

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam as a Philosophical Framework for Interfaith Coexistence: Bridging Relational Ethics with Prosocial Psychology

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ABSTRACT

Despite decades of efforts to create policies of tolerance, foster dialogue, and pursue strategies for peaceful coexistence, religious polarisation and fragmentation among faith communities remain significant challenges to maintaining peaceful social relations. The paper proposes that such problems are inherent in the traditional understanding of tolerance, in which phenomena such as moral passivity, an unequal relationship between majority and minority groups, and vulnerability during times of societal stress persist. Building on interdisciplinary concepts and theories in social psychology, sociology, political philosophy, and Indian Knowledge Systems, the study uses a method that combines philosophical hermeneutics, conceptual analysis, and critical interaction with existing literature to develop a new concept of “familial moral engagement”. Specifically, the theoretical framework explores the ancient Indian philosophical idea of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, or “the world is one family,” based on the ontology of oneness that exists according to the principles of Advaita Vedanta. The following are three hypotheses put forward to account for the manner in which the moral outlook in the family structure would foster empathy, minimise intergroup discrimination, and lead to sustainable solidarity between people with different attributes. In summary, the study indicates that a perspective of the world based on the idea of common humanity can help communities to rise above tolerance to curiosity, reciprocal responsibility, and enduring ethics.

Keywords: Religious Pluralism, Recognition Theory, Social Identity, Empathy, Indian Knowledge Systems, Contact Hypothesis

1. Introduction

The purpose of this research is to assess Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, an ancient philosophy of India, which means ‘the world is one family’, to demonstrate how this approach to interfaith coexistence can be philosophically and psychologically superior to the tolerance paradigm, which is currently dominant as the framework for religious diversity management in multicultural societies. Religious divisions and inter-religious hostility continue to increase in many national settings despite several decades of implementation of multicultural policies and establishment of interfaith dialogue institutions, thus indicating the ongoing problem in the conceptualisation of these processes within the existing frameworks. Previous literature on the topic has pointed out the serious problems with the tolerance paradigm, such as its structural passivity, essential asymmetry and social frailty (Nussbaum, 2012; Parekh, 2000; Honneth, 1995). However, a new, more adequate framework has yet to be provided.

The relevance of this question goes beyond theory, too, as there is a growing trend towards religious diversity all around the globe, with studies conducted on the geography of religion revealing how areas once dominated by a single religious identity have become progressively more diverse in their religious make-up, which, in addition to offering prospects for increased cultural interactions, carries with it the risk of conflict if the necessary co-existence mechanisms do not exist (Lin et al., 2022).

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (Sanskrit: वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्) is first mentioned in the Maha Upanishad (6.71-75) and philosophically discussed by academics such as Radhakrishnan (1927, 1955), Vivekananda (1989), and Sen (2005), while being located within the comparative perspectives of Hick (1989), Panikkar (1978), and Buber (1970). But none of these studies has ever combined an ontological approach toward the philosophical tradition of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam with social psychological empiricism on intergroup relations for testing theoretical propositions. This paper seeks to fill the lacuna in the literature. It will achieve this goal through three specific objectives. First, it aims at elaborating on the philosophical

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underpinnings of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam as a paradigm for interfaith co-existence. Second, it looks into the psychological processes that create a sense of familyhood within Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, leading to prosocial conduct beyond tolerance.

RQ1: Ontologically and ethically, what is the basis for Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam? How does it differ from other frameworks that are tolerance-based?

RQ2: Psychologically, what drives the prosocial nature of a family-type morality framework for religious pluralism?

RQ3: In terms of theory, how does the construct of familial moral engagement advance knowledge in interfaith dialogues and pluralism?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Classical Indian Philosophical Foundations

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, on the other hand, derives from the Upanishads, the pinnacle of Vedic philosophy that was written during the period of 800 to 200 BCE and proposes a metaphysics where the plurality of individual selves rests within one unitary consciousness, known as Brahman. The theory, elaborated by the school of Advaita Vedanta through Adi Shankaracharya, has profound implications for ethics; indeed, it states that if all living organisms represent different manifestations of the same entity, then any wrongdoing towards others is also a wrong against oneself (Radhakrishnan, 1927). From the standpoint of ethics, the vision provided by the Upanishads cannot be categorised either under contractarianism or consequentialism. It is essentially ontological. According to recent research conducted on classical Hindu ethics, there is an evident refusal on the part of classical Hindu ethics to fit into the usual Western ethical frameworks due to its evaluation of consequences, agency, and inherent worth instead of decision-making (Frazier, 2021).

A great deal of Radhakrishnan's (1927, 1955) philosophical endeavours centred on explicating the philosophical ramifications of such a vision of human existence for the issue of religious pluralism. In contrast to theologies based on exclusive revelation, which will inevitably have difficulties in recognising the morality of those who belong to a different religion, an Advaita theology can ground moral responsibility in the shared characteristic of human consciousness, irrespective of any specific religion or language in which that individual is raised. Such a philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam is not immune to criticisms, which argue that it obscures some theological and sociological realities. However, this vision represents the most profound philosophical understanding of this idea.

Vivekananda's address at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 translated this Advaitic vision into a prophetic call for interfaith harmony – grounded not in doctrinal uniformity but in the recognition that diverse spiritual paths converge on the same ultimate truth (Vivekananda, 1989). Where Radhakrishnan systematised the metaphysical argument, Vivekananda dramatised its moral urgency, demonstrating that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam is not a quietist philosophical position but a call to active civilisational engagement.

Another distinct but parallel trajectory may be traced through the writings of Rabindranath Tagore, whose conception of religion, based on humanity as “not an institution based on dogma and doctrine ... but one where relationship and affection play a dominant part”, offers a particularly rich example of literary philosophy of the kind of familial ethics that this paper attempts to develop. As Tagore (1931) noted, Religion has not attained its highest fulfilment through dogma, but rather through that sense of fellowship which makes one feel oneself a citizen of the whole world.

