Why Sri Aurobindo’s Hermeneutics Still Matters: Philology and the Transformative Possibilities of Scripture

Swami Medhananda

Ramakrishna Institute of Moral and Spiritual Education, Mysore 570020, India; sw.medhananda@gmail.com

Abstract: Contemporary scholars, this article argues, stand to learn a great deal from Sri Aurobindo’s sophisticated hermeneutic approach to the Vedāntic scriptures. After identifying the strengths and weaknesses of traditional and modern hermeneutic approaches to the scriptures, I summarize Sri Aurobindo’s neglected essay, “The Interpretation of Scripture” (1912), where he outlines a timely hermeneutic method that combines elements from both traditional and modern approaches. I then focus on the Īśā Upaniṣad as a test case, critically comparing the commentaries of the traditional Advaita Vedāntin Śaṅkara, the modern Indologist Paul Thieme, and Sri Aurobindo. I make the case that Sri Aurobindo’s interpretive approach to the Īśā Upaniṣad has significant advantages over the approaches of Śaṅkara and Thieme. Finally, I call for an Aurobindonian hermeneutics of śraddhā, which combines historico-philological inquiry with interpretive charity and an openness to the transformative possibilities of scripture.

Keywords: Sri Aurobindo; hermeneutics; Vedānta; Īśā Upaniṣad

1. Introduction

Recently, there has been a burgeoning interest in the prasthānātrayi, the three scriptural “pillars” of Vedānta: namely, the Upaniṣads, the Bhagavad-Gītā, and the Brahmaśūtra. Many recent scholars, such as Cohen (2018) and Malinar (2007), have adopted a historico-philological method in order to determine the original meaning of scriptural passages. Other scholars have critically examined and compared the scriptural interpretations of traditional commentators such as Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Madhva, Viṣṇuśarma, and others. Meanwhile, Ram-Prasad (2013) is among several scholars who have explored a constructive theological approach to the scriptures.

In spite of this thriving discourse on the prasthānātrayi, recent scholars have largely ignored Sri Aurobindo’s extensive writings on the scriptures. Aurobindo (1872–1950), a British-educated Bengali mystic, was conversant not only with traditional commentaries but also with some of the latest Western historico-philological scholarship on the Indian scriptures. Recognizing the strengths and limitations of both traditional and modern approaches, Aurobindo proposed a new hermeneutic paradigm for interpreting the scriptures that combines a modern historico-philological method with a receptivity to the spiritual core of the scriptures. On the basis of this unique hermeneutic approach, Aurobindo wrote full-scale commentaries on the Vedic hymns (CWSA 15), the Bhagavad-Gītā (CWSA 19), and the Īśā (CWSA 17, pp. 1–91) and Kena Upaniṣads (CWSA 18, pp. 3–98). Contemporary scholars, I would argue, stand to learn a great deal from Aurobindo’s sophisticated hermeneutic approach and his detailed commentaries on the scriptures.

This article has four parts. Part 1 identifies the strengths and weaknesses of traditional and modern hermeneutic approaches to the scriptures. Part 3 summarizes Aurobindo’s important unpublished essay, “The Interpretation of Scripture” (c. 1912), where he outlines a new hermeneutic method that combines elements from both traditional and modern approaches. Part 4 then focuses on the Īśā Upaniṣad as a test case, critically comparing the commentaries of the traditional Advaita Vedāntin Śaṅkara, the modern scholar Paul...
Thieme, and Aurobindo. I make the case that Aurobindo’s interpretive approach to the Isā Upaniṣad has significant advantages over the approaches of Śaṅkara and Thieme. Finally, Part 5 calls for an Aurobindonian hermeneutics of śraddhā, which combines historico-philological inquiry with interpretive charity and spiritual receptivity.

2. The Pros and Cons of Traditional and Modern Hermeneutic Approaches

Since the pioneering work of late nineteenth-century scholars such as Thibaut (1890), numerous scholars have convincingly argued that traditional commentators such as Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Madhva were often guilty of imposing their own views onto the scriptures (Minor [1986] 1991; Magnone 2012; Ghate 1981; Mainkar 1969). These traditional commentators took for granted the a priori correctness of their own preconceived philosophical frameworks and tended to read them into the scriptures, even when faced with verses that seemed to have an entirely different prima facie meaning. For instance, the Dvaitin Madhva (1969, p. 437), who maintains that the jīva is eternally different from Brahmān, counterintuitively interprets the declaration in Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7—"sa ātmā tat tvam asī" ("That is the Self; Thou art That")—as "sa ātmā atat tvam asī" ("That is the Self; Thou art not That"). By carrying over the vowel sandhi from the word "ātmā." Likewise, since the Advaitin Śaṅkara takes jñānayoga to be the only direct path to mokṣa, he interprets the first line of Gītā 3.20—"Through works, indeed, did Janaka and others attain perfection" (karmayoge hi sansiddhih asthitā janakādayah)—as a flagrantly eisegetic manner by claiming that karmayoga leads indirectly to mokṣa by purifying the mind and thereby making one fit to practice jñānayoga. Evidently, the priority of traditional commentators was not so much to determine the original import of scriptural texts as to prove that these texts consistently supported their own favored philosophical system. As numerous scholars have shown, one major reason for the eisegetic tendencies of these commentators was their acceptance of the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā principle of ekavākyatā, the “principle that the entire Veda itself is a single extended sentence . . . and hence can never be self-contradictory” (Nicholson 2014, p. 41). As a result, traditional commentators had to show, no matter how implausibly, that every statement in the Upaniṣads, the Gītā, and the Brahma-sūtra consistently supported their own favored philosophical worldview.

It cannot be denied that modern scholars have made a major advance from traditional commentators by identifying their lapses into eisegesis and adopting a sophisticated historico-philological method with the aim of determining the original meaning of scriptural passages. For instance, Adams (1993) has shed valuable light on the Brahma-sūtra by placing it within a broader historical and philosophical context and trying to determine the meaning of individual sūtras independently of traditional commentators. The contributors to Cohen (2018)’s recent edited volume on the Upaniṣads have achieved similarly fruitful results.

