

Article

Expanding Ethical Horizons: Rethinking the Ethics of *De* 德 and *Guna* in the *Laozi* 老子 and *Bhagavad-Gītā*

Pritam Saha 

Department of Philosophy, East China Normal University, Shanghai 200241, China; pritam1919@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper aims to engage in an ethical discussion of *de* in the *Laozi* and *guna* in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* to expand the horizon of our ethical understanding of Chinese and Indian philosophy. First, this paper will explore the different ethical levels of *de* and *guna* and discuss how these levels operate and are bound together. From an ethical perspective, this paper points out that *de* and *guna* can each be divided into two parts—higher *de* and lower *de*, and higher *guna* and lower *guna*. It will further explain the ethical significance of *de* and *guna*, arguing that they offer a unique contribution to developing our contemporary understanding of ethics. We will also seek to discover the interplay of *de* and/with the *dao* in the *Laozi* and that among the three *gunas* in the *Gītā* from the perspective of human behaviors. In the conclusion, we will provide a comparative discussion of our findings on the ethics of *de* and *guna* in the *Laozi* and the *Gītā*. These findings suggest that *de* and *guna* promote a shared philosophical outlook within their respective traditions and thereby make a contribution to post-comparative ethical approaches.

Keywords: the *Laozi*; the *Bhagavad-Gītā*; post-comparative ethics; *de*; *guna*

1. Introduction

At the beginning of his article “Extracting a Humanistic Philosophy of Social and Environmental Well-being from the *Bhagavad-gītā*”, Ithamar Theodor states, “The twenty-first century is apparently becoming ‘The Asian Century’; as such, it is characterized by the rise of Asia and specifically India and China. Naturally, the rise is not only economic or political, rather ideological and philosophical as well” (Theodor 2023, p. 19). The rise of Asia now encompasses not just economic and political dimensions but also religious, cultural, and language shifts that reshape global dynamics and perspectives. As Asia rises, its ideas and philosophies may gain prominence on the global stage, influencing international discourse on political philosophy, metaphysics, and ethics. Scholars from other regions are now developing their own philosophies by commenting on and interpreting major philosophical or religious texts from China and India.

Due to their religious as well as philosophical influence in China, India, and beyond, the Daoist classic *Laozi* 老子 or *Daodejing* 道德經 and the Hindu scripture *Bhagavad-Gītā*¹ are increasingly the subject of continuous scholarly studies in the West—as they have been in the East for millennia already. However, in comparison to the extensive East–West comparative studies that have been undertaken with these texts, the amount of research focusing on Chinese and Indian comparative studies is relatively limited. Especially when comparing the *Laozi* and the *Gītā*, or the *Lunyu* 論語 (the *Analects*) and the *Gītā*, these texts have much potentiality to explore in the context of ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, and politics. This observation has been highlighted by Theodor and Yao, who point out, “So



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far there is no systemic comparative study of Chinese and Indian philosophies and religion. Therefore, there is a need to fill this gap” (Theodor and Yao 2014, p. xi). Ethan Mills also expresses his concern and writes, “While this [comparative philosophy] approach has been beneficial both for cultural understanding and philosophical illumination, one might wonder why there have been so few comparisons between East Asian and South Asian traditions. The potential value of such comparisons becomes evident when considering the vast differences between these traditions” (Mills 2015, p. 525). While it is true that East Asian and South Asian traditions have some differences in philosophical and religious beliefs, I believe that we can find more similarities than differences between these traditions. John Chalmers (d. 1899) presented a different impetus for these comparisons more than 150 years ago: “whether the Chinese and Hindu minds came in contact at this early period—we may hope for further light when the subject receives the attention which it deserves” (Chalmers 1868, p. 8).

The present work attempts to respond to this need through engaging in a comparative study of Chinese and Indian philosophy. Specifically, this paper focuses on finding overlap between the philosophies of the *Laozi* and the *Gītā*, rather than only finding differences. In this sense, this paper intends to present a framework for thinking about ethics in the twenty-first century that we may call “post-comparative ethics”. By “post-comparative ethics”, I mean not simply looking at ideas from one tradition and comparing and contrasting them with those of another tradition but identifying an idea that proves capable of integrating or, perhaps preferably, sublating or synthesizing the philosophical and religious ideas of multiple traditions (see Moeller 2016, p. xvi; D’Ambrosio 2024, p. 11; Moeller 2022, 2018).²

Looking at the ethical philosophy of the *Laozi* and the *Gītā*, I believe that there is much to learn from these two main philosophical traditions from Eastern philosophy and that considering the concepts of *de* and *guṇa* from these two traditions can help us to understand their ethical horizons well. In addition, I also believe that the approach to expanding their ethical horizons might lead us to a more holistic understanding of ethics, morality, and epistemology in Chinese and Indian traditions.

As we know, nearly all the schools in Chinese and Indian philosophy present different ideas of *de* and *guṇa* and develop them in different ways. In Chinese traditions, the concept of *de* has a very long history prior to its introduction in the *Laozi*. Many scholars believe that the concept of *de* has a history of over 3000 years, and the meaning of *de* has also changed in different schools of thought. There are many methods and sources for investigating the original meanings of *de*, such as the images of the character that are shown in oracle bones and bronze vessel inscriptions, in the classical annotations in the philological texts or dictionary, and in commentary from scholars of different periods and different schools. The origin of *de* can be traced back to the Shang Dynasty 商朝 (1600–1046 BCE) and the early Zhou Dynasty 周朝 (1046–256 BCE). Although the specific character *de* 德 does not appear as a complete form on the oracle bones of the Shang Dynasty, the shape is fully developed later in the Zhou Dynasty, and a complete form of *de* can be seen in the bronze inscriptions.³

During the Zhou dynasty, the moral content of *de* and its employment as a philosophical term gained its first tentative foothold. The Zhou believed that the reason why the Xia and Shang dynasties died out was because they did not have virtue (*de*), and so the heavens’ command (*tianming* 天命) transferred to those with virtue: the Zhou (Wang et al. 2020, p. 20). David S. Nivison (d. 2014) explains, “It is the king’s duty to nourish and care for his ‘*de* or virtue,’ a duty it is even appropriate for him to ask for help in performing... A king with ‘*de* or virtue’ listens to advice; wise counselors are attracted to his service. A king without ‘*de* or virtue’ spurns advice” (Nivison 1996, p. 29). Besides the use of a *de*

as a king's virtue, *de* also had a religious purpose in its use as the offering of sacrificial goods for beseeching divine and ancestral blessing. *De* plays an extremely important role in the Confucian Five Classics (*Wujing* 五經) and the Four Books (*Sishu* 四書), where it is addressed in the discussions on ethics, governance, and self-cultivation. In sum, we can say that as a classical Chinese term, *de* is very difficult to interpret and understand in terms of its innate meanings. However, in the classical period, in a very general sense, *de* was characterized by spiritual beliefs, mythological narratives, moral character, virtue, power, ethical behavior, and so on. We will survey more diverse interpretations of the *de* when exploring the *Laozi*.

Similarly, Indian thought consistently demonstrates a deep concern for the concept of *guṇa*. Nearly all the philosophical schools within Indian philosophy address and engage in a discussion of *guṇa*; some approach it from an ethical perspective, while others approach it from a metaphysical or even spiritual perspective. Additionally, some traditions refer to *guṇa* in the singular form, whereas others refer to it in the plural form—two *guṇas*, three *guṇas*, sixteen *guṇas*, twenty-four *guṇas*, and so on. Many Indologists believe that the root of the concept of *guṇa* can be traced back to the Sāṃkhya and Yoga schools. And it is clear that the concept of *guṇa* appeared before the *Gītā*, because the *Gītā* itself mentions the Sāṃkhya concept of *guṇa*. However, throughout the *Gītā*, *guṇa* plays a significant role, and its relation to ethics is central.

