

Article

The Love of God? Bhakti (Devotion) and the Virtues in Spinoza's *Ethics* (Parts IV and V) and Bhagavadgītā Chapters 12–14 (Bhaktiyoga)

Lisa Widdison 

School of Arts and Sciences, Ahmedabad University, Ahmedabad 380009, India; lisa.widdison@ahduni.edu.in

Abstract

Common sense tells us that feeling love involves loving another as another and is not merely an accident of self-love, while the Sanskrit theory of rasa aesthetics tells us that genuine love must be returned. God's love for humanity would not require these distinctions, however, if it exists at all, and Benedictus de Spinoza (1632–1677) claims that it does not. Rather, he finds that God's love is not a philosophical problem because the very idea of God experiencing pleasure or pain as a result of desire for another (which constitutes common transactional conceptions of love) is irrational. This philosophical problem is compounded by the intrinsic value of loving without reciprocity, the follies of delusion, and the complicated—if not implicit—demands of reciprocity. Although Spinoza teaches a devotional path to liberation based on a logic of emotion in his *Ethics*, it is in the Bhagavadgītā's twenty verses on "Bhaktiyoga" that a philosophy of devotion extends to a practice for the sake of love in moral action. This virtue-theoretic approach to emotion responses yields yoga-classed results such that the characteristic traits of love are dedicated to humanity and productive actions are offered to God. This study reconciles the complex challenge of achieving adequate moral knowledge with Spinoza's claims that the path is rare, not difficult. If knowledge of what to do can be united with how to serve, divine love may be theoretically realised. The conclusion is that one may conduct ordinary secular transactions without contradiction yet generate a kind of affective currency as a channel for experiencing embodied liberation in a virtuous friendship with humanity via God.

Keywords: bhakti; devotion; virtues of Spinoza; ethics of the Bhagavadgītā; theocentric love



Academic Editor: Lee C. Barrett

Received: 9 January 2026

Revised: 15 March 2026

Accepted: 16 April 2026

Published: 13 May 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and

conditions of the [Creative Commons](#)[Attribution \(CC BY\) license](#).

"Now, an exposition on bhakti. . . but really in that is divine love. . ." ¹

Nārada Bhakti Sūtra ²

SUBTLE is the path of love !

Therein there is no asking and no not asking, There one loses one's self at His feet,

There one is immersed in the joy of the seeking:

plunged in the deeps of love as the fish in the water. . . ³

...

"The lane of love is very narrow, there is no capacity for duality.

When I was there, God was not, when God was there, I was not." ⁴

Kabīr

1. Introduction: Spinoza and the Aims of Bhakti

At first, it may seem that an inquiry into virtue through the lenses of Benedictus de Spinoza (1632–1677) and his *Ethics* (Latin: *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata*, 1674) and the “Bhagavadgītā” (situated in the Bhishma Parva Book of the *Mahābhārata*, composed in classical Sanskrit by 500 BCE) may be unnecessary. There is a clear mismatch between the virtues of Bhaktiyoga in the Bhagavadgītā and Spinoza’s *Ethics*. For instance, the *Mahābhārata* stresses a sense of humility, which is not a consistent virtue for Spinoza, and Spinoza does not imagine God to be a friend, like Kṛṣṇa is to Arjuna. However, rather than find new meanings in the *Ethics* or Bhakti traditions, this inquiry seeks to resolve a potential problem with delusion and deception in a devotee’s love of God in any tradition. If followers can be led astray or misguided in their love of God, then a means of assessing genuine devotion is required. It cannot be the case that merely proclaiming a love of God or charismatic shows of affection are enough. Bhakti, a devotional concept rooted in Sanskrit, is articulated as a type of devotion that is sustained by truth-conducive virtues, so it must also be falsifiable where there is an appearance that lacks substance, as Spinoza would say. The Bhagavadgītā provides a positive model with specific virtues to be obtained and vices to be avoided. However, as a virtue theory for devotional practise, it lacks one important feature: the Bhagavadgītā does not provide a solid error theory for mistakes in judgement about virtue. The impending battle that drives Arjuna to take refuge in Kṛṣṇa’s council is predicated on a series of erroneous judgments and false virtues made and demonstrated by multiple characters. Thus, the implicit virtue theory in the Bhagavadgītā’s Bhaktiyoga Chapter cannot hold that every claim to have virtue is genuine or self-justifying or that every claim to love God is true. From this other philosophical perspective, it is possible to support Bhakti virtues. Spinoza himself is also a kind of devotee of God. He provides a theory of error to show how people can be mistaken, even about their feelings for God, but does not extend his virtue of piety (*pietas*) to the lived experience of a personal relationship to God. Together, Bhaktiyoga and Spinoza’s theory of knowledge ground the virtues of adoration in correct understanding rather than passive affections. The central normative question is as follows: what are the qualifying characteristics required for one to freely love God? A combination of intellectual and moral virtues is clearly required. Responding to this need for a devotee, this study also reconciles Spinoza’s claim that a path of devotion through action is, in fact, not difficult, with the clearly complex challenge posed by Spinoza culminating in a conclusion to his *Ethics*: “All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.” Book V, Props 10, 42, Scholium (Spinoza 2002, pp. 301, 382)⁵.

The methodology applied in this study is to isolate virtues, mainly from the “Bhagavadgītā”, and then justify virtues that are required for divine love through Spinoza’s epistemology. Vyāsa is recognised as a compiler of the Vedas (he is therefore known as Kṛṣṇadvaipāyana Vedavyāsa). He is also connected to the more obscure Bhakti Sūtram, which was dictated by the exemplary sage Nārada. This latter text complements the “Bhaktiyoga” with a poetic description of love (*prema*) that is understood in the Hindi vernacular as a kind of deep and affectionate human-centred love. Subsequent commentaries on both, expounding moral virtue, include a commentary on the “Bhagavadgītā” by the Kashmiri polymath Abhinavagupta (950 BCE) called *Gītārtha-Saṃgraha*. This text is considered significant for drawing out critical concepts of Bhakti while maintaining a panentheistic stance, which might be considered unorthodox. Abhinavagupta is in a special position to reconcile Bhakti with theories of aesthetic emotion, but he keeps Bhakti centred in the moral realm of down-to-earth relations, or spiritual feelings and self-awareness, that are important for transforming personal character traits rather than the appreciation of art. Although the notion of Bhakti is appealing on various paths in Hindu traditions, as a non-dualist Śaiva philosopher, Abhinavagupta is not hostile to any opposing views when he

interprets Bhaktiyoga in a panentheistic context. It is not a matter of who has the one true view of God but rather what the texts tell us about following a path, fellowship, or the love of God. Certainly, the commentaries support both dualist and non-dualist readings, which are assisted by the theory of karma and the morality of Bhakti. This is important that, insofar as Bhakti arises as part of a moral theory pertaining to virtues such as piety, that knowledge is needed to carry out a duty or to serve God. This context of intellectual virtue should not be ignored or understood to be limited to one theistic view or even one way of knowing love.

Vyāsa's naming of devotional practises ("*bhaktiyoga*") communicate a form of intellectual virtue that is intended to put the devotee in touch with the reality of the little-understood self. This illustration of devotional practises also constitutes a form of virtue epistemology, a theory of knowledge based on truth-conducive character dispositions, that is intended to guide the devotee to reach a higher reality in a spiritually liberating sense. Unlike some aesthetic conceptions of *bhakti*, these works demand intellectual engagement with a theory of good. In arguing that Bhakti (devotion) is indeed needed for contact with the higher reality of God, Spinoza's philosophy is fitting for its unique, if not paradoxical, claims. He not only argues that God necessarily exists but also that love of God through intellectual virtue is necessary for sanity. The implication that the devotee's path will save one from madness is more contentious than his rational belief in God. It is odd considering that, contrary to the image of Spinoza's devotional virtues, the images of mad saints, socially outcast mendicants, and cults are well-known and serve as counter-examples to the everyday devotees practising *bhakti*. So, for the love of God, why would virtues protect one from delusional and selfish vices, such as lust and greed, and self-depravation and hopelessness while also preventing fanaticism and delusion? Can the mark of virtue going against practical life really be a gauge of sanity, and can a devotional virtue give one a sense of belonging even when their belief in God is not fully realised? In response to this line of questioning, we consider a set of master virtues described in the "*Bhagavadgītā*" and consider their implications for character traits. Spinoza qualifies the path to God affectively, meaning that it requires adequate knowledge of the self. On this point, the texts are in total agreement.

2. A Lover's Dilemma

As an ordinary state, the emotion of love (*prem*) involves loving an individual, either the self or another. When pure, love comes from a desire for good for the other. It should be clear that the distinction between divine love, erotic love, and sexual love is presupposed; there should be no confusion between the former and the latter. Even in the case of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, where some interpreters consider the erotic sentiment (*śṛṅgāra*) to be heightened in devotion, divine love from God and towards God is void of concupiscence. Looking at Nārada Bhakti Sūtram or the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, one can see that the descriptions of love approach *śṛṅgāra*, but they always indicate a likeness (*iva*); never are they (*eva*) the same. Thus, they speak more to the reader as a potential bhakta, who is also an aspiring agent of knowledge. A responsive agent evaluates conditions, can make a parallel connection and recognise that the simile does not convey a mere association of one kind of love with another but rather an adequate idea of complete surrender:

Like featherless nestlings await eagerly for their mother to return [and feed them]; or as calves, distressed by hunger, pine for [the milk from] the udder; or as the beloved languishes for her lover while away; all that my mind pines to behold, O lotus-eyed Lord, is You. (*Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, 6.11.25–26. Hotkar trans., p. 3)

It may be a good idea to consider where romantic love, as a kind of passion, can be misplaced. A person who is very passionate already and then directs that passion without discretion has made a mistake of association. A different kind of error occurs when a person does not act with any love towards humanity but expects that God will bestow love in return for worship. As errors of privation, these mistakes have something in common: relying on an understanding the love of God that comes from the perspective of a limited being rather than striving to know God adequately through reason. On a rational level, intuitively knowing God is something that comes with time, not in a moment of incomplete longing, and without the presumptive expectation that God will give love in return. Spinoza tries to free us from the incomplete belief that God needs to give love, and he suggests that we have to free ourselves from past associations that drive our need to be loved. Across these very different philosophies, humans are supposed to avoid the extreme of hubris and the belief that love of God is self-justified by feeling alone. In the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, when the gopis most expect to see Kṛṣṇa, he disappears, but as she fully surrenders to him, Radha is ultimately fulfilled in the divine relationship without following Kṛṣṇa out of Vrindavan.

These observations demonstrate that there is something very tricky about conceptions of love, especially as they pertain to what are theoretically considered the most dignified and sublime relations with God. God's omnipresent love, if love is part of God's nature, would not necessarily require the typical distinction between the self and another—and Spinoza claims that it does not. Rather, he reasons that the very idea of God experiencing pleasure or pain as a result of desire for another, which implicitly constitutes common sense conceptions of love, is irrational. Adequate knowledge of “the love of God” is possible to achieve, but the idea of “a love from God” is inadequate. “Strictly speaking, God does not love or hate anyone. For God is not affected with any emotion of pleasure or pain, and consequently he neither loves nor hates anyone.”⁶ Susan James reiterates the foundation of this point: “Or again, ‘through the prophets, God asks no other knowledge of himself from men than the knowledge of his divine justice and his loving-kindness (Latin: *charitas*), i.e., attributes of God as men can imitate in a certain way of life.” (James 2012, p. 193) Adequately understanding the good of humanity logically precedes knowing the good of God. The Bhagavadgītā extolls the agent who rises above both inaction and wrong action by changing their disposition, as Spinoza would the modes of one's being.

From an ethical perspective, emotions like love take on another dimension: moral virtue or vice. Someone giving love, especially to God, should have an affectively grounded virtue, not a vice like guilt, shame, or lust. Expressing ordinary love of any kind with virtue should benefit the recipient. However, in the case of the love of God, the completeness of God implies a complete lack of need for human affection. It may be the case that only human beings need to express love and have it accepted. Arguably, there is a simple reason for the human need for love outside these divine conundrums that is acknowledged by ethicists: “We are supported by pleasurable interactions with other people, and depend on these connections for our sense of self-esteem and self-understanding.” (Sherman 1993, p. 278) As human beings have common interests to pursue, we also have common virtues to cultivate, as Nancy Sherman suggests in “The Virtues of a Common Pursuit”, where the discussion is not about the love of God but the fact that moral agency does not have strict boundaries between individuals. The virtues required for a love of God will be social virtues with communal moral consequences. There is also a dependence involved in the love of another as another. It is not consistent to describe the love of God as merely the love of another without taking into account all the others who participate as recipients in a virtuous agent's love of God. Recognising commonality with others in a divine relation, rather than separation from all but part of humanity in an ordinary

private love relationship, is an epistemic achievement of the idea of the self in the whole and an extension of devotion to the self.

