅkara’s reductive reading of *vāsudevaḥ* as the impersonal Ātman, Sri Aurobindo makes a sustained case throughout *Essays on the Gīta* that God in the *Gītā* should be understood as at once impersonal and personal, at once immanent and transcendent.

Tellingly, chapter 9 of the *Gītā* begins by reasserting the distinction already made in VII.2 between *jñāna* and *vijñāna*: “But to you who are not given to caviling I shall speak of this highest secret [*guhyatamam*], which is *jñāna* combined with *vijñāna* [*jñānam vijñānasahitam*], by realizing which you shall be liberated from evil” (IX.1). Building on his reading of chapter 7, Sri Aurobindo claims that the “highest secret” of IX.1 is the “knowledge of the whole Godhead,” which consists both in *jñāna*—the “essential knowledge” of the impersonal Ātman—and *vijñāna*, the “complete knowledge” of the Godhead “in all its principles which will leave nothing yet to be known” (p. 309).

From Sri Aurobindo’s perspective, Kṛṣṇa deliberately leaves the concept of *vijñāna* somewhat vague and mysterious throughout the *Gītā* precisely in order to signal its esoteric and rarefied nature. The “supreme secret” of the *Gītā* is not the reality of the Ātman but the deeper and more profound “mystery of the transcendent Godhead who is all and everywhere” (p. 311), “at once impersonal and personal” (p. 308)—a spiritual mystery disclosed only by *vijñāna*, not by *jñāna*. While *jñāna* was a familiar

concept at the time of the *Gītā*, *vijñāna*—understood in the specific sense of a more comprehensive knowledge of God—was virtually unknown. Hence, the *Gītā* conveys the nature and significance of *vijñāna* not by defining it directly but by subtly insinuating the concept of *vijñāna* into the very underlying thought-structure of the *Gītā*. In other words, *vijñāna* should not be understood simply as one doctrine alongside other doctrines in the *Gītā* but as the very conceptual foundation for a variety of the *Gītā*'s most distinctive theological and philosophical doctrines.

The perspective of *vijñāna* emphasized by Sri Aurobindo helps explain an apparent contradiction in IX.4–5. Immediately after declaring in IX.4 that “all beings are situated in Me, not I in them,” Kṛṣṇa points out, in IX.5: “And yet all beings are not situated in Me—behold My divine Yoga.” How are we to make sense of the notion that all beings are situated in Kṛṣṇa and yet *not* situated in Him? For Sri Aurobindo, Kṛṣṇa's paradoxical assertion signals the unfathomable mystery of God. If IX.4 might seem to suggest a straightforwardly pantheistic view of the “identity of God and universe,” IX.5 decisively rejects any such “limited view” (p. 312). God's mysterious “divine Yoga” cannot be confined within any Procrustean theological paradigm that seeks to determine the nature of God by means of the finite intellect alone. It is only through the spiritual experience of *vijñāna*, not through the blindly groping intellect, that we can grasp the supreme divine mystery that God “is at once one with all that is and yet exceeds it” (p. 312).

The first six chapters of the *Gītā* stress the need for realizing the “unmanifest” and “unthinkable” Ātman (II.25) but also sometimes emphasize Kṛṣṇa's divine nature as the “great Lord of all the worlds” (V.29), the *avatāra* who incarnates on earth whenever righteousness wanes (IV.7). Notably, however, the precise relationship between God and the impersonal Ātman remains mysterious in the first six chapters. With the momentous introduction of *vijñāna* in chapter 7, this relationship begins to get clarified, eventually becoming one of the central themes of the *Gītā*. While the impersonal Ātman of the path of *jñāna* and the personal God of the path of *bhakti* may seem difficult to reconcile, Sri Aurobindo demonstrates that *jñāna* and *bhakti* can indeed be reconciled from the unique standpoint of *vijñāna*.

