



# A God at Play? Reexamining the Concept of *Līlā* in Hindu Philosophy and Theology

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**Abstract** *Līlā*, as a concept and term, has a long and complex history in Sanskritic Hinduism, yet, irrespective of context, it has routinely been translated by words signifying “play,” “sport,” and “game” in English and other languages. Focusing mainly on the term’s philosophical and theological connotations in Sanskritic Hinduism, this article challenges these facile and often misleading renderings. It analyzes the semantic functions and nuances of this deceptively multifaceted and important term over a range of contexts, from Vedāntic interpretations of Bādarāyaṇa’s *Brahmasūtra* 2.1.33 to the term’s meaning over a wide range of occurrences in Hindu tradition. In the process, attention is also given to the associated terms *krīḍā* and *khelā*.

**Keywords** *līlā* · *krīḍā* · *khelā* · play · sport · game · Kṛṣṇa-*līlā* · Goddess · *avatāra*

The semantics of *līlā* in Hindu philosophical and theological thought, which we shall focus on in this article, is an intriguing and, as we shall see, deceptively complex topic. The term represents an important concept, as perhaps one of its earliest and most familiar occurrences in this context—namely, in *Brahmasūtra* 2.1.33<sup>1</sup>—indicates.

But first, we must raise the crucial question of the term’s translation, for it is here that a significant problem of disseminating its semantic complexity arises.<sup>2</sup> As is well known, the following renderings into English are among the most common:

<sup>1</sup> Or *Brahmasūtra* 2.1.34, depending on how the *sūtra* is numbered.

<sup>2</sup> “*Līlā*, as with many rich Hindu terms and concepts, defies any easy or direct translation into English” (Schweig 2010: 793a).

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play, sport, game, and pastime.<sup>3</sup> However, we cannot start our inquiry into the philosophical and theological connotations of *līlā* by *a priori* taking for granted that any or all of these translations are semantically correct or even adequate for our specific purposes, which in fact scholars tend to do. A more careful approach seems to have been adopted by David R. Kinsley in his well-known work, *The Divine Player: A Study of Kṛṣṇa Līlā* (1979): “The gods act, but their acts cannot be understood simply within the structures of theological or ethical systems. In their complete otherness, their actions can only be called *līlā*, which *may* be translated as ‘sport,’ ‘play,’ or ‘dalliance’ ” (xi; emphasis added).<sup>4</sup>

We may now ask, is *līlā* acceptably translated by “play” and the other terms mentioned here in the contexts we are considering? And we may also inquire: to which “gods” at “play” is allusion being made in the statement above? Kinsley focuses on Kṛṣṇa, whom he also dubs a “god.” He does not distinguish here between the gods as *devas*—as inhabitants of the heavenly realms who are also often depicted in Hindu narrative as interacting with humans (whence they are not that “completely other”)—and the transcendent, ultimate or Supreme Reality (or “God”), sometimes referred to as Brahman, sometimes as *īśvara* or *puruṣottama*, and sometimes by a personal name,<sup>5</sup> this Reality being a more fitting candidate in Hindu theology for being described as completely other. What is *līlā* in the context of this God’s activity, which is a significant focus of our inquiry? In the context of Kṛṣṇa as *svayaṃ bhagavān*, or God Himself, *līlā*, however, may well be translated as “play”; we shall come to this in due course.

Or consider Bettina Bäumer’s translation of verse 9.2 from the *Svacchanda Tantra*,<sup>6</sup> “one of the main sources of Kashmir Śaivism,” describing “the [Supreme] Lord’s activity as playful”: “Oh Shining One (Goddess), the producer of creation and dissolution has issued forth from the heart of Bhairava, the great God, *as he plays*” (1995: 36; emphasis added).<sup>7</sup>

If we think in terms of such renderings as “play,” etc., for the divine creative act, are we not *a priori* jumping to conclusions concerning the semantic intent and content of the term *līlā*—all the more so since, as Johan Huizinga points out in his book *Homo Ludens* (though this would also apply to the other renderings for *līlā* mentioned earlier), “When speaking of play as something known to all, and when trying to analyse or define the idea expressed in that word, we must always bear in mind that the

<sup>3</sup> Supposed synonyms and equivalences of these terms are invariably used in other languages. We shall assume that the reader has a working understanding of what “play” and the other renderings mean. This assumption will allow us to query the adequacy of these stereotypical renderings for *līlā* in the Sanskrit settings that concern us in the course of our discussion. On a more comprehensive note, *līlā* can stretch to a more extensive semantic range in broader parlance. Monier-Williams’ *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* includes “semblance, pretense, disguise[.]...charm, beauty[.]...loveliness” and “a kind of metre” for meanings of the term (2003: 903b–c).

<sup>4</sup> I take this as a permissive use of “may” rather than one intimating doubt.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Śiva (or Maheśvara), Viṣṇu (–Nārāyaṇa), Mahādevī, etc., depending on the tradition being considered.

<sup>6</sup> *mahābhairavadevasya kṛṣṇamānasya bhāminī | sṛṣṭisaṃhārakartā hrdayāt tu vinirgataḥ ||*

<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, I have not been able to get hold of Bäumer’s doctoral dissertation on the concept of *līlā* in Hinduism. Still, I have been glad to read some distillation of her thoughts on the subject in her essay.

idea as we know it is defined and perhaps limited by the word we use for it” (1955: 28). This may well be the case, but for our purposes we cannot accept such a semantic *fait accompli*. To start our inquiry into the meaning of *līlā* by exploring the semantics of the English word “play” and its putative substitutes would be to begin at the wrong end. We are directly interested in decoding—in English—the meaning of the Sanskrit term *līlā* in different Hindu philosophical/theological contexts, not in matching senses of *līlā* with various connotations of “sport,” “play,” “game,” etc. To attempt the latter would imply that these English terms are uncontroversial as standard translations, and, as we hope to show, this is far from being the case.

These renderings themselves cover a wide and subtle range of meanings and must be subject to caveats if they are to serve any worthwhile purpose as translations.<sup>8</sup> One of the aims of this article is to indicate that it is a methodological *faux pas* to lump these terms—“play,” “sport,” “pastime,” “game”—together, irrespective of context, as if they were interchangeable translations for *līlā*. This is a mistake precisely because each has a semantic range that does not neatly accord with its fellows or with the meaning of *līlā* in the latter’s occurrences under review.

Further, as the following example illustrates, it is easy to jump to conclusions in applying one or other of these translations. In his famous work, *The Crown of Hinduism* (1913), the Christian apologist J. N. Farquhar writes:

Śaṅkara, Māṇikka Vāchakar, Rāmānuja, and all the other authorities use the word *līlā*, sport, to denote the activity of the Supreme in the production of the world. All the theophanies of Śiva to his worshippers are also spoken of as sport. Hence, they were expected to be whimsical, playful, wild, unaccountable. They show no settled purpose, and come under no law.... This is the point of view from which we can understand Kṛishṇa’s boyish knaveries and his immoralities among the milkmaids. He was an incarnate god, and therefore all his actions were bound to be *līlā*, sport. If they were full of fun and amusement, they were worthy of a divinity.... To bind him down to moral action would be to deprive him of his divine freedom.... These considerations show how far Indian thought is from conceiving the Supreme as the Creator (406–7).

So does this mean that *līlā* as “sport” (or is it “play” or “game” or “pastime” or “dalliance”?) is always “wild” or “unaccountable” or “whimsical” or lacking in “settled purpose,” outside the pale of any fixed law? There is much to contend with in Farquhar’s rather dismissive account of “the Supreme” in Hindu theology and the creative act as “sport,” namely, *līlā*—indeed, the word “travesty” comes to mind. Yet, an interpretation or translation of *līlā* lacking in nuance is not uncommon in the literature, even among reputed scholars of Hinduism, not least on the assumption that such putative renderings, as mentioned earlier, all mean the same thing. For his part, Farquhar has latched on to a supposed connotation of *līlā* that suits his apologetic purposes and has then exploited it in jumping to his conclusion. In this light, it is hard to see how his denunciation can then allow him to “crown” (to revert to the title of his

<sup>8</sup> Those who are interested in the place of “play” in our lives with an emphasis on western or Christian contexts can begin with Huizinga (1955); Cox (1969); Neale (1964, 1969); and Edgar (2017).

book) some preferred Hindu notion of the Supreme with the theological “fulfillment” of a Christian understanding! Nevertheless, we shall use Farquhar’s description of *līlā* as something of a negative template to question its implications.

To begin with, our use of the term “sport” (or “game” or “play”) in common parlance does not invariably signify action that is “whimsical” or “wild” or “unaccountable,” as implied by Farquhar. So much of what we describe as “play” and “sport” (for example, competitive games) is planned, purposeful, controlled, and accountable, both in its execution and organization. This is reflected in the increasingly widespread use of the term “playbook,” apparently quite a recent lexical invention originating in the United States.<sup>9</sup> The playbook provides options for strategizing a game/sport/play by considering appropriate tactics, clarifies players’ roles, and integrates a team’s efforts, thereby enhancing the chances for success. It is intended as a serious term, and it does not preside over an activity that is “whimsical” or “unaccountable” in any way. I need not labor the point. Nevertheless, this indicates how malleable the terms “play” etc., are and how contentious for meeting our objective.

Nor is it directly to my purpose to provide an *apologia* for some Hindu conception of deity. However, our conclusions may lead some to a more mature and accurate understanding of God in Hindu theology than Farquhar is prepared to admit. Part of the objective of this article is to indicate how susceptible to misunderstanding and indeed to manipulation standard translations of *līlā* can be. But let us press on with our inquiry into the meaning of *līlā* in Hindu religious thought.

Perhaps it would help to consider etymology at this point. Here are the views of two distinguished scholars in Sanskrit. Diwakar Acharya, Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at the University of Oxford, ventures the following comments:

For the derivation of *līlā*, there is more than one solution suggested: from the root *lal/laḍ* (*lalati/lalayati/lālayati*), or *lī* (*layate/lināti*), or from Pāli *līhā* or *kīḷā* (<*krīḍā*)....I am happy with the first suggestion, from the root *lal/laḍ*, because we have a few derivatives from this root: *līlā* itself, *lalita/laḍita*, *lālita*, *lālana* (vs *tāḍana*), *lalāma*, perhaps even *lalāṭa*, and also NIA [New Indo-Aryan] *lālā*, *lāl*, *lāḍ-pyāra*, all of which suggest [some] playful, gracious, aesthetic move particularly of a baby or anyone soft and delicate. There is also the personal name *Lalla/Lallā*. Anyway, *līlā* does not appear in the Vedic corpus,<sup>10</sup> and

<sup>9</sup> *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary* dates its origin to 1967.

<sup>10</sup> Jacob’s *A Concordance to the Principal Upanishads and Bhagavadgītā* (1891) has no entry under *līlā*. This does not mean that the broad idea of what we know as play does not appear in the Veda. Hospital quotes Coomaraswamy (1941: 99) to following effect: “The notion of a divine ‘playing’ repeatedly occurs in [the] RV [*Rg Veda*]” (1995: 24). He continues: “[Coomaraswamy] mentions twenty-eight occurrences of *krīḷ*, ‘to play,’ and proceeds to give details....He argues that the idea of divine play is fully represented in the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavadgītā*, though the only actual use of a word meaning play is in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.12.2 [in most transcriptions of this text, 8.12.3], where the disembodied *ātman* is described as ‘laughing, sporting [the term used is *krīḍan*], having enjoyment with women or chariots or friends, not remembering the appendage of this body’ ” (1995: 24, citing Hume’s translation of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 1931: 272).

when it appears in Suśruta and the Epics, it is associated with children and ladies.<sup>11</sup>

John D. Smith, who taught Sanskrit at the University of Cambridge for many years, is less sanguine:

On *līlā*, I don't know what root—if any—it is derived from, and I can't see much point in trying to decide the issue. Do I sense an argument from etymology here? ...It's all nonsense, you know: words mean what they mean, not what their earlier cognates meant (or are thought to have meant). Does it help...to know that the Gothic cognate for "yesterday," *gistradagis*, meant "tomorrow"?<sup>12</sup>

No doubt, the vagaries of etymological derivation do not apply equally to all target terms. Still, it does appear that, at best, *līlā* has an uncertain etymology, apparently implying some "playful, gracious" or "aesthetic" action or move, primarily associated with children or genteel women, at least in some not particularly philosophical/theological texts such as the epics. But our interest is mainly focused (though not exclusively) on philosophical/theological connotations of the term.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, it will be helpful to keep this range of semantic content in mind.

Acharya makes an important observation here. He links *līlā* to the Sanskrit term *krīḍā*, which in Monier-Williams' *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* is translated as "sport, play, pastime, amusement, amorous sport" (2003: 321c).<sup>14</sup> Since some Hindu theologians link the terms *līlā* and *krīḍā* when explaining the genre of literature called Kṛṣṇa-*līlā* and others appear to prefer *krīḍā* to *līlā* in such contexts as Trika Śaivism, we may then conclude that at least some of the issues that apply in translating *līlā* in philosophical and theological contexts, apply also in translating *krīḍā*. In this article, however, we shall not focus on *krīḍā* to the same extent.

Acharya's statement raises another issue: the association of *līlā* with gender. Is *līlā* best understood when associated, implicitly or explicitly, with a specific gender? Or does its use tend to come across as gender neutral? We shall be able to offer a

<sup>11</sup> Diwakar Acharya, personal correspondence, September 30, 2020. See also under *līlā* in Mayrhofer's *Kurzgefasstes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen* (1976: 104–5), where the etymological tone is also tentative.

<sup>12</sup> John D. Smith, personal correspondence, March 8, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Thus, our focus in this article is not on the aesthetics of *līlā* in terms of such topics as dance (or artistic endeavor in general), "humor" or sentiment (*rasa*) such as *hāsyā* (mirth), or (with particular reference to Advaita) *māyā*, etc. Such associations of *līlā* await further treatment. However, on *līlā* and artistic or "creative" endeavors, one could start with Butler's article, "Creation, Art, and Lila" (1960: 8–12), and on *līlā* in relation to *māyā*, let us be content with quoting from Eliade (1965: 36–37): "To tear the veil of *māyā* and pierce the secret of cosmic illusion amounts primarily to understanding its character as 'play'—that is to say, *free, spontaneous activity of the divine*.... The paradox of Indian [*sic*] thought is that the idea of liberty [namely, final deliverance from *saṃsāra*] is so concealed by the idea of *māyā*—that is of illusion and slavery—that it takes a long detour to find it. It is enough, however, to discover the deep meaning of *māyā*—divine 'play'—to be already on the way to [final] deliverance" (cited in Kinsley 1979: 18; emphasis added). I draw attention here only to Eliade's awareness that "play" is not to be understood in its ordinary sense, else he would not have (i) qualified his use of the term by the words we have emphasized in italics and (ii) placed the term in inverted commas on both the occasions he uses it. If "play" is acknowledged, then, to be such a contentious translation of *līlā* in so many settings, why use it as a *routine* translation, not least in philosophical/theological contexts?

