



Debating Freud on the Oceanic Feeling: Romain Rolland's Vedāntic Critique of Psychoanalysis and His Call for a “New Science of the Mind”

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The fascinating letters exchanged between Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the founder of psychoanalysis, and the celebrated French writer Romain Rolland (1866–1944) from 1923 to 1936 have been a fertile source of discussion and debate among scholars and psychoanalysts. In 1927, Freud sent Rolland a copy of his new book *Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (The Future of an Illusion), a polemical critique of religion from a psychoanalytic standpoint. In a momentous letter dated December 5, 1927, Rolland thanked Freud for sending his “lucid and spirited little book” and remarked:

Your analysis of religions is a just one. But I would have liked to see you doing an analysis of *spontaneous religious sentiment* [sentiment religieux *spontané*] or, more exactly, of religious *feeling* [sensation *religieuse*], which is wholly different from *religions* in the strict sense of the word, and much more durable.

What I mean is: totally independent of all dogma, all credo, all Church organization, all Sacred Books, all hope in a personal survival, etc., the simple and direct fact of *the feeling of the “eternal”* (which can very well not be eternal, but simply without perceptible limits, and like oceanic, as it were) [*le fait simple et direct de la sensation de l' « éternel » (qui peut très bien n'être pas éternel, mais simplement sans bornes perceptibles, et comme océanique)*]. (Parsons 1999: 173; Vermorel and Vermorel 1993: 304)¹

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In the same letter, Rolland went on to claim that the “true subterranean source of religious energy” is none other than this “oceanic’ sentiment” (*sentiment océanique*) (Parsons 1999: 173; Vermorel and Vermorel 1993: 304). According to Rolland, while this oceanic feeling is “of a subjective character,” it is nonetheless “common to thousands (millions) of men actually existing” (Parsons 1999: 173; Vermorel and Vermorel 1993: 304). He confessed that he himself enjoyed this oceanic feeling as a “constant state” and had “always found in it a source of vital renewal” (Parsons 1999: 173; Vermorel and Vermorel 1993: 304).

Rolland added, moreover, that the “rich and beneficent power” of the oceanic feeling is found both in the “religious souls of the West”² and in the “great minds of Asia.” Significantly, he singled out “two personalities”—the nineteenth-century Bengali saint Sri Ramakrishna (1836–86),³ and his chief disciple, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902)—who not only experienced this oceanic feeling but also “revealed an aptitude for thought and action which proved strongly regenerating for their country and for the world” (Parsons 1999: 173; Vermorel and Vermorel 1993: 304). Indeed, Rolland was so fascinated by these two Indian spiritual personalities that he went on to write a three-volume work on them—*Vie de Ramakrishna* (1929), *Vie de Vivekananda* (1930), and *L'Évangile universel* (1930)—which he sent to Freud in 1930.

Freud, in turn, read Rolland’s biographies of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda and commented on them in a letter to Rolland dated January 19, 1930. Freud also sent Rolland a copy of his book *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1930; Civilization and Its Discontents), the opening section of which investigates Rolland’s notion of oceanic feeling from a psychoanalytic standpoint. In this book, Freud interprets the oceanic feeling as a regression to a pre-Oedipal feeling of unity with the external world, and he argues—against Rolland—that the true source of religion is not this oceanic feeling but an infantile feeling of helplessness, which can be traced to the child’s need for the father’s protection (Freud 1930, [1930] 1961).

While Jeffrey Masson (1980: 1–50) and David Fisher (1982) have defended Freud’s psychoanalytic interpretation of the oceanic feeling as a regression to an infantile state, numerous scholars—including Janette Simmonds (2006), William Meissner (2005), David Werman (1986), and William Parsons (1999, 2003)—have argued that Freud’s psychoanalytic understanding of mystical experience is reductive and inaccurate.⁴

Werman (1986), Parsons (1999), and Jussi Saarinen (2012) have also fruitfully explored the unique phenomenology of Rolland’s oceanic feeling.

However, comparatively few scholars have investigated Rolland’s *underlying motivations* for asking Freud to analyze the oceanic feeling in his fateful 1927 letter. Fisher and Parsons, who are among the few to have addressed this issue, simply assume that Rolland was expecting from Freud a non-reductive psychoanalytic examination of mysticism.⁵ I will argue, however, that Rolland’s intentions in introducing the oceanic feeling to Freud were much more complex, multifaceted, and critical than scholars have generally assumed.

In Section 7.1, I will examine Rolland’s biographies of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, which provide essential clues to understanding the complex intentions behind his appeal to the oceanic feeling in his letter to Freud. In these biographies, Rolland not only polemicizes against psychoanalytic approaches to mystical experience

but also encourages psychoanalysts to correct and deepen their superficial conception of the mind by taking seriously the mystical experiences of both Eastern and Western saints. I will argue that Freud's attempts to rebut some of Rolland's criticisms of psychoanalysis are largely unconvincing. In *Vie de Vivekananda*, Rolland calls for a "new science of the mind" rooted in the ancient Indian spiritual systems of *rājayoga* and *jñānayoga*. According to Rolland, this new science of the mind would incorporate some of the most valuable insights of psychoanalysis without succumbing to the reductionism prevalent in psychoanalytic approaches to mystical experience.

With this background in place, I will contend in Section 7.2 that Rolland's primary intentions in appealing to the oceanic feeling in his 1927 letter to Freud—intentions less evident in his letters to Freud than in his biographies of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda—were twofold: first, to challenge the fundamental assumptions of psychoanalysis from a Vedāntic perspective, and second, to confront Freud with a yogic "science of the mind" that he felt was superior to Freud's psychoanalytic science.

In Section 7.3, I will consider Parsons's influential thesis that Rolland's critical engagement with Freud anticipated what Parsons calls the "adaptive" and "transformative" psychoanalytic approaches to mysticism that emerged after Freud's time. Drawing on the arguments of Sections 7.1 and 7.2, I will argue that Parsons's genealogy of Rolland's legacy is incomplete and somewhat misleading, since it downplays Rolland's radical critique of psychoanalysis. Against Parsons, I will argue that Rolland's pioneering criticisms of psychoanalysis from a Vedāntic perspective anticipated certain aspects of the critiques of psychoanalysis developed by twentieth-century spiritual thinkers as diverse as Sri Aurobindo, Swami Akhilananda, and Ken Wilber.

7.1 Rolland's Views on Psychoanalysis and Mysticism in his Biographies of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda

Rolland's biographies of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda provide helpful insight into his complex views on both psychoanalysis and mysticism.⁶ Throughout *Vie de Ramakrishna*, Rolland conspicuously refrains from indulging in psychoanalytic interpretations of the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna.⁷ To mention just a few examples, Rolland approvingly refers to Sri Ramakrishna's teaching that "[a]bsolute continence must be practiced if God is to be realized" (LR 153). While psychoanalytically oriented scholars such as Jeffrey Masson, Narasingha Sil, and Jeffrey Kripal have claimed that sexual repression plays a crucial explanatory role in Sri Ramakrishna's behavior and spiritual experiences, Rolland explicitly rejects the psychoanalytic theory of repression in the case of mystics.⁸ According to Rolland, both Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda successfully observed absolute "sexual continence" in thought, word, and deed (LR 153). Indeed, Rolland claims that mystics, by means of the practice of perfect continence, are able to *sublimate*—rather than repress—their sexual energies and rechannel them toward spiritual ends.⁹ As Rolland puts it, "All great mystics and the majority of great idealists, the giants among the creators of the spirit, have clearly and instinctively realized what formidable power of concentrated

soul, of accumulated creative energy, is generated by a renunciation of the organic and psychic expenditure of sexuality” (LR 152).¹⁰

Psychoanalytic scholars have had a field day with Sri Ramakrishna’s femininity and cross-dressing, some going so far as to claim that he was a closet homosexual.¹¹ Rolland, by contrast, refers several times to Sri Ramakrishna’s “femininity” (LR 9) and “feminine grace” (LR 6), but he views Sri Ramakrishna’s femininity not as psychoanalytic fodder but as a distinctive and charming personality trait. The psychoanalyst Masson (1980: 46 note 9) is clearly disappointed—even piqued—that Rolland did not consider Sri Ramakrishna to be a repressed homosexual: “It is astonishing that Romain Rolland could so overlook the blatant homosexual concerns of Ramakrishna. On the contrary, he [Rolland] seemed to perceive these elements as a sign of deep psychological penetration.” Rolland’s reverential account of Sri Ramakrishna’s pure and utterly unworldly marriage to the young Sārādā Devī is equally devoid of any psychoanalytic agenda: “It was a union of souls and remained unconsummated . . . and later it became a beautiful thing. A tree must be judged by its fruits, and in this case the fruits were of God, pure and not carnal love” (LR 21). Moreover, in his discussion of Sri Ramakrishna’s first mystical vision of Kālī, Rolland quotes Sri Ramakrishna’s own vivid description of his vision, in which he reports that he “saw an ocean of the Spirit, boundless, dazzling” and that he “was conscious of the presence of the Divine Mother” (LR 15). Rolland notably refrains from psychoanalyzing Sri Ramakrishna’s oceanic experience, in spite of Sri Ramakrishna’s references to oceanic imagery and the “Mother,” which might seem to invite a psychoanalytic interpretation (as Rolland himself was well aware).¹²