The problem is not the self and other relationships as much as it is the understanding of the relational nature of the self as a lover. In the Sanskrit aesthetic theory of *rasa*, the sentiment of erotic love has a condition of validity. Between the lover and the loved, the feeling must be mutual. If this condition is violated, the sentiment is considered absurd: a false impression of love. If Spinoza is correct, and the love of God were to align with the *rasa* aesthetic paradigm, then any love of God might be mistaken. Rather than dismiss the paradigm in this context, Spinoza himself would have looked for the missing concept. Spinoza argues that genuine love of God is possible and always a character trait of a virtuous person. To achieve a genuine love of God, we need not consider others excluded from the object of love—we need only to think only of dignified love in which others are treated not as separate persons but as what Aristotle calls a true friend: a Second Self. Spinoza also claims in Book IV, Proposition 37, that “The good which every man who pursues virtue aims at for himself he will also desire for the rest of mankind, and all the more as he acquires a greater knowledge of God.” (Spinoza 2002, p. 339). Here, knowledge and the virtues of friendship and theological goodness go hand in hand. In the relevant scholium, Spinoza signals that it can be rationally deduced that love of humanity goes hand in hand with the love of God: “The desire to do good which derives from our living by the guidance of reason, I call Piety [*pietas*]. Again, the desire to establish friendship with others, a desire that characterises the man who lives by the guidance of reason, I call Sense of Honour.” We look to these other-regarding virtues when judging whether an individual’s love of God is true. Self-love is the missing concept; love flows outward to other selves, and God’s love is returned through the self and community of the devotee.

How God’s love is returned, and if it is returned, depends on the desire for good. Either love is expressed out of a desire for completeness or only to express completeness. The latter could only be achieved by God, who is never an individual lover. Similarly, Kṛṣṇa, in Bhagavadgītā 2.70, also clarifies the role of desire, claiming, “Just as rivers all flow to the ocean, desires flow in our being; but to one in whom all desires flow, without becoming a lover of desire itself, he attains tranquillity like the ocean which is ever full.”⁷ This sentiment agrees with Spinoza’s characterisation of God as a completely full repository of desire. For one who manages the ebb and flow of desires with grace, rather than reaching beyond for something more, the self-satisfying virtue of equanimity persists. Conversely, the passionate lover of another, or even of God, is really asking to be desired in return. Spinoza’s passive versus active affects account for passion versus ethical action. To avoid falling into the trap, the lover would need to already have what is desired, and for that desire to be for virtue rather than reciprocated love. A person with virtue must be unlike an ordinary lover and yet maintain a love of God in ordinary people.

The Bhagavadgītā’s twenty verses on “Bhaktiyoga”, which reveal practises of emotional regulation through actions, have completely different presuppositions than Spinoza; nevertheless, he similarly teaches a logic of emotion in *Ethics*. The practise is a virtue-theoretic approach to devotion, meaning that the ethical system he advances is centred around character traits. For a virtue to be genuine, however, the character traits must produce effective actions. Spinoza theorises that the characteristic traits of love are offered to humanity, where they may be recognised as honourable. However, no external action affects God, and so the productive actions of virtues are dedicated to Him as being in accordance with His will. As knowledge of what to do, i.e., God’s will, is successfully united with whom to act for, i.e., others as the Self, divine love is to be realised as a virtue one carries within their Self, conducting transactions with the Self of others, which generates a flow of love back to the Self, especially in the case of unexpected grace, because God’s

love cannot be expected. On the other hand, proper understanding (Jñāna Yoga) can be expected in the process. This is the expectation of Bhakti in everyday life. It is an intersectional “theo-centric” virtue that exists in nearly all traditions in contemporary India. It flourishes in the Tamil region following the production of the 7th century Prabhanda works, spread with Rāmānuja and Vallabha to the South and Chaitanya, and later spread in the North through Kabīr, Nānak, and Tulsīdāsa in the 12th–16th centuries. (Jhingran 1989, pp. 148–49) Saral Jhingran, theorises the attraction and understanding of *bhakti* is “positive and life-affirming”:

And it recommends the practise of socio-moral virtues of a very high order. It is also markedly different from the popular polytheism on two counts. First, it advocated single-pointed devotion to one God and. . . Secondly, it asserts that this devotion to one God should be without any ulterior motive, as opposed to the polytheistic tradition wherein different gods are always worshipped with specific personal desires. Even more significant contribution of the theistic-devotional (Bhakti) tradition lies in its reaffirmation of the vision of one Self (Ātman) or the Divine Lord (Īśvara) indwelling all living beings. . . a positive morality. . .” (1989, pp. 147–48)

Jhingran traces the origin of the Bhakti movement not only to Vaiṣṇava sects, which is common, but also to Śaiva innovations. These traditions developed parallel insights from the 2nd century B.C. to the 17th century A.D. and were firmly established before the 10th century in the Pañcarātra Saṃhitas.

It is hardly strange that insight into the Self in Bhaktiyoga is closely linked to the elimination of ignorance (*avidya*) in the Advaita Vedānta tradition. Hotkar et al. point out the complementarity of Bhakti with *jñāna*, starting with the Nārada-bhaktisūtra, where, as noted earlier, Bhakti is the supreme love for God: “Comparably, Vidyāraṇya delineates the concept of *jñāna* in his work, the Pañcadaśī. Within this philosophical framework, he contends that each individual inherently harbours the highest form of love for the Self, grounded in the fundamental desire for existence. This sentiment arises from the universal inclination towards self-preservation, as individuals universally prioritise their existence over non-existence.” (Hotkar et al. 2025, p. 6) This teaching does parallel Spinoza’s ontology in the *Ethics* by chance; it is a rational conclusion for Spinoza that actually goes against his proximate tradition. Imperfections of the parallel aside, the result is that devotion can be considered to connect the unity of the Self with the plurality of selves. The fact that this knowledge that can only be realised in practice also makes it a bridge between intellectual and moral virtues.

Clearly, Bhakti is a major aspect of emotions in everyday life, as well as in philosophy and art, in India. The practise is widespread and applied with varying degrees of commitment to a single tradition of non-dualism or mode of theism. However, the emotion-centric aspects of Bhakti are barely visible in the mainstream philosophy of emotions. Even when emotions in the context of Indian philosophy are categorised, there is no philosophical study of Bhakti or its theorists alongside moral–psychological accounts or in reference materials (see the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Tuske 2025). In the anthology *Emotions in Indian Thought Systems* (Bilimoria and Wenta 2015), two chapters, one by T. Ganesan, “Principal Emotions Contributing to the Supreme Love of Śiva: A Study of Early Śaiva Hymnal Corpus”, and the other by Neal Delmonico and Aditi Nath Sarkar, “Love Never Tasted Quite Like This Before: Śṛṅgāra-rasa in the Light of Two Texts from a Sahajiyā Vaiṣṇava Notebook”, are similar in their approach to Bhakti; both emphasise the *rasa* aesthetic aspects of emotional experience as *bhakti*’s emotive content⁸. Although there is a centuries-long debate in Indian aesthetics on the number of *rasas* and whether there is a separate *bhaktirasa* sentiment that is distinct from aesthetic love (*śṛṅgārarasa*), or

from which other *rasas* are derived, this analysis is limited to the concept of virtue and Bhakti. If Bhakti is an intersectional mode practised as part of various spiritual experiences, its representations in art may be coloured by emotional responses from poets and artists. Although *rasa* experience pertains to Bhakti, and the emotion of love (*rati*) associated with *rasa* may be found beyond moral engagements, there are grounds to claim that either the aesthetic dimension of Bhakti is secondary, or Bhakti and *rasa* are intersectional. Rūpa Gosvāmin, in the 16th century *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* (*Ocean of Immortal Bhakti Rasa*), claimed *rasa* as *bhakti*. Others disagree with him: “Mammaṭa insists that love (*rati*) for a god is only a *bhāva*, not a *rasa*.” (Haberman 2003, p. xlviii) For a theory of virtue, there is no question as to whether or not *rasa* is necessarily extolled by every *bhakta*. The answer is clearly no: a lover of aesthetic emotion (*rasika*) need not be a *bhakta*, and a *bhakta* may also be a yogi, upholding no necessary connection to the *rasa* experience other than a connection to all kinds of transcendental, supramundane experiences. The Yogas of the Bhagavadgītā are more austere than most aesthetic philosophers of *rasa*.

As the concept and practice of Bhakti belong to religious traditions that claim different things, it cannot be the case that the presence of Bhakti validates a single view. Some writers claim the unifying thread of Bhakti is just a monotheistic notion of love for God, and that Bhakti belongs to every tradition. There are Buddhist, Sikh, and Sufi bhaktas and no hard rule that the oneness of God is a conception about a single God over and above the unity of divinity in all beings. Through his naturalism, Spinoza can also be understood as an atheist or intoxicated pantheist. Bhakti can manifest through different beliefs about God, which is one reason why it is helpful to look to Kabīr to answer questions about Bhakti. He is also seen as disagreeing with the dualism of the Bhagavadgītā and Sāṅkhya yoga. However, in a text organised around the Sanskrit alphabet, the Gyāna Caumtisa, he remarks on each letter: “The letter ‘ta’: Nothing is more important than the three *guṇas*. Let your body lie hidden in the threefold world. He who hides his body in the threefold world will find truth in truth.” (Hashimoto trans, in Shima 2011) This is a radical synthesis of traditions in which even Spinoza would have a place. Even more appropriate for this inquiry is his statement about the letter ‘kha’: “If you expect [it], you should correct your falseness. If not, you would be discarding the lord and choosing hell. Do release your enemies and forgive them. [Then] there will be no sorrow, and you can be inviolate.” The ‘it’ in this context is God’s love, and so the remaining question is how to shift to loving God without expectation. Kabir anticipates ethical love’s inquiry and responds by suggestion an important, a concrete action involving the self’s relation to others, in consideration of which action is important. The Bhagavadgītā unifies action, knowledge, and Bhakti. In this context, we may look to the text to understand action and truth-conducive virtues rather than for an answer to the question of truth regarding monotheism, polytheism, or pantheism. In general, a virtue requires an affective component to motivate ethical action. A correct understanding of ethical love is thus needed.

In virtue ethics, a stable character trait is the primary requirement in to bring about virtue, but a motivating feeling underlying the trait is also critical. The reflection on *rasa* in this comparison speaks to the very idea of “a lover with virtue” as someone who has the trait of piety, with a feeling of love that motivates acts of service. As the *bhakta*, this person is an ideal agent who has desire to share love rather than a desire to be loved in return. This model does not eliminate the aspect of requited love as mark of genuine love from the *rasa* paradigm. The *bhakta* is a likeness, or a counterpart, of the recipient of requited love. This similarity holds when substituting the goal of love. The lover seeks acceptance of their devotional service, either by God or by an ethical community, instead of an equal return of the same service or love. It is logical that the service should be good for a community or guide them in worship as a mark of successful action. This does not go against the *rasa*

aesthetic, as reciprocated love for a *bhaka* comes from a community who recognises their love and virtue. Paradigmatic, exemplars of *bhakti*, such as Kabir, are loved and valued as sources of knowledge and moral conduct. The Nārāda Bhakta Sūtram is also an action-guiding model that is even quoted by a key Bhaktiyoga commentator, Abhinavagupta's own commentator, Bhaskara, in the Īśvarapratyabhijñārikā "Verses on the Recognition of the Lord."

