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Description of Module

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***Bhagavad Gītā* I: The Dialectic of Four Moral Theories- Virtue, Consequentialism, Deontology and Bhakti**

1. Introduction

The *Bhagavad Gītā* is a small section of the *Mahābhārata*, which is one of the great epics of India. The story chronicles the familial feud between two sets of cousins: the Pandavas and the Kauravas. They are related via their fathers, who are brothers and princes. The father of the Kauravas is the older of the two brothers and as such, must take the lead in governing. However, he is blind and relies on his younger brother for help in administering the kingdom. From a young age, this dependency is correlated by a fraught relationship between the two sets of cousins. The five Pandavas are of mixed character but generally virtuous and talented. Yudishtara, the eldest, is destined for leadership but has his foibles. Arjuna, also one of the Pandavas, is a master archer. The Kauravas number one hundred and are depicted as vicious and jealous in character. As the two sides mature, the Kauravas begin to plot an exile for the Pandavas. They bring this about by employing a trick dice in a game with Yudishtara. The result is that the Pandavas must live *in cognito* in exile for fourteen years; when the period of exile is over, they may return to their lands and govern in peace. At the end of the exile the Pandavas return, but the Kauravas refuse to give them any place to live. The Pandavas exhaust diplomacy as a means of resolving the dispute: the Kauravas are bent on making no compromise. This means war.

The two sides are also mutual cousins of a famous third individual: Krishna, who in the *Mahābhārata* is depicted as Vishnu. Both sides ask him for help in the war: Krishna offers a choice between his army and himself. The Kauravas take his army, while the Pandavas opt for Krishna. Krishna ends up functioning as Arjuna's charioteer in the *Gītā*.

The connection between Vishnu and ethics is old: it goes back to the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* where Death, in response to the boy Naciketa's three questions, explains that life after death characterised by self-governance is yoga, and leads to the realm of Vishnu – the god of preservation. The connection is prophetic in some respects; or we might also say that the authors of the *Mahābhārata* clearly had the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* in mind. For just as Death in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* makes use of the analogy of the chariot to idealise the practical challenge of the individual – the senses are like the horses, the reins like the mind, the charioteer like the intellect, the passenger like the self, and the chariot like the body – in the *Gītā*, Krishna takes the role of the charioteer, which is to say the intellect, while Arjuna takes the role of

the warring passenger. However, the allusion is clear: the advice that Krishna gives Arjuna – intellectual advice, is geared towards practical success.

This idea that ethics is concerned with protection is a unique contribution of Indian philosophy to ethics. The theme continues in the *Gītā* and the *Mahābhārata*, but with perhaps ironic consequences. The Pandavas win the war, but must live with the aftermath. Moreover, as the fighting is fratricidal, the Pandavas find themselves having to go to war not only with many who they love, but also those who have sympathy for their cause yet must fight on the opposing side for the ethical reasons of loyalty and duty.

The *Gītā* and the *Mahābhārata* are hence a dialectical experimentation in moral philosophy, where the characters not only assume the role of prominent ethical theories, but must also work through the ethical challenge as a matter of practice.

Most accounts of the *Gītā* are delivered from an interpretive framework. To interpret is to attend to the meaning of a text in light of commitments or beliefs held by the reader. This is not only a common approach in Indology, but is also preceded by a long commentarial tradition of reading the *Gītā* in the Indian tradition itself. The major Vedānta philosophers for instance, such as Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja have their own take on what the *Gītā* amounts to, based on their philosophical orientations.

Common practice within philosophy, however, is different. Here, we eschew interpretation for reading. In this lesson, we will quickly review what is at stake in reading philosophy, and then move to a review of moral theory, and especially four options.

We will then review some of the arguments from the *Gītā*, which amounts to a dialectical movement away from teleology to proceduralism. Finally, we will consider a recent interpretation of the *Gītā* that is naturally given an interpretive, as opposed to a reading, framework.