Evidently, throughout his biographies, Rolland consciously refrains from invoking psychoanalytic theories and categories—such as sexual repression, the Oedipus complex, and latent homosexuality—to explain the behavior of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda.¹³ Moreover, in the second appendix to his biography of Vivekananda, entitled “On Mystic Introversion and Its Scientific Value for Knowledge of the Real,” Rolland attacks psychoanalytic approaches to mystical experience and argues that “mystic introversion” is a valid scientific “method of experiment” (LV 284).¹⁴ The appendix focuses on Ferdinand Morel’s *Essai sur l’Introversion mystique* (1918), a psychoanalytic investigation of the mystical experiences of Pseudo-Dionysius and other mystics. Rolland not only points out the “weak points” in Morel’s arguments but also makes more sweeping criticisms of psychoanalytic approaches to mysticism in general, three of which are especially significant (LV 278).¹⁵

First, Rolland claims that psychoanalysts tend to lack the spiritual sensibility, sympathy, and open-mindedness needed for an adequate understanding of religious experience:

The intuitive workings of the “religious” spirit . . . have been insufficiently studied by modern psychological science in the West and then too often by observers who are themselves lacking in every kind of “religious” inclination, and so are ill equipped for the study, and involuntarily prone to depreciate an inner sense they do not themselves possess. (LV 277)

According to Rolland, psychoanalysts have tended to “depreciate” the mystical experiences of saints because they lack the “inner sense” necessary to have mystical

experiences in the first place.¹⁶ Interestingly, in a letter to Rolland dated July 20, 1929, Freud admits, “To me mysticism is just as closed a book as music” (Parsons 1999: 175).¹⁷ Four days later, Rolland responds to Freud: “I can hardly believe that mysticism and music are unknown to you. Because ‘nothing human is unknown to you.’ Rather, I think that you distrust them, because you uphold the integrity of critical reason, with which you control the instrument” (Parsons 1999: 176; Vermorel and Vermorel 1993: 312). This epistolary exchange helps clarify Rolland’s understanding of Freud’s stance toward mysticism: in Rolland’s view, while Freud does possess a capacity for mystical intuition, Freud’s “critical reason” makes him suspicious of this mystical “inner sense” both in himself and in others. In any case, Rolland’s main point is that if a psychoanalyst—for whatever reason—has a dogmatic prejudice against the validity of mystical knowledge, then the psychoanalyst’s analysis of mystical experience is doomed to be biased and unreliable.

At various points in the appendix, Rolland makes the provocative suggestion that the psychoanalytic denigration of mystical experience stems from an abnormally extroverted tendency among psychoanalysts themselves. Morel, as Rolland notes, borrows the term “introversion” from Carl Gustav Jung but expands its meaning to encompass what he calls “mystic introversion” (LV 277 note 2). Rolland, in turn, departs from both Jung and Morel in accusing many psychoanalysts—including Freud, Morel, Pierre Janet, and Théodule Ribot—of “extroversion” in the normative sense of having a pathological aversion to, or incapacity for, introversion. According to Rolland, psychoanalytic extroverts dogmatically ascribe “the highest rank to ‘interested’ action and the lower rank to concentration of thought” (LV 279). Indeed, Rolland turns the tables on psychoanalysts by pathologizing their own tendency toward extroversion: “And this depreciation of the most indispensable operation of the active mind—the withdrawal into oneself, to dream, to imagine, to reason—is in danger of becoming a pathological aberration. The irreverent observer is tempted to say, ‘Physician, heal thyself!’” (LV 279). If psychoanalysts have tended to dismiss putative mystical experiences as pathological aberrations, Rolland suggests that the deep-seated aversion to introversion among many psychoanalysts is itself a “pathological aberration.”

To illustrate this point, Rolland refers specifically to Janet’s privileging of the “function of the real,” the “awareness of the present, of present action, the enjoyment of the present” (LV 279). According to Rolland, Janet places the “whole world of imagination and fancy” at “the bottom of the scale” (LV 279). Rolland goes on to detect a similar denigration of introversion in the work of Freud and Eugen Bleuler and adds a revealing footnote in which he invokes Plotinus: “With quite unconscious irony a great ‘introvert’ like Plotinus sincerely pities the ‘extroverts,’ the ‘wanderers outside themselves’ (*Ennéades* IV, III [17]), for they seem to him to have lost the ‘function of the real’” (LV 279). Plotinus, in this passage from the *Enneads*, refers to people who are so obsessed with their physical body that they have forgotten their divine soul within (1984: 87–91). Rolland cleverly appropriates this passage from Plotinus in the service of a spiritual metacritique of psychoanalysis. Inhabiting Plotinus’s mystical standpoint, Rolland argues that psychoanalysts have a severely impoverished understanding of what counts as “real,” since they tend to dismiss transcendental entities such as the soul or God—which mystics such as Plotinus take to be the ultimate reality—as merely



subjective imaginings.¹⁸ According to Rolland, the tendency among psychoanalysts to denigrate mystical experience stems from their pitiable—indeed, pathological—extroversion, which leads them to favor action in, and adaptation to, the external world over concentration, thought, and spiritual contemplation.

Later in the appendix, Rolland suggests that another reason for the psychoanalytic denigration of introversion is the assumption of a false dichotomy between introversion and extroversion: many psychoanalysts wrongly assume that the mystic's preoccupation with inward states comes at the expense of his or her adaptation to external reality. Rolland states:

If a scientist maintains that such a knowledge [i.e., the mystic's knowledge] of psychic profundities teaches us nothing about exterior realities, he is really, though perhaps unwittingly, obeying a prejudice of proud incomprehension as one-eyed as that of religious spiritualists who set up an insurmountable barrier between spirit and matter. (LV 283)

Once again, Rolland turns the psychoanalytic hermeneutics of suspicion against psychoanalysts themselves by diagnosing them with an unconscious “prejudice” that prevents them from recognizing the compatibility of mystic introversion with an ability to flourish in the external world. Rolland singles out Vivekananda as a perfect example of a great mystic who was fully capable of dynamic action in the world:

A great “Introvert” will know at the same time how to be a great “Extrovert.” Here the example of Vivekananda seems to me to be conclusive. Interiorization has never led in principle to diminution of action. (LV 287)

Rolland argues that the compatibility of introversion and extroversion finds its ultimate philosophical justification in the Vedāntic view—to which he clearly subscribes—that the Reality known through mystic introspection is identical with the Reality underlying the external world. As Rolland puts it, “The laws of the inner psychic substance are of necessity themselves those of outside reality” (LV 284). Hence, from Rolland's Vedāntic perspective, the psychoanalytic denigration of mysticism is rooted in the erroneous metaphysical assumption of a dichotomy between inner and outer, which can itself be traced to a pathological aversion to introversion.

After Freud read Rolland's biographies of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, Freud wrote a letter to Rolland dated January 19, 1930, in which he objects to Rolland's use of the terms “introvert” and “extrovert”: “the distinction between *extrovert* and *introvert* derives from C.G. Jung, who is a bit of a mystic himself and hasn't belonged to us for years. We don't attach any great importance to the distinction and are well aware that people can be both at the same time, and usually are” (Parsons 1999: 176). Freud attempts to dodge Rolland's criticisms of psychoanalysis by claiming that Jung, and not Freud himself, uses the terms “extroversion” and “introversion” and assumes a sharp dichotomy between them. Freud's response to Rolland, however, is clearly beside the point, since Rolland quite deliberately expands the meaning of the terms “introversion” and “extroversion” well beyond Jung's understanding of the terms. The metacritical





thrust of Rolland's appropriation of the originally Jungian terms is entirely lost on Freud. For Rolland, psychoanalysts as diverse as Freud, Janet, Morel, and Bleuler are "extroverts" in Rolland's broader sense of the term, since they all tend to denigrate the epistemic and existential value of mystical experience.

Rolland's second criticism of psychoanalysis in the appendix, which is intimately related to the first criticism, is that psychoanalysts tend to adopt reductive views on mystical experience as a result of their preconceived ideas. Rolland declares:

You, doctors of the Unconscious, instead of making yourselves citizens of this boundless empire and possessing yourselves of it, do you ever enter it except as foreigners, imbued with the preconceived idea of the superiority of your own country and incapable of ridding yourselves of the need, which itself deforms your vision, of reducing whatever you catch a glimpse of in this unknown world to the measure of the one already familiar to you? (LV 283)

According to Rolland, psychoanalysts enter the "boundless empire" of mystical experience as "foreigners," because they are unable, or unwilling, to understand mystical experience on its own terms and instead analyze mystical experience in terms of their own stock psychoanalytic ideas and assumptions. From Rolland's perspective, perhaps the most fundamental preconception among psychoanalysts is their borderline-pathological prejudice against introversion—targeted by Rolland's first criticism—which leads them to dismiss or downplay the metaphysical and salvific claims of mystics.

