ETHICAL ACTION IN THE WORLD-VIEW OF THE GĪTĀ

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The Upaniṣads, as we have them, are the records of seers who attempted to understand the problem of Man and the Universe. The Bhagavadgītā takes over many of the ideas and themes found in the Upaniṣads, but its purpose is not to build a logical, coherent system. Nevertheless, we cannot but note its predilection for certain themes.[1]

Dharma, the opening word in the first chapter of the Gītā strikes one of the most significant notes of the poem. It is uncharacteristic of R.C. Zaehner that he does not comment on the first chapter and it is only in the introduction to the second chapter that he briefly touches upon the first. Its function, according to him, lies only in providing the Gītā with a proper setting.[2] But a careful textual analysis will lead us to the conclusion that the first and second chapters are of paramount importance. A considerable number of scholars seem to assume that the purpose of the verses in the first chapter is merely to set the stage and provide the proper props for the real drama to unfold. Hence do they open their commentaries with the second chapter. To do so would be to miss the very point of the first chapter and therefore of the second as well. These two chapters present at the outset two distinct theses: Arjuna proposes one world-view in the first chapter, and in the second Kṛṣṇa instead of opposing it merely replaces it with another world-view, contrary and all-compelling. Hence, I am of the opinion that the Gītākāra does not use the first chapter merely as a fine frill.

The very first verse, which is carefully crafted, calls for comment and reflection:

dharma-kṣetre kuru-kṣetre samavetā yuyutsavaḥ
māmakāḥ Pāṇḍavāś c'aiva kim akurvata, Saṃjaya?

Dharma is the point of the whole poem and the field of dhrarma (dharma-kṣetre) is identified with the field of the Kurus on which stand the armies of Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas poised for battle. The reason for the identification of the field of dharma with that of the Kurus lies in the fact that the Bhagavadgītā is only a part of the great epic, the Mahābhārata.

Kṣetre again is a significant word and its import is taken up and discussed at length much later (13:1-14:4). Prakṛti is the field and puruṣa the knower of the field. When the Gītā touches on this theme, it does so against the background of the Upaniṣads.[3] It does not merely repeat what the Upaniṣads have said but gives it a new interpretation: God becomes the knower of the field (kṣetra-jña) in every field including the field of justice and righteousness (dharma-kṣetre).

In the Kuru field stand the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and of Pandu spoiling for the fight to settle issues among them. They are eagerly looking forward to the clash of arms. This desire and eagerness and expectation are brought out to the fore by the word yuyutsavaḥ which is the desiderative form of yudh. This war, then, springs from the desire of 'mine' and 'thine', from the fact that there is always the attachment to what is mine (māmakāḥ). Egoism and desire lead to action (akurvata) and the type of action determines liberation from the stream of births and deaths.

Thus we can see that at the very outset the author of the Bhagavadgītā raises the main problems that he will take up in due course:

the problem of action (karma) and of morality (dharma), the havoc that desire and egoism play in the area of man's interiority and moral decision and their dire consequences for man in pursuit of wisdom and liberation.

Opposing armies assemble on the battle-field and then is heard the deafening din of drums, trumpets and conches working warriors into a frenzy (1:12-19). Arjuna sees the enemy ranks and takes up his bow and the war begins (1:20). It is at this dramatic juncture that Arjuna asks Kṛṣṇa to halt the chariot and begins to express his doubts concerning the morality of war. Obviously, then, the poem is not to be taken literally. The chariot is a symbol of life and life-situations (1:21) and the charioteer, Kṛṣṇa , is the one who teaches the secret doctrine, who instructs man on how to fight in dharma-ksetre and on the battle-ground of life, and who shows how to discriminate between the absolute good and evil, dharma and adharma, and bondage and liberation. [4]

Desire, the root of all evil, in the world-view of the Gītā - incidentally this seems to be the influence of Buddhism - begins to get emphasis: men are eager to fight (yoddhukāmā 1:22); they are ready for war (yotsyamānām 1:23). This eagerness stems from their wanting to please the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra Priya-cikīrṣavaḥ (seeking to please) is again in the desiderative form enchoing yuyutsavaḥ in the opening verse.