According to *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies IV*, the word “*guṇa*” in Sanskrit usually means a “cord”, “string”, or “thread”. The term can refer to a “rope” or to the various “strands” that make up a rope. Moreover, the word can be used in the sense of “secondary” or “subordinate”, and in much Indian philosophical discussion (especially in Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, for example), the term is used to refer to the notion of a “quality” or “attribute” of a “substance” (*dravya*) or thing. The term also comes to be employed in moral discourse, so that “*guṇa*” may refer to “outstanding merit” or “moral excellence” (Larson and Bhattacharya 1987, p. 65).

Sāṃkhya (literally translated as numeration, enumeration, or calculation) is the dualistic or *dvaita* tradition, and the universe of animate and inanimate entities is perceived as ultimately the product of two ontologically distinct categories. These two categories are *prakṛti*, or the primordial material matrix of the physical universe, ‘the undifferentiated plenitude of being’; and *puruṣa*, the innumerable conscious souls or selves embedded within it. As a result of the interaction between these two entities, the material universe evolves in stages. The actual catalysts in this evolutionary process are the three *guṇas* (*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*), that are inherent in *prakṛti*. In Sāṃkhya philosophy, these *guṇas* are sometimes compared to the threads of a rope; just as a rope is a combination of threads, so all manifest reality consists of a combination of the *guṇas* (Bryant 2009, p. 45; Theodor 2023, p. 24). The *guṇas* are especially significant to *yoga* in terms of their psychological manifestation; in *Yoga*, the mind and therefore all psychological dispositions are *prakṛti* and thus also composed of the *guṇas*—the only difference between mind and matter being that the former has a larger preponderance of *sattva*, and the latter of *tamas* (Bryant 2009, p. 45). However, the *Gītā* offers a more comprehensive understanding of *guṇa* than the earlier tradition. As Theodor notes, “One unique feature of the *guṇa* doctrine is that it seems to move rather easily between ethics and ontology, and even epistemology...*Gītā* offers a humanistic interpretation of the Sāṃkhya doctrine in a way that relates the *guṇa* doctrine” (Theodor 2023, p. 25).

Now, this paper will move to explore a more nuanced ethical understanding and the meaning of *de* in the *Laozi* and of *guṇa* in the *Gītā*. It also further explains their different ethical levels. More specifically, I will argue that *de* and *guṇa* can both be divided into two parts: higher *de* and lower *de*, and higher *guṇa* and lower *guṇa*. While *de* in the *Laozi*

has been interpreted in many different ways, I will show that a productive way of understanding it has much overlap with the concept of *guṇa* presented in the *Gītā*. This paper then moves to discover the interplay of *de* and/or with the *dao* in the *Laozi* and that of the three *guṇas* in the *Gītā*, considering their impact on human behaviors and concluding with a comparative analysis of them.

2. Understanding *De*: Exploring Ethics in the *Laozi*

De is one of the most dynamic concepts of classical Chinese philosophy, and along with the *dao* 道, it holds a pivotal position in the *Laozi*. As we can see, out of the 81 chapters of the *Laozi*, *de* appears 44 times in 16 different chapters.⁴ In the *Laozi*, *de* is a central concept and is the name for the second part of the text (the *Dejing* 德經).⁵ *De* has a deep connection with the *dao*; it is also related to the concept *wuwei* 無為 (non-action or effortless action) and *ziran* 自然 (self-so), and together they constitute the highest ethical principle.

Before we examine the ethics of *de* in the *Laozi*, we can take an approach to understand the ethics in the *Laozi* or Daoism. It has been said that the concept of ethics in *Laozi* differs from the Western conception of ethics. Karyn Lai notes, “A discussion of ethics in the *Laozi* may seem almost a misdirected enterprise” (Lai 2007, p. 325). However, many scholars have made a great contribution to understanding the ethics of *Laozi*, Daoism, and Chinese traditions. Julia Ching 秦家懿 (d. 2001) poses some judgmental questions to understand what “Ethics” is in Chinese traditions, as she notes, “what can be said of Chinese ethics in itself? In what consists its real, if hidden, structure? What does it regard to be its fundamental, moral principle?” (Ching 1978, pp. 170–71). She extracts these questions and explains that Chinese terms for ethics refer to the study of the principles of moral relationships, or rather, the study of the fundamental moral principle (*dao*) and its manifest virtues (*de*). She notes, “It is my contention that the organic structure of Chinese ethics lies hidden in these terms, a proper understanding of which can reveal to us a whole universe of thought and morality” (Ching 1978, p. 171).

In addition, Jung H. Lee explains Daoist ethics in a slightly different way, as he states, “We can understand Daoist ethics in two dimensions: The first is a negative aspect that attempts to deconstruct the philosophical foundations of traditional beliefs and practices, primarily those of Confucians and Mohists, while the second is a more constructive dimension that concerns the cultivation of those virtues and natural tendencies that are instrumental in according with the Way” (Lee 2013, p. 3). Looking at the ethics in the *Laozi*, Karyn Lai suggests that “the concepts *ziran* 自然 and *wuwei* 無為 support an ethic that is grounded in the interdependent relationality of individuals” (Lai 2007, p. 325). However, she expresses concerns that “this ethic is not presented in terms of norms, rules, or principles” (Lai 2007, p. 325).

Furthermore, D’Ambrosio discusses five different approaches to ethics in his paper “Approaches to ethics in the *Laozi* (Lao-Tzu)”. As he notes,

First, *wuwei* and *ziran* are certainly promoted in the *Laozi*, and for some scholars they are already ethical. Secondly, other scholars emphasize the virtues of sincerity, simplicity, as well as those often associated with Confucianism, such as humaneness and duty. Third, still others argue that *wuwei*, *ziran*, and other virtues are not ethical themselves, but point to being ethical in that they are manifestations of being in accord with *dao* 道 or the “way”. Thus, only being in alignment with *dao* is ethical. Fourthly, there are those who find the *Laozi* to be opposed to any system of ethics and call into question any sort of “good”. Finally, we can use the model of the “sage” and passages that self-refer with the ‘I’ as calls to cultivate a particular attitude towards oneself and others, which can be related to “ethics” or “ethos”. (D’Ambrosio 2021, p. 2)

Based on the above discussion of ethics in Chinese traditions, we can also explain that ethics in the *Laozi* can be interpreted in two different ways. First, ethics can be understood via a positive approach, such as the ethics of the *dao* 道, and *ziran* 自然 (self-so). The second is a negative approach to ethics, which tacitly negates the positive, including the ethics of *wuwei* 無為 (non-action). Since this paper is engaging in an exploration of the ethics of *de*, I will now discuss how we can understand it. In a more specific sense, I believe that the ethics of *de* in the *Laozi* takes the middle path, in that it can be interpreted positively and negatively. In the positive approach to ethics, *de* is aligned with the *dao* and *ziran*, and in the negative approach, *de* is aligned with *wuwei*. In this paper, I deal with the ethics of *de* in a slightly different way. I divide *de* into two different ethical levels: the higher level represents the positive aspect of *de*, which includes the concept of *pu* 樸 (simplicity), *rou* 柔 (suppleness), *jing* 靜 (stillness), *an* 安 (tranquility), *ci* 慈 (compassion), and many other natural moral virtues. On the other side, the lower level represents the negative aspect of *de*, which includes some artificial moral virtues such as *ren* 仁 (humaneness), *yi* 義 (righteousness), *li* 禮 (ritual propriety), *zhi* 智 (knowledge), *sheng* 聖 (sagacity), and so on.

As Lai argues, “In order to fully appreciate this ethic, we must understand individuals as fundamentally interdependent. In the *Laozi*, individuals either possess or are a particular *de* 德 (potency, efficacy, virtue). This *de* ‘can only be understood in terms of how it realizes itself as it stands in relation to others, within its environment’” (Lai 2007, p. 327; as quoted in D’Ambrosio 2021, p. 4). My approach in this paper is to also explore the ethics of *de*, which include the idea that a person, sage, ruler, or sage ruler is interdependent, while *de* nurtures and nourishes them. An individual’s action can be measured by different levels of *de*, and an understanding of *de* helps with self-cultivation. In a similar expression to Lai, I would like to say that this ethics of *de* is not presented in terms of norms, rules, or principles. It is an other-regarding attitude, and in that sense, we may say that it is more fundamental than these other manifestations of ethical commitment (Lai 2007, p. 325).