But Sen (2005) has come at this tradition from another angle, emphasising the nature of argument, heterodoxy, and criticality that was characteristic of the intellectual milieu of India, a tradition that had allowed room for scepticism, internal dissent, and multi-faith dialogues long before these came to define modern liberalism. As such, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam is one of the most articulate examples of this indigenous version of pluralism, a tradition worthy of recognition on its own terms in parallel with Western traditions of tolerance and multiculturalism.

2.2 Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam within the Indian Knowledge Systems Framework

The foregoing treatment of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam has been the considered position of individual philosophers – Radhakrishnan, Vivekananda, Tagore, Sen – in relation to the primary source document. This is philosophically appropriate, but it understates the extent to which the philosophy is researched and institutionalised in a recognised discipline known as Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). IKS refers to the corpus of indigenous Indian intellectual knowledge systems – philosophical, logical, mathematical, medical, political, aesthetic – which grew out of the categories in which the subsequent colonial and post-colonial study of “Indian thought” would place such knowledge systems after the fact. IKS, as a field, received its first official recognition by being named explicitly in the National Education Policy of India 2020 as a priority area to be integrated into university curricula (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020). The new emphasis on IKS, then, means that the subject matter of the current paper moves from the realm of sentiment into that of scholarly work.

An important epistemological characteristic of IKS, which distinguishes it from a monist interpretation of “Hindu philosophy”, is its internal plurality. Rather than consisting of one single darshana like Vedanta, the Indian philosophical tradition contains several, including also Samkhya, Nyaya, Mimamsa and even Buddhism and Jainism in their own right, each of which has always existed alongside one another, engaged in debate and dialogue while being disseminated as part of a common scholarly culture without either dominating or imposing any monopoly of doctrine (Adamson & Ganeri, 2020). Recent studies on classical Hindu ethics have similarly shown that ethical reasoning involved in classical texts like the Bhagavadgītā cannot be categorised purely as either consequentialism or deontology, but involves the application of all three concepts equally and in equal measure, something that a single category would not be able to explain (Frazier, 2021). It is this same interpretative approach that is advocated by this paper regarding Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: that although the doctrine emphasises unity in diversity, it does not deny the existence of diversity but rather provides an overarching context in which diversity can flourish.

Understood in this context, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam does not stand alone as a mere slogan but serves as one example of IKS’s deeper commitment to epistemology and ontology being a non-problematic feature of plurality within India’s intellectual tradition, a tradition which has been structured by the need to accommodate multiple, conflicting claims about truth. In modern India, such a concept can resonate on a practical level as well as on a philosophical one, having moved from being written on paper to becoming part of living civilizational discourse – as exemplified by its use as the guiding theme behind India’s upcoming G20 presidency in 2023 under the motto “One Earth, One Family, One Future” (Raina & Kumar, 2023), as well as in continuing criticism of the disconnect between its idealized discourse and its actual implementation (Dash & Sharma, 2024). In fact, a recent body of IKS-related academic literature warns that the principle itself may have occasionally been used to foster an appearance of global harmony that glosses over existing inequalities, both internal to India and external between countries (Dash & Sharma, 2024). This insight is not only entirely consistent with but actively supports the stance taken in this paper on the need for relational accountability to guide any analysis of moral engagement within the family unit.

In positioning Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam within IKS, one does three things for the present analysis. Firstly, it gives the institutional and discursive context in which the textual analysis conducted earlier takes place, as something situated within a vibrant and growing body of peer-reviewed literature on the subject rather than simply an independent philosophical commentary. Secondly, it draws attention to the pluralism inherent in Indian philosophy as a potential ally, rather than barrier, to demonstrating the possibility of reconciling ontological unity and difference in the tradition. Thirdly, in the face of the criticism later developed in the paper, it acts as an insurance against the very same risk identified by the family metaphor – that of allowing appeals to civilisational unity to descend into mere celebration. By engaging literature in IKS that takes this problem seriously, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam becomes a philosophical position up for critique rather than an expression of nationalist ideology.

2.3 Contemporary Discourse on Pluralism & Interfaith Ethics

The contemporary philosophical literature on religious diversity is extensive and internally contested. Hick’s (1989) pluralist hypothesis – that the world’s major religions are culturally mediated responses to a single transcendent reality and therefore possess equal salvific validity – provided a philosophical basis for the moral standing of diverse faith traditions. The hypothesis has attracted sustained criticism for potentially dissolving the distinctive truth claims that give individual religions their internal coherence and their adherents their sense of identity. Whatever one makes of that debate, Hick’s work remains a foundational reference point for the philosophy of interfaith dialogue.

Panikkar (1978) advanced a phenomenologically richer account through his concept of intra-religious dialogue — the process by which genuine encounter with another tradition reshapes one’s understanding of one’s own. In Panikkar’s view, interfaith dialogue is not about comparing theologies. Interfaith dialogue is rather about transforming oneself and others. This point speaks very strongly to the notion of family morals, which forms the basis of this paper. In a family context, people don’t compare themselves to each other, but rather transform each other in their interactions.

Parekh (2000) applied the methods of political philosophy to answer these questions, differentiating liberal tolerance, which he faults for its hidden ethnocentricity and hierarchies, from dialogical multiculturalism, which appreciates the intrinsic value and inner workings of various cultures. His insight about the need for cultures to interact in order to question their presuppositions offers solid philosophical justification for going beyond mere toleration, which implies non-interference, to actual interaction required by Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.

In recent theories, Honneth’s theory of recognition has been quite effective in highlighting the ethical aspect of interreligious encounters. According to Honneth, tolerance, which can live side by side comfortably with contempt, indifference, and even condescension, is inadequate in preserving the dignity of humanity. Positive recognition – acknowledging that the other has value, uniqueness, and something of merit to add to the life of all humans – is what

needs to happen. This applies to interreligious relations. It is not enough for minority religious groups to be tolerated; they need recognition as contributors of value in human existence.