At the same time, however, Clooney (1994) and Phillips (2008), among others, have made a powerful case that many contemporary scholars are in danger of throwing out the baby with the bath water, as it were, by rejecting wholesale the interpretive method of traditional commentators. There are at least two major reasons why scholars cannot afford to ignore the traditional interpretations of the scriptures. First, traditional Vedāntic commentators made copious use of the sophisticated hermeneutic principles of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā, which specify a variety of philological and interpretive procedures for determining the meaning of scriptural statements on the basis of such considerations as their context and the etymological meaning of individual words (D’Sa 1992; Bilimoria 2008, p. 66). On the basis of such principles, traditional commentators provided interpretations of scriptural words and passages which remain a valuable resource for contemporary scholars, who continue to employ philological principles very similar to those of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā. Therefore, we can gain significant insight into the meaning of scriptural passages by examining and comparing numerous traditional commentaries.

Second, and even more fundamentally, all the traditional Vedāntic commentators accepted scripture—śruti—as an independent pramāṇa, a “means of knowing” supersensuous
realities that cannot be known through other pramāṇas, such as pratyakṣa (sense perception) or anumāṇa (inferential reasoning). As a result, they looked upon the Upaniṣads not primarily as philosophical or historical documents but as revealed utterances that have the potential to transform those who understand and assimilate them properly (Clooney 1994, pp. 162–63). Śaṅkara, for instance, emphatically declares that the Upaniṣads afford nothing less than salvific knowledge of the non-dual Ātman through the “eradication of the unreal ignorance which is the cause of transmigratory existence” (mithyājñānasya samśrāhetaḥ nivṛttiḥ) (Śaṅkara on Brahma-sūtra 1.1.4; translation mine). From this perspective, we can turn the tables on contemporary scholars by interrogating the often unexamined presuppositions informing their own historico-philological approach. Indeed, Clooney (1994) has convincingly argued that many recent scholars exhibit a “detachment and skepticism” (139), which lead them to ignore or dismiss the “transformative power” of the Upaniṣads (160). By treating the Vedāntic scriptures primarily as historical or cultural documents, many contemporary scholars have overlooked the crucial spiritual dimension of the scriptures, which is precisely what has imbued them with lasting value for millions over the course of many centuries.

In short, both traditional and modern approaches to the Vedāntic scriptures have unique advantages as well as significant limitations. While traditional commentators were right to take seriously the transformative potential of scriptural texts, they too frequently read their own views into the texts instead of taking them on their own terms. Conversely, while recent scholars have done invaluable historical and philological work that has helped to clarify the original meaning of scriptural passages, they have not been sufficiently aware, or critical, of their own presuppositions and biases—particularly, those which might impede, rather than facilitate, their exegetical project. As Clooney puts it, “scholarship that precludes the discussion of truth and right reading and ignores the possibility of the transformation of the reader is at best incomplete scholarship, and possibly merely naive virtuosity: anxious busyness, yielding no fruit” (1994, p. 140). From this perspective, traditional and modern approaches to the Vedāntic scriptures prove to be complementary rather than conflicting, since they do not only have unique strengths but also mutually correct their respective weaknesses.

3. Aurobindo’s Dialectical Hermeneutics of Mystical Immanence

This is precisely where Aurobindo comes in, because he was one of the first not only to identify the limitations of both traditional and modern approaches to the Indian scriptures but also to develop an alternative hermeneutic paradigm that combines the modern historico-philological method with a spiritual receptivity to the transformative possibilities of scripture. On the one hand, Aurobindo often faults traditional commentators for lapsing into eisegesis. For instance, in the introduction to his Essays on the Gītā, he argues that traditional “polemist commentators” were wrong to turn the Gītā into a “weapon of offence and defence against other schools and systems” (CWSA 19, p. 9). Traditional commentators, in their eagerness to marshal the scriptures in support of their own sectarian views, overlooked or suppressed the Gītā’s “universal comprehensiveness,” its ironic attempt to unify and reconcile apparently conflicting spiritual philosophies and religious practices (CWSA 19, pp. 8–9). Similarly, Aurobindo repeatedly criticizes Śaṅkara for projecting the Advaitic doctrine of the unreality of the world onto the Īsā Upaniṣad, which explicitly affirms the divinity of life and action in the world (CWSA 17, p. 83, 5n1, 5n3).

On the other hand, Aurobindo faults modern Western-educated scholars for their tendency to approach the scriptures as intellectual rather than spiritual documents. For instance, in the context of the Upaniṣads, he observes that many foreign scholars and translators “seek to bring out the intellectual sense without feeling the life of thought vision and the ecstasy of spiritual experience which made the ancient verses appear then and still make them to those who can enter into the element in which these utterances move, a revelation not to the intellect alone, but to the soul and the whole being, make of them in the old expressive word not intellectual thought and phrase, but Sruti, spiritual
audience, an inspired Scripture” (CWSA 20, p. 330). Notice Aurobindo’s emphasis on mystical receptivity as the key to achieving interpretive fidelity: we cannot “enter into the element” in which the Upaniṣadic mantras “move” without being receptive to the ecstatic spiritual experiences that inspired the ancient seers to utter these mantras in the first place.

 Crucially, although Aurobindo criticizes both traditional and modern approaches, he does not reject them altogether. Rather, to put it in Hegelian terms, he adopts a dialectical interpretive method that “sublates” (aufhebt) the traditional and modern interpretive approaches by determinately negating them—that is, by incorporating their strengths while avoiding their limitations. Aurobindo elaborates this dialectical hermeneutics most fully in his important—and unduly neglected—unpublished essay “The Interpretation of Scripture” (c. 1912; CWSA 12, pp. 33–37). In particular, he specifies three “standards of truth” for interpreting scriptural texts accurately: the known, the knower, and knowledge. He elaborates the first standard as follows:

The known is the text itself that we seek to interpret. We must be sure we have the right word, not an emendation to suit the exigency of some individual or sectarian opinion; the right etymology and shade of meaning, not one that is traditional or forced to serve the ends of a commentator; the right spirit in the sense, not an imported or too narrow or too elastic spirit. (CWSA 12, p. 36)

Aurobindo emphasizes here the need to avoid eisegesis in all forms. Instead of determining the precise meaning of words by drawing on our own preconceived ideas, we should strive to decipher the original meaning of the words by taking into account historical and philological considerations such as their etymological derivation and their context. For instance, as I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Maharaj 2020), in his commentary on the Īśā Upaniṣad, Aurobindo tries to decipher the meaning and spiritual significance of terms such as Mātatāsvaḥ, Agni, and Śīrṣa by examining how these terms were originally used in earlier Vedic hymns. In the same commentary, he also strives to bring out the semantic nuances of words like jagati and bhūtāni by tracing them to their verbal roots (√gam [“to go”] and √bhū [“to become”], respectively) (Maharaj 2020, pp. 316–19). Likewise, in The Secret of the Veda, he presents a “philological justification” of his interpretation of the Vedic hymns by appealing to “internal evidence” for the plausibility of his approach (CWSA 15, p. 34). Aurobindo’s kinship with present-day scholars should be apparent, since his hermeneutics explicitly accords a prominent place to historico-philological investigation.