Erin M. Cline points out that “While there has been general agreement about the translation of *dao* as ‘Way,’ the ‘underlying and unifying pattern beneath the play of events,’ there has been considerable disagreement about the translation of *de*” (Cline 2004, p. 219). Jia Jinhua 賈晉華 notes, “many qualities attributed to *dao*, such as impartiality, humbleness, femininity, non-action, void, and softness, are also attributed to *de*” (Jia 2009, p. 481). However, considering the wide range of translations of *de* into English, it is tough to define the exact translation of the term *de* in the *Laozi*. In translating the term *de*, D. C. Lau (d. 2010) notes, “*De* means ‘virtue,’ and seems to be related to its homophone meaning ‘to get.’ In its Daoist usage, *de* refers to the virtue of a thing (which is what it ‘gets’ from the *dao*). In other words, *de* is the nature of a thing, because it is in virtue of its *de* that a thing is what it is” (Lau 1963, p. xxxvi). Wing-tsit Chan concurs with Lau’s translation of *de* as “virtue”, but Arthur Waley translates *de* as “power”, emphasizing the way in which one with *de* has influence or moral force (as quoted in Cline 2004, p. 219). Hans Georg-Moeller translates *de* as “efficacy” or “virtue” (Moeller 2006). Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall translate it as “excellence” and “efficacy” (Ames and Hall 2003). Victor H. Mair explains, “the closest English approximation of *de* as used in the *Laozi* is ‘integrity.’ In simplest terms, integrity means no more than the wholeness or completeness of a given entity” (Mair 1990). James Legge translates *de* as ‘attributes’ and writes, ‘It is not easy to render [*de*] here by any other English term than ‘virtue,’ and yet there would be a danger of its thus misleading us in the interpretation...’” (as quoted in Cline 2004, p. 219).⁶ However, looking at the ethical philosophy of the *Laozi*, we may determine that “*de*” can be translated as “virtue” or “virtuosity”, while in a political or even metaphysical sense, it can be understood as “power”,

‘innate power’, ‘moral force’, and so on. However, I believe that no single term in English can fully capture the meaning and philosophy of *de* in the *Laozi*.

In addition, considering the position of *de* in some chapters of the *Laozi*, D. C. Lau claims that “in the *Laozi*, the term is not a particularly important one and is often used in its more conventional senses” (Lau 1963, p. xxxvi). On the contrary, both Roger T. Ames and Philip J. Ivanhoe have pushed back against this assessment of *de*. As Ames claims, “the concept *de* as found in the Daoist corpus has been severely undervalued in later commentary and in our present understanding of this tradition. *De* and *dao* are both central concepts in the Daoist literature that must be understood as correlatives on the model of *yin* and *yang*” (Ames 1989, p. 123). Ivanhoe also states that “an understanding of the concept of *de* is indispensable for a full appreciation of the philosophy presented in the *Laozi* and that the view of *de* that we find in this text shares several important characteristics with an earlier conception found in Confucius’s *Analects*” (Ivanhoe 1999, p. 239). I follow Ames and Ivanhoe in treating *de* as a key term in the text. Therefore, not only should we try to understand *de* well, but understanding *de* may help to understand the *Laozi* as a whole. I also believe that *de* in the *Laozi* should not be limited to interpreting as “virtue” but should also extend to inner character, virtuosity, moral power, and the embodiment of a holistic sense of well-being. Adopting a broader understanding of *de* will help expand the ethical horizon and enrich and diversify its innate philosophy.

2.1. Two Ethical Levels of De in the Laozi

Classifying the number of *de* is very complex when we look across the vast scope of Chinese philosophical literature. Different works provide a numerical classification of *de* or virtues, which are crucial to understanding the world, ethics, human behavior, and harmony in society. Texts that use *de* to mean virtue or moral quality, particularly Confucian texts, provide different enumerations of the virtues. As Nivison notes,

Chinese philosophical literature yields numerical lists of *de* in the sense of either “virtue” or “tendency”: three (e.g., *Zhongyong*), four (*Mencius*, *Yi jing*), five (as in *Zou Yan*), six (*Shang shu*), eight (*Zhuangzi*), nine (*Shang shu*). The “three *de*”, for example, are the three moral virtues wisdom (*zhi*), benevolence (*ren*), and courage (*yong*) in the *Zhongyong*—or the tendencies of heaven, earth, and man in the *Liji* (*Li ji*) of the elder Dai. And later, there are various Buddhist lists of three, e.g., (adapting Sāṃkhya metaphysics) *sattva* (goodness), *rajas* (passion), and *tamas* (illusion). (Nivison 2003, p. 237)

According to Nivison’s explanations, it is clear that different texts enumerate different types of *de*.⁷ As we know, the five constant virtues (*ren* 仁, *yi* 義, *li* 禮, *zhi* 智, *xin* 信) in the *Lunyu* 論語 (the *Analects*) are well-known and well-established, and the Confucian teaching always suggests that they be practiced to achieve moral greatness and harmony in society. Confucianism emphasizes the development of a person’s character through the cultivation of specific virtues.

However, these virtues appear differently in the *Laozi*, especially in chapters 5, 18, and 19, where the *Laozi* suggests people discard these artificial moral virtues or *de* and go back to simplicity. While the *Laozi* does not explicitly specify a fixed number of *de* or virtues as Confucian writings and other Chinese philosophical literature do, it presents a variety of important ideas and moral precepts that can be interpreted as virtues. One might even say that the understanding of *de* developed in the *Laozi* is more profound and robust than any other text in Chinese philosophy. Numerous characteristics and much language related to *de* besides *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* can be found in different contexts when we explore the *Laozi*, such as *pu* 樸, *rou* 柔, *jing* 靜, *an* 安, *shen* 深, *feng* 丰, *ci* 慈, *qian* 謙, *qiang* 強, *xin* 信, and so on. Classifying all these *de* into different levels is also very challenging because *Laozi* does not

provide any classification of them, nor does it list all the *de* or virtues. However, the *Laozi* suggests a straightforward way to understand and classify them into two different levels. Chapter 38 provides a great example where *de* is divided into two parts or levels—higher *de* and lower *de*—and its main connotation is quite clear. In this sense, we can say that it is possible that some of the *de* or virtues can be put into the higher level of *de*, and some of them can be put into the lower level of *de*.⁸ As the *Laozi* states,

Higher *de* [virtue, efficacy, power] is not *de*, therefore is *de*; lower *de* does not let go of *de*, therefore, it is not *de*.

Higher *de* does not act (*wuwei*) and thereby does not depend on action, lower *de* does not act and thereby depends on action.

Higher *ren* (humaneness) acts for it and does not depend on action, higher *yi* (duty) acts for it and depends on action, Higher *li* (ritual) acts for it and there is no response, so sleeves are rolled up and things are cast aside.