But there have been criticisms of Honneth's approach, too. For instance, it has recently been critiqued that Honneth's conceptualisation of recognition pays inadequate attention to the structuring effect that power has on who gets heard in recognition bids, thereby turning recognition theory into a comforting approach that emphasises the significance of recognising one another without engaging with the obstacles to doing so (Rutherford, 2026). Clearly, this is a valid criticism and one that deserves serious consideration. In response to the problem raised by this criticism, the present paper offers the concept of moral engagement within the family setting as an alternative that seeks to recognise others not because of any political goodwill but because of the very ontological reality.

The dialogic philosophy of Martin Buber (1970) offers a layer that political or sociological perspectives may ignore completely, which is the nature of the moral encounter itself. The distinction between the I-Thou relationship and the I-It relationship, as Buber illuminates, is an element entirely missed by theories of tolerance. Under the I-It relationship, the other, in a religious sense, is an object to classify, manipulate, study, or convert. However, under the I-Thou relationship, the other is approached holistically, as a centre of experiencing beings whose difference adds value to life rather than a threat. At its fundamental level, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam represents a philosophical call to approach the rest of humanity from the I-Thou position.

Scholarship on interfaith engagement has likewise increased hand in hand with this literature; yet, despite the relationship, these two strands have hardly been brought into conversation with one another. A systematic review of forty-seven empirical works on interfaith engagement programs concluded that while it is well-established that such programs do indeed serve to expand the participants' understanding and appreciation of alternative worldviews, there remains a lack of common language in the interfaith movement as regards the aims of the programs and a lack of consistency in methods of evaluation of the programs (Visser et al., 2023). A parallel review of the interfaith learning outcomes similarly identified a gap within the framework for categorising the desired outcomes of interfaith engagement. In summary, the above empirical literature suggests the same deficiency of conceptual language identified by this paper, albeit from an independent perspective – interfaith engagement has seen a substantial development while conceptual tools necessary for defining it have lagged.

Another area of research supporting the existence of the gap between programme intention and relational effect is qualitative inquiry. According to a phenomenological study on the experience of being an alumna of interfaith youth programming, despite participants reporting improvements in their knowledge of different religions and a reduction in their fear towards religious differences, very few mentioned that they had been able to maintain any kind of relational relationship or accountability towards the members of different religious communities (Barnas, 2022). Such findings are important because they reflect on the lives of participants after they left the programme and reveal that what they experienced was more a case of improved tolerance rather than relational commitment.

2.4 Psychological Dimensions of Intergroup Relations

The study of pluralism in philosophy finds its footing and complexity when juxtaposed with empirical findings in social psychology. According to the Contact Hypothesis of Allport (1954), it was possible to reduce intergroup prejudice through continued cooperation in contact among members of diverse social groups in an environment of equal status, similar objectives, and institutional encouragement. Further, meta-analysis summarising the results of more than 500 independent investigations confirmed that such a setting always resulted in positive changes in attitude (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). It is pertinent to note, however, that the same conditions, which were seen as indispensable for successful intergroup contact, can also be achieved easily through a family-based ethical perspective toward others. The correlation is no coincidence either, because it means that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam might serve as the motivational platform for achieving such contact.

The theory of Social Identity brings complexity to the situation in an interesting way. According to the theories put forth by Tajfel and Turner (1979), even minimal differences between groups are enough for in-group favouritism and out-group devaluation to be formed, which means that the classification of people as being different from ourselves is a very basic principle of human society. At the same time, there is a positive aspect that arises from the theory of Social Identity – any concept that involves restructuring the definition of in-groups to become larger and involve out-groups becomes an opportunity to channel the prosociality created by identifying oneself with the in-group into something productive. Such a method is applied in the Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam concept, which involves a philosophical reinterpretation of differences as being elements of one large family.

Haidt's (2012) moral foundations theory adds a further dimension. Human moral psychology, Haidt argues, is organised around a set of foundational moral intuitions – including care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity – that different

communities weigh differently, generating much of the moral miscomprehension that underlies intergroup conflict. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, by deploying the family metaphor, makes its ethical appeal through the care foundation – the most cross-culturally universal and motivationally powerful of Haidt’s foundations, and the one most closely associated with prosocial behaviour toward vulnerable others. Research by Graham et al. (2009) confirmed that the care foundation is endorsed most consistently across ideologically and culturally diverse populations, suggesting that an ethical framework that speaks primarily in care’s register has the broadest cross-cultural moral reach.

The assertion that the care foundation has unique breadth when it comes to cross-cultural acceptance has now been put under a more rigorous empirical test. Building on moral foundations theory and measuring the five dimensions of moral cognition across twenty-five populations, Atari et al. (2023) found not only that care is one of the most widely accepted foundations but also that there is greater variability in how moral cognition works than previous work, based mainly on samples from Western societies, had realised. This body of cross-cultural research helps support the premise of this paper that an ethics expressed in terms of care, such as that of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, has unique motivational power, while also urging some necessary caution.

Another useful perspective to consider in this respect is the psychology of belonging. According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), who conducted a thorough empirical synthesis of research on the topic, the desire to belong is among the most important motivations in human psychology, one that has significant implications for our cognitive processes and emotions. As such, identity development theories, such as those of Erikson (1959), hold that humans create their identities through interaction with other people, rather than despite it. It seems safe to conclude that the idea of an ethics of belonging resonates on a level beyond mere acceptance.