Arjuna sees his own kith and kin amid opposing armies; family is ranged against family and he is moved to compassion. This compassion is not born of concern for humanity as such, but springs from attachment to self and to his own family. He sees on the field of battle not just human beings but his brothers, his uncles, his sons and grandsons, his teachers and comrades (1:25-27). All of them are his own people (svajana) and he is disgusted to know that they are spoiling for a fight

(yuyutsūn 1:28). "dṛṣṭv' emān svajanān, Kṛṣṇa, yuyutsūn samavasthitān" (1:28) actually echoes part of the first couplet; both emphasize the selfishness born of 'mine' and 'thine' and both have the desiderative form of yudh.. Arjuna would rather make it appear that it is the unholy eagerness of his people that produces in him dejection and despair and despondency. Behind this manifest utterance lies the hidden but true feeling of his: these people are his own people. What makes him give up the fight is not compassion for the multitudes or love of humanity, but love of his own people. Again we must note that attachment to one's own (svajana) was mentioned in the very first couplet (māmakāḥ) and this has been recurring time and again (1:28, 31, 34, 37, 45).

Nevertheless, Arjuna tries to convince Kṛṣṇa that it is the motive of selflessness that leads him to abjure war. He says he seeks not victory, not kingdom nor things of pleasure. It turns out that this motive of selflessness is only a masked form of selfishness. Arjuna in his unconscious actually seeks life and kingdom, wealth and enjoyment for the sake of his people. [5] Once they are wiped out in battle, he will have no adequate reason for possessing the things of the earth (1:32-34). The love he has for his family and friends and relatives has such power over him that he would not slay them in order to possess the three worlds of earth, heaven, and the atmosphere much less for the earth (1:35). Killing relatives would be no sweetness and joy (1:36). Arjuna cites the moral rule that there is no right to kill. In his case the following of the rule is not morally but emotionally grounded. Arjuna makes himself the measure of things and judges the morality or immorality of an action from the point of view of his own personal happiness and not from the objective order of reality (1:37).

There are other reasons that Arjuna puts forward for not engaging in battle: 1) The fact that others hate us intensely is no reason to kill them. Should we do so, evil (pāpam) would come to dwell with us.[6] What is the meaning of evil taking shelter with us? Does this killing create a negative situation, an absence of doing the right, a situation of 'sin' and radical 'sinfulness' at the root of ontological being? (1:36). Because evil will come to dwell with us, we have no right to kill (1:37). This seems, according to Arjuna, a moral Imperative. 2) The minds of the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra are eaten up by greed (lobha) and therefore they cannot perceive the wrong-doing (doṣa) of ruining a family (kula-kṣaya-kṛtam) and of betraying friends by breaking their word (mitra-drohe). We, on the other hand, are not consumed by greed that clouds our moral discernment; we see that ruining a family is wickedness and hence, we should be wise enough to steer clear of this evil action (pāpam, doṣa). Earlier we saw that pāpam dwells; now we see that we can do pāpam which can be recognized as evil by the intellect. Because we perceive it as evil, we can and must turn away from it. 3) The ruining of the family is not only wicked in itself but the consequences that result from it make the immorality of such an action more obvious and more heinous. The whole edifice of the universe is dependent on its various component parts; if we tamper with any part of it, the whole collapses and instead of a cosmos, we shall have chaos. The destruction of the family does not stop with itself, but leads to the collapse of the eternal family laws (kula-dharma sanātana). When dharma in which everything is rooted is destroyed, then adharma engulfs the entire structure and foundation of the family and society. The story does not end here. With rise of adharma at the very heart of the family-structure, the women no longer follow the

regulations concerning marriage within the varṇadharma and thus there is the mixing of castes, and this in turn leads to hell the members of the family and the wreckers of the family-system. Kula-dharma says who is to perform ritual actions and sacrifices. When this is done away with, there is no one to offer to the ancestors who live in heaven (pitṛ-loka) food and drink and perform the rituals. Men feed the gods and the ancestors in heaven, and the latter in turn give rain to men on earth. But this cycle is broken with the destruction of kula-dharma; the ancestors and the gods are cheated out of their rightful share of ritual offerings and they fall into hell (naraka). This is the world-view that Arjuna has heard and accepted. This world-view has within it a particular model in which there is interdependency between kula-dharma, pitṛ-loka, and naraka. Removal of one element from this model spells disaster for the whole model. The reason behind the imperative: 'Thou shalt not kill' is not uniformally the same for all world-views. In common sense and rational ethics it would be morally wrong to take away another's life because every man has a right to his life and no one may tamper with this right. But in Arjuna's world-view the argument against killing rests on other reasons markedly distinct from other world-views. Acceptance of Arjuna's world-view implies an imperative not to cause even the slightest crack in the well-built structure of kula-dharma. We cannot, then, go ahead and fight in the war which would destroy not only the fabric of the civilization, but also the existence of the world of the gods and the ancestors.

