

Sen and the Bhagavad Gita: Lessons for a Theory of Justice

Joshua Anderson

Draft; do not cite

Final Version of Record: *Asian Philosophy* 22(1): 63-74 (2012)

Available at:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09552367.2012.664879>

DOI: [10.1080/09552367.2012.664879](https://doi.org/10.1080/09552367.2012.664879)

Abstract: In *The Idea of Justice*, Amartya Sen, among other things, discusses certain qualities any adequate theory of justice ought to incorporate. Two important qualities a theory of justice should account for are impartiality/objectivity and sensitivity to consequences. In order to motivate his discussion of sensitivity to consequences, Sen discusses the debate between Krishna and Arjuna from the religio-philosophical Hindu text the *Bhagavad Gita*. According to Sen, Arjuna represents a sensitivity to consequences while Krishna is an archetypal deontologist. In this paper it will be argued that Sen's interpretation of the *Gita* is inaccurate. Further, a more adequate interpretation will be presented. What will be of significance is that the more adequate interpretation actually demonstrates the importance of an impartial spectator in moral reasoning. Finally, there will be a discussion of some lessons that can be taken from the *Gita* regarding justice generally.

In his recent book, *The Idea of Justice*, Amartya Sen, among other things, discusses certain qualities any adequate theory of justice ought to incorporate. Two important qualities a theory of justice should account for are impartiality/objectivity and sensitivity to consequences. A more detailed treatment of each of these characteristics will be given below, but for now it is only important to mention them. In order to motivate his discussion of sensitivity to consequences, Sen discusses the debate between Krishna and Arjuna from the religio-philosophical Hindu text the *Bhagavad Gita*—or simply *Gita*.

According to Sen, Arjuna represents a sensitivity to consequences while Krishna is an archetypal deontologist. In this paper it will be argued that Sen's interpretation of

the *Gita* is inaccurate. Further, a more adequate interpretation will be presented. What will be of significance is that the more adequate interpretation actually demonstrates the importance of an impartial spectator in moral reasoning. Finally, there will be a discussion of some lessons that can be taken from the *Gita* regarding justice generally.

Before beginning the discussion of the *Gita* I will briefly present Sen's understanding of impartiality/objectivity and sensitivity to consequences. Sen notes, and rightly so, "that justice, by its very nature, has to have universal reach, rather than being applicable to the problems and predicaments of some people, but not others." (Sen 2009, 117) In other words, the dictates of justice are objective, at least to some degree, and for Sen impartiality is part of what it means to be "objective". In particular, Sen believes that in order to arrive at good and just decisions one needs to consider the viewpoint of an impartial spectator. Sen observes, following Adam Smith, that "[i]n solitude, we are apt to feel too strongly whatever relates to ourselves... The conversation of a friend brings us to a better, that of a stranger to a still better temper."¹ The idea for Sen is that often one's decisions are biased by personal emotions or enculturation, for example. By testing one's views and decisions by having them scrutinized by others better and more objective decisions will result. Further, the less stake the other(s) has in the decision, presumably the better the decision. To be clear, it does not have to be that the view of an impartial spectator is the correct one, it is just that decisions that have withstood the scrutiny of an impartial spectator tend to be better, because the impartial spectator helps to overcome biases.

The other aspect of justice that will be significant for the purposes of this paper is sensitivity to consequences. Sen does not accept a crude consequentialism; rather he is

¹ Smith, Adam. The Theory of Moral Sentiments. II.3.38. Quoted in Sen 2009, p. 125.

interested in a thick conception of consequences, or what he calls comprehensive outcomes. Sen states that he wants to underscore “the importance of paying particular attention to ‘comprehensive outcomes’ that include actions undertaken, agencies involved, processes used, etc. *along with* the simple outcomes seen in a way that is detached from processes, agencies and relation—what [Sen calls] ‘culmination outcomes’.” (Sen 2009, 215) Thus, for Sen, consequentialism is not only concerned with the best outcome of a particular decision, or action—a maximization of utility for example—but with *how* the action is brought about, taking account of the personhood of, or the relationship in which one stands to, those affected by a decision or course of action. For example, on Sen’s version of consequentialism, one probably ought not sacrifice an innocent person for an overall increase in average utility—however, that is not to say one definitely ought not, but the increase in utility needs to be weighed against other factors, such as the person’s autonomy. To be clear, the weighing of processes, et cetera, and cumulative outcomes is what Sen means by sensitivity to consequences. The consequences of decisions and actions are important of course and do need to be considered, but there are other factors which need to be taken into account.

