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## The Obligation to Worship God and Theistic Vedānta Philosophy

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**Abstract:** Worship is one of the paths used to accomplish the highest levels of knowledge in Vedānta theism. These levels refer to knowledge of ultimate reality, where the worshipper realises oneness with God. In worship, we regard Him with admiration and as a maximally excellent being. However, in contemporary debate many philosophers examined the grounds for worshipping the God and argued that none of them are compelling enough to be accepted. This paper explores the philosophy of the Indian theist Rāmānuja with respect to the contemporary debate on what justifies the obligation to worship God. This paper contends that the arguments against worshipping God used by contemporary thinkers do not undermine Rāmānuja’s arguments for worshipping God.

**Keywords:** Rāmānuja, worship, obligation, God

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## 1. Introduction

Tim Bayne and Yujin Nagasawa initiated a debate on the grounds for worshipping God (BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006, 2007). They examined a number of accounts of theists, who believed there were grounds for worshipping God, and asserted that there is no theory successfully proving the obligation for such worship. It is my intention to explore the theory of obligation in order to clarify what grounds, if any, exist for worshipping God. The obligation to worship has already received significant attention, and I believe that a cross-cultural examination can contribute greatly to this debate. This article will discuss the arguments put forward in contemporary debate from the perspective of the Indian theist Rāmānuja. It is my hypothesis that these arguments do not challenge his position on worship.

Rāmānuja was a prominent figure of the 11th century and a key proponent of the Vaiṣṇava tradition. He produced many original works, including the *Vedārthasaṃgraha*; the *Śrībhāṣya*, a commentary on the Vedānta *Brahmasūtra*; and the *Gītābhāṣya*, a commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā* (RAM-PRASAD 2023: 238). Swāmī Ādidevānanda writes about his works: “While the Bhāṣya on the Sūtras, known as Śrī-Bhāṣya is highly technical and polemical, and therefore too difficult to enter into except by those who have mastered the Vedāntic way of exegesis, the Gītā-Bhāṣya is much simpler” (ĀDIDEVĀNANDA 2009: 9). Rāmānuja holds that the supreme reality (Brahman) is the personal God (Īśvara) Viṣṇu, who possesses all unsurpassably excellent qualities, and that the *jīvas* (individual selves or souls) and the *jagat* (the material world or matter) constitute God’s body. Though the *jīvas* and the *jagat* exist in an inseparable relationship with God – the all-encompassing unity and the source of everything – they remain distinct from Him. Rāmānuja was a Vedāntin, and his philosophy is known as qualified non-dualism (Viśiṣṭādvaita).

Before starting this discussion on the theory of obligation, let us first examine the terms frequently used by Rāmānuja. In his *Gītābhāṣya*, Rāmānuja characterises *bhakti* (devotion) as “single-minded and abiding, which is expressed by the terms knowledge (*vedana*), worship (*upāsana*), meditation (*dhyāna*), etc., which constitutes the means of realising the Supreme Person, who is the Supreme Brahman”<sup>1</sup> (RGBh 3, the chapter’s introduction).<sup>2</sup> Through such *bhakti*-oriented actions, an agent worships God. For Rāmānuja, *bhakti* contains a deep feeling of attachment to God (RŚBh 1.1.1). Rāmānuja argues that the steady remembrance of God is called devotion (*bhakti*) (RŚBh 1.1.1). The continuous remembrance of God, such as the ceaseless flow of oil, is meditation (RŚBh 1.1.1). In the

<sup>1</sup> *parabrahmapuruṣottamaprāptiyupāyabhūta vedanopāsana dhyānādisabdavācya tādāikāntikā tanyantika-*. The *Gītābhāṣya* is cited in Ādidevānanda’s translation.

<sup>2</sup> See LIPNER (1984: 112–115); AKEPIYAPORNCHAI (2022: 91).