4) Earlier we saw that the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra could not judge the gravity of their wrong-doing because they were blinded by greed. Arjuna is aware that it is not the love of the good that motivates people to join in battle but lust for pleasure and kingdom (rājya-sukha-lobha

1:45). He has perceived the enormity of the crime of killing (mahat pāpaṁ kartuṁ), has understood that he himself is driven by greed. His enemies were ignorant; but Arjuna is enlightened, he has the self-understanding of the inner workings of his mind and heart; he possesses also the knowledge of the ultimate consequences of his evil deed. If he goes on to fight with such clear perception of the moral issues and obvious intention of killing, then he would verily be committing mahat pāpam. The sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra may have an excuse but he has none. More will be expected of those who have more knowledge. So Arjuna would rather be slain than slay and he lets his weapons slip from his hands.

5) The following argument not to fight has much less weight than the previous one. It is based on guru-bhakti: Bhīṣma and Droṇa are teachers of great dignity and hence worthy of respect and reverence. Even if they are driven by ambition to enter this battle, Arjuna feels that it is not right for him to take up arms against them. It would be better to beg for food than eat the food gotten through killing of one's own teachers. [7]

In spite of all these arguments that Arjuna can marshal, he confesses that his mind is in utter confusion. He does not know what is right and wrong and hence approaches Kṛṣṇa for enlightenment as a humble disciple: Teach me dharma (2:4-7). [8] It recalls again the opening word of the poem.

Kṛṣṇa's initial answer to Arjuna's dilemma is in conformity with varṇadharma: Arjuna must do his caste-duty of fighting his enemies when he is called to do so, otherwise he would bring dishonour on himself (2:2). The first ringing imperatives in the poem in sharp contrast to Arjuna's 'I will not fight' come from Kṛṣṇa : "Play not the eunuch... give up this vile-heartedness. Stand-up, chastiser of your foes! (2:3). [9]

But the real answer to Arjuna's question regarding his proper dharma comes in later verses. Kṛṣṇa does not go about rebutting the points already made by Arjuna, but presents him with a totally different world-view which would serve as a corrective to Arjuna's world-view. According to Kṛṣṇa , then, at no point in time did we not exist, nor our enemies, nor our relatives, and no one shall cease to exist in the future. We are all equally caught up in the stream of births and deaths - a continuous process that reaches a conclusion only with the attainment of liberation. The embodied self because it is embodied will pass from birth to old age and death only to be born again with another body. When this embodied self comes into contact with the objects of sense, it feels different sensations: heat and cold, pleasure and pain. The knowledge of the constitution of the phenomenal reality and its workings will convince us that there is nothing to be perplexed about. Feelings and sensations and doubts are essentially impermanent (anitya) and they are, therefore, not to be given undue consideration (2:12-14).

Wise men are precisely those who have perceived the permanent beyond the impermanent. With the apperception of the permanent, they are not in any way affected by pleasure or pain, and are unruffled and unshaken. They remain the same (sama) amid the changes in the phenomenal sphere, acting as though acting not, seeing as though seeing not, and weeping as though weeping not. To be the same is the quality of the absolute Brahman and if the wise man is truly wise and conformed to the immortality of Brahman, then he must participate in this quality of Brahman. He sees, therefore, the same in everything (6:29): the same in a Brahmin, a cow and an elephant, in a dog and an outcaste (5:18), the same in success and failure (2:48), the same in a friend and a foe (6:9). The Lord is the same

in all contingent beings and that is why He looks on all with an equal eye. The pairs of opoosites like love and hate, attraction and aversion are not applicable to Him. Once man gets into vital touch with the Ātman, the eternal abiding reality in himself and in all contingent beings, he is able to survey all contingent beings and events with sameness and indifference. [10]

Another argument proposed by Kṛṣṇa against Arjuna's decision not to fight is derived from the metaphysical concepts of being and non-being: Being is what IS; non-being is what IS NOT. From nothing by definition there can be no becoming. By definition again, being cannot cease to exist. Brahman is Being and whatever is, is because of Brahman. Creatio ex nihilo is not only foreign to this tradition but it would be naive to seek to find it in this world-view. Brahman is the warp and woof and the weaver of all phenomenal existence. In philosophical terms, Brahman can be said to be the material and the efficient cause of the entire span of existence. The whole universe is spun (tatam) by THAT (tat:neuter Brahman). [11]