3. Bhaktiyoga

Insofar as *yoga* is a globalised concept, it is also an obscured concept mainly associated with ancient Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtram* and 15th century *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā*. When understood as just a practise of mind–body control, the meaning is sufficient to grasp its aim to promote psycho-physical well-being, which includes moral well-being parallel to *bhakti*. Yoga's deeper aim includes soteriological aspirations, which are best understood through texts. Yoga-based practises consider morally grounded prescriptions based in reason, such as non-harm. One can practise physical strength without using it to do good in the world, and one can become mentally strong and still hurt others, but to overcome the effects of karma, one must change the nature of one's moral character. According to Dasgupta, "There are indeed divergences in certain details or technical names, but the means to be adopted for purification are almost everywhere essentially the same as those advocated by the Yoga system. It is only in later times that devotion (*bhakti*) is seen to occupy a more prominent place specially in Vaiṣṇava schools of thought." (Dasgupta 1922, IV, p. 77). Importantly, the spiritual grounding motivating this reason has an emotional aspect. Bridging cognition and feeling, emotion is seen to motivate proper action in accord with reason in all virtue ethics. Whether or not one takes a cognitivist or non-cognitivist view of emotion (here, meaning that the moral judgement is either affective or affected by feeling), only thinking and feeling beings have virtues and moral character traits that enable them to express approval or disain. Amy Coplan explains, "If virtue requires appropriate emotion, and emotion cannot be made appropriate by knowledge alone, then knowledge is insufficient for virtue." (Battaly 2010, p. 137). Bhakti and Yoga have been utilised together by many to establish a moral–psychological, rational, and affected foundation for spiritual practise. The Nārāda Bhakti Sūtra offers a similar caution: "Scriptures are to be followed as long as one's life has not become firm; Or else there is danger of doing evil in the name of liberty; When love becomes established, even social forms are given up, except those which are necessary for the preservation of life." Verses 1.10-12 were translated by Vivekananda for Lectures in America. (Vivekananda 1956, p. 151).

The idea of *bhaktiyoga* was introduced by Swami Vivekananda, the first global teacher of yoga, as one of the four paths to God, alongside *karmayoga*, *jñānayoga*, and *rājayoga*. Vivekananda was a master *bhakta*, grounding his life's work in service to humanity. He explains that each path has an advantage and a drawback, and Bhakti puts a check on the insufficiency of other paths. The first, *karmayoga*, is necessary for everyone. A key lesson pertaining to *karmayoga* in the Bhagavadgītā is that inaction is also a passive form of potentially dangerous actions, and participating in worldly actions, either actively or passively, and suffering consequences are impossible to avoid. However, a seemingly easy path of inaction will produce the most disastrous results, in part because the intent behind inaction is self-serving. The aims of action should flow selflessly towards desirable results according to God's will, with the knowing discrimination. This is only possible through love of God and adequate knowledge. Acquiring knowledge is necessary for effective action on any path, to some degree. Notably, *jñānayoga*, the path of knowledge, is very difficult. Not everyone has the means or capacity to pursue the highest level of knowledge. In any case, the life of a scholar can include unbearable stages of rejection,

humiliation, and disillusionment. Only devotion can redeem one, both from the ego and from intellectual vice that will impede progress. It is no wonder one might seek liberation through detachment and renunciation instead. Swami Vivekananda claims that the most elusive path is the path of practise, *rājayoga*, “which, when pursued as a means to attain liberation, and not (as unfortunately it frequently becomes in the hands of charlatans and mystery-mongers) as an instrument to hoodwink the unwary.” Alas, as a popular avenue to spiritual well-being, *rājayoga* is filled with detours of ego and vice, the misuse of power, and even a slippery slope from non-dualism to solipsism, so much so that in Western contemporary yoga practises, the idea of a union with God has become a trope mostly abandoned in favour of the pursuit of physical fitness and personal power. As a less mainstream, but not altogether uncommon, path within India, which has carried over into the diaspora, *Bhaktiyoga* does not exclude any of these other paths insofar as they are subordinated to the moral cognisance of devotion. Vivekananda was keen to point out that any spiritual path would converge on the same destination, and the practise of Bhakti is not ableist, elitist, or exclusive. However, Bhakti must be situated in a context that incorporates the other paths to some degree. Any allure which it might appear to have does not match the allure of *rajayoga*, but the focus on service rather than power renders *bhaktiyoga* more auspicious. With the understanding that there is no easy path of action but a path is needed, Vivekananda also claimed the following without contradiction: “The one great advantage of Bhakti is that it is the easiest and the most natural way to reach the great divine end in view; its great disadvantage is that in its lower forms it oftentimes degenerates into hideous fanaticism.” (Vivekananda 1996, pp. 4–5) This caveat provides a reason for why our discussion around difficult-to-obtain virtues matters and why the cultivation of challenging intellectual virtues in particular is necessary even on the easiest path. It is easy to see that a misguided fanatic is as comical or threatening as an unrequited and obsessed lover. Intellectual and moral virtues must make some difference in true devotion. What, then, is Bhakti in a higher form, and what are its necessary virtues?

Certainly, it is possible to historize the concept of *bhakti* and deliver an original analysis based on verbal usages of the root, *bhaj*, starting with its meaning in the g Veda and possibly culminating in established schools of philosophy and well-known Vaiṣṇava religious practises. However, doing so is likely to lead in the wrong direction, away from a broadly constructed, constitutive, human dimension of selfless love and towards etymological speculation and dogmatism that stand in opposition to a philosophical account of *bhakti*. From an opposing perspective, a glimpse at ordinary semantic usage reveals not so much a theistic reference but rather an array of creative usages centred around conventional functions, depending on which class of verb we follow: “to divide, distribute, allot or apportion, share with, grant, bestow, furnish, obtain as one’s share, receive as, partake of, enjoy (also carnally), possess, turn or resort to, engage in, assume (as a form), put on (garments), experience, incur, undergo, feel, go or fall into. Or, alternatively to serve, honour, revere, love, [and] adore. . .” Nothing on the surface of these etymological distinctions suggests it must be only divine love, much less a virtue. If anything, the abstract concept *bhakta*, insofar as it signifies to give or take a share, has a meaning that rings true of contracts, jobs, payment schemes, exchanges, and marriages. Our conventional lives are embodied, and embodied beings long for supreme relations. Yet, even texts are revered and redeeming: “in the Caraka-Saṃhitā it is said that a physician should particularly be attached (*bhakti-ādeśyā*) to the Atharva-Veda.” (Dasgupta 1922, XIII, p. 278) The optimal association of the semantics of *bhakti* with *prema* rather than *rasa* is evident here, especially as the alchemy aspect of *rasa* (medicine-making) is not a consideration. Rather, love of humanity applies as a character trait of a doctor who has virtues of dedication (*bhaktimān*), *dr̥ḍhaniścayas* (firm knowledge), and *arpitamanobuddhis* (the intellect and

mind are correctly fixed) by doing God's will. There is no single path of *bhakti*, but adequate moral goodness for serving humanity involves virtue. Love of God, which is free from *harṣa* (elation), *amarṣa* (envy), *bhayam* (fear), and *udvega* (anxiety), with self-control (*yatātmatvam*) is a virtuous love. Thus, the Yoga of the Bhagavadgītā makes a special point of identifying one who is neither destructive nor shaken by the hardships of the world (*yasmān nodvijate loka/lokān nodvijate ca yaḥ*).

It is no wonder that the alchemy of emotion in the *rasa* may be understood as the essence of the love of God. More perplexing is how mundane conventions can be mistaken for a kind of love that is unconditional, a personal interest or form of sharing that may never spiral into vices of greed and power. Humanity may deal in shares only on account of being given a share: "the word *bhagavan* [Lord] literally means one who possesses *bhaga*, that is fortune, wealth, blessings; hence its usual translation the 'Blessed One.' The term *bhaga* also means 'portion,' and thus *bhagavan* also means one who allocates the proper portion or fate of each creature. Bhagavan is thus the grand disposer of one's fate, wealth, and blessings." (R. R. Singh 2006, p. 58) If so, then the *bhakta* is working with the given, transforming mundane back into the divine. We might gather from this consideration that it is not that there is no transaction involved, but that there is an inverted flow implied in the love of God from the devotee to God and from the mundane to the devotee. However, the possible equivocation on the terminology of conventional transactions may serve an added purpose. The *bhakta* makes a "not-this" kind of conventional meaning of divine transactions, as in a not-for-sale type of offering, as grace cannot be bargained for in redemption, and one can only pay tribute to, not buy, divine love.

Alternatively, to correct the mistake, as R. Raj Singh does in *Bhakti and Philosophy* (2006), we can follow his claims that historians narrowed a term that was neither technical nor exotic in its own right: "*bhakti*" is understood as devotion or a means of worship. "However, a simple etymological analysis and a glance at its historical literary usage, reveals that this term is a synonym of *prema* (love), and its root *bhaj* represents involvement, engagement, participation, pursuit, preference... Its connection with knowledge (*jñāna*)... was rendered obscure in Indological scholarship and the bond between Bhakti and philosophy was seldom appreciated." (R. R. Singh 2006, pp. 1–2) Although there are well-researched contemporary studies on classical Bhakti texts, Singh points out that a wide range of Bhakti traditions, including Jain, Buddhist, and Sikh practises, are not captured adequately in Indological scholarship. However, in all of these traditions, the virtues of non-harm (*ahimsa*) wisdom, compassion, and reverence for learning are key. In this regard, Spinoza also has something to offer: a globalised account of devotion. Just as effective action is a necessary condition for a devotional virtue, reaching knowledge that is intuitive is a sufficient condition for proper devotion; together, they give rise to an act of love as service. In the absence of moral and epistemic justifications from philosophical arguments and analyses, we might expect to see extremes of more worldly transactional behaviour (for example, if a worshipper attempts to make a deal with God without understanding the nature of God's grace), as well as inauthentic worship in the form of mere spectacle and other extremes of irrationality and insanity that do not support any right to a leap of faith. Authentic devotion persists and is supported by the devotee's use of reason and dedication of service without expecting a reward, along with restrained practises that are ordered and involve self-awareness. Above all else, the affective dimension motivates and sustains the actions that are performed and the intuitive knowledge associated with reverence. This is for the devotee to recognise in themselves. If so, the philosophical question is not what the devotee gains as a result of conveying the feeling but how to reach an impartial stance, free from objectives, or how to desire only the freedom to serve, where the love of God is an end in itself.

The challenge of recognising Bhakti in action is not so much to distinguish the true from the fake but to maintain doubt that devotion can be superficially known at all. In any rational judgement of devotion, there is a judgement of oneself as a qualified evaluator. A devotee is likely to be compassionate to those who are struggling inwardly and careful to avoid those who are focused on the morality of others. Laughing at the maddened devotee masks self-assurance that one knows the truth of God's presence or absence there; it would take a selfless devotee to really know. Understanding the wonder of madness is more difficult than achieving a virtue for an ordinary person because ordinary persons rely on others for knowledge and love. The maddened appearance of the sane devotee relies on no other to reach the love of God. The *bhakta*, as Kṛṣṇa tells us, is *anayātā* (independent) by virtue. P.K. Gode touches on this virtue, after recognising that the devotee has no need because she is fulfilled by God's love:

Sūtra 2. Here '*bhakti*' is defined to be *parama-prema-rūpā* i.e., of the nature of intense love toward God. Compare in this connection the '*para- bhakti*' of Gitā XVIII, 54 and the subsequent four verses as also verse 68. The expression '*bhajatām prīti-pūrvakam*' in Gitā X, 10 comes very near the '*parama-prema*' of Nārada. In X, 1, Śrī Kṛṣṇa uses the adjective '*priyamānāya*' i.e., 'beloved' with reference to Arjuna; while in X, 20, the faithful devotees of God are said to be '*priyaḥ*' i.e., dear to Him. The relation of mutual love of God and Man is clearly defined in VII, 17, where Śrī Kṛṣṇa says: "I am supremely dear to the wise and he is dear to me. . ." [In Sūtra 3] We are told that '*bhakti*' towards God is of the nature of immortality ('*amṛta-svarūpā*'). (Gode 1922–1923, p. 67)

Counter to Spinoza's logic of love, but not counter to Spinoza's love of the Self as divine, being loved by God is attainable for the devotee through the fulfilment of one's own perfection in loving. Bringing the two views into harmony, it is clear that the power a *bhakta* has in virtue is not to control others' judgments (laughter and mocking); rather, it is to be free from the need to control anyone but the self. Self-knowledge and acceptance of qualifying characteristics are inalienable in moral and intellectual virtue. The *bhakta* has realised what is hard to learn, so it is rare indeed. However, once known, it is easy to achieve, solving the conundrum of Spinoza's virtues.

Once we understand that the *bhakta* is neither a self-refuting lover nor one experiencing desire due to a deficiency, the real objective of devotion is determinable. An egoless desire to express love, with neither viscous shame nor pride, is the mark of a true *bhakta*. For one who has all that is desired, in this case, simply to love God and not a to be lover of desire, no further liberation from the world is required. There is no elaborate scheme to gain merit, no longing for a heaven that is yet to be obtained, and especially no disregard of others on the path who are still seeking. Many are seeking, and very few have what they are looking for. To judge the masses of the world as truly mad, as we may well be, only detracts from the worthwhile ways to love. Desire for belonging, family, friends, success, wealth, beauty, and pleasure, and vanity that consumes, are absent from the *bhakta*. The power of Bhakti must be recognised as subtle and personal empowerment.