Sen’s discussion is of course more nuanced than has been presented here—e.g. Sen discusses the distinction between closed and open impartiality—but the rough understanding of both impartiality and sensitivity to consequences, as has been discussed, should be sufficient for now. I will now turn to Sen’s discussion of the *Gita* and my criticism thereof.

- 1.

Although Sen refers the reader to his other writings on the *Gita*² there is nothing in either of them which is substantially different from what he presents in *The Idea of Justice*; I will, therefore, be basing my discussion on his argument from that book. Further, it will be assumed that the reader is familiar with what Sen has said about the *Gita*, generally, and, therefore, the background of the *Gita*—e.g. that it is part of a larger epic—will not be re-hashed here. Sen gives very little textual support for his reading of either Arjuna’s or Krishna’s positions, although he does acknowledge that it is controversial. (Sen 2009, 212) Be that as it may, in this section of the paper I will first present what I take to be Sen’s reasoning and justifications for his interpretation. I will then, referring to both the *Gita* and commentaries on the *Gita* present a more accurate interpretation of the Arjuna-Krishna debate. Finally, it will be shown that the *Gita* is actually a good example of the importance of introducing impartiality into one’s decision-making process.

I. a.

According to Sen, Arjuna represents, and argues from, a consequentialist perspective. More precisely, Sen believes that the types of arguments which Arjuna gives, and the perspective that he takes, are of the thick Senian consequentialism variety that account for “comprehensive outcomes”. Krishna, on the other hand, represents, and argues from, a deontological perspective. Sen states that “Krishna’s deontology is of a particularly purist form, which goes beyond seeing the importance of duty-based reasoning, and denies the relevance of any concern, particularly any consequential

² Sen, A. (2000). Consequential Evaluation and Practical Reason. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 92(9), 477-502. and Sen, A. (2005). *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. New York: Picador.

concern, in determining whether some action should be undertaken or not.” (Sen 2009, 216)

Before the beginning of the battle between the just Pandavas—of whom Arjuna is their most respected and gifted general—and their allies and the Kauravas—the unjust usurpers of the kingdom that rightfully belongs to the Pandavas—and their allies, Arjuna becomes overwhelmed and despondent due to the carnage that is about to ensue, and declares that he will not fight and asks Krishna for guidance. Krishna, in turn, reminds Arjuna that he is fighting on the right side of a just war and that his duties as a warrior require him to engage in the ensuing battle.

Arjuna states that “we are not justified in killing,” and Sen believes Arjuna feels that he is not justified for the following reasons. (Sargeant 1994, 75) First, Arjuna ought not fight since it would entail Arjuna killing the teachers and family members on the opposing army who had benefited him greatly throughout his life. Second, since so many men would die as a result of the battle it would lead to the destruction of families, the caste system and all of society. Third, the “evil would cling to us [the Pandavas]” for killing those who had benefited them and destroying society. (Sargeant 1994, 74) In other words, the Pandavas, in general, and Arjuna, in particular, are personally responsible for all the deaths and the negative consequences that might result from those deaths. Finally, the benefit that could occur from the battle—viz. the Pandavas receiving the kingdom that is rightfully theirs—do not outweigh the negative consequences—i.e. is the first two points.