Chapter 10 of the *Gītā* is an especially rich elaboration of the *vijñānī*'s insight into the unfathomable mystery of God. Kṛṣṇa, we are told, is not only the “great Lord of the world” (X.3) but also the impersonal “Ātman residing in the hearts of all beings” (X.20). Strikingly, Kṛṣṇa then proceeds to catalog some of his primary “manifestations” (*vibhūtis*) in the universe. For instance, Kṛṣṇa is “*Om* among words” (X.25), the “Ganges among rivers” (X.31), and even the “gambling of the cunning” (X.36). In X.42, the final verse of the chapter, Kṛṣṇa points out that his various manifestations in no way exhaust his infinite being: “I support this entire universe with a minute portion of Myself.” From Sri Aurobindo's perspective, the various seemingly contradictory aspects of God mentioned in chapter 10 are reconciled in the experience of *vijñāna*. The *vijñānī* alone, according to Sri Aurobindo, realizes that God is at once the impersonal Ātman and the Lord of the universe capable of incarnating in human form, at once the transcendent Absolute beyond name and form and the immanent divine Spirit pervading the entire universe.

In XV.16–18, the *Gītā* explicitly codifies its various teachings about the infinite nature of God in the crucial doctrine of the Puruṣottama, the “Supreme Person,” which has puzzled many commentators:

There are these two Persons [*puruṣau*] in the world—the perishable [*kṣara*] and the imperishable [*akṣara*]. The perishable [*kṣara*] is all beings; the unchanging [*kūṭastha*] is called the imperishable [*akṣara*].

But other than these two is the Supreme Person [*uttamaḥ puruṣaḥ*] who is called the Supreme Ātman [*paramātmā*], who enters the three worlds and upholds them, the imperishable Lord [*avyaya īśvaraḥ*].

Since I am beyond the perishable [*kṣara*] and above even the imperishable [*akṣara*], I am known in the world and in the Vedas as the Supreme Person [Puruṣottama].

This is the *Gītā*’s most explicit and unambiguous statement that God—conceived as the Puruṣottama—is even greater than the “imperishable” (*akṣara*) Ātman. The term *akṣara*, which occurs frequently in the *Gītā*, refers almost invariably to the impersonal Ātman, as in VIII.11, VIII.21, XII.1, and XII.3. In XV.16, *akṣara* is defined as the “unchanging” (*kūṭastha*), a term used in XII.3 to refer to the imperishable Ātman. Hence, it is reasonable to assume from the context that *akṣara* is being used in the sense of the “imperishable” Ātman in XV.16 and XV.18. Śaṅkara, however, interprets *akṣara* in XV.16 and XV.18 as *māyā*, the seed of the mutable universe, despite interpreting *akṣara* in other places in the *Gītā*—such as XII.1 and XII.3—as the “immutable” Ātman. On Śaṅkara’s reading, then, the Puruṣottama is the impersonal Ātman beyond the *akṣara*, taken in the sense of *māyā*.⁵³ As T. G. Mainkar has pointed out, Śaṅkara adopts this implausible reading of *akṣara* in XV.16 and XV.18 as a result of his commitment to the philosophy of Advaita, which denies that there is anything superior to the Ātman.⁵⁴

Sri Aurobindo more plausibly interprets *kṣara* in XV.16 and XV.18 as the totality of the mutable universe (p. 436) and *akṣara* as the full-blown impersonal Ātman, “the immutable Self of all” (p. 440). Although the *kṣara* and the *akṣara* may seem to be irreconcilable opposites, Sri Aurobindo claims that the “highest spiritual experience” of *vijñāna* reveals that “these two spirits are a dual status of one eternal and universal existence,” which the *Gītā* here refers to as the Puruṣottama (p. 438). By attaining *jñāna*, we realize the impersonal Ātman, the “immutable” (*akṣara*) aspect of the Puruṣottama. When we ascend from *jñāna* to *vijñāna*, however, we realize the higher and more comprehensive truth that the Puruṣottama is not only the “Supreme Ātman” (XV.17)—the *akṣara* beyond the universe—but also the “imperishable Lord” (XV.17) who both rules over and pervades the *kṣara*, the domain of the phenomenal universe. The *vijñānī*, as Sri Aurobindo puts it, attains the integral knowledge of God as the impersonal-personal Puruṣottama, who is “more even than a highest unmanifest Akshara, more than any negative Absolute . . . because he is to be known also as the supreme Purusha who extends this whole universe in his own existence” (p. 441). For Sri Aurobindo, then, the concept of *vijñāna* is the key to understanding how the *Gītā* can maintain without contradiction that God is at once the impersonal Ātman

and the Lord of all the worlds, at once the transcendent Brahman and the immanent Divine pervading the entire universe.