*Vedārthasaṃgraha*, Rāmānuja says that he who meditates on Brahman attains the Supreme Being (AYYANGAR 1956: 145).<sup>3</sup> My main concern in this paper is to understand the notion of worship and the obligation to worship God from Rāmānuja’s point of view. The paper is an attempt to address the contemporary debate on what justifies the obligation to worship God, from the perspective of the Indian theist Rāmānuja.

## 2. The delineation of worship

The *Bhagavadgītā*, upon which Rāmānuja comments, runs as follows:

*śrībhagavān uvāca*  
*mayy āveśya mano ye mām nityayuktā upāsate |*  
*śraddhayā parayopetās te me yuktatamā matāḥ ||*

The Lord said:

Those who, ever integrated with Me and possessed of supreme faith, worship Me, focusing their minds on Me – these are considered by Me the highest among the Yogins

(RGBh 12:2)

Worship, or worshipful meditation (*upāsana*), is one of the paths used to accomplish the highest levels of knowledge in Rāmānuja’s philosophy. These levels refer to the knowledge of ultimate reality where a worshipper realises oneness with God. In worship, we regard Him with admiration and as a maximally excellent being. Nevertheless, the admiration of God is not the same as the admiration of another person. When we admire someone, it means we believe that someone is worthy of respect or praise. In the act of worship, different kinds of emotions come into play, which is natural for a worshipper. As Aaron Smuts writes, “the act of expressing this emotion is an act of worship” (SMUTS 2012: 222). However, he argues that there is a difference between an act of worship and feelings of worship because an act of worship is merely a set of rituals which cannot be termed as genuine without feelings of worship for the object also being present (SMUTS 2012: 222). Campbell Brown and Yujin Nagasawa argue that “one might pretend to worship God by following certain religious rituals, but that does not mean that one actually worships God” (BROWN and NAGASAWA 2005: 142). Many thinkers argue that worship involves gratitude, praise, reverence, or deep respect (CHOO 2022: 81). Such attitudes contribute to a meaningful relationship between the worshipper and God. A meaningful relationship involves sensing intimacy with God, where worshippers are able to express anything they wish before God. According to Rāmānuja, it is believed that this God-centered activity is a quest for ultimate good.

<sup>3</sup> The *Vedārthasaṃgraha* is cited in Ayyangar’s translation.

However, Bayne and Nagasawa state that “it seems to be extremely difficult to distinguish veneration from worship” (BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006: 302). They observe: “The younger sibling’s attitude towards his or her older sibling may have much in common with the devotee’s attitude to God [...]” (BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006: 302). Let us explore the attitude of the younger sibling in the above example. A younger sibling’s tendency to admire and seek to emulate is not the same as worship. From Rāmānuja’s perspective, worshippers always meditate on the attributes of God. They aspire to these attributes in the same way the younger brother wants to be like his older sibling. At this point, the younger sibling’s attitude and the worshipper’s attitude ostensibly appear the same, but in the former case it only signifies that the older sibling is being respected. A younger sibling should follow the path of the older in order to achieve or hold the same attributes. But a worshipper wishes to attain knowledge whereby he can realise the ultimate reality. The main goal of worship is to be as one with God. Rāmānuja argues that worship (*upāsana*) is the means for attaining God Viṣṇu (Nārāyaṇa). He also says: “The vision of the nature of the individual self of the aspirant constitutes an element of that worship” (RGBh 7, the chapter’s introduction).<sup>4</sup> But in the sibling analogy, the younger brother does not have this desire. Therefore, worshipping God is not the same as praising the older brother’s attributes. An explicit line can be drawn between veneration and worship. In the latter, we are trying to achieve the highest or ultimate knowledge of truth, while in the former, we admire a person for his achievements or his superiority.