2. Reading Philosophy

Philosophy is a discipline, not a theory, and we can do philosophy without endorsing the linguistic account of thought. Philosophy is not a spectator sport: to study it is to be involved in it. How do we get to the discipline behind the theory then? We need to look at the practice of philosophers – the commonalities across theoretical divides. The practice in question has to make it possible for philosophers to not only take sides in philosophical disagreements, but to also know what the possibilities that could contribute to the debate are. Hence, this practice distinguishes between the objectivity of what we believe, and its truth. My philosophical position is objective insofar as it is knowable by others. It is not thereby

true. I might be mistaken, and at the very least – as the positions we take in philosophy contradict each other – we can't all be right. Yet, our views are objective insofar as they are knowable by others. Philosophy makes this possible insofar as it distinguishes between the objectivity of possible positions, and its truth. Kantian Deontology and Millian Utilitarianism, to take two examples, are objectively different. I can disagree with both theories and yet converge with Kantians about what their theory states, and I can also converge with Millians about what their theory says. Call this the *objectivity of philosophy*. If the objectivity of philosophy required that parties agree to what is substantively true, then each party would have a differing account of what any philosophical position is, and it would be indistinguishable from what they *think* is true. However, what happens in philosophy is the opposite: we converge on the correct reading of each other's views without thereby having to agree about anything around what is true in philosophy. This entails that truth and objectivity are not the same thing.

The objective is the common trait of objects in public space. It is the trait of being viewable from multiple perspectives. (The subjective, like a reflection in a mirror, is only viewable from one perspective.) If we are to keep truth separate from the objectivity that we converge on, we would have to move away from anti-realist accounts of truth, which collapse convergence with truth.¹ The correspondence account of truth helps avoid this conflation. Accordingly, truth is a relationship of correspondence between a client and its representation. When the representation corresponds to an object, we have objective truth; when it corresponds to a subject, we have subjective truth. This distinction between truth and objectivity plays a central role in the evaluation of arguments.

In logic, we draw a distinction between the validity of an argument and its soundness. Validity, like consistency, is formal. For an argument to be valid, its premises must entail the conclusion, which is to say that if the premises are true, the conclusion has to be true. This is not to say that the premises are true: they may not be. Consistency in turn is the lack of contradiction. A proposition 'P and Q' can be consistent even if P and Q are false. Truth does not enter into the assessment. Yet, the validity of an argument, like its consistency, is objective: we can converge on this regardless of our substantive commitments because we do not have to rely upon what we think is true or what is true to assess validity or consistency. The soundness of an argument – the truth of premises that constitute a valid argument – is contentious. Here we have the distinction between objectivity and truth: validity has to do with objectivity, while soundness has to do with truth. The first is *de re* (of the thing) the latter *de dicto* (of the

¹ There are other accounts of truth. Also, there has been some discussion about them (Wright 1992; Dowden and Swartz Accessed 2015). However, in general, to the extent that the alternatives are plausible, they often try to accommodate correspondence as a platitude. In proceeding on the basis of the idea that truth has to do with correspondence as part of our distinction between truth and objectivity, we can make room for other accounts of truth that absorb this distinction.

proposition). It entails other interesting findings too. For instance, it is implausible that truth as a meta-propositional device is merely the same as assertion, often called deflationism. If this were true, asserting a valid argument would make it sound. Likewise, it is unlikely that truth is just what we can agree to at the end of inquiry – that is Pierce’s pragmatic account of truth. We might converge upon the validity of an argument at the end of inquiry, but this does not render it true, which is to say, *sound*.

The implication of these considerations is that reading philosophy requires no assumptions, prejudice or presuppositions. As long as reading philosophy is confined to the evaluation of philosophical arguments for formal considerations such as validity and consistency, we can read philosophy without having to agree about what is true. This explains how a Millian and a Kantian can objectively discern each other’s philosophical theories without having to agree about ethical truth. One might reason that this is implausible because philosophical concepts are truth functional, and hence require some agreement to make sense of them: surely, Kantians and Millians have to agree to something about the concept of ethics to make sense of each other’s theory. However, here we see that *AGREEMENT* is too vague an idea. What is truly required is that the Millian and the Kantian *converge* on the objectivity (validity) of each other’s position. Further however, this does not involve shared beliefs about what is true (soundness). So for the purposes of philosophy, philosophical concepts need only be objective (valid, insofar as they entail other concepts), but this is quite different from them being true. Concepts on their own, indeed, lack truth or falsity as a property. That distinction is left to thought. We understand the objectivity of philosophical concepts in terms of what we can converge on without agreeing about what is true. *ETHICS*, or *DHARMA*, for instance, has the objective conceptual content of being about the right and the good without entailing anything about what is right or good, or the relationship between the two poles of ethical thinking.