All phenomenal realities including man have at the heart of their beings the Self that is Brahman. The Self is indestructible and eternal (2:18); it is not born nor does it die; it is everlasting and primeval (2:20). Since these are the attributes of the inner Self, Arjuna must have no scruples about fighting this war. The self can neither slay nor be slain (2:19); it cannot and does not by its essential nature die when the body is slain (2:20). When a man slays, he only takes away the life of the body but cannot touch the living reality itself. Hence the ringing command of Kṛṣṇa: Fight (2:18). If in war one kills one's enemies, in vain does one grieve (2:25). If men do not die in war, they will nonetheless die otherwise. Death follows birth and birth

follows death. This is the inevitable law of nature and hence, birth and death of contingent beings must be accepted as ineluctable facts and should not be mourned over as tragedies. Perception of tragedies in such instances is based on a false interpretation and understanding of reality. This falsity can be removed once man understands the nature of the ultimate reality of the Self in all phenomenal beings. This is what Kṛṣṇa has enunciated thus far in order to rouse Arjuna from his deep despair and awaken him to the reality of things so that he can set aside his qualms of conscience and go on to fight the war that must be fought.

Because of the situation of war, some interpreters, according to K.N.Upadhyaya , are led to the conclusion that the Gītā is either for war or for peace. He finds Karl H. Potter and K.N. Jayatilleke upholding the view that the Gītā preaches war and violence. On the contrary Mahatma Gandhi and S. Radhakrishnan resort to an allegorical interpretation of war. Nataraja Guru, however, tries to underscore the wisdom of the Gītā while underplaying the background of the battle. Upadhyaya rejects all the three view-points since he believes that the Gītā frowns not on righteous war when it is fought with equanimity while doing one's svadharma. [12]

My approach to the problem would be textual and phenomenological. The main thrust of Arjuna's argument in the first chapter against participation in the fratricidal war is that no one has a right to kill, even in a just war. On purpose and for a weighty reason Kṛṣṇa does not meet his argument head-on in the second chapter. The first two chapters, as we noted at the outset, are of great importance precisely because they put forward contrary world-views. Arjuna seems to advance a common sense morality but actually it is not. His ethics is based on a unique world-view whose components are Heaven, Hell, and the Earth which are

mutually interdependent. In response, Kṛṣṇa does not waste words arguing against Arjuna's world-view since that would be a futile task. A world-view cannot be rejected by mere argument and therefore he offers another but nobler one that can supplant Arjuna's. This world-view has a markedly different interpretation of the nature of reality. You can, says Kṛṣṇa, slay men in battle because you slay only bodies and not the eternal indestructible Self that indwells those bodies. This rational argument, which we shall develop further, is consonant with Kṛṣṇa's world-view.

To explain the notion of this Self, the Gītā employs the sāṁkhya categories of matter and spirit. The Self is in the order of the spirit whereas matter is not. In man the Self gets involved in matter and is imprisoned by it. The only way to liberation is to use the material part of man in such a way as to rise above and transcend it. Man at the level of material nature has a 'soul' (buddhi), discursive intellect (manas) and the senses (indriya). The self cannot act of itself, but acts, so to say, through the psychosomatic structure (5:13 ff). The self, the principle of unity in man, is cojoined to this psychosomatic structure and undergoes experiences and eventually undergoes birth and death. The self participates in the action of the total man through buddhi which has the closest affinity to the self. The self can control the intellect and the senses through buddhi and thus it can reach recollection, overcome dispersion and attain concentration and eventually liberation. It is up to the self to seek liberation or bondage, to be a friend or foe unto itself (6:5).

Morality, then, belongs not to the sphere of the self but to that of the bio-psychophysical organism and it is essentially of the order of

nature and not of the spirit. Man's material nature is made up of three constituents known as sattva (goodness), rajas (passion and energy) and tamas (dullness). These constituents are also borrowed from the philosophy of sāṁkhya but better enunciated in the Gītā. [13]

Man is bound to act according to one of the constituents. Arjuna belongs to the ruling class in whom the quality of rajas predominates and he must act according to his nature. This is the second argument that Kṛṣṇa puts forward in order to induce Arjuna to participate in the war. The first argument dealt with the ultimate reality of the Self and the distinction between the eternal Self and the empirical body in which the Self is embodied. The second argument is based on the necessity of doing one's caste-duty in order to preserve the world-order.

Arjuna had spoken of his fear that taking part in the war would unleash untold harm on kuladharma and evil would come to dwell with them (1:36-40). Krishna takes up the same issue and says that for a warrior to fight is not against dharma but in harmony with it (dharmyād); war is just for warrior-class and leads to paradise. It is only when Arjuna does not fight that evil will come to dwell with him; by renounding duty and honor, he will bring pāpam upon himself (2:31-33). It is puzzling that Kṛṣṇa also brings in the motive of dishonor and shame that will follow in the wake of Arjuna's refusal to fight: He will appear contemptible in the sight of men; he will fall in their esteem; his prowess will be in doubt (2:34-36). Whatever the outcome of war, says Kṛṣṇa , Arjuna has nothing to lose since death will bring him the joys of paradise and victory the enjoyment of the earth (2:37).