Perhaps the single strongest piece of evidence in favor of Sri Aurobindo's radical reinterpretation of *vijñāna* and the Puruṣottama in the *Gītā* is a remarkable passage from chapter 18, which clearly distinguishes two fundamental stages in spiritual experience that correspond perfectly to Sri Aurobindo's notions of *jñāna* and *vijñāna*:

One who resorts to solitude, eats sparingly, with speech, body, and mind under control, who is intent on meditation, and who resorts to dispassion, (XVIII.52)

That person, having wiped out egoism, force, pride, desire, anger, and superfluous possessions, free from the idea of "me" and "mine," and serene, becomes fit for becoming Brahman [*brahmabhūyāya kalpate*]. (XVIII.53)

When one has become Brahman [*brahmabhūtaḥ*] and has attained the serene Ātman, when one neither grieves nor desires and is the same toward all beings, then one attains supreme devotion to Me [*madbhaktiṃ labhate parām*]. (XVIII.54)

Through devotion, that person knows Me, who and how much I am and in all the reality and principles of My being. Then, having known me comprehensively, one enters into That. [*bhaktiṃ māmbhijānāti yāvānyaścāsmi tattvataḥ | tato māṃ tattvato jñātvā vísate tadanantaram*] (XVIII.55)

Even while continuing always to perform all actions [*sarvakarmāṇyapi sadā*] and resorting to Me as refuge, one attains by My grace the eternal and imperishable State. (XVIII.56)

These pregnant verses, according to Sri Aurobindo, contain "all the kernel of the complete Yoga of the Gita" (p. 539). On Sri Aurobindo's reading, the special Yoga described in these verses encompasses a "double realisation" (p. 536) that can only be understood on the basis of the *Gītā*'s key distinction between *jñāna* and *vijñāna*. The first essential stage of spiritual experience is embodied in XVIII.52–54: by eradicating all egoism, one "becomes Brahman" in the sense of attaining *jñāna*, the realization of the "serene Ātman" (XVIII.54). As Sri Aurobindo puts it, "To lose ego and be this impersonal self, to become this impersonal Brahman in our consciousness is therefore the first movement of this Yoga" (p. 533).

Strikingly, however, the *Gītā* does not stop with the attainment of *jñāna*. Verses XVIII.54–56 proceed to describe the spiritual ascent from *jñāna* to a still greater and more comprehensive realization. After realizing the impersonal Ātman, the *jñānī* goes on to attain "supreme devotion" (*parām bhaktim*) (XVIII.54) toward Kṛṣṇa. This passage leaves little doubt that the supreme spiritual ideal taught in the *Gītā* is not *jñāna*—as Śaṅkara would have it—but *bhakti*, albeit a special form of "supreme *bhakti*" rooted in the prior attainment of *jñāna*. Sri Aurobindo makes a convincing case that this "supreme *bhakti*" is none other than *vijñāna*, the "integral knowledge" of the impersonal-personal Puruṣottama pervading the universe (p. 536). The unusual adverb *tattvataḥ*, used twice in XVIII.55, echoes the *tattvataḥ* of VII.3, a verse that distinguishes the lower perfection of *jñāna* from the greater perfection of *vijñāna*, a comprehensive knowledge of God "in all the principles of His existence."

Reading XVIII.54–56 within the broader context of the *Gītā*'s teachings on *vijñāna*, Sri Aurobindo observes: "Here there is given to us something yet higher than the Impersonal,—here there is the supreme Self who is the supreme Ishwara, here there is the supreme Soul and its supreme nature, here there is the Purushottama who is beyond the personal and impersonal and reconciles them on his eternal heights" (p. 535). By ascending from *jñāna* to *vijñāna*, one realizes the supreme secret that God is the infinite Puruṣottama who is not only the impersonal Ātman but also the Lord dwelling in the hearts of all creatures as well as the Divine Spirit pervading the entire universe.