Bayne and Nagasawa assert that theists primarily hold two views: firstly, “it is reasonable for us to worship God”, and secondly, “it is obligatory for us to worship God” (BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006: 303). The latter view is an appropriate way to see God within the Indian theist framework. Worshipfulness is the state of being worshipful, and being worshipful is to feel or express worship. In this paper, however, I am using the word “worshipfulness” as used by Bayne and Nagasawa in their paper, to describe the property that the obligation viewpoint ascribes to God (BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006: 303).

Bayne and Nagasawa argue that most theists accept the obligation thesis. They quote two theistic philosophers, Thomas V. Morris and Richard Swinburne, who assert that it is our duty to worship God and be thankful for his beneficial acts towards creation (BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006: 303). D. Benjamin Crowe raises an essential issue of the obligation thesis by stating that it depends on the individual’s various capacities (CROWE 2007: 467). Bayne and Nagasawa assert that “the ‘us’ in ‘necessarily, it is obligatory for us to worship God’ was meant to refer to those human beings who have the cognitive and emotional capacities to worship God” (BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2007: 477). This is significant because

<sup>4</sup> *tadaṅgabhūtam [...] prāptuḥ pratyagātmano yāthātmadarśanam uktam |*

a person who does not have a healthy mental state cannot talk about his religious duty or obligations.

Bayne and Nagasawa adduce correctly that it is important for theists to justify our obligations for worshipping God. I will examine three arguments, namely, the creation-based account, the account of maximal excellence, and the prudential-reasons account, according to Rāmānuja's philosophy of worship. My main contention is that the arguments against the obligation to worship God used by contemporary thinkers do not pose any challenge to Rāmānuja's arguments for worshipping God.

### 3. The creation-based account

The first account considered by Bayne and Nagasawa is a creation-based obligation theory. This argues that we are obliged to worship God because He created us and we should be grateful for this. However, Bayne and Nagasawa raise four main objections, arguing that this theory does not oblige us to worship God. To rebut this creation-based account, they discuss the possibility of beings who have not been created by God and who, thus, do not have an obligation to worship Him (BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006: 304). In order to respond to this objection raised by Bayne and Nagasawa, it is important to understand the creation theory from the point of view of Rāmānuja's system of philosophy. He makes it clear that God is the primary reason for the existence of this world. In the unmanifest state, God is one and undivided; but God is also manifold because He has countless attributes in the manifest state (SINHA 2015: 677).

God is manifold and creates innumerable objects and souls in this world. According to Rāmānuja, God created this world for His own entertainment (CHAKRAVARTI 1974: 189; SINHA 2015: 680). In his commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*, Rāmānuja maintains that the creation and reabsorption of this world are simply God's sport (RSBh 1.4.27). Now let us look at Bayne and Nagasawa's first argument against the creation-based account:

Even if the theist rules out the possibility of uncreated beings (capable of worshipping God), the objection from uncreated beings has some force as long as the theist allows that such entities are conceivable. The mere fact that we can conceive of beings uncreated by God allows us to ask whether such beings would have obligations to worship God. If the theist answers this question in the affirmative, then they cannot hold that worshipfulness has its *sole* ground in the obligations we owe our creator *qua* creator.

(BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006: 304)

They argue that beings not created by God have no obligation to worship God (BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006: 304). However, they mention that in cases where the theist denies this possibility, one has to conceive of uncreated beings. Rāmānuja’s argument for uncreated beings is similar to Bayne and Nagasawa’s: “The theist might suggest that God’s role as the ultimate cause of all should be understood not just in terms of everything that happens to exist, but in terms of everything that *could* exist. On this view of things, God is the ground of all *possible* being” (BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006: 304). Rāmānuja argues that only God is uncreated, and that everything else is created by God. However, the concept of “creation” in Rāmānuja is thoroughly different than the one Nagasawa refers to, since Nagasawa’s creation is a unique event, whereas Rāmānuja’s creation is repeated in a never-ending cycle. He adduces that whatsoever is seen or heard in this world, both inside and outside, God abides everywhere (RŚBh 1.1.12).