Therefore, when the *dao* is lost, there is *de*, when *de* is lost, there is *ren*, when *ren* is lost, there is *yi*, when *yi* is lost, there is *li*. (Chen 2020, p. 234; translation modified)

上德不德，是以有德；下德不失德，是以無德。

上德無為而無以為，下德無為而有以為。

上仁為之而無以為，上義為之而有以為，上禮為之而莫之應，則攘臂而扔之。

故失道而后德，失德而后仁，失仁而后義，失義而后禮。 (Lou [1980] 2017, p. 93)

According to this passage, we can understand that there are two different types of *de*. One is higher *de* (上德 *shang de*), and the other is lower *de* (下德 *xia de*). Higher *de* has a connection with the *dao*, which is rooted in non-action, simplicity, humility, or other natural virtues, whereas lower *de* is not aligned with the *dao* but is deeply rooted in artificial virtues, selfish desires, higher ambitions, and so on. In that sense, we can put *pu* 樸 (simplicity), *rou* 柔 (suppleness), *jing* 靜 (stillness), *an* 安 (tranquility), *ci* 慈 (compassion), *qian* 謙 (humility), and many others of the highest moral virtues or *de* in the higher level of *de*. On the other hand, *ren* 仁 (benevolence), *yi* 義 (righteousness), *li* 禮 (ritual propriety), *zhi* 智 (knowledge), *sheng* 聖 (sagacity), *qiang* 強 (strength, forcefulness), *zheng* 爭 (disputes), and so on are in the lower level of *de*. However, the two levels are interconnected; they are complementary opposites, and the *Laozi* teaches us the consequences of the *de* throughout.

To understand these two levels deeply, we can draw the analogy that the higher *de* is the utmost virtue of a superior person, and the lower *de* represents the virtue of an inferior person. Examples of a person of superior virtue include the *shengren* 聖人 (sage or wise person) or the sage king or ruler, while a person of inferior virtue is a *bu shanren* 不善人 (unkind person), sometimes including the common people who are not aware of how to cultivate *de*. Therefore, to understand the *de* in the *Laozi*, this paper suggests that *de* can be divided into two different ethical levels. However, the two ethical levels are also interdependent, like the two sides of a mirror or the two ends of a rope: one without the other is incomplete.

2.2. The Ethical Significance of De in the Laozi

From an ethical point of view, *de* encompasses various meanings; it refers to the inherent qualities and moral character of a person, it refers to the inherent qualities of a sage and the power of a ruler, and it is also characteristic of nature. On the ethical as well as the metaphysical level, *de* aligns with the *dao*. The relationship between the *dao* and *de* becomes more evident when we look at chapter 51 of the *Laozi*. The text states, “The *dao* generates them, *de* nourishes them, things give shape to them, *shi* [appearance, situation, tendency] brings them to completion. 道生之，德畜之，物形之，勢成之” (Chen 2020, p. 290). As

Chen explains, “The *dao* is the ultimate cause behind the generation of all things, and *de* [virtuosity] is the cause behind the emergence of one particular entity” (Chen 2020, p. 290). This means all things on the earth are generated by the *dao* and nourished by *de*. According to the philosophy of *Laozi*, *de* strengthens the individual and helps to develop their moral qualities. In order to cultivate oneself, an individual should cultivate their *de*. Since *de* and the *dao* are correlated, we can say that practicing *de* is a way of living according to the *dao*.

Wang et al. note that, “From the explanation provided in *Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters* we can gather that its [*de*] original meaning was rising or climbing to a height” (Wang et al. 2020, p. 19). This idea can also be applied in the context of the *Laozi*, as in this paper, I categorize *de* into two different levels, and a person from the lower level of *de* always tries to reach the higher level of *de* by discarding his artificial moral virtues. Furthermore, in a moral sense, Victor Mair points out that “*de* is determined by the sum total of one’s actions, good and bad”. Therefore, it is possible to speak of “cultivating one’s *de*”. He adds that, like the Indian or Buddhist concept of *karma*, “*de* is the moral weight of a person, which may be either positive or negative” (Mair 1990, p. 153). In this sense, a person’s *de* depends on how he cultivates his *de* and how he applies it in his life. Here, Mair’s explanations clearly demonstrate the teaching of the *Laozi*. Chapter 54 states,

By cultivating it in oneself, its *de* becomes genuine; cultivating it in one’s family, its *de* will be in abundance; cultivating it in one’s village, its *de* will be enduring; cultivating it in one’s state, its *de* will be plentiful; cultivating it in all under heaven, its *de* will be widespread. (Chen 2020, p. 304; translation modified)

修之於身，其德乃真；修之於家，其德乃餘；修之於鄉，其德乃長；修之於邦，其德乃豐；修之於天下，其德乃普。(Lou [1980] 2017, p. 144)

This chapter clearly illustrates how self-cultivation leads to a path of eternal harmony. Cultivating one’s *de* is the beginning of this journey, and the goal is to reach the ultimate position where one can achieve the highest goodness. If one cultivates his *de* properly by following the way of the *dao*, one’s *de* becomes constant, and this constant *de* will never depart; it will not err—which is the central theme of chapter 28. “Know the male, yet safeguard the female, and be a river gorge to the world. As a river gorge to the world, you will not lose your real potency (*de*)” (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 120).

In addition, the characteristics of a sage or a person of higher *de* can manifest through the imagery of the *Laozi*. Ivanhoe notes, “The sage is like a loving mother who has unqualified and overflowing concern for all” (Ivanhoe 2003, p. xxvi). Regarding the characteristics of the sage, *Laozi* chapter 55 states, “One who is vital in *de* (character), can be compared with a newborn baby” (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 163). The image of a newborn baby portrayed in the *Laozi* has a deep philosophical connotation. For example: “Wasps, scorpions, and venomous snakes do not bite it; fierce birds and ferocious beasts do not capture it. Its muscles and bones are pliant and delicate, but its hand grip is firm... (Chen 2020, p. 311). The person with *de* is protected from harm because the cultivation of *de* gives them power.

2.3. The Interplay of De and/with the Dao

The *dao* and *de* form a harmonious relationship. On the ethical level, we can say that the *dao* and *de* complete and harmonize with each other and maintain balance in everything. Chapter 51 of the *Laozi* states, “The *dao* generates them, *de* nourishes them, things give shape to them, *shi* [appearance, situation, tendency] brings them to completion. 道生之，德畜之，物形之，勢成之” (Chen 2020, p. 290). Zhang Dainian 張岱年 (d. 2004) explains that this means that a thing is generated by the *dao*, nourished by *de*, shaped by things already in place, and molded by situations in the environment. The *dao* and *de* are the essential foundation for the occurrence and development of any given entity... He

added that the *dao* and *de* are the two most fundamental concepts of Daoist philosophy. This is why Daoism is also called the ‘school of the *dao* and *de*’ (as quoted in Chen 2020, p. 291). In commenting on chapter 51 of the *Laozi*, Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (d. 1990) also emphasizes that “Without the *dao*, the myriad things would have nowhere to emerge from, and without *de*, they would remain without a proper nature” (Chen 2020, p. 292)

Another interesting interpretation of the *dao* and *de* can be found in chapter 41, where the *Laozi* divides individuals into three categories in an explanation of how different individuals perceive and respond to the *dao* and *de*. This chapter begins by mentioning higher individuals, who are diligent, wise, and follow the way of the *dao* in daily life; for them, the higher *de* seems like a valley. In contrast, when middle individuals hear the *dao*, half believe it and half doubt it; and when lower individuals hear the *dao*, they respond to the *dao* with laughter. For the middle and lower individuals, “the bright *dao* seems dark”, and “the advancing *dao* seems to retreat”; “the most white seems dirty”, and “vast *de* seems insufficient” (Chen 2020, p. 254).

The ethical interplay of *de* can be applied to the character (*de*) of the ruler. Chapter 68 states, “Those who are good (*shan* 善) at commanding soldiers are not aggressive; those who are good at war are not wrathful; those who are good at winning over enemies do not join issue; those who are good at employing people stay lower. This is called the *de* 德 [obtain, virtue, virtuosity, efficacy, potency, power] of not contending...” (Chen 2020, p. 360; translation modified). All of these characteristics can be applied to the person who is in the higher position of *de*, or in other words, the sage. Ivanhoe further explains that “*de* accrues to an individual who processes natural calm, compassion, and confidence. It is a power through capable of attracting, disarming, reassuring, and pacifying other people” (Ivanhoe 2003, p. xxvi). *De* enables a person to return to the center and helps build a harmonious society without contending with others and promote prosperity with the *dao*. If one loses his *de*, then he might lose his *dao*. Thus, the teaching of the *Laozi* always suggests firmly grasping the *dao* and cultivating *de*.

