



The meaningfulness of “The Meaninglessness of Ritual”: [an advaita Vedānta perspective on] Vedic ritual (*yajña*) as narrative of renunciation (*tyāga*)

O sentido do “Sem-sentido do Ritual”: o ritual Védico (*yajña*) como narrativa
de renúncia (*tyāga*) [segundo a escola não dualista advaita Vedānta]

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Abstract

The objective of the present article is to suggest that systematic, deliberate and gradual renunciation (*tyāga*) constitutes the fundamental thrust of Indian Vedic traditions and the main feature of what may be called a *religious or spiritual outlook*, in contrast with a *mundane* one. I'll try show that renunciation is ultimately purportful in enabling one to overcome suffering (*duḥkha*) through gradual immersion into the knowledge of the deepest levels of one's immediate Reality. Considering the two-step ladder that make-up Vedic religious designs according to Advaita Vedānta - viz., *karma* as ritual-related actions leading to improved rebirths, and *jñāna* as knowledge-related disciplines leading to ultimate self-realization, - the specific focus of the present article will be on the first step. Accordingly, I'll strive to unveil the specific characteristics, modalities and cognitive facets of renunciation that make up, in my opinion, the fundamental meaning of *dharma* as a goal to be pursued in accordance with the narrative prescriptions of the Vedas and in the form of ritual actions - *karma* -, leading one to paradise in next life.

Keywords: renunciation; sacrificial ritual; *dharma*; Vedic injunctions; Vedānta.

Resumo

É objetivo do presente artigo sustentar que a renúncia (*tyāga*) sistemática, deliberada e gradual, constitui a dimensão fundamental das tradições védicas indianas e a principal característica do que poderia ser denominado de *horizonte religioso ou espiritual*, em contraste com um *horizonte mundano*. Tentarei mostrar que a renúncia é, em última análise, o meio que viviliza a superação do sofrimento (*duḥkha*), através de uma imersão gradual, de caráter cognitivo, nos níveis mais profundos da Realidade imediata. Considerando os dois níveis constitutivos da senda religiosa dos Vedas segundo a escola não dualista Advaita Vedānta - a saber, (i) *karma* enquanto ação ritual conduzente a renascimentos aprimorados, e (ii) *jñāna* enquanto disciplina conducente à meta final de auto-conhecimento -, o foco específico do presente artigo será o primeiro nível. Nesse sentido, esforçar-me-ei por apresentar criticamente as características específicas, as modalidades e as facetas cognitivas da renúncia que compõem, em minha opinião, o significado fundamental da teleologia do *dharma*, a ser perseguido em consonância com as prescrições narrativas dos Vedas e na forma de ações rituais - *karma* - conducentes ao paraíso numa vida futura.

Palavras-chaves: renúncia; ritual sacrificial; *dharma*; injunções Védicas; Vedānta.

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Introduction

The objective of the present article¹ is to suggest that systematic, deliberate and gradual renunciation (*tyāga*) constitutes the fundamental thrust of Indian Vedic traditions and the main feature of what may be called a *religious or spiritual outlook*, in contrast to a *mundane* one. I'll try show that renunciation is ultimately purportful in enabling one to overcome suffering (*duḥkha*) through gradual immersion into the knowledge of the deepest levels of one's immediate Reality. In other words, knowledge-driven renunciation would bring one definitely closer to Reality by eliminating one's recurrent errors about it, by redefining the nature of one's worldly interactions and relationships, and by developing one's sense of responsibility and compassion. Perhaps no text could illustrate better those principles than the dialogue between Yājñavalkya and his wife Maitreyī in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. After announcing his earnest desire to follow the path of renunciation (*sannyāsa*), Yājñavalkya describes the latter's teleology as a cognitive enterprise leading to the realisation of the (absolute) Brahman as the non-dual (*advaita*) reality and the innermost essence of the self (*ātman*):

Verily, not for the sake of the husband, my dear, is [the husband] loved, but he is loved for the sake of the Self (*ātman*). Verily, not for the sake of the wife, my dear, is [the wife] loved, but she is loved for the sake of the Self (*ātman*). Verily, not for the sake of the sons, my dear, are [the sons] loved, but they are loved for the sake of the Self (*ātman*). Verily, not for the sake of wealth, my dear, is [wealth] loved, but it is loved for the sake of the Self (*ātman*). Verily, not for the sake of the *brāhmaṇas*², my dear, are [the *brāhmaṇas*] loved, but they are loved for the sake of the Self (*ātman*). Verily, not for the sake of the *kṣatriyas*³, my dear, are [the *kṣatriyas*] loved, but they are loved for the sake of the Self (*ātman*). Verily, not for the sake of the worlds, my dear, are [the worlds] loved, but they are loved for the sake of the Self (*ātman*). Verily, not for the sake of the gods, my dear, are [the gods] loved, but they are loved for the sake of the Self (*ātman*). Verily, not for the sake of the beings, my dear, are [the beings] loved, but they are loved for the sake of the Self (*ātman*). Verily, not for the sake of all this [universe], my dear, is [all this universe] loved, but it is

¹ This article is based on a conference delivered at the Oxford Centre of Hindu Studies (OCHS), University of Oxford, in January 2015, as part of my activities as Visiting Scholar (Shivdasani Fellow) at the OCHS. "The meaninglessness of Ritual" (1979) is a direct reference to the title of Frits Staal's well-known and thought-provoking article on the nature of Vedic ritual. All translations from original Sanskrit texts included in this article were made by the author.

² Representative of the priesthood/scholarly class.

³ Representative of the ruling political class.

loved for the sake of the Self. (*ātman*). (BRHADĀRANYAKA-UPANIṢAD, 1965, p. 245-246 [II.iv.5]).⁴

Considering the two-step ladder that make-up Vedic religious designs according to Advaita Vedānta⁵, viz., *karma* as ritual-related actions leading to improved rebirths, and *jñāna* as knowledge-related disciplines leading to ultimate self-realisation, the specific focus of the present article will be on the first step. Accordingly, I’ll strive to unveil the specific characteristics, modalities and cognitive facets of renunciation that make up, in my opinion, the fundamental meaning of *dharma*, the penultimate teleology of the so-called “human goals” (*puruṣārtha*), to be pursued as religiously enjoined *karmas*, in form of paradise-leading ritual actions. For that, I will take support of fundamental Vedic texts, both *śruti*⁶ and *smṛti*⁷, such as the Brāhmaṇa(s), the Kalpa-sūtras (Śrauta, Gṛhya and Dharma-sūtras)⁸, the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā literature and the overall commentarial tradition.

The relevance of such enterprise can be gauged by the twofold dimension that underscores the foundational character of Vedic traditions. They represent, on the one hand, one of oldest matrices of Indian civilization and, on the other, a flexible structure of ordering and incorporating adventitious elements that underlines the process generally described as *hinduization*⁹ culminating in today’s reality.

