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As is well known in India, the action of the great Indian epic Mahābhārata takes place on at least two levels, namely the human or everyday (vyāvahārika) level and the trans-human or ultimate (pāramārthika) level.¹ At the former level, the great Mahābhārata war on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra is fought by human (or semi-divine) warriors, with clearly delineated human weaknesses and a human goal: victory, the conquest of a kingdom. At the latter level, the entire action is subsumed by the divine principle, nirguṇa or saguṇa brahman, the one God. Most explicitly -- although a multiplicity of variations on the theme are present in this encyclopedic work -- all action throughout the epic is seen to be directed by the god Kṛṣṇa; the war is his game, and the various characters all dance to his tune.

Much of what applies to the Mahābhārata as a whole applies to the Bhagavadgītā (Mahābhārata 6.23-40) in particular, in fact, is crystallized and presented in clearest form in this portion of the epic.² Certainly, the distinction between and, at the same time, the meeting of the human and divine levels of the epic action is exemplified most clearly here. For it is at this point in the epic action that the most vulnerable of the heroes, Arjuna, expresses his human fears to Kṛṣṇa, and is reassured with regard to the impending battle from the divine point of view. In this paper, I propose to analyze one aspect of Kṛṣṇa's argument, which has not generally been noted, but which is highly significant for the structure of the Gītā as a whole: the juxtaposition there of Arjuna's human notion of time with the broader

picture presented to him by Kṛṣṇa from the divine perspective.

In the first chapter of the Gītā, Arjuna, justifying his initial refusal to engage in the impending war at Kuruksetra, describes to Kṛṣṇa the horrendous effects which he fears would result were he to fight, as follows:

Having killed the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, what pleasure would be ours, O Janārdana [Kṛṣṇa]? Indeed, evil would attach to us when we had killed those armed aggressors.

Therefore we ought not to kill the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and their relations. How, having killed our own kinsmen should we be happy, O Madhava [Kṛṣṇa], even if they, with minds corrupted by greed, do not see the fault consisting of destruction of family and the sin in injury to friends?

Seeing the fault consisting of destruction of family, O Janārdana, how should we not know enough to turn away from this evil?

When the family is destroyed, the eternal family laws perish, and when law has perished, anarchy overcomes the entire family.

Due to the predominance of anarchy, O Kṛṣṇa, the women of the family are defiled. When the women are defiled, O Vārṣṇeya [Kṛṣṇa], mixture of classes results.

Mixture [of classes] leads straight to hell for the family killers and the family, for their ancestors fall, their ancestral offerings cut off.

By those faults of family killers, making for class mixture, caste laws and eternal family laws are destroyed.

For people whose family laws are destroyed, Janārdana, the eternal dwelling is in hell; thus we have heard. ³

Arjuna's argument here, which, in fact, caps his protest in the Gītā against fighting, revolves around the issue of war against family: the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the enemy, are his cousins, and to do battle with them would lead to a breakdown of "kuladharmāḥ sanātanaḥ" ("eternal family laws"), that is, a breakdown of society, as represented by the class system, with concomitant hell for all involved. It is worthy of notice, furthermore, that Arjuna seems to focus the blame for the situation upon himself, as he concludes his statement with the following words:

Alas! We are bent upon great evil in that, out of greed for the pleasures of sovereignty, we are prepared to kill our own kinsmen.

If the armed sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra were to kill me weaponless and unresisting in battle, it would be more agreeable to me. ⁴

According to Arjuna's analysis, then, it is the actions of a generally good human being (himself) suddenly behaving wrongly which will bring about the dire consequences described.

In order to prepare the way for the rest of my discussion, it is important that I emphasize here that what Arjuna is presenting in this argument is his own, typically human, understanding of the progression

of time and history. The chain of events he is experiencing and bemoaning, the breakdown of the family, is prominent among the changes which characterize the Kaliyuga, the fourth, degenerate age of human history; so much so, that comparison of Arjuna's statement of Gītā 1.36 ff. with statements made in the epic's most complete account of the Kaliyuga, Mahabharata 3.188, must suggest to the epic audience that Arjuna's words are meant to be the explicit expression of a premonition on his part regarding the onset of the Kaliyuga as a direct result of the impending war. Note, for example, the following quotations from Mahabharata 3.188:

Neither priests, warriors, nor farmers will remain,
O lord of men. The world will then, at the end of
the age [that is, in the Kaliyuga] be all of one class.