In the Bhagavadgītā, we find another step. With the incorporation of attributes, degrees, dualism, and non-dualism or monism, into the world-view of a devotee, certain virtues must hold. In the essay "Jñāneśvar's Interpretation of the Bhagavad Gītā I-VI", the contemporary Bhakti scholar Iwao Shima makes what may seem like a sweeping conjecture—that Bhakti has its origins in the Bhagavadgītā (Shima 2011, p. 182). The accompanying claim that Bhakti and Tantra were the two major streams of medieval Hinduism is not unfounded, especially when considered as interfaith traditions. In the same volume, Chihiro Koiso points out that "Bhakti encompasses all of the virtues." These virtues are grounded in a person who must cultivate humility to access a mystical expe-

rience. To make his point, he cites Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan in the context of a discussion around the saint-poets of Maharashtra, especially Tukārām, who expressed views on Bhakti and virtue in abhagas and kīrtans, which are now regarded as proverbs. Radhakrishnan, who considered the religious nature of the Bhagavadgītā claims that:

When we see the One-self in all things, equal-mindedness, freedom from selfish desires, surrender of our whole nature to the Indwelling Spirit and love for all will arise. When these qualities are manifested, our devotion is perfect and we become God's own men. Our life then is guided not by the forces of attraction and repulsion, friendship and enmity, and pleasure and pain, but by a single urge to give ourselves to God and therefore to the service of the world which is one with God. (Radhakrishnan 1992, p. 299; Shima 2011, pp. 199–200)

A social relevance is critically important to bhaktas across time. Suddenly, what was seen as a solitary practise became a matter of the struggle against social inequality. Thus, Shima concludes that the true bhakta is “an ideal member of the society.” This entails a prescribed duty (*svadharma*) as one who “serves all beings equally without expecting anything in return” and is striving to know reality as it is. Perhaps more important than being a morally perfect being is the master virtue, which is clear: “A true bhakta's way of life is that of harmony. [and] The true bhakta is he who prays for the happiness and harmony of the entire universe.” (2011, pp. 201–2) Bhakti is considered by some to be the longest running social reform movement, since it continues today, long after it flourished as an intellectual consideration of “Oneness” amongst diverse faiths in India. It has a specific topology because of social forces in particular places and times across the landscape of India (R. Singh 2023). There is now a link to multiple traditions that hold the same idea of selflessness, even when positing a self. We can add to this Purushottama Billomoria's point that the historical transition of the Buddha in becoming Avalokiteśvara (*ava-lokita-īśvara*) is treated as a transition to divinity for the sake of others (Bilimoria 2024, p. 437). We consider the Buddha full of love that is enacted through the same virtues. Thus, even an account without reference to theism holds a place among Bhakti traditions. Modelled on the Buddha's service to humanity, a bodhisattva passes a test of genuine devotion. This is something better demonstrated in practise than in treatises. In “The Atmosphere of Bhakti in Literature: A Buddhist Stotra, a Kathā, and a Folk Tale” (Shima 2011), Yoshifumi Mizuno claims that it is also possible to capture character of Bhakti as it is transmitted from storytellers, in courtly poetry, or through *kāvya* in works such as Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa*. Thus, the *rasa* aesthetic connection may be more salient for illustrating the modes of Bhakti than is initially apparent. Bhakti is needed for the love of God in humanity. Moral virtues are needed for Bhakti. Intellectual virtues are needed for the moral practice of devotion, and aesthetic sentiments are needed for understanding the emotions of love and compassion.

4. The Power of Bhakti

Instead of considering only gnostics, it is best to consider the relevance of virtues for the faithless, or complacent, believer. Arjuna is not one, but in the Eleventh Chapter of the Bhagavadgītā, Kṛṣṇa essentially floored Arjuna with a sublime display unmatched by anything we can imagine. Had Arjuna already known Kṛṣṇa was capable of such a display, he would not have been human. This is the position occupied by anyone who has not found a reason to believe, including those who believe without a reason. Humanity can only transition from ignorance to knowledge—from agnosticism or doubt to faith. The value of Bhakti in this regard emerges in Chapter XI.53–54.⁹ Kṛṣṇa restores Arjuna's sight and explains, “No kind of a knowledge, penance, gift or sacrifice grants this vision. By Bhakti alone I can be seen.” The exchange they continue in the “Bhaktiyoga” Chapter is

not a dialogue between equals: it is an assessment of the plight of knowing and unknowing seekers, all of whom who have a place in the march through Kṛṣṇa's Being. Anyone who sees such a marvel would surely be asking, where do I go? What do I do? The only refuge from the relentless torrent of birth, ageing, and death, must be found within Kṛṣṇa himself. Arjuna even has some love for his enemy before he receives this vision, but what he does not fully have in terms of virtue is given by God's grace in the last moment of his surrender to Kṛṣṇa. Perhaps this is why humility is not a virtue for Spinoza, as "humility, or the pain, that arises from a man's contemplation of his own weakness, does not arise from true contemplation or reason, and is not a virtue but a passive emotion." Part IV Prop 53, (Spinoza 2002, p. 348)¹⁰ Kṛṣṇa has specifically asked Arjuna to participate actively in a fight, not to step aside in accordance with the will of others, and to not cast aside his love and respect for them. Arjuna must achieve a universalised stance while maintaining personal love. Virtue theorist Christine Swanton resolves a very secular form of the same problem by distinguishing between universal love and the individualised form. On one hand, love that is limited to relationships between individuals serves a limited self-interest. On the other hand, "lovingness", which is actually a character trait, acts "as a basic emotional attunement to the world at large." As a character trait, love becomes less partialistic (Battaly 2010, p. 156).

To find a sense of belonging within God's being, as all-pervading, is impossible if God is effectively outside the hostile world and the believer is trapped within it. There is no taking refuge in the world as it exists. Bhakti does what cannot be achieved otherwise: it brings God to the conventional, everyday reality through the secular emotion of love, *prema*.

The transforming relationship between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā is indicative of Vedic bhakti changing into theistic bhakti. Their friendship turns into the bond between man and God. . .the real problem lies in forgetting that love does not merely abide in the domain of religion. . .Bhakti is the way love has been interpreted and applied to philosophy, religion, and culture by the thought systems of India. Love and Bhakti is something that reverberates in every human heart. (R. R. Singh 2006, p. 78)

In fact, prior to witnessing Kṛṣṇa's cosmic form, Arjuna was unaware of who Kṛṣṇa was. In his presence, Arjuna was defiant, broken, at a loss, and dejected. Upon seeing him as the All-pervading (Viśvarūpa), Arjuna felt obliged to apologise for having joked with Kṛṣṇa in the past like a friend. This marks the turning point in which Arjuna shifts into the modalities of *bhakti*. Love continued, but the nature of the relationship was drastically altered. Arjuna implicitly awakened to the fact that he had no right to demand affection in return from Kṛṣṇa but was nonetheless blessed in Kṛṣṇa's presence. There is also good reason to believe that we could never trace the origin of Bhakti as a human phenomenon.

Chapter XII begins with a reference to practised devotees (*bhaktās*) and Arjuna questioning Kṛṣṇa about two kinds of practitioners: those performing worship by either *saguṇa upāsana* or *nirguṇa upāsana*. In other words, (1) those who worship deities or (2) those who worship God as the ultimate reality in the sense of being omnipresent, formless, and eternal. The distinction demonstrates that Bhakti is not homogeneous. There are divergent paths within any one tradition, and the tradition is rooted in divergent philosophical views. Devotion is the key to making space for God and creating a place in which a sense of belonging is sustainable. The modes of Bhakti appear to follow parallel trajectories: an individual who worships a higher other and one who worships the higher self in all. In the former, there will be qualities of immersion, unification, faith, and meditation in a distinct form, and in the latter, there will be qualities of self-control, equanimity, and love for all without distinction. Kṛṣṇa's reply concerns the human capacity of worship and

not at all the form of God, which may be both. Human beings, unless already enlightened, would not easily love an unimaginable, all-pervading reality. We know and love the world through limited forms. Thus, *saguṇa upāsana* is a pragmatically realistic route, characterised by technical ease in four ways. In this practice, devotees give service to a specific personally befitting deity while maintaining distinctions and respect for others. Contrary to the initial suggestion that Bhakti is easily achieved, Kṛṣṇa tells us that it is not so: “absorption” (*aveśa*) in God is a form of perfection achieved through difficult acts of controlling the senses and sympathy for others. Ordinary persons worship through rituals, chanting, study, and service. Those who do so for the sake of others attain immersion. As Kṛṣṇa builds up a complete response to Arjuna, he shows that within a single tradition, there is a hierarchy of modes of worship. The five stages of Bhakti from XII.3-12 rank blind practise of yoga, dialectic acquisition of knowledge, meditation on a deity, and the renunciation of personal benefits from acts of devotion:

śreyo hi jñānamabhyāsāj jñānāddhyānaṃ viśiṣyate |
dhyānātkarmaphalatyāgas tyāgācchāntiranantaram || 12.12

Knowledge is indeed better than practise, meditation is better than knowledge, renunciation of the fruits of one's actions is better than meditation, and unending peace immediately follows from renunciation.

As framed by Abhinavagupta in his *Gītārthasamgraha* XII.11, surrender to God stands out. The traits (*lakṣaṇa*) of a devotee (*parābhakta*) are as follows:

XII.13, one who is

adveṣṭā (Non-hatred);

māitras (Friendly);

karuṇa (Empathetic);

nirmamas (Non-possessiveness, free from *mamakāra*, Mine-ness);

nirahaṇikāras (Not self-regarding, free from the trappings of *ahakāra* 'I'-making);

samaduḥkhasukha (i.e., *śamatvam*, equanimity with respect to pain and pleasure);

kṣamā (Forgiving).

XII.14, one who has

saṃtuṣṭas (Contentment);

yatātmā (i.e., *yatātmavān*, Self-control);

dṛḍhaniścayas (Firm knowledge);

arpitamanobuddhis (The intellect and mind correctly fixed).

XII.15, one who does not practise destructive and self-destructive ways:

yasmān nodvijate loka/lokān nodvijate ca yaḥ (wrecking the world, nor being wretched);

harṣa (Elation), *amarṣa* (Envy), *bhayam* (Fear), and *udvega* (Anxiety).

XII.16, one who sustains respectful relations in the world:

sarvārambhaparityāgī (With full abandonment of questionable motives);

anapekṣas (Having no-expectations);

śuci (i.e., *śucitvam*, Maintaining purity);

dakṣas (Cleverly);

udāsīnas (i.e., *udāsīnatvam*, With impartiality);

gatavyathas (Being not pained);

bhaktas (Is devoted to God).

XXII.17, one who does not go to extremes of

śubhāsubhāparityāgī (Abandoning attachment to the agreeable and disagreeable);

hr̥ṣyati, dveṣṭi (Neither overexcited nor hateful);

śocati, kāṅkṣati (Neither grieving or wishing).

XII.18, but is rather

samaḥ sagavirvarjita (With equanimity, and non-attachment);

samaḥ śatrāu ca mitre ca (To friend and foe);

tathā mānāpamānayoḥ (In honour and disgrace);

śītoṣṇasukhaduḥkheṣu (In cold, heat, pleasure and pain);

XII.19, and

tulyanindāstutir māunī (equally silent on praise and blame);

saṁtuṣṭo yena kenacit (content with anything);

aniketaḥ sthiramātir (without a residence mentally stable);

bhaktimān (having devotion to God);

Notably, these virtues do not merely constitute a list of desirable character traits. Contained within “Bhaktiyoga” is a guide to avoiding the vicious extremes of both positive and negative emotions. It is not merely that *sama* is repeated in multiple instances; the whole set of interrelated character traits must be achieved with equanimity, and Bhakti itself must be practised with *samatvam*. Sri Sitansu Chakravarti has argued in many ways that the master virtue in this context is *samatvam*, and for good reason. He concurs with Amita Chatterjee on her point: “*Samatvam* is the basis of all three yogas—*jñāna*, *bhakti* and *karma*—the ways of knowledge, devotion and selfless action to liberation. It is a virtue of the mind and also the golden mean between the extremes of asceticism and self-discipline. We re-iterate that this virtue of evenness of mind, or *samatvam* plays the same role in the moral system of the Bhagavad-Gītā as the virtue of non-violence or Ahimsa plays in other systems of philosophy.” (Chakravarti 2024, p. 199) It also provides an avenue through which to channel affection or grace towards the devotee into a single disposition (*bhāva*) and no harm can touch on the devoted. As Kṛṣṇa says in 12.12, “To me, the one in whom censure and praise are equal, who is silent, content with anything, homeless, steady-minded, and full of devotion, is dear.”¹¹ He speaks of a person who gives up the need for a returned love, as it is God who deserves praise, but at the same time does not enemies through personal attacks or hide from personal shortcomings. If on equal ground (*tulya*) with both, there is no expectation from God, much less from others on their own paths of acting and reacting. A being full of devotion (*bhaktimān*) is worthy of being loved (*priya*). *Bhaktiyoga* is, then, the only path that follows a process of giving up the demand for love, only to be rewarded with love when all else has been granted the same value. The Nārada Bhakti Sūtra 2.1 concurs: “Bhakti is greater than all paths because Bhakti is both the means and the end (fruit).” Here, where we should notice very wide-ranging implications for who can practise when, where, and how. There is not one place of worship that is more worthy than others, there is not just one type of offering to be made, and there is not just one act of service that is fitting. For this reason, the virtue of *samatvam* allows all other paths to be tolerated, if not welcomed insofar as the equanimity principle continues to apply. This is how Bhakti may be universalized as impartial love. It must be given with indifference to one’s own pleasure or pain, praise or blame, and desire or aversion. Except in the case of a moral rule, and wherever a sense of “I-ness” prevails, this something that is impossible in conventional life.