Based on the above interpretation of Arjuna’s thinking, Sen abstracts three, more general, principles. First, Arjuna’s reasoning is based on the “belief that what happens to

the world must matter and be significant in our moral and political thinking,” in particular, “the significance of human lives.” (Sen 2009, 212-3) That is to say, the massive loss of life that will result if the battle takes place cannot be ignored. Second, Arjuna is concerned with personal responsibility. So, “Arjuna argues that the results of one’s choices and actions must matter in deciding what one should do,” in other words, one is responsible, personally, for the results that occur due to one’s decisions and actions. (Sen 2009, 213) Third, Arjuna believes that there are relational obligations that must be considered. So, because many of the people that Arjuna would have to kill “are people for whom he has affection, including his own relatives,” Arjuna is particularly troubled. (Sen 2009, 213) According to Sen “[r]elational obligation linked with family connections and personal affection as well as agency-related concerns ... call for accommodation within the broader reach of moral and political philosophy, including that of the theory of justice.” (Sen 2009, 213)

On the other side of the debate stands Krishna, who Sen takes to represent the archetypal deontologist. According to Sen, “Krishna argues that Arjuna must do his duty, come what may, and in this case he has a duty to fight, no matter what results from it. It [the ensuing battle] is a just cause, and as a warrior and a general on whom his side must rely, he cannot waver from his obligations.” (Sen 2009, 209) So, Sen understands Krishna to be arguing from a perspective that is *only* concerned with one’s duty, and is completely consequent-independent, which is in stark contrast to Arjuna’s consequence sensitivity.

Arjuna’s moral and political reasoning is deeply concerned with outcomes in their comprehensive form. The idea of social realizations ... demands that outcomes be seen in these broader terms, taking note of actions, relations and agencies. ... Arjuna does make substantial room for his idea

of duty,³ taking into account his responsibility for his own agency, and also acknowledging his special relationship with many of the potential victims of the war (in addition to his general grief at the prospect of massive human death and deliberate killing). (Sen 2009, 216-7)

Thus, while, according to Sen, Krishna is advocating a view that one ought to “Fare forward. Not fare well/ But fare forward,”⁴ (Sen 2009, 210) Arjuna wants to both fare forward and fare well.

What is important for Sen’s purposes are the lessons that can be gleaned from the Arjuna-Krishna debate. What Sen wants to drive home is that using the type of reasoning that Arjuna does is essential for making good, moral and just decisions. By being sensitive to consequences an individual and a society can “fare well” and not just “fare forward”, and that is Sen’s point. For Sen, any adequate theory of justice must not only take account of comprehensive consequences, but do so with the idea that people and society can fare well and fare better. However, contra a simplistic consequentialism, part of faring well involves accounting for agency, relationships and duties.

1.1.

In this sub-section of the paper, it will be shown that Sen’s reading of the Arjuna-Krishna debate is inconsistent with the actual text of the *Gita*. Further guidance in this matter will be based on commentaries of the *Gita*, in particular the commentaries of M. K. Gandhi. In order to show where Sen went wrong, it is important to reiterate Sen’s major conclusions. So, according to Sen, Krishna advocates a deontological position that is completely consequent-independent. Arjuna, on the other hand, advocates a

³ It is unclear why Sen makes this claim now, since nothing in the rest of his discussion mentions much about Arjuna’s concern for duty.

⁴ Sen is quoting Elliot, T. S. (1994). “The Dry Salvages”. In *Four Quartets* (pp. 29-31) London: Faber & Faber.

consequentialist position that is comprehensive in nature, taking not only the culmination outcomes into account but also issues regarding agency and relationships.

The first point to note is that Arjuna was not troubled by the thought of fighting in general, in fact he was a famous warrior who had engaged in many wars and battles prior to the one which was about to take place. “If he [Arjuna] did not wish to fight, he would have told Krishna so on the previous day. He had no aversion to fighting as such.” (Gandhi 2000, 30) Second, it should be pointed out that there is a difference between reasoning and having reasons, that is to say, between arguing for a particular course of action and rationalizing a particular course of action. Finally, and dovetailing with the second issue, it is not clear that Arjuna is debating Krishna at all.

Again, Arjuna was not averse to fighting, per se, but his professed reason for not doing so in the current situation was based on two main issues. First, that the people that would be killed were “kinsmen”. Arjuna “is unhappy not at the thought of killing, but at the thought of whom he was required to kill.” (Gandhi 2000, 32) Second, that this particular battle would lead to the destruction of society as a whole.