Bayne and Nagasawa further contend that in the creation-based account, we are grateful to God because he created us; but what if the act of creation does not benefit a person? They argue that “an act can benefit someone only if it leaves them better off than they were, or at least, better off than they would have been had one not acted. Since we would not have been had God not created us, our creation cannot benefit us” (BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006: 305). Here, they make a comparison between a world in which we exist and a world in which we were never created and argue that the act of creation cannot benefit us. Indian theists have a different way of comprehending this issue. In response to Bayne and Nagasawa’s argument, I can say with some certainty that Rāmānuja, and all Indian theists for that matter, do not talk about a world in which we have never been created. There is also a logical constraint here for Rāmānuja, because after accepting a world in which we do not exist, it will be challenging to argue coherently for the chain of birth and rebirth. For Rāmānuja, life is part of an endless cycle of birth and rebirth because of nescience. He then goes on to say that “the beings found in *saṃsāra* are in the same condition – for they are essentially devoid of purity since they reach their true nature only later on, when through Yoga knowledge has arisen in them” (RŚBh 1.1.1; THIBAUT 1904: 90).<sup>5</sup> Here, it is clear that in the world in which we have been created (*saṃsāra*), we are considered as impure. Now let us imagine a world where we exist in a pure state. The question arises that if we are impure, then how did we become so? A pure soul cannot be transformed in to an impure soul. Indian theists do not talk about a world in which we have never been created. They give importance to the present world, its problems and their solutions. For Rāmānuja, therefore, the question of benefiting from creation does not arise. Bayne and Nagasawa’s argument is based on procreation:

<sup>5</sup> Rāmānuja’s commentary on the *Brahmasūtra* is cited in Thibaut’s translation.

Suppose that someone really believed that bringing a person into existence is – or at least can be – of benefit to the person created. Such a person would have reason to attempt to bring into existence as many people as possible, either through their own procreative powers or by encouraging others to procreate. Most of us would regard such a strategy of procreative maximization as odd if not downright perverse

(BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006: 305)

Bayne and Nagasawa clearly consider this strategy to be anomalous; therefore, the creation-based theory does not validate worshipping God. This argument is based on the premise that we benefit from being created in the world. In Rāmānuja philosophy, since the question of benefiting from the act of creation does not arise, an argument based on the procreative theory does not reject the obligation to worship God.

Bayne and Nagasawa assert that not everyone benefits from being brought into existence. For instance, many people have cursed the day of their birth, coming into this world with much pain and anguish. Bayne and Nagasawa argue that as God is responsible for an individual being born into an utterly miserable life, that person has no obligation to worship God (BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006: 305). Indian theists debate the theory of action where they argue that individuals must face the consequences of their last actions. In a later section I will go into more detail on the theory of action. Here, it is significant to note that the inequality of creation<sup>6</sup> is based on the last actions of the individual. Those who have performed good deeds reap their just rewards or, put another way, will always remain in a position of benefit, while those who have performed bad deeds will not be reborn into auspicious circumstances. Therefore, an individual's present life is dependent on his last actions performed during his previous life. However, if we accept that an individual life is part of the cyclical chain of birth and rebirth, how can one account for the starting point of this chain, where good or bad actions cannot be held responsible for the creation of inequality. In response to this objection, Rāmānuja argues that there is no starting point in creation. In other words, the cycle of creation is beginningless.<sup>7</sup> Rāmānuja insists that it is necessary to accept that the creation of inequality is due to the actions performed by the being in a previous lifetime. It is significant to mention here that Rāmānuja argued that the soul has the independence and freedom to choose between good and evil actions. Otherwise, souls would be rewarded for what they have earned from their deeds rather than for what they have not earned (RŚBh 2.1.35). In this case, one can argue, as Bayne and Nagasawa do, that not

<sup>6</sup> This means that we are not created equally, or that we have not received the same life circumstances.