⁴ *na vā are patyuh kāmāya patih priyo bhavati, ātmanastu kāmāya patih priyo bhavati / na vā are jōyāyai kāmāya jōyā priyā bhavati, ātmanastu kāmāya jōyā priyā bhavati / na vā are pūtrāṇām kāmāya putrāḥ priyā bhavanti, ātmanastu kāmāya putrāḥ priyā bhavanti / na vā are vittasya kāmāya vittam priyaṃ bhavati, ātmanastu kāmāya vittam priyaṃ bhavati / na vā are brahmaṇaḥ kāmāya brahma priyaṃ bhavati, ātmanastu kāmāya brahma priyaṃ bhavati / na vā are kṣtrasya kāmāya kṣatram priyaṃ bhavati, ātmanastu kāmāya kṣatram priyaṃ bhavati / na vā are lokānām kāmāya lokāḥ priyā bhavanti, ātmanastu kāmāya lokāḥ priyā bhavanti | na vā are devānām kāmāya devāḥ priyā bhavanti, ātmanastu kāmāya devāḥ priyā bhavanti | na vā are bhūtānām kāmāya bhūtāni priyāni bhavanti, ātmanastu kāmāya bhūtāni priyāni bhavanti | na vā are sarvasya kāmāya sarvaṃ priyaṃ bhavati, ātmanastu kāmāya sarvaṃ priyaṃ bhavati / ātmā vā are draṣṭavyaḥ śrotavyo mantavyo nididhyāsitavyo maitreyi, ātmano vā are darśanena śravaṇena matyā vijñānenedaṃ sarvaṃ viditam.* (BRHADĀRANYAKA-UPANIṢAD, 1965, p. 245-246 [II.iv.5]).

⁵ One of the most revered schools of Vedānta, gathered around the canonic relevance of the Upaniṣads and the pursuance of soteriological methods of self-realization. It was consolidated by philosopher Śaṅkarācārya (8th century) by stressing on the radical unicity of *Brahman*, the Absolute, and on the unsubstantial character of the world of multiplicity. One of its major tenets is the postulation of a fundamental non-difference (*advaita*) between the self (*ātman*) – the subjective principle of one’s experience – and *Brahman*, the absolute principle that conforms the totality of the universe.

⁶ Lit. “that which is heard”. It refers to the body of most authoritative or revelatory religious texts.

⁷ Lit. “that which is remembered”. It refers to ancillary religious texts whose authority is derived from their association with *śruti*.

⁸ An excellent account of *kalpasūtra* literature is given by Ram Gopal in his work *India of Vedic Kalpasūtras* (1983).

⁹ In a homonymous and unpublished essay, Harold Arnold termed this process as “The Hinduization of Vedic Ritual” (SMITH, 2011, p. 177).

1 Renunciation (*tyāga*) and the Foundations of *Dharma* and *Mokṣa*

In Vedic tradition, the spiritual or religious undertaking can be basically framed within a two-step ladder leading to ultimate self-realization: (i) *dharma* (duty/virtue) or *karma-khaṇḍa*, the ritual-driven (*yajña*) tradition associated with oral and written textualities of the Brāhmaṇas and the in-depth scholarship of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā school (better known as Mīmāṃsā only); (ii) and *mokṣa* (liberation) or *jñāna-khaṇḍa*, the knowledge-driven (*jñāna*) tradition associated with oral and written Upaniṣads and the in-depth scholarship of Uttara Mīmāṃsā school (better known as Vedānta¹⁰). In his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Śaṅkarācārya (8th century), one of the major exponents of the *upanīṣadic* or *vedāntin* tradition, describes as follows those two steps constitutive of the Vedic path: *pravṛtti-lakṣaṇa-dharma*, the “path of action” or ritual engagement; and *nivṛtti-lakṣaṇa-dharma*, the “path of renunciation” or detachment and knowledge (ŚAṅKARĀCĀRYA, 1982, p. 1-2 [Introduction]).¹¹

It is a well-established fact - vide Nakamura’s comprehensive work on the origins of Vedānta (NAKAMURA, 1990, p. 409-13) - that those two dimensions, understood as an integrated organic whole, wherein the first stands as a (long-term) pre-requisite for the second, was in place since early days.¹² In other words, *dharma* and *mokṣa* are intrinsic and constitutive stages of a gradual religious path. In a terminology more akin to western traditions, one could designate the first stage as “moral religion” and the second stage as “mystical religion”. Their organic articulation within a vertical axis of a recurrent existential process of self-development stands in sharp contrast with some modern interpretative tendencies - certainly inspired by Christian perceptions of an “historical evolution” from the *Old* to the *New Testament* – that look at them as mutually excluding terms of a process of diachronic succession in time, whereby the emergence of the second

¹⁰ Lit. “The end of the Vedas”, a reference to the Upaniṣads.

¹¹ *dvevidho hi vedokto dhamah pravṛttilakṣaṇo nivṛttilakṣaṇsca jagataḥ sthitikāraṇam* (ŚAṅKARĀCĀRYA, 1982, p. 1-2 [Introduction])

¹² Particularly relevant in this connection is Sāyana (14th century)’s preface (*upoddhāta*) to his own commentary on the *Rg Veda*. (SĀYANA, 1933, p. 1-32 [*Upoddhāta*]).

would irremediably tend to disqualify the first or relegate it to the past of human history.¹³

Conversely, in Indian Vedic traditions, the religious dynamics that prompts the transition from *dharma* to *mokṣa* corresponds to an enlargement rather than to a substitution of horizons. In fact, the critical perspective that arises out of one’s pursuance of *mokṣa* - as per the *upaniṣadic* or *vedāntin* traditions - is an outcry for a deeper understanding of *dharma*, rather than its negation. And similarly, the compliance with the fundamentals of *dharma* – as per the Brāhmaṇas and *smṛti* literature - is understood, as well, as an enlargement of the horizons pertaining to the mundane goals of *kāma* (sexual demands) and *artha* (the demands for material prosperity), rather than their negation.

One could, therefore, speak of a three-level hierarchy of meaning underlying the pan-Indian doctrine of *catur-puruṣārtha* (“the four human aspirations”): (i) *artha* (the demands for material prosperity) and *kāma* (sexual demands) are the constituents of the mundane level of reality; (ii) *dharma*, the first stage of religion, stands as an in-depth resignification of *artha* and *kāma*; (iii) and *mokṣa*, the second and ultimate stage of religion, stands as an in-depth resignification of *dharma* or, in other words, an in-depth resignification of the *dharma*’s in-depth resignification of *artha* and *kāma*. As such, *kāma* and *artha*, i.e., the mundane level of existence necessarily involves, in a raw and blurred way, the totality and complexity of one’s world-giving experience. And the two-staged intervention of the religious process would, then, represent the two highest layers of cognitive clarification of that totality. In short, the transition from the mundane to the religious is one of perspective rather than reality, of epistemology rather than ontology. That’s, precisely, the innermost meaning of the ultimate condition of