Regarding the first issue, although Arjuna does express concern about the killing of kinsmen, and Sen takes this point to indicate Arjuna’s concern for agency and relationship, as Karl Potter has pointed out: “he (Arjuna) worries about everything else but the pain he may inflict upon those he wounds or kills.”⁵ While Arjuna repeatedly refers to his kinsmen, he is not concerned with the actual harm done to them. Rather, Arjuna is concerned with the “great sin” that would accrue to him for killing his kinsmen, and not the actual pain and suffering of the kinsmen themselves. (Auribindo 1995) Thus,

⁵ Quoted in Upadhyaya, K. N. (1969). *The Bhagavad Gita on War and Peace*. Philosophy East and West, 19(2), p. 161.

it is not that Arjuna is concerned with the agency or the relationships involved, but instead with the goods, or bads in this case, that would result for him personally. Also it should be noted that “[i]n the past, he [Arjuna] never hesitated even when he had to fight against relations.” (Gandhi 2000, 34) Therefore, he cannot really be offering it as a principled reason now, but, rather, he is just using kinship as an excuse—i.e. using the issues of the agency and the relationships of those involved instrumentally—which, again, demonstrates that Arjuna was not really concerned with Senian “comprehensive outcomes”.

The other major reason that Arjuna gives is that the battle would lead to the destruction of society as a whole. However, were Arjuna to leave and not engage in the ensuing battle, the battle would still take place and families would still be destroyed and the caste system might still be ruined and society as a whole might collapse. Except, unlike with Arjuna’s reasoning—where his involvement could *hypothetically* lead to the destruction—if Arjuna did not participate it would be more likely happen, because “[i]f he left the battle, the Pandava army would be simply annihilated,” and the “evil” Kauravas would maintain rulership of the kingdom. (Gandhi 2000, 34) Without Arjuna at least as many people would have died except the unjust side would have won, and on any version of consequentialism—comprehensive or otherwise—that would be a much worse consequence.

The next issue to be discussed is that it does not seem that Arjuna was in fact arguing for any particular position, but rather, he was rationalizing his loss of nerve. In fact, as Gandhi points out, “[h]is reason [i.e. his ability to reason] is, for the time being, clouded.” (Gandhi 2000, 34) Before putting forth the “reasons” he has for not fighting

Arjuna was “[d]espondant ... [and] said this: Having seen my own people, Krishna, [d]esiring to fight ... [m]y limbs sink down, [m]y mouth dries up, my body trembles, ... [m]y skin burns, I am unable to remain as I am, [a]nd my mind seems to ramble.” (Sargeant 2004, 66-8) Then, after giving his “reasons” the chapter of the *Gita* ends with “[t]hus having spoken on the battlefield, Arjuna sat down upon the seat of the chariot, [t]hrowing down both arrow and bow, [w]ith a heart overcome by sorrow.” (Sargeant 2004, 85) What is clear then, from the text, is that Arjuna was not speaking from a position of reason; he was overcome by sorrow and anxiety.⁶ Therefore, it seems hard to believe “Arjuna’s moral and political reasoning is deeply concerned with outcomes in their comprehensive form.” (Sen 2009, 216) At least one could not draw such a conclusion based on the text of the *Gita*, because in the *Gita* Arjuna is not reasoning at all, or as Krishna indicates “Arjuna ... is talking specious wisdom.” (Gandhi 2000, 38) It is difficult to believe that Arjuna so described—“him thus overcome by pity, despairing, whose eyes were filled with tears and downcast”—is cognitively situated to reason morally or politically. (Sargeant 1994, 86)

The above mentioned questioning of Arjuna’s ability to reason suggests the third problem with Sen’s reading of the Arjuna-Krishna debate, and that is that it does not seem to be a debate at all. Arjuna states that: “[m]y own being is overcome by pity and weakness. My mind is confused as to my duty. I ask you [w]hich is preferable for certain? Tell that to me, your pupil. Correct me, I beg you.” (Sargeant 1994, 92) The important thing to note is that Arjuna himself realized that he was not cognitively in a

⁶ Sri Ramanuja. (1992) *Sri Ramanuja Gita Bhasya*. Mylapore, India: Sri Ramakrishna Math Printing Press, 1992. p. 55. “He [Arjuna] was filled with fear, not knowing what was righteous and what was unrighteous.”

position to make a proper judgment on the situation, and therefore asks Krishna for guidance regarding what the appropriate course of action is.

