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## The Concept of God in the Bhavagad Gītā

### A Panentheistic Account

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#### Abstract

This chapter offers a reconstruction of the *Gītā*'s concept of God with a focus on the relationship between God and the world. It tries to explain the claim that the *Gītā* is panentheistic. This is achieved with the help of some key notions of contemporary metaphysics (such as ontological dependence, priority monism and fundamentality) along with the Indic notion of *prakṛti*, considered as a metaphysical primitive denoting the intimate relationship that exists between matter and conscious living beings on the one hand, and God on the other.

#### 1. Introduction

The *Bhavagad Gītā* is a key text for most Vaiṣṇava traditions. More than that: it is one of the most important and often quoted texts in Hindu religious and philosophical traditions. Among the issues dealt with in the *Gītā* that have caught the minds of scholars is its conception of divinity, or as we shall call it, its concept of God. Virtually everyone who has written or spoken on the *Bhagavad Gītā* had something to say about how the text conceives God. From an academic point of view, several works have specifically dealt with the concept of God in the *Gītā* such as, for instance, (Kumarappa, 1934, pp. 57-85), (Edgerton, 1944, pp. 146-156), (Price 1948; Olivelle, 1964), (Whittemore, 1985) and (Ram-Prasad, 2013).<sup>1</sup>

It might be argued, for example, that the *Gītā* portrays a kind of monotheism (4.6, 9.24, 10.15) in which Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, God, possesses attributes such as personhood (10.12, 11.38), omnipotence (11.43, 11.40), omniscience (7.26, 13.3), omnipresence (9.4, 11.38), eternity (2.12, 11.18), aseity (9.4-5) and immutability (4.6).<sup>2</sup> Besides, he is the source of all excellences (10.41),

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<sup>1</sup>Chapters 5 and 13 of this volume also deal with the concept of God in the *Gītā*.

<sup>2</sup>Two comments about the term “God” are in order here. First, while we recognize that it might be a problematic term, we will use it here to refer to what the *Gītā* sees as the supreme reality or the supreme

the supreme being (10.15, 11.43), the source, origin, and dissolution of the cosmos (7.6, 10.8) as well as its sustainer and support (7.7, 9.4-6, 9.18, 10.42).<sup>3</sup>

But things are not that simple. From a philosophical point of view, it is important that the attributes assigned to God be conjointly consistent. In an often-quoted passage, Surendranath Dasgupta (1922, p. 527) accuses the *Gītā*'s concept of God of being inconsistent:

From these examples it is evident that the *Gītā* does not know that pantheism, deism, and theism cannot well be jumbled up into one consistent philosophic creed. And it does not attempt to answer any objections that may be made against the combination of such opposite views. The *Gita* not only asserts that all is God, but it also again and again repeats that God transcends all and is simultaneously transcendent and immanent in the world. The answer apparently implied in the *Gita* to all objections to the apparently different views of the nature of God is that transcendentalism, immanentism and pantheism lose their distinctive and opposite characters in the melting whole of the superpersonality of God.

Despite being written in the early 1920s, Dasgupta's passage points to a problem with the *Gītā*'s concept of God that today is still pertinent and bears consideration. He basically claims that the *Gita* supports both theism and pantheism, which are inconsistent positions.

In fact, as pointed out, the *Bhavaḡad Gītā* contains traces of theism. Accordingly, it portrays God as transcendent to the world or the cosmos. Kṛṣṇa does not stand in beings, and beings do not stand in him (9.4-5). The *Gītā* also describes Kṛṣṇa's supreme and separate abode: Sun does not light it, nor moon, nor fire; going there, one never returns (15.6). But the *Gītā* also says that the cosmos is somehow in God. All that exists rests on him like pearls on a thread (7.7). Paradoxically, but perhaps not surprisingly, while beings do not stand in him (9.4-5), beings do stand in him (9.4, 9.6). More generally, all states of being are in him (but he is not in them) (7.12). The text further depicts God as immanent to the cosmos. He pervades this world (9.4, 11.38) and encompasses all (11.40). He is present in everyone's heart (10.20, 15.15). Kṛṣṇa's immanence in the world reaches what appears to Dasgupta to be a kind of pantheism, where not

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being. Second, we will be following a general theistic approach to the *Gītā* according to which Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa is that supreme being (for a defence of this, see (Resnick 1995), for example). This is a methodological assumption.

<sup>3</sup>It should be pointed out that we will accept all statements in the *Gītā* as equally valid and will not resort to a Śāṅkara-like *mahāvākya*, or elevating of certain verses, to avoid potentially contradictory statements in the *Gītā*.

only is he identified with distinguished items of the world (7.8-11, 10.20-38), but with all that exists (7.19, 11.40). In the often-repeated theological claim: Vāsudeva is everything (7.19).<sup>4</sup>

To be fair, it is not clear that there is an inconsistency as depicted by Dasgupta. To start with, most theists claim that God is transcendent as well as immanent to the cosmos, although they prioritize transcendence.<sup>5</sup> Besides, Dasgupta does not properly define terms like “theism”, “deism”, “transcendence” and “immanence”. If there is an uncontroversial inconsistency, it is between theism and pantheism (theism presupposes that God and the cosmos are different). So, the *Gītā*’s claim that God is the cosmos and at the same time transcendent to it is *prima facie* inconsistent. Furthermore, even supposing that immanence and transcendence are not contradictory, they must be minimally explained so that (it is clear that) they do not cancel each other out.