However, meta-analysis have further refined these results without overturning them. In focusing on natural rather than experimental intervention conditions, the meta-analysis conducted by Lemmer and Wagner (2015) verified the power of contact to boost intergroup attitudes beyond the artificial confines of the lab, whereas a subsequent meta-analysis of more rigorously designed randomized trials indicated that though contact indeed positively influences intergroup relations, these effects are both less powerful and more contingent than the aggregate literature previously reported (Paluck et al., 2019). According to the findings of yet another meta-analysis summarising 418 experiments aimed at reducing prejudice in the time period between 2007 and 2019, field interventions are mostly light-touch, their lasting influence remains unknown, and the literature itself could greatly benefit from more theoretical advancements than replication of prior contact experiments (Paluck et al., 2021). And herein lies exactly what motivated the authors of this article to look for an additional source of motivation other than contact.

2.5 Gap in the Existing Literature

While the philosophical and psychological literature reviewed thus far has largely developed separately rather than in dialogue with each other, discussions in philosophy regarding Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam have been primarily concerned with prescriptive accounts, i.e., that the world should be viewed as a community of relatives, without exploring how this normative claim could be operationalised from a psychological perspective. Similarly, research on intergroup contact and reductions in prejudice has failed to explore the philosophical and ontological assumptions that would lend such psychological theories the deepest and most sustainable motivational basis possible. As far as the author is aware, there is no existing theory that has combined these perspectives in order to explain how a familial moral view of religion leads to prosocial behaviour. The present study addresses this gap through the development of the Familial Moral Engagement Framework – an integrative conceptual model designed to bridge philosophical analysis and psychological mechanisms.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present study employs an interdisciplinary conceptual analysis integrating philosophical hermeneutics, systematic conceptual synthesis, and critical engagement with empirical findings from the social psychology and sociology of religion literatures. As a theoretical investigation, the study does not collect primary empirical data. It will focus on theory building and integration; that is, the formulation of a theoretical model that links together constructs and knowledge that have never before been related in any systematic fashion. Such an approach is ideal, even essential, in studies intended to discover new theoretical connections and develop new hypotheses for empirical testing (Jabareen, 2009).

In the philosophical aspect of the study, Gadamerian hermeneutics will be employed. This involves approaching a text not merely as an ancient document requiring classification, but rather as an ongoing philosophical argument to be interpreted through a process of fusion of horizons – a fruitful exchange between the context of its creation and that of its current interpretation (Gadamer, 2004). The Upanishadic and Vedantic texts, accordingly, will be studied not simply as historical documents but as philosophical discourse, amenable to analysis, expansion, and application.

The Psychological Element utilises a structured narrative synthesis based on previous empirical literature. Important findings from seminal studies, chosen due to their rigorous methodology and significance as well as their direct connection to the concepts being investigated, will be synthesised into the conceptual model outlined below. This approach mirrors that taken in previous theoretical syntheses of the social psychology of intergroup relations (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006) and moral psychology (Haidt, 2012) and should not be confused with a statistically significant meta-analysis.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

The study proposes the Familial Moral Engagement Framework (FMEF) as its organising conceptual structure. The FMEF comprises four sequentially related constructs. Ontological Orientation refers to the foundational metaphysical stance an individual or community adopts toward human difference – whether difference is experienced as threatening or as a dimension of a deeper unity. Moral Identity Scope refers to the breadth of the moral community within which the self is located – whether that community is bounded by religious or ethnic in-group membership, or extends, as Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam demands, to encompass humanity as a whole. Mode of Moral Engagement refers to the qualitative character of interreligious interaction – whether passive and restrained as in tolerance, procedurally structured as in dialogue, politically affirmative as in recognition, or actively relational and caring as in familial moral engagement. Prosocial Outcomes refer to the behavioural and attitudinal consequences of the preceding constructs, including reduction in intergroup bias, growth in empathic concern, willingness to engage in cooperative contact, and charitable attribution of out-group behaviour.

The FMEF posits that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam operates as an ontological reorientation that expands moral identity scope, shifting the mode of moral engagement from tolerance toward familial moral engagement and thereby producing prosocial outcomes of a quality and durability that tolerance-based frameworks cannot generate. This causal sequence constitutes the theoretical logic of the present analysis and grounds the three theoretical propositions advanced in the following section.

3.3 Theoretical Constructs and Operationalisation

For the purpose of future empirical investigation, the core constructs of the FMEF are operationalised as follows. Ontological Orientation may be assessed through a purpose-developed survey instrument examining the degree to which respondents endorse holistic versus atomistic conceptions of social identity, with items probing openness to the idea of ontological interconnectedness across community boundaries. Moral Identity Scope may be operationalised using Aquino and Reed's (2002) Moral Identity Scale, adapted for cross-faith contexts to capture the extension of moral concern beyond in-group boundaries. Mode of Moral Engagement may be assessed through items distinguishing restrained non-interference, procedural openness, and active relational care, drawing on adaptations of the Intergroup Contact Scale developed by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006). Prosocial Outcomes may be operationalised using the Empathy Quotient (Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, 2004) and Batson's (2011) empathy-altruism paradigm as adapted for interreligious contexts.

Three theoretical propositions follow from the FMEF and the literature reviewed above. The first proposition holds that individuals and communities oriented toward the ontological framework of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam will demonstrate higher levels of empathic concern and intergroup prosocial behaviour than those operating within restraint-based tolerance frameworks (TP1). The second proposition holds that the family metaphor, by activating the care moral foundation (Haidt, 2012), will mediate the relationship between ontological orientation and prosocial outcomes, such that recategorisation of out-group members as family members will produce attitudinal change consistent with the predictions of the Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006) (TP2). The third proposition holds that familial moral engagement will correlate positively with intergroup contact quality, with a reduction in the out-group devaluation predicted by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), and with willingness to engage in sustained mutual perspective-taking across faith traditions (TP3).