<sup>7</sup> Indian theists argue that “beginningless” means that there is no starting point to the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

everyone benefits from being brought into existence. In Rāmānuja’s elucidation on creation, all beings are held to be responsible for their existence, and this is why Bayne and Nagasawa’s argument presents no threat to Rāmānuja’s argument concerning the obligation to worship God.

Lastly, they maintain that the creation-based account runs the risk of domesticating worship: “If our dependence on God gives us an obligation to worship God, it ought to follow that our dependence on our parents, our friends, and family, and even our society will generate obligations to worship these individuals” (BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006: 306). According to Rāmānuja, our dependence on God is not the same as being dependent on our parents, friends, and family. Bayne and Nagasawa correctly observe that theists can emphasise “the uniqueness thesis”, which maintains that worship has “no real parallel in our relations with created things” (BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006: 306). In the same vein, Rāmānuja also asserts that God is the ultimate ground of our existence (RŚBh 1.1.1). Therefore, dependence on God is significantly different from dependence on other beings. Further, Bayne and Nagasawa declare that highlighting the distinction between different forms of dependence does not justify an obligation to worship God. They argue that in this case worship has been reduced to thankfulness or gratitude. Rāmānuja would have responded to this objection by saying that this sense of gratitude or thankfulness occurs when an individual has received support on a few occasions. But what if an individual is totally dependent on someone else, even for the duration of his lifetime?<sup>8</sup> As such, the creation-based theory provides strong grounds for worshipping God.

#### 4. The maximal-excellence account

The account of maximal excellence proposes that worship is the acknowledgment of the supreme degree of intrinsic excellence of God (ADAMS 1999: 14; BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006: 307). In their paper, Bayne and Nagasawa argue that properties, such as perfect goodness, knowledge, power, and presence, which constitute the maximal excellence of God, are not sufficient grounds to worship God (BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006: 307). If we do accept these properties are a sufficient basis for worship, then we should also worship a person who is more knowledgeable, more powerful, and more aware than us. “The idea that moral perfection obligates worship is less objectionable, but not unproblematic. Most of us recognise various other persons as our moral superiors, yet few of us suppose that we have *obligations* to worship such persons” (BAYNE and

<sup>8</sup> RŚBh 2.1.33: “The motive which prompts Brahman – all whose wishes are fulfilled and who is perfect in himself – to the creation of a world comprising all kinds of sentient and non-sentient beings dependent on his volition, is nothing else but sport, play” (THIBAUT 1904: 477). *avāptasamastakāmasya paripūrṇasya svasaṅkalpavikāryavividhavicitracidacinmiśraja gatsarge līlaiva kevalā prayojanam* | (Śrībhāṣya 1990: 100).

NAGASAWA 2006: 307). Responding to this objection, Jeremy Gwiazda argues in favour of the threshold obligation, which is “an obligation that arises only when a property is possessed beyond a certain degree” (GWIAZDA 2011: 522). But God is beyond the threshold obligation. Gwiazda does not reject Bayne and Nagasawa’s account, but instead discusses the existence of the threshold obligation where one is obliged to perform an action in one situation, but not in other contexts. For instance, take the example of a child who refuses to eat peas at lunchtime but later demands food. The parent is not obliged to feed the child until he has passed a certain degree of hunger. Here, Gwiazda argues that there is no obligation to feed someone if that person is not hungry (GWIAZDA 2011: 522). John Danaher, who opposes Gwiazda’s idea that there is a threshold obligation to worship God, suggests that parents are obliged to feed their child once he has passed the hunger threshold because they already have pre-existing general obligations to look after the child (DANAHER 2012: 474). Danaher argues that a general obligation can crystallise into a concrete obligation after one crosses a certain threshold (DANAHER 2012: 475). He uses the instance of assisting a wounded child in support of the idea of a general obligation. A person passing by who sees a child whose leg is bleeding profusely is obliged to help the child. The person has an obligation to assist the child because there is a standing general obligation to help others, which is morally praiseworthy and can be transformed into a perfect obligation within a particular context (DANAHER 2012: 474). In the case of the debate on worship, he argues that Gwiazda’s threshold obligation argument only works if there is a general or imperfect obligation<sup>9</sup> involved, since there is no pre-existing agreement in the case of worship. Therefore, Gwiazda’s argument fails to justify the account of maximal excellence.