Most importantly, as an overlooked clue to the reflexive equanimity of *bhakti*, the devotee is both homeless and at home in every place. Though *aniketah* is usually translated as homelessness, there is not a conjunction ‘and’ in place to indicate that one must be mentally stable, etc., *and* homeless. The devotee need not be physically homeless at all. Rather, the deeper significance is that one must not occupy a fixed mindset; one must be mentally stable without being attached to one way of being. This interpretation provides some ground to question many of the extremes that might arise in terms of fanatical mindsets. Being at home in the world is clearly permitted, but a place of worship is to be mentally created even when there is no set physical space available. Vivekananda has interpreted these passages with different vocabularies and done well to create a shorthand list of the virtues. He has also practised the virtues, wandering around India without attachment to any one place, as well as abroad, where he kept a sacred place of reverence within his own being. His comments on Bhakti are most telling of the context around *bhakti*, and his claims capture the essence of the normativity of devotion. As he explains, “Bhakti-Yoga, therefore, lays on us the imperative command not to hate or deny any one of the various paths that lead to salvation. Yet the growing plant must be hedged round to protect it until it has grown into a tree. The tender plant of spirituality will die, if exposed too early to the action of a constant change of ideas and ideals.” (Vivekananda 1996, p. 53) Learning devotion requires a tradition, and it may be the case that there are transplants between traditions. However, attacking other traditions takes energy away from the effort to reach deeper, and so both are harmed when no harm to either is necessary. Vivekananda emphasises the need to evade vain states such as, jealousy, vanity, and brooding, all of which involve overexcitement but sap energy. The devotee is freed of vain desire (*anabhidhyā*) and is not low on energy but spirited (*anavasāda*)—not in a giddy sense, but rather because they are able to cut off the fervour (*anuddharsha*) of overexcitement due to contact with the divine.

As we consider the ethics of action and the ethics of knowing in our response to the question of devotion and properly situated feeling, there are two kinds of virtue that are united in Bhakti: moral and intellectual. It goes without saying that the love in question behind Bhakti, *prema*, is a human emotion. It is not the love God has for earthly beings without qualification, and it is not the love of human beings for one another in an ordinary, unreflective sense. Only by seeing the divine in humanity is there a Bhakti of the human family. However, ordinary human beings cannot reach out to all of humanity in general while maintaining a functional livelihood. Merely loving humanity unconditionally is also impossible, as is a simple version of *bhakti*. The idea is that God mediates the love towards humanity, and the love of God is taken up through a mode of worship. If we take the characteristics of God to be venerable, then we have an instance of *Ishta-Nishtha*, or “steadfast devotion to the chosen ideal”. God’s love is not out of the question in *bhakti*, but it is presupposed on faith in every virtue involved in the genuine worship of God’s qualities. Like being devoted to study for the sake of learning, or devoted to a teacher for knowledge, it is not common in the philosophical mainstream to be devoted for the sake of worldly love, except to desire a sport of love itself and by materialist–hedonists. Maintaining a distinction between mundane affairs of the heart and religious practice was unnecessary for many theologians outside Bhakti tradition. However, the added need for distinction brings about a newfound basis for understanding ordinary love as a semblance of the divine. A semblance of love has some value as a reminder that there is another dimension of liberation outside the goals of pleasure, wealth, and duty. Lance Nelson counters Śākara’s Vedānta with Madhusūdana Sarasvatī (16–17th CE) as follows: The Bhāgavata Purāṇa (*BhP*, eighth–ninth century), however, proclaimed that *bhakti* is both the highest spiritual discipline and the most desirable goal, superior even to *mokṣa*. Following this

lead, Rūpa Gosvāmī (c. 1470–1560) and the other theologians of the Gaudīya or Bengal Vaisnava tradition identified bhakti as itself the supreme goal of life (Nelson 2004, p. 345).

As a non-dualist, Madhusūdana Sarasvatī (Madhusudanarasvasati 1961) comes closest to Spinoza regarding the level of unity with the divine. However, Nelson suggests that it is Rūpa who shows that “Bhakti is a manifestation of *mahāśakti*, the ‘great power’ that is part of God’s essential being. . . [and that] Kṛṣṇa has three main powers: his essential power (*svarūpa-śakti*), his power of manifesting individual souls (*jīva-śakti*), and his power of creating the universe (*māyā-śakti*). The essential power, described as ‘intrinsic’ (*antaranga*), is the highest.” (Nelson 2004, p. 356). These are practised on three levels as *sādhana-bhakti*; *bhāva*, the beginning of exalted emotional status [and devotional emotions]; and *preman*, ecstatic love. These *bhāvas* are kinds of human relationships one can have with a deity. These relationships, “filial affection, friendship, reverence, servitude, etc.” (Sharma 1983, p. 58), like reverence for a teacher, can reach an idealised stage beyond the ordinary and transactional. Kṛṣṇa’s virtuous devotees (*gopis*) also experience *mahābhāva* (ecstasy) in an idealised form, in addition to the modes they experience emotionally. A friend (*sakhā*) can be first and foremost the Guru, and a *guru* can become a friend, but the subtle grammatical distinction between the two senses of “teacher” that makes all the difference in terms of loving, serving and non-reciprocal relations.

Much of the Gopis’ spiritual pursuits have highs and lows, like every human going through stages of ordinary love. They bring the quest down to earth, with earthy tones of pride and humility, but they do not represent one *bhāva* all the time: they have emotional highs and lows. They represent the universality of play (*līla*) that human beings engage in as we transform. They are not wise in the traditional sense, either, even in terms of their emotional intelligence. The Gopis are deep in emotion, transcending mere pleasure beyond their practical life. Every bit of their being is authentic and as phenomenologically real as *rasa* (aesthetic response). They affectively engage with the reality of contradictions and flux. Nelson stated, “For our present purpose, we can safely and accurately read *bhakti-rasa* and Bhakti as synonyms especially when Madhusūdana is speaking about the highest level of devotional experience, Bhakti as *parama-purṣārtha*.” (Nelson 2004, p. 367). Importantly, however, the virtue of aesthetic experience is not simply having the experience. This is why character traits must be mentioned—to move the conversation forward into the realm of ethics and the virtues of love instead of just ecstatic love.

Madhusūdana adds a reflective element that is needed to picture *bhaktirasa* as an aesthetic–epistemological hybrid state. Since all *rasas* require a stable emotion-state, in theory, he posits the reflective state of the self to be the ground-zero background of devotional love in a sublime form. In short, devotion reflects back the love of God, because it is essential for conscious, sentient beings to be self-reflective. It is not just a cognitive image, either; the reflexive reflection (*pratibimba*) is sentient. The love of God is always returned, but it is only returned if one gives freely, without the conventional exchange of a partner. Nelson states, “it is interesting to note that the Vaisnava critic Gopeśvara attacks Madhusūdana’s definition of Bhakti as reflection of the form of God on the grounds that ‘a reflection of that which is without form (*nirūpa*) is impossible.’” (Nelson 2004, p. 377). There is something to indicate such a philosophical thesis in the Gītā itself, however. As we have seen, there is a form of Bhakti, taking a difficult path, that not everyone can practise. If we merge the criticism with a tenet of the primary text, it follows that one who worships the formless must be capable of reflecting the absolute (*nirguṇa*) from within as ultimate reality. One who sees God in everything, a true, non-dualist devotee, is neither dependent on another nor indifferent to others. “The distinction between imagining God as *nirguṇa* (the lingam; Saiva Siddhanta) and as *saguna* (the puranic images; Siva-bhakti) is one manifestation of what is essentially a difference in imagining the relationship between

God and humankind. The Saiva Siddhanta priests were capable of proximity to the Lord and undertook ritual transformations to ‘become a Siva’. In contrast, Siva-bhakti represents distance from Siva, according to Saiva Siddhanta.” (Pechillis Prentiss 1999, p. 125). This tells us that there are creative allowances for how Bhakti operates in a tradition that are not confined to rigid distinctions between sects or social status. The quality a Saint has as one who reflects the divine includes God-like compassion and, above all, equanimity. Here, we have extended beyond Madhusūdana’s philosophy and returned to the *nirguna*-like philosophy of Spinoza. Momentarily bridging both perspectives, we have transcended the mental aspects of devotion and will now address the epistemological and moral-psychological aspects.

5. Liberation Geometry: Spinoza on Virtue

There is nothing transcendental in Spinoza’s ontology of God. God is immanent in the world. A love of God can be taken as a mode of seeking, and in Spinoza’s conception, a mode is a way of persisting in the world through the mind and body. In *The Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, Spinoza claims that desire, or the conatus, can be understood as the mode itself: “For although the thing and its conatus are distinguished by reason, or rather, by words (and this is the main cause of their error), the two are in no way distinct from one another in reality.” A mode reasons and has ideas, the desire to persist is pervasive throughout all modes, and it is given a priori in a mode’s idea of its own essence. In expressions of a being as a mode, there is no entertaining an idea without the desire to know. Thus, there is no knowledge without a desire to know. Desire and thought are virtually simultaneous. This implies that in terms of ideas, both those that are adequate and those that are inadequate (i.e., involve error), express the power of a conatus in its capacity to persist. The second axiom of Book V of the *Ethics* grants that the greater the power of the cause, the closer it brings one to adequate ideas by way of active reasoning.

Spinoza’s philosophy requires the reader to be familiar with the methodology of geometry, but applied to substance as mind–body attributes. Indeed, he describes the mind as a determinate sphere subject to laws of motion. In the *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, he sets the desiring self, or conatus, alongside definitions of an elliptic, poles, and angles: “By conatus to motion we understand, not some thought, but that a part of matter is so situated and stirred to motion that it would in fact be going in some direction if it were not impeded by any cause.” Part III Definitions (Spinoza 2002, p. 176) In the same way, Spinoza states in the *Ethics* that a human mind will continue to be affected by external bodies long after those bodies cease to be present. In other words, when we direct the mind towards an object that is not present, we will regard the object as if it were present. Part II. Prop 17 Of the Mind (Spinoza 2002, p. 256) In this way, we continue to be moved by external bodies psychologically, especially when passionate love is concerned. Affective response on the part of the body reinforces the regard for objects that are no longer present, as the body reflects through in sensation. The manner in which Spinoza describes this process is somewhat obscure, but he indicates that imagination and sensation are closely linked to emotional expression. Synthetic associations (or judging the degree of connectedness between concepts and the world), for the individual experiencing them, carry over into the imagination as embodied experiences. A person who senses the presence of God by thinking of persistence or friendship will gain strength and motivation, just as one trembles when thinking of a power greater than oneself. The proper understanding of all these affections and images would grant one a proper understanding of the necessary conditions of the self and thereby grant freedom in terms of the knowledge of necessity. However, we never have a full understanding of the causal conditions related to

our own bodies, so we are never completely free. This understanding leads to an account of error as a privation and privation as a condition of bondage.