Significantly, XVIII.56 adds that the *vijñānī* continues to perform "all actions" (*sarvakarmāṇi*) as a perfect instrument of the divine Puruṣottama. As Sri Aurobindo puts it, the *vijñānī* acts "for the sake of the Divine in the world, for the good of all beings, for the fulfilment of the world action and the world purpose, or in one word for the sake of the Purushottama and done really by him through his universal Shakti [power]" (p. 538). Taken together, verses XVIII.54–56 indicate that the integral realization of *vijñāna* involves nothing less than a perfect synthesis of knowledge, devotion, and selfless action—a fact, as Sri Aurobindo recognizes, that has far-reaching consequences for how we understand the *Gītā*'s complex teachings about spiritual practice. As we will see in the following section, the syncretic spiritual ideal of *vijñāna* proves to be the foundation for the comprehensive form of spiritual practice preferred by the *Gītā*—one that *combines* the disciplines of *jñāna*, *bhakti*, and *karma* instead of emphasizing one discipline at the expense of the others.

IV. *Vijñāna as the Basis for the Gītā's Philosophical Syncretism and Religious Pluralism*

Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita*, I have been arguing, is the most sophisticated and sustained attempt in the history of commentary on the *Gītā* to determine the philosophy of the *Gītā* on the basis of the *Gītā*'s own immanent thought-structure. From Sri Aurobindo's perspective, the *Gītā*'s whole philosophical edifice is built on the foundational thesis that there are two basic stages of spiritual experience: *jñāna*, the knowledge of the impersonal nondual Ātman, and *vijñāna*, the greater and more comprehensive realization of God as the infinite Puruṣottama, who is at once personal and impersonal, at once immanent and transcendent.

The *Gītā*'s philosophy, I would suggest, is best understood not as one competing philosophical position among others but as a more elemental philosophical *matrix* from which a variety of philosophical positions can be derived.⁵⁵ As Sri Aurobindo aptly observes, unlike the rigidly defined philosophical schools that emerged centuries after the *Gītā* such as Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita, the *Gītā*'s broad and syncretic philosophy "maps out, but it does not cut up or build walls or hedges to confine our vision" (p. 9). No wonder commentators subscribing to a wide array of philosophical and theological views have claimed the *Gītā* as their own. The *Gītā*'s philosophy of *vijñāna*, which combines elements of both *jñāna* and *bhakti*, lends itself to being

appropriated in a variety of ways by readers of differing temperaments and philosophical persuasions.

Thus far, I have been discussing the *Gītā*'s philosophy, but the *Gītā* is not merely a philosophical treatise but also a *yogaśāstra*, a scripture oriented toward "Yoga" in the sense of spiritual discipline or practice. I will conclude this essay by highlighting briefly the intimate connection between the *Gītā*'s philosophy of *vijñāna* and its syncretic approach to spiritual practice. As many commentators have noted, the *Gītā* recommends a comprehensive form of spiritual practice that combines the Yoga of Knowledge (*jñānayoga*), the Yoga of Devotion (*bhaktiyoga*), and the Yoga of Selfless Action (*karmayoga*).⁵⁶ Sri Aurobindo claims that the *Gītā*'s "triune path" cultivates the "will, heart, thought" so that they are all raised "to the Highest and into the being of that which is the supreme object of all action, love and knowledge" (p. 39). For Sri Aurobindo, the profound logic behind the syncretic spiritual practice taught in the *Gītā* is that it cultivates equally the volitional, emotional, and intellectual dimensions of our being instead of developing only one of these dimensions at the expense of the others.