3.4 Data Sources

Primary philosophical data are drawn from classical Upanishadic texts — principally the Maha Upanishad (6.71-75) in Radhakrishnan's critical edition — together with major commentaries within the Advaita Vedanta tradition. Secondary philosophical data include the works of Radhakrishnan (1927, 1955), Vivekananda (1989), Tagore (1931), Gandhi (1927), Sen (2005), Parekh (2000), Hick (1989), Panikkar (1978), Honneth (1995), and Buber (1970), alongside key texts in Habermasian discourse ethics (Habermas, 1984). Empirical data are drawn from landmark quantitative studies including Allport (1954), Pettigrew and Tropp (2006), Tajfel and Turner (1979), Baumeister and Leary (1995), Graham et al. (2009), Batson (2011), Frankl (1959), and Haidt (2012). Contextual empirical evidence is drawn from the Pew Research Centre (2021) and UNESCO (2009).

3.5 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeds through three main phases. The first phase is called philosophical reconstruction, where the ontological assumptions behind Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and their ethical consequences are determined by means of textual analysis of key Upanishadic and Vedantic texts. The second phase is comparative conceptual analysis, during which the ontology developed in the first phase is compared to those of tolerance-based theories, pluralistic theories, recognition theory, and discourse theory, focusing on the similarities, dissimilarities, and superiority of the latter over the others. The final phase is theoretical synthesis, where results of philosophical analysis will be combined with findings from social psychology to develop FMEF and substantiate the three theoretical arguments. Interpretative charity is applied throughout all three phases; that is, each argument is evaluated based on its most plausible version.

3.6 Quality and Validity Criteria

In this study, the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research are judged by the four validity standards suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) for interdisciplinary theoretical scholarship. The former two qualities of credibility and transferability have been achieved by triangulating the three traditions of philosophy, sociology, and psychology without placing undue burden on any particular one of them and taking into consideration the historical/cultural context of the sources used. The quality of dependability was assured by documenting all of the analytic decisions made during the writing of the paper. Finally, confirmability was achieved by grounding all interpretive claims in citations from primary or secondary texts.

4. Conceptual Analysis and Theoretical Framework

4.1 Ontological Foundations of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam

Despite appearances, the grammar of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam carries more meaning than it might seem. “Vasudha” (earth or world), followed by the emphatic “eva” (indeed) and kutumbakam (family), translates as “the world is indeed one family.” The profoundness of this idea becomes apparent when one takes into account the Upanishadic philosophy underlying it. According to the tradition of Advaita Vedanta established by Shankaracharya, multiple instances of individual souls constituting human experience do not represent independent entities accidentally united together. Instead, they are manifestations of one unitary being of Brahman – the Absolute (or God, if one prefers that word) – and the oppositions between oneself and others structuring our society do not represent any reality beyond functional differences in a broader context of unity (Radhakrishnan, 1927). It may therefore become clear why Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam is not an analogical expression but rather the designation of something real and true about the world as a whole.

This ontological grounding marks a decisive philosophical advantage over tolerance. Tolerance-based frameworks ground the obligation to respect religious others in moral choice or social contract: one restrains one’s hostility, or consents to an arrangement of mutual non-interference. Therefore, the obligation follows from the very same contingency of the choice, and choices made on advantageous conditions will not necessarily continue to be made when conditions change. In the Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam scheme of things, however, the basis for moral consideration is ontological rather than chosen: there exists an ontological condition where the world is always already one family, whether its members choose to recognise this or not. Therefore, the moral obligation to approach the other with moral consideration becomes a necessity rather than a choice. The moral obligation becomes much stronger and significantly less likely to dissolve under social pressure.

An intellectually honest interpretation of the framework in question will have to avoid the implication that the ontological unity of existence implies empirical identity. Advaita Vedanta does not deny the reality of the differences between individuals, communities, and religious traditions: it provides a larger ontological context for those differences to exist. There is an appreciation of religious diversity, of the multiplicity of traditions and practices and the differences between them, which still retains the sense of ontological unity that is essential for Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam. It is precisely such a middle ground that provides the philosophical usefulness of the framework.

4.2 The Family Metaphor as Moral Architecture

The choice of the family as the governing metaphor of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam is not casual. The family is distinct from other human associations based on an important structural characteristic, which has important implications for moral life: it is non-voluntary. One cannot choose their parents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles. Family ties are formed before affirmation, and continue to exist – at least with a presumption of continuance – despite disagreement, frustration, and conflict which could destroy many of our chosen associations. The non-voluntary aspect of family association is crucial to the strength of the metaphor when applied more broadly to all humans.

Differences do not destroy the relation but are worked out through the relation. When a member of the family expresses an opinion that the patient believes to be wrong, or acts in ways that appear destructive, the appropriate action is not one

of passive acceptance or severing the relation, but of active involvement. The person seeks to comprehend the other's point of view, shares his or her own, and persists in the relation through the struggle. The family offers a picture of moral solidarity amidst difference.

From a social psychology perspective, the family metaphor works effectively as an extremely powerful device of recategorization. When the boundaries of the in-group morality are redefined such that it includes all human beings as part of their family, the process of favouritism toward in-group members and discrimination against the out-group, as pointed out by Tajfel & Turner (1979), is significantly altered. What used to be part of the out-group is now part of the same big in-group family, and the prosocial tendencies expected in social identity theory are consequently activated. Crucially, this recategorisation operates not through the abstract philosophical language of universal human dignity, which has proven motivationally limited in practice, but through the family metaphor – among the most psychologically immediate and emotionally resonant relational categories available to human beings.

4.3 Familial Moral Engagement: An Original Theoretical Construct

Building on the analysis above, this study proposes the construct of familial moral engagement as the distinctive mode of interreligious interaction that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam enables. Familial moral engagement is defined as an active, relational, and caring orientation toward the religious other – characterised by empathic curiosity about the other's inner life, honest self-disclosure oriented toward shared understanding rather than conversion, willingness to receive the other's challenge as an occasion for self-examination, and sustained relational commitment that persists across disagreement and difficulty.