If understanding the “known”—the text—requires philological and historical sensitivity, then understanding the “knower” and “knowledge” requires spiritual receptivity. By the “knower,” Aurobindo means the draṣṭa (seer) who originally composed the particular scripture. According to Aurobindo, we should attempt to discern the intent and broader philosophico-spiritual worldview of the draṣṭa. As he puts it, “The knower is the original drashta or seer of the mantra, with whom we ought to be in spiritual contact” (CWSA 12, p. 36). For Aurobindo, then, the full understanding of a scripture requires not only textual or philological analysis but also knowledge of the draṣṭa’s intention, gained through direct spiritual communion with the draṣṭa. Put another way, Aurobindo takes spiritual praxis (sādhanā) to be an essential component of scriptural interpretation: to grasp fully the spiritual practices and realizations described in the scriptures, the interpreter should herself undertake those spiritual practices with the aim of attaining the same realizations enjoyed by the draṣṭa.

Aurobindo’s imperative to understand the intentions of the mantra-draṣṭa may seem quaint to contemporary scholars and students raised on Wimsatt and Beardsley’s “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946) and grand poststructuralist pronouncements of the “death of the author” (Barthes 1977). How might Aurobindo have responded to such ideas? Most fundamentally, I think he would have pointed out that different genres of text require correspondingly different canons of interpretation. Even if it may be unfruitful or hopeless to attempt to discern the author’s intentions when interpreting literary and philosophical texts, Aurobindo maintains that the Indian scriptures belong to a unique genre of text for which inquiry into authorial intention is entirely appropriate and even
necessary. For Aurobindo, the Upaniṣads are distinctive as a genre precisely because they express “a mind in which philosophy and religion and poetry are made one” (CWSA 20, p. 329). The Upaniṣads are not philosophy in the ordinary sense of “abstract intellectual speculation about Truth” but spiritual philosophy rooted in “Truth seen, felt, lived, held by the inmost mind and soul in the joy of utterance of an assured discovery and possession . . . ” (CWSA 20, p. 329). Likewise, the Upaniṣads are a unique form of poetry as well, since they are the “work of the aesthetic mind lifted up beyond its ordinary field to express the wonder and beauty of the rarest spiritual self-vision and the profoundest illumined truth of self and God and universe” (CWSA 20, p. 329). From Aurobindo’s standpoint, then, spiritual texts naturally call for a spiritually grounded hermeneutics which aims to uncover their meaning by a variety of means, including a direct mystical communion with the mantra-draśta.

Finally, “knowledge” is the “eternal truth” embodied in the scripture (CWSA 12, p. 36). Since scripture aims to impart spiritual rather than intellectual knowledge, a mere intellectual understanding of scriptures is insufficient. Rather, we should strive to attain direct mystical knowledge of the spiritual truth conveyed by the scripture. Aurobindo observes: “To understand Scripture, it is not enough to be a scholar, one must be a soul. To know what the draśhta saw one must oneself have drīṣṭi, sight, and be a student if not a master of the knowledge” (CWSA 12, p. 37). His assertion that “it is not enough to be a scholar” is telling: instead of dismissing the historico-philological approach of modern scholars, he maintains that such a scholarly approach, while valuable, remains incomplete unless it is combined with spiritual receptivity. After all, the primary aim of scripture is not to impart intellectual knowledge but to effect a radical spiritual transformation in the hearer. As Aurobindo succinctly puts it, the Upaniṣads are “vehicles of illumination and not of instruction” (CWSA 17, p. 13).

One major reason why recent scholars have tended to ignore Aurobindo’s scriptural commentaries is that they fail to appreciate the sophistication and contemporary relevance of his hermeneutic method.7 Robert N. Minor, for instance, claims that Aurobindo took “one’s inner experience” to be the “basic interpretive principle for understanding any scripture” (Minor [1986] 1991, p. 72). While Minor is right to emphasize the importance of spiritual experience in Aurobindo’s hermeneutics, Minor’s claim is reductive and misleading, since it seems to imply that Aurobindo adopted a subjective approach to the scriptures, reading his own mystical experiences into the scriptures instead of trying to understand them on their own terms. Minor overlooks the fact that all three standards of truth in Aurobindo’s “The Interpretation of Scripture”—knowledge, the knower, and the known—are oriented toward achieving interpretive immanence. For Aurobindo, then, the best way to avoid eisegesis in the interpretation of scripture is to combine literary and historico-philological sensitivity with a spiritual receptivity both to the mantra-draśta’s intention and to the spiritual truth embodied in scripture.

4. Śaṅkara, Thieme, and Aurobindo on the Īśā Upaniṣad: A Critical Comparison

In this section, I will test the fruitfulness of Aurobindo’s hermeneutics of mystical immanence by investigating how he applies it to a particular scripture. I have chosen as a test case the brief but cryptic Īśā Upaniṣad, which has been interpreted in numerous ways by traditional and modern commentators. I will highlight some of the unique features and advantages of Aurobindo’s approach to the Īśā Upaniṣad8 by comparing it with the traditional Advaitic approach of Śaṅkara and the modern historico-philological approach of the German scholar Paul Thieme. After briefly outlining the respective hermeneutic approaches of these three commentators, I will compare and critically evaluate their interpretations of the first two verses of the Īśā Upaniṣad in particular.