<sup>14</sup> In its primary senses, *līlā* is given a similar range of meanings in Monier-Williams.

comment on this issue after our analysis at the end of the article. Finally, is our understanding of *līlā* best associated with a particular age group, for example, that of children? This is a question whose answer will clarify as our discussion develops, though we shall give a fuller response again at the end of this article.

## I

Let us advert now to the occurrence of *līlā* in the *Brahmasūtras*, a text generally dated to the early centuries CE. It is through this text, I believe, interpreted by Hindu theologians as a gnomic condensation of the teachings, particularly of the Upaniṣads, that the term *līlā* first springs significantly onto the philosophical-theological stage.<sup>15</sup>

*Brahmasūtra* 2.1.33<sup>16</sup> reads as follows: *lokavat tu līlākaivalyam*, which can be rendered laconically as: “However, [it is] but *līlā*, as [occurs] in daily experience.” What is but *līlā*? And in what sense is it so? It is generally agreed by Vedāntic theologians who tend to “own” this text, that this section of the second Part of the *Brahmasūtras*, in which *līlā* appears, is concerned to show, in the teeth of various objections and opponents’ views, that Brahman, the Supreme Reality (variously named in devotional Hinduism), is the intelligent material and efficient cause of the world.<sup>17</sup> The previous *sūtra* (2.1.32: *na prayojanavattvāt*) objects to this position: “[Brahman is] not [the cause of the world] because there must be some motive [for such causation].” The objection is as follows: The Vedāntin maintains that

<sup>15</sup> Frost seems to endorse this observation when he says: “While there were approximations to the idea of *līlā* in earlier Hindu religious literature, even in the Vedic age,....Bādarāyaṇa’s account and subsequent commentaries on the passage were to have a pervasive influence in the culture” (1998: 393). Compare also Sax: “The first use of *līlā* as a theological term is in the *Vedāntasūtras* of Bādarāyaṇa at 2.1.33, where the author maintains that the Supreme Lord creates the world ‘merely in play’ (*līlākaivalyam*)” (1995a: 4). Note that the *Manusmṛti*, generally dated to the early centuries CE, expresses a similar idea in 1.80, but in terms of *krīḍā*: *manvantarāṇy asaṃkhyāni sargaḥ saṃhāra eva ca | krīḍann iva it kurute paramēṣṭhī punaḥ punaḥ ||* Bühler translates this as: “The Manvantaras, the creations and destructions (of the world, are) numberless; sporting, as it were, Brahman [for *paramēṣṭhī*] repeats this again and again” (1886: 22). In his commentary on this verse, the *Manvarthamuktāvalī*, Kullūka Bhaṭṭa (ca. 1000 CE?) remarks: “[The Supreme Being] Prajāpati produces the cycle of creation and destruction repeatedly as if playing (*krīḍan iva*). Now, *krīḍā* is an activity done for joy (*sukhārthā hi pravṛttiḥ krīḍā*), but because [the Supreme Being] is completely fulfilled (*āptakāmatvāt*) and does not act to attain happiness, the term ‘as it were’ is used, since *paramēṣṭhī* [namely, He who subsists as the Supreme Being] means He who subsists in the Highest Place as of right (*anāvṛttalakṣaṇa-*). Since the Supreme Self is without [selfish] motive, if you were to ask why He engages in the creation and so on, one must reply, ‘[He acts] as if in play’ (*līlayaiva*)” (my translation). See the *Manvarthamuktāvalī*, page 22, for the Sanskrit. Kullūka is perfectly aware that *krīḍā/līlā* here are being used figuratively and not literally: hence “as if in play.” But what exactly does it mean to say that the Supreme Being creates “as if in play”? We are not told. One of our tasks in this article is to offer an explanation. Note too, *en passant*, how “*krīḍā*’s” use in Manu is more or less interchangeable with “*līlā*’s” use in Bādarāyaṇa. Kullūka seems to confirm this observation by his reference to *krīḍā* and *līlā* in the same passage quoted above. All translations in this article are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>16</sup> In the enumeration of many leading Vedāntin theologians. For Madhvācārya, whom we shall consider in due course, this *sūtra* falls under 2.1.34.

<sup>17</sup> What this means from the viewpoint of one of the leading early Vedāntin theologians, Rāmānuja, I discuss in my book *The Face of Truth* (Lipner 1986, see especially Chapter 5).

Brahman, as Supreme Being, is perfect with all desires realized (*āptakāma*). In that case, Brahman can have no reasonable motive for producing some “added,” finite, imperfect mode of being, like the world with its constituents. And since creation requires a motive, Brahman cannot be the cause of the world.<sup>18</sup> *Sūtra* 2.1.33[34] is interpreted by the Vedāntins as the first move in countering this objection from (Brahman’s supposed) need for a motive, namely, “it,” that is, Brahman’s action in creating the world can be said to be *līlā*, analogous to the way this occurs in everyday life.

Each of the leading Vedāntin theologians of the past has produced a commentary on the text of the *Brahmasūtras* shaped in terms of his philosophical-theological viewpoint. However, they all agree that Brahman is the originative cause of this world and that Brahman has no gainful or self-interested motive for producing it. The text intimates, they continue, that Brahman creates the world in the way we see specific individuals engage in *līlā* in their daily lives. We can illustrate this response by adverting to the views of three leading early Vedāntins: Śaṅkara the monist (eighth century CE), whose major commentary on the *Brahmasūtras* is one of the first to have come down to us; Rāmānuja (eleventh century CE), whose extensive commentary on the *Brahmasūtras* played a decisive role in establishing the Śrīvaiṣṇava *sampradāya*’s (or tradition’s) take on this text; and Madhva (thirteenth century CE), the *ācārya* of the Dvaita or dualist school of Vedānta. These three thinkers, each of whom approaches the topic from a different perspective, will give us an adequate range of views to consider within the Vedāntic tradition.

Śaṅkara is keen to refute the objection that Brahman cannot be the sole originative cause of the world since such a creational act would require a motive (*prayojana*). The opponent (*pūrvapakṣin*) points out (in 2.1.32) that producing this world-egg (*jagadbimba*) is a significant undertaking (*gurutarasamrambhā*). Look around you, he argues: no intelligent person takes on even a small task without thinking about it beforehand and reckoning how it can serve his purpose (*ātmaprayojana*). So, what more for such a significant task as creating the world! You say that the Supreme Self is intelligence itself, he continues, so how can It produce the world without some motive that serves Its purpose, in which case It cannot be completely self-fulfilled (*paritrpta*) as the Perfect Being should be. Therefore, *either* Brahman, namely, the Supreme Self, is an imperfect being in so far as It needs to produce the world for some self-serving reason, *or* if It is to be regarded as perfect and self-fulfilled, It cannot be the creator of the world.

Śaṅkara responds by arguing that the objector has missed an alternative. The Supreme Self/Brahman is perfect and inherently fulfilled and *has* created the world,

<sup>18</sup> I shall use the word “creation” in this article not in the technical sense used in Christian (Scholastic) philosophical theology, namely, *productio rei ex nihilo sui et subjecti*, that is, the production of something from absolutely no prior ontological substratum of that thing, but more loosely as “*deriving* ontologically from the Supreme Being.” However, it is to be noted that if, from an alternative angle, “creation” presupposes complete ontological *dependence* on God for its object’s both coming into and remaining in being, then “creation” in this strong sense can also be shown to apply in Vedāntic theology. See my article “The Christian and Vedāntic Theories of Originative Causality: A Study in Transcendence and Immanence” (Lipner 1978).



but without a *self-serving* intention. Brahman acts analogously to the way people engage in *līlā* in our world. He answers under 2.1.33:

Just as in the world a king or one of his ministers who has every desire fulfilled (*āptaiṣaṇa-*) engages in their pleasure-halls (*krīḍā-vihāreṣu*) in activities that are of the nature of *līlā* alone (*kevalam līlārūpāḥ pravṛttayah*) without regard for motive of any kind, or just as one breathes in and out naturally (*svabhāvād*) without any external motive, so the Lord too, naturally (*svabhāvād*) and without any ulterior motive, engages *līlā*-like [in producing the world]. For one cannot impute [an ulterior] motive of any kind to the Lord whether this be based on reason or scripture.<sup>19</sup>

The point here is that “the Lord” (*īśvara*) is the originative cause of this complex world for no self-serving purpose, analogous to the way someone who has all his needs satisfied, for example, a great king, and who wishes to relax, engages without ulterior motive in recreational activity in his pleasure-hall (*krīḍā-vihāra*), which, of course, a king always has at his disposal! Further, such activities may appear to have no ulterior motive, but they are not necessarily “wild”; *līlā* here is an expression of spontaneous, uncompelled action, which produces no stressful exertion. It functions, in a way that is characteristic of the Hindu syllogism, as the *drṣṭānta*, or “illustration” of the argument, with a semantic content that is capable of being indefinitely exploited. We shall comment further on this in due course.

Śaṅkara’s reference to “the Lord” (*īśvara*) here is a distinctive feature of his Advaitic (namely, ontologically non-dual) philosophical standpoint. For Śaṅkara, a personal God (*īśvara*) exists only from the phenomenal point of view, that is, from the point of view of *avidyā*, or congenital ignorance of the true nature of things. From the standpoint of Absolute Being, only the perfect, self-fulfilled Brahman truly exists, nothing else. So, in the context of Śaṅkara’s explanation, the meaning of *līlā* is confined to the limitations of the sphere of empirical experience with regard to a Reality, namely, Brahman, which *per se*, does not belong to this sphere.

“The scriptural text about creation does not apply to the Supreme Reality as such (*paramārthaviṣayā*),” avers Śaṅkara, “because it refers to the sphere of the everyday experience of name and form produced by ignorance (*avidyākālpiṭānāmārūpavyavahāragocaratvāt*). Moreover, we must remember that its intention is to proclaim that Brahman is the Self of all being” (under 2.1.33).<sup>20</sup>

So, for Śaṅkara, from the absolute point of view, only Brahman exists, while, from the empirical standpoint, where *avidyā* or congenital ignorance operates, Brahman must be known as the personal Lord or as God, who is the originative cause of the finite universe which He creates by way of *līlā*. The argument so far is that from the viewpoint of everyday, ignorance-bound experience (*vyavahāra*), Brahman, when perceived as the Lord, acts just as a mighty king might act during recreation (*līlā*) in

<sup>19</sup> See the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* of Śaṅkara, page 394, for the Sanskrit text.

<sup>20</sup> See the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* of Śaṅkara, page 395, for the Sanskrit text.



his pleasure-hall, namely, without any gainful motive. *Līlā*, for Śaṅkara, is an activity integral to the evanescent reality that characterizes phenomenal existence.

Śaṅkara takes the example further when he says that Brahman produces the world as spontaneously as when a (healthy) person breathes in and breathes out. We do not breathe in and out with any ulterior motive in mind. It comes naturally, freely (*svabhāvād*). As we have seen, Śaṅkara uses this Sanskrit term more than once. It is in Brahman's nature to create freely, just as it is in our nature to breathe in and out spontaneously. Through these two examples taken together semantically—recreational sport and breathing in and out—Śaṅkara continues to excavate the semantic content of *līlā* concerning the creative action of Brahman as personal Lord. The Lord's creative act is conscious, premeditated, as when a king engages in a game in his pleasure-hall. But it is spontaneous in the sense that it is not forced in any way or subservient to some ulterior purpose; it springs freely from the power of His nature (*svabhāvād*) just as breathing in and out springs from our natural constitution (*svabhāvād*).

If one were to object that producing the world is a tremendous undertaking and so must imply both effort and needful purpose, the answer is that this cannot be the case with Brahman as Lord because His power is unlimited (*aparimitaśaktitvād*). Creating the world is a mighty undertaking only from the finite creature's point of view; from the standpoint of the Lord, whose nature consists of infinite power, producing the world implies no effort or compulsive purpose whatsoever. It is easily done, springing from the unlimited power of the Lord's proper nature (*svarūpa*). From our argument so far, a syllogism can be tentatively framed as follows: When one acts naturally (*svabhāvād*), that is, spontaneously, as in certain instances of play in the world, one can be said to have no self-serving or ulterior motive for doing so. Brahman acts naturally, spontaneously, as in some instances of play in our world in creating the world. Therefore, Brahman can be said to create the world without any ulterior motive.

But Śaṅkara anticipates a further objection from the *pūrvapakṣin*. There may be no apparent motive for the Lord's production of the world, the latter concedes, but perhaps, as in the case of *līlā* in daily life (for example, when we wish to develop a friendship or relieve stress), there may well be a subtly *hidden* personal motive for the creative act. In that case, the Lord would not be creating the world without some (covert) self-serving objective. Śaṅkara answers: "Even if one supposed some subtle motive (*kiṃcit sūkṣmaṃ prayojanaṃ utprekṣyeta*) to operate in everyday actions of *līlā*, one could not suppose this to be the case here [that is, when the Lord creates], because scripture says that the Lord has all his desires fulfilled (*āptakāma*-)." <sup>21</sup> There would be no logical room for any subtle motive in the case of the perfectly self-fulfilled Lord's production of the world.

Very well, rejoins the opponent, somewhat desperate now. Mad or intoxicated or excitable (*unmatta*-) individuals can act randomly, he says brightly, with or without an ulterior motive. (Do we not say, "Don't play the fool/lunatic!" when we see someone perform what seems to be a random act?) So perhaps the Lord acts randomly in the way mad, intoxicated, or excitable individuals act, albeit without

<sup>21</sup> See the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* of Śaṅkara, page 395, for the Sanskrit text.

ulterior motive, when He creates the world. Śaṅkara gives this rather pathetic suggestion short shrift. We know, he responds, that this cannot be the case: “Scripture says the Lord is omniscient, all-knowing (*sarvajña*).” Such an agent cannot act randomly in the way suggested. We see that a further implication of Śaṅkara’s understanding of the term *līlā* here is that it may connote freedom from compulsion, but not randomness. In other words, to counter a remark made by Farquhar in his denunciatory statement, for Śaṅkara, in the context of the divine creation, *līlā* as a performative act is not “whimsical” or “wild”; it serves some “settled purpose,” only not some purpose that benefits the Creator. We shall see now what this settled purpose is.

This comes out in Śaṅkara’s commentary on the next verse of the *Brahmasūtra*, 2.1.34, which may be rendered as follows: “[If you say] favoritism or cruelty [motivates the Lord to create, the answer is] No, for He has regard [to certain considerations] as [scripture] teaches (*vaiṣamyānairghrṇye na sāpekṣatvāt tathā hi darśayati*).” The objector now adopts a different tack. He argues that we see about us in everyday life that the human condition, like that of other living creatures, is unequal. And it is the Lord who creates such an unequal world. In this creation, he continues, the gods are happy, animals, etc., are rather miserable, while humans lie somewhere in between. This gamut of experience implies some form of favoritism and prejudice on the Lord’s part in his underlying objective for creating the world.