One might say that the way out of this consistency problem is *panentheism*, a position often portrayed as situated between theism and pantheism. The *Gītā* taken as a standalone text has been associated with panentheism. During the times when it was compared with the Bible, Franklin Edgerton (1944, p. 149) states that “the *Gītā*’s theism differs from pantheism [...] in that it regards God as more than the universe.” Similarly, Johannes van Buitenen also suggests a form of panentheism in Rāmānuja’s interpretation of the *Gītā* (Buitenen 1968, p. 139). More recent works explicitly mention the word “panentheism” in connection with the *Gītā*. Delmar Langbauer (1972, p. 30), for example, says that “the only way that nature and brahman can be in God while God is not in them, but surpasses both, is for God to include brahman and the world within himself as a part of the whole. This is the *Gīta*’s conception of panentheism. It is the key to understanding its metaphysics and ethics.” Robert Whitemore (1985, p. 354) calls the panentheism of the *Gītā* panauotheism. Commenting on verses 13.13-16, he says that “The One expands to many and dissolves to One. What is this, if not that species of panentheism which for want of a better term we may call panauotheism (from the Greek Auxesis, expansion, hence, the all as the expansion of the One).” Besides, the *Gītā* is often mentioned in general philosophical accounts of panentheism that are minimally sensitive to the world’s religious traditions

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<sup>4</sup>Pantheism, the thesis that God and the cosmos are identical, entails that God is immanent to the cosmos (immanence: from Latin “*immanere*”, “to dwell in, remain”).

<sup>5</sup>See (Mullins, 2016a & Culp, 2021).

(Hartshorne & Reese 1953, p. 30; Clayton 2013, p. 372; Lataster & Bilimoria 2018, p. 51 & Culp 2021, p. 9).

Pantheism is an account of the relation between God and the cosmos that emphasizes inclusion rather than separation. Etymologically, “pan-en-theism” means “all is in God.” Although it is acknowledged that forms of pantheism are found in religious thought as early as 1300 BCE, the term “pantheism” has been apparently used for the first time by the German philosopher Karl Krause in an 1828 publication.<sup>6</sup> Pantheism holds that the cosmos is *in* God (or *in* the divine), although God is more than the cosmos. It is intended to be a mediating position between theism and pantheism. Like theism, pantheism holds that there is something in the nature of God that is more than the cosmos, something that transcends it. And like pantheism, pantheism also defends some form of immanence. While some claim that immanence is a consequence of the cosmos being in God, others add it as an independent feature of pantheism.<sup>7</sup> As Philip Clayton (2013, p. 372) puts it (perhaps suitably mentioning the *Gītā*): “The ‘en’ of pantheism is almost always a two-fold ‘in’: the transcendent is in the immanent, and the immanent is in the transcendent. Or, in the beautiful words of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, ‘He who sees Me everywhere and sees all in Me; I am not lost to him nor is he lost to Me’ (VI, 30).”

Pantheism has seen a revival over the past two decades in philosophical literature. Many critics have pointed out the difficulty with defining the “in” in this characterization of pantheism (that the cosmos is *in* God, although God is more than the cosmos). They complain that the “in” is fuzzy and that there is no widespread agreement on its meaning.<sup>8</sup> A reply to this is that there is no need of widespread agreement. Pantheistic models, both ancient and contemporary, have provided minimally satisfactory accounts of the sense in which the cosmos supposedly is *in* God. The ‘etymological definition’ of pantheism is enough, leaving it to each individual model to provide an interpretation of the meaning of the “in” in the claim that the cosmos is in God.<sup>9</sup> Specific models might say the world is *in* God in the sense that God is present to, or in, every finite thing; or that God responds to events and experiences in the world; or that

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<sup>6</sup>See (Göcke, 2018).

<sup>7</sup>See (Pfeifer 2020, p. 123) and (Culp 2021, p. 1), for example.

<sup>8</sup>See (Mullins, 2016a; Lataster & Bilimoria, 2018; Gasser, 2019; & Culp, 2021) for a survey on this debate.

<sup>9</sup>This seems to be the position defended in (Lataster & Bilimoria, 2018), for example.

God is affected by, changed by, or even depends on events in the world; or still that God is transformed by every moment of finite experience (Clayton, 2013, p. 372).

It should be clear by now that just saying that the *Gītā* is panentheistic is not *per se* a solution to the consistency problem. To really address it, one must provide a minimally precise explanation of the “in” in the claim that, according to the *Gītā*, the cosmos is *in* God, showing that it consistently explains both God’s immanence and God’s transcendence. As far as we know, no such account has been given by those who claim that the *Gītā* is panentheistic.

The task we propose to undertake in this chapter is an explanatory one. We want to explain the *Gītā*’s panentheism. As an additional by-product, we relate the *Gītā*’s concept of God to some key notions in contemporary metaphysics, such as ontological dependence, priority monism and fundamentality. As far as this explanatory endeavor is concerned, we basically look for a small set of principles which can be read from the *Gītā* and which can consistently explain both the *Gītā*’s immanence and the *Gītā*’s transcendence.

The *Gītā*’s panentheism can be seen as the conjunction of the following five claims (which, as we will show, might be read from the *Gītā*):

- (G1) The cosmos is in God.
- (G2) God is different from the cosmos.
- (G3) God is the source of the cosmos.
- (G4) God is the cosmos.
- (G5) The cosmos is pervaded by God.

To explain these claims, we lay down some ontological theses (the small set of principles we mentioned above) which, we argue, are supported by the *Gītā* and explain G1-G5. The key thesis is one which states that the cosmos is God’s *prakṛti*, where we consider *prakṛti* in the *Gītā* to be a metaphysical primitive<sup>10</sup> denoting the intimate relation that exists between matter and conscious living beings on one hand, and God on the other.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>By metaphysical primitive we mean a metaphysical concept that cannot be reduced to other concepts, although it can be elucidated or clarified with the help of other notions.

<sup>11</sup>This is mostly based on the taxonomy of meanings to the word “*prakṛti*” given by Knut Jacobsen (1999). See Section 4 below.