Arjuna's mention of "duty" in the above quote provides a good segue into a discussion of Sen's interpretation of Krishna as a pure deontologist—i.e. someone concerned only with duty regardless of the consequences. It seems clear from the above quote from Arjuna that the use of "duty" here is not to be taken in a technical or deontological sense, but rather as synonymous with what one "ought to do," generally, and it is in that light that Krishna should be interpreted.

A problem, of course, does arise since, as has been mentioned, the *Bhagavad Gita* is a religious text. So, though it begins with concerns about the actual lived world and what is good and right and just, it then immediately turns to religious questions, and what Krishna has to say relates, more specifically, to that. It is therefore unfair to criticize Krishna's "pure deontology" because he has taken the discussion from concerns about what is the right or just thing to do in the world to what is the right thing to do to attain liberation. Nevertheless, there are at least a few lessons about worldly justice that can be gleaned from Krishna's discussion.

Arjuna's expressed concerns—regardless of their motivation—are about the negative consequences that would result from the massive destruction of life, and particularly the lives of those with whom Arjuna is closely related. Arjuna was concerned about the sin that would accrue from such actions, but Krishna points out that "[b]y reason of delusion, man takes wrong to be right. By reason of delusion was Arjuna led to make a distinction between kinsmen and nonkinsmen." (Gandhi 2000, 35) Overcome as he was, Arjuna was not able to think clearly and thus assumed that there

would be certain negative consequences. Not only was Arjuna making an invalid distinction between kinsmen and nonkinsmen⁷—a tacit form of parochialism that Sen himself finds problematic—but that by not performing the duties proper to his caste and constitution he would be accruing the sin that he thought he would be for killing those to whom he had close personal relationships. Thus Krishna states that “if you [Arjuna] will not undertake [t]his righteous war, [t]hereupon, having avoided your own duty and glory, [y]ou shall incur evil.” (Sargeant 1994, 118)

To return to the issue of Krishna’s pure deontology, it seems that Sen is comparing apples and oranges. Arjuna’s “arguments” are about this-worldly concerns, while Krishna’s are about other-worldly realization. Thus, seen in the light of religion Krishna’s arguments make sense as a sort of pure duty. However, not everything Krishna does say concerns religious liberation. As has been noted, Krishna does discuss actual consequences. For example, as Gandhi draws out in his commentary, many of the negative consequences, that Arjuna feared, would more likely be realized were Arjuna not to fight, which is implicit in Krishna referring to the battle as a just or righteous cause. Finally, it is not that Krishna is ignoring consequences, it is just that many of the consequences which Arjuna expresses concerns about are ultimately outside his control. Thus, whether or not Arjuna participates in the battle many people are going to die. Therefore, holding the massive slaughter of those to whom Arjuna has personal relationships fixed, the issue of duty becomes more significant.

The important thing to note, however, is not what position Krishna was arguing but the relationship in which Krishna stood to Arjuna. Regardless of whether or not

⁷ Krishna’s argument here is highly religious, and, thus, a full articulation of his argument is probably not relevant for the purposes of this paper. What is important is simply to note that Krishna is pointing out Arjuna’s biases.

Arjuna was actually presenting a version of comprehensive consequentialism to justify a particular course of action, Arjuna realized that he was not really in a position to properly judge the situation. In every way Krishna is Arjuna's superior,⁸ and Arjuna knew that. Further, Arjuna was aware that in the current context, despite any reasons he could give to justify his position, his perspective on the situation was skewed. He, therefore, looked to Krishna for guidance in a situation in which he knew his judgment was flawed, and that is, at least one, important non-religious lesson that can be taken from the Arjuna-Krishna debate.