Once again, Śaṅkara absolves the Lord from succumbing to this kind of creational motivation:

If the Lord had no regard for any supervening considerations (*nirapekṣa*) and simply brought about the creation [of the world], these two culpabilities might apply, namely, favoritism and cruelty. But he doesn’t produce the world in this way. For the Lord does have supervening considerations on the basis of which he creates the world: He has regard to the [existing] merit and demerit (*dharmādharmā*) of the beings that are produced.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, in the continuous cycle of world creations, the Lord looks to the *karma* of the variety of beings (gods, humans, animals, etc.) involved in each world production. He creates a world appropriate to the expending—and, where applicable, recalibration—of their *karma*. The Lord establishes each world, not from some personal need, but with observance or respect for the outworking of *karma* in mind.<sup>23</sup> For Śaṅkara, the semantic connotations of *līlā* do include a “settled purpose” then and do “come under” some law (to revert again to Farquhar’s terminology), namely, the law of *karma*, rather than connote a “wild” and “whimsical” act.

<sup>22</sup> See the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* of Śaṅkara, pages 395–96, for the Sanskrit text.

<sup>23</sup> The *karma* of others, of course, and not His own, for God is not subject to the law of *karma*, as van Buitenen points out in a note to his translation of *līlā* in Rāmānuja’s *Vedārthasaṃgraha*: “the important conception of God’s sport is best understood by its opposite *karman*-. It contains a free action (an action not resulting from a preceding action in an endless retrogressive succession) performed to...no purpose that of necessity would result in new phalas [namely, fruit of the action(s) performed] for the agent to enjoy or suffer” (1956: 192n83).

Nevertheless, it is vital to be clear about what is meant by our terminology here. We have used such expressions as “settled purpose” and “objective” to explain the divine creative act. Still, as we have said before, this must not be understood to signify an intentionality on the part of the Creator that seeks to fulfill some (personal) need or requirement. In producing, conserving, etc., the world, the divine Agent has no *ulterior* motive or objective. The Divine Being creates freely and spontaneously; the (pending) *karma* of the produced beings can be said to act merely as a guiding principle. Hence the *prayojana* (“motive”) of *Brahmasūtra* 2.1.32 must be taken to mean “ulterior” or “gainful” motive. As the Vedāntin commentators make clear, the Creator has no motive or objective of this kind.

In this light, we cannot agree with the italicized portions in the statement below made by Paul Devanandan (1950: 220–21):

[God’s] action in the world, instead of being the laborious working out of a continuous purpose, is unself-conscious, un strenuous and...*of the nature of playful sport*. The idea behind such a belief is that we must not constrain God to labour from a sense of need or attribute to Him an overwhelming desire to accomplish some definite task. He needs nothing *and is not troubled with the burden of cosmic responsibility* (cited in Frost 1998: 394; emphasis added).

Śaṅkara’s insistence (as that of other leading Vedāntins) that the Almighty has regard, in repeatedly producing and destroying the world, for the outworking of its denizens’ *karma* does entail, in human terms—in contrast to Devanandan’s affirmation—that God is “troubled with the burden of cosmic responsibility.” *Līlā*, in the creational context, does not entail an act that is devoid of responsibility. On the contrary, though the act of creation may be “un strenuous” and imply that the Almighty “needs nothing,” it entails God’s regard for implementing the law of *karma* and, as such, is a responsible act. As we shall see, the next theologian who enters our discussion, the Vedāntin Rāmānuja, amplifies this sense of responsibility by bringing in the concept of the divine *avatāra*, or God’s descent into the created realm, in his explanation of the divine *līlā*.

Albeit with an eye to his philosophical-theological standpoint, Rāmānuja follows Śaṅkara’s lead in interpreting these two aphorisms of the *Brahmasūtras*. His commentary under 2.1.33 in the *Śrī Bhāṣya* is brief. For Rāmānuja, the Highest Brahman is the personal Lord who has a name—Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa. Further, this God and the gamut of created beings continue to exist as individually distinct from each other (potentially and actually, depending on the particular phase of divine creation under consideration).<sup>24</sup> So he remarks:

[Brahman], who is completely self-fulfilled (*paripūrṇa-*) and whose desires are all realized (*avāptasamastakāma-*), creates this differentiated world consisting of a mix of conscious and non-conscious beings dependent on His will, with no other motive (*prayojana*) than *līlā*. Just as we see that in this world some great king—lord of the earth with its seven continents and full of heroism, courage, and might—engages in a game of balls and the like for the

<sup>24</sup> See my book *The Face of Truth* (Lipner 1986: Chapter 5) for an explanation.

sole purpose of *līlā*, so it cannot be denied that the motive (*prayojana*) for the highest Brahman's production, conservation, and destruction of the world, which is subject entirely to His will, is nothing but *līlā*.<sup>25</sup>

Rāmānuja's example here, which likens the perfect Brahman's intention (or "motive") for cyclically creating, conserving, and then destroying the world to that of a mighty king who wants for nothing and is under no constraints, playing a game of balls (*kanduka*) purely for *līlā*, is but an instantiation of Śaṅkara's example, in his commentary on this *sūtra*, of a great king engaging in activities in his pleasure-hall for the sake of *līlā* alone. As in the case of Śaṅkara, for Rāmānuja, the Lord creates with no gainful motive in view. It is the expression of His *līlā*, His uncompelled will or desire. *Līlā* here refers to a spontaneous act, and it is not for us to try to fathom this decision of the infinite Being.

This helps explain references to the concept of *līlā* in Rāmānuja's lengthy commentary on *Brahmasūtra* 1.4.27 (namely, *pariṇāmāt*: "Because of modification/transformation"). Rāmānuja interprets this text as explaining how and why the Divine Being, which, following the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.1.1, he acknowledges is perfectly self-contained and fulfilled, proceeds to create by "transforming" Itself again and again into the multiform world(s) in which we find ourselves, by desiring: "Let Me become many, let Me bring forth" (2.6.1). Here is George Thibaut's translation of Rāmānuja's commentary:

The highest Self, which in itself is of the nature of unlimited knowledge and bliss, has for its body all sentient and non-sentient beings—*instruments of sport for him as it were*—in so subtle a form that they may be called non-existing; and as they are his body he may be said to consist of them....*Then desirous of providing himself with an infinity of playthings of all kinds* he, by a series of steps...leading down to the elements in their gross state, so modifies himself as to have those elements for his body—when he is said to consist of them—and thus appears in the form of our world containing...all intelligent and non-intelligent things, from gods down to plants and stones (1904: 405; emphasis added).<sup>26</sup>

The Sanskrit for the two italicized portions in the excerpt above is as follows: (i) *svalīloparakaraṇa*- and (ii) *vicitrānantakrīḍanakopāditsayā*.

Concerning the first phrase there is no equivalent of "as it were" in the Sanskrit; this uncalled-for addition intimates that Thibaut may have experienced some hesitancy in translating the passage as he did. And well he might, for with *upakaraṇa* signifying "a means to an end," the text is saying that all creaturely sentient and non-sentient beings (which function as the "body" of the Highest Self) become in their "evolved" or manifest state the means of Its *līlā*, not of Its "sport"—there is no lighthearted or competitive activity involved here—and of expressing the supreme Spirit's uncompelled, creative action. This makes much more sense in context. As to our second phrase: with the same object in view, we translate it as

<sup>25</sup> See the *Śrī Bhāṣya*, page 462, for the Sanskrit text.

<sup>26</sup> See the *Śrī Bhāṣya*, page 390–93, for the Sanskrit text. "Body" here has a technical sense for Rāmānuja. See my *The Face of Truth* (Lipner 1986, especially Chapter 7).

follows: “Because of Its wish (*upāditsayā*) to have any number of different stimuli for *krīḍā*, namely, Its effortless action (so *krīḍanaka*), the Highest Self by a series of steps,” etc. Though *krīḍanaka* can indeed mean “toy” or “plaything,” it has a technical sense here, the *ka* suffix indicating the function of *enabling* *krīḍa*, or effortless action (rather than “play”), to occur. Hence *krīḍanaka* here does not mean, “plaything.” Again, this seems to make better sense in context.<sup>27</sup> For a theologian who maintains that the descents, or *avatāras*, of the Lord occur for the welfare of the world (*jagadupakārāya*) and for relieving the burden of the earth (*bhūbhārāvata-  
raṇāya*)—see later—it seems odd to impute to Rāmānuja the view that God creates to provide himself “with an infinity of playthings of all kinds.” One should at least grant to Rāmānuja some consistency of thought in such an important matter! We shall have more to say about *līlā/krīḍā* further on as the argument develops.

Nor does Rāmānuja, when interpreting the next *Brahmasūtra* (2.1.34), which suggests that the motive of the Supreme Being for creating the world is to show partiality or disfavor towards its inhabitants, depart from the gist of Śaṅkara’s rejection of this statement in his interpretation of the *sūtra*. Rāmānuja states:

When the gods, etc. [that is, humans and animals too] are about to be created, the unequal creation that follows occurs on account of [the supreme Person] having regard to the *karma* of the conscious agents (*kṣetrajñā*) concerned. For this is what the various scriptures [that is, *śruti* and *smṛti*] demonstrate, that the appropriateness of the bodies of the gods etc., that is, of the conscious agents concerned, depends on (*sāpekṣa*) each agent’s *karma*.<sup>28</sup>

For Rāmānuja, too, God creates not capriciously or to fulfill some personal whim, but so that divine justice and mercy may be dispensed through the law of *karma*.<sup>29</sup> Rāmānuja is more forthcoming about the world as the arena for and the object of God’s *līlā* in another work, the *Vedāntasāra*, a shorter commentary on the *Brahmasūtras*. Here, under 2.1.33, we find the following comment:

For Him who is self-fulfilled, “having every desire realized” means always having the wherewithal for experiencing all personal pleasure.<sup>30</sup> Experiencing personal pleasures is different from being self-fulfilled. The three constituent qualities (*guṇa*) [of Prakṛti, the substrate of all materiality,] coupled with individual selves are the means for savoring [His] *līlā* (*līlā-rasa*), which is different from being self-fulfilled.<sup>31</sup>

The point is this: being self-fulfilled (having *ātma-trpti*), that is, lacking in nothing that makes for perfection, is the permanent state of the Supreme Person; He is self-

<sup>27</sup> This calls for similar moves when interpreting such terms in Rāmānuja’s commentary later under this *sūtra*.

<sup>28</sup> See the *Śrī Bhāṣya*, page 463, for the Sanskrit text.

<sup>29</sup> Rāmānuja argues elsewhere that the otherwise inalienable law of *karma* and rebirth may be superseded by the combination of the Lord’s compassion for the devotee and the devotee’s reciprocal devotion to the Lord.

<sup>30</sup> *asyātmatrptasyāvāptasamastakāmatvaṃ hi sadābhīmatasakalabhogopakaraṇasadbhāvaḥ* |

<sup>31</sup> See the *Vedāntasāra*, pages 160–61, for the Sanskrit text.

fulfilled by nature. If the Lord never created the world, He would continue to remain perfectly self-fulfilled and happy. But the Lord is free to engage in contingent action such as bringing about the worlds we inhabit and experience. If He does so—and He has—then He can be said to enjoy, consequently, such contingent delights or pleasures (*bhoga*) as some human votary's acts of devotion towards Him, the construction of a temple made for His worship, bestowing blessings of one sort or another on finite beings, or helping devotees overcome difficulties of various kinds. The existence or not of these contingent pleasurable experiences (*bhoga*) does not affect Brahman's essential state of fulfillment and bliss, which would remain intact regardless. And it is these contingent pleasurable experiences that constitute the sphere of *līlā* for the Lord. Savoring the contingent joys that derive from His creating the world through *līlā* is *līlā-rasa*.

As in Śaṅkara's case, Rāmānuja must now face the problem presented by *Brahmasūtra* 2.1.34: an unequal world in which some of its denizens are more or less happy and some more or less miserable. How can this be the arena for *līlā-rasa*, savoring the results of the Lord's *līlā*? The answer is not far to seek. The Lord produces the cycle of worlds with an eye to the developing *karma* of its inhabitants. Within the scope of this karmic field and its variegated outworking, there is ample opportunity for the Lord to experience particular acts of delight as described above. This savoring contingently of the pleasurable effects of His freely willed production of the universe is *līlā-rasa*.

But now we may ask: But doesn't this mean that the law of *karma* has a *deterministic* function? Isn't the Lord forced to create so that the karmic law may do its work? No, and this is the point of introducing the concept of *līlā* into the argument. We have seen that Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja affirm, in the light of scriptural texts (and this can be said of Madhva too, as we shall see), that the divine creation is an entirely spontaneously determined, unforced act, just as specific instances of "play" (*līlā*) in our everyday experience seem to be. Only once the Lord has decided to create—and this is an ongoing decision, for creation is a cyclical process—the rounds of world production take place in conformity with the pending *karma* of the beings produced from one world to the next.

Rāmānuja expands on the Lord's decision to create in a treatise called the *Vedārthasaṃgraha*. There is an interesting passage in the middle of his response to an Advaitin objector. From the viewpoint of his stance, Rāmānuja says:

Though the Supreme Brahman is a veritable ocean of noble attributes which are unlimited, excellent, and opposed to all defects, He is to be apprehended... as the inner controller (*antaryāmin*) of the whole conglomeration of conscious and non-conscious entities...which can be regarded as constituting but a fraction of His being and the sphere (*parikara*) of his *līlā*.<sup>32</sup>

Let us home in on the point that concerns us—that the world of finite beings is the "sphere (*parikara*)" of the Supreme, personal Brahman's *līlā*. It is clear from this statement that *līlā* denotes Brahman's activity in the sphere of derived—that is, Brahman-dependent—being. Engaging in *līlā* is not a *necessary* attribute of

<sup>32</sup> See the *Vedārthasaṃgraha*, pages 95–98, paragraph 42, for the Sanskrit text.

Brahman's; as perfectly self-fulfilled, the Supreme Being does not need to create and so engage in *līlā*. Rather, *līlā* makes sense only as an expression of the creative act, which *per se* is an exercise in contingency. For Rāmānuja (as for Śaṅkara and Madhva, as well as the leading Vedāntins of other schools), by invoking the contingency of the creative act—its superfluity in terms of the divine nature—*līlā* is inherently a *relational term* signifying the dependent nature of all “added” being, which derives *per se* from the Absolute Being and exists as entirely reliant on Its free will.