¹³ The idea of Christianity as a symbol of the historical defeat of ritual traditions – both Jew and Pagan traditions -, through “spiritual interiorization”, has, in my opinion, marred Indological studies on Vedic ritual. It prevents a proper understanding of the synchronic and organic links binding together the two layers of Vedic religion and the connecting role exercised therein by renunciation and purportful knowledge of Reality. The crudest expression of that prejudice is Max Muller’s description of the Brāhmaṇa(s) as “a literature which for pedantry and downright absurdity can hardly be matched anywhere... The general character of these works is marked by shallow and grandiloquence, by priestly conceit, and antiquarian pedantry... These works deserve to be studied as the physician studies the twaddle of idiots, and the raving of madmen.” (MULLER, 1926, p. 204).

mokṣa in Vedic tradition – the *jīvan-mukta*, i.e., the “liberated in life”, in this world, here and now.¹⁴

The in-depth resignification of mundane reality that makes up the fundamental character of Vedic religion – *dharma* and *mokṣa* – has, therefore, a major cognitive orientation. Accordingly, renunciation (*tyāga*), as an essential feature of such spiritual project, points specifically to the renunciation of one’s erroneous perspectives (*avidyā*) on Reality, rather than the renunciation of Reality itself. In other words, renunciation constitutes the behavioural and disciplinary facet of a correlate process of incremental knowledge about Reality, that fosters, under specific circumstances, the elimination of one’s errors regarding its true nature and, consequently, the eradication of one’s suffering. In both the levels, *dharma* and *mokṣa*, fundamental definitory concepts and practices – as much as their overall literature – speak, unequivocally, of their eminent renunciatory character: *dharma* is made concrete through the systematic practice of *yajñas*, a word derived from the root *yaj* that points to the “act offering or sacrificing” something of one’s possession; and *mokṣa* is realised through the practice of *sannyāsa*, a word derived from the root *as* that points to the act of “giving or casting away” everything, including one’s own self.

The etymology and actual meaning of both the words point to a major difference between the two dimensions of renunciation at stake. *Dharma* as ritual implies fundamentally a renunciation of actual possessions or actual habits, leaving relatively intact the notion of “I” (*ahaṃkāra*) as an autocratic agent. Accordingly, the act of renunciation is subjectively justified by the expectation of future acquisition of a transcendent object, the “paradise” (*svarga*). It’s therefore a *partial renunciation* that hits primarily the dimension of “mine” (*mama*) of one’s self-identification and its correlate idea of the world as a sort of privatised otherness. *Mokṣa* as reflexive contemplation implies fundamentally the renunciation to one’s notion of “I”, the presumptive autocratic agent, and, consequently, to any sort of

¹⁴ See, in this connection, the classical *advaita* work by Vidyāraṇya (14th century), *Jīvanmuktiviveka* (“The Path of Liberation in this Life”) (1916).

residual acquisitive expectation. It's, therefore, a *total renunciation* that hits irretrievably the acquirer or possessor of things, the dimension of “I” (*ahaṃkāra*) of one's self-identification and its correlate idea of the world as substantive otherness (*dvaita*).

In both cases, the paramount role of renunciation, as a part of a gradual process of elimination of errors regarding an ever-present Reality, leaves no room for doctrinal reifications or even representations of transcendent entities: the discourse on ritual deals primarily with a *method of action* (*yajña*) – the performance of the sacrifice -, conducive to the acquisition of an “not-yet-existing” entity (*apūrva*), the “paradise” (*svarga*), in a future life; whereas the discourse on knowledge deals primarily with a *method of thinking* (*jñāna*) that seeks the realization of Reality as a non-dual ontology (*advaita*), as an ultimate non-difference between Brahman, the Absolute, and *ātman*, the self. The absence of doctrinal reifications attests the non-dogmatic and transformational character of the two-layered complex of religious traditions in India, conducive to the definitive elimination of suffering through knowledge.

As it will become clear ahead, the renunciatory aspect of *dharma* constitutes, in the long term of a transmigratory process involving a plurality of births and rebirths, an indispensable stage towards the renunciatory aspect of *mokṣa*. In both the cases, renunciation opens the way for a gradual unveiling of the underlying non-dual (*advaita*) dimension of Reality – viz., Brahman – or, in other words, the ontological dependency (*paratantra*) of all things on Brahman. Therefore, in both the instances of *dharma* and *mokṣa*, renunciation (*tyāga*) and knowledge (*jñāna*) are co-related and intrinsic features of their respective operational procedures. If, then, one tends to classify the first, *dharma*, as primarily consisting of action (*karma* or *pravṛtti*), that's because it prompts only a partial renunciation and, as a consequence, a partial knowledge of Reality, leaving intact the agent as the epicenter of one's interested actions. On the other hand, if one tends to classify *mokṣa* as primarily consisting of knowledge (*jñāna* or *nivṛtti*), that's because it prompts a total renunciation and, as a consequence, a total knowledge of Reality,

that irradiates definitively the centrality and the autocraticity of the agent, leaving no room for further interested actions.

2 Vedic Ritual (*yajña*) and Renunciation (*tyāga*)

I now turn my specific attention to *dharma* as ritual action and the overall implications underlying the idea and nature of *partial renunciation*. The persistence of interested action in *dharma*, marked by subjective expectation of future results in the next live, tends to obscure the actual relevance and specific contents of the renunciation involved and their cognitive facets. In the final analysis, however, more than the paradise eventually acquired, it's the renunciatory sacrifice it involves that should be construed as the paramount feature of *dharma*, for its organic links with the awakening of the desire for *mokṣa* (*mumukṣā*). Let us see how.

I'll take initial help and inspiration from modern Indologist and Vedic ritual expert Fritz Staal's seminal article "The Meaninglessness of Ritual" (1979). Through controversial exegetical ways, Staal puts forward a magnificent insight into the major dimensions of what is at stake in traditional Vedic ritual procedures. In my understanding, Staal's characterization of ritual as "meaninglessness" involves two fundamental ideas: (i) ritual does not, ultimately, target any external goals – i.e., it exists intrinsically, for its own sake, rather than for something else – and (ii) it does so, because it prompts the ultimate renunciation of whatever external goals it may circumstantially entertain.¹⁵ In other words, Staal seems to suggest that renunciation is an essential and not an incidental dimension of ritual. This extraordinary insight risks, however, to be significantly misunderstood on account of an exegetical mistake which greatly affects the proper understanding of the nature and specific modality of the renunciation at stake. In my opinion, therefore, Staal did it right through the wrong way.

¹⁵ Staal (1979, p. 9) states: "To say that ritual is for its own sake is to say that it is meaningless, without function, aim or goal, or also that it constitutes its own aim or goal. It does not follow that it has no value: but whatever value it has is intrinsic value."

The exegetical passage at stake - decisive for Staal’s position - constitutes one of the most explicit declarations, in Vedic literature, of the renunciatory character of *dharmic* ritual. In the *Kātyāyana Śrauta-sūtra*, the author states that *yajña* (sacrifice) is made of three basic elements: (i) the offerings (*dravya*), i.e., the objects to be consecrated; (ii) the deities (*devatā*), i.e., the receptacles of those offerings; (iii) and renunciation (*tyāga*), i.e., the act of renouncing itself.¹⁶ Now, the controversy lies in the precise contents of the renunciation mentioned last.