Hugh Burling advances the respect theory that resolves Danaher’s objection to Gwiazda’s threshold argument. He argues that we have a general or imperfect obligation that is then transformed into a perfect obligation to worship God (BURLING 2019: 498). In the context of worship, an imperfect obligation does not mean that one needs to worship normal creatures rather than respect them. Therefore, a person possessing more knowledge and excellence than another should not be worshipped but, rather, respected. But when we encounter God, this imperfect obligation generates a perfect obligation to worship (BURLING 2019: 498).

The argument for respect as an imperfect obligation is plausible from Rāmānuja’s perspective. From his point of view, a general or imperfect obligation can

<sup>9</sup> Danaher argues that the distinction between imperfect and perfect obligation captures the idea that some obligations allow for latitude with respect to the actions that fulfil them whereas other do not. The former would be imperfect obligations and the latter would be perfect obligations (DANAHER 2012: 475).

be transformed into a perfect obligation. For instance, suppose there are two individuals, x and y, who are roommates in a university hostel. One night x is studying and y is sleeping. Unexpectedly, y starts crying and pleading for help in his sleep. He is dreaming about a person who is trying to kill him and repeatedly cries out for mercy. Since x is awake, he knows that y's pain is due to the fact that y does not have the capacity to understand his dream is not reality, due to an absence of knowledge. In this example, x has more knowledge and more awareness than y; therefore, there is an obligation for y to respect x because of this. Respecting others is called a general or imperfect obligation, as Burling has argued. But when we find someone more knowledgeable and more aware than us, we should show respect for the person. For Indian theists who believe, as I have discussed above, that our lives are full of pain that is not going to end during this lifetime, but will continue into the afterlife, the main cause of this pain is our ignorance. God is a perfect being and the source of all knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Rāmānuja argues that here knowledge refers to everything through which an individual can know, comprehend, or perceive the perfect, pure, highest reality God (RŚBh 1.1.1).

One might wonder why God is the only object of worship. Rāmānuja argues that all beings in the world are in the same condition: "They are all implicated in Nescience, and stand within the sphere of the *samsāra*; knowledge arises in them only later on, and they are thus of no use in meditation" (RŚBh 1.1.1; THIBAUT 1904: 90). Everything in the world is a part of God but this does not mean that any being is worthy of becoming an object of worship. God is the only one who can be worshipped. As Crowe argues, "a good person and God are both 'good', but God's goodness is incommensurably greater to such an extent that we are no longer talking about the same property" (CROWE 2007: 473). Gwiazda correctly asserts that this incommensurable superiority does not mean that God's properties differ from the properties of lesser beings; rather, it shows that God is beyond such things (GWIAZDA 2011: 523). As Thibaut explains

<sup>10</sup> Concerning God as an excellent being, Rāmānuja refers to the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*: "The whole creation of beings is taken out of a small part of his power. Assuming at will whatever form he desires, he bestows benefits on the whole world affected by him. Glory, strength, dominion, wisdom, energy, power, and other attributes are collected in him, Supreme of the supreme in whom no troubles abide, ruler over high and low, lord in collective and distributive form, non-manifest and manifest, universal Lord, all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful, highest Lord" (RŚBh 1.1.1; THIBAUT 1904: 86).