Rāmānuja clarifies this idea about the contingency of the divine *līlā* in another passage of the *Vedārthasaṃgraha*, important for our purposes, where he speaks of the Lord by name as He descends in one form or other, that is, as an *avatāra*, into the realm of derived being, namely, being that is an effect (*kārya*) of the divine creative act:

We should understand from those [scriptural] statements urging us to meditate upon Viṣṇu as the cause, that when [Viṣṇu] enters into the midst of an effect of His, He does so freely as an *avatāra* (*svecchāvatāra*), by way of His *līlā* (*svalīlayā*), to complete the number of entities of the particular category of effect in question, so as to benefit the world (*jagadupakārāya*). So, through *līlā*, the Highest One completed the number of gods (*deva*) by becoming Upendra [the god Indra's younger brother]; again, the Supreme Brahman freely became an *avatāra* (*svecchāvatāra*) in the form of Daśaratha's son [Rāma] to complete the number of kings of the solar dynasty, and again the Lord freely (*svecchayā*) became an *avatāra* [as Kṛṣṇa] in Vasudeva's house to complete the lunar dynasty in order to relieve the burden of the earth (*bhūbhārāvatarāṇāya*).<sup>33</sup>

These are premeditated, responsible (contra Devanandan), and voluntary (*svecchayā*, therefore contingent) actions.<sup>34</sup> They are meant for the welfare of individuals and the world (*jagadupakārāya/bhūbhārāvatarāṇāya*). As such, they are also morally meaningful actions (contra Farquhar). Such activities encompass the *līlā* of the Lord.

Vasudha Narayanan suggests another nuance of *līlā* in connection with Rāmānuja's thought. When discussing the meaning of *līlā* as qualifying the creational act in Rāmānuja's theology, she writes:

While we frequently interpret “play” as the ease with which the Lord creates, I am inclined to say that the notion of *celebration* is prominent in the writings of Rāmānuja. *Līlā* is a display of the Lord's wealth and dominion, and a joyful expression of his power and abundance (1995: 178; emphasis in the original).

<sup>33</sup> See the *Vedārthasaṃgraha*, page 138, paragraph 107, for the Sanskrit text.

<sup>34</sup> We can reinforce our interpretation that in these philosophical/theological contexts, *līlā* signifies free or voluntary action rather than “play” specifically by noting in the extract above Rāmānuja's paraphrase of the term *līlā* by *svecchā*-. The Lord appears as Upendra “through *līlā* (*līlayā*)”; then, continuing the sequence, Rāmānuja writes that the Lord becomes Rāma and Kṛṣṇa “freely” (*svecchayā*, paraphrasing *līlayā*).



Narayanan augments her interpretation by mentioning a thirteenth-century hagiography of Śrīvaiṣṇava teachers according to which:

Rāmānuja apparently was searching for the “festival image” (*utsava mūrti*) of Viṣṇu...when he “fell asleep; the Lord Tirunārāyaṇa [Viṣṇu] graciously came to his dream and said, ‘My festival [form]...is now in Delhi; [in that form I] am *delighting in play* [with the princess] in the house of the Turkish king....’ ” The Tamil words “*līlai koṇṭāṭi*” have been translated as “delighting in play.” *Koṇṭāṭutal* is “to celebrate or rejoice” in—as in celebrating a festival or *utsava*. With the word *līlā* it takes on erotic overtones, and the phrase is usually taken to mean “consorting with,” as in fact that episode makes clear in subsequent paragraphs (1995: 179; emphasis and square brackets in the original).

As to the erotic connotation that *līlā* can express, this will emerge more clearly when we discuss the term in the context of Kṛṣṇa’s relationship with his beloved, Rādhā.

We come now to Madhva. Madhva’s commentary on the text, *lokavat tu līlākaivalyam* (which in his reckoning appears as *sūtra* 2.1.34), is even shorter than Rāmānuja’s:

Just as in the world the *līlā* of dancing and singing, etc., performed by some excitable individual (*mattasya*) occurs purely through an excess of joy (*sukhodrekād eva*) and not because of reliance on some needful motive (*na tu prayojanāpekṣayā*), so it is for the Lord [when He creates the world].<sup>35</sup>

Jayatīrtha, in his *Tattvaparakāśikā*, expatiates on Madhva’s view as follows: “The Lord, filled with joy as He is (*pūrṇānando’pi bhagavān*), performs the spontaneous action (*krīḍā*) of creation and so on, to show kindness to the world (*lokānugrahāya*). There is nothing reprehensible in this.”<sup>36</sup> He has no self-serving motive for His action. And under 2.1.35 (as enumerated by Madhva)—namely, *vaiṣamyānairghrṇye na sāpekṣatvāt tathā hi darśayati*—Madhva remarks, again briefly, and also adverting to the law of *karma*: “Because [the Lord] bestows the fruit consequent on the *karma* of individuals (*karmāpekṣayā*), neither favoritism nor cruelty can be imputed to Him.”<sup>37</sup> The argument here is the same—in a (tiny) nutshell.

Thus, in the philosophical/theological viewpoints we have considered so far, *līlā* and *krīḍā* do not straightforwardly mean “play, pastime, sport,” etc. By themselves, these are highly misleading renditions and, to my mind, should not be used without

<sup>35</sup> See the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* of Madhva, pages 56–57, for the Sanskrit text. It is of interest to note that while Śaṅkara refers to the mad or intoxicated individual (*unmatta*) somewhat negatively in the mouth of the objector as a model to be rejected for God’s creation of the world, Madhva, by contrast (deliberately?) refers to the excitable individual (*matta*) on a more favorable basis to explain the creative action of the Divine Being. I am grateful to one of the Reviewers for this observation. This allows Jayatīrtha to define the divine creative action as arising from an abundance of joy or bliss.

<sup>36</sup> See the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* of Madhva, page 57, for the Sanskrit text.

<sup>37</sup> See the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* of Madhva, page 57, for the Sanskrit text.

qualification to describe the nature of the creative act.<sup>38</sup> *Such renditions would nullify or undercut other qualities simultaneously attributed to the Divine Being, such as thoughtful or premeditated (buddhipūrvaka) agency with the end of respecting the law of karma in view (implied by the use of sarvajña in some commentaries), accountability, providence and the ordered conservation of the world, and so on. Līlā, in this context, is not “playful” or “sportive” action if we are to give these terms their due. Rather, līlā implies action that is responsible though contingent, that is, it is not necessitated by intrinsic constraints of any kind in the divine agent undertaking the act. It connotes activity that is non-compulsive from an intentional point of view, action with serious purpose, that is not done for any personal, self-serving end. This is hardly “play”!*

Let us note *en passant* that Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and for that matter Madhva do not associate *līlā* in these contexts specifically with the activity of young persons or children. On the contrary, all three exemplify their use of the term with regard to men of leisure, or perhaps, with leisurely activity in general. It seems then that from their point of view, *līlā* may well be understood as an open concept in terms of age-related activity.

This brings us to a further consideration clarifying the use of *līlā* as associated with the divine creative act in the Vedāntic tradition, if not in Hinduism as such. It is common for scholars or interpreters to say that this act reflects a state of consciousness in God that *distances* Him in some way from the effect of the action. Norvin Hein puts it thus:

God in his creating and governing of the world is moved...by a free and joyous creativity that is integral to his own nature. He acts in a state of *rapt absorption* comparable to that of an artist *possessed* by his creative vision or to that of a child *caught up* in the delight of a game played *for its own sake* (1995: 13; emphasis added).

But this supposed self-absorption on the part of the Deity in the philosophical-theological understanding of the matter does not accord with the point made earlier—that God creates with an eye to the outworking of the world’s inhabitants’ *karma*. It is in this context that the world may be benefited by the arrival of the divine *avatāra* (*jagadupakārāya/bhūbhārāvataranāya*). As a responsible, creative agent who is prepared to descend into the world (*qua avatāra*), God is not detached from the fate of what He creates. When translating *līlā* in its philosophical/theological senses does it ring true to say that the actions it denotes refer to “mere play” or “sheer sport” or some self-absorbing “pastime”?<sup>39</sup> Hardly. Such blunt if routine translations do not carry the *semantic weight* of the interpretation(s) intended by our leading Vedāntins.

We are now well placed to take up another objection often made against Hindu understandings of God and aired by Rachel Fell McDermott in her lecture entitled

<sup>38</sup> By employing such expressions as “mere sport,” “just in/for play,” and “pastime.” These “translations” are apt to connote frivolity.

<sup>39</sup> These are renderings taken from various scholarly sources.

“What Does It Mean for the Goddess to Play? And Is a Playful Divinity Comforting to Think With?” (2019). McDermott objects as follows:

In Indian theodical thinking, there is something called “the *Līlā* Solution” to the problem of evil: God cannot be blamed for allowing suffering as, like a child, He is simply playing and expressing the unmotivated joy of His being. But this argument...is ultimately unsatisfying: Okay [to God], so You are playing, and have no purposes or need. But why did You decide to play in the first place, or couldn’t You have played better [that is, more responsibly]? (2019, page 6 of transcribed lecture).

The problem clears up when we reiterate the point that—throughout the tradition—the Hindu God is not *by nature* a “playful God” if by that is meant that a *defining* characteristic of this God is playfulness. The Hindu God—irrespective, so far as I can see, of any particular Hindu tradition one may have in mind—is not a playful God *per se*, but, as we have shown, a God who acts effortlessly during the creative act analogous to the way we might act *in (some forms) of play* (hence “*līlāvat*”). In this sense, one might say that this God is a God who “plays”/may “play”/can “play.” While our view allows for a theology of divine play, for a *Deus ludens*, it is far from affirming that God in Hinduism is essentially playful or playful by nature. And this would answer the questions put to this God in the quotation above. Our view allows for suffering and evil in our worlds to be taken seriously by the Deity, as evinced by the coming of the divine *avatāra*(s) to benefit and take up the burden(s) of the world (*jagadupakārāya/bhūbhārāvatarāṇāya*). The problem arises, once again, when *līlā* is translated willy-nilly—in context and out of context—in an unqualified sense of “play” or “sport” or “pastime.” As we shall see, another connotation of *līlā* comes to the fore here—that of inscrutability.<sup>40</sup> God’s creative act may be effortless, but it is also inscrutable, even though in creating the world, God is guided by and so oversees the implementation of the law of *karma* and rebirth (to be reverted to later).

We shall now offer another reason for methodological hesitation when translating *līlā* by its unvarnished routine renderings, especially with regard to the term “sport” (as used by Farquhar, for example). In common parlance, “sport” usually refers to a competitive activity whose outcome is uncertain in so far as this depends on the dexterity and nerve of the competitors and their skillful exploitation of the natural and psychological circumstances that apply (not to mention a sizeable slice of luck). For sport to be experienced in its true nature, the result of some sporting activity must be subject to an element of jeopardy that affects the outcome’s predictability. This is what gives sport its essential thrill. In April 2021, when the owners of six English Premier League football (or “soccer”) clubs proposed starting a Super League in which their teams, together with some teams from continental Europe, would play against one another without the prospect of any one of the clubs being relegated or suitably penalized if it failed competitively to measure up to the standards of the group, there was a universal cry of outrage—from the fans, from many players themselves, from the British Prime Minister, and indeed from the British public at large. A leading article in *The Times* reported that “[The Prime

<sup>40</sup> Which is perhaps associated with a notion of “abandon” in play.

Minister] Boris Johnson branded the [proposed] league a ‘cartel’...and pledged to do whatever it took to stop the plans, warning privately that football clubs had become the ‘playthings of bankers’.”<sup>41</sup> In the same newspaper article, Pep Guardiola, the manager of Manchester City, one of the clubs included in the proposed scheme, is reported to have encapsulated the prevailing objection to the proposal in the following terms: “Sport is not sport when the relationship between effort and success, and reward, does not exist....It is not sport if you can’t lose.” *Līlā*, by contrast, in the context we are considering here, is quite the opposite. There is no element of jeopardy involved concerning the effort or exertion needed to deliver the hoped-for outcome. On the contrary, *līlā* here implies certain success *through ease of accomplishment*. It is not “sport” then in one fundamental sense of our use of this term. And it is not “sport” in another basic but related sense: that of “trifling” or “toying” with the opposition.<sup>42</sup> To avoid ambiguity or ambivalence in this respect, it would be as well from the outset to question the use of “play,” “sport,” etc., as naked translations of *līlā* in the setting we are now concerned about. We shall give other reasons to show the unsuitability of these terms as routine renderings for *līlā*, at least in philosophical/theological contexts. (Later, we shall consider a sense of *līlā* used in a dramatic or performative context where an element of competitiveness does come into play. We shall see that in this context, such renderings as “sport,” and its analogs, for *līlā* might well be appropriate.)

Let us return to the gist of our main discussion. With contingency and ease of accomplishment among the primary determinants of the *līlā*-act in mind, we can now consider other subtle but related occurrences of the term’s semantic repertoire in philosophical or theological contexts. Here we will come across more nuanced uses of the term than its rather uninflected appearance in the *Brahmasūtras*. Also, it is important to note that the nuance(s) of *līlā* emphasized in each (numbered) section below may well coexist in specific usages with one or more of the inflections highlighted in the other sections, quite possibly by way of some combination of dominant or recessive meaning.

But first, some important caveats. We have focused thus far on what may be called the linguistic implications of the term *līlā*, and this emphasis will continue throughout the article. But a word may be in place now, both with retrospective and prospective effect, about structure and chronology. It may be helpful to point out that we have begun our analysis of *līlā* with its occurrence in the *Brahmasūtras* for two reasons: (i) for the obvious reason that this seems to be the first significant philosophical/theological appearance of the term in Hindu tradition, but (ii) also

<sup>41</sup> “Fan ownership of England’s top football clubs investigated as European Super League crumbles,” *The Times*, April 21, 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Similar comments can be made of the term “game” as a rendering for the *līlā* associated with the world’s creation. While both the creational *līlā* and any particular game must follow their respective sets of rules to be effective—namely, those governing the outworking of the karmic template of the particular world’s denizens under consideration on the one hand—and the rules governing the playing of the specific game in question, every game proper *must* incorporate a structural element of jeopardy if it is to meet overall expectations *qua* game. As in the case of what we understand by “sport,” this decisive property of “jeopardy” does not apply to the *līlā* associated with the world’s creation.

because its meaning here may well act as the basis for grasping the further nuances of the term that we shall now consider.

Hence the following discussion presents what appears to be a many-streamed semantic development of *līlā* in the contexts that concern us. We do not claim that the additional nuances distinguished here represent a development in *chronological* order. A great deal of further study would be required to establish a proper chronology. Instead, what follows is an enumeration or exemplification of the philosophical or theological nuances/functions of *līlā* in Hindu tradition. This will lend a somewhat discrete aspect to our analysis as it proceeds. However, we hope to draw various strands together in our discussion by indicating associations and connections with the term's primary significance as uncovered by us in its *Brahmasūtra* locus. This, we hope, will knit the preceding and following segments of the article more closely together. But first, to grasp better how *līlā*'s rather abstract meaning in the *Brahmasūtras* can be brought down to earth, as it were, in Hinduism, we must draw closer attention to a feature that is a constant and encompassing presence, more or less explicitly, in the tradition—the law of *karma* and rebirth.