Another preconceived idea discussed at length by Rolland in the appendix is the idea of regression:

Almost all psychologists are possessed by the theory of Regression, which appears to have been started by Th. Ribot. It is undoubtedly a true one within the limited bounds of his psychopathological studies on functional disorganization, but it has been erroneously extended to the whole realm of the mind, whether abnormal or normal. (LV 278)

According to Rolland, the tendency among psychoanalysts to interpret mystical experience as a regression to an infantile state is highly questionable. While Rolland concedes that the theory of regression *is* often applicable to cases of psychological abnormality or pathology, he claims that psychoanalysts are not justified in applying the theory of regression to mystics, who do not generally exhibit pathological behavior.¹⁹ From Rolland's perspective, psychoanalysts favor such a regressive explanation of mystical experience in part because of their own preconceived preference for the theory of regression.

Interestingly, however, Rolland does admit that certain features of mysticism might appear to "add weight" to the psychoanalyst's assumption that mystic introversion is "a return to a primary stage, to an intrauterine state" (LV 281). First, many of the "symbolic words" used by mystics such as Eckhart and Tauler to describe their spiritual experiences—such as "*Grund*," "*Urgrund*," and "*Wurzel*"—suggest, at least superficially,



a return to a primordial condition. Second, the psychoanalytic explanation of mystical experience in terms of regression might help explain the “curious instinct which has given birth in Ramakrishna’s India to the passionate worship of the *Mother*, and in Christianity to that of the *Virgin Mother*” (LV 281). Rolland makes the subtle point, however, that while mystical experiences do undoubtedly bear a superficial resemblance to infantile states, there is, in reality, a world of difference between them phenomenologically. Accordingly, Rolland invokes the distinction first drawn by Henri Bergson’s disciple, Édouard Le Roy, between the *pre*-discursive intuition of the infant and the *post*-discursive intuition of the mystic. Le Roy contrasts the “simplicity anterior to the discursive intricacy, belonging solely to the confused pre-intuition of a child” with the mystic’s “rich and luminous simplicity, which achieves the dispersion of analysis by surpassing and overcoming it” (LV 282 note 10). Misled by the superficial similarity of these two entirely different states, psychoanalysts have tended mistakenly to reduce the post-discursive “simplicity” of mystical experience to the pre-discursive “simplicity” of infantile experience.

In his letter to Rolland, Freud protests: “our terms such as *regression*, *narcissism*, *pleasure principle* are of a purely descriptive nature and don’t carry within themselves any valuation” (Parsons 1999: 176). Once again, however, Freud’s attempt to sidestep Rolland’s criticisms proves to be unconvincing. First of all, at certain places in his work, Freud’s use of the concept of regression does have a strongly normative thrust. For instance, in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, Freud’s brusque dismissal of religion as a regression to an infantile state is flagrantly normative: “The whole thing is so patently infantile, so foreign to reality [*so offenkundig infantil, so wirklichkeitsfremd*], that to anyone with a friendly attitude to humanity it is painful to think that the majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life” (Freud 1930: 20, [1930] 1961: 74). No wonder Rolland is so scathing in his attack on the scientific pseudo-objectivity of psychoanalysis: while psychoanalysts pretend to be objective and nonnormative in their diagnoses and explanations, their supposedly objective judgments often stem from profoundly subjective prejudices. Second, even if Freud’s concept of regression is nonnormative, it remains vulnerable to Rolland’s two basic criticisms: first, that the concept is extended illegitimately from abnormal cases to the cases of psychologically normal mystics; second, that infantile states and mystical experiences, in spite of certain superficial resemblances, are radically different states. Hence, it must be said that Freud’s response to Rolland’s criticisms of psychoanalysis is superficial and inadequate.

In earlier letters written to the Swiss psychoanalyst Charles Baudouin (1893–1963) in 1922, Rolland repeatedly singled out for attack the psychoanalytic theory of infantile sexuality. In one letter, Rolland writes, “I’m speaking to you, my friend, in all affectionate candor: nothing seems more false and revolting to me than this obsession—not in the child but imputed to him—with sexual things” (Werman 1977: 230). In another letter, Rolland scathingly remarks, “Whatever he [the child] says, writes or draws, you are ready to reduce it to three or four motifs: Oedipus or Electra complex, sexual themes, etc But it is you, the psychoanalysts, who are obsessed with all this” (Werman 1977: 230). Although Rolland does not explicitly target the psychoanalytic theory of infantile sexuality in his second appendix on Morel, it is clear from his

earlier letters that one of the “preconceived” ideas held by psychoanalysts that Rolland rejected is the theory of infantile sexuality, particularly the Oedipus complex.

Rolland’s third fundamental criticism of psychoanalysis in the second appendix stems from his previous two criticisms. As a result of their bias against mystical experience, psychoanalysts have, at best, an incomplete knowledge of the workings of the mind. Rolland quotes a passage from Morel’s book that discusses Pseudo-Dionysius’s mystical experience of Unity: “Consciousness seems to gather itself together to confine itself within some unknown psychic pineal gland and to withdraw into a kind of center wherein all organic functions and all psychic forces meet, and there it enjoys Unity... nothing else” (LV 282). From Morel’s psychoanalytic perspective, Pseudo-Dionysius’s experience is purely subjective and hence has no metaphysical import: the “Unity” the mystic enjoys, according to Morel, is not a unity with God or the cosmos so much as a regression to a feeling of infantile unity with the external world. Accordingly, Rolland faults Morel for failing to take seriously the metaphysical dimension of Pseudo-Dionysius’s mystical experience:

“Nothing else?”—What more do you want? There, according to your own admission, you have an instrument for penetrating to the depths of functional consciousness, of subliminal life—and yet you do not use it in order to complete your knowledge of the whole activity of the mind. (LV 282)

From Rolland’s perspective, the psychoanalytic understanding of the unconscious remains superficial, since it fails to acknowledge what Rolland takes to be the most archaic metaphysical layer of the unconscious—namely, the “Ocean of Being” which unites us all (LV 227). According to Rolland, since mystics have directly experienced this oceanic substratum of the unconscious, psychoanalysts stand to learn a great deal from the testimony of mystics. Hence, Rolland encourages psychoanalysts to leave off trying to psychoanalyze mystics and to attempt, rather, to *learn* from mystics in order to enrich and deepen their understanding of the psyche and its metaphysical depths.²⁰

In fact, toward the end of the appendix, Rolland goes so far as to suggest that mystic introversion is a valid scientific procedure that grants the investigator access to aspects of the mind not detectable or measurable by any other empirical means. As Rolland puts it, “the judicious use of deep introversion opens to the scientist unexplored resources: for it constitutes a new method of experiment, having the advantage that the observer identifies himself with the object observed—the Plotinian identity of the seer and the thing seen” (LV 284–5). From Rolland’s perspective, the very fact that mystic introversion is “subjective”—far from making it *unscientific*—makes it especially suited to serve as a rigorously scientific “method of experiment.” There is less of a chance of investigative error or misinterpretation, Rolland argues, because the “seer” and the “thing seen” are identical in mystic introversion.

That this remark is directed against psychoanalysts is abundantly clear from the context, since Rolland goes on to attack the “exclusive rationalists, and particularly... psycho-pathologists”—he even mentions Freud by name—who reject this “great effort” to incorporate mystic introversion into scientific investigation (LV 286). For Rolland, the positivistic rationalism of Freudian psychoanalysts leads



them to adopt an unjustifiably narrow view of science, which dogmatically excludes the possibility that mystic introversion is a genuinely scientific method of gaining knowledge.²¹

In a long footnote at the end of his chapter “The Great Paths: The Four Yogas,” Rolland calls for a “new science of the mind” (*une nouvelle science de l’esprit*) which would be far better equipped than psychoanalysis to investigate the nature and existential value of mystical experiences: “How is it possible to estimate the value of such [religious] experiences? Perhaps by a new science of the mind, armed with a more supple, and finer instrument of analysis than the incomplete rough methods of the psychoanalyst and his fashionable descendants” (LV 212–13 note 120).²² Unfortunately, Rolland does not explicitly discuss this “new science of the mind” anywhere else in the book. Nonetheless, numerous passages from the long chapter in which this footnote occurs provide important clues as to what Rolland meant. In this chapter, Rolland summarizes Vivekananda’s account of the four main Yogas (spiritual practices) that lead to spiritual realization: namely, *karmayoga* (the Yoga of Works), *bhaktiyoga* (the Yoga of Love), *rājayoga* (the Yoga of Concentration), and *jñānayoga* (the Yoga of Knowledge). At various points in this chapter, Rolland suggests that the disciplines and methods of *rājayoga* and *jñānayoga* in particular should serve as the basis for the “new science of the mind” he envisions. However, he also insists on the need to modify and update these ancient Indian yogic practices in the light of modern scientific findings—a project, Rolland believes, that was initiated by Vivekananda and continued by Sri Aurobindo.²³

According to Vivekananda, *rājayoga* is the science of concentration based on the principles outlined in Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra*. Rolland elegantly defines *rājayoga* as “a minutely elaborated and experimental science for the conquest of concentration and mastery of the mind” (LV 184). Rolland goes on to summarize the “*aṣṭāṅgayoga*” (“eight-limbed discipline”), which lies at the heart of Patañjali’s system, as explained by Vivekananda: (1) *yama* (restraint), (2) *niyama* (observance), (3) *āsana* (physical posture), (4) *prāṇāyāma* (regulation of breath), (5) *pratyāhāra* (sense-restraint), (6) *dhāraṇā* (mental fixity), (7) *dhyāna* (sustained concentration), (8) *samādhi* (perfect concentration). Rolland specifies the five practices involved in the first stage of *yama*: (1) noninjury toward all creatures (which he calls the “great aim of Gandhi”), (2) absolute truthfulness in “action, word, thought,” (3) perfect chastity and purity, (4) absolute non-covetousness, and (5) purity of soul and absolute disinterestedness (LV 186). Rolland approvingly refers to these five preliminary ethical disciplines as a “fivefold ring of fire,” the “five indispensable conditions,” each one of which is “sufficient to make a saint” (LV 186). He notes that the third and fourth limbs of the *aṣṭāṅgayoga*—*āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*—are “exercises of a physiological nature ... of great interest to medical science” (LV 191 note 73).