So far Kṛṣṇa seems to have spoken against the background of the impending war, and this probably accounts for his holding up before Arjuna

the motive of shame and dishonor. But as the poem progresses (2:38 ff), we see that the overtones of war imperceptibly vanish yielding place to the war that takes place in the hearts of men. To fight this war, man must be yoked and get ready for it (yuddhāya yujyasva). Here yuj is used in the secular sense of being prepared for something (2:38), but from the very next verse onwards it will take on different meanings on the nature and practice of yoga.[14] Yoga is a process by which man achieves control over his senses and mind and reaches what is most real in him - the self - and this is the process by which man overcomes dispersion and disintegration and achieves concentration and integration in the immaterial, eternal Self. The dispersion of man starts from the senses which are attracted by and attached to sense-objects and this festering attachment affects in turn the mind and buddhi (3:40-42). Hence the yogic process must begin with the control of the senses and attain concentration in the self. The word 'concentration' here means more than just an exclusive application of the mind to an object; it means to bring to a single point, to a unity without dispersion, to bring the whole bio-psychophysical organism to its true center (con+centrum) which is the self. In this state man reaches sameness and indifference.

Through Bhakti too man can reach the same state of integration. What is demanded by this bhakti mārga is that we offer up not only our acts of piety and religiosity but all our ordinary secular actions in our life such as eating and drinking. The devotion to God touches man's intentionality, and this intentionality in turn affects his moral actions. That is why mukti through bhakti is possible even for a woman, vaiśya and śūdra (9:26-32). The bhakta's mind, prostrations, loving service and sacrificial acts are all directed to the Lord and he is thus integrated

in potency to become the self, rather the self is in man and it is hidden and unknown to man wallowing in the sensual and the empirical. This self must be uncovered and thus discovered. In this process of knowing the self, the bio-psychophysical organism is made use of and transcended, but it has no part to play once the realization of the self becomes a reality.

In the context of what we have said so far about the dichotomy of the self and the bio-psychophysical organism, we shall examine the conception of evil in the Gītā. Arjuna in the very first chapter speaks of pāpam coming to dwell with his family as the result of killing his enemies in battle. The slaughter creates a situation of evil and this is pāpam (1:36). To destroy kula-dharma is wickedness (doṣaṁ). To break one's word of honour is a crime (pātakam) (1:38-39). Pātakam involves injury to a friend or relative. From Arjuna's words we can conclude that it is possible to turn away from pāpam (1:39). This means that one can recognize it and that is why it is possible to steer clear of it. To wreck the family laws is again termed evil (doṣair) (1:43). Killing, says Arjuna finally, is mahat pāpam (1:45).

Krishna leads Arjuna into the mystery of reality and the secret of how to fight right yet be untouched by it. Pain and pleasure, loss and gain, defeat and victory are pairs of opposites only to the 'natural' man and not the enlightened. Transcend we must this world of opposites and then every quality, positive or negative, will be the same exactly as Brahman is the same. Having transcended the pairs of opposites Arjuna can fight without bringing pāpam on himself (2:38). What was pāpam according to Arjuna is no longer pāpam according to Krishna.

(yuktvā) and at that stage attains to the Lord (9:34).

Karma mārga if pursued relentlessly can also lead to mukti. Man is constituted by the three constituents of sattva, rajas and tamas and because of such a constitution he cannot escape action. But action binds and rebirth follows death in a never ending stream. To cut the chain of this continuous cycle, action must be rendered powerless. The way to remove the 'sting' from action is to perform action with complete detachment from the fruits of action and from the motive of gain and profit. Thus man rises above the sense of 'mine', does not attribute actions to himself but thinks that 'constituents on constituents act'(3:28). This practice of detachment leads him to the 'fixed, still state of Brahman' (2:72) - state beyond good and evil in which the law of karma cannot function.

The Gītā upholds a world-view in which there is a dichotomy between the self and the bio-psychophysical organism in man. The three mārgas show man how to use and transcend the material organism in order to reach the self. In this world-view there is process only in the sphere of the bio-psychophysical organism; there is no question of man becoming the self since becoming implies a process, a terminus a quo, a terminus ad quem and a subject perduring through the transformation; rather man can be said to discover the true self through yogic concentration and integration, loving devotion to God and passionless selfless action. In scholastic categories, the self would be purus actus and at the very core of man lies this actus and the whole moral process consists, so to say, in uncovering this self. Ecstasy is of no avail in this process since it implies 'standing out of oneself'. Rather we must enter into ourselves and experience 'enstasy'. Man does not become the self but is the self. The child is in potency to become an adult but man is not in the same way