The concept under consideration has several distinct features compared to related concepts discussed in the literature on interfaith dialogue. Tolerance, as stated before, implies a passive approach, since all it demands is the suppression of negative emotions, without producing any positive obligations within the relationship. While dialogue implies openness to interaction, it does not require the level of dedication and care for the other person characteristic of the process under discussion. In Honneth's definition, recognition implies a political and juridical phenomenon in terms of the acknowledgement of another's dignity and status, which, while being necessary for an interreligious dialogue, is far from sufficient in itself. The concept developed by Buber seems to be closer to the idea discussed here; however, it lacks a discussion of how such a dialogue can be created on an institutional level, as well as the connection between the experience of encounter and the process of change brought about by this phenomenon.

Moral conflict within the construct must also receive special emphasis. As opposed to procedural dialogue models, which seek either a consensus outcome or mutual bracketing of truth claims, familial moral discourse recognises disagreement as integral to the relationship, without the need to achieve agreement between the parties involved. What makes the relationship is the commitment to one another even amidst disagreements, and it is this very kind of commitment – a commitment intrinsic to and independent of whether the relationship is comfortable – which makes the construct especially relevant in situations of theological disagreement, where the need for consensus or bracketing of truth claims would otherwise be dishonest and counter-productive. The above gap is empirically supported by the fact that according to literature from systematic reviews, current efforts in interfaith cooperation do not have a common language on the degree of participation involved, judging their success based on knowledge gain and appreciation and not on the level of relational engagement (Visser et al., 2023).

4.4 Psychological Mechanisms of Prosocial Activation

The plausibility of familial moral engagement as an effective mechanism for producing prosocial consequences better than any that can be accomplished through tolerance is empirically grounded. One of the most directly relevant lines of research is based on the Contact Hypothesis developed initially by Allport (1954). A meta-analysis conducted by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) found over 500 independent contact studies which confirmed that intergroup contact defined by equal status, cooperation, and true interpersonal association is indeed consistently productive; it causes positive attitudinal change, decreases prejudice and increases prosocial motives and intergroup relations. It should come as no surprise since the moral orientation embodied in Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam inevitably creates conditions required for attaining this effect; there is indeed nothing accidental about it, as both traditions converge in one idea.

Additional evidence can be gained from Haidt's (2012) study on the moral foundations framework. One such moral foundation is the care moral foundation, which consists of a suite of intuitions related to the prevention of harm and the promotion of the welfare of others. It is the most universal of all the moral foundations found across cultures, as well as the most consistently linked to prosocial actions towards vulnerable others (Graham et al., 2009). Using the family metaphor as its central mode of expression, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam appeals to the ethics of care moral foundation, circumventing the two other moral foundations – namely the fairness and the loyalty foundations, which are more sensitive to contexts and group boundaries.

The explanation offered by Baumeister and Leary (1995) about the need to belong as one of the basic motivations of human beings provides a perspective that is missing in the purely rationalistic theories of ethical responsibility. If an ethic can satisfy the need to belong in the most inclusive way possible, by including the self in the larger community of mankind, then there emerges a social identity which, in its positive effects on behaviour, goes much further than an ethics which guarantees only freedom from interference.

The empathy-altruism hypothesis proposed by Batson (2011) is yet another theoretical basis for asserting that the experience of empathic concern reliably brings about an altruistic motivation for the benefit of the other person, rather than oneself. By defining humanity as a whole as being one large family, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam creates an empathy that motivates altruistic action. The significance of such findings is further underlined by the assertion by Frankl (1959) that meaning in human life is discovered not through self-serving achievements but through caring for and taking responsibility towards others, just as envisioned in Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam. Taken together, the findings of four different disciplines, namely contact theories, moral psychology, motivational psychology, and meaning-based psychology, offer strong theoretical support for the assertion that the family model of moral action leads to prosocial effects that far exceed those obtained via the toleration paradigm.

The above-mentioned theoretical case has received further empirical support in the meantime, after Batson's proposition. The meta-analytic study of sixty-two previous investigations, including seventy thousand participants, proved there was a strong positive relationship between both types of empathy and prosocial behavior (Yin & Wang, 2023). Moreover, another three-level meta-analysis based on ninety-two studies showed that social support (structural equivalent of the need to belong postulated by Baumeister and Leary, 1995) had a reliable connection with prosocial outcomes, the effect being moderated by the origin of social support and the measurement used (Wang et al., 2024). As for the construct of familial moral engagement, it needs to be mentioned that recent research proves moral identity mediates the relationship between empathy and prosocial behavior, which means that empathic concern is more likely to result in prosocial action when incorporated into individual's identity (Peng et al., 2024). It seems that the findings add to the credibility of FMEF's propositions and prove the order of steps that should be followed in converting ontological orientation into prosocial action.

5. Beyond Tolerance: A Comparative Analysis

5.1 Structural Weaknesses of Tolerance-based Models

A critique of tolerance as a basis for interfaith coexistence can be made along three lines, each one identifying a particular shortcoming of that concept as it pertains to relations between religions. First, there is the question of its passivity. In calling for toleration, all that is demanded is that negative evaluations be put aside without engaging with the other community. There is no call to understand, relate to, or acknowledge the intrinsic value in another religious community. A tolerant society is thus one where religious communities exist apart in a state of controlled indifference, where they are divided by an artificial boundary that keeps them from expressing the conviction of their own rightness and the wrongheadedness of the other community.

A second feature of the structural deficiency of tolerance is that it is an asymmetrical term right from its very roots. Tolerate means to endure, tolerate, and endure something. To tolerate someone's presence or belief means that you put yourself in a superior position while putting the other person in the inferior position – that of being tolerated. This is not a reciprocal process at all. Here, the recognition theory of Honneth (1995) comes into play: this asymmetry of tolerance is much more than mere semantics; it involves psychology and morals too. Communities that are tolerated as opposed to communities that are recognised will feel their status within the society to be temporary and conditional. Nussbaum (2012) similarly documents the ways in which the politics of tolerance can generate, alongside the nominal protection of minority rights, a pervasive social atmosphere of anxiety and subordination.