Rolland then goes on to focus on the remaining four limbs of the *aṣṭāṅgayoga*, the “three first psychological stages in the concentration of the mind” (*pratyāhāra*, *dhāraṇā*, and *dhyāna*) which culminate in the coveted state of *samādhi* (LV 192). He is especially impressed with Vivekananda’s psychologically penetrating elaboration of the technique of *pratyāhāra*, by means of which—according to Rolland—the mind grows quiet “under the calm inner regard that judges it impartially” (LV 192). He quotes





Vivekananda's advice for calming the "monkey"-mind: "The first lesson then is to sit for some time and let the mind run on ... Let the monkey jump as much as he can—you simply wait and watch ... Many hideous thoughts may come into it; knowledge is power" (Cited in LV 192).

Rolland then archly observes, "The ancient Yogis did not wait for Dr. Freud to teach them that the best cure for the mind is to make it look its deeply hidden monsters straight in the face" (LV 192). In the final footnote in his section on *rājayoga*, Rolland strikingly declares that "it has actually been proved [by *rājayoga*] that sovereign control of the inner life is able to put into our hands (partially if not entirely) our unconscious or subconscious life" (LV 194 note 79). Rolland refers approvingly to Vivekananda's statement from his book *Rāja-Yoga* (1896): "Almost every action of which we are now unconscious can be brought to the plane of consciousness" (LV 194 note 79). According to Rolland, the ancient *rājayogic* method of detached mindfulness and mental concentration—especially as elaborated and amplified by the modern yogic master Vivekananda—is a much safer, more effective, and more ethically and spiritually beneficial means of discovering and dissolving one's own unconscious complexes than Freudian psychoanalysis. Moreover, Rolland clearly felt that modern psychologists like Freud could stand to learn a great deal from the psychological techniques of *rājayoga*: "I recommend it [*rājayoga*] to Western masters of the new psychology and of pedagogy, insofar as it is scientifically founded on the physiology of the mind" (LV 191).

Rolland points out that the various disciplines of *rājayoga* should culminate in "absolute Concentration," which he characterizes as the "most perfect instrument of scientific method" (LV 187). Rolland goes on to add:

And in this we are all interested. Whatever may be the effect upon the mind produced by this instrument on the part of the Hindu seekers after truth, all seekers after truth, whether of the West or the East, are obliged to use that instrument; and it is to their advantage that it should be as exact and perfect as possible. There is nothing of the occult in it. (LV 187)

Rolland makes abundantly clear here that the "new science of the mind" he envisions would have as its chief "instrument" the technique of mental concentration taught by the ancient Indian science of *rājayoga*. Indeed, Rolland seems to have Freud—among others—in mind when he encourages Western scientists to acquaint themselves with, and learn from, the *rājayogic* "methods of control and mastery" of the mind:

It makes it all the more astonishing that Western reason has taken so little into account the experimental research of Indian Rāja-Yogīs, and that it has not tried to use the methods of control and mastery, which they offer in broad daylight without any mystery, over the one infinitely fragile and constantly warped instrument that is our only means of discovering what exists. (LV 189)

From Rolland's perspective, the ancient psychological science of *rājayoga* offers a far more sophisticated, comprehensive, and rigorously worked out account of the



mind and its workings than even the most advanced Western psychologies, including psychoanalysis.

In sum, I would suggest that three features of *rājayoga* in particular led Rolland to champion *rājayoga* as the basis for a “new science of the mind.” First, *rājayoga* insists on the development of a strong moral character and numerous ethical qualities—such as noninjury, sexual purity, truthfulness, and unselfishness—as an indispensable precondition for the practice of mental control and mastery. By insisting on the inseparability of scientific investigation from ethical living, Rolland counters the pervasive Western assumption that science and ethics are independent enterprises. Second, since *rājayoga* teaches psychological techniques that allow one to gain control and mastery of one’s *own* mind, it is far more empowering and strength-giving than Western psychological methods that depend heavily on the curative role of the analyst. Third, since the fundamental principles and techniques on which *rājayoga* is based were scientifically developed and empirically tested, Rolland believes that *rājayoga* is in perfect consonance with the modern Western scientific temper.

Rolland credits Vivekananda with inaugurating the urgent project of updating and modifying the techniques and findings of *rājayoga* in the light of modern science:

While admitting, with no possibility of contradiction, that Yogist psychophysiology uses explanations—and still more terms—that are both controvertible and obsolete, it should be easy to rectify them by readjusting (as Vivekananda tried to do) the experiments of past centuries to modern science. (LV 189)

Moreover, Rolland credits Sri Aurobindo with going “one step further” (LV 204 note 104) than Vivekananda by incorporating “religious intuition” into “the strict limits of science” (LV 205 note 104). Hence, for Rolland, Patañjali, Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo—rather than Freud and other Western psychologists—were the true pioneers in the effort to develop a “new science of the mind.”

Rolland claims, however, that the “practical methods” (LV 199) of *rājayoga* must be combined with the Vedāntic philosophical method of *jñānayoga*, the spiritual practice of self-inquiry that culminates in the realization of the “innermost core of the soul” (*au noyau le plus intime de l’âme*) (LV 203).²⁴ Quoting Vivekananda, Rolland asserts that the *jñānayogī* realizes “an Abstract Essence underlying every existence,” which Rolland calls “one Unity” (LV 206). Crucially, since there is only one metaphysical Reality, the *jñānayogī* discovers “that at the innermost core of the soul” is “the center of the whole universe” (LV 203). Rolland provides here the Vedāntic rationale for his claim in the appendix on Morel—against psychoanalytic orthodoxy—that mystic introversion is compatible with dynamic action in the world. According to Rolland, the method of introversion employed in *rājayoga* and *jñānayoga* is not merely “subjective,” since the deepest core of our subjectivity is identical with the deepest core of the universe.

For Rolland, it is precisely this fundamental Vedāntic insight into the unity of everything that provides the metaphysical basis for the “new science of the mind” he envisions (LV 214). Accordingly, Rolland claims that “Vedāntic Advaitism” is “so close to the aim of pure Science that they can hardly be distinguished” (LV 206). Rolland continues:



The main difference is in the gesture with which the runners arrive at the tape: Science accepts and envisages Unity (*l'Unité*) as the hypothetical term for its stages of thought, giving them their right bearings and coordinating them. Yoga embraces Unity and becomes covered with it as with ivy. But the spiritual results are practically the same. (LV 206)

For Rolland, while modern science is only able to posit “Unity” as a hypothesis that has not yet been conclusively proved, Vedāntic Yoga teaches the psychological and rational methods for attaining the direct spiritual experience of this Unity at the core of our being. In the following chapter, on “The Universal Science-Religion,” Rolland elaborates how this Vedāntic realization of the “Ocean of Being” (*l'Être océanique*) also serves as the basis of “the highest code of ethics: ‘Not me, but thou!’” (LV 227–8).²⁵ As Rolland points out, both Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda experienced this oceanic feeling of the metaphysical Unity of everything. Rolland accordingly cites Vivekananda’s reference to “the vision of Self which penetrates all living beings” (LV 228). And in his biography of Sri Ramakrishna, Rolland interprets Sri Ramakrishna’s first vision of the Divine Mother Kālī as the spiritual realization of the all-pervading “Ocean” of Being: “he saw nothing, but... he was aware of Her all-permeating presence. He called the Ocean by Her name” (LR 15).

According to Rolland, great Indian mystics such as Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda—as well as numerous Western mystics, including Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Angelus Silesius—realized the truth of metaphysical Unity in which both science and religion culminate: “At the basis of everything then is force, Divine Force (*la Force Divine*). It is in all things and in all men. It is at the center of the Sphere and at all the points of the circumference” (LV 231). The “new science of the mind” that Rolland envisioned—rooted in the ancient Indian systems of *rājayoga* and *jñānayoga*, and revitalized and updated by Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo—would provide a rigorous scientific method for penetrating to this oceanic “*Force Divine*” that unites all of us at the metaphysical core of our being.²⁶

7.2 Revisiting the Rolland-Freud Debate on the Oceanic Feeling

With this background in place, we are now in a position to explore the important question: What did Rolland have in mind when he invited Freud in 1927 to provide “an analysis of *spontaneous religious sentiment* or, more exactly, of *religious feeling*”? According to Fisher (1976: 44), “What Rolland expected from Freud... was an empirical psychoanalytic exploration of the various dimensions of the ‘oceanic’ sensation.”²⁷ Parsons (1999: 14), in his richly informative book *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism*, arrives at a similar conclusion by placing Rolland’s 1927 letter to Freud in the broader context of his biographies of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda.²⁸ Parsons (1999: 167) finds in Rolland’s biographies of these Indian saints strong evidence that Rolland’s primary motivation in appealing to the oceanic feeling was to enlist Freud in the creation of a “mystical psychoanalysis”—by which he means a non-reductive psychoanalytic investigation of mysticism.