Control of buddhi, the noblest part in man's bio-psychophysical organism, will protect man from the great fear (mahato bhayāt 2:40). This great fear is the fear of the stream of births and deaths. Is there not a connection between mahat pāpam of Arjuna and the mahato bhayāt of Kṛṣṇa? Is not the great peril of rebirth which makes liberation impossible? Is not the great evil being bound by the chains of phenomenal existence? Being bound by time and space, encapsulated in a body - is not this the deep rooted abiding 'sinful' condition of human existence? For those who have gone beyond the pairs of opposites, who work without attachment, who are steadfast in loving and worshipping the Lord, there is no more pāpam (7:28, 4:36).

How does it come about that man does pāpam even though he is unwilling (3:36)? Doing pāpam is a new expression. To understand how man does pāpam, one must understand the bio-psychophysical organism of man. Man sees the phenomenal world and takes it as real and therefore hankers after the sense-objects.

This desire for sense-objects is the root of all evil. Hence the command of Kṛṣṇa to strike down the evil thing (pāpmānam). The senses are said to be pāpmānam (3:41). It is through the senses that one gets into touch with the empirical world and through this contact with the world, desire (kāma) is born (2:62-63). Desire leads to the mistaken notion of 'I' ness and to rebirth and hence, desire is said to be mahā-pāpmā (3:37). Pāpmā is an adjective here whereas pāpam is an adjective as well as a substantive. Both words are quite often translated by Indians and non-Indian scholars as sin and evil. But these words, especially the word 'sin', as they occur in common parlance or in technical theological language have totally different meanings. Sin and evil

evoke in a Christian emotions and feelings that are completely foreign to the mind of the author of the Gītā. Pāpam is a metaphysical and not a psychological concept. Nor is it a moral concept. Is it the reason why we do not find in the Gītā any trace of guilt or guilt-feelings? Is this the reason why sorrow for sin does not occur, why retribution and reparation for sin make no sense since nature itself avenges the wrongdoer, why there is only an avatāra to right the wrong but no incarnate saviour with a crown of thorns?

When man functions in the world, he does so through his bio-psychophysical organism. The Gītā realizes that action is ineluctable for him in his embodied state and hence, rejects the Upaniṣadic trend of renunciation of action. There are two ways in which action can be performed: a) with attachment to action b) without attachment to action and the fruit of action. The latter type of action does not bind and karma is powerless to initiate the cycle of rebirth.

We must further examine the structure and implications of action with passion and attachment. The self by definition cannot act. What is at the root of action is the material part of man - his bio-psychophysical organism. Man has different needs and urges and accordingly performs actions: I am hungry, I want pleasure, I make sacrifices, I do my caste-duty. The 'I' in all these statements is the phenomenal ego and not the self. If man is not aware of this vital distinction and falsely identifies the 'I' with his real self and thinks and affirms that the 'I' is the real kartā (agent), then he comes under the law of karma and the stream of birth and death. His action whether good or bad binds and he will be born again after his sojourn in heaven or hell which is determined according to good and evil deeds. Good deeds of themsleves do not lead

him to liberation and a life of good deeds only leads to a periodic stay in svarga. Action must be followed by a reaction either in heaven or hell. In this world-view there is no hint of good deeds perfecting man and it cannot be so for the reason mentioned above. Because Indian ethics "is cosmic-biological, the inevitable consequence is that every action is bound to its due reaction. Neither 'good' nor 'bad' therefore is an ultimate canon in India's natural, in the sense of ethically indifferent, Philosophy". [15]

Such a stand might be puzzling to us if we do not take into account the conception of man in the Gītā. Both good and evil occur in the biopsychophysical sphere of man and do not and cannot touch the self. Hence the effects of good and evil cannot transcend this material empirical level. In the performance of both good and evil, man identifies himself with the phenomenal ego and it is this identification that leads him to rebirth. If in the final analysis the performance of both good and evil has the same effect of coming to birth again, we are constrained to ask not only where the distinction lies between them but also what the purpose of doing good is. For those who go beyond pragmatic values, good has a value in itself and is its own self-justification even though performance of the good does not lead to liberation. This does not fully answer our question and so we shall proceed further.