## 2. Panentheism and Proto-Pantheism

There is a particular verse that sums up well the *Gītā*'s panentheism: “Know that all states of being, be they characterized by *sattva*, *rajas* or *tamas*, have their source in me alone (*ye caiva sātṭvikā bhāvā rājasās tāmasās ca ye matta eveti*); but I am not in them (*na tu aham teṣu*)—rather they are in me.” (7.12).<sup>12</sup> Here, while these three kinds of states of being (*bhāva*), which are produced by the *guṇas* (*tribhir guṇamāyair bhāvāir*) (7.13),<sup>13</sup> come from God and are in God, God is not in them; he is different from them. Assuming that these three states of being are representative of all states of being, which are similarly produced by the *guṇas* (7.14, 15.2),<sup>14</sup> the following two claims might be said to be read from the *Gītā*:

(G1\*) *Panentheistic claim*: all states of being are in God.

(G2\*) *Transcendence*: God is not in these states; God is different from them.

Let us start with G1\*. How does one understand the claim that all states of being are in God? Verse 7.12 seems to suggest that this might be understood as a causal dependence relation. Kṛṣṇa says *matta eveti tān viddhi*: “know that they (the states) come, proceed from me.” In fact, the *Gītā* seems to support the claim that Kṛṣṇa is the source or origin of all that exists. He is said to be the origin (*prabhava*) of all (7.6, 9.18, 10.8); he causes beings to be (*bhūtabhāvana*) (9.5, 10.15); everything emanates (*pravartate*) from him (10.8). He is the first creator (*ādikartre*) (11.37), the father of the moving and unmoving world (*loka*) (11.43) and the unperishable and perennial seed of all beings (7.10, 9.18). The difference here is that reference is made not to the three kinds of states of being mentioned in verse 7.12, but to the entire cosmos, to all that exists. Thus, we have the following additional claim:

(G3) *Source of all*: Everything proceeds, emanates (*pravartate*) from God; God is the source, origin (*prabhava*) of all that exists.

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<sup>12</sup>Our *Gītā* translations are mostly based on those of (Theodor 2010) and to a lesser degree of (Sargeant 2009).

<sup>13</sup>Despite the undoubtful connection that is between the words “*bhāva*” and “*guṇa*” in these verses, we follow (Theodor 2010) and translate “*bhāva*” as state of being, leaving the word “*guṇa*” untranslated (“*guṇa*” is usually translated as quality, mode of existence and state of being; it is of three kinds: *sattva* or goodness, *rajas* or passion, and *tamas* or darkness).

<sup>14</sup>Our argument does not really depend on the truth of this assumption, as these two claims—G1\* and G2\*—are provisional (their final versions are presented below).

Assuming a Sāṅkhya *satkāryavāda* theory of causation, one might claim that the manifest effect is pre-existent in an unmanifest state or as potentiality within the cause: as everything proceeds, emanates from God, all states and the whole cosmos pre-exist *in* God. While we do not rule this out as a possible explanation of G1 and G3, there is in the *Gītā* what appears to be a deeper, more fundamental dependence relation between God and beings:

The entire world is pervaded by me<sup>15</sup> in my unmanifest form; all beings stand in me, but I do not stand in them. And yet all beings do not stand in me; see my mystic splendour! I sustain beings but rely not on them; my very self is the cause of their being. As the great wind that goes everywhere is eternally situated in space, know that similarly all beings stand in me. (9.4-6)

The key term here is “*stha*”, which means amongst other things “to abide in; be situated in; rest in; stand in.” In verse 9.4, for example, Kṛṣṇa says *matsthāni sarvabhūtāni*, “all beings abide, are situated, or stand in me.” It seems uncontroversial among commentators, both traditional and contemporary, that statements like this mean (at least partially) the following: all beings *ontologically depend* on Kṛṣṇa;<sup>16</sup> their own existence or essence is supported (*bhūtabhṛn*) by him (9.5).

Ontological dependence is an old philosophical concept. It refers to a relation between entities or beings (*onta* in Greek, whence ontological) where one depends on the other in a distinctly metaphysical sense. Sets ontologically depend on their members; electricity ontologically depends on electrons. As one of the most used notions in contemporary metaphysics to study the structure and basis of reality, ontological dependence has been subject

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<sup>15</sup>This interpretation of “*maya tatam idaṃ sarvaṃ*” as “the whole world is pervaded (*vyāpta*) by me” is accepted by many *Gītā* translators and commentators and seems to be informed by some of the text’s earlier commentators. “Pervasion,” or “*vyāpta*” is suggested by Śaṅkara in his *Gītā-bhāṣya*, who glosses “*tatam idaṃ sarvaṃ*” as “*tatam vyaptam sarvaṃ idaṃ*”. Rāmānuja in his *Gītā-bhāṣya* states: *asya jagato dhāraṇārthaṃ niyamanārthaṃ ca śeṣitvena vyāptam ityārthaḥ*, or “the meaning is that all this is pervaded by me, the principal (*śeṣi*), so that I may sustain and rule this universe”. We therefore stand on the shoulders of giants and maintain this interpretation and understanding. Furthermore, this sense of pervasion is not the same as the formal *nyāya* logical sense (*vyāpti*), like when X pervades Y in an analogous causal sense (e.g. Y is smoke that is caused, or pervaded by, X, which is fire, in all cases—whether on a hill or in a kitchen).

<sup>16</sup>See (Theodor, 2010, p. 82) and (Malinar, 2007, p. 148), for example. See also (Chari, 2005, pp. 97-99) for Śaṅkara’s, Rāmānuja’s and Madhva’s views on these verses.

to various types of analysis.<sup>17</sup> As far as we are concerned, we want to be as general and nontechnical as possible. We will understand the relation of ontological dependence in the following intuitive and pre-analytical way: Y ontologically depends on X when Y's existence or Y's identity depends on X. Besides that, we will make two harmless (albeit technical) assumptions. First that the relation of ontological dependence is irreflexive (it cannot be that X ontologically depends on X), and second that it is asymmetric (if Y ontologically depends on X, then it cannot be that X ontologically depends on Y).

The idea of ontological dependence also seems to be behind the beautiful analogy found in the seventh chapter where Kṛṣṇa says that all that exists rests on him like pearls on a thread (7.7). Or when he is said to be the supporter (*bhartā*), foundation (*sthānam*) (9.18) and the supreme resting place of all cosmos (*viśva*) (11.38). Or still when he says that with a single fragment (*amśa*) of himself, he sustains this entire universe (*jagat*) (10.42).