Recent scholars have tended to discuss the *Gītā*'s views on spiritual practice in isolation from its broader philosophical thought-structure. Sri Aurobindo, by contrast, makes a powerful case that the philosophy of *vijñāna* in fact lies at the basis of the *Gītā*'s threefold Yoga of works, devotion, and knowledge. As Sri Aurobindo observes, the *vijñānī*'s "integral turning of the soul Godwards bases royally the Gita's synthesis of knowledge and works and devotion" (p. 324). I take this to be a very pregnant insight, for it suggests that the *Gītā* holds up the *vijñānī* as the ideal embodiment of the synthesis of *jñāna*, *karma*, and *bhakti* that all spiritual aspirants should strive to emulate. As we have seen, the *vijñānī* described in XVIII.53–56 of the *Gītā* ascends from the realization of the nondual Ātman to the still greater and rarer state of "supreme *bhakti*" (XVIII.54). Having thereby attained a "comprehensive" knowledge of God as the impersonal-personal Puruṣottama pervading the universe, the *vijñānī* continues to perform "all actions" (XVIII.56) as a perfect instrument of the divine Puruṣottama. Hence, the *vijñānī* alone is at once the consummate *jñāna-yogī*, the consummate *bhakti-yogī*, and the consummate *karma-yogī*.

Pursuing Sri Aurobindo's hint, I think it would be fair to call the "triune path" taught in the *Gītā* "Vijñāna-Yoga," since the essence of this threefold Yoga is to strive to see, and act in, the universe precisely as the *vijñānī* would see and act in it. In III.30, for instance, Kṛṣṇa instructs Arjuna: "Giving up all your actions to Me, with your mind on the inner Ātman [*adhyātmacetasā*], free from hope and all egoistic notions of 'me' and 'mine,' fight devoid of the fever of the soul." Notice the syncretic thrust of this verse: the spiritual aspirant, according to the *Gītā*, should be not only a *jñāna-yogī* intent on realizing the Ātman but also a *karma-yogī* who performs selfless works and a *bhakti-yogī* who lovingly dedicates all these works to the supreme Lord. In other words, the *Gītā* calls on us to practice Vijñāna-Yoga by striving to emulate the ideal *vijñānī*, who, after having realized the impersonal Ātman, continues to act selflessly in the world as an instrument of the impersonal-personal Puruṣottama.

Indeed, commentators such as Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan have claimed plausibly that the *Gītā*'s remarkable acceptance of diverse spiritual paths can be extended beyond the Hindu tradition to encompass non-Hindu religious and spiritual traditions as well.⁵⁷ In IV.11, Kṛṣṇa voices the bold pluralist view that people following a variety of religious paths are all ultimately worshipping one and the same God: "As people approach me, so do I accept them. O Pārtha, human beings follow My path in every way."

And here we come full circle to Sri Ramakrishna, who explored even more fully than Sri Aurobindo the radical pluralist implications of the philosophy of *vijñāna*. The root of all religious dogmatism and fanaticism, in Sri Ramakrishna's view, is a one-sided emphasis on one aspect of God or Reality at the expense of other aspects. The *vijñānī*, however, revels in God's various manifestations and aspects and, hence, is in a unique position to appreciate the truth of all religions. The *vijñānī* alone, according to Sri Ramakrishna, is able to recognize that the practitioners of different religions—including "Hindus, Muslims, and Christians"—are "all calling on the same God" and seeking "the same Reality."⁵⁸

Sri Ramakrishna's startlingly modern observations about the harmony of religions, I would suggest, provide a clue to the philosophical basis of the *Gītā*'s own religious pluralism expressed in verses such as IV.11.⁵⁹ While it would take another essay to substantiate this claim, I believe a convincing case can be made that the *Gītā*'s doctrine of *vijñāna* provides the implicit rationale for its acceptance of various religious paths. The *vijñānī*, who knows God "comprehensively" (*tattvataḥ*) in His various manifestations, is able to confirm experientially the bold pluralist doctrine expressed at various points in the *Gīta*: God, the infinite Puruṣottama, manifests Himself to religious seekers in various ways depending on their respective backgrounds, temperaments, and capacities. The *Gītā*'s concept of *vijñāna* thus proves to be of potentially immense contemporary significance, opening up exciting possibilities for interreligious dialogue and comparative theology.