Is good action the result of sattva quality (2:45, 14:5, 6, 9, 11, 14, 16, 17, 18)? If it is so, then those in whom rajas and tamas predominate cannot do good. But then we know that all actions consist of the three qualities or constituents but one among them predominates. There is, however, the problem of language. In Sanskrit we find different words which are translated as good action: puṇya and sukṛta. Puṇya is merit

which is the result of good action. Sukṛta can mean good works or works well done. Work that is well done consists of sattva quality and that is why it leads to joy (sukha) and wisdom (jñāna) (14:9, 16). Brahmins are not those who are born into a jāti but are those in whom sattva quality predominates and whose actions are derived from it whereas the actions of others have their origin in rajas and tamas and hence, they participate in those qualities which lead them not to joy and wisdom but to suffering (duḥkha) and ignorance (ajñāna). The suffering referred to is not physical pain but suffering arising from the stream of rebirths.

Is it possible, then, for all classes to do good deeds? People irrespective of the caste they belong to can perform their duties well; doing their duties well is nothing else except good works. But then we may ask whether the predominant influence of tamas and rajas would make it impossible for them to perform good works. The answer seems to lie in the conception of svadharma: Each one irrespective of the quality he possesses has a duty to perform in society and for the sake of the society so that it may function according to its proper rhythm and order (ṛta) and rest supported (dṛ) by the law of righteousness (dharma). It is possible for all classes of people to carry out their svadharma well and this is precisely what constitutes works well done (sukṛta). Everytime the śūdra does his svadharma well, the density, so to say, of the sattva quality in him increases. This is an arduous and long process spanning many possible lives spent on earth. Through this process man will ascend from the lowest tamas to the highest sattva.

Hence it is wise to abide by one's svadharma. The Lord himself is the author of varṇadharma and the creator of the constituents that is at the foundation of the four-fold caste system (4:13). The Gītā says that it is better to perform one's own duty even if it is without merit

than to undertake another's (paradharma). It is better to die doing one's own duty (3:35). The same lesson is again driven home in the final chapter. (18:47).

Why is it better to do one's own duty than another's well? Why is it so even if there is no merit? Why is it that a man should do his duty even though it is defective (sadoṣam)? Where lies this defect? It is conceivable that a man may be fitted to do another's duty well. To seek to do another's duty is to be under the influence of desire, the root of all evil and the cause of continued phenomenal existence. One's own duty may be defective in so far as it does not correspond to one's gifts, yet in the ultimate analysis what counts is that we do our work without attachment and without seeking the fruits thereof. After all in this world there is the risk of every enterprise being vitiated by defects (18:48).

There is still another reason for man to do his own duty. Human action belongs to the bio-psychophysical organism and to man's phenomenal nature (svabhāva). A man may think he is able to perform another's duty well, but there is the problem of certitude about it. Is it not, then, better to follow in doubt the safer rule of svadharma ordained by birth and circumstances of life?

Besides God is the author of the caste-system and hence to subject oneself to the observance of this system is to be subject to God, to do His will known through one's birth and station in life, and thus attain perfection (siddhi 3:30, 12:6, 18:46). Liberation is equally within the reach of all whatever one's caste may be. It is not important what one's svadharma is but what is of paramount importance is how one performs it. What is needed is the proper perspective with regard to the hierarchy of values.

The Gītā accepts the Upaniṣadic assertion that the whole cosmos including man tends towards the one reality (sat) which is the self. Man is part of the cosmos and is under the same laws as the rest of it. The physical laws of energy and balance of energy are applicable to both. What man gains in terms of spiritual vitality, he loses proportionately in terms of physical strength. The Brahmin is pure and recollected and tranquil whereas the prince and the warrior are bent on physical action (18:41-44). There is not only a balance in an individual but also in society and the balance in nature can be seen in society. The caste-system does not imply superiority and inferiority but a complex organism functioning with balance. What man must do is within his nature, in his 'biology'.[16] Karma is not ethics in the western sense of the word but it belongs to "purely biological ethics, revealed in the inviolable law of cause and effect, and imposing on the individual a super-personal responsibility towards both the future and the cosmos".[17] Biological laws are so deeply ingrained in man that he cannot free himself from their power and compulsion:

> But if, relying on your ego, you should think, 'I will not fight', vain is your resolve, for Nature will constrain you. You are bound by your own works which spring from your own nature; for what, deluded, you would not do you will do perforce. (18:59-60)

But as we have noted earlier, the Gītā introduces the element of bhakti into this biological ethics and raises it to sublime level by making God its author and supporter (4:13).

S.K. Belvalkar finds in the text of the Gītā a great attempt at a momentous compromise (2:39, 5:2-5, 6:1-4, 7:17, 7:21-22, 9:23,25, 12:3-4, 18:54) and he surmises that this took place in order to ward off some uncommon danger threatening the whole society.[18]

> The Bhagavadgītā can then be understood as an effort on a great scale put forth by the older Śrauta religion with its institutions of Yajña and Varṇāśrama to hold its own and to stem the gathering tide of heretic and agnostic speculations. Only so we can understand the emphasis laid by the B.G. upon Svadharma or Śāstravihitakarman, when the Author probably knew full well that the voice of revolt had already been raised against all those 'Śāstric' institutions. [19]

Conclusion: We may now derive some conclusions from our brief analysis of ethics in the Gītā.