Considering that these verses are talking about *all* that is—that is a completeness assumption—, it seems safe to say that the *Gītā* supports the following thesis:

(T1\*) *Ontological dependence*: All that exists ontologically depends on God.

It also seems safe to say that the panentheistic and transcendence claims present in the *Gītā* are broader than G1\* and G2\*, encompassing not only states of being, but all that exists. Thus, we have the following reformulated and final versions of G1\* and G2\*:

(G1) *Panentheistic claim*: the cosmos, in the sense of all that exists, is in God.

(G2) *Transcendence*: God is not in the cosmos; God is different from it.

Our proposal is to understand G1 in terms of ontological dependence. All beings and all states of being are in God in the sense of ontologically depending on God. In other words: G1 can be explained in terms of T1\*.

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<sup>17</sup>A traditional approach is to analyze ontological dependence in modal terms, that is, in terms of possibility and necessity. More recently, analysis in terms of the notion of essence have become popular. A third option is to treat the notion of ontological dependence as a metaphysical primitive, a term one cannot define further. For more on ontological dependence and related notions, such as ontological independence and fundamentality (see below), see (Hoeltje, Schnieder & Steinberg, 2013), (Koslicki, 2013), (Chalmers, Manley & Wasserman 2009), (Tahko & Lowe 2020) and (Tahko, 2018).



We use the terms “cosmos”, “all that exists” and “everything” (as well as negative correlates like “nothing”) in the same way as western philosophers usually use the words “world”, “universe” and “cosmos”, to refer to the totality of entities, the whole of reality, or everything that is. However, there is an important caveat to note in our use: God himself, as well as a supposed ‘spiritual’, transcendental realm, are not included in the cosmos. Insofar as supposed ‘spiritual’ beings (or souls, if you will) are assumed in the *Gītā* to be embodied (*dehinam*), they are also included in the cosmos. If you will, what we are referring to by expressions like “cosmos”, “all that exists” and “everything” corresponds to what the *Gītā* and other Indian texts refer to by the world *trāilokya* (1.35), the three (‘material’) realms.<sup>18</sup>

There is however more to the *Gītā*’s connection with the cosmos than G1-G3. We have already mentioned the verses where Kṛṣṇa is identified with all that exists (7.19, 11.40). In an often-quoted passage, it is said that Vāsudeva is everything (7.19). There are also verses that seem to directly refer to God’s immanence in the world: the whole cosmos is said to be pervaded (*tatam*)<sup>19</sup> by Kṛṣṇa (8.22, 9.4, 11.38); he abides in the heart (*hṛd*; *āśaya*) or mind (*āśaya*), or the region of the heart (*hṛd-deśe*), of every living being (10.20, 15.15, 18.61). It seems then that we have two more claims in need of explanation:

(G4) *Proto-Pantheism*: God is everything.

(G5) *Immanence*: The cosmos is pervaded by God; God abides in every living being of the cosmos.

While T1\* seems to be an acceptable explanation for G4—God is everything in the sense of everything ontologically depending on God—it does not seem to be enough to explain G5. Kṛṣṇa’s claim that he pervades the whole cosmos and abides in the hearts of every living being suggests a much more *intimate* relation, one which T1\* does not seem to capture. Neither does T1\* appear to be enough to explain G3. The quasi-causal sense of terms like “*pravartate*” and “*prabhava*” does not seem to be captured by T1\*. So, it looks like we need a more fine-grained ontological relation between God and the cosmos.

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<sup>18</sup> This qualification applies even if one sees a particular *Gītā* claim (like G3, for example) to be referring to a ‘spiritual’ realm as well.

<sup>19</sup> See footnote 15 for our interpreting *Gītā* phrases that contain “*tatam*” in reference to God’s, or Kṛṣṇa’s, relation to the universe as “pervasion” (*vyāpta*).

### 3. Transcendence

In the context of T1\*, another reason why God is not included in the cosmos is that God cannot ontologically depend on God. The relation of ontological dependence is irreflexive. So, the expression “all that exists” in T1\* must exclude God. As we said, ontological dependence is also antisymmetric: while beings depend on God, God does not depend on them. This appears very clearly in verses 9.4-6 and 7.12 above, which contrast God’s independence with everything else’s dependence on him. Although beings and states stand in or are in God, God is not in them. Or in the philosophical jargon we are adopting: although beings and states depend on God, God does not depend on them. Considering the completeness assumption just mentioned, we might say that the *Gītā* supports the following thesis:

(T2) *Absolute independence*: There is nothing on which God is ontologically dependent.

Along with T1\*, T2 entails the following derived thesis:

(T3) *Fundamentality*: God is the (only) absolute fundamental entity; he is the ontological foundation of all that exists.

T3 conveys the idea that there is a foundation of being, which is God, the absolute independent being (T2) on whom all else depends (T1\*). The notion of fundamentality, as used in metaphysics, aims to capture the idea that there is something basic or primitive in reality. It is commonly thought, for example, that particle physics plays some special role in our investigation of the structure of reality. Since every material entity is made up of fundamental particles, one might think that particle physics aims to describe the fundamental level of reality, which contains the basic building blocks of nature. This is a kind of micro fundamentality. The *Gītā* in some sense reverses the equation and locates fundamentality in the super-macro aspect of reality, which is one of the basic tenets of priority monism (Schaffer 2010a). Section 5 below.