Notes

- 1 – See B. G. Tilak, *Śrī Bhagavadgītā-Rahasya or Karma-Yoga-Śāstra*, vol. 1, trans. B. S. Sukthankar (Bombay: Bombay Vaibhav Press, 1926), pp. xxiv–xxv; Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997), pp. 8–9; R. C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gītā* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), pp. 1–4; Robert Minor, "The *Gītā*'s Way as the Only Way," *Philosophy East and West* 30, no. 3 (July 1980): 339–340; Robert Minor, *Bhagavad-Gītā: An Exegetical Commentary* (New Delhi: Heritage, 1982), p. xi; Keith Yandell, "On Interpreting the 'Bhagavadgītā,'" *Philosophy East and West* 32, no. 1 (January 1982): 38; T. G. Mainkar, *A Comparative Study of the Commentaries on Bhagavadgītā* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1969); R. D. Ranade, *The Bhagavadgītā as a Philosophy of God-Realisation* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1982), p. 39; Arvind

- Sharma, *The Hindu Gītā: Ancient and Classical Interpretations of the Bhagavadgītā* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1986), p. vii.
- 2 – Minor, “The *Gītā*’s Way as the Only Way,” p. 340.
 - 3 – I follow Minor and Yandell in borrowing the term “eisegesis” from Biblical hermeneutics and applying it to *Gītā* interpretation. See Yandell, “On Interpreting the ‘Bhagavadgītā,’” pp. 37–39, and Minor, “The *Gītā*’s Way as the Only Way,” p. 354 n. 35. As should be obvious, I agree with the scholars listed in note 1 above that many traditional commentators on the *Gītā* often lapsed into eisegesis. However, a full substantiation and defense of this large and controversial claim would require a book in its own right. In the present article, I will restrict myself to defending the more specific claim that traditional commentators such as Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja fall into eisegesis when they interpret particular passages in the *Gītā* relating to the Puruṣottama and to the distinction between *jñāna* and *vijñāna*.
 - 4 – For some discussions of the apparent contradictions in the *Gītā*, see Sharma, *The Hindu Gītā*, pp. xii–xvi; Ranade, *The Bhagavadgītā*, pp. 159–169; Eliot Deutsch, *The Bhagavad Gītā* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968), pp. 174–176; Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. 1 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 451–460. Some commentators, such as Richard Garbe, explain away the apparent contradictions in the *Gītā* by claiming that the *Gītā* is itself a composite text comprising multiple redactions. See Garbe, “The Bhagavad-Gītā,” in J. Hastings, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 2 (New York: Scribner’s, 1956), pp. 535–538. I will argue, by contrast, that the *Gītā* is a unitary text with a coherent philosophical thought-structure.
 - 5 – Throughout this essay, I cite passages from the *Bhagavad Gītā* by chapter and verse number in the body of the text. Translations of passages from the *Gītā* are my own except in cases where I specifically cite Sri Aurobindo’s own translation in *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2006). I often consult the following translation: *Bhagavadgītā with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. Swāmī Gambhīrānanda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2010).
 - 6 – See, for instance, Franklin Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gītā* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994), pp. 44–54; Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, pp. 451–453; Deutsch, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, pp. 174–176; Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 2 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975), pp. 523–534.
 - 7 – Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, p. 9. Hereafter, I will refer to Sri Aurobindo’s *Essays on the Gita* in the body of the essay by citing the page number in parentheses.
 - 8 – See Minor, “Sri Aurobindo as a *Gita*-yogin,” in *Modern Indian Interpreters of the Bhagavad Gita*, ed. Robert Minor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 81.