Settled practice in reading philosophy conflicts with theories of understanding in literature. Many claim that understanding is interpretive. Interpretation in turn consists of making sense of something in terms of beliefs held to be true (Lepore 1986; Davidson 1996, 2001a, 2001b; Gadamer 1996). To apply interpretation to philosophy would be confusing, because this would undermine the distinction between the validity of an argument and its soundness.

However, another interesting implication comes from these observations. If objectively reading philosophy eschews interpretation, then interpreting philosophy is a *means* of doing something novel. In this respect, traditional interpreters of the *Gītā*, such as Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja, are interesting figures to consult not because they tell us what the *Gītā* says, but more so because they are using it to articulate something new, daring and interesting. The *Gītā* becomes a prop in the articulation of their philosophy.

Our goal as historians of philosophy, in contrast, is to focus on reading philosophy and the *Gītā*.

3. Four Ethical Theories

Understanding ethics as concerned with the right and the good is a positive first step. This is objective and it underdetermines the question of what is true in ethics. This allows us to distinguish at least four kinds of theories:

1. **Consequentialism:** the *good* (end) justifies the *right* (means).
2. **Virtue Theory:** a *good*—virtue or strength—produces *right* action.

These two theories are often associated with each other in the literature. They are together the *teleological* ethical theories. What they have in common is the primacy of the good over the right. The difference is whether the relationship is causal or epistemic. The inverse could be called *procedural*:

3. **Deontology:** the *right* is prior to the *good* as a matter of justifying choices.
4. **Bhakti Theory:** the *right* is productive of the *good*.

Western moral philosophy stops at Deontology. Indeed, it is not possible in the history of Western moral philosophy to find clear examples of the fourth moral theory. We find for instance, some moralists claim that the point of moral practice is to become virtuous, but such theories are teleological: the good plays a priority in justification. For the Bhakti theorists, the good plays no justifying role in moral practice. This is because on the devotion (bhakti) account, right action is the emulation of the ideal (the Lord) and the good outcome is merely a perfection of the practice.

3.1. Reasons for failing to understand

One common mistake is to confuse the criterion of moral choice with the definition of what to choose. Not every moral theory draws this distinction: procedural accounts do, while teleological ones do not. A virtue theorist identifies virtues as what defines the right action – whatever we do on the basis of the virtues is right. It also rests with this: there is no sense in the idea that there is a criterion of moral choice over and above acting on the virtues. In the end, both come to the same thing. Consequentialists, for instance, identify duty in terms of its ability to bring about a certain end but also identify this ability to bring about the end as the reason to do it.

Deontologists reject this; they believe the right thing to do might result in good outcomes. Indeed, what defines the right thing to do might very well be a good states of affairs. However, they deny that this is the reason to do one's duty. Rather, for the deontologists, some other criterion is needed for moral choice. We see this in Kant, for instance, who identifies duty with the categorical imperative, and defines the categorical imperative in terms of good outcomes in his principle of humanity formulation but also his kingdom of ends formulation of the categorical imperative. However, he argues that the reason we choose duty is not its end, but the respect for the moral law.

Every deontologist will draw such a distinction. Consequentialists can also at times sound like deontologists. For instance, a consequentialist might claim that long term good justifies moral choices. This is rule consequentialism. According to this, the right thing to do on any particular occasion might not result in a good outcome, but overall it does. This sounds like deontology as it provides some ground for distinguishing between good outcomes and the criterion of choosing duty. However, here we see, that the distinction is non-deontological, because the criterion of choosing duty is good outcome over the long term. There is no such thing as distinguishing between the outcomes and the reason for choosing one's duty, except in the illusory case where we focus on specific instances of choosing duty, and not duty over the long term.

Deontologists, for their part, might define a duty to tell the truth in terms of long-term benefits, but they always reject that the long-term benefits are the reason for doing one's duty. This is because deontologists reject the idea that the outcome of an action is the reason to do it.

Bhakti, the very Indian moral theory, has the illusion of being like rule consequentialism.