T2 contains a kind of aseity: according to the *Gītā*, God is *a se*, completely independent, self-sufficient. He does not depend on anything to be. T2 might be seen also as portraying a kind of transcendence: since God depends on nothing, he is transcendent to everything. Of course, as mentioned in the Introduction, the *Gītā* expounds what might be seen as a more standard kind of transcendence. Kṛṣṇa speaks about his abode as being outside the cosmos: Sun does not light it, nor moon, nor fire; going there, one never returns (15.6). As it was also mentioned, he is said to

be transcendent to all that exists: he is above the *guṇas* (7.13); he is the supreme person (Puruṣottama) who is beyond the perishing and is higher than the unperishing (15.19). These claims can be partially understood in terms of T2: one of the reasons why God is above matter and beyond the perishing and the unperishing is that God is absolutely independent.

But there is still another thesis the *Gītā* seems to support that is important for God's transcendence:

(T4) *God's personhood*: God is an eternal individual person (*puruṣa*),<sup>20</sup> ontologically distinct from other persons, as well as from other beings and the cosmos as a whole.

Kṛṣṇa is unperishing, eternal, everlasting (2.12, 11.18). He is described as a person (*puruṣa*) in several places in the *Gītā*. He is called the "eternal divine person" (10.12, 11.18), the "primeval" (11.38) and the "supreme person" (13.23, 15.17, 15.19). He is a special *puruṣa* distinct from other *puruṣas*: while ordinary *puruṣas* are experiencing pleasure and pain in this world, being subject to repeated births, the supreme *puruṣa* is the witness, the consentor and the supporter; knowledge of him by ordinary *puruṣas* ends their cycles of birth and death (13.21-24). That Kṛṣṇa is distinct from the cosmos as a whole can be inferred from the fact that he is *a* person, but also from T1\* and T2, and all the verses that support them. For example, only if Kṛṣṇa is ontologically distinct from other beings can he be said to be ontologically independent from them.

But there are some problems. First, G2 (transcendence) seems to be threatened by T1\*. How can God be transcendent to everything if all beings are ontologically dependent on him? Second, T4 seems to contradict G4 (proto-pantheism).

The answer to the first problem seems to be in verses 9.5-6. Right after saying that all beings stand in him, Kṛṣṇa paradoxically says that beings do not stand in him. Then he offers a way out of the paradox. It is an analogy. As the wind stands in space (*ākāśa*), all beings stand in him. Here "space" seems to be used more or less in accordance with what some call metaphysical space: the medium that holds, contains within it and allows physical things to exist, but which does not depend on them to exist.<sup>21</sup> Space exists permanently and independently of

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<sup>20</sup>We are assuming in T4 what might be seen as the most general notion of personhood compatible with the term "*puruṣa*", namely that a person (*puruṣa*) is a (1) conscious entity (2) ontologically distinct from other entities. In Section 4 we elaborate on the way we are using the word "conscious".

<sup>21</sup>See (Mullins 2016b).

whether there is any physical object in it. And while space contains physical things within it, it does not touch nor interact with them; it remains the same, aloof, distant and transcendent, we might say, to physical things. Thus, T1\* should be reformulated as follows:

(T1) *Ontological dependence*: All that exists ontologically depends on God (like physical things depend on space).<sup>22</sup>

Now rather than denying God's transcendence, T1 along with T2 and T4 can be seen as supporting and explaining G2. That God is not in the cosmos, that he is different from the cosmos, is explained by the supposed fact that he is absolutely independent: there is nothing on which God is dependent (T2). Besides, he is an individual person, distinct from everything else (T4). The dependence that all beings have on God does not affect his transcendence: beings depend on God analogously to how physical things depend on space (T1).

The solution to the second problem lies in our explanation to G3 (source of all) and G5 (immanence). This in turn lies in a particular set of verses of the *Gītā*—verses four to six of chapter seven and verse seven of chapter fifteen—and in a specific philosophical understanding of the term “*prakṛti*” as it appears in these verses.

#### 4. *Prakṛti*

Although the term “*prakṛti*” is best known as a technical term referring to the ultimate material principle of Sāṃkhya and Yoga systems, this is late in appearing. According to its earliest recorded use, “*prakṛti*” means “that which was first” or “the original”. It is a common term not only in Sāṃkhya and Yoga texts, but also in texts of phonetics, grammar, ritual theory, lawbooks, medicine, political theory, drama and theology (Jacobsen 1999, p. 25). As such, it has a variety of meanings.

Jacobsen (1999, p. 25) identifies three clusters of meaning of the term “*prakṛti*” in Indian traditions:

(1) *Prakṛti* is ‘that which precedes,’ the ‘first,’ ‘that which is in its own form.’ This is the ‘basis,’ the ‘original state,’ therefore the ‘natural,’ the ‘archetype,’ one’s ‘character,’ and ‘normal.’ From this sense is also derived the meaning ‘health’ and ‘normality,’ the ‘ordinary’ and ‘usual.’ (2) *Prakṛti* is the ‘material cause,’ the ‘producer of effects,’ the ‘innate power of transformation and manifestation,’ the ‘generative principle’ and the

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<sup>22</sup>All claims made earlier in terms of T1\* should now be read in terms of T1.

‘ultimate material principle.’ Here *prakṛti* is a word connected with the field of birth and production, which is in later periods associated with goddesses and women. (3) *Prakṛti*-s in the plural are the ‘principles,’ ‘constituents,’ ‘parts,’ or ‘components of a whole’ (the components of the human being, of the political state, of the cosmos, of a play, and so on.).