The distinction between adequate and inadequate ideas made by Spinoza in Book II does not allow that there are false images *per se*. What we know as error, Spinoza will still call a positive idea, but one that is not sufficient in itself to be legitimately recognised as unconditional (i.e., either knowledge of type II, common notions, or knowledge of type III, intuitive ideas). Thus, through knowledge by association, one can have the impression that hallucinations are veridical, with their actual truth value limited to the brute fact of their appearance. This is why reports of divine revelation based on knowledge of type I are prone to error: these revelations are heavily dependent on experience and seemingly random associations. The associations, which are linked to affections of pleasure and pain, allow inadequate ideas to tear a person in multiple directions. Desiring love makes it appear where love does not exist, whether in the idea of another person or God. Conversely, knowledge of the third kind increases the capacity of the mind and body. Love of God, if it arises according to adequate ideas rather than affections based in appearances, increases the capacity to love anyone on this count, offering a clue to the signs of virtue in friendship to others. When love follows from proper ideas that support virtues, its origin is the opposite to when it follows from associations.

Spinoza takes the belief that reason cannot conflict with God as Nature and that nothing in Nature goes against loving God seriously. Following from the fact that an individual is embedded in Nature, the individual will naturally desire to care for themself and seek what is advantageous. Here, Spinoza does not claim that we always act to preserve our own being, but that each of us endeavour to do so by not going against Nature. As a version of naturalism, this system has a built-in normative dimension. Just as seeing the validity of a logical formulation dictates what it is that we ought to believe and seeing one's own nature for what it is refines self-love, seeing the nature of a thing in relation to God–Nature–Substance dictates how we should feel and act towards all beings, who are also experiencing privation. Even where there is a sense of being diminished, Spinoza considers enduring with equanimity virtuous because it grants us the dignity, or happiness, of not going against our nature, and it does so via the only route one can choose freely, by way of rationality. Thus, virtue, the key term for devotion here, is defined as acting in accordance with a rational law. All love is rational, but the love of God is exceptionally rational because it arises from virtue. Spinoza equates moral virtue with recognition and cultivation of a drive: “The more every man endeavours and is able to seek his own advantage, that is, to preserve his own being, the more he is endowed with virtue. On the other hand, insofar as he neglects to preserve what is to his advantage, that is, his own being, to that extent he is weak.” Book IV Prop. 20 (Spinoza 2002, pp. 331–32) To be happy is to be virtuous, as reason demands. If the love of God makes one happy even though it does not demand any reciprocation from God, there is self-understanding of the devotee's relation to God.

While we see insanity and irrationality as radically different dispositions of mind, Spinoza brings them back together into one. While he openly conflates madness with irrationality and widens the category of persons who ought to be deemed mad, he also leaves space for the creative capacity of mad persons as expressions of their power. The only essential difference between the fanatical power of a tyrant and a saint is in the ideas that lead to a practise. Both are sustained in Nature, but the tyrant, like a false prophet, is vulnerable to being defeated by both powers of truth and deception. If one does succumb to weakness, even in virtue, and is destroyed by outside forces, those outside forces are either inadequate ideas or physical objects. External objects differ from ideas only through the attributes they are known by: extension or thought. Thus, we can think of inadequate ideas

affecting us like a ton of bricks when we lack the power of adequate ideas, which are like a protective shelter. The subtlety of Spinoza's understanding of the relationship between the conatus and knowledge is that knowledge is not just power. Like love, knowledge is, first and foremost, a manifestation of desire. Desire precedes any power expressed by a conatus. Freedom is not freedom from desire. The desire to understand essences through ideas of God's attributes is a liberating virtue of the mind that falls under the highest conatus. (Book V Prop. 25–28 (Spinoza 2002, pp. 375–76)).

In contrast to contemporary epistemology, Spinoza's theory is not concerned with justification as much as it is with the degree of power an idea has. The greater the power, the closer the idea is to being adequate. This does not imply that influential political ideologies are more powerful than geometrical proofs; only the latter are powerful enough to provide a normative force that no individual can deny when she understands all of its components, because there is no regress argument to contend with. No matter how pervasive the inadequate idea is, the greater the privation of adequacy, the less it can withstand dissolution. Yet this is what the conventionalist does, and it gives rise to a notion that we have states of affairs that are really just "The Madness of the Day." The French writer Blanchot's short story by this name is subtle and enigmatic. (Blanchot 1995) The title suggests that knowledge produced from type I always produces a form of insanity. Thus, an unconventional madman is no more irrational than the conventionally mad. In the case of the devotionally mad, we have to determine the source of their ideas. It may be the case that they appear mad according to type I Knowledge, but by type III knowledge they are the sanest of all. In Spinoza's account, this hints at a sanity of love that is found in the absence of harm and other virtues.

Regarding equanimity, we can understand epistemological insanity as a state in which one cannot keep a range of affects in mind or maintain thoughts with equanimity. It is usually the case that we find some persons comical in their obsessions and others malicious in their vendettas, but for Spinoza, there is no fundamental distinction in terms of the ideas that drive misguided relations. An inadequate notion of free will determines reactive attitudes to those who are deemed insane. If the entire world suffers from inadequate ideas, then, to some degree, we are all a little mad. However, we might gauge irrationality by the degree to which one is unresponsive to satisfactory conditions or responsive to unmet conditions. When satisfactory conditions for the presentation of an adequate idea are met, then there is no irrationality or failure to act accordingly because adequate ideas operate in the same manner as geometrical proofs. Both adequate and inadequate ideas operate causally, but since the former have more power, they can redirect the later. Inadequate ideas are inherently weak because there is nothing positive in them to begin with. Any content of an inadequate idea merely has the inherent validity of an image, and any addition to that content must be positive. This will increase its power, but not necessarily to the level of adequacy.

The question of this love is, why all this? What is it for if nothing is added to experience? As Gilles Deleuze explains, "The whole order of Nature is expressive. But it is a simple misunderstanding of natural law to grasp it as an imperative or commandment. . . God expresses himself in his attributes, and attributes express themselves in dependent modes: this is how the order of Nature manifests God. The only names expressive of God, the only divine expressions, are then the attributes: common forms predicable of substance and modes." (Deleuze 1990, pp. 58–59). The sentiment of Bhakti is an expression of God for the sake of God's freedom in accordance with Nature. Embodied and eternal, it is experienced by the devoted, who find themselves within. Why, then, from the perspective of the mode, is there any cause to love God like another? In acknowledging the reality of both God and embodiment, Bhakti philosophers are suggesting that the two

are distinct. However, the exact nature of the relationship between the two is not necessarily evident from the Gita or Bhakti poetry in regional languages because both leave the door open to interpretation (Pechillis Prentiss 1999, p. 41). In the context of Spinoza, the tenets will not move someone who knows God from within. As Daniel Garber explains, “tenets will, suitably interpreted, be common to all pious religions, those that move people to proper obedience, they will have no place among the beliefs of the truly rational person, the person moved to love God and his neighbour not from obedience but from reason.” (Huenemann 2008, p. 181). Likewise, “Spinoza even upholds the value of the passions. This is because the passions provide us with a kind of knowledge that is particularly important to ethical or moral reasoning: the knowledge of our own virtue and perfection.” (Kisner 2011, p. 241).

If causal necessity holds us in bondage yet delivers us freedom in terms of the adequate ideas we might come to hold, there is, at best, only freedom in terms of knowledge of necessity and the causal necessity we are subject to prior to any understanding we have of it. When we do have a proper understanding of our bondage, it liberates us. As noted earlier, knowledge of the manner in which all individuals are constrained grants freedom from the suffering that goes along with believing that anyone freely inflicts suffering on others. Naturally, we are then free from anger, hatred, and enmity. Blaming the criminal is as unjustified as blaming a stone for falling down a hill. In this way, Spinoza merges concepts of irrationality, insanity, and mental illness, yet any positive understanding of madness (as in artistic geniuses, devotees, etc.) would fall apart according to his account of madness. As an unorthodox Nature worshipper, Spinoza himself was a kind of reverse-madman of his day. Sane persons were, and still are, in the minority by his standard. But the normalised obsession with others or objects is exactly what holds persons in bondage beginning with just association. As a touchstone, this point is also articulated in the Bhagavadgītā philosophy. The emotional shackling from desire leads to anger, to delusion, to the destruction of remembrance, until even the self is lost.

(dhyāyato viṣayānpumṣaḥ sagasteṣūpajāyate sagātsañjāyate kāmāḥ kāmātkrodho'bhi-jāyate krodhādbhavati sammohaḥ sammohātsmṛtīvibhramāḥ smṛtibhramāṣād buddhināśo buddhināśātpraṇāśyati // 2:62–63)

Activity as a basis for both an account of error and of knowledge has been addressed. With this consideration, a seed of metaphysical comparison has sprouted, which will help form a basis for a more extensive comparison.

6. Spinoza's Monism and Nature in Sākhya Dualism

In the Sākhya-Yoga tradition of philosophy, an examination of *prakṛiti* as nature, and thought or *cittam* as its product, reveals a parallel concept. Like with Spinoza, there is no substantial dualism of the body and mind. *Puruṣa* and *prakṛiti* are fundamental categories, and the mind is associated with *prakṛti*, or nature, just as it is with Spinoza. The essence of matter, expresses some degree of activity in all life. The three *gunas*, *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, or strands of substance, do not map onto Spinoza's notion of substance in any unforced way, but considering them as potential attributes still allows for an uncontradictory conceptual analogy. After all, Spinoza begins Book V with the following proposition: “The affections of the body, that is the images of things, are arranged and connected in the body in exactly the same way as thoughts and the ideas of things are arranged and connected in the mind.” In Sākhya, matter as the intellect is simply the manifestation of the *buddhi*, and it is also where knowledge is stored, which needs to be grounded in a body: “The translucent and plastic element of thought, *sattva*, in association with movement of images and ideas, *rajas*, simultaneously would have revealed the entire mass of matter and material objects if the

force of inertia, *tamas* had not obstructed it.” In detail, it is possible to conceptualise levels of Bhakti from Sākhya philosophy as follows:

Tamasa Bhaktas, or bhaktas blinded by delusion. Those that worship God for some earthly end, for worldly prosperity or for putting down enemies that have done them an evil turn, are known as Rajasa, i.e., impassioned or Egotistic, bhaktas. And those that do not at all care for mundane pleasures, but pray to God for Heavenly bliss alone, are known as Satviki, i.e., Pure or Enlightened bhaktas. All these three sorts of bhakti have some ulterior motive, while Mukhya Bhakti or primary devotion has none. There is no desire even for heavenly bliss. . . (Datta 1971, p. 12)

From this perspective, knowledge is a successive processing of images (Mishra 1972). *Buddhi* stands in relation between *Puruṣa* and *prakṛiti*, reflecting consciousness to the former and determining true and false images in the latter. Impurities in *buddhi* are considered darkness. If we think of darkness as an absence, then we find another parallel with Spinoza’s understanding of error as a privation. Since the reflection of the impurities in *buddhi* is a form of bondage, we should note that it is privation of ideas keep one in bondage for Spinoza. Bondage and liberation are intellectual. Adequate ideas hasten the dissolution of thought into Nature, just as *buddhi* dissolves into *prakṛiti* through the removal of impurities. The concept of *āvidyā* (ignorance) is central to a moral-psychology aimed at liberation. Interestingly, the art of freedom and metaphysics comprise a single science in the *Ethics*. In both, degrees of activity are apparent in all matter.

Considering mental activity according to Spinoza, it is consistent to claim that thought has a greater proportion of focused activity according to the degree to which it is neither torpid nor overly engaged. As activity in *prakṛiti* becomes more focused, the mental modifications or *vṛtti* are stabilised harmoniously. An understanding of thought as inherently active, even at its lowest levels, is the basis for the activity of the higher levels. Consider an observation from David Carpenter in “Practice Makes Perfect”:

. . .Patañjali’s most general statement on the nature of spiritual practice is that it aims at the cessation of the various disturbances or “turnings” (*vṛttis*) of the mind (*citta*) through repeated practice (*abhyāsa*) and dispassion (*vairāgya*). What is most striking about this formulation, at least in the present context, is that the cessation of the activity of the *citta* is said to derive from a form of *activity*. Repeated practice, repetitive activity, leads beyond activity. Thus the key to the cessation of action is action itself, properly carried out. (Whicher and Carpenter 2003, p. 35)

In Sākhya, liberation is achieved in equilibrium. In the Bhagavadgītā, liberation is achieved with equanimity, *śamatva*. In tune with Spinoza, freedom from suffering comes from acting in accord with nature to the degree of achieving harmony.