What exactly is to be renounced? For Staal, the passage would stand for the renunciation “of the expected fruits of the ritual acts” (Staal 1979, p. 6) which, in accordance with the *dharmic* literature in general, stands for the acquisition of paradise (*svarga*) in next life (*paratra*), understood as the putative goal of all Vedic rituals and objectively emblematic of one’s search for happiness. This follows the well-known statement of both the Brāhmaṇas and the Śrauta-sūtras according to which “one who desires the paradise should perform the ritual” (*Āpastamba Śrauta-sūtra* III.xiv.8, cited in TABER, 1988, p. 161).¹⁷ In his *Mīmāṃsā-sūtras*, Jaimini’s (3rd century BCE) standard definition of ritual largely corroborates this point: “[*yajña*, the sacrifice] is a sequence of actions that originates from the injunctions (*vidhi/codanā*) enunciated in the Vedas”, whose “result is paradise, something coveted by all” (JAIMINI, 1923, [I.i.2; IV.iii.15]).¹⁸ Śabara (5th century), the author of the oldest commentary available on Jaimini’s *Mīmāṃsā-sūtras* – the *Śabara Bhāṣya* -, goes to the extent of considering such desire a criterion of eligibility for the performance of the ritual. He says: “The ritual imperative ‘perform the sacrifice’, prescribed by the Vedic texts, concerns those whose eligibility (for the exercise of the ritual) is founded in the desire for paradise. The criterion of such eligibility (i.e., the desire for paradise) is, therefore, clearly established” (ŚABARA, 1933, p. 1354 [VI.i.3]).¹⁹

¹⁶ “Sacrifice [is endowed with these three elements]: the offerings, the deities and renunciation”. (*dravyam devatā tyāgaḥ [yajñah]*). (*Kātyāyana Śrauta-sūtra*, I.2, cited in DHARMADHIKARI, 1999)

¹⁷ *svargakāmo yajeta* (*Āpastamba Śrauta-sūtra* III.xiv.8, cited in TABER, 1988, p. 161).

¹⁸ *codanālakṣano’rtho dharmah / (...) / sa svargaḥ syāt sarvān pratyaviśiṣṭatvāt* (JAIMINI, 1923, [I.i.2; IV.iii.15]).

¹⁹ *svargakāmam adhiḥṛtya yajeteti vacanam ityadhikāralakṣaṇam idam siddham bhavati*. (ŚABARA, 1933, p. 1354 [VI.i.3]).

Staal is not unaware of the unavoidable contradiction involved in the idea that the Vedic injunctive texts would, on the hand, exhort one into ritual action as a means to satisfy one's subjective desire for paradise and, on the other, posit the need for one to renounce to that same desire, while actually performing the ritual. (STAAL, 1979, p. 6) His contextual quotation (STAAL, 1979, p. 6) of the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s fundamental exhortation to one's "complete renunciation to the (expected) fruits of action" (Bhagavad-Gītā, 1982, p. 488 [XVIII.2])²⁰ - or, in other words, to one's adherence to *sannyāsa*, the ultimate dimension of renunciation (*tyāga*) -, further complicates the matter: in addition to an outright disqualification of one's subjective desire for the paradise, Staal blurs dangerously the difference between *dharma*, as partial renunciation, and *mokṣa*, as total and definitive renunciation. Still, he sticks to that dubious exegesis so as corroborate his fundamental insight on the "meaninglessness" of ritual, understood as an act that stands ultimately on its own, free from external, extrinsic or adventitious goals.

I've stated above that I'm wholeheartedly sympathetic with Staal's basic insight on the ultimate self-reliability of ritual and its primordial dimension – or shall I call it *intrinsic meaning* – as existential renunciation (*tyāga*). It provides outrightly a more accurate explanation as to why, different from *kāma* and *artha*, whose designation reflects the actual objects of desire, *dharma* and not the "paradise" stands listed as the human goal (*puruṣārtha*). In other words, much more than just a means to the acquisition of the paradise in next life, *dharma* stands, primordially, as a goal in itself, to be realized here and now, in this very life. However, different from Staal, I don't see the need to disqualify the subjective desire involved, in order to postulate existential renunciation as the ultimate intrinsic and self-reliable meaning of *dharma* as ritual performance. In fact, as will be seen below, the peculiar nature of the subjective desire involved – viz., the acquisition of a transcendent and "not-yet-existent" (*apūrva*) paradise, in next life, – stands in sharp contrast with the acquisition of mundane objects and fits well the inexorable graduality and multistageness that conforms the process of

²⁰ *sarvakarmaphalatyāga*. (Bhagavad-Gītā, 1982, p. 488 [XVIII.2]).

renunciation, so that it may actually and ultimately be conducive to the pursuance of *mokṣa*.

Going back to the Katyāyana’s definition of ritual and much to Staal’s disbelieve, the *tyāga* mentioned therein - as Bodewitz²¹ has convincingly shown with reference to the Brāhmaṇas and the Kalpa-sūtras - stands for the overall offerings required as counterparts for the future acquisition of paradise, viz., the material (*dravya*), mental (*upāsanā*) and attitudinal (*dikṣā*) sacrifices one has to go through. They represent the sacrificer’s renunciation to a fundamental dimension of his/her own self-identification, viz., the instrumental notion of “mine” (*mama*). In several Brāhmaṇas, these various dimensions of renunciation are explicitly said to constitute a self-(re-)presentation of the sacrificer (*yajamāna*). In other words, the “sacrificial victim”, the “object of renunciation”, the “offering” is, in the ultimate analysis, (a dimension of) the sacrificer himself/herself (HEESTERMAN, 1987).

Considering the manifest contrast with processes of acquisition of mundane objects, one could classify into two basic categories the various dimensions of *partial renunciation* constitutive of Vedic ritual:

(i) *the renunciation of objective dimensions of one’s mundanity – viz., the objects of artha and kāma*. This takes the form of offering acts that involve material, mental and behavioural renunciations pertaining to the “mine” (*mama*) component of one’s self-identity. Similar to mundane dealings, those acts represent the cost to be paid in one’s bargain for the acquisition of paradise in next life;

(ii) *the renunciation of immediate enjoyment of the expected fruit of ritual, the paradise of next life*.²² Quite differently from mundane objects (*artha* and *kāma*), the specific nature of the ritual goal at stake, the paradise (*svarga*), demands a time gap of one’s entire present existence for the results to mature in a future life. Here lies the uniqueness of *dharma* as a doorway for the resignification of one’s present mundane life and for the ultimate pursuance of *mokṣa*.