- 9 – Sri Aurobindo, “Spirituality and Nationalism” (1908), in *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1972) (hereafter *SABCL*), vol. 1, pp. 799–801.
- 10 – *Śrīśrīrāmakṣṇakathāmṛta: Śrīma-Kathita* (Kolkata: Udbodhan, 2010), p. 415; *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York: Sri Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1992), pp. 417–418. I cite Swami Nikhilananda’s translation of the Bengali text, although I sometimes make minor modifications.
- 11 – See, for instance, *Śrīśrīrāmakṣṇakathāmṛta*, p. 985; *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 910.
- 12 – *Śrīśrīrāmakṣṇakathāmṛta*, p. 479; *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 478.
- 13 – *Śrīśrīrāmakṣṇakathāmṛta*, p. 247; *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 271.
- 14 – *Śrīśrīrāmakṣṇakathāmṛta*, p. 534; *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 523.
- 15 – *Śrīśrīrāmakṣṇakathāmṛta*, p. 51; *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 104.
- 16 – *Śrīśrīrāmakṣṇakathāmṛta*, pp. 576–577; *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 559.
- 17 – Since Sri Aurobindo also read Swami Vivekananda’s works, one might wonder whether Sri Aurobindo’s conception of *vijñāna* was influenced at all by the thought of Vivekananda, who was Sri Ramakrishna’s chief disciple. Interestingly, on those rare occasions when Vivekananda contrasts *jñāna* with *vijñāna*, he tends to follow Śaṅkara in conceiving *jñāna* as “intellectual” knowledge and *vijñāna* as “realization.” See *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 9 (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1997), p. 239. That being said, I think a strong case can be made that Sri Ramakrishna’s standpoint of *vijñāna* is *implicitly* present in Vivekananda’s work. See, for instance, “God In Everything,” a fascinating lecture from Vivekananda’s *Jñāna-Yoga*, which presents a highly original interpretation of the Īśā Upaniṣad that seems to be inspired more by Sri Ramakrishna’s idea of *vijñāna* than by Śaṅkara’s Advaita (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 2 [Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2005], pp. 144–154). On p. 146, for instance, he remarks, “Here I can only lay before you what the Vedanta seeks to teach, and that is the deification of the world.” See also the second part of his lecture series, “Practical Vedanta,” where he claims, “The theme of the Vedanta is to see the Lord in everything, to see things in their real nature, not as they appear to be” (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 2:312). I think it is safe to say that Sri Aurobindo may very well have been influenced by such passages in Vivekananda’s work, which come remarkably close to the standpoint of *vijñāna* emphasized by Sri Ramakrishna.
- 18 – *SABCL*, 26:78.
- 19 – *SABCL*, 26:80.
- 20 – *SABCL*, 27:434 (letter dated 1913).

- 21 – Ibid.
- 22 – *SABCL*, 2:2.
- 23 – *SABCL*, 2:3.
- 24 – *SABCL*, 16:415.
- 25 – Ibid.
- 26 – Ibid.
- 27 – Ibid.
- 28 – *SABCL*, 16:416.
- 29 – *SABCL*, 16:422.
- 30 – *SABCL*, 16:416.
- 31 – *Eight Upaniṣads*, vol. 1, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2004), p. 14.
- 32 – For instance, in his detailed commentary on the Īsā Upaniṣad published between 1914 and 1915, Sri Aurobindo repeatedly employs the term *vijñāna* in Sri Ramakrishna’s sense as a “perfect knowledge” of the One in the multiplicity. See Sri Aurobindo, *The Upanishads: With Sanskrit text: English Translation and Commentary* (Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Light Publications, 1996), p. 48. It might be argued that Sri Aurobindo himself is guilty of eisegesis if he attempts to use Sri Ramakrishna’s notion of *vijñāna* in order to read the ancient scriptures. However, as I pointed out in the previous section, Sri Ramakrishna explicitly traces *vijñāna* to the Indian scriptures, especially the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Hence, I think it would be more accurate to claim that Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings about *vijñāna* attuned Sri Aurobindo to a crucial—if underemphasized—strain in the ancient scriptures themselves.
- 33 – *SABCL*, 2:344.
- 34 – *SABCL*, 16:427.
- 35 – *SABCL*, 16:412.
- 36 – Minor, “Sri Aurobindo as a *Gita*-yogin,” p. 63.
- 37 – *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā: Śāṅkarabhāṣya hindī-anuvādasahita* (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 2011), p. 139.
- 38 – It should be noted, however, that other grammatical forms of the noun *vijñāna* occur at several places in the *Gītā*: *vijñātum* (XI.31), *vijānataḥ* (II.46), *vijānītaḥ* (II.19), *vijānīyām* (IV.4), *vijñāya* (III.18).
- 39 – *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, p. 104.
- 40 – *Śrī Rāmānuja Gītā Bhāṣya: With Text and English Translation*, trans. Svāmī Ādidevānanda (Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2009), p. 244.