We can see some commonality here with Spinoza in that the way out of bondage is a matter of engaging with the essence of the very activity that renders us unstable and crazy. Even the most unstable mode of thought without focus, the *kṣipta-cittabhūmi*, is a form of activity, and in it there is also some aspect of *śamādhī*. The Sākhya-Yoga subtlety supplements Spinoza’s moral psychology in a way that allows for some enrichment of our understanding of the conatus as active engagement in nature over and above mere desire. If not a practise of meditation, an increase in activity in thought is generated by increasing the active focus of the body. Channelling desire into an embodied act creates a change in how and individual relates to the world. This is not the same thing as expending desire. Where flowers are offered, or mantras are recited, or music is played, etc., the desiring self is continuously present. What is this conatus as Spinoza describes it? It is striving to

persist, and to express essence; it is both physiological and psychological; it is both will and appetite depending on whether we speak of thought or the body. Book III, Prop 9, Scholium (Spinoza 2002, p. 284) It is diminished in pain and strengthened in pleasure. It can manifest as hate and ambition or love and kindliness—the greater the love or hate, the greater it is. It is the source of our creativity, rationality, irrationality, and insanity. It expresses God or Nature and modes. It is indefinite and not expressed completely in finite terms; hence, as a desire to know the essence of God’s attributes, it is at its best. However, to create a feedback loop of expression to the body in an act of worship creates a self-sufficient mode of expression. Bhakti and its associated virtues offer this advantage for desiring beings, as it ends the search for completion outside oneself by bringing the body and mind together in a kind of involution, or inner transformation. Instead of looking to the world for a good friend, the *bhakta* finds one in themselves. Rather than being harmed by rejection, the *bhakta* finds self-acceptance. Although violence and hatred continue in the world, the *bhakta* carries on with positive, active love. The *bhakta* is a friend in virtue and an inspiration to the lonely.

7. Virtuous Endeavours

Taking a closer look at character traits in an exposition of Bhakti, we see that love is eventually subsumed under master-virtues. “Academic discussions of Bhakti that focus on the image of God, including monotheism and *nirguna* and *saguna*, and those that focus on social movements, including reform, revolution, and revival, tend to obstruct scholarly recognition of the pattern of concern with embodiment common to bhakti’s proponents and interpreters.” (Pechillis Prentiss 1999, p. 153). Virtues are always embodied through practise, and we would like to claim that they are something one takes credit for by involving active (freely willed) emotions. Spinoza’s own concept of the dualism of passive and active emotions plays out within the one Nature as God or Substance, not recognising that emotions are any less free than in *prakṛti*. His account of freedom grants freedom from the suffering that things could experience otherwise and freedom to act in accord with one’s own nature. It is a shift away from the privative state towards a state of fulfilment that makes one active, though the worldly transactional feelings remain the same. This is what interests us as devotees—that the normative demand is not that one needs to be a less sentient being: “He who clearly and distinctly understands himself and his emotions loves God, and the more so the more he understands himself and his emotions.” Book IV. Prop 15 (Spinoza 2002, p. 329) The prescriptive aspect of this statement is to understand the self as an affective being. As emotions are clarified with distinctions, they take on a different qualitative feel. Recalling the embodied chain, we see that “For an emotion is the idea of an affection of the body”. Book V, Prop 3, Corollary (Spinoza 2002, p. 366) This body we find ourselves in can be modified with practise, conveying the “idea of God which is in us is adequate and perfect” such that it is impossible to hate God. Book V, Prop 18 (Spinoza 2002, pp. 371–72).

Spinoza deduced that the body is the key to understanding God, the self, and others. It is for this reason that we now pay special attention to the embodied practises of *bhakti*. In comments from the scholium on emotion, Spinoza tells us that piety is a through which the appetite flourishes, but in accord with reason. (Book V, Prop 4 Sch; (Spinoza 2002, p. 336)) This point is needed to curb any misunderstanding of the embodied practise of virtue. Here, we find a stark difference between lustful passion and *bhakti*. Though both are seen in the world and may look the same to an outside observer, from the perspective of an initiate, there is an active distinction: the first has a perpetually unfulfilled and wild trajectory, while the other achieves perfect completeness in its supra-ecstatic focus. Spinoza’s mantra is as follows: “The desire to do good which derives from our living by

the guidance of reason, I call Piety. . . true virtue is nothing other than to live by the guidance of reason" Book IV Prop. 37 Sch. 1 (Spinoza 2002, pp. 339–40), which is characterised by a desire for friendship and is praised as honourable. Nrisinha Bhaduri offers a parallel, "In view of such a distinctive nature of the Bhakti sentiment, it can justifiably be said that the connoisseurs of this sentiment are totally different from the general connoisseurs of poetic pieces." (1988, p. 397).

Though similar concerns were raised over *śāntarasa* and the lack of emotion as an aesthetic sentiment, the fact that Bhakti involves a heightened state of personal emotion, which is not necessarily universal outside of a devotional context, matters. However, not everyone can resonate with the sentiment of horror films or stand-up comedy, or even the erotic sentiment. A *bhakta* shares in a community of appreciation, however. Even when the community is scattered, the understanding of love of God can be recognised in art, devotional acts, and character traits. If the sentiment of *śānta* has a place in the emotional life of a *bhakta*, and the character trait of *samatā* shows that it does, the added feature of affect happiness also does. Bhaduri continues: "Jiva Gosvamin, who in many places assimilated the philosophic principles with rhetoric, goes a step further and says: the essence of the essential power of the Lord is *hliddini*. The kernel of that *hliddini* [rejoice] is Bhakti which is the other name of love towards the Lord (*rati*). This Bhakti stretches one of its two ends in the Lord and the other in the devotee. In order to enjoy the love of the devotees, the Lord, out of his personal eagerness, placed love, i.e., the essence of his bliss (*hliddini*) in the heart of his devotees" (Bhaduri 1988, p. 402). Like a true friend, indeed.

Freedom from the bondage of opposing emotions and the suffering inflicted by misunderstanding the self that Spinoza stresses may appear more negative than the positive freedom to act in accord with one's own nature, which is essential to divine love. Consider what Matthew Kisner claims about virtue: "One might object that there has been more work on freedom, since Spinoza essentially equates our freedom with our virtue and there has been a great deal of work on the latter. However, one cannot have a complete picture without also considering how his view of virtue also serves as a theory of freedom. This means examining how his view relates to other theories of freedom and to concepts connected with freedom, such as responsibility (Kisner 2011, p. 2). We can gain a better understanding of virtue from the like-minded Bhakti tradition. On the other end of the spectrum, Bryant translates, "The virtues of a *sādhu* are tolerance, compassion, friendship toward all beings, holding no enemies, and peacefulness" (Bryant 2017, p. 209). These are emotionally constituted states. Returning to Vivekananda, he also offered an interpretation of Nārada Bhakti Sūtra in his Lectures in America, which brings us full circle. As we now know, it is not just that Bhakti is the nectar of love for God; it is neither a virtue itself nor a selfish emotion but the grounds of a virtue: "Getting which man becomes perfect, immortal, and satisfied forever. . . desires no more, does not become jealous of anything, does not take pleasure in vanities. Knowing which becomes filled with spirituality, calm, and finds pleasure only in God. It cannot be used to fill any desire, itself being the check to all desires. This is the highest form of love, because there is no desire of reciprocity, which desire is in all human love." (Complete Works, Vol. 6 Lectures).

This is no esoteric teaching; it is available to all in simple language, and the message is clear: the Self is not individually bound for reciprocal exchange. The opposing understandings for the verb *bhaj* from one verbal classification to the next is contradicted. Śaiva theologians also have a point of contact, as Bhakti is woven between the schools:

In the second chapter of the *Rudra-saṃhitā* of the *Śiva-mahāpurāṇa* Śiva is supposed to say that the highest reality, the knowledge of which brings liberation, is pure consciousness, and in that consciousness there is no differentiation between the self and the Brahman. But strangely enough Śiva seems to identify *bhakti* or

devotion with knowledge. There can be no knowledge without *bhakti*. When there is *bhakti* or devotion, there is no distinction of caste in the way of attaining the grace of God. Śiva then classifies the different types of *bhakti*. (Dasgupta 1922, XXXVII, p. 102)

Against the vice of gullibility, and as a counter to the irrational acceptance of falsehoods, in Vīra-śaivism, Bhakti provides protection from error: “When the false appears as true and the mind is detached from it by the adorative action of Bhakti, and the person becomes detached from the world—this is called *bhakti-sthala*.” (Dasgupta XXXV, p. 64). The means of avoiding error need to be shown, however. What is the mechanism of epistemic correction? Appearance and detachment go hand in hand with experience and the experiencer, for one. “This emphasis on Bhakti is also to be found in the verse with which Abhinavagupta concludes his commentary: ‘One who is devoid of the delusion of egoism under the influence of the nectar of scintillating devotion, even though present amidst the traffic of the *gunas* is as good as having gone beyond them thereby.’” (Sharma 1983, p. 32). These *gunas* are essentially representative of the material world and its phenomenological qualities. Agency is the problem in a world that appears to be fixed and binding. The solution takes shape with the body, though. For one who is already realised, the whole world is inner; rather than viewing the body as an obstacle, Bhakti, as the path of devotion according to Abhinavagupta, is based in embodied knowing (*jñāna*). As much as Bhakti is present, one is already liberated, and to the extent one is liberated, one would know through the self’s power to detach from external appearances. This is telling in the sense that how one is dispositioned is key to knowing reality, and not just for a theory of ecstatic enjoyment, as one might superficially expect from the author of the *Tantrāloka*. Virtues are dispositions (*bhāvas*).

As a commentator on Bharata’s aesthetics, ecstatic enjoyment is not explicitly left out of the analysis by Abhinavagupta, but everything has its proper place. In answer to the question, what is Bhakti? Abhinavagupta reveals key features of a devotee. Bhakti is the particular kind of faith (*śraddhā*) that comes from austerity (*tapas*). “Having rent asunder the knots of sin” to develop a higher-level practice of austerity, the love of God arises on its own (Sharma 1983, p. 213). The virtues are necessary and the love of God is the bestowal of divine grace itself.

In the non-dualist Pratyābhijñā Śaiva philosophy (of self-recognition), salvation is for living, breathing, and relating beings, not for a disembodied being or a merely embodied being. For this reason, we must be cautious not to divide the schools of Indian philosophy according to dualisms. Typically, “Dvaita is a deeply Bhakti-oriented system (*bhakti* = “devotion”), generally practising devotion to Vishnu/Krishna.” (Diller 2025). This also leaves the Gītā as the only text that can account for the kind of action (*karma*) that is needed in order to be liberated and for restructuring desire into desireless action (*niṣkāmakarma*). It follows from an account of how Bhakti arises, with the aim of acting without interest or selfishness for the sake of God rather than merit that friendships are true, foes are forgiven, and lies have no power over the epistemic agent. In *Ethics in the Māhabhārata: a philosophical inquiry for today* (2006), Sri Sitansu Chakravarti establishes a context for *samaduḥkhasukha*, the virtue of taking pain and pleasure on equal terms, which is essentially equanimity, or *amatvam*. It is a virtue ordering experience cosmologically (*ṛta*) according to truth as a value. As an active form of equanimity, it resolves the problematic bias against the bad, judged according to pain, or the good, judged according to pleasure, in the form of suffering or enjoyment that affects a being (*bhāva*). The affected being, living in accord with the nature of a desiring being, is a mode of Spinoza’s substance. As a mode, even in a deterministic reality, one can allow desires to pass through without

acting for the sake of enjoyment, even when the sense of enjoyment fills the being of the experiencer. This is how love of God fills the life and actions of a devotee.

8. Conclusions

Does the Bhagavadgītā contain a firm monotheistic or dualist philosophy? This question might not be philosophical, but it could not be answered here. Only by looking to the text as a piece of philosophical literature that resolves more specific philosophical questions can it be made relevant to many divergent traditions. The question examined in this study is as follows: What does having a theistic virtue of love embody as opposed to a delusional lover, loveless or even megalomaniac figures like Claudius in Roman history? Where there is error, or intellectual and moral vice, the object of love is a limited self, and self-love is expressed through harmful actions towards humanity. Where there is devotion, there is complete understanding of the Self in others, and character traits bring about harmony within the self for a common good. At least in the context of this paper, the question is about fallibility in the love of God. If acquiring virtues is necessary for the love of God, then failing to achieve some degree of virtue would indicate that the love is ingenuine. Just as someone who has a good feeling is not necessarily a morally good person, a person who passionately loves God is not necessarily a *bhakta*. All human beings have the potential to be fallible about claims to truth, especially the self-reported claim that one's passions are correctly situated for a true love of God. This matters because charismatic characters often attract followers, and people need a standard by which to distinguish a genuine devotee from a charlatan. Devotees also need a set of virtues to strive for and model practices on. All of this is given in the Bhagavadgītā, but what it does not give is a theory of error that comes in degrees that are suited to judging moral values. Spinoza postulates that error is privation of adequate knowledge, which suits both Jñānayoga and Bhaktiyoga. In this sense, the philosophy of moral virtue should be conceptualised as being derived from adequate knowledge rather than mere association. The major downfall of Spinoza's *Ethics* is that love should be immanent in the world, but it is very difficult to locate as a worldly love in his philosophy. The virtues of the Bhagavadgītā help to ground love in concrete action in the world. They provide a compass with which to guide action and a way to cultivate the intuitive knowledge that Spinoza prescribes. The key to successful action in the *Ethics* is also the correct knowledge, which must be engaged with emotively.