The father will not show patience to his son nor
the son to his father, nor will any wife obey her husband.⁵

Sons will kill mothers and fathers at the end of
the age; and women, resorting to their sons, will kill
their husbands.⁶

Then, when the end of the age is imminent, men will
disown their friends and relations, their subjects and
followers.⁷

In fact, the fatal confrontation between cousins which turns into the Kurukṣetra war provides an entirely apt symbol for the coming of the Kaliyuga, in which all social roles are reversed; and insofar as the epic generally recognizes that the events it describes ushered in that dreadful period of world history,⁸ Arjuna's argument must be considered to be firmly grounded in reality, and very convincing.

Everything which follows in the Gītā constitutes Kṛṣṇa's successful attempt to allay Arjuna's concerns regarding participation in the Kurukṣetra fighting, and, as is to be expected, the central focus of his speech to Arjuna addresses Arjuna's central objection: Arjuna's premonition of the Kaliyuga.

At first, beginning as early as the second chapter of the Gītā and continuing into the third, Kṛṣṇa urges Arjuna to fight because it is his class duty to do so:

And also, having considered your own duty, you
ought not to tremble. For nothing better for a
warrior is known than righteous battle. ⁹

In speaking thus, Kṛṣṇa seems to be urging Arjuna to buttress, in face of the Kaliyuga, the dying morality of earlier ages, the very class-based morality for which Arjuna has expressed fears in the passage from Gītā 1 quoted above. ¹⁰ Kṛṣṇa's argument is not convincing however, since it is Arjuna's very performance of class duty, i.e., his fighting, which will threaten the caste structure ultimately. Indeed, Kṛṣṇa soon drops his simple advice, to return to it only much later in the Gītā, after additional input with regard to the Kaliyuga has been provided. This additional input consists of two arguments which have been presented fully by Gītā 11, and are calculated to place what is revealed to be Arjuna's limited, human view of the Kaliyuga in a broader perspective, the perspective of divine time.

First, Kṛṣṇa suggests that time and history progress independent of human actions, indicating that if the Kaliyuga is indeed on its way (a fact which he never denies), this is through no fault of Arjuna's, but is a result of a cosmic cycle established by fate. This argument

first appears half hidden amidst Kṛṣṇa's initial statement to Arjuna (Gītā 2), which has more generally to do with the self's immortality: Arjuna will not really be killing anything when he fights in the war, since the self is not harmed even when bodies are destroyed.¹¹ But Kṛṣṇa adds almost as an afterthought, even if the self is thought of somehow as being born and dying, this movement should not be considered the result of any human action:

For one that is born, death is certain, and for
one that has died, birth is certain. Therefore, since
the thing is inevitable, you ought not to grieve.¹²

It is in this verse that the well-known Hindu idea of the cyclical movement of all things of this world through time, in an eternal pattern independent of human actions, is first mentioned in the Gītā. Kṛṣṇa's second argument regarding time in the Gītā builds upon this cyclical view, applying it to the universe as a whole, rather than merely to individuals.

The second argument is presented most forcefully in Gītā 11 itself, a chapter which may be understood best as an appropriately strong response to Arjuna's central argument of Gītā 1. Here Kṛṣṇa grants Arjuna a vision of himself as the destroying, devouring Time (kāla) of the end of one thousand mahāyugas (four-yuga periods), the moment of pralaya (periodic dissolution of the universe).¹³ What Kṛṣṇa appears to be showing Arjuna here is that as grim as the future may seem to be from Arjuna's limited, human perspective, the reality of events is even more startling. The vision functions like a suddenly widening camera angle, a back-stepping from the human to the superhuman viewpoint.¹⁴ The Kaliyuga is seen to be only a small part of a much longer and greater

cosmic cycle, which climaxes in a far more total destruction than could ever be conceived of in human terms. Nor do human deeds appear to matter at all from this point of view, for they and their fruit are destined to be destroyed periodically. ¹⁵

Indeed, the tremendous duration and all-encompassing power of the cosmic cycle has already been mentioned by Kṛṣṇa as early as Gītā 8:

People who know that a day of Brahmā lasts a thousand ages and a night [of Brahmā] lasts a thousand ages are knowers of day and night.

At the coming of day, all differentiations arise from what was undifferentiated [before]. At the coming of night they are absorbed into that very thing which is called the undifferentiated.