This law is perhaps the most salient characteristic of *saṃsāra*, the round of existence in which the unenlightened human is caught up, wandering from birth to birth till enlightenment dawns and final liberation, or *mokṣa*, is attained. *Saṃsāra* is usually described as an abode of sorrow (*duḥkhālaya*), where even most joys deceptively harbor the seeds of their decay. In the late *Maitrī Upaniṣad*, King Bṛhadratha, after describing the instabilities of this world, even of seemingly durable entities like the pole star and the great oceans and mountains, laments to the sage Śākāyanya as follows:

What is the point of enjoying desires in a *saṃsāra* like this, when someone who has been consumed by them is seen to return repeatedly to this world? Be pleased to deliver me for in this *saṃsāra*, I am like a frog stuck in a sightless well (that is, a well that is waterless and/or choked with plants) (1.4).<sup>43</sup>

What is the scope for *līlā*—play? sport?—in a world like this? We answer that through its sense of *joie de vivre*, of freedom from constraint discussed earlier (hence, “play”), *līlā* can act as a *leavening factor* within the grim realities of this state. Moreover, the inscrutable and untrammelled “play” of cosmic and personal forces in our lives, initiated or overseen in many Hindu philosophies by the Deity, can be interpreted as an incentive not to take the unpredictable course of life's events too seriously, for there is the prospect of a transcending liberation from all sorrow at the end.

## II

The great Bengali poet, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), seems to have had shades of this sense of *līlā* in mind when he uses the term towards the beginning of his Bengali collection of poems, *Gītāñjali*. In his English translation, he writes:

<sup>43</sup> See my article on *saṃsāra* (Lipner 2010).

Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure [= *līlā*]. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life.

This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales, and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new.

At the immortal touch of thy hands my little heart loses its limits in joy and gives birth to utterance ineffable.

Thy infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine. Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still, there is room to fill (Tagore 1970: 1).

Tagore's command of English comes through, notwithstanding his rather florid rendering of the beautiful cadences and power of the original Bengali. In this poem, the poet celebrates with awe and apprehension the Almighty's generosity in continually giving him the opportunity, by way of many births, to experience the joy of living anew and the homage this should entail. It is the Deity's *līlā*<sup>44</sup> or "pleasure" or free choice—Tagore eschews such translations as "whim," "play," "sport," etc.—to make this gift, a dispensation that enables the receiver to share the divine joy in living life to the full and making the endemic woes of *saṃsāra* tolerable.

*Līlā*, then, in these settings, is to be understood as a challenge to the leaden grip of mindless ritualism and the relentless constriction of age-old custom imposed by the legalisms of caste and other social norms of *saṃsāra*. But the sense of freedom it harbors can also act as a catalyst for socio-religious reform. In this sense, *līlā* encourages a tilt towards anti-structure, an opportunistic "playing" of the field of options and possibilities available. Such an understanding of *līlā* makes the teachings of social and religious change (see below) viable and attractive. Thus, their *līlā* becomes a playbook for initiating spiritual growth, not only in some specific Hindu traditions, but also by the osmosis of mimetic thought and action, throughout the significant practice of "Hinduism" itself.

### III

This aspect of *līlā*—namely, of "abandoned or antinomian play" as a mitigating factor of the woes of *saṃsāra*—can be seen to apply, sometimes in extreme circumstances, in the lives, especially of the leaders of such socially "transgressive" groups as the Bāuls and Sahajiyās. They take the lead, sometimes scandalously, in breaking the rules of extant social and religious norms.<sup>45</sup> In her essay, "Love of Woman: Love of Humankind?," when discussing the practices of *gurus* of some of these transgressive traditions, Jeanne Openshaw comments: "[T]he concept of *līlā* is used to deflect negative explanations of behaviour. I sometimes heard a disciple remark wryly of an important *guru*'s love affair. 'What for us is a sin, for them is *līlā*.'" (2020: 189). Nevertheless, this perception that these "deviant" traditions can

<sup>44</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Ankur Barua of the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, for bringing this reference to my notice.

<sup>45</sup> For examples, see Okita 2020; Openshaw 2020; Sarbadhikary 2020; Stewart 2020; and Wong 2020.

challenge the existing order may well contribute to these traditions being tolerated by the more conventional members of society. Through the “anti-social” experiments their leaders, in particular, engage in, sometimes dubbed a form of *līlā* as noted above, and the entailed possibility that they may herald some form of much-needed societal change, the drudgery of current and constricting socio-religious norms, so redolent of *samsāric* existence, becomes all the more bearable.

## IV

*Līlā*, as indicated earlier, linguistically also has a catalytic function. This mode allows an agent to express itself more fully without destroying its true nature. In the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, the received Life of Caitanya, the following text occurs:

*rādhā kṛṣṇa aiche sadā eki svarūp |*  
*līlāras āsvādite dhare dui rūp || (1.4.85).<sup>46</sup>*

But one essence forever are Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā,  
They take on two forms to savor the sweetness of their *līlā*.

From a theological point of view, the “binitarian” Deity mentioned above overtly “plurifies” to express the *joie de vivre* of being—through the differentiation that *līlā* implies. Here is another reason why “play” or perhaps “sport” is not always an adequate translation of *līlā*. *Līlā* generally connotes potential or actual differentiation, whereas play may not. Only one individual can play a game of solitaire (the same may be said for dominoes, patience, jigsaws, etc.), and only one individual may play a piece of music just for their satisfaction. Play then can be a solitary activity, whereas *līlā* has an “othering” implication in the contexts we are considering.

This “othering” quality of *līlā*, sometimes with erotic overtones (as here), clearly comes to view in the Bāul *guru*, Rāj Khyāpā’s “autograph verse manuscript...dating from the early twentieth century” (Openshaw 2020: 191), namely, the *Man Bhrānti Svarūp Līlā* (“Delusion of Mind and the Līlā of Essence”),<sup>47</sup> where the *līlā* of the Divine Being is described as “*līlār āsvād janya, ekāṅga haye bibhinna*: One body [is] divided into many for the sake of ‘sublime play,’ ” in Openshaw’s translation (2020: 192).<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Cited in Openshaw 2020: 207n12.

<sup>47</sup> One could even translate this title as “The *līlā* of the divine essence as occurring from the delusion of the mind.”

<sup>48</sup> More literally: “In order to taste *līlā*, one body becomes differentiated.” Openshaw gives another example of this plurifying function of *līlā*. “[The Bāul] Rāj [Khyāpā] directly divinises Rājeśvar [his Bāul practice-partner], her mother, even her husband (Prāṇ Kṛṣṇa), and by implication, himself” (2020: 202). She continues by quoting from Rāj Khyāpā in translation: “To experience divine play (*līlā*), the one body is divided, manifesting itself in order to be worshipped by the world. By divine command, she who is adored by the universe, whose eyes are blue lotuses, whose complexion is like a golden-lotus, came to earth as the wife of Prāṇ Kṛṣṇa [i.e., Rājeśvar]. Her auspicious feet are the boat to take one across the ocean of this worldly life” (202–3).



This harks back to the relationality of *līlā* as its fundamental existential property, as noted earlier.<sup>49</sup> In her work, *Reality, Religion, and Passion* (2009), Jessica Frazier explores the implications of this property with regard to the views of the noted Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theologian Rūpa Gosvāmī (who flourished in the first half of the sixteenth century) and the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), bringing into comparative consideration Rūpa’s concept of *līlā* and Gadamer’s notion of *Spiel*. “[Gadamer’s] use of *Spiel* is much closer in meaning to the Sanskrit word *līlā* than the English word ‘play,’ as which both are rather inadequately translated,” she notes insightfully (Frazier 2009: 57), going on to say:

Just as Gadamer’s “vitality” is at the centre of his ontology, and furnishes a eudaimonian ethics realising that vitality in the life of the individual, so the “*enjoyment*” of *relation* is shown in the Krishna theology [of Rūpa with special reference to Rādhā, we might add] to be both the true nature of Being, and the soteriological destiny of the individual.

In a striking parallel, it is given the same name that Gadamer uses to characterise the true nature of Being: *līlā*, or play. The “play,” as Gadamer puts it, “of light...the play of gears or parts of machinery, the interplay of limbs...even a play on words” is not merely metaphor but is the meta-principle of Being, universally instantiated and apotheosised in Krishna (2009: 178, citing Gadamer 1975: 103; emphasis added).

The point here is that for its fullest expression, *līlā* seems to require some “other.” *Līlā* enables the divine essence to be perceived as “descending” from the transcendent, hidden realm to the visible, phenomenal realm with all the latter’s vicissitudes and opportunities so that these actualities can be experienced to the full. It is only in the phenomenal realm that Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā can undergo the vagaries of love-in-separation and love-in-union with all the vulnerabilities these relationships imply. This is what constitutes their *līlā*—their “painful play”<sup>50</sup>—and allows the devotee to participate spiritually in their lovemaking through various forms of role playing. *Līlā* here becomes a participative concept.

## V

Hinduism’s narrative tradition, not least with regard to Kṛṣṇa (often in association with Rādhā), is fertile soil for fresh nuances of *līlā*. Thus, in *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (circa ninth century CE) Book 10, Chapter 58, the youthful Kṛṣṇa, the Deity in human form, is faced with a task that for ordinary humans and other non-divine figures would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish.

Preliminary to Kṛṣṇa’s intervention, we are told that Nagnajit, the King of Kauśalya, had a beautiful daughter named Satyā. No suitor could win her hand unless he overcame seven sharp-horned indomitable bulls (verse 33). When Kṛṣṇa

<sup>49</sup> One can contemplate an individual absorbed in solitary *līlā*, but this is not *līlā* actualizing its full potential. *Līlā* is fully actualized in its “othering” function.

<sup>50</sup> See Frazier 2009: 215.

heard of this, he went to Kauśalya as a suitor to Satyā. On seeing Kṛṣṇa, Satyā was attracted to him and fervently hoped that he would succeed in subduing the bulls (verses 34–36). Confronted by the bulls,

the Lord (*prabhu*) tightened his clothing, and having made himself sevenfold [one for each bull], subdued them *līlayā* [namely, *as if in play*,<sup>51</sup> that is, *easily*], and tied them up with ropes. Their pride broken and their power lost, he dragged them, bound as they were, just as a boy drags toys made of wood when playing (*līlayā*) (verses 45–46).

*Līlā* here describes ease of accomplishment not seen among ordinary mortals. For Kṛṣṇa, what he did was “child’s play,” just as creating the world, as we saw earlier, is child’s play for the Almighty. The difference here is that the Supreme Being creates the world without effort as a theologically established property of his infinite power, whereas the youthful Kṛṣṇa’s extraordinary acts of *līlā* reveal *his hidden divinity* among humans. *Līlā* in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and similar texts can function as a term that brings out such latent meaning. It does not necessarily denote “play” or “sport”; instead (to bring out its theological sense here), it signifies the arrival or activity of the divine *avatāra* and, by this token, reveals the Deity’s involvement with the phenomenal world, which in some traditions has given rise to the concept of the *līlā-avatāra*. This idea incorporates the spectrum of activities engaged in by the Deity as one sort of *avatāra* or other. These forms and their various activities can be quite extensive.

## VI

*Līlā* in the context of the divine *avatāra* reveals another aspect of the term’s semantic versatility: its ability to signify *the kind of personhood* the Deity manifests—that is, the personhood of a specific individual that is conscious and rational and capable of expressing emotions (such as pleasure and displeasure), desires, and creativity (over a range of different kinds of *avatāra*) and of entering into reciprocal relationships with other persons.<sup>52</sup> Writing in the context of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Ithamar Theodor notes that by this description the *līlā* or range of phenomenal activities of the *avatāra*

may be seen as manifesting a deeper...personhood than the previous notions [of Indian philosophy]. In other words, the *avatāra* becomes more specific; i.e., his qualities are particular, whether he is a boar, lion, or dwarf. His consciousness is manifested to a wider degree through his activities and speech. His emotional state is clearer, and it is evident when he is pleased,

<sup>51</sup> “*Līlayā*” can take on this hypothetical meaning. Huizinga notes this in his book *Homo Ludens*: “*Līlā* is used in the sense of ‘as if,’ to denote ‘seeming,’ ‘imitation,’ the ‘appearance’ of things, as in the English ‘like,’ ‘likeness’ or German ‘gleich,’ ‘Gleichnis.’ Thus *gajalīlayā* (literally: ‘with elephant play’) means ‘like an elephant’ ” (1955: 32). Alternatively, we could say, “playing the elephant.”

<sup>52</sup> This is the gist of Theodor’s view about the notion of divine personhood in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (2020, see especially pages 7–8).

enjoying, or displeased. His desires and aims are also clearer, and so is his creativity manifested in the way he does things—the boar avatāra dives into the cosmic ocean to rescue the earth,...the dwarf avatāra begs for three steps of land and then expands to cover the entire world, etc. The avatāra exhibits a wide variety of relationships... (2020: 8).

These are all characteristics of the Kṛṣṇa-avatāra's *līlā* in the various worlds into which he “descends.”

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* presents many other examples of Kṛṣṇa “doing his thing”—or engaging in *līlā*—in this manner, accomplishing one deed or other that transparently manifests his otherwise concealed Godhead as personal. This is not the Kṛṣṇa of the *Bhagavadgītā*, a text composed probably over half a millennium earlier, where we encounter a Kṛṣṇa who is magisterial and mature; instead, it is the youth who often behaves contrary to convention—“licensed to thrill”—as if his very youthfulness were reason enough to rupture the boundaries of conventional behavior. After all, this is what God is supposed to do by His mighty powers and inscrutable ways—challenge the limits of human expectation, sometimes in a guise that would in normal circumstances be unequal to the task (here, that of a youth) and often in response to the devotee's supplication, to vindicate the faith of those who have eyes to see.

## VII

Perspicacious translators are on to this sense of *līlā*. We have an instance in Svāmī Prabhupāda's translation of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.15.37 (in the version he has consulted): *tāṁs tān āpatataḥ kṛṣṇo rāmaś ca nṛpa līlayā | grhītapaścāccaraṇān prāhiṇot tṛṇarājasu* ||, “O King, as the demons attacked, Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma *easily* [*līlayā*] seized them one after another by their hind legs and threw them all into the tops of the palm trees” (emphasis added).<sup>53</sup> Prabhupāda rightly rejects any direct reference to “play” or “sport” here, for this was intended to be a rescue operation, not a game. Nevertheless, there is an underlying consideration at work here, intimated by the association of the extravagant act performed—“threw them all into the tops of the palm trees”—with its agent, the boy Kṛṣṇa, namely, the *carefree spontaneity* that accompanies true play. Thus, on occasion, especially in connection with the deeds of the youthful Kṛṣṇa, *līlā* does not eschew a sense of enjoyment or amusement often associated with the notion of “play.” Further, as our example suggests, there is also a dimension of *improvisation* to the meaning of *līlā* here.<sup>54</sup> If Kṛṣṇa is—in part—a *Deus ludens*, a playful God, or a God at play, this play invariably carries some serious underlying purpose or significance.