Bhakti aims to bring about good outcomes. Consequentialism is incorrectly depicted as being concerned with the production of good outcomes. It is rather concerned with the justification of action by way of outcomes—outcomes that need not be produced to function in a justificatory capacity.

Moreover, in Bhakti, we cannot swap duties. The moral worth of an action here is not to be found in the outcome but in devotion to the regulative ideal. It is the regulative ideal that dictates what is to be done, and not the consequences. Here we can quote Mahatma Gandhi, who articulates this theory: "They say, 'means are, after all, means.' I would say, 'means are, after all, everything.' As the means so the end..." (Gandhi 1959, 67).

If my duty is to be a professor and your duty is to be a student, we cannot swap if it turns out that we would arrive at the same external outcome: someone teaching and someone studying. Indeed, it makes no

sense according to Bhakti to understand outcome as something independent that two differing actions can achieve. This is because here, the outcome is just the practical realization of the regulative ideal of the procedure. The regulative ideal is the Lord (*Īśvara*) of the practice. Here we see why Bhakti – devotion – is a distinct ethical theory, for the right action is defined by a devotion to an ideal and not an independent outcome like utility (happiness, or pleasure).

We can come up with an analogy here. If I want to become a musician, I have to first be devoted to the ideal of music (*Īśvara* of the practice of music). I therefore take up the practice of music, and over time I start to produce music. Eventually, I instantiate the ideal of music itself. It is as though I exemplify the lord of my practice (music) in proportion to my virtuosity, which I have inculcated via my practice. However, the virtue is nothing but the practice realized. If this was a form of utilitarianism, I could swap my practice of music with you – what difference does it make, as long as someone is making music? For the consequentialist, all that matters is the end, and the means is an inessential route to the end. However in Bhakti, it makes a difference whether it is you who practices music or I, for the end is the realization of the practice understood as devotion to the regulative ideal. The *moral* worth of the action is hence not in the result (music, good music) but in the dedication that produces music. Indeed, in the Bhakti account, one cannot explain the moral worth of any action except by way of devotion to the Lord of the practice. Perhaps we can explain it aesthetically: how does it matter whether it is Guru Karakudi Mani (or Stuart Copland – my favorite drummer growing up) or me who is amazing at the drums, as long as someone makes music by playing the drums that well. Ethically, it makes a world of difference whether the virtuosity is mine, yours, or both of ours.

Here is why both Bhakti and Deontology are versions of proceduralism: the right has explanatory privilege over the good. Both can agree with Krishna's *no swap* claim: better the practice of one's own dharma poorly than the practice of another's well (*Gītā* III: 35 and XVIII: 47). Both certainly entail that we should not swap duties merely for the sake of the outcome. Deontologists might be able to tolerate the idea that two individuals can swap duties for the sake of fulfilling procedural considerations. For instance, if in our duet, one person must play the violin and the other the drums, then perhaps we can swap roles so long as both positions are adequately filled. Devotion seems to be more stringent: my devotion to my craft (learning to play the violin) cannot be swapped for something else (learning to play the drums) merely because it fulfills a procedural consideration (that in our ensemble, we need a violinist and a drummer). The reason that I cannot swap is because my duties only count as my duties in Bhakti, as part of my emulation of the regulative ideal of my practice. If the regulative ideal of my practice is to play the violin, I cannot do anything else that distracts from my duty to this ideal. Thus, in the strongest possible sense, Bhakti precludes swapping both on consequential and procedural grounds.

Consequentialists and virtue theorists could not make sense of Krishna's no swap claim: if the good takes priority over the right, then all that matters is the job well done. Moreover, the teleological accounts of ethics would entail that we should swap: my poor showing at my duty and my more productive showing at another person's duty is reason to think that I was ill suited for my assigned duty in the first place. Plato, who carefully constructs an argument for the *Republic*, for his part identifies virtue as the foundation of moral action and further argues that people should be tasked with doing what they are well suited to. The idea that one could do someone else's duty better than one's own, or that they should stay with the practice of duty poorly done makes no sense in his virtue theoretic account.

Indeed, Plato's *Republic* is a caste society, and caste itself is a virtue theoretic idea. Accordingly, right action is caused by our strengths; however, here we cannot understand mistaken action. Right action simply results from what we are well suited to. Certainly, a virtue theoretic account can make sense of vicious action – action done on the basis of the vices. However here the problem is not the act, but the underlying cause.