Therefore, we can say that *de* and the *dao* are both interconnected and dynamic processes. The interplay of the *dao* and *de* also impacts human nature. An individual’s actions may be good or bad depending on the understanding of the *dao* and *de*. Throughout this insightful interplay between the *dao* and *de*, we can fully explore the essence of the *Laozi*’s philosophy.

3. Understanding *Guṇa*: Exploring Ethics in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*

In the *Gītā*, *guṇas*⁹ and their relation to ethics are central. Out of the eighteen chapters of the *Gītā*, chapters fourteen, seventeen, and eighteen are mostly engaged in the discussion of *guṇas*, where Kṛṣṇa explains the nature of the *guṇas* to Arjuna. K. B. Ramakrishna Rao (d. 2021) notes that “There are instances of the term’s [*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*] being used for moral qualities in the *Mahābhārata*” (Rao 1963, p. 61). At the same time, the *Gītā* as a part of the *Mahābhārata* carries the same connotation. However, *guṇa* in the *Gītā* does not possess a single meaning; rather, it is always changing with the specific context.

Generally, ethics in Indian philosophy is very complex; many scholars present a different understanding of ethics based on different philosophical schools of thought, and some even believe that Indian philosophy neglects ethics. In this paper, I am not going to engage in a debate about whether Indian philosophy has ethics or not or what kinds of ethics Indian philosophy represents. Instead, I will simply focus on the philosophy of *Gītā* and explore the ethics of *guṇa*. However, when we engage in a discussion of ethics, we can see the somewhat similar expression of ethics in the Vedānta school to that in Daoism, making them easy to compare. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (d. 1975) illustrates, “Ethics, in the Vedānta system, appears in the phenomenal realm, or the sphere of relativ-

ity” (Radhakrishnan 1911, p. 466). He continues, “Reality, according to the Vedānta, has two aspects, the higher and the lower, the fixed and the changing, the absolute and the relative. The higher aspect of reality is Brahman, the unconditioned, infinite, and perfect. The lower aspect, or the universe, appears and disappears, in turns, in the higher reality of Brahman” (Radhakrishnan 1911, p. 466). According to his explanation, we can see a parallel between the ultimate being or absolute—Brahman—and the Daoist concept of Dao. Together, they can put in the higher level of ethics. The lower aspects can also be compared with the different principles of Daoism.

The ethics in the *Gītā* can also be understood in many different ways. Many scholars believe that the ethics of the *Gītā* begins with a critical moral question—or we could say a moral dilemma—regarding whether it is right for the main character Arjuna to engage in battle and kill his relatives. In a broader sense, this inquiry not only delves deeply into Arjuna’s personal conflict but also expands into a deeper exploration of several fundamental questions and introduces various paths of knowledge, including the key philosophical and/or religious concepts such as *dharma* (duty), *karma* (action), *bhakti* (devotion), *ātman* (self), *guṇa*, *yoga*, and so on. Among the concepts presented in the *Gītā*, *guṇa* is one of the fundamental ideas and is essential for understanding the ethical philosophy of the *Gītā*. However, the role of *guṇa* in the *Gītā* is very complex and multifaceted. As Eliot Deutsch (d. 2020) describes, “when the term *guṇa* is used in the *Gītā* it is necessary to look closely at the context in which it is employed in order to see whether the physical, psychological or moral aspect is emphasized” (as quoted in Maitra 2018, p. 169). Swami Chinmayananda translates *guṇa* as “mood”. As he comments that, “The term *guṇa*, used in the dialectics of the *Gītā*, indicated not the ‘properties’ of a material but ‘attitude’ with which the mind functions” (Chinmayananda 2013, p. 941).

The term *guṇa* appears multiple times in the *Gītā*, and it seems that the three *guṇas* should be a matter of some apprehension to the practitioner in many contexts. Some modern scholars generally explain that the *guṇas* in the *Gītā* are the fundamental constituents of *prakṛti* or the material world. The *Gītā* mentions the *guṇas* together with *prakṛti*, and it frequently refers to the *guṇas* as “born of *prakṛti*” signifying that the *guṇas* depend on *prakṛti* (e.g., *Gītā* 3.5, 14.5 etc.). Although this explanation fits quite well when we study the *Gītā* together with Sāṃkhya philosophy, it should also be kept in mind that the *Gītā* has its own philosophy that can easily influence other schools of thought. As R. D. Ranade (d. 1957) notes, “in the Upaniṣads, in the *Gītā* and even in the later works all the three systems of Sāṃkhya, Yoga and Vedānta were in a state of fusion. These systems had run into each other and as there had been no definite systematization, there were many overlapping ideas in the three systems” (Ranade 1959, p. 23). The concept of *guṇa*, which mainly refers to the three intrinsic modes or qualities of nature in the Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and other traditions, provides a rich framework for analyzing human behavior and the moral implications of actions in the *Gītā*. In the ethical sense, we can say that *guṇa* helps in an individual’s self-cultivation and decision making. Now, I will turn to a more detailed discussion of the ethical philosophy entailed by the notion of *guṇa* and its different modes.

3.1. The Three Ethical Levels of *Guṇa* in the *Gītā*

The concept of *guṇa* in the *Gītā* is divided into three categories: *sattva* (goodness), *rajas* (passion), and *tamas* (ignorance). While the division of *guṇa* into three categories is straightforward, the ideas behind these classifications are very complex. Each of the *guṇas* represents different fundamental qualities that influence human behavior, moral growth, and development. According to the philosophy of the *Gītā*, every action could be performed in any one of the three *guṇas*. As Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan notes, “The main application of the *guṇas* in the *Gītā* is ethical, we use goodness for *sattva*, passion for *rajas*, and dullness

for *tamas*” (Radhakrishnan [1948] 1970, p. 317). All these three *guṇas* are present in every human being and even in nonhumans, and they bind together various aspects of life and maintain the balance between nature and humans. As Theodor explains, “The three *guṇas* comprise human nature, and they bind the soul to mind and matter, or to the subtle and gross bodies” (Theodor 2021, p. 9). *Guṇas* are the qualities that try to grasp the subtleties of life.

To understand the three levels of *guṇas*, we must look at them closely on the etymological level.¹⁰ The first *guṇa*, *sattva*, is a noun built on the participle *sat* (or *sant*), from the verb “to be”, which also means real or existent. Since consciousness (*chaitanya*) is generally granted such existence, *sattva* is said to be potential consciousness. In a secondary sense, “*sat*” also means perfection, so the *sattva* is what produces goodness and happiness. It is said to be buoyant or light (Radhakrishnan [1923] 1948, p. 262). Heinrich Zimmer (d. 1943) explains the meaning of *sat* as “being; as it should be; good, well, perfect”, and *sattva* accordingly as “the ideal state of being; goodness, perfection, crystal purity, immaculate clarity and utter quiet”. The quality of *sattva* predominates in gods and divine beings, generous people, and men bent on purely spiritual pursuits. This is the *guṇa* that facilitates enlightenment (Zimmer 1952, pp. 295–96). The second *guṇa*, *rajas*, is derived from the Sanskrit root “*raj*” or “*rañj*”, meaning “to be colored, affected, excited, charmed”. *Rajas* is dynamic. It produces motion and has the tendency to do work by overcoming resistance. It is the mass element that resists the other two *guṇas* to function (Chakravarti 1951, p. 210; Bryant 2009, p. 45). *Rajas* is the source of all activity and produces pain; it also means impurity. The third *guṇa*, *tamas*, is that which resists activity and produces states of apathy or indifference. In Sanskrit, it has its roots in the verbal root “*tām*”, which means “gloomy”, “to be dark”, or “to be inactive”. It leads to darkness, ignorance, and sloth. *Tamas*, by its very nature, is massive and inert. The three *guṇas* are interdependent and inseparably connected with one another. In every reality, whether physical or psychical, one of them becomes predominant and the other two subordinate. In a nutshell, the three *guṇas* (or *triguṇa*) with the respective functions of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* are manifestations (*prakāśa*), activity (*pravṛtti*), and restraint (*niyamana*), producing pleasure, pain, and sloth (see Radhakrishnan [1923] 1948, pp. 262–63; Chakravarti 1951, p. 210; Monier-Williams 1899, p. 438).