<sup>53</sup> See: <https://vedabase.io/en/library/sb/10/15/37/>

<sup>54</sup> This more general connotation is suggested by Hildebeitel 1995 (see especially page 211, though the context here is that of *līlā* as a dramatic performance. We shall consider this sense of the term later.).

## VIII

The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* provides more grist to the mill of our ongoing analysis. In 1.2.18, this time with reference to *krīḍā*, we have: *vyaktaṃ viṣṇus tathāvyaktaṃ puruṣaḥ kāla eva ca | krīḍato bālakasyeva ceṣṭāṃ tasya niśāmaya ||* We have excerpted this verse from a passage in which Viṣṇu's divine properties are enumerated. He is described as the one who creates, maintains, and destroys the world (*sargasthityantakārin*, 1.2.2),...the cause of final salvation (*muktihetu*, 1.2.3),...the support of everything (*ādhārabhūtaṃ viśvasya*, 1.2.5),...Brahman, the Highest, eternal, unborn, imperishable, undecaying (*tad brahma paramaṃ nityam ajam akṣayam avyayam*, 1.2.13), and so on. In this light, 1.2.18, which follows in this eulogy, should hardly be rendered (particularly with reference to *krīḍato*) as H. H. Wilson has done in his translation of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, namely, "Vishṇu being thus discrete and indiscrete substance, spirit, and time, *sports like a playful boy*, as you shall learn by listening to *his frolics* (1840: 10; emphasis added).

It is hard to see how "frolics" for "*ceṣṭā*" can be justified unless it is regarded as a rider to "sports like a playful boy," which itself is a dubious rendering of *krīḍato bālakasyeva* in context. The verse in question is a culmination of the glorification of Viṣṇu's exalted status, his power and might, as the Supreme Reality. So, in 1.2.18, the compatibility and spontaneity of Viṣṇu's exalted powers are being lauded; it is not a reference to some supposed quality of playfulness. Wilson's rendering, therefore, both lowers the tone of the ontology of the passage and misses the point.

We propose, instead, the following translation of 1.2.18: "Viṣṇu is both manifest and unmanifest as the [Supreme] Person, and also as Time. Follow then his activities as he behaves with the spontaneity of a boy at play." Or words to that effect. The deity's actions in *saṃsāra* are not enforced: they are freely done and are "spontaneous" in this sense. Similarly, for instances of *līlā* in other Purāṇas. Here are a few examples extracted from Clifford Hospital's (1995) essay:

(a) Hospital quotes *Vāyu Purāṇa* 5.30: *yogeśvaraḥ śarīrāṇi karoti vikaroti ca | nānākṛtikriyārūpanāmavṛttiḥ svalīlayā ||*, and translates the verse as: "The Lord of Yoga, who *in his play* manifests various creations, activities, forms, names, and conditions, creates and effects changes in bodies" (1995: 26; emphasis added). Note that *svalīlayā* occurs once more in the context of the Lord's being in total control of and harmony with his unlimited (creative) powers (implied by the expression "Lord of Yoga"). *Svalīlayā* then means not that He creates "in play," as if He were engaging in some "game" or "sport," but that He creates without effort. So the verse should be translated to following effect: "The Lord of Yoga, possessed as He is of various creative actions, effects, forms, and names, *effortlessly* produces and changes bodies." That is, He can assume any form at will.

(b) Or this time with reference once more to *krīḍā*: *jagatsargādikāṃ krīḍāṃ viṣṇor vakṣye 'dhunā śṛṇu |* (*Agni Purāṇa* 17.1). Hospital translates: "Listen: I shall now describe the play of Viṣṇu, which is the creation and so on of the universe" (1995: 26). But again, this is not really about Viṣṇu playing. It is rather about Viṣṇu's effortless production, etc., of the world. So I make it: "Now listen! I shall speak of Viṣṇu's effortless activity pertaining to the creation, etc., of the world."

This makes much more sense in context. Similarly, with regard to the example given and translated by Bäumert noted towards the beginning of this article. This should read something like (keeping, in the main, to Bäumert's translation): "O Shining One (Goddess), the producer of creation and dissolution has issued forth from the heart of the great God Bhairava acting spontaneously." Bäumert goes on to comment:

The quality of the *play* is brought out by Kṣemarāja in his commentary on the word *krīḍā* in this context: it is absolutely free from obstacles..., [the] bestower of fulfillment..., and it implies the desire to bestow grace.... Here he also hints at the fact that the ultimate motive for the divine activity is that of bestowing grace and liberating the bound souls (1995: 36; emphasis added).

If the ultimate motive for the divine activity is to bestow grace and liberate the bound souls, what has this got to do with "play" or "sport," as we generally understand these terms? Introducing the word "play" into the translation strikes a discordant note concerning the true sense of the passage.

So ingrained is the notion of "play" (with its analogs) with respect to the Deity's existential support/production of the world that some scholars thrust the concept in even though there is no verbal basis for it. Thus Wilson translates *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 1.4.36—namely, *daṁṣṭrāgravinyastam aśeṣam etad bhūmaṇḍalaṁ nātha vibhāvya te | vigāhataḥ padmavanam vilagnaṁ sarojinīpatram iva oḍhapaṅkam* ||—as: "The orb of the earth is seen seated on the tip of thy tusks, as if thou *hadst been sporting* amidst a lake where the lotus floats, and hadst borne away the leaves covered with soil" (1840: 31; emphasis added). However, as Hospital notes: "The word that Wilson translates as 'sporting' is *vigāhataḥ*, from *vi* + *√gāh* 'to bathe,' which appears to be not the same as aquatic play" (1995: 27)! One need not say more.

## IX

Let us now consider another text: *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.2.39. This verse occurs in a section of the *Purāṇa* in which the gods acknowledge Kṛṣṇa's divine supremacy and salvific efficacy: *na te'bhavasyeśa bhavasya kāraṇaṁ vinā vinodaṁ bata tarkayāmahe | bhavo nirodhaḥ sthitir apy avidyayā kṛtā yatas tvayy abhayāś-rayātmani* || Again, this cannot be translated as Kinsley (very loosely) has done: "O Lord, verily we cannot conceive any other cause of thy birth, *except in thy sportive humour*; for thou art not attached to this Earth" (1979: 4; emphasis added). The verse is not about "sportive humour" causing the birth of the Lord, not least because there is no explicit reference to either *krīḍā* or *līlā* in it! Instead, we propose:

How can we think of you, O Lord, who have no origin, as the cause of [originated] being except in so far as you act contingently (*vinā vinodam*) in this respect? For being, its destruction and conservation, are accomplished by

you in terms of [our] nescience, whence you become the refuge for tranquility of soul.

*Vinoda* is a nominal form of the verb *vinud* which means to drive asunder or dispel; it implies distancing or sundering, from which the sense of acting in an extraneous manner arises. So the text says that Kṛṣṇa as Lord (*īśa*), though without origin himself, is the originative cause of all finite beings through an act contingent to his nature, thus demonstrating his (infinite) *ontological* distance from originated being. Kṛṣṇa has no recourse to any “sportive humour” here. Incidentally, one can see that inserting references to play in such passages results in *a significant misinterpretation* of what the text intends to convey.

## X

For our following example, we turn to a non-Vaiṣṇava source. The Bengali sage Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa (1836–1886), who was devoted to the Mother Goddess, is speaking to the reformer Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–1884), one of the leading Bengali socio-religious shapers of modern India in the nineteenth century. The excerpt below is taken from the standard translation into English of the sage’s conversations with various devotees, namely, from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* by Swami Nikhilananda.

KESHAB (*with a smile*): “Describe to us, sir, in how many ways Kālī, the Divine Mother, sports in this world (*kālī katabhābe līlā karchen*).”

MASTER [Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa] (*with a smile*): “Oh, She plays in different ways (*tini nānābhābe līlā karchen*). It is She alone who is known as Mahā-Kālī, Nitya-Kālī, Śmaśāna-Kālī, Rakṣā-Kālī, and Śyāmā-Kālī” (Gupta 1952: 135).

The sage then describes various forms of the Goddess with their different functions (before and after the creation of the world), pointing to how intimate experience of the Goddess gives true knowledge of her.<sup>55</sup> Then he sings a song attributed to the poet-saint Rāmprāsād Sen (1718?–1775), which likens humans to kites flown by the Goddess. They are “held fast by māyā’s string.... Out of a hundred thousand kites, at best but one or two break free. And Thou dost laugh and clap Thy hands, O Mother, watching them!... [T]he kites set loose will speedily be borne away to the Infinite, across the sea of the world” (Gupta 1952: 136).

After this song, Rāmākṛṣṇa continues still in Nikhilananda’s translation:

“The Divine Mother is always playful and sportive. This universe is Her play. She is self-willed and must always have Her own way. She is full of bliss. She gives freedom to one out of a hundred thousand.”<sup>56</sup>

<sup>55</sup> “Is Kālī black? She’s black from afar, but once you get to know her she’s no longer black.... The water of the ocean is blue from afar, but go up close and take some in your hand; it’s colorless.” See Gupta (1977, 1: 43) for the Bengali text.

<sup>56</sup> *tini līlāmayī | e saṁsār tār līlā | tini icchāmayī ānandamayī | lakṣyer madhye ekjanke mukti den |* See Gupta 1977, 1: 43.

A BRAHMO DEVOTEE: “But, sir, if She likes, She can give freedom to all. Why, then, has She kept us bound to the world?”

MASTER [Śrī Rāmkrṣṇa]: “That is Her will. She wants to continue playing with Her created beings. In a game of hide-and-seek the running about soon stops if in the beginning all the players touch the “granny.” If all touch her, then how can the game go on? That displeases her. Her pleasure is in continuing the game” (Gupta 1952: 136).

There is frequent reference in this extract to play/sport/game. However, what kind of “play” or “game” is this? Is the Divine Mother just like a playful child flying kites, indulging in sport and fun? It would be a mistake to think so. This is the “game” of bondage and liberation for the world’s inhabitants and of her liberating action in it. The Divine Mother is not playing with our lives. The image is of Bengali boys flying kites. The kite strings are rubbed with glue containing powdered glass so that when the string of one kite is adroitly manipulated to rub against that of the opponent, the latter’s kite is cut free, expelling its owner from the contest. We are told that the Divine Mother rejoices when, through her saving action, a kite/soul breaks free from the bondage of *māyā*—from the round of rebirth—and attains liberation. This is the “*līlā*”—with its countless participants and myriad machinations—in which the Goddess is inextricably involved and over which She presides majestically. If this is a “game,” it is a game with serious intent. Accordingly, I offer the following paraphrase for the excerpt above (with an eye to Nikhilananda’s translation):

[The Goddess] continually plays in this inscrutable way (*līlāmayī*). This world of recurring birth is [the theater for] her endless machinations (*e saṃsār tār līlā*). She always gets her own way (*tini icchāmayī*) and is full of bliss (*ānandamayī*). Among a hundred thousand, she’ll give liberation to only one.

Continuing with the translation of the rest of the passage:

A BRĀHMO DEVOTEE: “But, sir, if She wants she can give final liberation to everyone. So why has She kept all of us bound to life in this world of rebirth (*saṃsār*)?”

MASTER [Śrī Rāmkrṣṇa]: “That’s her wish. She wants to keep the game of life going (*tini ei sab niye khelā karen*). If you start off by touching the Old Lady [in a game of catch], the running around comes to an end.<sup>57</sup> If everyone manages to do so, how can the game continue? If that happens, the Old Lady is unhappy. The Old Lady is delighted only if the game continues.”

The round of *saṃsāra* must continue. That is the point of the analogy. Everything is under the purview of the Divine Mother. She keeps *saṃsāra* going so that we can experience and work out our *karma*. The sentiment here is akin to that of verse 2 of Henry Newbolt’s famous poem, *Vitai Lampada*:

<sup>57</sup> In the Bengali game of catch, the target (the Old Lady, *buḍī*) acts evasively, often indicating where she is by calling out. The other players, who are blindfolded, run about trying to touch her. For anyone who succeeds in doing so the game is over.



The sand of the desert is sodden red, —  
 Red with the wreck of a square that broke; —  
 The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead,  
 And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.  
 The river of death has brimmed his banks,  
 And England's far, and Honour a name,  
 But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:  
 "Play up! play up! and play the game!"

It is not about having fun and games in some lighthearted, self-aggrandizing way. It is about going through with "the game" of existence, that is, the rules of a virtuous life as demanded by the situation, and to the best of one's ability, come what may. This is a lesson of life that one must learn from one's school days. So Rāmakṛṣṇa's Mother Goddess wants to keep the game of existence, *saṃsāra*'s *līlā*, with all its rules governing birth and death, sickness and health, sorrow and happiness, failure and success, operative so that one's *karma* can be worked out to one's salvific advantage, subject to the love She implicitly deserves. That is not playing with creation, or being frolicsome, or sporting about. This is why it is so important to continually nuance, even at some length, the sense of *līlā* implied in one context or other.

Some would argue that it is in the context of the Mother Goddess in the Śākta tradition of Bengal, where She is the Divine Śakti or "Power, Energy" personified, rather than of the Goddess as depicted in Vaiṣṇava tradition, for example, by Śrī or Lakṣmī, that it is most apt to translate *līlā* as "play" or "game." The Bengali term often used to express this concept is *khelā*, more readily translated as "play" or "game." The Divine Mother in Bengali Śākta tradition is often portrayed as "mad" or "intoxicated" in her dealings with the world. Malcolm McLean, in his essay, "The *Līlā* of the Goddess in Bengal Śāktism," gives several examples of her ambivalent behavior, but he also rightly distinguishes between "the surface meaning" of the Goddess' *khelā* and another "deeper meaning" (1995: 90). The deeper meaning points to the fact that though the divine nature can be trusted to save all those who, aware of their helplessness, call upon it, the logic of salvation is yet incomprehensible to the human mind so that one cannot presume to gauge or control it. The Divine Mother acts as She sees fit, whether we appreciate it or not; it is for us to accept her inscrutable *līlā* and wait upon her. A grasp of this deeper meaning appropriately initiates us into engaging successfully with the solemn "game" of life.