Teleological accounts of ethical theory are quite popular in Indian moral theory. If you are a teleologist, you will associate morality with outcomes, or states of affairs. The common use of “dharma” for states of affairs, metaphysical principles or causal processes would be very natural.

The common idea of caste in India is teleological. For instance, the idea that what one should do is determined by one's character is a basic component of the caste system – it adds the idea that one's character is determined by birth (*jati*) and this characterizes one's *varṇa* (caste). At the same time, virtue theorists need not buy into caste. The two famous teleological accounts of ethics in the Indian tradition – Buddhism and Jainism – are critical of caste. Jainism for its part comprises of an exemplar of a virtue theory. Here, our essence is *vīrya* –virtue – and this gets covered up by intentional action – karma. A virtue theorist could tell you why this is wrong: virtue comes first, not action. Yet, the ordinary way of the world in the Jain diagnosis is to be constrained and bound by ones goal oriented activity, and not by one's intrinsic virtue. In short, the ordinary roles we have, understood deontologically (in terms of activity) are the problem. This inverts the proper order of explanation, resulting in the confusion of agent with states of action. Dharma, or ethics, is the movement away from this confusion: it is supreme virtue, so to speak, disposing us to be free from the deontological appreciation of one's life. The Jain individual hence vows to move away from karma and idealize the end as freedom from action. It's only virtue afterwards that disposes one.

Far from the usual trap, Indian ethics is robust and presents us with all the interesting possibilities.

4. From Teleology to Proceduralism

Let us combine two findings. First, reading philosophy is not the same as interpreting it. We have to look at the reasons articulated in a text for its objective concepts – all of these are objective insofar as we can converge on them independently of what we think is true. Let us also bring to bear our appreciation of the four ethical theories (reviewed in the previous section) in reading the *Gītā*. We can keep these in mind because in calling upon them we are not deciding what is true in ethics, but only what we can objectively converge on while disagreeing about what is true in ethics.

4.1. Normative Theory (Chapters One Through Three)

The story in the *Bhagavad Gītā* is minimal. It is a brief episode within the *Mahābhārata*, specifically set before the advent of the war with the warring factions arrayed on either side of the battlefield. This image includes Krishna poised to be Arjuna's charioteer and Arjuna the warring passenger. This resonates with the image we find in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, where the charioteer is the intellect. Krishna's function in the *Gītā* is the intellect, which critically address the worries of the self. The self in turn is Arjuna. Even if we ignore the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, this image is implicit in the *Gītā*.

Arjuna is depicted in the epic as a master archer. Archery as the release of action based on a disposition of the bow is a metaphor for virtue. This is objective only because we can converge on this without having to agree, philosophically, whether virtue is a good thing or not. Indeed, the *Mahābhārata* does not deny the importance of virtue. Yet the strength of Arjuna at the decisive moment when he must face the final battle of his existence is inept.

Arjuna, noticing the details of the context, communicates to Krishna his second thoughts about the entire scenario. His initial reaction is to argue against war because it results in bad outcomes. This is a consequentialist argument. Here, we find teleology: Arjuna as the virtuous individual poised to fight on the basis of his virtues (that is, deliver right action on the basis of his prowess) providing a consequentialist argument. Both assume the primacy of the good, but faced with a challenge, they shrink. The trouble of course is that in case of a battle there is no guarantee of success, given a virtuous disposition. Moreover, there are plenty of reasons to believe that things will not go well. If the good takes priority, then what we find in the face of the mounting evidence of failure is apathy, depression, and inaction. The problem here seems to be the fact that we do not control the outcome, and anything we do is merely a contribution to a dynamic context with many players: the outcome would thus seem to be a system property of the various contributions of various players. Our power in the face of this complexity

dwindles: it is not at all obvious what counts as ethical action. Arjuna articulates these worries, as well as the conclusion that one should merely avoid fighting.

Specifically, Arjuna makes a few points. First, if he is to fight in the war, it would result in death and destruction on both sides, including the death of loved ones. Even if he succeeds, there would be no joy in victory since his family will largely have been decimated as a function of the war (I.34-36). Second, if the battle is between good and evil, his character is not that of the evil ones (the Kauravas), yet fighting a war would make him no better than his adversaries (I.38-39). Third, war results in lawlessness, which undermines the safety of women and children (I.41). All three arguments are teleological.