Predictably, Śaṅkara argues that the Īśā Upaniṣad consistently supports the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta, which holds that the impersonal (nirguṇa) nondual Brahman alone is ultimately real and that everything else—including the personal God (saṅguṇa Brahman), individual souls (jīvas), and the universe (jagat)—is ultimately non-existent. As an Advaitin,
Śaṅkara maintains that jñānayoga alone leads directly to the salvific knowledge of nondual Brahman, while karmayoga and bhaktiyoga lead indirectly to the knowledge of Brahman by preparing the aspirant’s mind for the rigors of jñānayoga. However, the Iṣā Upaniṣad presents major difficulties for Śaṅkara, since many of its verses seem to enjoin life and action in the world. Śaṅkara’s overall strategy for reconciling these problematic verses with his Advaitic philosophy is to invoke the familiar Advaitic doctrine of adhikārībheda (differing competencies). On the basis of this doctrine, Śaṅkara claims that only verse 1 and verses 3 through 8 of the Iṣā Upaniṣad address superior aspirants who are fit to practice Advaitic jñānayoga, while all the other verses—namely, 2 and 9 through 18—address inferior aspirants who are only qualified for karmayoga and upāsanā, the worship and contemplation of devatās.

Śaṅkara’s commentary on the Iṣā Upaniṣad reflects both the strengths and the weaknesses of the traditional approach to the scriptures. On the one hand, he agrees with other traditional Vedāntic commentators in highlighting the uniquely soteriological value of the Upaniṣads. In the introduction to his commentary on the Iṣā Upaniṣad, Śaṅkara claims that the Upaniṣads, by revealing the “true nature of the Ātman” (ātmayathātmya), afford nothing less than moksa to the fit spiritual aspirant. On the other hand, several commentators and scholars have convincingly shown that Śaṅkara’s Advaitic interpretation of the Iṣā Upaniṣad suffers from numerous problems, three of which are especially serious. First, Śaṅkara’s entire approach to the Iṣā Upaniṣad is arguably eisegetic, since he is less interested in understanding the Upaniṣad on its own terms than in reading his Advaitic framework into it. Second, his repeated appeal to the doctrine of adhikārībheda has no internal textual justification, since none of the verses themselves indicate that they are addressed to differing grades of spiritual aspirants. Third, Śaṅkara’s claim that only seven of the eighteen verses of the Iṣā Upaniṣad actually concern the highest knowledge of Brahman lacks prima facie plausibility. Moreover, on his interpretation, the entire Upaniṣad becomes disjointed and almost incoherent, since he posits a sharp discontinuity in thought not only between the first and second verses but also between verses 3 through 8 and verses 9 through 18.

We seem to breathe a different air when we move from Śaṅkara to Thieme, who adopts a modern historico-philological approach to the Iṣā Upaniṣad. Thieme strives to determine the original meaning of the verses of the Iṣā Upaniṣad by placing them in their historical context, comparing its doctrines with those of earlier and later Indian scriptures, and speculating—primarily on the basis of metrical and semantic analysis—that certain words and phrases in the Upaniṣad may not have been part of the original text (Thieme 1965, pp. 95, 98). In his boldest move, Thieme attempts to reconcile the many apparently “contradictory” statements in the Iṣā Upaniṣad by arguing that the first fourteen verses are best read as a “chain of argumentative dicussions meant to be based on logical reasoning . . .” (1965, p. 97). Employing the framework and terminology of later scholastic Indian philosophy, Thieme claims that many of the verses of the Iṣā Upaniṣad actually embody not the speaker’s own final position (the siddhānta) but pūrvapakṣa (“first alternative”) and uttarapakṣa (“second alternative”) positions motivating the siddhānta views expressed in verses 3, 6, 11, and 14. According to Thieme, employing this scholastic framework as a hermeneutic lens enables us to interpret the verses of the Iṣā Upaniṣad as a “consistent, meaningful whole” (1965, p. 97).

While Thieme’s historical and textual analysis of the individual verses of the Iṣā Upaniṣad is sometimes quite illuminating, his overall hermeneutic approach to the Upaniṣad is highly questionable for several reasons. Most fundamentally, Thieme opens himself to the charge of eisegesis, since the verses of the Iṣā Upaniṣad provide no indication that they should be read in the manner of a scholastic disputation. Moreover, he commits an anachronism by imposing a pūrvapakṣa-siddhānta framework onto a scripture that was composed centuries before such a scholastic style of argumentation was even fully developed in India. Finally, Thieme’s approach has the implausible consequence that only four of the first fourteen verses of the Iṣā Upaniṣad actually represent the speaker’s own viewpoint. The
respective hermeneutic approaches of Thieme and Śaṅkara, for all their differences, share
the same fundamental weakness: they both invoke an external framework—in Śaṅkara’s
case, the Advaitic framework of adhikārībheda, and in Thieme’s case, an Indian scholastic
framework—in order to reconcile apparently contradictory statements in the Iṣṇa Upaniṣad.
Since neither Śaṅkara nor Thieme provides an internal justification for their respective
hermeneutic frameworks, they remain vulnerable to the charge of eisegesis.

We are now in a position to appreciate the distinctiveness and contemporary im-
portance of Aurobindo’s hermeneutic approach to the Iṣṇa Upaniṣad. Like Śaṅkara and
Thieme, Aurobindo acknowledges the numerous apparently contradictory assertions in
the Upaniṣad. However, in stark contrast to Śaṅkara and Thieme, Aurobindo reconciles
these statements not by appealing to an external framework but by discerning a unifying
principle within the Iṣṇa Upaniṣad itself: namely, “the uncompromising reconciliation of
uncompromising extremes” (CWSA 17, p. 83). In particular, he argues that the Iṣṇa Upaniṣad
resolves sequentially the following nine pairs of opposites:

1. God and the world (verse 1, line 1)
2. Renunciation and enjoyment (verse 1, line 2)
3. External action and internal freedom (verse 2)
4. The One stable Brahman and the multiple Movement (verses 4–5)
5. Being and Becoming (verses 6–7)
6. The Active Lord and the indifferent Aksara Brahman (verse 8)
7. Knowledge (Vidyā) and Ignorance (Avidyā) (verses 9–11)
8. Birth and Non-Birth (verses 12–14)
9. Works and Knowledge (verses 15–18)\[1\]