Having come to be again and again, this aggregate of beings is absorbed willy-nilly at the coming of night, O Pārtha [Arjuna], [and] arises [again] at the coming of day. ¹⁶

In this chapter of the Gītā, however, the truth of God is said to lie beyond the cosmic cycle. ¹⁷ It is not until Gītā 10.30 (and 33) that God Himself and the process of time are identified with one another, indicating that time and history must be viewed in a new light. This realization of Gītā 10, presented visually in Gītā 11, provides the argument which proves ultimately convincing to Arjuna.

Following Kṛṣṇa's revelation of his true form, two conclusions are drawn in Gītā 11. The first, presented by Kṛṣṇa himself, draws upon what I have referred to above as Kṛṣṇa's first argument regarding time:

Therefore, arise! Win fame! Having defeated
your enemies enjoy abundant sovereignty! Indeed,
they have already been killed by me. You, O
Savyasācin [Arjuna], be the mere instrument. 18

In these words, Kṛṣṇa repeats his old advice that Arjuna should act according to his class duty; but in light of the new justification which Kṛṣṇa can now give for it, the advice seems much more appropriate than it did before.

The second conclusion, to me even more striking, is the one which Arjuna comes to himself, immediately upon viewing the vision: insofar as the true nature of time is infinitely beyond human reckoning, and time, in fact, is equivalent to God Himself, the only real solution to the threat which time poses is submission to time, that is, devotion (bhakti) to God; a response with reference to the more-than-human is called for where all human efforts would be doomed to failure. Indeed, Arjuna's words to Kṛṣṇa reflect precisely the elevation of his world view from the human to divine plane:

For whatever I have said [to you] rashly, thinking
"This is my friend," calling out "Hey, Kṛṣṇa! Hey, Yādava!
Hey, friend!" not knowing your greatness, due to heedlessness
or familiarity, or for any insult you have received [from me]
in jest, while sporting, lying, sitting or eating, either
alone or in front of someone else, O Acyuta [Kṛṣṇa], I ask
you, immeasurable, for forgiveness.

You are the father of the world with its mobile and
immobile beings. You are its very great and honorable elder.
There is no other equal to you, let alone superior, in all

the three worlds, O you of incomparable majesty.

Bowing and prostrating my body, therefore, I beseech you,
the praiseworthy Lord: as father to son, as friend to friend,
as lover to beloved, do show tolerance, O God. ¹⁹

Kṛṣṇa supplements Arjuna's statement with the reminder that Arjuna could never even have attained his realization of the divine nature of time except by way of the grace of God, which is brought down by devotion to Him. ²⁰ The train of thought set in motion by these arguments will culminate in the tour de force of Gītā 18, which advocates obeying class duty, but casting one's every action upon God. ²¹

In the famous verses of Gītā 4.6 ff., Kṛṣṇa has indicated that he incarnates himself in age after age, whenever righteousness languishes. From a human perspective, this statement suggests that God will set things right according to the ordinary (vyavahārika) meaning of that word whenever a period such as the Kaliyuga threatens to intrude. It should be clear from the preceding discussion however, that God's morality is not the same as man's, in the view of the Gītā poet.

That a true vision of reality in fact implies a total reversal of human values -- carrying out to its logical conclusion the reversal inherent in the Kaliyuga itself -- has already been stated by way of time imagery early in the Gītā:

In what is night for all beings, the self-controlled
man is awake. When creatures are awake, it is night for
the seeing sage. ²²

As if elaborating on this verse, the Gītā goes on to suggest, as I have indicated, that what is referred to here as the "night for all beings" is human night, the night of human time; what is referred to as "night for the seeing sage" is the night of Brahmā, the night of

divine time (for it is this which Arjuna sees when he is granted a special vision). One who learns the distinction between the two is enabled to pass beyond the often denigrated "opposites" ("dvandvas")²³ natural to the ordinary human conception of existence; Arjuna, for example, is enabled by his cosmic vision to overcome his human moral compunctions and fight a war which partakes of divinity, with Kṛṣṇa as his charioteer. The imagery of time in the Gītā, then, provides some of the key symbolism through which the true nature of things, inexpressible in human terms, emerges.

The revelation presented to Arjuna by Kṛṣṇa in Gītā 11, and even the Gītā as a whole, is not absolutely decisive, in that Arjuna tends to relapse into his human view of the world periodically throughout the epic; that is, the epic action continues to fluctuate between its two basic poles, human and divine, even after it has presumably been elevated by the Gītā revelation. Arjuna himself sometimes seems to rise above the human level, while at other times he fails completely to do so. The vision of Gītā 11, then, striking as it is, is only one example of a transition from the human level to the divine, which is repeated very frequently throughout the epic.