Krishna responds immediately by mocking Arjuna. Indeed, if virtue is a worry or a concern, then appealing to Arjuna's sense of honour is one way to "get him back on the horse" so to speak (II.2-3, II.33-7) for this attempt to appeal to Arjuna's commitment to his own virtue. He also makes the claim that paradise ensues for those who fight valiantly and die in battle (II.36-7). This would be a consequentialist consideration; however he also appeals to a very peculiar metaphysical view: as we are all eternal, no one kills anyone and so there are no real bad consequences to avoid by avoiding a war (BG II.11-32). These are passing arguments. Krishna further does something else. He abandons teleology.

Krishna apparently considers it his job in the *Gītā* to turn around the ethical scenario. Teleology in the face of a dynamic, multiparty game cannot determine a unique result. The outcome depends upon the choices of many players and many factors that are out of the control of any single player. This is debilitating, especially if we are to choose a course of action with the consequences in view. However, if the practical challenge can be flipped, then ethical action can be identified on procedural grounds and one has a way by which to take charge of a challenge via a simplification: the criterion of moral choice is not the outcome. It is rather the procedure. This might seem dumb. If I resort to procedure, it would seem imprudent because then I am letting go of winning (the outcome). However, there are two problems with this response. First, the teleological approach in the face of a dynamic circumstance results in frustration and nihilism – or at least, this is what Arjuna's monologue of despondency shows. Thus, focusing upon a goal in the face of challenges is not a winning strategy. Indeed, when one thinks about any worthwhile pursuit of distinction (whether it is the long road to becoming an award winning scientist or recovering from an illness), the *a priori* likelihood of success is low, and for teleological reasons, this gives one reason to downgrade one's optimism, which in turn depletes one's resolve. This ultimately curtails actions that can result in success. As such, focusing on the outcome backfires in cases of indeterminacy where good outcomes matter the most. Call this the *paradox of teleology*. Second, if we can distinguish between the criterion of choice and the definition of duty – deontology – then we have a way to choose

duties that result in success, for procedural reasons. This insulates the individual from judging the moral worth of their action in terms of the outcome, and hence avoids the paradox of teleology while pursuing a winning strategy (BG II.40). The essence of the strategy, called *yoga*, is to discard teleology as a motivation (BG II.50). Indeed, one abandons the very idea of good (*śubha*) and bad (*aśubha*) (*Gītā* XII.17).

Deontologists and Bhaktas can, as a matter of course, embrace duties that are by definition successful. Yet, their point would be that the *reason* for choosing the duty cannot be the success. This insulates the proceduralist from the debilitating evidence of failure. Yet, when the proceduralist embraces a winning strategy, they change the context and stand a fighting chance for success.

To this end, Krishna distinguishes between two differing *normative* moral theories: karma yoga and bhakti yoga. Karma yoga is what we understand as deontology: doing duty without the motive of consequence (BG II.38, 47, XVIII.47). Duty so defined might have beneficial effects, and Krishna never tires of pointing this out (BG II.32). However, the criterion of moral choice on karma yoga is not the outcome. Bhakti yoga in turn is Bhakti ethics: performance of everything as a means of devotion to the regulative ideal that results in one's subsumption by the regulative ideal (BH IX.27-33). Metaphorically, this is described as a sacrifice of the outcomes to the ideal. This is exactly how bhakti in the ordinary context, or devotion to an ideal such as music, results in accomplishments: one gives up claim to the outcome of one's practice and instead prefers devotion to the ideal of music.

Krishna sets himself up as the regulative ideal of morality in the *Gītā* in two respects. First, he (Krishna) describes his duty as *lokasaṃgraha* (the maintenance of the welfare of the world) (BG III.24). To this extent, he must get involved in life to re-establish the moral order, if it diminishes (BH IV.7-8). Second, he acts as the regulative ideal of Arjuna, who is confused about what to do. The outcome of devotion (bhakti) to the moral ideal – Krishna here – is freedom from trouble and participation in the divine (BG XXII), which is to say, the regulative ideal of ethical practice – the Lord of Yoga (BG.XI.4). This, according to Krishna, is *mokṣa* – freedom for the individual. Liberation so understood is intrinsically ethical, as it is about participation in the cosmic regulative ideal of practice – what Indians called *Ṛta*.