Aurobindo further claims that these nine pairs of opposites are “worked out sym-
metrically in four successive movements of thought” (CWSA 17, p. 13). The first three
verses, which comprise the first movement of thought, articulate all the main ideas of the
Iṣṇa Upaniṣad. The remaining fifteen verses explain and amplify the ideas of the first three
verses in a sequential and symmetrical manner. Verses 4 through 7, comprising the second
movement of thought, develop the ideas of verse 1. Verses 8 through 14, comprising the
third movement of thought, develop the ideas of verse 2. Finally, verses 15 through 18,
comprising the fourth movement of thought, develop the ideas of verse 3.\[12\]

Of course, one can dispute whether the principle of the reconciliation of opposites
Aurobindo claims to find in the Iṣṇa Upaniṣad is really internal. Each reader will have to
answer this question for herself after a careful examination of Aurobindo’s entire commen-
tary on the Iṣṇa Upaniṣad, a task that is beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, it is
important to note a fundamental difference between Aurobindo’s hermeneutic approach
on the one hand and the approaches of Śaṅkara and Thieme on the other. For both Śaṅkara
and Thieme, the Iṣṇa Upaniṣad is full of prima facie contradictions, so the interpreter’s task
is to develop a hermeneutic framework for reconciling these apparent contradictions. As
Thieme puts it, the verses of the Iṣṇa Upaniṣad appear “at first blush” to be “a jumble of more
or less vaguely contradictory statements” (1965, p. 97). For Aurobindo, by contrast, the very aim of the Iṣṇa Upaniṣad is to reconcile apparent opposites, so the interpreter need only
discern—through patient, careful, and meditative reading—how the verses themselves
both thematize and resolve the various pairs of opposites. Put another way, Aurobindo
grants more agency and self-reflexivity to the Iṣṇa Upaniṣad than either Śaṅkara or Thieme.
As a result, Aurobindo feels no need to appeal to an external framework to reconcile the
apparent contradictions of the Iṣṇa Upaniṣad. From Aurobindo’s standpoint, Śaṅkara’s
appeal to an Advaitic framework and Thieme’s appeal to a pūrṇapakṣa-siddhānta framework
are both equally unwarranted and eisegetic, since the mantra-draṣṭā of the Iṣṇa Upaniṣad
consciously presented various paradoxes and apparent contradictions and proceeded to
resolve them on a spiritual basis.

Since a detailed comparative study of the commentaries of Śaṅkara, Thieme, and
Aurobindo is not possible here, I will restrict myself to the more modest task of comparing
their interpretations of the first two verses of the Iṣṇa Upaniṣad, which run as follows:
According to Śaṅkara, the meaning of the first line of the first verse is that “all this that is unreal [ānṛtām idam sarvam], whether moving or not moving, is to be covered [acchādanīyam] by one’s own Supreme Ātman” (Śaṅkara on Īsā Up. 1). By glossing “idam sarvam” as “ānṛtām idam sarvam,” Śaṅkara boldly claims that the first line supports the Advaitic doctrine of the unreality of the world: this unreal world should be renounced by “contemplating the supreme truth of the Ātman” (Śaṅkara on Īsā Up. 1). However, Śaṅkara’s interpretation is eisegetic in two respects. First, he suppresses the theistic connotation of the word “Īsā” by taking it to imply the impersonal Ātman. Second, since the Īsā Upaniṣad does not seem to propound the unreality of the world, Śaṅkara’s interpretation of “vāsyam” as “acchādanīyam” (“to be covered”) is difficult to justify on internal grounds.

Śaṅkara’s interpretive acrobatics are equally on display in his commentary on the phrase “tena tyaktena bhūjīthāḥ,” in the second line of the first verse. The word “bhūjīthāḥ” poses a serious problem for Śaṅkara. 1.3.66 of Pāṇini’s Aṣṭadhyāyī, “bhūjo ‘navane,” specifies that √bhuj should be conjugated in the ātmanepada form unless it has the meaning of “to protect.” The word “bhūjīthāḥ” in the first verse of the Īsā Upaniṣad is the ātmanepada form of the second person, singular, optative tense (vidhi liṅga) of √bhuj. If we follow Pāṇini’s rule, then, “bhūjīthāḥ” must mean “enjoy” or “eat,” not “protect.” While Śaṅkara generally follows Pāṇini, he notably departs from Pāṇini here in glossing “bhūjīthāḥ” as “pālāyethāḥ” (protect), since this meaning accords better with his Advaitic reading. Implausibly taking the Ātman to be the implied direct object of “bhūjīthāḥ,” Śaṅkara claims that “tena tyaktena bhūjīthāḥ” means that one should “protect” the Ātman in the sense of practicing “steadfast devotion to knowledge of the Ātman” (Śaṅkara on Īsā Up. 1). Accordingly, the first verse indicates that “one who thinks of the Lord as the Ātman is qualified only for renunciation of the threefold desire for son, wealth, and worlds and not for action” (Śaṅkara on Īsā Up. 1). From Śaṅkara’s Advaitic standpoint, the pure, nondual nature of the Ātman stands in direct contradiction with action, which presupposes “multiplicity, doership, and enjoyership” (Śaṅkara on Īsā Up. 1). Therefore, Śaṅkara claims that the first verse enjoins the renunciation of works for jñānayogīs who are qualified to practice steadfast devotion to knowledge of the Ātman.

The second verse of the Īsā Upaniṣad also poses a serious problem for Śaṅkara, since it unambiguously enjoins karma: “Doing verily works in this world one should wish to live a hundred years.” If the first verse enjoins renunciation, why does the second verse enjoin action? To resolve the contradiction between the first and second verses, Śaṅkara appeals to the Advaitic doctrine of adhikārībheda. The second verse, he argues, is meant for “one who is unable to grasp the Ātman as a result of his preoccupation with the non-Self” (Śaṅkara on Īsā Up. 2). According to Śaṅkara, while the first verse enjoins renunciation for spiritually evolved aspirants who are qualified for jñānayoga, the second verse enjoins action for less evolved aspirants who are only qualified for karmayoga. However, as several scholars have pointed out, Śaṅkara’s invocation of adhikārībheda in this case is clearly eisegetic, since the Īsā Upaniṣad itself gives no indication that the first and second verses are addressed to differing grades of spiritual aspirant.