²¹ “I am afraid that Staal has completely misunderstood the meaning of *tyāga* in this context... The doctrine of the *Gītā*, however, is rather different from the Vedic ritualistic doctrine. The Petrograd Dictionary (“Hingabe eines Gutes”) and Ranade’s translation of KŚS [Kātyāyana Śrauta-sūtra] (“the act giving away [the oblation to the deity]”) correctly interpret this Vedic *tyāga*.” (BODEWITZ, 1990, p. 8).

²² This sounds close to Staal’s proposition and yet does not imply, as Staal suggested, the actual renunciation of the desire for paradise.

3 Vedic Ritual (*yajña*), Injunctive Words (*vidhi*) and the Paradise (*svarga*)

To address appropriately the above two categories of renunciation, we need first to expand our investigation into the general aspects of Vedic ritual injunctions that purportfully lead one to paradise. In fact, notwithstanding the plurality of designative goals, some of them even contemplating worldly matters, the uniqueness of Vedic ritual tradition lies in the fact that the putative goal of them all is the acquisition of paradise (*svarga*) in next life. Echoing the necessary implications of Jaimini's definition of ritual, Gachter states: "even if the result is not specifically mentioned in the context of a particular sacrificial act, the result will be *svarga* ('heaven'/'paradise') because [says Śābara] 'this result would heaven, as it is equally desirable for all. In fact, all men desire heaven'". (GACHTER, 1990, p. 134).

The central aspect of *dharma*, wherein the subjective desire for self-transformation and the imperative commands of the Vedas converge, is, therefore, to be found in the so-called *kāmya-karmas*, i.e., the sacrificial rituals of optional character that are the seeds of putative future results (*āgami-karma*) in the form of paradise. They constitute the core object of the description and prescription of the Brāhmaṇas and their *smṛti* follow-ups, the Śrauta-sūtras. Ancillary to them, are the so-called *nitya-karmas* - more often the object of the Dharma-sūtras and the Gṛhya-sūtras -, daily or seasonal rites that possess a sheer mandatory character, since they constitute the derivative results of past actions (*prārambha karma*). Though their observance is not productive of future results, their non-observance may be productive of negative results being, as a consequence, indirectly associated with the major interested actions related to the desire of paradise.

The concept of "paradise" (*svarga*) that prompts one to perform the Vedic ritual is far from the Christian idea of a preexisting and objective place. As a concept-limit, it constitutes the linguist point of convergence of all desires for a transformed condition of existence, in a future life, that may bring about incremental "happiness", i.e., a decrease in one's suffering (*duḥkha*) and a more

lasting objective enjoyment. While commenting on Jaimini’s relevant passage - viz., the “result [of sacrifice] is paradise, something coveted by all” (JAIMINI, 1923, [IV.iii.15])²³ - Śābara is unequivocal: “Paradise (*svarga*) is happiness (*prīti*), and all desire happiness... Paradise is the result of any (ritual) action, whose result is not explicitly mentioned” (ŚĀBARA, 1933, p. 1246 [IV.iii.15-6]).²⁴ In other words, “paradise” is a word whose denotation can’t be restricted to anything specific, since it refers to what, in general terms, could be designated as “sentiment of happiness”. In other words, the “paradise” of ritual literature is a linguistic concept/sign without a definite external referent, whose ultimate relevance lies in its efficacy of driving one towards action.

As the focal point that settle the bridge between text and performance, Vedic imperative injunctions (*vidhis*) earn precedence over *mantras* (“hymns”) and *arthavādas* (“exhortative words”). These latter’s mythical and panegyric stories of gods and goddesses (*devatā*) function primarily as exhortative words rather than actual revelations of metalinguistic entities. As such, instead of “mythological dramatizations” appealing to gods’ propitiatory actions, rituals subordinate those very gods to the requirements of renunciation, making them the nominal repositories of the sacrificer’s offerings. As Śābara puts it, Vedic gods exists as Vedic “words”. Following Jaimini’s statement declaring the subsidiary role of the deities²⁵, Śābara is emphatic in regard to the fundamental nominal character of the passages dealing with the deities:

Thus, though the deity is evoked as a participant of the sacrifice [i.e., the recipient of the offerings], what actually pertains to the makeup of the sacrifice is the word [i.e., the name of the deity]. Accordingly, the word *agni* [the fire-god] is not pronounced with the objective of delivering knowledge of the thing being nominated [fire]. What really happens is that it’s the word, in fact, [the name and not the thing] that is connected with the offerings, and through that connection with the word, the thing [fire] become recognized as a deity. ... [opponent’s question] In that case, it’s the word itself that which constitutes the deity? [Śābara’s reply]

²³ *sa svargaḥ syāt sarvān pratyaviśiṣṭatvāt.* (JAIMINI, 1923, [IV.iii.15]).

²⁴ *prītir hi svargaḥ sarvaśca pritim prārthayate / ... / bhavati cānādiṣṭaphale karmani svargaḥ phalam iti pratyayo loke* (ŚĀBARA, 1933, p. 1246 [IV.iii.15-6]).

²⁵ Jaimini says: “On the other hand, by reason of being based on the word, the sacrifice is principal and the mention of a deity is subordinate” (*yajñakarma pradhānam syād guṇatve devatāśrutih*). (JAIMINI, 1923, [IX.i.9]).

That's an interpretation that it's not up to us to refute. If stated, that interpretation does not contradict our position. (ŚABARA, 1933, p. 1928 [X.iv.23]).²⁶

The “truth” of ritual deities resides, basically, in its capacity to prompt one into action or, as Halbfass puts it, in the “motivating power of language”. (HALBFASS, 1992, p. 32) Śabara's refusal to speculate about the existence of gods beyond their nominality as Vedic words, makes one think that even non-existing entities could fulfil that role. Here lies the inherent power of paradigmatic words: the narratives suggest that the “divine condition” acquired by the gods is the result of their correct discharging of ritual sacrificial duties in remote times. In short, Vedic words denoting gods - *arthavādas* or *mantras* – should not be taken as representative descriptions of transcendent entities and cannot, as such, be the foundation for any substantive mythological or, even, theological discourse.²⁷ As a consequence, therefore, the expected results of the ritual performance, viz., the future acquisition of paradise, are not a matter of god's grace.

Where does, eventually, lies the actual source of efficacy of the sacrificial ritual? The answer is simple and yet requires an extremely complex explanatory framework. The efficacy of the ritual lies nowhere else but in the very performance of the ritual. In other words, the active deliberation of the sacrificer to act strictly in accordance with the Vedic injunctions by assembling, in the right time and space, all the necessary inputs, constitutes the major instrumental cause leading to the production of the coveted object of desire, viz., the paradise. At the same time, since its actual enjoyment – a postmortem and afterlife condition - does not follow

²⁶ *vedatāyāmapyupakāriṇyām coditāyām śabdasyaiva yajñe samavāyah / tasmānna śabda'rthapratyāyanārtham uccāritaḥ / sa cānyah punaḥ śabdām pratyāyayediti lakṣitalakṣaṇā hi tathā syāt / kim tarhi / śabda eva haviṣā sambadhyate / tatsambandhādartho'pi devata bhaviṣyati / ... / ucyate / nanvevam śabda eva devata p;rapnoti / atrocyate / naitadasmābhiḥ parihartavyam / na hidamucyamānamasmatpakṣam bādhatē.* (ŚABARA, 1933, p. 1928 [X.iv.23]).