1) When Arjuna accepts unconditionally "Thou shalt not kill', he seems to be accepting a common-sense morality. "It is generally thought that common-sense is practical... All its propositions have to be proved so many times before they can become unquestionable, i.e. traditional. When they become traditional they gain oracular authority... But the point is that common-sense can never teach itself, can never advance beyond its own limits, for as soon as the lack of fundamental learning has been made good, all items become questionable and the whole function of common-sense is destroyed." [20] But Arjuna's morality is not of mere common-sense; it is built on the philosophical world-view of svarga, naraka and the earth which are interdependent.

2) Kṛṣṇa's refutation of Arjuna is based on another world-view and another interpretation of reality: In this world-view man does not perfect himself by moral action and moral process only uncovers and discovers the real self within the depths of his own being. Therefore we can say that the world-view of the Gītā can be said to be anthropocentric in the most profound sense.

3) Since morality belongs to the bio-psychophysical structure of man, it can only lead to svarga and naraka but cannot lead to liberation. Hence the need to transcend both good and evil.

4) The transcendence of good and evil is possible when the self is able to look upon everything with sameness and indifference and says: constituents on constituents act.

5) The words 'good and evil, sin and nature' have totally different meanings and theological implications depending upon the world-view in which they are found.

We must, finally, make an attempt at isolating the timeless content from the time-bound world-view. Passionless selfless action tending to lokasaṁgraha has in itself a value irrespective of the world-view in which it is formulated. But is this possible in principle?

NOTES

1. See Franklin Edgerton, The Bhagavad Gītā (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952), p.7.
2. See R.C. Zaehner, The Bhagavad Gītā (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.120. Archie J. Bahm does have extensive comment on the first chapter in Appendix I under the title "The Historical-Dramatic Setting" and seems to agree with S. Radhakrishnan's statement that the final solution of Kṛṣṇa : "Be not anxious" is more important than the dramatic setting. See Bahm, The Bhagavad Gītā (Bombay: 1970), pp. 17-18, 141-149. "Since the philosophy of the Gītā is what interests most, we relegate description of the dramatic setting, with its multitude of strange names, to Appendix I and proceed directly to the answers. The exciting quality of the opening drama also detracts from the importance of philosophy itself, and postpones our gaining insight into it. In fact, some incongruity appears from inserting the prolonged, abstruse, and variegated psychological discussions into a pause before two armies rush into battle." Ibid, p.18.
3. See Ibid, pp. 333-335.
4. See Heinrich Zimmer, Philosophies of India (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), p.382.

5. Inordinate love of one's own people is still a marked feature of our people in India. Marriage-customs will bring this out to the fore. With some exceptions men and women continue to marry within the caste as a rule and marriage between first cousins even in the Christian Churches is not that rare a phenomenon. When a girl marries, she marries a whole family and not just her husband. Love of one's family and caste is only an extended form of self-love and selfishness.

6. Even Hindu scholars like S.K. Belvalkar and S. Radhakrishnan tend to translate pāpam as sin, doṣam and pātakam as guilt.

7. Arjuna's despondency is not quite characteristic of him. A few days before the battle he had actually sent a tough note to Duryodhana warning him that Bhiṣma would be the first victim in the war. See S.K. Belvalkar, The Bhagavadgītā (Poona: The Bilva-Kunja Publishing House, 1943), pp. xiv-xv.

8. In 2:7 Arjuna is willing to learn from Kṛṣṇa whereas in verse 9, he emphatically says: I will not fight. Could verse 7, then, be an interpolation?

9. The translation is from Zaehner, The Bhagavadgītā, p. 122.

10. See Ibid, pp. 126-127.

11. Ibid, p. 130.

12. See K.N. Upadhyaya, "The Bhagavad Gītā on War and Peace" Philosophy East and West XIX (1969): 159-169.

13. See Zaehner, The Bhagavad Gītā, pp. 10-15.

14. See Ibid, pp. 138 ff.

15. Betty Heimann, Indian and Western Philosophy (London: 1937), p.72.

16. See Ibid, pp. 64-70.

17. Ibid, p. 71.

18. See Belvalkar, The Bhagavadgītā, pp. lxxxiv-v.

19. Ibid, pp. lxxxv-vi.

20. John Berger, A Fortunate Man (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p. 95.