Parsons has undoubtedly enriched our understanding of the Rolland-Freud debate on oceanic feeling by taking into account Rolland's biographies of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. However, I will argue that Parsons's interpretation of Rolland as the champion of a non-reductive psychoanalysis is based on a selective and inaccurate reading of Rolland's biographies of the Indian saints. Parsons claims that the strongest piece of evidence in favor of his interpretation is Rolland's reference to a "mystical psychoanalysis" in his biography of Sri Ramakrishna. Tellingly, Parsons cites this striking phrase out of context no fewer than ten times, but he fails to mention the original French phrase used by Rolland himself.²⁹ In fact, "mystical psychoanalysis"—the phrase so frequently quoted by Parsons—is E.F. Malcolm-Smith's inaccurate English translation of Rolland's (VR 239) original French phrase, "*psychophysiologie mystique*," which would be more accurately translated as "mystical psychophysiology."

Moreover, the long footnote in which this phrase occurs makes clear that the "mystical psychophysiology" of which Rolland speaks has absolutely nothing to do with psychoanalysis, mystical or otherwise. In the course of describing Sri Ramakrishna's extraordinary ability to stimulate spiritual experiences in his disciples by a "little thing" such as "a word, a look, a touch" (LR 167), Rolland adds a footnote in which he cites the testimony of Swami Shivananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, who attested to Sri Ramakrishna's ability to transmit to others "the energy of his own spirituality" (LR 167 note 41). Rolland then adds this significant remark:

Let the learned men of Europe, who are preoccupied by the problems of mystical psychophysiology (*psychophysiologie mystique*) put themselves in touch with these living witnesses [such as Swami Shivananda] while there is yet time. I myself, I repeat, have little curiosity about such phenomena, whose subjective reality is not in doubt, and I believe it my duty to describe them; for they are hedged about by all possible guarantees of good faith and analytical intelligence. I am more interested in the fact of great religious intuition in that which *continues to be* rather than in that which *has been*, in that which is or which can be always in all beings rather than in that which is the privilege of a few. (LR 167 note 41)

What Rolland means by "mystical psychophysiology" is the unique ability of mystics such as Sri Ramakrishna to stimulate or effect spiritual knowledge in others through physical proximity or contact. In other words, Rolland casts Sri Ramakrishna himself as a mystical psychophysicist and encourages the "learned men of Europe" who are interested in such phenomena to investigate them further. Rolland adds that he himself has "little curiosity about such phenomena," not because he is skeptical about them but because his primary concerns lie elsewhere.

One might object, at this point, that while Parsons wrongly claims that Rolland used the phrase "mystical psychoanalysis," Parsons may still be correct that Rolland more generally advocated a non-reductive psychoanalytic approach to mysticism. However, if Rolland *had* championed such a mystical psychoanalysis, then there would surely be signs of such an approach in his biographies of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. Indeed, as we have seen in the previous section, Rolland not only



refrains from psychoanalyzing Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda but also expresses his outright hostility toward psychoanalytic approaches to mysticism at various points in his biographies. In his biography of Vivekananda, Rolland repeatedly calls on psychoanalysts such as Freud and Morel to recognize the limitations and biases of psychoanalysis and to “complete” their knowledge of the whole mind by taking seriously the mystical experiences of both Western and Eastern saints. Contrary to Parsons, then, I would argue that Rolland does not champion a non-reductive psychoanalytic approach to mysticism anywhere in his biographies.

Parsons (1999: 38) claims that “Rolland... wanted Freud’s help to scientifically establish the benefits of mystical introversion, what he would refer to in his biographies of the Hindu saints as a ‘universal science-religion’ and ‘mystical psychoanalysis.’” Here, it becomes clear that Parsons’s mistaken claim that Rolland advocated a “mystical psychoanalysis” has serious consequences for his overall argument about Rolland’s intentions in appealing to the oceanic feeling in his 1927 letter to Freud. While I agree with Parsons that Rolland sought to enlist Freud in the creation of a “universal science-religion,” Parsons wrongly equates this “universal science-religion” with a “mystical psychoanalysis.”³⁰ As I have shown at length in Section 1, there is not a single reference to psychoanalysis in Rolland’s entire extended account of the “universal science-religion” in his biography of Vivekananda. In fact, the universal science-religion envisioned by Rolland was based not on psychoanalysis but on the Indian spiritual systems of *rājayoga* and *jñānayoga*. Against Parsons, then, I would argue that there is virtually no evidence that Rolland wanted Freud to provide a non-reductive psychoanalytic examination of the oceanic feeling.

In light of Rolland’s evident antipathy toward psychoanalytic approaches to mysticism, why did he ask Freud to provide an “analysis” of the oceanic feeling in his 1927 letter? I would suggest that Rolland appealed to the oceanic feeling as a direct *challenge* to Freud: the oceanic feeling, precisely because it is a genuine “*contact*” with metaphysical Reality attested to by countless people, is not vulnerable to Freud’s psychoanalytic debunking. In his letter to Freud, Rolland was calling not for any kind of psychoanalytic study of mysticism but for a mystically grounded Vedāntic “science-religion” that would *replace* psychoanalysis altogether.

The somewhat veiled critical thrust of Rolland’s appeal to the oceanic feeling is confirmed by the remainder of his letter. Shortly after asking Freud to analyze the oceanic feeling, Rolland remarks that since the oceanic feeling “is common to thousands (millions) of men actually existing, with its thousands (millions) of individual nuances, it is possible to subject it to analysis, with an approximate exactitude” (Parsons 1999: 173; Vermorel and Vermorel 1993: 304). What kind of “analysis” did Rolland have in mind? I think Rolland answers this question in his biography of Vivekananda, where he calls for a “new science of the mind” that would subject mystical states to rigorous scientific analysis. Rolland believed that Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo were the true pioneers in this mystical scientific endeavor. Rolland applauds Vivekananda’s attempt to demonstrate that there is “no essential difference” between “science and religion” (LV 197). Rolland also approvingly mentions Sri Aurobindo’s efforts to incorporate “religious intuition” into “the strict limits of science” (LV 205 note 104). Hence, when Rolland remarks to Freud that it is possible to subject the oceanic feeling to “analysis,”



I think it is plausible to assume that he had in mind not a psychoanalytic examination but a yogic-cum-scientific analysis of the oceanic feeling along the lines of what Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo had already begun to develop. This interpretation of Rolland's letter to Freud would also be consistent with the many passages in his biography of Vivekananda where Rolland encourages psychoanalysts to learn from ancient Indian yogic science instead of engaging in reductive analyses of mystical phenomena.

In the next paragraph of the letter, Rolland predicts that Freud would classify the oceanic feeling “under the *Zwangsneurosen*” (Parsons 1999: 173; Vermorel and Vermorel 1993: 304). (Rolland proved to be right, since Freud would go on to interpret the oceanic feeling in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* as a regression to a pre-Oedipal state.) In a canny move, Rolland preemptively rejects this psychoanalytic debunking of the oceanic feeling, insisting that both Western and non-Western mystics have experienced the “rich and beneficent power” of the oceanic feeling. Citing Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda as examples, Rolland adds that the oceanic feeling is perfectly compatible with the utmost “aptitude for thought and action” (Parsons 1999: 173; Vermorel and Vermorel 1993: 304).

In the beginning of 1930, Rolland sent Freud his biographies of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda in the hope that Freud would step outside the narrow confines of psychoanalysis and try to learn from the mystical insights of Indian spiritual traditions and saints. Upon receiving the biographies, however, Freud confesses in a letter to Rolland dated January 19, 1930 that “it isn't easy to pass beyond the limits of one's nature” (Parsons 1999: 176). After responding briefly to Rolland's criticisms of psychoanalysis in the second appendix to *Vie de Vivekananda*, Freud makes this significant remark:

We seem to diverge rather far in the role we assign to intuition. Your mystics rely on it to teach them how to solve the riddle of the universe; we believe that it cannot reveal to us anything but primitive, instinctual impulses and attitudes—highly valuable for an embryology of the soul when correctly interpreted, but worthless for orientation in the alien, external world. (Parsons 1999: 177)

It is clear from this remark that Freud rejects outright Rolland's view that mystical intuition is a scientific instrument that can help us gain deeper insight into reality. Freud simply reiterates his position in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* that the oceanic feeling reveals nothing but “primitive, instinctual impulses.”