The third weakness is its fragility under pressure. Tolerance, as a virtue of restraint, is most vulnerable precisely when it is most needed: under conditions of economic competition, political mobilisation, or social anxiety, restraint is the first casualty. The historical record of inter-communal violence demonstrates repeatedly that communities capable of tolerating one another under favourable conditions have abandoned that tolerance rapidly when circumstances change. A model of coexistence whose operative mechanism is the suppression of negative impulses – rather than the cultivation of positive relational bonds – cannot be expected to hold when the pressures that sustain suppression are removed. This conclusion agrees with new reviews conducted on the contact hypothesis; once we only include the best-designed experiments, the positive effects on attitudes resulting from intergroup contact turn out to be actual and yet less impressive and contingent than previously thought (Paluck et al., 2019), and an extensive analysis of prejudice reduction programs demonstrated that the field of intergroup contact has overdeveloped practical applications compared with theory (Paluck et al., 2021).

5.2 Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam as a Corrective Framework

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam counters all three structural shortcomings at their root causes. In response to passiveness, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam provides proactive engagement of moral duties. The duty of the family member is not simply abstaining from harming but also understanding, caring for, correcting affectionately, and growing along with other family members. This familial morality is based on positively motivational principles that lead to approach behaviours, not avoidance ones. In response to the asymmetry of the current structure of relations, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam promotes the ontological parity of the family members, in which there are neither beneficiaries nor burdeners. In the family, created by Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, all family members are created from the same basic substance and have equal responsibilities for the welfare of others. Finally, in response to the fragility of relations, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam introduces the idea of relational robustness. Family relations remain unbroken despite difficult situations because they are constitutive relations.

Recognition of the philosophical strengths of the family metaphor does not mean that the dangers posed by the family should be overlooked. For example, family units have the ability to compel conformity, create a sense of loyalty so strong that it pre-empts all individual moral reasoning, and, when pushed to extremes, create an environment of familial solidarity that merely displaces but does not eliminate exclusion. It would therefore be philosophically irresponsible for us to ignore these dangers while reading into Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam. The solidarity in which the principle believes is not homogeneity but the solidarity of difference – of sustaining relationships without reaching consensus. As Parekh explains (2000), morally responsible political communities do not stifle dissident voices in the pursuit of unity but rather those that sustain commonality and relationships by engaging with differences.

5.3 Integration with Procedural Ethics

The substantive moral conception of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam becomes most meaningful when it is supplemented by a procedure that prevents it from the possibility of familial paternalism. In this sense, Habermas's (1984) conception of discourse ethics serves exactly as this supplement. Habermas argues that a moral norm is morally acceptable if and only if it wins the consent of all people who are involved, provided that such an agreement takes place under the conditions of free, equal and non-coercive communicative rationality. If this is applied to the context of inter-religious interactions, then the result would be that the motivation for morality created by Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam – we interact because we really care about one another as family members – will not be used to justify any form of coercion or manipulation by some families towards other families to make them accept their ethical norms, since they do so because of familial love.

Parekh's (2000) dialogical multiculturalism provides a further complementary dimension at the institutional level. His argument that cultures require encounter with each other to examine and develop their own assumptions strengthens the case for moving beyond tolerance's negative liberty toward the positive engagement that familial moral engagement demands, while his account of the institutional conditions under which genuine cross-cultural dialogue can occur without collapsing into the assimilation of minority traditions provides a practical framework for the implementation of the FMEF in policy and educational contexts.

6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical Implications

The conceptual analysis developed in the preceding sections generates several significant theoretical implications, the most important of which concern the adequacy of existing frameworks and the contribution of the FMEF. The three theoretical propositions advanced in the Methodology can now be shown to have solid grounding in the analysis. TP1 – that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam-oriented communities will demonstrate higher prosocial behaviour than tolerance-oriented communities – is substantiated by the demonstration that the FMEF generates active engagement, ontological equality, and relational resilience where tolerance generates only passive restraint, structural asymmetry, and situational fragility. TP2 – that the family metaphor mediates prosocial outcomes through activation of the care moral foundation – is supported by the convergence of Haidt's (2012) moral foundations findings with the Social Identity Theory-based recategorisation mechanisms identified above. TP3 – that familial moral engagement will correlate positively with intergroup contact quality and reduction in out-group devaluation – is grounded in the precise alignment between the conditions that familial moral orientation generates and the conditions that Allport (1954) and Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) identified as necessary for effective intergroup contact. More recent empirical evidence has further corroborated this assertion: examining the moral foundations theory in twenty-five different societies, Atari et al. (2023) have verified the ubiquity of approval toward care principles but have also helped enhance the understanding of their manifestations in various cultures.

Beyond the confirmation of these theoretical propositions, the paper makes a specific contribution to the typology of interreligious modes of relation. Existing typologies – whether theological, distinguishing exclusivism, inclusivism,

and pluralism, or political, distinguishing tolerance, dialogue, and recognition – fail to capture the active, personal, caring, and relationally sustained quality of the mode of engagement that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam enables. Familial moral engagement constitutes a theoretically distinct mode that is not reducible to any of the existing categories, and whose specification contributes meaningfully to the conceptual apparatus available for thinking about interreligious relations.

The paper further shows that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam is not a philosophy-specific notion limited merely to the framework of the Indian tradition or even Hinduism alone. Being rooted in the ontology of the universality of consciousness, employing the universal concept of the family and triggering the moral principle of care highlighted by Graham et al. (2009) and Haidt (2012) as a universal moral principle, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam stands out as an invaluable source in the philosophical discussions on harmonious interfaith coexistence, being equally worthy of recognition as Western philosophies of multiculturalism and tolerance.