²⁷ The development of theistic currents – the Tantras and the Purāṇas' *śaiva*, *vaiṣṇava* and *śakta* traditions – entrust the doublefold dimension of the Vedas with the character of a continuum of devotion (*bhakti*) and service (*sevā*) that conditions and gives substance to both action (*karma*) and knowledge (*jñāna*). Here, the plurality of [Vedic] deities are reinterpreted as diverse modes of appearance of an all-encompassing Supreme God, centered around the performance of codified *pūjās* by the devotees and the dispensation of grace by the former. The different layers of performative devotion tend to roughly reproduce the partial and total instances of the renunciatory process that conforms the Vedic path of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*, respectively. The differences are basically of doctrines and methods, rather than teleologies. Specifically, in the case of partial renunciatory processes, the shift in formal sources of efficacy - from the ritual itself to the Supreme God's grace - is but a necessary response to the shift in the conceptual nature of the deities involved: the gods of Vedas are exemplary individuals, whereas the *tantric* and *pauraṇic* deities are personifications of the non-dual Absolute, the *upaniṣadic* Brahman. Thus, one's acts of surrendering to the latter are not acts of submission to an arbitrary and substantive alterity, but acts of self-sacrifice of the ego as it realizes the Supreme God as one's innermost and ever-present essence.

chronologically the immediate ending of one’s performance, the Mīmāṃsā school postulates the intermediate production of a virtual or potential entity called *apūrva* or *adr̥ṣṭa* – lit. “something not yet existent” or “something not yet perceptible to the senses” – that adheres irrevocably to the sacrificer’s self. This virtual entity constitutes the seed of the future blossoming of the objects of transcendent enjoyment: it’s an irrevocable passport to paradise. It’s important to note that the mediating intervention of *apūrva* does not alter the basic fact that the primordial cause leading to the afterlife paradise is *yajña*, i.e., the actual performance of ritual.

The sacrificial ritual could, finally, be described as a factory of production of paradises, as a “would-be” or “not-yet-existent” reality. Accordingly, the injunctive words of the Vedas (*vidhi*) – and, more specifically, the Brāhmaṇas – assume the status of an instantiating “magic” power. According to Mīmāṃsā, the transformative power of Vedic ritual words is congruent with its fundamental attribute, *autpattika*. According to Jaimini, the attribute *autpattika* points to an innate and eternal relationship that subsists between word and meaning. He says: “The relation (*sambandha*) between word (*śabda*) and meaning (*artha*) is innate [/eternal] (*utpattika*)” (JAIMINI, 1999, [1.1.5])²⁸. The precise implications of this “innate” and “eternal” character demands further explanations. Instead of a relationship of representative type, connecting two pre-existing levels of reality – one linguistic and another metalinguistic –, the injunctive word of the Vedas/Brāhmaṇas implies a productive relationship between two terms, viz., the materiality of the word – the signifier – and the ritual action it leads to – the signified –, whereby the embryo (*apūrva*) of a future reality, the paradise, is generated. As such, the innate or eternal character (*autpattika*) of Vedic language – viz., the binding together of signifier and signified, words and ritual actions – has definitely nothing to do with any type of linguistic representation of actual realities, be it empirical or transcendent, be it mundane things, gods or paradises: it reflects,

²⁸ *Autpattikastu śabdasyarthena sambandhaḥ*. (JAIMINI, 1999, [1.1.5]). This innate or eternal character constitutes the appropriate background against which one should understand the meaning of another important attribute of the Vedic words, viz., *apauruṣeya* or “non-authorship”. According to Mohanty: “The authorlessness [*apauruṣeya*] of the *śruti* (the Vedic texts) means for me minimally the following: in the case of the texts such as the *śruti* the intention of the author is not relevant for understanding the texts. The text is primary and autonomous.” (MOHANTY, 2007, p. 65).

instead, a recurrent capacity to generate meta-meanings in form of new births and new existential conditions.²⁹

4 Renunciation (*tyāga*) and the “Paradise” on Earth

Considering the above, it’s fair to state that Vedic sacrificial ritual demands from the sacrificer, here and now, a systematic process of renunciation - the unavoidable “price” for acquiring the paradise as an improved rebirth in next life. That is bound to produce significant “collateral” effects in this very life, which will prove to be, in the long run of perhaps countless rebirths, the most important factor leading to the realization of one’s ultimate goal of *mokṣa*. In short, the idea of an intrinsic and immediate efficacy of *dharma* as the actual performance of ritual (*yajña*) and not the enjoyment of the paradise - which is to experienced only in next life - seems to give credence to Fritz Stall’s fundamental intuition about the “meaninglessness” of ritual, i.e., about its intrinsically self-justifiable character.

We are now in a better position to address and analyze, in greater depth, the two basic categories of renunciation, constitutive of *dharma* as ritual action (*yajña*). As mentioned above, they amount to a partial self-renunciation and realisation of Reality, on account of their limited concern of deconstructing the “mine” (*mama*) dimension of one’s self-identity, leaving intact the agent - i.e., the “I” (*ahaṃkāra*) dimension of one’s self-identity - as the epicentre of one’s interested actions. Let’s recollect those two basic categories:

- (i) the renunciation of objective dimensions of one’s mundanity – i.e., the objects of *artha* and *kāma*;
- (ii) the renunciation of immediate enjoyment of the expected fruit of ritual, the paradise of next life.

The first category of renunciation – viz., the renunciation of objective dimensions of one’s mundanity (*artha/kāma*) – can be further divided into two major subcategories. The first subcategory has a general character and stands as a

²⁹ It’s important to note that the attribute of *autpattika* is here restricted to the language of the Vedas, a fact that should refrain one from the temptation of postulating any sort of “theory of language”. Its specific Vedic implications point, necessarily, to the production of a “not-yet-existing” (*apūrva*) entity (*svarga*) and to its corresponding factors of production (*yajña*). Therefore, the innate and eternal character of Vedic words are, essentially, a matter of injunctive impregnation.

pre-requisital purification. It prompts subjective acceptance of the imperative commands of the Vedas being, therefore, at the core of the renunciatory foundations of ritual and a fundamental requisite for its efficacy. It includes two main disciplines consisting of reflection, argumentation and dialogue: (i) *svādhyāya*, the discipline of self-study; (ii) and *śraddhā*, the principle of faith or self-conviction. *Svādhyāya* points to the need of one’s undertaking an exegetical and hermeneutical study of the Brāhmaṇas, as a preliminary task to the actual performance of the ritual. Accordingly, the meaning of the ritual as a whole, the cosmological conditions under which the results are expected, and the logic behind each and every rite or task, are to be scrutinized beforehand with the help of a specialized teacher. Considering the extreme subtlety of the subject matter – dealing as it does with an “invisible” (*adṛṣṭa*) or “not-yet-existent” (*apūrva*) dimension of reality -, the *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* states through the words of master Prācīnayogya:

If, while accomplishing the act of offering in the *agnihotra* ritual³⁰, you are aware of the reasons [as to why the spoon should be stirred after the placement of the offering], then [it can be said that] you would have, really, made the offering; but if you do it unaware of that, you would have, in fact, made no offerings at all. (ŚATAPATHA-BRĀHMAṆA, 2018, [XI.v.3]).³¹

Śraddhā or the principle of self-conviction, on the other hand, points to the need for one to entertain an unwavering faith in the truth of the Vedas, the teachers, and the promised efficacy of ritual. It is both a precondition and, above all, a necessary consequence of *svādhyāya* and its consolidated positive arguments. Moreover, as stated in the *Āpastamba Śrauta-sūtra*, *śraddhā* is a fundamental ingredient to ensure, during the actual performance of the ritual, a solid concentration on the intended transcendent object, keeping the mind away from any surreptitious interference of worldly objects. (THITE, 1975, p. 320-1) As the *Kauṣītaki-Brāhmaṇa* emphatically states: “The ritual of he who performs it with

³⁰ An ancient Vedic ritual that is performed till date.

³¹ *yadi vā etadvidvānagnihotramahaṣīratha te hutam yadyu vā avidvānahunameva ta iti* (ŚATAPATHA-BRĀHMAṆA, 2018, [XI.v.3]).

conviction is not susceptible to perishing (i.e., it leads to the achievement of the desired goal)” (Kauṣītaki-Brāhmaṇa VII.4, cited in THITE, 1975, p. 321).³²

The second subcategory of renunciation to objective dimensions of one’s mundanity has a specific character and comprehends three major disciplines: (i) *dikṣā*, the consecration rites; (ii) *upāsanā*, the meditation exercises; (iii) and *dāna/dakṣinā/āhuti*, the various material offerings. *Dikṣā* and *upāsanā* could be classified as mental disciplines, consisting of a temporary renunciation to one’s ordinary self. *Dikṣā* or consecration consists of preparatory rites by means of which the sacrificer is said to assume symbolically an extraordinary, trans-human or divine status, as if prefiguring the desired condition afterlife. It includes the partial suspension of mundane activities such as sexual intercourse, daily sociability, regular conversation, and food regimes. This circumstantial condition of silence and solitude is usually associated with *tapas*, the discipline of self-inflicting penance. (KEITH, 1998, p. 300-5) *Upāsanā*, on the other hand, consists of specific exercises of meditation that resort to the instrumental usage of internalized forms of god worship, abstract concepts, or concrete objective formulas. Through various techniques, such as the recitation of *mantras*, it aims at generating mind concentration, diversion of one’s attention from mundane life and, consequently, an enhanced focus on the extra-ordinary level of ritual injunctions. Finally, *dāna/dakṣinā/āhuti* consists of the physical objects to be given as ritual offerings to the major actors involved: the gods (*āhuti*), the priests (*dakṣinā*), and the members of one’s community or village (*dāna*). The offering of *āhuti*s or oblations to the gods, through the mediation of the fire-god (*agni*), is emblematic of all those acts of relinquishment of one’s worthy assets. While placing them into the sacrificial fire, the sacrificer is supposed to utter the following words: “This oblation is for the fire-god. It’s for the fire-god. It’s not for me” (STAAL, 1983, p. 47).³³

³² *Śraddhaiva sakṛdīṣṭasyākṣitih as yaḥ śraddhahāno yajate tasyeṣṭam na kṣīyate.* (Kauṣītaki-Brāhmaṇa VII.4, cited in THITE, 1975, p. 321).

³³ *agnaye svāhā, agnaye idam na mama.* (STAAL, 1983, p. 47).

It's important to note that the existential imperative of ritual performance, as a unique platform for one to renounce mental and physical assets, takes precedence over what has actually to be done and which offerings are actually to be relinquished. In fact, Vedic tradition has developed within itself a plurality of exegetical and hermeneutical schools and currents (*śākhā/sampradāya*) that tend to adapt and adjust themselves to historical, regional, communal and individual diversities. Moreover, specific prescriptions enjoined therein are always open to alternative ways, in tune with the so-called “principle of substitution” (*pratinidhitva*). According to it, specific rites, instruments, offerings, places and dates, may be circumstantially replaced by substitutes, if genuine obstacles are acknowledged. Doing justice to the primacy of subjective determination, the real motto – i.e., the “spirit” rather than the “letter” - seems to be: “do perform the ritual [i.e., “do sacrifice/renounce”], not matter how [or what]!”. As Thite observes: “The apparently rigid ritual shows elasticity in the cases of difficulties and prescribes substitutes. The substitute is identical with the thing for which it stands and it helps to get the desired result. Thus, the provision of substitute shows how the ritualism gives importance to the ‘spirit’ and not to the ‘letter’ of the rules in the ritual”. (THITE, 1975, p. 314).

The second category of *dharmic* renunciation - viz., the renunciation of immediate enjoyment of the expected fruit of ritual, viz., the paradise of next life - constitutes the pinnacle of ritual action as sacrifice. Here lies the uniqueness of *dharma* as a doorway for the cognitive re-signification of one's mundanity and, still further, for the pursuance of *mokṣa* as the ultimate knowledge of Reality. Accordingly, as already noted above, the idea of an immediate efficacy of *dharma*, here and now, seems to ratify the fact that, like any other human goal (*puruṣārtha*), *dharma* stands for a goal of human existence, to be accomplished in this life, and not just a means to acquire something in a future life (the paradise).

But in which sense, after all, is *dharma* to be understood as an end in itself, an immediate source of existential efficacy? In other words, what is the actual cognitive content of one's re-signification of mundane life through ritual action?

The answer to those questions is key for one to understand the fundamental ethics that underscores Vedic ritual. Let's us recollect, for a moment, that different from mundane goals, the actual acquisition of the paradise points to an afterlife condition. In other words, the actual acquisition of paradise does not follow, be it in a short, middle or even long gap, the ritual performance that is considered to be its necessary and sufficient cause. In such a scenario, the sacrificer's condition is rather unique: on the one hand, he/she has renounced the actual ownership of physical and mental assets, generic or specific, represented by the first category of partial renunciation discussed above – the renunciation of the objective dimensions of one's mundanity, i.e., the objects of *artha* and *kāma* - and, on the other, he/she did so in exchange for the much desired paradise, whose fruition, however, will take place only in next life. In other words, his/her singular existential condition abounds in irony: *he/she is bound to live his/her entire life, until the very death, without the actual ownership of both the types of objects of desire – viz., the once private mundane objects (artha/kāma) and the “not-yet-existent” transcendent object (svarga)*. The first type of objects remains within the sphere of one's present interactive existence, but demands a complete change of outlook; while the second type of objects, being basically a matter of future interaction, remains, at present, a rather chimerical entity, a mere word.