There are actually a few related lessons that can be taken from the Arjuna-Krishna debate. First, in moral and political decision-making an individual—whether an individual person or an individual community—can, at times, be “too close” to the situation, and because of that fact be unable to make a good decision or even be able to properly evaluate the situation. In such circumstances considering the viewpoint of an impartial spectator can be helpful, which is an issue important to Sen and the reason that he incorporates Adam Smith's discussion of the impartial spectator within his understanding of justice. Second, it takes a certain amount of humility and self-critical understanding to acknowledge that one's own viewpoint might, in fact, be flawed, and it is this issue that I take to be what is actually illustrated by Arjuna in the Arjuna-Krishna debate.

In his book, and elsewhere, Sen has argued that the importance of the Arjuna-Krishna debate is that it demonstrates two issues. First, that in moral and political decision making processes one must be cognizant of a variety of consequences that might

⁸ From the context of the *Gita*, since Krishna is an omniscient and omnipotent deity he is clearly in every way superior to the mortal Arjuna. Whether or not Krishna is a god is beside the point.

obtain due to a particular decision or course of action. Second, and relatedly, deontology, in and of itself and precisely because it ignores consequences, is often an inappropriate approach to take regarding issues of justice. While Sen might be correct about both of the conclusions that he draws, it has been shown that the Arjuna-Krishna debate does not actually justify such conclusions.

A better understanding of the Arjuna-Krishna debate shows three things. First, Arjuna was actually less concerned with issues of comprehensive outcomes, agency and relationships than Sen maintains. Second, Arjuna was actually not even making an argument for any particular position, but was instead rationalizing his lack of nerve and emotional weaknesses regarding the ensuing battle. Third, while Krishna does, at times, advocate doing one's duty, for duty's sake,⁹ his purpose in doing so is religious and not really moral or political. Further, Krishna is concerned with consequences it is just a question of which consequences are the important ones. So, if similar results are expected from two different courses of action, the one that aligns most closely with duties and obligations is, *ceteris paribus*, the better decision.

The purpose of this section of the paper was to explore both Sen's understanding of the *Bhagavad Gita*, and what the *Bhagavad Gita* actually says. Sen introduces a discussion of the Arjuna-Krishna debate for the purpose of illustrating one important aspect of his theory of justice—viz. the importance of a comprehensive consequentialism, a sensitivity to consequences and all that that entails. It was shown that Sen's interpretation is inconsistent with the actual text of the *Gita*, and in so far as it is, it fails to adequately demonstrate what he believes that it does. That is not to say, however, that Sen is wrong in believing that consequences, agency and relationships are important

⁹ Krishna does say things that sound like this, even if I have not said much about it in this paper.

aspects of an adequate theory of justice, but just that his example fails to illustrate their import. Another way to think about the issue raised here is to note that Sen was arguing that the type of reasoning in which Arjuna engaged was critical for coming to a good and just decision. However, it was shown that Arjuna was not really reasoning at all, and therefore to model one's decision making procedure on what Arjuna *actually* argued would most likely not lead to a good or just decision.

A better understanding of the *Gita*, in general, and the Arjuna-Krishna debate, in particular, does illustrate the importance of incorporating the perspective of an impartial spectator into one's decision making process. Since the concept of an impartial spectator is an important aspect of Sen's theory of justice it is interesting that he did not use the *Gita*, if he was going to use it at all, to illustrate that aspect of his theory. Further, one is left to wonder why Sen would use a text for secular purposes when it is difficult to make sense of the text divorced from its religious context. That being said, there are some important lessons that can be taken from the *Gita*, besides the one's already discussed, regarding justice. However, those lessons will be addressed in the next section of the paper.

2.