In conclusion of this paper, it may be suggested that the structure of the Gītā, with its motion from the human to the divine perspective, symbolized by a broadening conception of the nature of time and history, may provide a key to certain structural elements of the Kurukṣetra war -- and the Mahābhārata epic -- as a whole. For eighteen days, the war is primarily a human (or semi-divine) struggle, which reflects a degenerate Kaliyuga morality: not only is it a war between cousins, but victory in it requires trickery and deceit on the part of the hitherto

"good" heroes, the Pāṇḍavas. (This trickery is sanctioned, in fact suggested, by Kṛṣṇa, who, as I have indicated, is above ordinary moral considerations; but it is emphasized that his role in the war is entirely a passive one.) Just after the war has supposedly been won by Pāṇḍavas, however, a sweeping night raid against them, led by a Śiva-inspired warrior, leads to almost total destruction of their remaining forces, in a pralaya-like attack²⁴ suggestive of the Gītā-11 vision.²⁵ Here the action of the epic is escalated to an entirely different level, which can be comprehended only by the mind of devotion.

¹See, for example, Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar, On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata, Society's monograph No. 4 (Bombay: Asiatic Society of Bombay, 1957). Sukthankar, the highly respected first editor of the Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata, notes what he calls three "planes" in the epic action: the "mundane," the "ethical," and the "metaphysical"; these planes supply the titles for the various sections of his study. Referring to the work of Ānandatīrtha (Madhvācārya), Sukthankar (p.120) points out that his own conception, particularly regarding a metaphysical plane over and above the obvious story line, has precedents in early Indian thought.

²The truth of this statement must be admitted whether the Gītā is understood to be an integral portion of the epic or a late interpolation, which issue is highly controversial.

³Gītā 1.36-44.

⁴Gītā 1.45-46.

⁵Mahābhārata 3.188.41-42.

⁶Mahābhārata 3.188.78.

⁷Mahābhārata 3.188.82.

⁸Mahābhārata 1.2.9, 3.148.37, 9.59.21; cf. Mahābhārata
5.72.18, 140.7ff., 6.62.39, 12.326.82ff.

⁹Gītā 2.31.

¹⁰Cf. Gītā 3.20:

. . . and also, considering support
of the world, you ought to act.

¹¹Gītā 2.11ff. This particular argument does not seem very
effective here, perhaps because Arjuna is as much disturbed at the
thought of fighting his relatives at all as at the thought of
actually killing them. Nor, in fact, does the argument present
itself as a strong case for fighting; rather, it presents itself
as a case for not grieving (Gītā 2.11, etc.). The case for fighting
begins, as a new thought (note the ". . . api ca . . ."), at verse 31.

¹²Gītā 2.27.

¹³Gītā 11.32; see also Gītā 11.25.

¹⁴An opposite movement of perspective is to be noted in the course
of Mahābhārata 3.186-88. That is, the main subject of 3.186-87 is
the dissolution of the world after a thousand mahāyugas, while in
3.188, the perspective narrows to a consideration of the Kaliyuga alone.

¹⁵If, as one may assume, the majority of human beings are to be recreated,
in line with their previously accrued karma, after the period of

cosmic rest ends, this fact is never mentioned in conjunction with the Gītā-11 vision.

¹⁶Gītā 8.17-19.

¹⁷Gītā 8.20ff.

¹⁸Gītā 11.33.

¹⁹Gītā 11.41-44.

²⁰Gītā 11.47, 52ff.

²¹Compare the implication of Gītā 8.5-6, that whatever actions a person does are all set right by a thought of God at the time of death.

"Therefore," says Gītā 8.7, "at all times remember me and fight."

²²Gītā 2.69.

²³Gītā 2.45, etc.

²⁴In her important series of articles entitled "Etudes de mythologie hindoue," in Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extreme Orient, 54, 55, 58, 63, 65 (1968, 1969, 1971, 1976, 1978), Madeleine Biardeau argues that the entire Kuruksetra war is pralaya-like in structure and that the night-raid scene is a "reprise" of the whole; see especially, "Etudes" IV, 209. I prefer to look upon the war as a whole as a reflection of the passage, during a single mahāyuga, into the Kaliyuga period, with the chronologically fitting dissolution after a thousand mahāyugas represented by the ensuing night raid.

²⁵Mahābhārata 10. Note an apparent parallel with the Gītā-11 vision in that both there (see verse 26) and in Mahābhārata 10, the Pāṇḍavas themselves seem to survive the destruction, although most of their allies perish.