Jacobsen (1999, p. 65-71) also identifies six categories of meaning for “*prakṛti*” in the *Gītā*:<sup>23</sup>

- First, it means original form or state of normality. This appears, for example, in chapter eleven. After seeing Kṛṣṇa’s mystical forms and asking him to show himself again in his gentle human form, Arjuna then states that his mind has been restored to normality (*prakṛti*) (11.51).
- Second, it means one’s nature, which probably includes *samskāras*, or trace impressions acquired in the present life as well as in previous lives that influence one to act in certain ways. This occurs in chapter three, where it is said that even one with knowledge behaves according to one’s nature (*prakṛti*); beings follow their nature (*prakṛti*) (3.33).
- Third, it means the materiality or material nature, which impels one to act. This is related to the second meaning, with the difference that now *prakṛti* has a kind of objective existence: actions are done entirely by the *guṇas* of material nature (*prakṛti*) (3.27); relying on egotism, if Arjuna thinks “I shall not fight,” that decision will be in vain; nature (*prakṛti*) will impel him (18.59); material nature (*prakṛti*) is beginningless; transformations and the *guṇas* arise from it; it is the reason for the production of cause, effect and agency (13.20-21).
- The fourth meaning is related to but is also distinguished from the third meaning. Here “*prakṛti*” means not only material nature (or simply, nature), but something belonging to Kṛṣṇa: it is Kṛṣṇa’s *prakṛti*, Kṛṣṇa’s material nature (4.6). In chapter nine he says that all beings rest on *his prakṛti*, going to *his prakṛti* at the end of an era (*kalpa*) (9.7-8).
- Jacobsen’s fifth and six meanings appear in verses 7.4-6, where the terms “*aparā prakṛti*” and “*parā prakṛti*” are mentioned. These are explained and expanded below.

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<sup>23</sup>For an alternative taxonomy see (Dasgupta, 1922, p. 1082). For an analysis of the *Gītā*’s pluriform use of the term “*prakṛti*” in the context of chapter seven see (Malinar, 2007, pp. 130-132).

As we said, verses four through six of chapter seven, and verse seven of chapter fifteen, contain the basics for explaining G3 and G5. Let us begin with verse 15.7:

The conscious living being (*jīvabhūta*) existing in this world of conscious living beings (*jīvaloke*) is indeed a part (*aṁśa*) of me; it draws towards itself the six senses including the mind, which are all rooted in material nature (15.7).

Here Kṛṣṇa says that conscious living beings (*jīvabhūta*) are his parts (*aṁśa*) (15.7). That is an intimate relation, the one that holds between parts and whole. A more intrinsic intimate relation is described in verse 7.5, for example, where Kṛṣṇa says that living conscious beings are his *prakṛti* (nature):

Earth, water, fire, air, space, mind, intellect and egotism—these eight comprise my separated (*bhinnā*) *prakṛti* (nature). But you should know that beside this inferior (*aparā*) nature, O mighty-armed one, there is another superior (*parā*) *prakṛti* (nature) of mine, comprised of conscious living beings (*jīvabhūta*), by which this world is sustained. Realize that all entities have their source in this [the two kinds of *prakṛti*]. I am the origin of this entire cosmos and of its dissolution too.<sup>24</sup>

Not only living conscious beings, but the five elements—earth, water, fire, air and space—and the three cognitive faculties—mind (*manas*), intelligence (*buddhi*) and egotism (*ahaṅkāra*)—are Kṛṣṇa’s *prakṛti* (7.4). Understood within a Sāṃkhya or proto-Sāṃkhya framework, these five elements and the three cognitive faculties can be seen as the stuff from which all material things are made, or matter, in the broad sense of the term.<sup>25</sup>

Translators disagree on the correct meaning of “*jīvabhūta*” in these verses. Although it literally means “living being”, many translators translate it with the help of terms like “individual self”, “embodied self”, “spirit” and “soul” so to emphasize a supposed non-material or ‘spiritual’ aspect present in the term. That such an aspect must be present in the word “*jīvabhūta*” as used

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<sup>24</sup>There are interpretations to the expressions “*parā prakṛti*” and “*aparā prakṛti*” different from the one we are going to give here. For some of them, including Śaṅkara’s, Rāmānuja’s and Madhva’s, see (Jacobsen, 1999, p. 69-71). There are also other ways to understand the reference of the word “*etad*” (this) in verse 7.6; we are here following Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja and others and understanding it as referring to both kinds of *prakṛti*. See (Edgerton, 1944, pp. 95-96).

<sup>25</sup>When using the word “matter,” we are distancing ourselves from the common western understanding of the word. Although psychological in nature, the three cognitive faculties are on the material side of reality. A Cartesian dualist, for example, would place them on the non-material side. See (Schweizer, 1993).

in verses 7.4-6 is evidenced by the fact that the body of living beings is made of matter, which is already referred to in the verses as a different kind of *prakṛti*.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, “*jīvabhūta*” is often identified with terms like “*ātmā*” and “*puruṣa*”, which have a similar non-material connotation. Verse 13.22, for example, states *puruṣaḥ prakṛtistho hi bhunkte prakṛti-jān guṇān*: “indeed, the *puruṣa*, abiding in material nature (*prakṛti*), experiences the *guṇas* born of material nature.” The common interpretation here is that of an embodied non-material being instantiating personhood, the *puruṣa*, that because of the embodiment, experiences the *guṇas* of material nature. That a *puruṣa* can experience something shows that it is conscious in the sense of being able to experience pain and joy, cold and heat, happiness and distress, which are phenomenological states with a distinctive qualitative experiential aspect of “what-is-it-like” to be in those states.<sup>27</sup>

We therefore translate “*jīvabhūta*” as conscious living being. The capacity of experiencing “what-is-it-like” states is, for our purposes here, the distinctive, ‘non-material’ feature of the *jīvabhūta*.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, at least some of those conscious living beings can enter into personal relationships with other conscious living beings, and with God himself (4.3, 7.17, 9.26, 9.29, 12.20, 18.65). Thus, they are Kṛṣṇa’s superior *prakṛti*. The five elements and the three cognitive faculties are not conscious in this sense. Therefore, they are Kṛṣṇa’s inferior and separated (*bhinnā*) *prakṛti*.

Going back to Jacobsen’s six categories of meaning for the word “*prakṛti*” in the *Gītā*, the fifth and sixth categories are, respectively, these two kinds of Kṛṣṇa’s *prakṛti*, the inferior and separated one and the superior one. We however think that these two categories are better thought of as comprising a single category, one that extends the meaning of the fourth category, and consequently of the third category. We could say that *aparā prakṛti* is the *prakṛti* of the fourth category, which in turn is the *prakṛti* of the third category with an additional reference to its possessor. The new category we are proposing (which we argue can replace Jacobsen’s fifth and sixth categories) then maintains the aspect of belonging to Kṛṣṇa while expanding it to

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<sup>26</sup>For a discussion on the translation of the term “*jīvabhūta*” in these verses, as well as a justification for attributing a non-material or ‘spiritual’ aspect to it, see (Malinar, 2007, pp. 130-131).