Interestingly, after Rolland received and read Freud's *Unbehagen in der Kultur*, Rolland wrote a letter to Freud dated May 3, 1931 in which he expresses disappointment with Freud's psychoanalytic interpretation of the oceanic feeling as a regression to a pre-Oedipal state. Rolland implicitly challenges Freud's psychoanalytic denigration of the oceanic feeling by insisting that his oceanic feeling is “a psychological fact, a vital trait of my character” and that it is “absolutely disinterested” (Parsons 1999: 178; Vermorel and Vermorel 1993: 349). Moreover, Rolland reiterates that he has received letters from people “from all corners of the earth” who have also experienced this oceanic feeling (Parsons 1999: 178; Vermorel and Vermorel 1993: 349). Rolland





thereby implicitly responds to Freud's claim in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* that the true source of religion is not the oceanic feeling but a childish feeling of helplessness and need for the father's protection. Rolland clearly feels that Freud has trivialized the oceanic feeling, which is why Rolland issues the warning: "It would be dangerous for the philosopher and man of action to ignore" the many occurrences of the oceanic feeling throughout the world (Parsons 1999: 178; Vermorel and Vermorel 1993: 349).

Rolland had sincerely hoped—perhaps naively—that his account of the mystical oceanic feeling and his biographies of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda would lead Freud to accept the scientific validity of mysticism and to move beyond a narrowly psychoanalytic understanding of the workings of the psyche. Instead, Freud dug his heels in even further, reiterating his psychoanalytic dismissal of mystical experience and insisting that science and mysticism are worlds apart.

7.3 Rolland's Anticipation of Later Mystical Critiques of Psychoanalysis

Parsons, as we have seen, argues that Rolland's primary aim in appealing to the oceanic feeling was to encourage Freud to adopt a sympathetic and non-reductive psychoanalytic approach to mystical experience. According to Parsons, Freud adopted a "classic' reductionist" approach to mysticism, since he dismissed the oceanic feeling as a regression to an infantile state.³¹ Rolland, by contrast, anticipated what Parsons (1999: 109, 2003: 92–3) calls the "adaptive" and "transformative" psychoanalytic approaches to mysticism which developed after Freud's time. While the adaptive approach frames mysticism as a "healing enterprise," the transformative approach goes even further by allowing "meta-psychological space for the deeper, transcendent claims of the mystics" (Parsons 2003: 93). In Parsons's view, Rolland adopted an "adaptive-transformational" approach to mysticism, which paved the way for later non-reductive psychoanalytic approaches to mysticism (Parsons 2003: 93).

I have argued, by contrast, that Rolland's biographies of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda reveal a skepticism toward psychoanalysis that is much more radical and far-reaching than Parsons assumes. I would suggest, then, that Rolland's true heirs are not post-Freudian psychoanalysts who have explored non-reductive approaches to mysticism but twentieth-century *mystics* in both the East and the West who have highlighted the fundamental defects and limitations of psychoanalysis from a mystical perspective.³² To begin to make my case, I will briefly demonstrate how Rolland's criticisms of psychoanalysis and his call for a new yogic "science of the mind" anticipated the sophisticated critiques of psychoanalysis provided by mystics as diverse as Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950), Swami Akhilananda (d. 1962), and Ken Wilber (b. 1949).

Throughout his biography of Vivekananda, Rolland refers approvingly to, and cites numerous passages from, a variety of Sri Aurobindo's works, including *Essays on the Gita* (1916), *The Synthesis of Yoga* (1921), and the numerous articles—published between 1914 and 1919—that were eventually revised and collected into the book





The Life Divine (1939–40). As we have already seen, Rolland especially applauded Sri Aurobindo's efforts to integrate spiritual intuition into science and thereby to bridge the gap between Western rationalism and Indian spirituality. While the works of Sri Aurobindo with which Rolland was familiar do not contain any remarks on Freud or psychoanalysis, Sri Aurobindo wrote a number of letters to disciples in the 1930s—of which Rolland could not have been aware—in which he made numerous critical remarks about psychoanalysis. Unfortunately, I have not been able to determine whether Sri Aurobindo read Rolland's *Vie de Vivekananda*. If he had, he may very well have been influenced by Rolland's criticisms of psychoanalysis, especially those presented in his appendix on Morel.³³ Setting aside this speculative issue of direct influence, I will briefly point out four striking affinities between Sri Aurobindo's and Rolland's respective critiques of psychoanalysis.

First, Sri Aurobindo claims that Freud's psychoanalytic theory stems from pathology. In a 1936 letter to Sri Aurobindo, one of Sri Aurobindo's disciples made the following scathing remark about Freud:

The extreme of ridiculousness is reached when Freud analyses Leonardo da Vinci to show how he was pathological, how he failed disastrously in his adaptation to life, how his artistic imagination was an aberration and a maladaptation. All poets, all imaginative people, all geniuses, all religious people were to Freud the result of aberration and maladaptation. (CWSA 27: 528)

In a response to this letter, Sri Aurobindo seconds the sentiment of his disciple: "Well, his [Freud's] own theory is very clearly that, the result of aberration and maladaptation" (CWSA 27: 528).³⁴ Rolland, as we have seen, claimed that the psychoanalytic "depreciation" of introversion of all sorts "is in danger of becoming a pathological aberration." In a striking echo of Rolland, Sri Aurobindo turns the tables on Freud—or, perhaps more aptly, puts Freud on the couch—by claiming that Freud's own tendency to pathologize artistic and religious geniuses stems from a pathological "aberration and maladaptation" (CWSA 27: 528).

Second, Sri Aurobindo claims that psychoanalytic theories are false generalizations based on an incomplete understanding of the workings of the unconscious:

The psychoanalysis of Freud is the last thing that one should associate with yoga. It takes up a certain part, the darkest, the most perilous, the unhealthiest part of the nature, the lower vital subconscious layer, isolates some of its most morbid phenomena and attributes to it and them an action out of all proportion to its true role in the nature. Modern psychology is an infant science, at once rash, fumbling and crude. As in all infant sciences, the universal habit of the human mind—to take a partial or local truth, generalise it unduly and try to explain a whole field of Nature in its narrow terms—runs riot here. Moreover, the exaggeration of the importance of suppressed sexual complexes is a dangerous falsehood and it can have a nasty influence and tend to make the mind and vital more and not less fundamentally impure than before. (Aurobindo [1936] 1981: 70–1)





According to Sri Aurobindo, Freudian psychoanalysis mistakes the “darkest” and “unhealthiest” part of the unconscious for the unconscious as a whole and, on that basis, proceeds to make unjustified generalizations about how unconscious drives influence conscious behavior and activity. Moreover, just as Rolland found the psychoanalytic “obsession ... with sexual things” to be “false and revolting,”³⁵ Sri Aurobindo claims that Freud exaggerates the “importance of suppressed sexual complexes,” thereby hindering the patient’s recovery.³⁶

Sri Aurobindo points out that Freud’s view of the unconscious is incomplete because it focuses exclusively on the “lower vital subconscious,” which is “no more than a restricted and very inferior portion of the subliminal whole” (Aurobindo [1936] 1981: 71). According to Sri Aurobindo, the “subliminal self” is in fact much vaster and its dynamics much richer and more complex than Freud assumes. Sri Aurobindo claims that the subliminal self also “opens to higher superconscient ... ranges,” and he insists that true psychic transformation and purification can only be achieved by ascending to the superconscient plane: “If one wishes to purify and transform the nature, it is the power of these higher ranges to which one must open and raise to them and change by them both the subliminal and the surface being” (Aurobindo [1936] 1981: 71). While Sri Aurobindo and Rolland hold similar views on the limitations of the Freudian conception of the unconscious, they differ somewhat in their understanding of the ontological basis of mystical experience. Rolland, as we have seen, locates the oceanic feeling at the most archaic level of the unconscious. Sri Aurobindo, by contrast, claims that genuine spiritual experience takes place at the level of the “superconscient,” from which one can begin the work of transforming both the conscious and the subliminal planes.³⁷

Third, Sri Aurobindo argues that psychoanalytic explanations of spiritual experience are both crude and woefully inadequate because they are based on the false presupposition that the unconscious is “the true foundation of things”:

I find it difficult to take these psycho-analysts at all seriously when they try to scrutinise spiritual experience by the flicker of their torch-lights ... They look from down up and explain the higher lights by the lower obscurities; but the foundation of these things is above and not below, *upari budhna eṣām*. The superconscient, not the subconscious, is the true foundation of things. The significance of the lotus is not to be found by analysing the secrets of the mud from which it grows here; its secret is to be found in the heavenly archetype of the lotus that blooms for ever in the Light above. (Aurobindo [1936] 1981: 73)

According to Sri Aurobindo, the fundamental mistake of psychoanalysis is the assumption that one can “explain the higher lights by the lower obscurities.” Spiritual experience, like the lotus in Sri Aurobindo’s metaphor, cannot be explained by analyzing the “mud” of the unconscious but by rising to a superconscient divine plane. Implicit in Sri Aurobindo’s remark is a critique of the dogmatic positivism underlying psychoanalysis: since psychoanalysts dismiss the very possibility of a superconscient plane of experience, they inevitably explain away mystical experience in terms of unconscious strivings.