While the *Bhagavad Gita*, itself, does not really discuss political issues or the organization of a just society, it seems clear that it takes for granted the Hindu theory of castes.¹⁰ On such a theory, a just society is a well ordered society where people perform those functions which are appropriate to their caste, which in turn are based on people's natural dispositions and inclinations. Thus, a just society is one that is similar, in many

¹⁰ Arjuna's concern that his participation in the battle would lead to the destruction of society was based on the view that by killing so many men the family would fall apart "producing intermixture of caste [and] caste duties [being] abolished." (Sargeant 1994, 81)

respects, to Plato's republic. The problem, of course, is that such a society might seem abhorrent to modern liberal sensibilities. However, there is some intuitive plausibility to the idea that there is at least a *prima facie* obligation to exercise one's abilities and talents in service of the greater society. Further, as has been mentioned, it is difficult to understand the *Gita* independent of its religious context and concepts. However, there are some ideas that seem relevant to an adequate theory of justice, and in this section of the paper I will discuss what some of those might be.

First, the Arjuna-Krishna debate actually demonstrates the importance of incorporating an impartial spectator into one's decision making procedure. I agree with Sen and Smith that considering the viewpoint of an impartial spectator is an important aspect of a theory of justice, and for just the same reasons—viz. universalizability and objectivity. An impartial spectator understanding of objectivity introduces a notion of fallibility and correctability, and thus, at least potentially, can avoid some of the paternalistic concerns that one might have regarding a more traditional objective theory, like Plato's. Second, by incorporating an impartial spectator one can evaluate one's impartiality and not just particular decisions or courses of action. In other words, there can be higher-order evaluations of impartiality.

The Arjuna-Krishna debate also demonstrates a problem that often arises in discussions of morality and politics, and that is emotions are often involved. While, emotions, in and of themselves, are neither good nor bad, they can lead to—as they did with Arjuna—poor decisions or less than rational reasoning. Questions of justice and of right and wrong are often emotionally charged issues, consider the debate currently occurring over healthcare, if one is not careful the emotions involved can cloud one's

judgment. It is at such times that Arjuna's example can be instructive. Despite his rationalizations, Arjuna was aware that he was probably not in the best position to make such an important decision by himself, he therefore turned to one who was not only an impartial spectator, but an expert.¹¹ This, then, is another lesson that can be had regarding justice; that one has to be self-critical enough to know that one's judgment might be being influenced by emotions or biases. While one does not necessarily have to take the advice of an impartial spectator or an expert, one does have to be cognizant of one's own biases and limitations.

A third lesson that can be had regarding justice and the Arjuna-Krishna debate is that there are situations in which there are no good solutions, just more or less bad ones. In other words, one lesson of the *Gita* is that one lives in a morally complex world in which there are competing demands, all of which cannot be satisfied. In such circumstances there is not always an ideal solution, but one must act anyway, and that is the real import of Krishna's claim to do one's duty. Opting out, or in Arjuna's case refusing to fight, is not a valid option, especially in cases of manifest injustice—which the battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas was supposed to represent—there is an obligation to get involved. Further, by not getting involved or not acting one is tacitly condoning the injustice,¹² which was Gandhi's point in underscoring the fact that “Arjuna ... had no choice but to fight.” (Gandhi 2000, 34)

¹¹ Tripurari, B. V. (2001). *The Bhagavad Gita: Its Feeling and Philosophy*. San Rafael, CA: Mandala Publishing Group, 2001. p. 38. “In the midst of his confusion, Arjuna himself understands the reality of what Krsna has indicated. He admits his weakness of heart. He knows that as long as a person thinks he knows, he cannot know the truth.”

¹² Swami Nikhilananda. (1992). *The Bhagavad Gita: Translated from Sanskrit, with Notes, Comments, and Introduction*. New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, p. 66. “inasmuch as if one sees evil one must resist it.”