## XI

Thus, the throes of illness, too, can express the Deity's inscrutable *līlā*. Towards the end of his life, Keshab Chandra Sen wrote in a letter on October 11, 1883 to Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905), himself a pioneering Bengali intellectual of the modern Hindu era: "I have no longer that health, that strength I was wont to enjoy. Broken down, stricken by diseases, I am getting weaker, and weaker, and sinking day by day....All this is His sport—it is His mysterious way of drawing one closer

to Him.”<sup>58</sup> Keshab here uses the routine translation of *līlā* to describe the divine action during his final months, but one can see that he was unhelpfully bound by the conventional rendering, which ill accords with the perceived reality of the situation. A loving God could hardly engage in “sport” to accomplish the end of drawing His votary closer to Himself by way of great suffering. Hence, Keshab felt the need to paraphrase his use of “sport” by mentioning the Deity’s mysterious ways. However, such use of “sport” adds fuel to the critical fires of detractors of Hinduism like Farquhar. This characteristic use of the term *līlā* in Hindu thought denotes, as Keshab felt forced to point out, the transcendent *inscrutability* of divine action in the world/one’s life and the willing resignation with which one should respond. For the Hindu, such inscrutability is generally bound up with the unfathomable unfolding of the law of *karma*, which we have considered earlier.

## XII

Let us change tack now and discuss the meaning of *līlā* in the setting of theatrical or dramatic performance. Here *līlā* may refer both to the “play” framing the performance—the narrative and its unfolding—and to its enactment, the play-acting, itself. It is with this sense of *līlā* primarily in mind, I think, that Nita Kumar apostrophizes the concept of *līlā* thus:

It presents some of the most creative, subtle, original, insightful paired oppositions in Hindu thought...the idea of abandon but also control, playfulness but total application, freedom achieved through discipline, amusement coexisting with purposefulness, superhuman bliss and joy within the earthly mundane, divine presence evoked by human craft, ecstasy that breaks the bound [*sic*] of the self while celebrating the human senses....The pervasiveness of the *līlā* concept in Hindu life is so marked that one may well analyze it as being at least the one constant of Hindu life, since...it permits that very flux and change, moving and varying...that more rigid concepts cannot handle (1995: 159).

There are numerous examples in Hindu culture of *līlās* in this genre, under such headings as *Pāṇḍav-līlā*, *Rām-līlā*, and *Rāsa-līlā*. We shall give particular attention to the *Rāsa-līlā* presently; here we offer some general comments first about this kind of *līlā*. It is often the case that such *līlās* are expressed in terms of one or more performers acting out various personalities within the context of the performance. In the *Pāṇḍav-līlā*, for example, events from the *Mahābhārata* featuring, in particular, the Pāṇḍavas and their common wife Draupadī are reenacted. *Pāṇḍav-līlās* occur only in Garhwal in the Himalayan regions of Uttar Pradesh and can last from half a day to about two weeks.<sup>59</sup>

Though “*pāṇḍav līlā* is conceived of as fundamentally a Garhwali Rājput—that is, a Kṣatriya—tradition,” notes Sax (1995b: 143), in the course of the performance,

<sup>58</sup> See Tagore 1909: 157.

<sup>59</sup> See Sax 1995b.

Rājput men...are encouraged to “play with” their identities, becoming now a Brāhmaṇ, now an “untouchable,” now a woman. Rājput women, however, do not have so much freedom: they are allowed to play the parts of females from these other castes, but not of males. And the lowest castes are not allowed to “play” in this way at all....Ultimately, the playful freedom of the *līlā* is circumscribed and limited by the larger “frame” within which it takes place, the “real-world” frame (147).

In this religiously sanctioned play-acting, the actors, as well as the viewers, are usually thought of as participants in an actual *re-presentation* of the “past” action they reprise because such *līlās* are intended to be *actual re-enactments* rather than simple imitative presentations (*anukaraṇa*) of the sacred episodes they recall. Thus, in the *Rāsa-līlā*: “Once the crowns are placed upon the heads of the Brahman boys who take the roles of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, these boys are treated by spectators as if they were the divinities themselves” (Hawley 1995: 117).

David L. Haberman has described the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava practice of *līlāsmaraṇa* (literally, “bringing [Kṛṣṇa’s] *līlā(s)* to mind”) as follows:

The practice involved visualizing a particular dramatic scene of Vraja in great detail, establishing its setting (*deśa*), time (*kāla*), and characters (*pātra*). *Mantras* are employed to assist the visualization. The practitioners memorize the descriptions of the various *līlās* in an impressively elaborate manner, using maps and diagrams to locate the more important *līlā* activities. The mind is to be withdrawn from the ordinary world and completely concentrated on and absorbed in the *līlā* of Vraja. When this process is perfected, the cosmic drama appears directly before the eyes of the practitioner, granting visual access to the world of ultimate meaning (1988: 126, cited in Schweig 2010: 797a).

In more general terms:

In these plays there are different degrees and types of identifications of the action with their role models. Sometimes the deity possesses the human actor for the duration of the performance, and in other sacred dramas the audience treats the actors as temporary avatars, indeed as embodying the divine essence (*svarūp*) (Carman 1995: 226).

Such *līlās* are thought to enable all concerned to experience new identities tied to a recurring present instantiated in a “frame” of life that is transient but allows indefinite iteration.

Further, this sense of *līlā*, as hinted at earlier, often includes a competitive element, allowing the *līlā* to be characterized, at least partially, as a sportive event. Describing features of the *Rām-līlā* memorializing the episode of the “Cutting off of the Nose” of the ogress, Śūrpaṇakhā by Lakṣmaṇa (half-brother of Rāma) in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Nita Kumar observes:

Competitiveness is...part of Rāmlīlās like the *nākkaṭayyā*. Floats and performers, animal trainers and fire swallows are awarded prizes, shop fronts and decorated spaces compete to dazzle, and the most explicit competition is between the different *ākhārās* [*sic*, namely, *ākhaḍās*], or clubs

of sword and pole wielding....At the next level the whole affair is competing...with all the *nākkaṭayyās* of all the other neighborhoods in Banaras (1995: 167).

There is use of *līlā* in a similar sense, noticed by John Stratton Hawley. This is exemplified by the “role reversal” (Hawley’s phrase) attributed to Kṛṣṇa during his various “antics/pranks” in the Braj region as a boy and youth.

One of the commonest themes in the sermons (*pravacan*) delivered by Kṛṣṇa in prose and song between the *rās* and *līlā* portions of the Brindavan *rās līlās* is that of reversal. Kṛṣṇa often says that his purpose in coming into the world is to play, and the form that this play takes is *turning things upside down*. He describes himself as a god whose divinity is measured by his eagerness to leave the divine behind. He is a “crazy god”...who prefers the intimate insult of being called a thief to the etiquette with which he would be addressed as the superintendent of an orderly heaven. For him...the sentiment that if “God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world,” is the enemy of...*līlā* [as play] (1995: 122; emphasis added).<sup>60</sup>

This is another instance of *līlā* signifying *role-play* in what turns out to be a serious game, that is, the Deity challenging, often by role reversal, and more by appearance and behavior than by words, certain fixed expectations of the time.<sup>61</sup> Translating *līlā* here by “play,” both with regard to the theatrical performance entailed and the various incidents stemming from the reversed role-play of the plot, seems to be appropriate. We are reminded once more via these instances of *līlā* that cultural depictions of the Supreme Being have their own rules, tropes, *loci*, history, and particular psychological and spiritual demands; they are far from being carbon copies of one another. All the more need, then, for the terms *līlā* and *khelā* to be nuanced in translation as and when the context demands.

### XIII

We can also consider here an instance of *krīḍā* as recorded in Bettina Bäumer’s essay noted earlier. Bäumer is quoting from the commentator Kṣemarāja’s remark on a text from one of the primary sources of the Trika worldview, the *Śivasūtra*. In 3.10, the text says *raṅgo ’ntarātmā*: “The inner self is the stage,” that is, the stage, the platform, for enacting the drama of life leading to final emancipation. Kṣemarāja comments (in Bäumer’s translation) that “the place where the self takes delight with the intention of exhibiting *the play of the world drama* is the stage, i.e., the place

<sup>60</sup> One could also argue that Kṛṣṇa’s role as *pārthasārathin*, namely, co-charioteer or driver to Arjuna in the framing episode of the *Bhagavadgītā* which precedes the great *Mahābhārata* battle, is another instance of role reversal, this time applicable to the adult Kṛṣṇa.

<sup>61</sup> In his essay, Hawley (1995) enumerates further examples of role reversal “plays” (*līlās*). Note that Śiva in myth and narrative can also be highly unconventional in appearance and ludic behavior, but enough has been said about *līlā* in this sense to make the point.

where the Self adopts the various [acting] roles” (1995: 39; emphasis added).<sup>62</sup> Here again, the *Śivasūtra*, according to Kṣemarāja, is speaking of the theater of life and its enactments rather than some lighthearted game or sport or playful activity. True, from Kṣemarāja’s point of view, these enactments are evanescent, they have no ultimate staying power in the salvific scheme of things, but they are to be taken seriously as rungs on the ladder to emancipation, ascending or descending according to the actions and roles, generated through *karma*, of each of the participants involved in the drama of existence.

## XIV

In the context of “play” as theater, it may not be surprising that *līlā* can also serve a didactic function. The intensity of its meaning in specific contexts intimates the devotee’s absorbing and personal love of God—God’s love for His votaries and His votaries’ love for God. “*Līlā*” can be understood as the expression of this love’s hyperbolic, over-the-top character—its daringness, the throwing of all caution to the winds in total self-giving notwithstanding the violation of conventional norms: holding back nothing in the act of mutual self-offering.

An excellent example of this didactic function is the *Rāsa-līlā*, a dance of love involving Kṛṣṇa and the *gopīs* or milkmaids, as described in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* Book 10, Chapter 33. In Graham M. Schweig’s fine treatment of this episode, we are told that:

The Rāsa Līlā takes place in the earthly Vraja (a rural area...in northern India, about eighty miles south of the modern capital city of Delhi) during the bountiful autumn season, when evenings abound with soothing scents and gentle river breezes....

One special evening...Krishna and the Gopīs met and played on the banks of the Yamunā River. When the maidens became proud of his loving attention, however, their beloved Lord suddenly vanished from their sight....Discovering that he had run off with one special maiden, they [the Gopīs] soon found that she too had been deserted by him....Then Krishna...reappeared and spoke to them on the nature of love.

The story culminates in the commencement of the Rāsa dance. The Gopīs link arms together, forming a great circle. By divine arrangement, Krishna dances with every cowherd maiden at once, yet each one thinks she is dancing with him alone. Supreme love has now reached its perfect fulfillment and expression through joyous dancing and singing long into the night, in the divine circle of the Rāsa. Retiring from the vigorous dancing, Krishna and the Gopīs refresh themselves by bathing in the river. Then, reluctantly, the cowherd maidens return to their homes (2005: 2–3).<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> *rajyate’smin jagannātya kṛīḍāpradarśanāśayenātmanā iti raṅgaḥ tattadbhūmikā grahaṇasthānam |*

<sup>63</sup> See bottom of page 1 (Schweig 2005) for the portion in parentheses towards the beginning of the excerpt.

This incident, occurring as it does in a religious text pregnant with erotic implication, seems to cry out for symbolic interpretation, and thus it has been approached in the context of Hinduism's cultural specificities by Hindu devotees and theologians. Through His *līlā*, the Lord here plays a most consequential "game" with His votaries, teaching them in the process—and not without heartache and the risk of rejection or misunderstanding—what it means to love selflessly. In this *līlā*, in Schweig's interpretation:

The divine yearns for the love of souls and delights in it: "He, the beloved Lord, knowing all pleasure within himself, delighted in loving them in this divine play (*līlā*)" (*BhāṅP.* 10.33.20)...For the divine, on the one hand, *līlā* expresses the absolute fullness of his own self, and on the other hand, it expresses a divine passion and yearning for those other souls with whom he can share a kind of divine intimacy; both are displayed in *līlā* (2010: 795b).

It must be pointed out that not everyone agrees with the view that the *Vṛndāvana-līlā* points towards a symbolic interpretation. Sushil Kumar De, in his *The Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (1961), and writing in a context and time when susceptibilities to erotic religious literature were less tolerant than they are today, avers:

The Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa myth, as depicted in the Purāṇas...is taken as a vivid historical, as well as super-historical,<sup>64</sup> reality [in Bengal Vaiṣṇavism]; and there is no suggestion of its being an allegory. The pressure of modern thought has no doubt, induced some modern writers on the subject to the desperate method of allegorical interpretation, but the theologians and poets of the sect never think it necessary to spiritualise the myth as a symbolism of religious truth; for the Purāṇic world to them is manifestly a matter of religious history (223).

It can be argued, however, that this is to miss the wood for the trees. One can take certain events as historically accurate while yet interpret them as having deeper theological, symbolic, or didactic meaning (the life of Christ is a well-known example). So it is with the *Vṛndāvana-līlā*. The very fact that the *Rāsa-līlā* narrative claims that Kṛṣṇa gave each milkmaid the impression that he was dancing with her alone, while in fact, he was dancing with all of them at once, clearly suggests that the *Rāsa-līlā* carries a symbolic significance. After all, for the theologians of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, the Kṛṣṇa of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is to be considered not just as the *avatāra par excellence* of the Divine Being, but as the very personification (*svayaṃ bhagavān*) of the Divine Reality; in this capacity, Kṛṣṇa may be expected to act didactically.

Schweig decodes a great deal of the symbolism involved in this event. He points out that:

Some Western and even Indian interpreters have assumed that the love exhibited between the cowherd women and their beloved Krishna is nothing

<sup>64</sup> That is, it is also enacted in the heavenly realm, as we shall see.

more than a display of worldly lust. The author's intention expressed in the text, however, is quite the contrary—the hearing or reciting of this story, he proclaims, will *free* souls from lust....[S]aintly voices from particular traditions within the Hindu complex of religion claim that its erotic imagery is an expression of the intensity and intimacy of divine love, rather than a portrayal of worldly passion. It is only a lack of enculturation and purity of heart on the part of the reader that prevents one from appreciating the Rāsa Līlā as the greatest revelation of love (2005: 3–4; emphasis in the original).

Nevertheless, Christian missionaries like Farquhar have remained insensitive to the teaching intended by this incident, even though such writing reflects to a significant extent a similar genre in Christian tradition describing the love of God and the God of love in relation to His saints.

Other Christian theologians, knowledgeable about the dynamics of Hindu symbolism and its mythopoeic nature, have been more perceptive. Consider the views of the Hindu convert to the Catholic faith, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861–1907), whose pioneering attempts at Hindu-Christian dialogue have inspired many an Indian Christian to follow suit conceptually and in practice.<sup>65</sup> In an important lecture in Bengali, the “Śrīkṛṣṇatattva” (“The True Nature of Śrī Kṛṣṇa”), given in 1904 with opposition to Farquhar's views particularly in mind, and later published, Upadhyay, who distinguished between the Deity's “incarnation” or actual taking on of human nature as Christ, on the one hand, and the Deity's *avatāra* or “descent” in human form as Kṛṣṇa, on the other, comments as follows, after invoking “the authoritative succession (*pāramparya*) of teachers” he claimed to follow:

[Having] understood the defining characteristics of avataric manifestation[,] we must now show that these characteristics are present in Sri Krishna in an abundant and wondrous manner....