It's precisely here, in this rare existential vacuum, that an opportunity emerges for self-transformation and reassessment of Reality. To explore all its potentialities, one needs to realise the ephemeral character of all transmigratory stages, including the objective experiences of paradise. Produced as a result of subjective desires and the consequent merits generated by ritual performances, paradises are bound to be extinct with the unavoidable exhaustion of those very merits: they are always contingent territories, leading one to recurrent rebirths in human condition. The systematic failure to overcome suffering through paradisiacal experiences finally leads one to the fundamental suspicion that Reality is not, after all, what it appears to be – viz., an incidental relationship between an autocratic self and ontologically distinct objects. That's the climax of Vedic ritual: the existential vacuum that emerges out of its twofold renunciatory aspects - viz.,

the “loss” of one’s ownership of mundane objects and the (temporary) “resignation” to the enjoyment of transcendent/future objects – brings about a fundamental cognitive transformation.

The sacrificer’s cognitive transformation is expressed by a significative change of outlook towards immediate Reality. The once unthinkable becomes fully experienceable: one may well live - and live well - with both the “loss” (of one’s ownership of mundane objects) and the “resignation” (to the immediate enjoyment of transcendent/future objects). In other words, the loss of one’s private appropriation of mundane objects of *kāma* and *artha* is realized as not necessarily amounting to a severance of interaction. On the contrary, one is thrown into an unsuspected and totally new pattern of relationship, co-existence and real proximity: the once *private otherness* is radically re-signified as *shared otherness*. Purged of the egoistic distortions of the first, shared otherness is finally experienced as a less painful, more pleasurable, and mutually benefiting relationship. In this way, the “loss” (of mundane objects) is converted into a gain and the “temporary resignation” (of paradise) into a “definitive resignation”.

The partial renunciation that makes up the innermost meaning of Vedic ritual is, therefore, tantamount to a “consecration” or “sacralisation” of mundane objects - the *dharmic* level of re-signification of *artha* and *kāma*. It reflects the sacrificer’s radical change of heart from an egocentric to a more sensible, compassionate and sharing attitude towards the world. Earlier described as fundamentally hitting the “mine” (*mama*) dimension of one’s self-identity, such deconstructive task constitutes the innermost and in depth consequence of the same magic that once seemed to be merely justified by the acquisition of paradise. It’s a rather unexpected and extraordinary magic, that eventually rescues a sense of positiveness to Stall’s (negative) “meaninglessness”: purportful and cognitive self-sacrifice is the immanent and immediate goal of Vedic ritual, notwithstanding all formal postulations of (future) transcendent goals. In the long term, it ensures a fundamental reversal of existential fortunes: it ensures lasting happiness through

the elimination of errors and the consequent dawn of a correct vision of things, much beyond the egoistic designs of a self-assumed autocratic self.

Conclusion

More than just a communicating channel between the sacred and the profane, through the mediation of the object of renunciation (HUBERT; MAUSS, 1968, p. 95-103), sacrificial ritual constitutes, in the very long term, the means to one's realisation of the "sacred" within the "mundane", the immanent "paradise". In other words, far from being limited to the idea of obtaining a paradise in next life, the profound and ultimate meaning of Vedic *yajña*, the substantive praxeology of *dharma*, is that of a "worldly" efficacy, here and now, as (partial) renunciation of one's self identity. Kātyāyana's inclusion of renunciation (*tyāga*) as a constitutive element of the ritual should, therefore, be understood as follows: the act of renunciation is an essential dimension of ritual. Rather than just an event where acts of renunciation take place, ritual *is renunciation*.

In sum, our analysis of Vedic ritual reveals that the doctrine of transmigration has, at its core, an ethical and epistemological pedagogy of the subject, through acts of partial self-renunciation. The profound meaning of those acts underscores the organic link between *dharma* and *mokṣa*. In fact, *dharma*'s deconstruction of the "mine" (*mama*) dimension of one's self-identity is the doorway for a more radical and definitive deconstruction and renunciation: the deconstruction of the "I" (*aham*) dimension of one's self-identity, the foremost task of *jñāna-khaṇḍa*, leading one to complete renunciation. In other words, the elimination of one's false ideas of the self as a possessor (*mama*) is the doorway for the elimination of one's false ideas of the self as an agent (*aham*) and the final realisation of its ontological inherence in the non-dual Reality of Brahman. In other words, again, *dharma*'s resignification of *kāma* and *artha* as a shift from private otherness to shared otherness, opens the way for *mokṣa*'s final resignification of the very same (viz., *kāma* and *artha*) as a shift from *shared otherness* to

constitutive otherness (of oneself) - the ultimate ontological non-difference between subject and object.

We enter here the final domain of human soteriological designs, the foremost goal of liberation (*mokṣa*), demanding distinct pedagogical structures, qualifications, and literary sources (the *Upaniṣads*), and whose scope lies beyond the limits of this article. The knowledge of the non-dual nature (*advaita*) of Reality – Brahman - and the consequent non-difference between the self (*ātman*) and Brahman eliminates, in a definite way, one’s existential need to satisfy one’s desires through objective acquisition: if *dharma*’s corollary prompts one to refrain from ritual egocentric acts on account of an unavoidable suffering they lead to, *mokṣa*’s corollary makes one realize that one’s ultimate nature has always been that of a complete realization of desires.³⁴ Śaṅkarācārya’s sums this up in the following words: “How can the notions of ‘agent’ and ‘enjoyer’ persist after the realization of ‘I am Brahman’?” (ŚAṅKARĀCĀRYA, 1989, p. 85 [II.i.19]).³⁵

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³⁴ Prominent *mīmāṃsāka* authors such as Kumārila (8th century) and Prabhākara (7th century), whose primary concern is with *dharma* and one’s search for paradise, have both intuited that the ultimate means to overcome suffering demands the renunciation to all objective enjoyments - in this or other paradisiacal lives – and the elimination of the “interested agent”. According to Kumārila and Prabhākara, the pursuance of *mokṣa* demands the relinquishment of all interested actions (*kāmya-karma*), i.e., the relinquishment of all ritual performances aiming at the acquisition of paradise. (KLOSTERMAIER, 1984, p. 54). In his *Mīmāṃsāsīloka-vārttika*, Kumārila states: “One who desires *mokṣa* should not perform *pratiśiddha* (prohibited)-*karma* and *kāmya-karma*. He should only perform *nitya-karma* and *naimittika-karma*, so as to avoid the negative consequence of their non-performance (*pratyavāya*)”. (*mokṣārthī na pravarteta tatra kāmyaniśiddhayoḥ nityanaimittike kuryāt pratyavāyajahāsayā*) (KUMĀRILA, 1898, p. 671 [V.xvi.110]).

³⁵ *na ced bhūyaḥ prasūyeta kartā bhokteti dhīḥ katham / sadasmīti ca vijñāne tasmad vidyāsahāyikā* (ŚAṅKARĀCĀRYA, 1989, p. 85 [II.i.19]).

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