[...] *svaśaktileśād dhṛtabhūtasargah |*  
*icchāgrhītābhimatorudehaḥ samsādhitāśeṣajagaddhito 'sau || Viṣṇupurāṇa 6.5.84 ||*  
*tejobalaiśvaryamahāvobodhasuvīryaśaktyādiguṇaikarāśiḥ |*  
*paraḥ parāṇāṃ sakalā na yatra kleśādayaḥ santi parāvareṣe || Viṣṇupurāṇa 6.5.85 ||*  
*sa īśvaro vyaśtisamaṣṭirūpo 'vyaktasvarūpaḥ prakāṣasvarūpaḥ |*  
*sarveśvaraḥ sarvadṛk sarvavettā samastaśaktiḥ parameśvarākhyāḥ || Viṣṇupurāṇa 6.5.86 ||*  
 (Śrībhāṣya 1985: 139)

Rāmānuja's view, "in meditations on Brahman, His qualities are the chief matter of meditation, just as these qualities are the principal point in Brahman reached by the devotee" (THIBAUT 1904: 82; see RŚBh 1.1.1). Therefore, we worship God because he manifests intrinsic excellence to the supreme degree. As such, God is the only one who qualifies as the object of meditation because he is perfect and the source of all knowledge. The soul in all its states is imperfect and to comprehend ultimate reality, one has to free oneself from imperfections (VARADACHARI 1956: 65). This is not possible without worshipping a perfect being (RŚBh 3.2.38). Rāmānuja writes: "The objects of meditation in all the *vidyās* which refer to the highest Brahman, are Brahman viewed as having qualities, and the fruit of all those meditations" (RŚBh 1.1.1; THIBAUT 1904: 99).<sup>11</sup> Rāmānuja argues for the incommensurable superiority of God.

Bayne and Nagasawa next debate on the existence of multiple maximally excellent beings (BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006: 308). They contend that if worshipfulness changes one's possession of "M-properties", where M-properties are those that contribute to God's maximal excellence, then we would have an obligation to worship multiple beings. Again, suppose there were two perfect beings, namely God and God\*, then surely both would have obligations to worship each other (BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006: 308). Regarding this argument, Rāmānuja insists that achieving God's M-properties is possible. As I have discussed earlier, for Rāmānuja, all beings have the potential to achieve the God-like state, but the question that remains is what happens after acquiring M-properties. As far as Rāmānuja is concerned, after achieving them a person becomes the body of God. Rāmānuja argues that all souls and matter are the body of God, but due to false knowledge, we perceive the world differently (BHARADWAJ 1958: 109). After achieving the ultimate state of reality, we will be able to realise the true nature of everything and will become the body of God. Therefore, in Bayne and Nagasawa's example, God and God\* cannot be called two separate beings, but rather, there is only a single being called God. What Bayne and Nagasawa view as a problem does not pose any challenge to Rāmānuja's idea of worship.

## 5. The prudential-reasons account

A third approach to worshipfulness examines prudential reasons to justify our obligation to worship God. Bayne and Nagasawa point out that some theists uphold the view that not worshipping God is a sin and that sin is punishable by death. However, they also note that this has little philosophical appeal because it leaves unanswered the connection between worship and our wellbeing. They argue that this account does not justify God punishing us for failing to worship Him. To understand the problem from an Indian perspective, it is important

<sup>11</sup> *paravidyāsu sarvāsu saguṇam eva brahma upāśyam | phalaṃ ca ekarūpam eva | (Śrībhāṣya 1985: 161).*

to shed light on the theory of *karma*, or action, which argues that one has to face the consequences of one's last actions. These consequences will have to be faced both during present and future lifetimes (ADAMS 1999: 225). It is God who maintains the rules of *karma*, or action, awarding or punishing the sentient being based on his past actions. As God is necessarily antagonistic to all types of evil, one might well wonder how our world began to experience suffering during the first cycle of creation. However, as there is no starting point for the cycle of creation, one cannot debate such an issue (GUPTA 1967: 72). So, God created the world, as well as its progress, based on the merits and demerits of individual souls. If any individual wishes to remove himself from this endless cycle of birth and rebirth, then he is obliged to worship God. Refusing to worship God cannot be considered as a bad deed; therefore, not worshipping God is not a sin or punishable act. Indian theists argue that worshipping God is essential because He is the only maximally excellent being and source of true knowledge (KUMARAPPA 1934: 184).