Thieme’s interpretation of the first verse of the Īsā Upaniṣad contrasts sharply with Śaṅkara’s. Thieme interprets “Īsā” theistically as “by the LORD” and takes the second word to be “ātāvāyam,” glossing it as “to be dwelled in” rather than as “to be covered” (1965, p. 89). For Thieme, then, the first line of the first verse declares that the Lord dwells in all living beings, thereby providing the theological rationale for the practical injunction of the second line: “Therefore [tena] you should nourish yourself [bhūjīthāḥ] with what is
abandoned (voluntarily ceded to you) [Ityaktena]; you should not covet anybody’s property [na grthah kasya svd bhunum]” (1965, p. 89). In other words, the first verse provides a spiritual justification for ahiṃsā (non-injury): since the Lord dwells in every living being, we should not harm others and we should only eat whatever is given to us voluntarily as alms.

Thieme then somewhat surprisingly claims that the second verse of the Iṣā Upaniṣad “obviously is in contradiction to” the previous verse (1965, p. 92). His paraphrase of the second verse clarifies his understanding of the relation between verses 1 and 2: “You may do anything (even rob or kill a living being), provided you are acting without ‘attachment’ . . . : for thus sin will not soil you” (1965, p. 92). According to Thieme, while verse 1 enjoins ahiṃsā, verse 2 enjoins any and all actions—including those that harm other living beings—so long as those actions are done without emotional attachment. Verse 3, Thieme adds, warns that those who are “killers of souls” (atmahano janah) go to hell (asuryah lokah) (1965, p. 92). In order to reconcile the apparently conflicting statements in verses 1, 2, and 3, Thieme claims that these three verses actually constitute a brief argumentative dialectic. Verse 1, the pūrva-paksa, tells us not to injure any living being. Verse 2, the uttara-paksa, “rebuts” verse 1 by arguing that actions done without attachment—including harmful actions—are ethically justified (Thieme 1965, p. 93). Finally, verse 3, the siddhānta, upholds the position of verse 1, adding that “killing is not only wrong, but will be punished in hell” (Thieme 1965, p. 93). As I pointed out earlier, Thieme then goes on to argue that verses 4 through 14 of the Iṣā Upaniṣad should also be read in the manner of dialectical arguments.

On the whole, Thieme’s interpretations of individual words in the first verse—such as “iṣā” and “bhunijthah”—have greater plausibility than Śaṅkara’s rather forced interpretations. Nonetheless, there are three major problems with Thieme’s broader interpretation of the relationship of the first verse to subsequent verses. First, Thieme’s bizarre claim that the second verse “obviously” contradicts the first verse stems from a misinterpretation of the words “karma” and “karmāṇi” in the second verse. While the second verse clearly enjoins unattached action in general and makes no mention of sin, Thieme unjustifiably takes “karmāṇi” to encompass even sinful acts such as robbing and killing. His gloss of the phrase “na karma lipyate nare” as “sin will not soil you” is also unconvincing, since “karma” here clearly means action or the fruit of action rather than sin. Second, since there really is no overt contradiction between the first and second verses, Thieme’s broader interpretation of verses 1 through 3 as a dialectic between pūrva-paksa, uttara-paksa, and siddhānta collapses. Ironically, Thieme’s and Śaṅkara’s respective interpretations betray the same eisegetic structure: both of them not only implausibly claim to find a contradiction between verses 1 and 2 but also attempt to resolve this nonexistent “contradiction” by invoking an external framework that is not grounded in the Iṣā Upaniṣad itself. Third, Thieme’s very effort to interpret the Iṣā Upaniṣad as an elaborate argumentative dialectic is symptomatic of the pervasive tendency among recent scholars to downplay or ignore the spiritual-transformative dimension of scripture. Ultimately, Thieme’s approach to the Iṣā Upaniṣad—as ingenious and scholarly as it is—reveals less about the meaning of the Upaniṣad than about his own intellectualistic presuppositions.

Aurobindo, in contrast to both Śaṅkara and Thieme, interprets the first two verses of the Iṣā Upaniṣad in terms of the fundamental principle of the reconciliation of opposites which he finds at the basis of the thought-structure of the Upaniṣad as a whole. Aurobindo renders the first two verses as follows:

1. All this is for habitation by the Lord, whatsoever is individual universe of movement in the universal motion. By that renounced thou shouldst enjoy; lust not after any man’s possession.

2. Doing verily works in this world one should wish to live a hundred years. Thus it is in thee and not otherwise than this; action cleaves not to a man. (CWSA 17, p. 5)

According to Aurobindo, Śaṅkara’s reading of “vāsyam” as “to be covered” contradicts “the whole thought of the Upanishad,” which nowhere suggests that the world is unreal and, in
fact, teaches the reconciliation of “apparently incompatible opposites” (CWSA 17, p. 5n1). Like Thieme, Aurobindo interprets “Iṣṭa” as “by the Lord” and “vāsyam” as “to be inhabited,” arguing that the first line thereby conveys one of the main themes of the Upaniṣad—that the world is the Lord’s “dwelling-place” (CWSA 17, p. 5n1). However, unlike Thieme, Aurobindo maintains that the first line of the first verse resolves the apparent antithesis between the eternal, immutable, perfect God and the transient, changing, imperfect world by affirming that God inhabits everything in the world.

Aurobindo then claims that the second line of the first verse resolves the opposition between renunciation and enjoyment by telling us to enjoy the world through renunciation: “tena tyaktena bhūjñīthāḥ.” While Thieme interprets “tena” as “therefore,” Aurobindo takes “tena tyaktena” to mean the inner renunciation of “idam sarvam” (“all this”) through the renunciation of desire. Aurobindo departs starkly from Śaṅkara in claiming that the second line redefines the concepts of enjoyment (bhoga) and renunciation (tyāga) so as to show their mutual compatibility:

Real integral enjoyment of all this movement and multiplicity in its truth and in its infinity depends upon an absolute renunciation; but the renunciation intended is an absolute renunciation of the principle of desire founded on the principle of egoism and not a renunciation of world-existence. (CWSA 17, p. 85)

While Śaṅkara violates Pāṇinian grammar by interpreting “bhūjñīthāḥ” as “protect,” Aurobindo interprets the word in its expected atmanepada sense of “enjoy,” arguing that the phrase “tena tyaktena bhūjñīthāḥ” resolves the antithesis between renunciation and enjoyment. True enjoyment of the world, he claims, consists not in the selfish enjoyment of sense-objects but in the desireless enjoyment of everything in the world as various manifestations of God. Indeed, the ideal “integral” enjoyment of the world requires nothing less than the spiritual vision of God in—and as—everything, described in the first line of the first verse. In order to achieve this panentheistic realization, we have to renounce all our selfish desires, but such inner renunciation is perfectly compatible with action in the world.