<sup>27</sup>Any good contemporary philosophical introduction to consciousness or to the philosophy of mind contains a fair explanation of consciousness in the sense of the ability to experience “what-is-it-like” states. See (Blackmore & Troscianko, 2018), for example.

<sup>28</sup>See that by doing that we are not denying that the term “*jīvabhūta*” might have a stronger non-material component, referring to some kind of ‘spiritual’ aspect.

include conscious living beings. Now Kṛṣṇa has two kinds of *prakṛti*, the superior *prakṛti*, consisting of conscious living beings, and the inferior, separated *prakṛti*, consisting of matter (as expressed below in T5.)

## 5. Immanence

Giving what has been said so far, the following theses seem to be supported by the *Gītā*:

(T5) *Inferior prakṛti*: Matter, meaning the stuff from which all material things are made, is God's (inferior, separated) *prakṛti*.

(T6) *Superior prakṛti*: Conscious living beings (*jīvabhūta*) are God's (superior) *prakṛti*.

Together, these two kinds of *prakṛti* are the source of all: all beings have their origin (*yoni*) in them (7.6). Given this and T5 and T6, it seems reasonable to say that all that exists is God's *prakṛti*:

(T7) *All-is-prakṛti*: All that exists is God's *prakṛti*.

As Kṛṣṇa's natures, they convey the sense of intrinsic intimacy mentioned earlier. They belong to Kṛṣṇa. As such, they cannot be dissociated from Kṛṣṇa; they are intrinsically part of him. Referring to Jacobsen's three clusters of meaning of the term "*prakṛti*" in Indian traditions that we showed in the beginning of previous section, we might say that the use of the term "*prakṛti*" in verses 7.4-6 involves the first cluster of meaning: Kṛṣṇa's two kinds of *prakṛti* precede Kṛṣṇa in the sense of being or belonging to his nature, his character, his normal form or status. But it also involves the third cluster of meaning: Kṛṣṇa's two kinds of *prakṛti* are principles, parts or components of a whole, which in this case is Kṛṣṇa himself.<sup>29</sup> This is also corroborated by verse 15.7, which says that the *jīvabhūta* is part (*aṁśa*) of Kṛṣṇa.

But how are we to understand this part-whole relation? In other words, how are we to understand the claim that X is part of God? Well, first of all, it seems clear that conscious living beings are not part of Kṛṣṇa in the same way that, for example, the handle is part of the mug, or the cutlery is part of the tableware. If they were, Kṛṣṇa would be dependent on them, which contradicts T2. In fact, it is the other way round: Kṛṣṇa's two kinds of *prakṛti* are ontologically

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<sup>29</sup>And partially, it also involves the second cluster of meaning, insofar as only the inferior *prakṛti* is concerned.



dependent on him. Otherwise T1 would not be true. But not only because of that: this sense of ontological dependence seems to be present in the term “*prakṛti*”, more specifically in Jacobsen’s first cluster of meaning where *prakṛti* of X is seen as that which precedes X, the original state of X, or X’s character. If, for example, we take a person’s character as something unique to that person, then it makes sense to say that that person’s character or original state ontologically depends on the person. Finally, at the end of verse 7.6 Kṛṣṇa’s says that he is the origin (*prabhava*) of the entire cosmos (*jagat*) and in the following verse that all that exists rests on him like pearls on a thread, which we have already agree to understand in terms of ontological dependence.

We thus have a kind of *priority monism* where the parts are ontologically dependent on the whole, or the whole is ontologically prior to the parts:

(T8) *Gītā’s priority monism*: God is the absolute whole who is ontologically prior to its parts (which comprise everything else).<sup>30</sup>

Priority monism holds that there is exactly one entity that is ultimate and fundamental, an entity of which all other entities derive, which is the whole. Contemporary priority monists usually take this whole to be the cosmos. But the idea is neutral as regards to what the whole is. In fact, Cyril Joad’s definition of the core monistic thesis (1957, p. 420) fits well the kind of monism we talking about here: “The wholes emphasized by monistic philosophers are, therefore, logically prior to their parts. They are there, as it were, to begin with, and being there, proceed to express themselves in parts whose natures they pervade and determine”.<sup>31</sup>

If we were to offer an analogy to clarify the meaning of proposition “X is a *prakṛti* of God” we would mention trope theory. Trope theory is the view that reality is wholly or partly made up from tropes. Tropes are the particular qualities of objects. An object might be seen as possessing universals like the property of redness, but it might also be seen as the bearer of a particular and unique quality, a trope, which is that particular redness, that object’s redness.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>T8 is entailed by T1, T2, T4, T7 and T9 below.

<sup>31</sup>Priority monism may have been defended by philosophers such as Plato, Plotinus, Proclus, Spinoza, Hegel and Bradley. For a philosophical as well as historical account of priority monism see (Schaffer 2010a & Schaffer, 2010b).

<sup>32</sup>According to some philosophers, trope theory has roots going back at least to Aristotle. In the *Categories*, Aristotle points out that Substance and Quality both come in what we may call a universal and

Socrates' charisma is a trope. As such, it is a particular, a thing if you will. Second, it is ontologically dependent on Socrates. The existence of Socrates' charisma depends on Socrates. Third, it is something intimately related to Socrates. And finally, Socrates' charisma is in a very important sense a part of Socrates.