For Rāmānuja, not worshipping God is not a punishable act but it may perpetuate the endless cycle of pain and pleasure. Rāmānuja holds that the cessation of the bondage “which consists in the experience of pleasure and pain caused by the connection of souls with bodies of various kind” “is to be obtained only through the grace of the highest Self pleased by the devout meditation of the worshipper” (*bhaktirūpāpannopāsanaprītaparamapurūṣaprasādalabhyā*) (RŚBh 1.1.1 in *Śrībhāṣya* 1985: 249; THIBAUT 1904: 145). However, the main cause of this pain and pleasure is our past actions and inclinations. We all desire happiness, but happiness is only possible if there is an absence of pain, and the state of happiness without pain is achievable only through worshipping God.

Our pain is caused by our past actions and cannot be considered as punishment for not worshipping God; worshipping God should not be driven by the fear of punishment or by the prospect of rewards. Let us take a look at Bayne and Nagasawa's analogy of Sarah in order to understand the prudential-reasons account. Suppose I have offended Sarah and I feel guilty about it. I know that I will feel better if I apologise to her. However, “my apology should be motivated by my desire to repair my relationship with Sarah, not by my desire to feel better about myself”. In a similar way, Bayne and Nagasawa suggest that worshipping God should not be driven by the prospect of prudential rewards (BAYNE and NAGASAWA 2006: 309).

Rāmānuja would have seen the example of Sarah in a different way. The relationship between God and self cannot be compared with the relationship between me and my friend Sarah. For Rāmānuja, humans are an accessory – or modes – of God. Souls and matter constitute the body of God (SINHA 2015: 664). Due to ignorance, we falsely identify the self with the body (SINHA 2015:

665). Similarly, if we apply the Sarah analogy to God and the worshipper, it will appear absurd from Rāmānuja's point of view since he argues that the worshipper is not different from God. It seems absurd that I can offend myself. This analogy appears in Rāmānuja's view of philosophy along the lines that even though I have offended myself, the cause of this feeling is my ignorance and it can be resolved only by banishing this ignorance. Therefore, the act of worship is not motivated by the fact that not worshipping God is a punishable act.

For Rāmānuja, an absence of worship is the same as living one's life in ignorance. The classic illustration is the snake and rope analogy. Here, I falsely identify a piece of rope as a snake in the darkness. I realise my foolishness when I bring more light and thus clearly see I have made a mistake. Bringing more light, more clarity, to illuminate reality can be seen as the process of worship, and identifying the rope as a rope removes all false information.

## 6. Conclusion

Rāmānuja argues that the essential nature of God is knowledge. The existence of an individual self is based on nescience, and when a person destroys ignorance, he ceases to see existence in terms of plurality. One might wonder how it is possible that we can know the nature of God. One cannot understand or know the nature of God through the perception *pramāṇa*. Since He is not an object of perception, but can only be known through scripture. Indian theists always argue that one should worship God's essential nature because this is the only way to achieve the final goal in life. Therefore, our obligation to worship God is not groundless, and based on such grounds, we are obliged to worship God. In this paper, I have argued that Bayne and Nagasawa's arguments against the obligation to worship God do not undermine Rāmānuja's ideas concerning our obligation to worship Him. This article adduces that there is nothing incoherent in arguing for the obligation to worship God from Rāmānuja's point of view.

## Abbreviations

RŚBh Rāmānuja's *Śrībhāṣya*, ed.: *Śrībhāṣya* (1985–1991); trans.: THIBAUT (1904).

RGBh Rāmānuja's *Gītābhāṣya*, ed. and trans.: ĀDIDEVĀNANDA (2009).

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