For Aurobindo, then, the first verse’s emphasis on enjoyment of the world through the renunciation of desire provides a natural segue to the second verse, which encourages us to act in the world throughout our lives. As Aurobindo puts it, “life and works can and should be accepted in their fullness; for the manifestation of the Lord in life and works is the law of our being and the object of our world-existence” (CWSA 17, p. 86). The second verse resolves the apparent opposition between external action and internal freedom on the basis of the previous verse, which affirms the divinity of all existence. Aurobindo even anticipates later scholars in claiming that Śaṅkara’s Advaitic interpretation of the second verse as a “concession to the ignorant” is “forced and unnatural” (CWSA 17, p. 5n3). In contrast to Śaṅkara, Aurobindo argues that the first two verses of the Iṣṭa Upaniṣad are perfectly consistent: they instruct us to manifest our divinity through enlightened enjoyment of—and action in—the world, since the Lord manifests Himself precisely in “life and works.”

While I am not prepared to defend here Aurobindo’s interpretation of the first two verses of the Iṣṭa Upaniṣad as the “right” or “correct” one, I do think his interpretation has significant hermeneutic advantages over the interpretations of Śaṅkara and Thieme. First, Aurobindo’s understanding of “tena tyaktena bhūjñīthāḥ” as an injunction to enjoy the world by renouncing desire has greater contextual justification than the interpretations of Śaṅkara and Thieme, since Aurobindo shows in detail how this instruction is consistent with the theme of the reconciliation of opposites present throughout the Iṣṭa Upaniṣad. Second, while Aurobindo discerns a plausible semantic continuity between the first and second verses, both Śaṅkara and Thieme claim unconvincingly that the second verse contradicts the previous one.

Third, I would argue, from a broader perspective, that Aurobindo’s overall approach to the Iṣṭa Upaniṣad has the primary advantages of Śaṅkara’s and Thieme’s approaches but avoids their most serious limitations. While Śaṅkara rightly emphasizes the Upaniṣad’s
unique status as śruti which aims to impart spiritual truth and salvific knowledge, he denies the natural meaning of many words and phrases in order to make the verses conform to his own Advaita philosophy. Moreover, while Thieme rightly takes into account various historical and philological considerations in order to determine the original meaning of the verses of the Isa Upanishad, he ends up lapsing into eisegesis in his own right by reading them as part of a far-fetched argumentative dialectic that is not warranted by the verses themselves. Aurobindo’s hermeneutic approach to the Isa Upanishad combines a traditional commitment to the spiritual-transformative power of scripture with a modern historico-philological method. At the same time, Aurobindo strives to avoid both the eisegetic tendency of traditional commentators and the overintellectualism of modern scholars such as Thieme.

5. Toward a Hermeneutics of Šraddhā

Why, then, does Aurobindo’s hermeneutics still matter to us now? Aurobindo, I would suggest, helps us pinpoint the key missing element in much of contemporary scholarship on the Indian scriptures: namely, śraddhā. This untranslatable Sanskrit term, which is often rendered into English as “faith,” actually encompasses a range of semantic connotations, including not only faith but also belief, reverence, humility, spiritual conviction, and the capacity and willingness to act in accordance with one’s deepest convictions. From an Aurobindonian standpoint, any historico-philological inquiry into the meaning of scripture remains incomplete and sterile unless it is grounded in a fundamental attitude of śraddhā.

In the context of hermeneutics, śraddhā in scripture takes two basic forms: interpretive charity and spiritual receptivity.

According to the principle of interpretive charity, we should assume provisionally that the statements in a given scripture are consistent and internally coherent. We should resist the impulse to find contradictions or discrepancies in a scriptural text and then to explain or resolve them either by claiming that some statements in the text are later interpolations or by appealing to some external framework. For Aurobindo, the right reading of scripture requires patience, humility, and an openness to the possibility that our inability to reconcile certain statements in a scripture may reflect not contradictions in the text but our own limitations as readers removed from the text by over a millennium.

Aurobindo also repeatedly emphasizes that the Indian scriptures belong to a unique genre of spiritual literature that demands a commensurately spiritual receptivity and openness on the part of the reader. Anticipating Clooney (1994), Aurobindo makes a strong case that the best reader of scripture must have śraddhā in its spiritual core, its capacity to shape, surprise, transform, and enlighten us. Put another way, interpretive śraddhā involves a willingness to cede agency to scripture instead of arrogating agency exclusively for ourselves. Ideally, then, the interpretation of scriptural texts cuts both ways. When we read, interpret, and interrogate a scripture, we should also remain attentive to the various ways that the scripture can read, interpret, and even interrogate us—for instance, by calling into question our own unexamined presuppositions or by making available to us new perspectives from which we can reflect on, and potentially modify, our own entrenched modes of thinking and living.