Fourth, Sri Aurobindo claims that his own “Integral Yoga”—which harmonizes and modernizes the ancient Indian systems of *rājayoga*, *bhaktiyoga*, *jñānayoga*, and *karmayoga*—provides a far more adequate psychological framework both for understanding the workings of the mind and for achieving spiritual fulfillment. Referring to psychoanalysts, Sri Aurobindo remarks:

The self-chosen field of these psychologists is besides poor, dark and limited; you must know the whole before you can know the part and the highest before you can truly understand the lowest. That is the promise of the greater psychology awaiting its hour before which these poor gropings will disappear and come to nothing. (Aurobindo [1936] 1981: 73)

Rolland, in his appendix on Morel, encouraged psychoanalysts to “complete” their “knowledge of the whole activity of the mind” by learning from the testimony of both Eastern and Western mystics. Several pages later, Rolland singled out “Aurobindo Ghose” as “one of the greatest thinkers of modern India” who was trying to develop the very yogic psychology that Rolland himself had in mind (LV 286). Sri Aurobindo himself was quite consciously developing his Integral Yoga as a “greater psychology” infinitely superior to the “poor gropings” of psychoanalysis. For both Rolland and Sri Aurobindo, the ancient Indian systems of Yoga were a far more promising basis for this “greater psychology” than psychoanalysis.

In his book *Hindu Psychology: Its Meaning for the West* (1948), Swami Akhilananda, a monk of the Ramakrishna Order, also made numerous criticisms of psychoanalysis that are akin to Rolland’s. Indeed, early on in his book, Akhilananda refers approvingly to Rolland’s *Life of Ramakrishna*, so he might also have been aware of—and perhaps even influenced by—Rolland’s criticisms of psychoanalysis in the *Life of Vivekananda*.³⁸ Here, however, I will set aside the question of whether Akhilananda was directly influenced by Rolland’s views and restrict myself to pointing out some parallels between Akhilananda’s and Rolland’s critical views on psychoanalysis. As I pointed out in Section 1, Rolland claims that psychoanalysts have “erroneously extended” the theory of regression, which is “undoubtedly a true one” in regard to cases of pathology, to “the whole realm of the mind, whether abnormal or normal.” Similarly, Akhilananda observes, “It seems that Freud and other psychoanalysts make unnecessary and uncalled-for generalizations from the study of pathological cases” (Akhilananda 1948: 7). Akhilananda claims that two of Freud’s theories in particular are based on such unjustified generalizations: first, Freud’s thesis that the “sex urge . . . is the most predominant instinct,” and second, Freud’s theory of the “death instinct” (Akhilananda 1948: 7). According to Akhilananda, “Hindu psychologists do not agree with the view that man has a basic destructive tendency. Suicide, war, and all other such destructive tendencies are not expressions of the normal mind” (Akhilananda 1948: 7).

Moreover, just as Rolland claimed that Western psychologists have largely ignored or misunderstood mystic introversion because of their tendency toward “extroversion,” Akhilananda observes with regard to American psychology, “It should be noted here that great emphasis is given to ‘action’ in most of the schools of psychology in America . . . Consequently, the subjective element of mind is ignored. In fact, meditation





and inner understanding are generally neglected” (Akhilananda 1948: 10). Like Sri Aurobindo, Akhilananda attacks the positivist attitude among many psychoanalysts which leads them to “make superficial remarks about the religious tendencies of man in terms of sex” (Akhilananda 1948: 18). Akhilananda traces the inadequacy of psychoanalytic explanations of spiritual experience to a positivist skepticism toward “supernormal” possibilities of the mind: “Actually, the supernormal minds function in a manner quite different from normal and abnormal cases. This is the reason that the unfortunate generalizations of many of the psychotherapists regarding spiritual experiences are extremely inaccurate and unscientific” (Akhilananda 1948: 18).

Akhilananda also echoes Rolland in claiming that psychologists such as Freud, Adler, and Jung focus unduly on the unconscious at the expense of other equally essential aspects of the mind and human personality. Hindu psychologists, by contrast, “are primarily interested in the study of the total mind, as they feel that the different functions—including consciousness, superconsciousness, cognition, volition, and conation—cannot be really separated” (Akhilananda 1948: 16). By “Hindu psychology” Akhilananda means primarily Patañjali’s Yoga system, especially as developed and elaborated by Vivekananda. According to Akhilananda, the aim of Hindu psychology is “total integration of the mind” (Akhilananda 1948: 17), which is achieved through the combined practice of self-analysis, concentration, and meditation:

According to the Hindu view, not only must one analyze one’s own self but at the same time one must reconstruct his life... We observe that many disintegrated minds are synthesized by the combined methods of self-analysis and concentration. A mere discovery of mental conflict, by either the Freudian method of psychoanalysis, [Carl] Rogers’ insight, or self-analysis, does not integrate the mind. (Akhilananda 1948: 64–5)

Like Rolland, Akhilananda insists that mental conflicts can only be fully dissolved through yogic practice, which integrates the mind as a whole. Akhilananda quite presciently emphasizes the psychological benefits of concentration: “Our experience proves it is the practice of concentration that brings out hidden mental forces which reconstruct and integrate the whole mind” (Akhilananda 1948: 65). In agreement with Sri Aurobindo, Akhilananda argues that the psychoanalytic method of treatment is, at best, partially or transiently curative and, at worst, dangerous and potentially counterproductive.

Rolland also anticipated some of the insights and arguments of Ken Wilber, a prominent contemporary theorist and champion of transpersonal psychology. In light of space limitations, I will only mention one especially striking resonance between Rolland’s and Wilber’s respective critiques of psychoanalysis. Rolland, drawing on the work of the Bergsonian Édouard Le Roy, argues that the psychoanalyst mistakes the *post*-discursive state of the mystic with the *pre*-discursive state of the infant (LV 282 note 10). Strikingly, Rolland and Le Roy anticipated by over half a century Wilber’s now well-known notion of the “pre/trans fallacy.” As Wilber observes, “The essence of the pre/trans fallacy is itself fairly simple: since both prerational and transrational states are, in their own ways, nonrational, they appear similar or even identical to the untotored eye” (Wilber 1998: 88).





Interestingly, Wilber specifically targets Freud's psychoanalytic explanation of the oceanic feeling in terms of regression as a paradigmatic case of the pre/trans fallacy: "Genuine mystical or contemplative experiences, for example, are seen as a regression or throwback to infantile states of narcissism, oceanic dualism, indissociation, and even primitive autism. This is, for example, precisely the route taken by Freud in *The Future of an Illusion*" (Wilber 1998: 88).³⁹ Moreover, Wilber astutely traces this reductive tendency among psychoanalysts to their dogmatic assumption that "rationality is the great and final omega point of individual and collective development, the high-water mark of all evolution" (Wilber 1998: 88). As Wilber argues, such a dogmatic rationalism necessarily entails the positivistic dismissal of the very possibility of transrational states:

Since no higher context is thought to be real, or to actually exist, then whenever any genuinely transrational occasion occurs, it is immediately explained as a *regression* to prerational structures... The superconscious is reduced to the subconscious, the transpersonal is collapsed to the prepersonal, the emergence of the higher is reinterpreted as an irruption from the lower. All breathe a sigh of relief, and the rational worldspace is not fundamentally shaken. (Wilber 1998: 88–9)

Rolland's Appendix on Morel, I would suggest, contains the seeds of Wilber's provocative metacritique of the positivistic rationalism lurking at the basis of psychoanalysis. In that appendix, after applauding Sri Aurobindo's attempt to "reintegrate generative intuition" into science, Rolland launches into a spirited attack on "exclusive rationalists" such as Freud who dogmatically reject the "great effort" of mystics like Sri Aurobindo (LV 286). The positivistic rationalism of psychoanalysts, according to Rolland, is based on nothing more than "prejudices" that have become "second nature" (LV 286). Wilber echoes Rolland in his sarcastic nod to the narrowly "rational worldspace" in which psychoanalysts have snugly—perhaps irrationally?—ensconced themselves.

In the past few decades, many Western psychologists and psychiatrists have begun to incorporate Eastern meditative techniques into their treatment of patients suffering from various kinds of psychological problems and unhealthy addictions.⁴⁰ Seen from this perspective, Rolland's mystical critique of psychoanalysis and his call for a new Vedāntic science of the mind have proven to be both timely and enduring.

Abbreviations

- CWSA 21–2 Aurobindo, Sri ([1939–40] 2005), *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vols. 21–22: *The Life Divine*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.
- CWSA 23–4 Aurobindo, Sri ([1914–48] 1999), *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vols. 23–24: *The Synthesis of Yoga*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.
- CWSA 27 Aurobindo, Sri ([1930–50] 2004), *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 27: *Letters on Poetry and Art*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.
- CWSA 28 Aurobindo, Sri ([1927–50] 2012), *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 28: *Letters on Yoga I*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.