Theodor explains that the *guṇa* of goodness (*sattva*) is characterized by knowledge, happiness, and adherence to duty for the sake of duty. The *guṇa* of passion (*rajas*) is characterized by desire, attachment, and adherence to duty for the sake of its fruits or for some ulterior gain. And the *guṇa* of ignorance (*tamas*) is characterized by darkness, indolence, and madness, and it involves the negligence of duty (Theodor 2021, pp. 8–9). As Theodor continues, the *Gītā* suggests a gradual elevation by which one raises oneself from a lower *guṇa* to a higher *guṇa*. He applies the idea of the ladder from the writings of Viśvanātha Cakravartī (1640?–1730?) in his interpretation of the *Gītā* and states that the idea of *guṇas* is firmly tied to the ladder-like structure of the *Gītā*. For example, when one adheres to *dharma* by being motivated by some ulterior motive, one is considered to be governed by the two lower *guṇas* (*rajas* and *tamas*), but when one is able to rise to the *guṇa* of goodness (*sattva*), one is following *dharma* for its own sake, without any desire for fruits. Theodor also notes, “Out of these three modes or states, the first mode is recommended, the second state is worse, and the third state is the worst” (see Theodor 2021, pp. 9, 18; 2023, p. 25). However, as we can see, one governed by the lower *guṇa* always follows the higher *guṇa* and wants to reach the highest position; in that sense, it is a continuous, never-ending process. *Guṇas* are not only explained in terms of what is good or bad, or in terms of these three different levels, but also in terms of the different levels of human nature, as is explained below.

3.2. The Ethical Significance of *Guṇa* in the *Gītā*

Ethics plays a central role in the *Gītā*, and the concept of *guṇa* is deeply implicated in ethical discussions. According to the philosophy of the *Gītā*, every action can possibly be conducted in the three modes (*prakāras*) of the *guṇas*, which represent distinct modes of human nature. Because the *guṇas* are so dominant and govern every aspect of life, Theodor says that this is sometimes called “the world of the *guṇas*”. He states that the three *guṇas* comprise human nature, and they are reflected through each and every thought, word, or deed. As such, the way one thinks, speaks, and acts reflects the combination of the conditioning *guṇas* (Theodor 2023, p. 25). The three *guṇas*—*sattva* or goodness, *rajas* or passion, and *tamas* or ignorance—are fundamental in shaping the moral framework and influencing human behavior. They also affect ethical decision making and the pursuit of a virtuous life. Swāmī Ādidevānanda explains, “*Sattva* mainly attaches one to pleasure. *Rajas* mainly attaches one to actions. But *Tamas*, veiling knowledge of true things and being the cause of false knowledge, mainly attaches one to actions which are contrary to those which ought to be done” (Ādidevānanda 1991, p. 468). The three *guṇas* deeply impact an individual’s consciousness and actions, providing a basis for ethical evaluation. As the *Gītā* notes,

The three *guṇas*—*sattva* (goodness), *rajas* (passion), and *tamas* (ignorance) born of *prakṛti* (nature) bind down in the body, O Mighty-armed (Arjuna)! (14.5). Of these, *sattva* being pure, causes illumination and health. It binds one by attachment to happiness and by attachment to knowledge (14.6). *Rajas*, know thou, is of the nature of attraction, springing from carving and attachment, It binds fast, O Son of Kuntī (Arjuna), the embodied one by attachment to action (14.7). But *tamas* know thou, is born of ignorance and deludes all embodied beings. It binds, O Bhārata (Arjuna), by (developing the qualities of) negligence, indolence, and sleep (14.8). (Radhakrishnan [1948] 1970, pp. 316–18; translation modified)

There are many ways we can interpret these three *guṇas*. *Sattva*, which is the purest among the three *guṇas*, always encourages ethical behavior, such as doing good, being good, and maintaining harmony within oneself and in relation to others. *Sattva* helps us to understand that individuals are responsible for actively engaging in good deeds and aligning them with moral virtues, such as compassion, generosity, kindness, and respect. *Sattvic* knowledge cultivates clarity that is free from all confusion, delusion, and ignorance. This knowledge leads one toward higher truths and moral wisdom. Further, as Swāmī Ādidevānanda notes, *sattva* causes attachment to happiness and knowledge. When attachment to knowledge and happiness is born, one engages oneself in secular and Vedic means to secure them (Ādidevānanda 1991, pp. 465–66).

By contrast, *Rajas* is often characterized by activity, passion, movement, and restlessness. *Rajasic* knowledge refers to knowledge driven by one’s desires, higher ambitions, and craving for achievements. This knowledge may foster a strong sense of individualism and a focus on one’s identity, position, and status. *Rajas* is concerned with outcomes, results, and the pursuit of goals; this kind of activity is sometimes referred to as *sākāma karma*. On the other hand, *sattvic* work is categorized as *niṣkāma karma*, which refers to selfless action performed without attachment to the fruits of the actions. While *rajasic* knowledge can be a source of energy and initiative at certain times, it can also lead to harmful consequences when it is not balanced with *sattva*. Especially when *rajas* moves towards *tamas*, all our actions motivated by *rajas* might result in stress, competition, or unhealthy desires, which might cause an imbalance in our lives and relationships.

Tamas can be characterized by confusion, dullness, apathy, and an obstruction to mental as well as spiritual growth. This kind of knowledge is associated with a lack of awareness and understanding. It is covered by ignorance and leads to misconceptions and delu-

sions about the reality of our life. Those who are influenced by *tamasic* knowledge may lack good initiative and avoid engaging with deeper truths or responsibilities. They face mental confusion, make poor decisions, and are not aware of their duties or goals in life. Although *tamasic* activity is regarded as *sākāma karma*, it is worse than *rajas*. The *Gītā* always encourages individuals to cultivate *sattvic* knowledge and move away from *rajasic* and *tamasic* tendencies to achieve greater clarity, purpose, and fulfillment in life.

Furthermore, we can also say that *guṇa* has major ethical significance in the *Gītā*; it provides a complete framework for understanding human behavior and ethical decision making. In the categorization of the three *guṇas*, the *Gītā* encourages individuals to cultivate *sattvic* qualities and suggests a way to discard *rajas* and *tamas*, which motivate action and often lead us to restlessness, insecurity, delusion, and destructive behaviors. Of the three *guṇas* the *Gītā* discusses, *sattva* is the highest because it fosters compassion, clarity, and selflessness and leads us to a happy, meaningful life. The teaching of the *Gītā* suggests that individuals follow the way of *sattvic guṇa*. Embracing the ethical teachings surrounding *guṇa* in the *Gītā* helps individuals align their actions with *dharma*, leading to fulfillment and a harmonious society.