By way of concluding, I will narrate an episode in Aurobindo’s life that dramatizes the transformative power of scripture in a way that no amount of abstract theorizing can. In May 1908, Aurobindo was incarcerated in the Alipore jail for his political activities. His one-year imprisonment turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Surrendering completely to God, he let himself be guided by the Divine antaryāṃti within him. In his famous Uttarpara speech of 1909, Aurobindo tells us what transpired in prison after his act of self-surrender:

Then He [God] placed the Gita in my hands. His strength entered into me and I was able to do the sadhan of the Gita. I was not only to understand intellectually but to realise what Srikrishna demanded of Arjuna . . . 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 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 Srikrishna 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 Srikrishna around me, the arms of my Friend and Lover. . . . 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. (CWSA 8, pp. 5–6)

Clearly, Aurobindo was no ordinary prisoner. He not only studied the Gita carefully but intensely practiced the sadhana taught in the Gita, which culminated in an ecstatic spiritual experience that should remind us of verse 7.19 of the Gita:

\[
\text{bahùnàm jàmanàntànte jñànavàn màm prapadyate}
\]
\[
vàsudevaàh savàm iti sa mahaàmà sudurlabhàh.
\]

[At the end of many births, the man of Knowledge attains Me. Very rare is the great soul who knows that Vástudva is everything.] (Roy [1938] 1995, p. 127)

In Essays on the Gita, which he started writing a few years after his imprisonment, Aurobindo takes the “jñànavàn” of 7.19 to refer back to the “jñàni” of 7.16 and 7.17 who has “bhakti with knowledge” (CWSA 19, p. 284). Accordingly, he characterizes the supreme realization of 7.19 as “bhakti of an integral knowledge” (CWSA 19, p. 284)—the realization that Vástudva is at once the “immutable and impersonal” Atman (CWSA 19, p. 284) and the personal Lord who is “all that is” (CWSA 19, p. 285). When we situate his commentary on 7.19 in the context of his earlier Utparpara speech, it becomes evident that his highly original explanation of the jñànavàn’s integral spiritual realization was informed by his own panentheistic realization of the impersonal-personal Vástudva in the Alipore jail. Tellingly, however, Aurobindo does not refer to his own spiritual experience anywhere in his commentary on the Gita, since he is fully aware that any such autobiographical appeals would leave him open to the charge of eisegesis. Rather, as I have discussed elsewhere (Maharaj 2015), he strives to provide a strictly internal justification for his spiritually-grounded interpretation of 7.19 by demonstrating its consistency not only with the preceding verses of chapter 7 but also with the thought-structure of the Gita as a whole.

Notice that in the passage from the Uttarpara speech cited earlier, Aurobindo remarks that during his imprisonment, he not only understood the Gita “intellectually” but also gained direct spiritual insight into its teachings. For Aurobindo, the intellectual and spiritual understanding of scripture are both equally vital. Accordingly, throughout his commentaries on the Gita and the Upanisads, he takes into account various historical, philosophical, and philological considerations that have typically preoccupied present-day scholars. At the same time, he strives to ground all such philosophical and historico-philological inquiries in his own spiritual realization of the truths conveyed in the scriptures. Aurobindo reminds us not to confuse the means with the end: modern scholarly methods, as valuable as they are, are only so many interpretive tools that can help us penetrate to the spiritual core of scripture. So, when the Gita declares, in 7.19, that the rare soul—the jñànavàn—sees Vástudva everywhere, we can parse and analyze the verse to our heart’s content. But when a flesh-and-blood jñànavàn like Aurobindo seeks to illuminate the spiritual depths of this verse, we would be wise to listen.

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Notes

See also Thibaut (1890), Minor ([1986] 1991), Ghaté (1981), Mainkar (1969), Thieme (1965), and Maharaj (2015).

2 See, for instance, Hirst (2005), Lipner (1997), Bartley (2002), Magnone (2012), Mainkar (1969), and Nicholson (2007).

3 I explain Aurobindo’s hermeneutic method in Part 3 of this paper.

4 See the discussions of the hermeneutic implications of ekavākyatā in van Buitenen (1968, pp. 29–30), Ghaté (1981, pp. 9–10), Hirst (2005, pp. 61–83), and Tapasyananda (1990, pp. xxi–xxii).

5 In the notes at the back of CWSA 17, the date of “The Interpretation of Scripture” is given as “Circa 1912” (CWSA 17, p. 504). This is a big “may,” since many scholars continue to argue that authorial intention—at least in the case of philosophical and literary texts—is often relevant in understanding their meaning. See, for instance, Hirsch ([1946] 1992), Alitieri (1981), and Farrell (2017).

7 Another reason why recent scholars have largely ignored Aurobindo’s scriptural commentaries may be that Aurobindo does not cite other scholars and does not always explicitly specify which verses he is commenting on, especially in Essays on the Gita.

8 Throughout this section, I refer only to Aurobindo’s final commentary on the Īśā Upaniṣad, which was published in 1924 (CWSA 17, pp. 3–91). Prior to 1924, Aurobindo wrote ten incomplete commentaries on the same Upaniṣad, none of which were published during his lifetime.

9 See, for instance, Radhakrishnan (1913, p. 569), Magnone (2012, pp. 354–55, 358–61), Jones (1981, pp. 79–81), and Harshananda (2013, pp. 77–91).

10 Olivelle (1998, p. 611) also expresses doubts about Thieme’s scholastic interpretation of the Īśā Upaniṣad.

13 Throughout this article, all English translations of passages from Śaṅkara’s commentary on the Īśā Upaniṣad are those of Swami Gambhirananda (Śaṅkarācārya 1989), though I sometimes modify his translations.

14 In this context, Cohen (2018, p. 293) notes that the “highest being in the Īśā Upaniṣad is not an impersonal brahman but a personal deity, Īśa (‘The Lord’).”

15 See, for instance, Radhakrishnan (1913, p. 569), Harshananda (2013, pp. 38–55), and Aurobindo’s criticism of Śaṅkara’s interpretation (CWSA 17, p. 5n3).

16 One might argue, in Thieme’s defense, that he is led to interpret karman as “sin” because of the verb lipyate, which suggests stain—as in several scriptural verses he cites, such as “pāpam karman na lipyate” in Chāṇḍogya Upaniṣad 4.14.3 and “lipyate na sa pāpena” in Bhagavad-Gītā 5.10 (Thieme 1965, p. 91). While this might be true, I still see no justification for glossing the word “karman” in Īśa Upaniṣad 2 as “sin,” since there is no mention of “pāpa” anywhere in that Upaniṣad.

17 In this context, Aurobindo also claims that the metaphysical foundations for this “bhakti of an integral knowledge” are presented in Gītā 15.16–19, where Krishna declares that He is the “Purushottama” who is beyond both the “mutable” (ksāra) and the “immutable” (aksāra) (CWSA 19, p. 284). Aurobindo elaborates his interpretation of the Gītā’s doctrine of the three Purusas in his commentary on chapter 15 of the Gītā (CWSA 19, pp. 435–49). I discuss Aurobindo’s interpretation of bhakti and jñāna in the Gītā in much greater detail in Maharaj (2015).

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