- CWSA 35 Aurobindo, Sri ([1926–50] 2011), *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 35: *Letters on Himself and the Ashram*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.
- CWSV 1 Vivekananda, Swami ([1907] 2007), *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda: Mayavati Memorial Edition*, vol. 1, Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama.
- LR Rolland, Romain ([1929] 2007), *The Life of Ramakrishna*, trans. E.F. Malcolm-Smith, Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama.
- LV Rolland, Romain ([1930] 2008), *The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel*, trans. E.F. Malcolm-Smith, Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama.
- VR Rolland, Romain (1929), *La Vie de Ramakrishna*, Paris: Stock.
- VV Rolland, Romain (1930), *La Vie de Vivekananda; et, L'Évangile universel*, Paris: Stock.

Notes

- 1 All the relevant letters exchanged between Rolland and Freud between 1923 and 1936 concerning the oceanic feeling—written originally in French by Rolland and in German by Freud—were published in French in Vermorel and Vermorel (1993). Parsons (1999), in the appendix to his book (170–80), has provided an English translation of all these letters. Throughout this chapter, whenever I cite passages from Rolland's letters to Freud, I first cite the page number from Parsons's English translation, and then cite the page number of the original French passage in Vermorel and Vermorel (1993).
- 2 For Rolland, these “religious souls of the West” include Pseudo-Dionysius (LV 299–318), Philo (LV 291), and Plotinus (LV 291).
- 3 For a detailed discussion of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy, see Long's chapter in this handbook (Chapter 5).
- 4 See also Erikson ([1958] 1962), Dadoun (1976), and Kovel ([1976] 1983).
- 5 See, for instance, Fisher (1976: 44), Parsons (1999: 14), and Saarinen (2012: 941).
- 6 For biographical information about Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, Rolland consulted numerous people, including Swami Shivananda, Swami Ashokananda, Mahendra Nath Gupta, Josephine MacLeod, Dhan Gopal Mukherji, and Kalidas Nag (LR ix). Rolland drew heavily on two source texts on Sri Ramakrishna: Swami Saradananda's, *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master* (1920), and Max Müller's *Ramakrishna: His Life and Sayings* (1898). Rolland also consulted Sister Christine's unpublished memoirs of Vivekananda (LR ix).
- 7 Rolland's second appendix to LV—which I discuss at length later in this section—indicates two main reasons why Rolland avoids a psychoanalytic framework when discussing Sri Ramakrishna. First, Rolland is generally skeptical of many of the key assumptions of psychoanalytic theory. Second, Rolland argues that a psychoanalytic framework is especially reductive when applied to mystics.
- 8 See Masson (1980), Sil (1991), and Kripal (1995).
- 9 Rolland's understanding of the spiritual sublimation of sexual energy likely derives from the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. Rolland cites Sri Ramakrishna's teaching that the long-term practice of continence results in the development of a “new nerve . . . called ‘the nerve of intelligence’” (LR 153). Rolland also carefully read Vivekananda's *Rāja-Yoga*, which provides a detailed account of the yogic process by which “sex energy,” when “checked and controlled,”



- gets converted into “Ojas,” the source of spiritual strength and power. See CWSV 1: 169–70.
- 10 For Rolland, these “great idealists” include Ludwig von Beethoven, Honoré de Balzac, and Gustave Flaubert (LR 152).
 - 11 See, for instance, Masson (1980), Sil (1991), and Kripal (1995).
 - 12 Rolland explicitly discusses the psychoanalytic interpretation of mystical tropes such as the ocean and the Mother in LV 281–2.
 - 13 In his preface “To My Eastern Readers,” Rolland indicates that throughout his biographies of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, he has adopted an attitude of hermeneutic sympathy and immanence tempered by critical judgment. As he puts it, “The only thing to which I can testify is the sincerity which has led me to make a pious attempt to enter into all forms of life. At the same time I must confess that I have not abdicated one iota of my free judgment as a man of the West” (LR xiii). As he points out, he sees in Sri Ramakrishna “a man and not an ‘Incarnation’ as he appears to his disciples” (LR xiii). Rolland also apologizes in advance for the “mistakes” he might have made in his biographies, acknowledging the extreme difficulties involved in a Westerner’s attempt to understand the mindset of Indian saints: “In spite of all the enthusiasm I have brought to my task, it is impossible for a man of the West to interpret men of Asia with their thousand years’ experience of thought; for such an interpretation must often be erroneous” (LR xiii). It is worth noting that Rolland exhibits greater awareness of the dangers of ethnocentric prejudice and bias than some contemporary scholars writing on Sri Ramakrishna—such as Kripal, Masson, and Sil—who do not reflect adequately on their own cultural situatedness.
 - 14 Throughout this chapter, I sometimes make slight modifications to E.F. Malcolm-Smith’s translations of Rolland’s biographies of Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna.
 - 15 One might ask how my analysis of Rolland’s criticisms of psychoanalysis differs from Parsons’s analysis in Parsons (1999: 61–73). According to Parsons, Rolland was highly critical of what he took to be *reductive* psychoanalytic approaches to mysticism—such as those of Freud and Morel—but quite open and even sympathetic to *non-reductive* psychoanalytic approaches to mysticism. Indeed, Parsons is eager to show that Rolland did not harbor “active hostility toward psychoanalytic modes of investigation” (Parsons 1999: 156). By contrast, I will argue in this section that Rolland *was* actively hostile toward psychoanalytic investigations of mysticism. Moreover, I hope to show that Rolland’s criticisms of psychoanalysis are so fundamental and far-reaching that they undermine even the “adaptive” and “transformative” psychoanalytic approaches that Parsons thinks Rolland advocates.
 - 16 By “inner sense,” Rolland seems to mean a faculty for mystical knowledge.
 - 17 *Je suis fermé à la mystique tout autant qu’à la musique.*
 - 18 Rolland refers to Plotinus at various points in LR. See, for instance, pp. 144, 285, 315 n, 226 n, 297, and 311 n of LR. Most significantly, Rolland devotes four pages of Note III to a laudatory discussion of Plotinus’s mystical philosophy and its affinities with Indian thought (LR 295–9).
 - 19 See also LV 151 note 19.
 - 20 Rolland seems to imply that psychoanalysts can learn especially from the testimony and teachings of mystics, even if psychoanalysts have not enjoyed any mystical experiences themselves.
 - 21 See Dadoun (1976: 942) for a helpful discussion of Rolland’s critique of Freud’s positivism.



- 22 For the original French passage, see VV 98 note 1.
- 23 Phillips discusses Sri Aurobindo's philosophy in Chapter 6 of this handbook.
- 24 For the original French phrase, see VV 86.
- 25 For the original French, see VV 118.
- 26 Rolland's account of the "*Force Divine*" is quite vague, so it is not entirely clear what he means by it. In general terms, however, it is clear that the phrase refers to the single Divine Reality that unites everyone and everything in the universe.
- 27 For a similar claim, see Saarinen (2012: 941).
- 28 See also Saarinen (2012: 941).
- 29 Parsons (1999) refers to "mystical psychoanalysis" on pp. 58, 63, 65, 134, 140, 146, 162, 163, 165, and 167.
- 30 Parsons makes this mistake elsewhere in the book as well. He refers, for instance, to Rolland's "promotion of a mystical psychoanalysis characterized as the universal science-religion of the future" (Parsons 1999: 163).
- 31 Parsons (2003: 81).
- 32 A referee asks whether it might be more accurate to claim that "Rolland's non-psychoanalytic mystical legacy complements rather than supplants his other, adaptive-transformative psychoanalytic legacy." To clarify my position, I would agree with Parsons that Rolland's *criticisms* of Freudian psychoanalytic approaches to mysticism did pave the way for later adaptive-transformative critiques of Freudian reductionism. However, contrary to Parsons, I do not think there is any convincing evidence that Rolland actually advocated adaptive-transformative psychoanalytic approaches to mysticism. Therefore, I stand by my claim that Rolland's true heirs are not adaptive-transformative psychoanalysts but *mystics* who have criticized psychoanalytic methods.
- 33 However, it should be noted that Sri Aurobindo sometimes made critical remarks about Rolland in his letters to disciples. For instance, he remarks that Rolland mistakenly "takes his emotional intellectuality for spirituality" (CWSA 28: 324). Nonetheless, Sri Aurobindo's skepticism about Rolland's credentials as a mystic does not rule out the possibility that Sri Aurobindo was influenced by Rolland's criticisms of psychoanalysis.
- 34 Letter dated June 1, 1936.
- 35 Cited in Werman (1977: 230).
- 36 See also CWSA 35: 9, where Sri Aurobindo claims that the "forced connection with sex" in psychoanalytic theory is "quite groundless."
- 37 Sri Aurobindo provides a detailed account of the nature of the superconscious in *The Life Divine* (CWSA 21–2) and *The Synthesis of Yoga* (CWSA 23–4).
- 38 Akhilananda remarks, "The writings of Romain Rolland, Professor Hocking, and others prove that the dynamic ideas of Sri Ramakrishna have a direct influence on the world" (Akhilananda 1948: 7).
- 39 "Indissociation" is the term used by the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget to refer to the failure of young children to differentiate themselves from their environments. See Colman (2003: 357). "Primitive autism" is a type of autism in which the subject displays "primitive means of relating to the environment, such as smelling and mouthing" (Siegel et al. 1986: 286).
- 40 See, for instance, Goleman (1975), Engler (1986), Baer (2003), Witkiewitz et al. (2005), and Garland, Froeliger, and Howard (2013).



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