Come now! Today we'll behold the *Rasa* dance and be freed from the taint of concupiscence....On this romantic autumnal night of the full moon, the strains of Krishna's...flute inflamed Vrindavan. The enraptured milkmaids, following the sound of the flute, gathered in the presence of Krishna. The golden-hued doll-like milkmaids began to circle Krishna with small incoherent cries. Then, after they had joined hands, the *Rasa* dance began in a circular motion. Just as the ocean heaves at the touch of full moonlight, so the milkmaids' hearts leaped at Krishna's touch. Then were sweet Nature, bathed in moonglow, and the milkmaids, Nature personified and enchanted by Krishna's sweetness, joined in that best of men [viz. Krishna]: renunciation and engagement with the world (“*prabr̥tti o nibr̥tti*”) were synthesised....

Hail [Krishna], Beloved of the milkmaids!...You are God's avatar....On the one hand the full play of worldly engagement, on the other no worldly desiring [at all]!...The fragrance of the Krishna-flower on its milkmaid-creeper, which bloomed in the *Rasa* place, has quite overcome the odour of

<sup>65</sup> On Upadhyay and his work, see my *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary* (Lipner 1999).



lust....Be warned! Without the flowers of renunciation (*nivṛtti*), Krishna cannot be worshipped [—and so on].<sup>66</sup>

The symbolic intent of the *Rāsa* episode, expressed as it is in Hindu cultural terms, shines through for those who respect and understand the relevant interpretive tradition. The figurative nature of texts like that of the *Rāsa Līlā*, when understood aright, challenges talk of Kṛṣṇa's so-called "immoralities" (Farquhar's term: see earlier) in the symbolic love play and other exploits, that is, the *līlā*, attributed to him in his youth.

## XV

One must remember, regarding *līlā*, that in devotional literature focused on Kṛṣṇa, both comparison and contrast are made between Kṛṣṇa's heavenly state and his earthly or phenomenal realm. This is carried out in terms of Kṛṣṇa's "non-apparent," or *aprakāṣa līlā*, on the one hand, and his "manifest," or *prakāṣa līlā*, on the other. In general, Kṛṣṇa's *līlā* is regarded in the relevant traditions as "a display of his inherent divine Energy or Śakti" (De 1961: 248). His *prakāṣa*, or manifest *līlā*, namely, the events and activities distinctively associated with him in various earthly locations (mainly in Dvārakā, Mathurā, and Vṛndāvana), which the devotee is encouraged to meditate on and visualize, are reckoned to be as real as the transcendent, out-of-sight, and glorious (*aprakāṣa*) *līlā* of the heavenly realm. It is in this heavenly realm where he presents in his glory, surrounded by the heavenly court, though his *prakāṣa līlā* is more reassuring in the circumstances of *saṃsāra* than the *aprakāṣa* in that the former more easily inspires faith and belief in Kṛṣṇa. Both expressions of *līlā*, that of the heavenly court and that of the phenomenal realm, demonstrate a nexus of differentiated being in their manifestation, namely, the circle of attendants present, the joint worship of the devotees, and the other paraphernalia of devotional acknowledgment, as well as the graciousness and powerful outreach of the Lord; they are not mere "sport" or "play" or a "pastime" in the conventional sense. God in Hindu tradition is not a joker, an irresponsible gamester. Quite the contrary. If one wishes to use these terms as unnuanced translations of *līlā* in this context, one risks substantial misunderstanding of what is meant by devotion to Kṛṣṇa.

## XVI

Finally, let us round off our (somewhat abridged) survey of the various nuances of *līlā* by noting that *līlā* is not infrequently used in the title of a work, to sum up the activity or life of a revered individual, for example, *Śrī-gaurāṅga-līlā-smaraṇa-maṅgala-stotram*, which translates roughly as "The Sacred Hymn of Praise Commemorating the Līlā of the Revered Gaurāṅga." *Līlā* in this title is intended

<sup>66</sup> See Lipner and Gispert-Sauch (2002: 336–57) for an annotated English translation by the author of the whole essay, from where this passage is quoted.

to signify the life activity of the Vaiṣṇava saint Gaurāṅga or Caitanya (mentioned earlier), who is regarded “sometimes as an avatar of Kṛṣṇa, sometimes as the Lord himself, and sometimes as Kṛṣṇa, but incarnated with the fair complexion and the intense feeling of [his lover] Rādhā so that he might taste the sweetness of her love for him” (Wulff 1995: 100).

The life activities of such a saintly individual are believed to occur completely freely and without the usual impediments attributed to sin, spiritual ignorance, and egoism, hence their description as *līlā* (an echo of the ease of action and transparency of accomplishment underlying the meaning of the term in the *Brahmasūtras*). Thus, *līlā* here hardly means “play” or “sport” and certainly does not refer to the individual’s “pastimes.” This would be to trivialize that individual’s life and devalue its impact. Rather, in our example, the term is meant to encapsulate the range of Caitanya’s activities as more or less transparently manifesting his divine power.<sup>67</sup> In other words, it points to his gracious *outreach* among his disciples and the wider world.<sup>68</sup> The use of the term *līlā* in this context makes us think of such a life at the same time on both a transcendent and a mundane plane, the former permeating and defining the latter.

At this point, we may ask: Why is it that in Hindu philosophical or theological contexts, the *līlā* of the Deity or a saint comes across as a mark of spontaneity, mystery, or purpose which is nevertheless under the control of the agent manifesting that *līlā* (as in the creation of the world or through the actions and teachings of a life well lived), whereas in so much Hindu poetry or narrative (for example, in the *Purāṇas*), the *līlā* that is manifest occurs in association with verbal or visual images that betoken excessive passion or apparently irresponsible behavior in some way (often described as the expression of a “divine madness”)?

There are various ways in which one may answer this question. At the outset, one should note that many narrative texts are pronouncedly sectarian, keen to portray their deities and saintly figures to advantage while showing up the supposed weaknesses and excesses of their rivals. Further, it is of the nature of philosophical/theological texts to present a sober account of their material, demonstrating how “hot” symbols and metaphors may be translated into “cold” concepts in the light of

<sup>67</sup> We can agree then with Kinsley when he says: “The *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, the famous biography of Caitanya by Kṛṣṇadāsa, is divided into three parts: the Ādi-, Madhya-, and Antya-līlās—the early, middle, and late playings. The implication is that all of Caitanya’s actions were free, transcending the limitations of the pragmatic world, that none of his actions were performed because of necessity,” but we cannot agree when he continues: “that all his actions were done *for the fun of it*. It is no exaggeration to say that Caitanya’s mission itself was to play, to display himself *aimlessly for the salvation of men*” (1979: 219; emphases added), for the portion emphasized in the last sentence is obviously a contradiction in terms. The salvation of humankind cannot but be a serious, responsible matter, and by definition is hardly “aimless.” Similarly, when he says in footnote 2 on the same page, “The tendency to call all Caitanya’s actions play is seen in this passage from the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*: ‘I shall now enumerate the boyhood *līlās* of the Lord, / The chief among them being his study.’ ... Ādi-līlā 15.2,” it again seems evident that “study” as a chief *līlā* of Caitanya can hardly be mere play or aimless. Else, why do it? *Līlā* here obviously means an action that is not necessitated or enforced but freely undertaken with providing guidance to others in view.

<sup>68</sup> “Gracious” here harks back to the use of this term by Professor Acharya in his email to me (quoted earlier) explaining *līlā*’s etymology.

reason. The sometimes heady flights of narrative are often brought down to earth in philosophical and theological texts by recourse to a goodly dose of decorum and moderation. Narrative—one may say, especially in Hinduism, which excels in the art of lively storytelling—thrives on exaggeration, mood, tension, surprise, symbol, and animated metaphor, which translates into larger-than-life characters, giving their interpreters the opportunity to come across as insightful decoders of the markers of social significance! So what passes for *līlā* in narrative or poetry is often portrayed in terms of excess, but this is not the case in philosophical or theological texts, which tend to be more soberly expressed.

The following objection may now come to mind. It may be said that a significant import of our discussion so far has been to point to the unsuitability of “play” or “sport” as routine translations of *līlā* because these terms connote activities that are mainly frivolous or “lightweight”; as such, they do no justice to the weighty senses of *līlā* we have been considering. However, is this not to overstate the case, for a thorough analysis of the role of play and sport in our lives will show how important these activities are for understanding and developing what it means to be human, as thinkers like Huizinga and Gadamer have indicated. Besides, have we not ourselves pointed out at the beginning of this article that these (English) renderings carry serious connotations?

True, but it also cannot be denied that the “*surface*” meanings of these words, their everyday connotations, first come to mind in common parlance. After all, this is what Farquhar’s ready reference to *līlā* as “sport” in his diatribe at the beginning of this article demonstrates, and it is with this in mind that we have cast doubt on “play” and “sport” as standard or routine renderings for “*līlā*” in the contexts that concern us.

## Concluding Remarks

We can now draw this article to a close. Our discussion, of course, is far from exhaustive of the philosophical and theological nuances and functions of *līlā* (not to mention *krīḍā* and *khelā*) in Hindu thought. A glance at the list of *līlā* entries in any reasonably complete survey of the term, for example, in the index of a good encyclopedia of Hinduism, would make this apparent. Nevertheless, we have made a start, and others can add to or modify the semantic range distinguished here. Note, too, that I am emphatically not arguing that it is inappropriate in all cases to translate *līlā* by such terms as “play,” “sport,” and “game.” There are occasions when these routine translations more or less fit the bill, as in the case of various aspects of Kṛṣṇa-*līlā*, not least in the context of Kṛṣṇa’s dalliance with Rādhā and the *gopīs* in Vṛndāvana. In such instances, renderings in terms of “love play” and “foreplay” may be appropriate however symbolically one may then go on to interpret their significance. This also applies—in the case of *krīḍā*—to Utpaladeva’s (tenth century) comment on the Kashmiri Śaiva text, *Śivadr̥ṣṭi* 1.38, given in Bäumer’s essay mentioned earlier (1995: 38), that is, *tathā paramēśvaraḥ pūrṇatvāt svata ānandaghūrṇitais tais tair bhūtabhedātmabhiḥ prakāir evaṁ etat sadṛśaṁ krīḍati | harṣānusārī spandah krīḍā ||*, which I render as: “Indeed, the Supreme Lord

out of the [sheer] fullness [of being], Himself plays/play-acts in a manner similar to the ways different beings frolic with joy. For play is the exuberant action that follows on delight.”

Here there does seem to be a reference to “play” or “play-acting,” but that is because *the context requires it*. In the Śaiva worldview of Trika, “play,” as a translation of *krīḍā*, does appear to be an apt rendering in many contexts, but again *only with the appropriate qualification(s)*. For even here, “play” (not to mention “sport”) as an unnuanced rendering usually ends up a hostage to fortune, for the reasons we have specified concerning *līlā* in this article.<sup>69</sup>

Further, it will not have escaped notice that where devotional Hinduism is concerned, we have mainly focused on Vaiṣṇava sources.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, in general, one cannot baldly assert that in Hinduism “God creates the world and enters into it in a spirit of play” (Sax 1995a: 3) as scholars tend to do. I do not think one can ever put it as simplistically as this. For this would be to gloss over the multifaceted concept of *līlā*—as well as of *krīḍā* and *khelā*. This caveat applies also to such renderings as “sheer sport” and “just play,” so often resorted to, not least in the philosophical/theological contexts that have concerned us. There is no universal fit for our term; we can see this because the stereotypical renderings themselves (inadequately) cover a wide range of surface and deeper meanings, and, as we have pointed out, it is *the surface, everyday meanings* that are taken for granted as acceptable renderings for *līlā* in our varied encounters with the term in Hindu philosophical/theological tradition.

By translating *līlā* routinely as “play,” regardless of context, one is confronted by the translator’s predetermined (and predeterminative) take on the term rather than by the term’s intended meaning in a particular occurrence. This is to put the cart before the horse. Instead, as we have tried to show, the nuances of *līlā* that lie embedded in the term’s varied contexts should dictate how one translates the term. The fact that scholars often put the standard renderings “sport,” “play,” and “game” in inverted commas indicates that they experience some misgiving in the matter. Why not grasp the nettle, then, and avoid these misleading renderings in favor of the translation that the context demands?

It is the absence of nuance, the oversight of context, and the almost total lack of *imagination* in translating *līlā* across the spectrum of its various occurrences that I wish to flag up and contest in this article. For to proceed in this manner is neither fair to the original tradition nor scholarly practice, and has given rise, especially in philosophical and theological discourse, to misrepresentation of what this important term is intended to signify in context. This is exacerbated by those who, unsympathetic to Hinduism, wish to promote other faiths and cultures at Hinduism’s expense: Farquhar is but one example among many.

To repeat, *līlā*, as analyzed here, does not come across as either gender or age specific, though, as noted earlier, *līlā* as (theatrical) play or play-acting has tended to

<sup>69</sup> The same applies to *khelā*, to which we have adverted on occasion.

<sup>70</sup> “The part of Hinduism that appears to dwell and most elaborately focus upon *līlā* in sacred revelational texts, in theological thought, and in the greatest variety of dramatic and artistic expression can be found within the traditions of Vaiṣṇavism” (Schweig 2010: 794a).

be the preserve of, and has been patronized chiefly by, males. The term's meaning derives from the semantic context in which it occurs, ranging from "ease of accomplishment" to the act of role-playing in a dramatic setting, not to mention the dramatic performance itself.

*Līlā*, therefore, is a context-sensitive term whose translation must reflect its polysemic nature. I do not think it can be "*defined*" *sensu stricto*. There seems to be no overriding meaning of the term that makes a definition proper possible in the verbal settings that have concerned us. However, it may well be that the various functions and nuances we have distinguished can be woven together into some interrelated web of meaning. We have tried to intimate this in our analysis. Can one discern some chronological development in the nuances and functions of this multifaceted word? All we could claim here is to have laid the groundwork for further inquiry into these matters.

*Līlā* (and *krīḍā*), at least in the contexts that have concerned us, are, on the whole, non-technical words that have been thrust into technical service. There is an interesting implication of this fact, namely, that these words are inextricably woven into the web of everyday experience and discourse. As a result, we must seek translations that reflect the vagaries of the contexts in which these words find themselves. All the more then should such hackneyed renderings as "play," "sport," etc., be avoided or modified in favor of more accurate translations with a critical eye to context. With a dutiful nod to Wittgenstein, we can say that this is the way to play the *līlā* language game.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> I am grateful to Professor Douglas Hedley of the Divinity Faculty, University of Cambridge, for a number of insights in the final paragraph.

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