3.3. The Interplay of the Three Guṇas in Human Behavior

As I mentioned earlier, to understand these three *guṇas* more closely, we might divide them into two levels. The *guṇa* of *sattva* or goodness is in the higher level, and the *guṇas* of *rajas* or passion and *tamas* or ignorance are in the lower level. As we have seen, these three *guṇas* are seen to be present in each of us, and the interplay of these *guṇas* manifests in our daily lives. In the *Gītā* (18.40), Kṛṣṇa says, “There is no creature on earth or again among the god in heaven, which is free from the three modes (*guṇas*) born of nature” (Radhakrishnan [1948] 1970, p. 364). However, through developing self-awareness of these three *guṇas*, a person can cultivate *sattva* and minimize the impact of *tamas* and *rajas*. Keya Maitra illustrates how the three *guṇas* interact in a person with the following example:

We may now imagine a person who has seven counts of goodness, two counts of passion, and only one count of dark inertia. Comparing this person with someone who has one count of goodness, two counts of passion, and seven counts of dark inertia—once again arbitrarily speaking—we might be able to reflect on how the behavior of these two individuals would differ. (Maitra 2018, p. 18)

As demonstrated by her example, the three *guṇas* are present in every human being, but the main difference is in their ratio, which varies from individual to individual. Maitra further demonstrates that a person with a prevalence of higher *guṇa* or *sattva* would quest for truth, have contemplative moral attitudes, and possess an interest in knowing the Vedas. On the other hand, a person with a prevalence of the two lower *guṇas* would exhibit dark inertia-like behavioral traits and dispositions like laziness, inability to finish any sophisticated job, or even the cultivation of base pleasures (Maitra 2018, p. 18). A person who has two counts of passion may act in both constructive and destructive behaviors. On the one hand, they might be ambitious, enthusiastic, and creative, but if their objectives or wishes are not met, they might also become restless, aggressive, impatient, and so on, which could cause friction or discontent. A person with two counts of passion may maintain balance over *sattva* and *tamas*, but this balance is dynamic and ever-changing. External circumstances and inner desires frequently challenge this balance, and as a result, a person needs self-awareness and adaptation to maintain harmony in their behavior and well-being. It is now clear that the interplay of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* influences a person’s ethical decision making, ideas, and daily behaviors. It is a continuous process that we, as human beings, experience in our daily lives. The *Gītā* (14.18) notes, “Those who are estab-

lished in *sattva* go upward; those who are established in *rajas* dwell in the middle; those of *tamas*, abiding in the scope of the lowest *guna* sink low” (Maitra 2018, p. 133). A person’s behavior can be judged through these three dynamic and ever-changing *gunas*. Cultivating *sattva* promotes clarity and harmony, and controlling *rajas* and *tamas* leads towards a balanced, meaningful, and satisfying life free from illusion, ignorance, superstition, delusion, and so on.

The *gunas* are continually interacting and competing with each other, with one *guna* becoming prominent for a while and overpowering the others. As the *Gītā* (14.10) says, “Goodness prevails when it overcomes passion and darkness, similarly passion prevails by overcoming goodness and darkness, and darkness by overcoming goodness and passion” (Theodor 2010, p. 112). Thus, the interplay of the three *gunas* determines an individual’s nature and behavior. However, the *Gītā* suggests we detach from the three *gunas* and go beyond them.

4. A Comparative Analysis of the Ethics of *De* and *Guna*

4.1. Blending the Laozi’s *De* and the Three *Gunas* into Two Levels

The idea presented by Ithamar Theodor (2021, p. 9) of two different levels of *guna* very closely parallels the Laozi’s concept of *de*. As can be seen in chapter 38 of the *Laozi*, *de* is divided into two categories—higher *de* (*shangde* 上德) and lower *de* (*xiade* 下德). Higher *de* is characterized by actions that occur without any desire or personal motives, it is embodied in effortless action (*wuwei* 無為), and it is aligned with the *dao* 道. We can say that it is a kind of action where individuals act deliberately, spontaneously, and authentically in harmony with all living creatures and the natural flow of life. Higher *de* is very similar to *sattva*. *Sattva* is characterized by the highest knowledge or purity, goodness, higher truth, and happiness. It promotes balance, harmony, and well-being. And metaphysically or cosmologically, it leads to the higher way or path of life, and it has a close connection with the ultimate. Higher *de* is fully associated with the *dao* and involves maintaining balance in everything. Considering all the above characteristics and qualities, we can say that higher *de* and *sattva guna* can both be put into the highest level of knowledge and nature.

On the other hand, in the *Laozi*, lower *de* is characterized by an action that is motivated by desire and personal ambition. Such kinds of action often conform to societal norms and expectations rather than embodying the principles of *wuwei* and other natural virtues. Thus, lower *de* can often be regarded as the kinds of actions that lack mindful awareness and intrinsic understanding, so those with lower *de* gradually fall into the dark phase of life. This lower *de* in the *Laozi* can be easily compared to the two lower *gunas*—*rajas* and *tamas*, manifesting as actions driven by desire and ignorance. Lower *de* leads to conflict and disconnection from the *dao*. In the same way, *rajas* and *tamas* can lead to actions that result in chaos, stress, and dissatisfaction if not balanced with *sattva*. They are associated with laziness, higher ambition, restlessness, confusion, and a lack of motivation. These kinds of characteristics can be regarded as being in the lower level, so it is appropriate to say that *rajas* and *tamas* should be put in the lower level, as with lower *de*.

Based on the above discussion, we may understand that *de* and *guna* largely share a similar philosophy. I would say it is appropriate to consider them to constitute two different levels of our knowledge. The overlap between *de* and *guna* provides a rich framework for understanding human behavior and their dynamic activity in both the Chinese and Indian philosophical traditions.

4.2. The Fusion of the Ethical Significance of *De* and *Guna*

The ethical frameworks of *de* and *guna* on both sides emphasize classification of the types of *de/guna* that help individuals manifest ethical behavior, foster compassion, and

bring peace and harmony to society and the world. As Moeller elaborates, “Efficacy or *de* will spread wherever things are arranged according to the ideal structure of the *dao*. This begins with the body, and it extends to the family and the whole community until it reaches the whole cosmos” (Moeller 2006, p. 42). This is actually what chapter 54 refers to when it says, “By cultivating it [*de*] in oneself, its *de* becomes genuine; cultivating it in one’s family, its *de* will be in abundance... cultivating it in all under heaven, its *de* will be widespread” (Chen 2020, p. 304; translation modified). Moeller goes on to say that the same concept of ever-extending cultivation is also very important in Confucianism. I would also like to add that this ever-extending cultivation concept or process is also extended to other schools in Chinese philosophy, and when we look at Indian philosophy, it becomes more obvious. The *Gītā*, as well as Hindu and Buddhist philosophy overall, also teaches us how to cultivate ourselves through engaging in *yoga*, *dharma*, and meditation and following other doctrines in their respective traditions.

As we can see, in many ways, the *Laozi* and the *Gītā* share a similar philosophy via *de* and *guṇa*. The highest levels of *de* and *guṇa* present in both texts are in many ways the same. We can describe both as the path of highest goodness—*sattva* or *de*—which is somewhat pale; however, when a person adheres to it, he can gradually begin to experience its result. He may feel purity, clarity, balance, stability, illumination, joy, peace, and spiritual growth (Theodor 2021, p. 9). On the contrary, when a person consciously or unconsciously approaches the lower *de* and *guṇa*, he may experience restlessness, turbulence, sloth, dark inertia, and laziness in his life. The main teaching of both texts is to guide us to develop moral virtue by cultivating the highest *de* or *guṇa* to live a happy and harmonious life.

Theodor explains that the idea of the *guṇas* is firmly tied to the ladder-like structure of the *Gītā*, so, for example, when one adheres to *dharma* by being motivated by some ulterior motive, one is considered to be governed by the two lower *guṇas*, but when one is able to rise to the *guṇa* of goodness (*sattva*), one practices following *dharma* for its own sake, in a disinterested manner, with no desire for its fruits. This is the highest position one may reach within what we consider to be the humanistic realm (Theodor 2021, p. 9). In agreement with Theodor’s view, I also want to say that the teaching of the *Gītā* is like a ladder where everyone tries to reach a higher level when they are aware of it, but some of them can and some of them cannot because of intention, desire for fruits, and their types of action. However, it is a never-ending and ever-extending process.