4.2. Acting Without Desire (*niṣkāmakarma*)

According to some commentators, such as MK Gandhi, a central concept of the *Gītā* is *niṣkāmakarma*—acting without desire. This in turn is closely related to *sthita-prajñā*—literally ‘still knowing’ (Gandhi 1969, vol. 37, 126). Gandhi goes so far as to claim that these doctrines imply that we should not even be attached to good works (Gandhi 1969, vol. 37, 105). How do we reconcile these impressions with the

Gītā? These ideas are difficult to accommodate if the main point of the Bhagavad Gītā is to argue for teleology: on a consequentialist account, for instance, the good works that are justified by outcomes are simply those that we should want. Acting without desire would be difficult to make sense of on this account. Even if deontology were the dominant line of ethical reasoning in the Gītā, thinking in terms of the abandonment of all desire, even for good works, would seem strange: the good works are very much the outcomes we should desire on a deontological account—the reason we endorse such work is for non-teleological reasons. But if devotion to the ideal is the basic idea of moral practice, then we can make sense of acting without desire, even for good works. For the right thing to do is defined by the ideal, and, moreover, the right thing to do may not be all that good. This is because the good is merely the perfection of the practice, on the bhakti account, and the practice is defined by the ideal. So in being devoted to the ideal, we may have to engage in behavior that we do not desire, in part because the work itself is not definable as a good outcome. Here the musical analogy is useful. Learning out to play an instrument involves a commitment to a practice, defined by the ideal of music, and the practice itself may not at all be good. It might involve many mistakes, and errors. It might be terrible to listen to, and count as *bad* music and not *good* music. But yet, it is the right thing to do, for it constitutes devotion to the Lord of the practice. For the practitioner of bhakti ethics, this is a common feature of moral practice: it consists in the unpleasant work of engaging vice as something that must be transformed. This is right, but not good. Desire as a motivation would lead us astray here, for it would lead us away from the very foibles we must confront. The right thing to do may not be a good work at all. It might be characterizable as an evil work, fraught with vice and shortcomings, but yet something we do because in dedicating ourselves to these austerities, we emulate the ideal.

Is this asceticism? When we appreciate the range of moral options, then the criticism of desire as a motivation is hardly asceticism in any normal sense, for the ethicist who is committed to devotion as a moral practice does not abandon their sense of right and wrong, or good and bad: they do not give up on the hope for better outcomes. They merely prevent these perspective and desires from playing a role in motivation.

5. Conclusion

Krishna depicts karma yoga (deontology) as a dialectical precursor to bhakti yoga. What is important to note however, is that the dialectic in the *Gītā* moves away from teleology to proceduralism, and the bridge here –rather the sharp turn in the opposite direction – is deontology. This is because while Bhakti appears to be concerned with the outcome, deontology is not. However, if we start out with teleological

assumptions, as Arjuna does, then one cannot get to bhakti without traversing deontology. This is because deontology is the simplest rejection of teleology; it is mild as it does not dispute the role of the goodness of action in defining duty. It merely rejects such considerations in the criterion of moral choice. Yet, Bhakti is the stronger claim that the goodness of action does not define duty: rather it is the devotion to the regulative ideal that defines duty. This seems at once more onerous as it sacrifices both the outcome as a criterion of duty and also ultimately the very rules of morality (dharma) as crude approximations to moral action. The musical analogy is useful. As we start learning to play music, devotion to the regulative ideal of music involves learning various rules of musical composition. However, as we become virtuosos and are capable of improvising and composing music, these rules go out the window; instead we have the practical realisation of the regulative ideal. Hence, Krishna at the virtual end of the *Gītā* makes the claim that Arjuna should abandon all dharmas and seek him alone, and that he will relieve him of fault (XVIII:66). As Krishna is the regulative ideal, this is a radical articulation of the bhakti theory – one that doesn't work for beginners.

In this lesson, we took an introductory look at the dialectic from teleology to proceduralism. In the next module, we shall examine some of the meta-ethical issues involved in this dialectic.



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