This analogy specially touches on the parthood side of the concept of *prakṛti*. In contemporary philosophy, Philip Goff's (2017) concept of 'aspect' is perhaps as close as we could get to the concept of *prakṛti*, especially with regard to its parthood aspect:

We reach the core of the notion of an aspect when we allow for the possibility that fundamental entities [like the cosmos] can be structured rather than homogeneous blobs, and we reflect on what is required for that to be the case. So long as a fundamental entity is structured, it will involve various constituents that can be considered in isolation from the whole, but which are (at least contingently) dependent for their existence on the whole of which they are constituents. This is precisely what I mean by my talk of "aspects." (Goff, 2017, p. 225).<sup>33</sup>

We propose here to understand *prakṛti* as a metaphysical primitive denoting this relation of intrinsic intimacy that exists between matter and living conscious beings on one hand, and God on the other. First, in accordance with verses 7.4-6 and Jacobsen's third cluster of meaning, we are taking the term "*prakṛti*" as a relational term. To be *prakṛti* is to be *prakṛti of* something: something can be said to be a *prakṛti* only *in relation* to other thing. Second, as a metaphysical primitive, *prakṛti* is a fundamental aspect of reality; as such it is not something that can be explained or defined in terms of simpler entities. That is why we have decided not to translate "*prakṛti*" in verses 7.4-6. It is also the reason why we have put T5 and T6 in terms of ontological theses and not in terms of claims-to-be-explained. Despite of this, we claim that *prakṛti* involves two things: intrinsic intimacy in the form of parthood, and ontological dependence. We thus have the following thesis:

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a particular variety (man and this man in the case of substance, and pallor and this pale—to ti leukon—in the case of quality). See (Maurin, 2018).

<sup>33</sup>Among the examples Goff gives to clarify his notion of aspect is the example of sensorial experiences and their parts: "In some sense an experience has 'parts'; my current experience, for example, involves visual experience of colors, auditory experiences of sounds, and emotional experiences of joy. One view is that one's total experience is a composite event of having many partial experiences, or perhaps of having many partial experiences related in a certain way. An alternative to this 'bottom-up' analysis of total experience, to my mind more plausible, is the view that what is more fundamental is the total experience: the total experience is a unity of which the experiential parts are aspects." (Goff, 2017, p. 221).

(T9) *Law of prakṛti*: If X is a *prakṛti* of God, then (1) X is part of God and (2) X is ontologically dependent on God (like physical things depend on space).

Now we are in a position to explain G3 (source of all) and G5 (immanence). G3, the claim that everything proceeds from God, that God is the source of all that exists, can be explained in terms of T7 and T9. If X is part of Y, then in an ontological sense we might say that X proceeds from Y, that Y is the source of X. But since all that exists is God's *prakṛti* (T7) and therefore part of God (T9), from an ontological sense everything proceeds from God; God is the source of all that exists.

G5, the claim that the cosmos is pervaded by God, that God abides in every living being, is also explained in terms of T7 and T9. Since every single being in the cosmos is God's *prakṛti* (T7) and therefore part of God (T9), in a sense the cosmos is pervaded by God; specifically, we might say that God abides in every living conscious being, for being a combination of God's superior *prakṛti* and God's inferior *prakṛti* (T5 and T6), (embodied) living beings are part of God in a double sense.

Recall our earlier suggestion that G1—the panentheistic claim that the cosmos is in God—, might be understood in terms of T1, the thesis that all that exists is ontologically dependent on God (like physical things depend on space). G1 can now also be understood in terms of T7 and T9: as God's *prakṛti* (T7), the cosmos is part of God (T9), and as part of God, the cosmos can be said to be *in* God. Since T1 follows from T7 and T9, our first explanation is contained in this new one. We can also offer a better explanation to G4, the claim that God is everything: it can be understood in terms of the *Gītā*'s priority monism (T8), which says that God is the absolute whole.

We are also in a position to solve the remaining problem stated at the end of Section 3: that T4 (God's personhood) contradicts G4 (proto-pantheism). As one might have already anticipated, the solution to this problem is in the above explanatory paragraphs. Our understanding of G4 through T8 does not conflict with the thesis that God is an individual person ontologically distinct from other persons, as well as from other beings and the cosmos as a whole (T4). God is the whole, and the cosmos and individual beings are part of the whole, but the whole is still ontologically distinct from the cosmos and the individual beings present in it because they are ontologically dependent on God, whereas God is not dependent on them.

## 6. Conclusion

We presented in this chapter a partial reconstruction of the *Gītā*'s concept of God focusing exclusively on its panentheistic aspect. More specifically, we proposed to explain the *Gītā*'s panentheism—which we analyzed in terms of the five claims G1-G5—in terms of eight ontological theses which, we argued, are supported by the *Gītā*. Our key philosophical move was to take *prakṛti* as a metaphysical primitive denoting the intimate relation that exists between matter and conscious living beings on one hand, and God on the other. As a byproduct of our explanatory endeavor, we analyzed the *Gītā*'s concept of God in terms of key contemporary metaphysical notions such as ontological dependence, priority monism and fundamentality.

Two comments are in order before we end this chapter. First, note that all explanatory claims made throughout the text were stated in terms of possibility. By claiming for example that G4 *might* be explained in terms of T8, we do not claim that this is the only way to explain G4, nor that it is the best way to explain it. All we claim is that T8 is a philosophically legitimate way to understand the *Gītā*'s claim that God is everything.

Second, we know that our contribution here is in many ways preliminary. In a sense, our attempt to reconstruct the panentheistic concept of God in the *Gītā* consisted of bringing to light some key aspects of its ontology. But much more work needs to be done to philosophically defend such an ontology. Among the questions that need to be answered are: How this account of the *Gītā*'s concept of God relates to more traditional accounts such as Rāmānuja's which also characterize the relation between God and the world in terms of parthood? How does *prakṛti* relate to other well-known metaphysical notions such as grounding and supervenience (which are related to ontological dependence)? Does it have some advantage over them? Do T3 and T8 entail a constitutive view according to which facts about non-fundamental entities are the case in virtue of facts about the ultimate fundamental entity? Can one characterize the parthood aspect of *prakṛti* in terms of the axioms of mereology?

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