As we can see, the person who can attain higher *de* and *sattva guṇa* can reach the highest level of this realm. They become a role model for others and guide others to follow the way to reach a higher position. The person who attains all these higher characteristics of *de* is characterized by the name of *shengren* 聖人 (sage) in the *Laozi*. The *Gītā* states that Kṛṣṇa himself has attained all of the characteristics of *guṇa*, but he is not bound by them, he is “*guṇātīta*”—that means he has transcended all the *guṇas*. Throughout the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa teaches Arjuna about the influence of the *guṇas* in our lives and their ethical significance.

4.3. Harmonizing the Interplay of *De*, the *Dao*, and *Guṇas* in Human Behavior

The interplay of *de* and the *dao* in the *Laozi* and that of the three *guṇas* in the *Gītā* offer deep insight into human behavior and ethical living. As we see in the *Laozi*, the interplay and relation of *de* and the *dao* reaches another level. Looking at the relation between the *dao* and *de*, Mair illustrates that their relation is almost exactly parallel with that between the Indian concept of *ātman* (soul) and *Brahman*. He added, “The *Dao* and *Brahman* both represent cosmic unity, while *de* and *ātman* stand for the individual personality or character” (Mair 1990, p. 153). It is true that the *Dao* can be compared with *Brahman*, and as an individual’s characters in relation to the ultimate, *de* and *ātman* represent the highest bonding. The three *guṇas* in the *Gītā* govern an individual’s actions and tendencies. In sum, human

nature is deeply characterized by the three *gunas* and *de*. Thus, it is appropriate to say that both traditions converge in their ultimate aim of achieving their impact on human nature or behavior.

The three *gunas* and *de* of an individual also help us to understand his behavior. The characteristics of the person or individuals who are engaged in the highest level of *de* and *guna* are almost the same across many different traditions: for example, in Indian tradition, we can see the Guru, *rṣi* or rishi; in Daoist tradition, we can see *shengren* 聖人 or master; in Confucian tradition, *junzi* 君子 (exemplary person); in Muslim tradition, Sufi master; in Buddhist traditions, we can also see Master or Bodhisattva, and so on. The characteristics of these highest or exemplary persons are almost the same, and they guide individuals to attain the highest knowledge and lead them on the proper path.

5. Conclusions

Compared to the wide range of scholarly work on the *Laozi* and the *Gītā*, this paper is unable to grasp the vast complexity of the entire ethical doctrine indicated by the notions of *de* and *guna*, but here I have tried to elucidate them within the context of the *Laozi* and the *Gītā*. As was stated, *de* in the *Laozi* is categorized in many different ways, and people can cultivate themselves by cultivating their *de*. *De* in the *Laozi* can be interpreted as a particular concept and can also be connected with the *dao*. The multiple uses of *de* allow us to consider its complexity in overall Chinese philosophy. Similarly, in the *Gītā*, the concept of *guna* has been introduced in a new way that helps us better understand its innate philosophy. The *guna* presented in the *Gītā* is crucial in understanding ethics in Indian philosophical thought. The way *de* and *guna* are presented across both texts is really exceptional. Both texts suggest cultivating the highest *de* and *guna* to reach the supreme level and lead a happy life. The interplay of the three *gunas* governs us and helps to maintain balance regarding our human nature. In both texts, we can see that the notions of *de* and *guna* tie together individual, social, and political ethics and extend to metaphysics, politics, and epistemology. And I believe that there might be more possibilities to explore this further.

To conclude this paper, I would like to say that it is obvious that the *Laozi* presents a unique ethical framework of *de*. And I believe this concept is much clearer here than in any other text before the *Laozi*. Similarly, the *Gītā* presents the Sāṃkhya system of *guna* in a new way, giving it a new philosophical and religious identity. The *Gītā* also presents a more complete understanding of *guna* than any other school in Indian philosophy. Additionally, with regard to the importance of ethics or what we may call post-comparative ethics, I believe that, today, the philosophy of *de* in the *Laozi* and of *guna* in the *Gītā* is not merely a product of ethical teachings. What they demand is that people actually engage in philosophical thinking themselves. In other words, they represent ways to think about how to be ethical in one's actual life. They encourage developing an innate awareness of one's interconnectedness with other beings or even non-beings, which highlights the cultivation and pursuit of genuine goodness, enabling us to think about and connect with the ultimate. The *Laozi* and the *Gītā* both shared and promoted almost the same philosophy over two thousand years in Asia and have spread them to the West in modern times. They exceeded the limitations of the traditional understanding of ethics, and now they have entered into the concept of post-comparative ethics. In this way, when we read the *Laozi* and the *Gītā*, we can see how they are useful resources for thinking about a whole host of contemporary issues. They exceed the traditional, limited understanding of ethics and provide a resource for engaging in post-comparative ethics.

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Notes

- ¹ Hereafter, I will use the “Laozi” to refer to the text of the Laozi 老子 or Daodejing 道德經 and use the “Gītā” to refer to the *Bhagavadgītā* or *Bhagavad-Gītā*.
- ² In this paper, I integrate and present the idea of “post-comparative ethics” from Moeller and D’Ambrosio’s works and utilize the term “post-comparative ethics” in a very general sense. However, we know that different kinds of approaches to doing philosophy have been introduced in academia since the end of the twentieth century, such as—“method of sublation”, “fusion philosophy”, “transcultural Philosophy”, “cross-cultural philosophy”, and so on. But my intention in this paper is not to discuss and use any of them, rather simply stick to the idea of “post-comparative philosophy”.
- ³ For a detailed etymological analysis of *de* in Classical Chinese philosophy, see (Nivison 1979; Wang 2015; Chan 2011; Cui 2023).
- ⁴ Roger T Ames notes that *de* occurs thirty-six times in the *Laozi* (Ames 1989, p. 123). However, Ivanhoe notes that the word appears forty-three times (Ivanhoe 1999, p. 239). The number of counts varies because of different versions of the *Laozi*. In this paper, I use Wang Bi’s version of the *Laozi* from www.ctext.org (accessed on 20 November 2024).
- ⁵ See, e.g., D. C. Lau’s translation of the *Laozi* (Lau 1963, p. 7).
- ⁶ In this paper, my intention is not to discuss how to translate *de* in the *Laozi* but rather to explore its ethical philosophy as a whole. Therefore, I choose to keep the terms “*de*” as well as ‘*guṇa*’ untranslated because the readers of this paper are well aware of their complexity and multiple meanings.
- ⁷ Nivison also noted the three *guṇas* from Sāṃkhya philosophy, where these three *guṇas* represent the qualities of *prakṛiti*, and they are engaged in metaphysical discussion. But, when the idea of these three *guṇas* is developed and mentioned in the *Gītā*, they represent not only metaphysical ideas but also ethical, moral, epistemological and political ideals, which I will discuss in the next part of this paper.
- ⁸ In this paper, I chose not to translate the term “*de*” because of its complexity in the *Laozi* as well as in other traditions. However, as we can see, in the Confucian and other contexts, *de* translated as “virtue”. Thus, when referring to the virtue from the Confucian texts, I usually use “*de* or virtue”. It is also worthwhile to note that I use the terms *ci* 慈, *qian* 謙, *xiao* 孝, *rou* 柔, *qiang* 強, *pu* 樸, *xin* 信, *ren* 仁, *yi* 義, *li* 禮, *xin* 信 and many others to refer “*de*”. In this paper, I believe these characteristics of *de* can be divided into two different levels. These characteristics and two levels of *de* might be clear when I compare them with *guṇa* because *guṇa* has three different levels, which represent different characteristics of *guṇa*.
- ⁹ The term “*guṇa*” can be both singular and plural. In its singular form, “*guṇa*” refers to an overall quality or attribute. When discussing multiple qualities of *guṇa*, the term can be pluralized to “*guṇas*”. This dual usage is very common in academic writing in Indian philosophy.
- ¹⁰ Although many scholars interpret the concept of *guṇa* primarily in the context of Sāṃkhya philosophy, where it plays a vital role in understanding Sāṃkhya metaphysics, we can also apply their interpretations to the *Gītā* because the initial understanding of *guṇa* is relatively consistent across many Indian philosophical schools.

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