Similarly, it is not always the case that one's family, community or country is on the "right" side of the battle. Thus, while it is true that one does have obligations relative to one's community, in matters of justice, the moral obligations of right and wrong trump clan and community affiliation. While the *Bhagavad Gita* is premised on an extreme version of such a situation, similar situations are not uncommon. What the Arjuna-Krishna debate demonstrates is that one can have obligations that transcend one's close relationships. Thus, as in the previous issue, one must act, but for the right reasons. While few people will be put in Arjuna's situation where they have to physically battle their kinsmen, the *Gita* does seem to be encouraging its readers to correct and improve one's community, and that was, at least part of, the appeal of the *Gita* for Gandhi—it was not just the appeal of the pure theory of "doing one's duty irrespective of the consequences" as Sen suggests. (Sen 2009, 210)

The purpose of this section was to merely introduce some apparent lessons the *Gita* can provide when considering the question of justice. By putting the Arjuna-Krishna debate in the proper context—in the previous section—lessons which Sen ignored can be brought to the fore. By noticing that Arjuna was not really defending a particular theory, concerns other than a sensitivity to consequences can be highlighted. Broadly speaking, the lessons articulated here are connected by two issues, namely impartiality and a self-criticalness. By incorporating an impartial perspective and acknowledging one's own biases—whether personal or communal, and "[t]he *Gita* [all but] says, '...We should point out the lapses of our own people...'"—a particular view of justice seems to follow. (Gandhi 2000, 36-7) The view of justice that seems to follow from the concerns discussed in this section is one of active involvement that is universal

in scope. In other words, one's moral obligations transcend the boundaries of any particular community and are exacting, a failure to act on one's duty—broadly construed as moral obligations—is equivalent to supporting injustice.

Whether or not the conclusions made here, and derived from the lessons of the *Bhagavad Gita*, provide a correct, at least partial, theory of justice is an open question. However, they do seem to naturally follow from the understanding of the *Gita* that was presented in section one, which in turn was put forward to remedy Sen's inadequate interpretation.

3.

In conclusion, the purpose of this paper was to critique Amartya Sen's use of the Arjuna-Krishna debate from the *Bhagavad Gita* in his recent book, *The Idea of Justice*. Sen introduces the *Gita* as a way to illustrate the concept of sensitivity to consequences, which he believes is necessary for any adequate theory of justice. The purpose was not to show that a sensitivity to consequences is not necessary for a theory of justice, but rather to show that Sen's understanding of the Arjuna-Krishna debate does not seem consistent with the actual text. A better, or at least more textually consistent, interpretation was put forward, and it was shown that such an interpretation could not be used to illustrate the importance of a sensitivity to consequences. However, it did provide a good example of the importance of incorporating the viewpoint of an impartial spectator into one's decision making procedure, which is another concept that Sen believes is an essential aspect of an adequate theory of justice.

In order for the paper to not be merely critical, there was a discussion of some further implications that the more adequate interpretation of the *Gita* had regarding the

issue of justice. While the discussion of the further implications was brief it was shown that the theory of justice that is implied by the *Gita* is not only universal in scope—which is in keeping with Sen—but also quite demanding. It was not the purpose of this paper to defend the theory of justice that seems to follow from the *Bhagavad Gita*, but merely to suggest what such a theory might look like.

References

- Sri Aurobindo. (1995) The Bhagavad Gita and Its Message. Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Press.
- Gandhi, M. K. (2000) *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi*. Berkely, CA: Berkely Hills Books.
- Swami Nikhilananda. (1992). *The Bhagavad Gita: Translated from Sanskrit, with Notes, Comments, and Introduction*. New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center.
- Sri Ramanuja. (1992). *Sri Ramanuja Gita Bhasya*. Mylapore, India: Sri Ramakrishna Math Printing Press.
- Sargeant, W. (1994). *The Bhagavad Gita*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Sen, A. (2005). *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. New York: Picador.
- Sen, A. (2000). Consequential Evaluation and Practical Reason. *The Journal of Philosophy*. 92(9), 477-502.
- Sen, A. (2009). *The Idea of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University.
- Tripurari, B. V. The Bhagavad Gita: Its Feeling and Philosophy. San Rafael, CA: Mandala Publishing Group, 2001.
- Upadhyaya, K. N. “The Bhagavad Gita on War and Peace”. Philosophy East and West. Vol. 19, No. 2, April, 1969. pp. 159-69.