6.2 Practical Implications

The findings of this research can be said to be relevant to interfaith education, the formulation of multicultural policies, and the organisation of interfaith dialogue on an institutional basis. In an educational setting, the integration of teaching material regarding the idea of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, as a philosophy that involves ontology, ethics, and psychology, and not merely as a cultural slogan, may help in the development of a moral identity defined through relational care towards others rather than mere tolerance. This applies to both secular and religious educational environments, especially when such ideas are taught to students during the developmental stages of forming their moral identity.

The enduring example set forth by Gandhi (1927) of reaching across religious divides through sincere affection and openness to both receiving and giving criticism, sustaining relationships despite deep-seated disagreements, can be said to provide an unparalleled illustration of how moral engagement on a family level can move beyond an impractical dream and into a practical ethic. For policy makers crafting interfaith programmes, such an example points towards the importance of creating opportunities for personal interaction based on parity and shared cooperative intent over merely symbolically endorsing tolerance.

Institutionally speaking, this means that any program based on the principle of fostering familial moral engagement would emphasise different actions when compared to a program based on tolerance. Joint community service, longer stays at interfaith centres, joint solutions to common social problems, and joint perspective-taking among the members of different faith communities fit much better with the concept of familial moral engagement than interfaith dialogues that mainly deal with theological comparison and expressions of mutual respect.

6.3 Limitations

Several limitations need to be mentioned. This research is purely theoretical and conceptual in nature, and hence, does not offer any primary empirical evidence of the relationships discussed in the FMEF framework. While the three theoretical propositions developed in the framework are empirically substantiated and can be derived through reasoning, these relationships need to be validated through actual empirical observation with suitable measurement tools applied across various religious and cultural settings. Also, while the references made to the Upanishads and the philosophy of Vedanta add value to this theoretical study, there are several schools of thought related to Indian philosophy that should have been considered in depth. The universality of the psychological mechanisms identified – drawn primarily from North American and European empirical research – across non-Western and non-liberal cultural contexts also requires further investigation. In recent years, however, there has been some progress made regarding these shortcomings – namely, the study conducted by Atari et al. (2023), which reconsiders the moral foundations theory from a cross-cultural perspective among twenty-five populations. In South Asia and the Middle East, on the other hand, cross-cultural research on the contact and empathy/altruism hypotheses is still relatively limited. And the risks associated with the family metaphor – conformity, loyalty overreach, expanded tribalism – while noted in the comparative analysis, deserve a more developed account of institutional safeguards than this paper provides.

6.4 Directions for Future Research

The theoretical framework developed here opens several productive avenues for empirical research. Quantitative survey studies examining the attitudinal and behavioural correlates of exposure to Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam-informed educational content – using adapted versions of Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) Contact Scale, Graham et al.'s (2009) moral foundations battery, and the Empathy Quotient (Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, 2004) – would provide the most direct empirical tests of TP1 and TP2. Experimental studies comparing familial-framing and tolerance-framing conditions in interreligious contact settings, using random assignment and pre-post measurement of intergroup attitudes, would enable causal inference regarding the mechanisms through which familial moral orientation generates prosocial change, and provide the most rigorous test of TP3. Cross-cultural replication across religious and national contexts — particularly

in South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa — would be essential to establish the cross-cultural generalisability of the framework's central claims.

7. Conclusion

This paper has advanced the argument that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam – taken seriously as philosophy rather than celebrated as a slogan – offers a substantively richer, psychologically more resonant, and structurally more robust foundation for interfaith coexistence than the tolerance paradigm that continues to anchor most contemporary approaches to religious diversity. The three research questions that organised the inquiry can now be addressed directly. With respect to RQ1, the ontological foundations of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam lie in the Advaitic metaphysics of unity-in-multiplicity, which grounds moral obligation not in contractual agreement or ethical choice but in the structure of reality as the tradition understands it – a grounding that renders the obligation more robust and less contingent than tolerance's restraint-based foundation. Regarding RQ2, the psychological processes that lead to prosocial behaviour arising from a familial moral orientation comprise social recategorization, stimulation of the care moral foundation, fulfillment of the basic need for belonging, and the empathy-altruism model described by Batson (2011), which aligns with Frankl's (1959) conceptualization of relational significance – four complementary processes that occur simultaneously on multiple dimensions: cognitive, emotional, motivational, and existential. Regarding RQ3, familial moral engagement constitutes a fourth type of interfaith interaction and a significant contribution to theoretical knowledge because it represents an active, caring process of engagement not covered by any of the other three types of interaction: tolerance, dialogue, and recognition.

In that sense, the Family Moral Engagement model proposed in this paper provides the connection between the rich philosophical insights found in the Upanishads and the empirical findings of modern social and moral psychology. It will not solve all problems inherent in interfaith coexistence; no such model can solve all problems. However, it represents a much more realistic view of what true coexistence entails than what has been offered by the tolerance approach. The difference between the two concepts may not seem to be significant at first glance, but while tolerance merely implies enduring each other, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam calls for accountability to one another.

Family is not simple. Family entails friction, disagreements that remain unresolved, and the continual challenge of maintaining commitment to individuals whose decisions one cannot always agree with. However, family also means something that the virtue of tolerance cannot possibly provide for: the understanding that the relationship will not end just because it becomes difficult. The unique feature of relational commitment that is unconditional is what the concept of familial moral engagement attempts to define and what the world so desperately needs at this time, when it is so rife with religious divides and communal separation.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no financial or commercial conflict of interest related to this research.

Ethical Declarations

The author declares that this research does not involve human participants, animals, or any procedures requiring ethical approval. All data used in this study (philosophical texts and secondary literature) were obtained and processed in accordance with applicable ethical and legal guidelines.

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