- 41 – Minor, *Bhagavad-Gītā: An Exegetical Commentary*, p. 141.
- 42 – See Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, pp. 222 and 244; Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, p. 73; Franklin Edgerton, “Jñāna and Vijñāna,” in *Festschrift für Moritz Winternitz*, ed. O. Stein and W. Gambert (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1933), pp. 217–220; *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. W. J. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 33; Minor, *Bhagavad-Gītā: An Exegetical Commentary*, pp. 141–142; Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, 2:491.
- 43 – Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2010), p. 280; David White, “Proto-Sāṃkhya and Advaita Vedānta in the Bhagavadgītā,” *Philosophy East and West* 29, no. 4 (October 1979): 501.
- 44 – Swami Tapasyananda, *Śrīmad-Bhagavad-Gītā: The Scripture of Mankind* (Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1984; paperback reprint, 2008), pp. 208–209.
- 45 – *Ibid.*, p. 208.
- 46 – *Ibid.*, p. 209.
- 47 – *Ibid.*, p. 208.
- 48 – Étienne Lamotte, R. V. De Smet, Deutsch, and Zaehner similarly argue that the supreme goal taught in the *Gītā* is a supreme *bhakti* attained *after* realization of the nondual Ātman. However, none of these commentators links the *Gītā*’s doctrine of supreme *bhakti* to the concept of *vijñāna*. See Lamotte, “Notes sur la Bhagavadgītā (1929),” in *Opera Indologica* (Louvain-La-Neuve: Institut Orientaliste de Louvain, 2004), p. 97; R. V. De Smet, “Manmanā,” in *Studies in the Gita*, ed. M. D. Paradkar (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1970), pp. 174–178; Deutsch, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, pp. 167–169; Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, pp. 27–36. Eknath Easwaran, perhaps following Sri Aurobindo, makes the passing suggestion that the term *vijñāna* in the *Gītā* could be understood in terms of Sri Ramakrishna’s notion of *vijñāna*, but he makes no attempt to justify this reading. See Easwaran, *The Bhagavad Gita* (London: Arkana, 1985), p. 111.
- 49 – *Bhagavadgītā with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, p. 317.
- 50 – *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, p. 197.
- 51 – *Ibid.*, p. 330.
- 52 – *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, p. 205.
- 53 – *Ibid.*, pp. 376–377.
- 54 – Mainkar, *A Comparative Study of the Commentaries on Bhagavadgītā*, p. 16.
- 55 – Deutsch and Edgerton make a similar point. See Deutsch, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, p. 160, and Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, p. 108.
- 56 – See *Śrī Rāmānuja Gītā Bhāṣya*, pp. 210–212; Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita*, pp. 54–55; Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy* 1:473; Minor, “The *Gītā*’s Way as the Only Way”; Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, pp. 263–336; Swami

- Tapasyananda, *Śrīmad-Bhagavad-Gītā*, pp. 105–106; Deutsch, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, p. 162; A. H. Armstrong and R. Ravindra, "The Dimensions of the Self: Buddhi in the 'Bhagavad-Gītā' and 'Psyché' in Plotinus," *Religious Studies* 15, no. 3 (September 1979): 333.
- 57 – *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 1 (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2007), pp. 3–5; Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita*, p. 183. Minor, by contrast, rejects such a pluralist interpretation of the *Gītā*'s teachings. See his "The *Gītā*'s Way as the Only Way," pp. 339–354. Minor does not seem to me to provide sufficient evidence for his thesis that the *Gītā* teaches exclusively one spiritual path and denies the efficacy of all other paths.
- 58 – *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta*, pp. 576–577; *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 559.
- 59 – For a helpful discussion of Sri Ramakrishna's religious pluralism, see Jeffery Long, "(Tentatively) Putting the Pieces Together: Comparative Theology in the Tradition of Sri Ramakrishna," in *The New Comparative Theology*, ed. Francis Clooney (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 151–170.