Different senses of Bhakti are brought together in a theory of virtue, just as devotion can mean devotion to God or to value in the world. Our deeper philosophical problem is this possibility of a genuine love for God from an agentic characteristic of the self. This love, the Narada Bhakti Sūtra assures us, is supreme. But the love of God implicitly involves actions of a worldly lover for a being who is complete, with no need to receive love or give it in return. Though there is also an advantage for the lover (*bhakta*), and no love to lose on the path, it is arguably riddled with false starts. Spinoza provides an error theory for knowledge and virtue that allows virtue to come in degrees of perfection according to adequate ideas. The devotee must overcome ignorance that inclines one to love merely a limited self or limited others. However, the devotee must also understand that being a part of God does not imply infallibility. Being that there is a fallibility condition, there is also a truth value assignment applicable to a love of God. One can be mistaken or satisfy the conditions of a devotee. The devotee must also love freely, without restraint. However, the devotee must also be in possession of self-control (*yatātmā*). This also implies that passionate love for God is not necessarily a virtue in the *Bhagavadgītā* or *Ethics*. The madness of love can only be accepted with the right reason to love. In short, a *bhakta*'s love must be ethical. One must be worthy and judge oneself to be good. This person is not only rare but

also difficult to identify. Thus, Spinoza's dictum holds, doubly. All things good are indeed rare, and becoming a knower of the good is itself problematic without adequate knowledge. Considering someone like Jane Goodall, and her love of the divine in Nature that is sentient, the traits of Bhakti are clearly part of her character. Therefore, the virtues for the love of God are recognisable in her as well. With just a small amount of understanding, we can see that such a person has adequate knowledge of the limited self in relation to the whole. Her account of a self–other relationship echoes the description of Kabir's loss of self in finding the love of God. She recalled experiences of feeling herself absent: "I and the chimpanzees, the earth and trees and air, seemed to merge, to become one with the spirit power of life itself. . ." (Goodall and Berman 1999, p. 171). The "I" she recalls is most consistent with a kind of divine being, *bhāva*, and being itself. When we describe her in the primary sense of *baj*, meaning that she had a "share" in a divine experience, we can equivocate and say she was sharing the experience with the divine. She was also of service, not just to the apes, but also for humanity. As a reminder, "In addition to caring about self and others we care about the fact that we do things together." (Sherman 1993, p. 278). Our love of God demonstrates this more than any other action. In different faiths, on different paths, and from different devotional modes, every solitary reveller in the divine is in this together. Jane Goodall's devotion to her work is an example of Bhakti. Bhakti brings humanity closer by sharing God's grace: serving, knowing, feeling, expressing, the absence of self, the presence of God, and effulgent loving are combined as one.

This is also where we see that Abhinavagupta, with his non-traditional, non-dualist reading of the Bhagavadgītā, accounts for virtues along the same lines as Spinoza, who considers adequate knowledge to be the condition for liberation and liberation to be God's immanence. For Abhinava, "by this he meant the knowledge of Siva, that Siva "who is the self of all beings, moving and non-moving. He is immanent (*viśvamaya*) as well as transcendent (*viśvottinta*). He is called *anuttara*, the reality beyond which there is nothing. He is pure consciousness (*caitanya*), absolute experience (*para samvit*) and supreme lord (*paramēśvara*)." (Sharma 1983, p. 33). While some paths relate Bhakti to *nirguna brahma* and others to *saguna brahma* in their worship, Abhinavagupta takes both as one. As such, he is not taking knowledge, action, and Bhakti to be separate outside of virtue and moral agency. The lesson we can take from this is that the friendly service we perform together is taken as the same (*samatā*) as the progress that we make travelling a path for its own sake. In this context, Bhakti is not considered a virtue but is rather the intrinsic value of virtues of love, expressed for humanity and for God. Although we are looking at the love of God in world that appears to be ready-made for individual separation and transactions, the point of our inquiry was precisely to identify virtues that unbreak the broken, piecing together a world of beings and *bhāvas*. This is how Bhakti is not just any kind of love of God, but is loving-relations between beings, sustained through hard-earned virtues.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: It is thanks to support from Ahmedabad University research for this article has been possible. I wish to extend my gratitude to Shilpa Pandit, Mona Mehta, Aditya Chaturvedi, and Shishir Saxena for their engagement and assistance in various capacities, from discussions to internal guidance. I also wish to thank Rajeev Kumar Mishra of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, for providing assistance and access to the Institute's Library. Most emphatically, I am

indebted to two anonymous reviewers who offered insightful criticisms and significant encouragement to make clarifications, Prem Lal Raina for questioning the difference virtue makes, and many dedicated teachers and inquisitive students of Bhakti in India.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ *athāto bhaktim vyākhyāsyāmaḥ/sā tvasmin parama prema rūpā/amṛtasvarūpā ca.*
- ² Translations from Sanskrit and/or Hindi are by the author, unless otherwise indicated.
- ³ *bhakti kā māraḡ jhīnā re* (Das 1915, p. 60, LV I.73).
- ⁴ प्रेम गली अति संकरी, तामें दाऊ न समाई । जब मैं था तब हरी नहीं, अब हरी है मैं नहीं ।।
- ⁵ All translations of Spinoza are by Samuel Shirley.
- ⁶ This follows from the Definitions of Emotions, 6–7, and Spinoza in PROPOSITION 17, “God is without passive emotions, and he is not affected with any emotion of pleasure or pain. Proof All ideas, insofar as they are related to God, are true (Pr. 32, III), that is (Def. 4, II), they are adequate. Thus (Gen. Def. of Emotions), God is without passive emotions. Again, God cannot pass to a state of greater or less perfection (Cor. 2[M1.1], Pr. 20, I), and so (Def. of Emotions 2 and 3) he is not affected with any emotion of pleasure or pain.” (Spinoza 2002, p. 165).
- ⁷ आपूर्यमाणमचलप्रतिष्ठं समुद्रमापः प्रविशन्ति यद्वत् । तद्वत्कामा यं प्रविशन्ति सर्वे स शान्तिमाप्नोति न कामकामी ॥ २-७०॥
- ⁸ The term *bhaktirasa* appears in the 10th century text, Stavacintāmaṇi of Bhatta Narayana, the 15th century Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu of Rūpa Gosvāmin and in the 16th century Bhaktirasāyana of Madhusudana Sarasvati. For an aesthetic analysis of *bhakti*, paying close attention to selfless love, Nrisinha Prasad Bhaduri discusses the erotic devotion of Rūpa Gosvāmin, explaining “the bhakti, devotion, and love of a self-effacing gopī (cowherd-girl playmate of Kṛṣṇa), which is consummated in the selfless desire for the union of Kṛṣṇa and rādhā, forms the central literary, poetic, musical, and spiritual emotion, there are three other primary forms of love that aid it: (1) love as servitude, (2) love as friendship, and (3) love as filial affection.” (Chakrabarti 2016, pp. 107–25).
- ⁹ नाहं वेदैर्न तपसा न दानेन न चेज्यया । शक्य एवंविधो द्रष्टुं दृष्टवानसि मां यथा ॥ ११-५३॥
भक्त्या त्वनन्यया शक्य अहमेवंविधोऽर्जुन । ज्ञातुं द्रष्टुं च तत्त्वेन प्रवेष्टुं च परन्तप ॥ ११-५४॥
- ¹⁰ Spinoza distinguishes between Culpable Humility, a vice against perfection, and True Humility, which involves Self-respect (Spinoza 2002, p. 348).
- ¹¹ तुल्यनिन्दास्तुतिर्मांसी सन्तुष्टो येन केनचित् । अनिकेतः स्थिरमतिर्भक्तिमान्मे प्रियो नरः ॥ १२-१९॥

References

- Battaly, Heather. 2010. *Virtue and Vice, Moral and Epistemic*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Bhaduri, Nrisinha P. 1988. Bhakti (Devotion) as an Aesthetic Sentiment. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 16: 377–410. [CrossRef]
- Bilimoria, Purushottama. 2024. Gods, Absolute, Non-theistic Divinity, and Monotheism in Indian Philosophy of Religion: A Genealogical Critique. *Sophia* 63: 419–45. [CrossRef]
- Bilimoria, Purushottama, and Aleksandra Wenta, eds. 2015. *Emotions in Indian Thought-Systems*. New Delhi: Routledge.
- Blanchot, Maurice. 1995. *Madness of the Day*. Barrytown: Station Hill Press, Inc.
- Bryant, Edwin F. 2017. *Bhakti Yoga: Tales and Teachings from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. New York: North Point Press.
- Chakrabarti, Arindam, ed. 2016. *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. New Delhi: Bloomsbury.
- Chakravarti, Sitansu. 2024. *Traditional Indian Virtue Ethics for Today: An East-West Dialogue*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. Cham: Springer Nature.
- Das, Kabir. 1915. *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*. Translated by Rabindranath Tagore. London: Macmillan.
- Dasgupta, Surendranath. 1922. *A History of Indian Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Datta, Aswini Kumar. 1971. *Bhaktiyoga*. Translated by Gunada Charan Sen. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhava.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1990. *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*. Translated by Martin Joughin. New York: Zone Books.
- Diller, Jeanine. 2025. God and Other Ultimates. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Spring 2025 Edition. Edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. Available online: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2025/entries/god-ultimates/> (accessed on 8 January 2026).
- Gode, P. K. 1922–1923. The Bhakti-Sūtras of Nārada and the Bhagavadgītā. *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 4: 63–95.
- Goodall, Jane, and Phillip Berman. 1999. *Reason for Hope: A Spiritual Journey*. New York: Grand Central Publishing.
- Haberman, David L., trans. 2003. Rūpa Gosvāmin. In *The Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*. Vanarasi: Motilal Banarsidass.

- Hotkar, Lalita, R. Lalitha Sarma, and K. Ramasubramanian. 2025. The Synthesis of Jñāna and Bhakti in Advaita Vedānta Through Svāmī Vidyāranya's Lens. *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 42: 1–15. [CrossRef]
- Huenemann, Charlie, ed. 2008. *Interpreting Spinoza: Critical Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- James, Susan. 2012. *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jhingran, Saral. 1989. *Aspects of Hindu Morality*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Kisner, Matthew. 2011. *Spinoza on Human Freedom: Reason Autonomy and the Good*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Madhusudanarasvasati. 1961. *Bhaktirasāyana*. Edited by Janardana Sastri Pandeya. Banaras: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Mishra, Rammurti M. D. 1972. The Sākhya system of philosophy. In *Textbook of Yoga Psychology*. London: Lyrebird Press Limited.
- Nelson, Lance. 2004. The Ontology of “Bhakti”: Devotion as “Paramapuruṣārtha” in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and Madhusūdana Sarasvati. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32: 345–92. [CrossRef]
- Pechillis Prentiss, Karen. 1999. *The Embodiment of Bhakti*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli. 1992. *The Bhagavadgītā*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.
- Sharma, Arvind, trans. 1983. Abhinavagupta. In *Gitārthasāgraha*. Leiden: Brill.
- Sherman, Nancy. 1993. The Virtues of a Common Pursuit. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53: 277–99. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Shima, Iwao, ed. 2011. *The Historical Development of the Bhakti Movement in India: Theory & Practice*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Singh, Raj R. 2006. *Bhakti and Philosophy*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Singh, Ravinder. 2023. *The Topography of Bhakti: Social Reform Watersheds in Indian Intellectual History*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.
- Spinoza, Benedictus de. 2002. *Complete Works*. Translated by Samuel Shirley. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Tuske, Joerg. 2025. The Concept of Emotion in Classical Indian Philosophy. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Winter 2025 Edition. Edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. Available online: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2025/entries/concept-emotion-india/> (accessed on 15 April 2026).
- Vivekananda, Swami. 1956. *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama Press, vol. 6.
- Vivekananda, Swami. 1996. *Bhaktiyoga: The Yoga of Love and Devotion*. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama Press.
- Whicher, Ian, and Carpenter, eds. 2003. *Yoga: The Indian Tradition*. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge Curzon.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.