

Philosophy on the Battlefield: The *Bhagavad Gita*

II. The Yoga of Action: Action without Involvement

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Arjuna's problem

Arjuna's decision not to fight has its roots in two considerations: (1) emotional, (2) ethical. On the first count, he is horrified at the thought of causing the death of kinsmen he loves, merely for the sake of acquiring an earthly kingdom. This is inhuman; he would not do this even for the sake of possessing the whole world. On the second count, he argues, far from bringing pleasure or happiness, this act would incur sin, endangering his future spiritual prospects. That the adversaries are not aware of this risk of sin is no reason why a man of discretion like Arjuna should not be. Further it is not merely the question of the spiritual ruin of an individual; the mass destruction of the able male community through war would ruin the whole society, leading the women to immoral liaisons resulting in the devastation of the entire social structure.

The tentative solution

Arjuna's sudden change of mood took Krishna by surprise (II.2), but soon the latter attempts to bring the situation to normalcy. Since attack is the most common and immediate direction of such attempts, Krishna tries out some commonplace rejoinders on Arjuna. His first move is that Arjuna's refusal to fight is but impotence which does not become a warrior of his stature (II.3); it would ruin his hitherto image as a brave soldier. He would be despised as a coward, – a situation worse than death for a man of honour (II.33-35). By doing his duty, says He, Arjuna would profit, alive or dead, – enjoying the pleasures of a kingdom in the first case, and the pleasures of heaven in the second (II.37). But such pragmatic replies have little chance to succeed against Arjuna's main concern, viz., the fear of sin he would incur. The Lord, therefore, points out that it is his sacred duty to fight for a righteous cause, and that it is not by fighting but by abstention from fighting that he would incur sin and ruin his spiritual prospects.

Treatment of the central problem

The *Bhagavad Gita* deals with this issue elsewhere too (XVIII.47). It is not for an individual to decide what would or would not incur sin; given this freedom, one can find no action that is totally untarnished by sin. One must not, therefore, discard one's duty even if it is tainted with some defect, as is fire with smoke. (XVIII.48). It is with this outlook that Krishna admonishes Arjuna that one's own duty, although defective, is superior to another's, howsoever superior in quality it

may appear. (III.35) In other words, Arjuna is no authority to decide what is right or wrong. The sacred law (*shastra*, XVI.24) has settled this point definitively by prescribing duties for the warrior class and others (XVIII.41-44); and it is not the performance, but the non-performance of one's sacred duty that incurs sin (II.31-33). The *Bhagavad Gita*, incidentally, discusses the causes that prompt one to the path of sin. In its view, it is the instinct of love, transformed into hatred when thwarted, that prompts one to sin. It operates on the basis of organ-mind-intellect complex. The way to curb it is to establish control over this team. (III.36-41). This exposition implies that, if done purely as duty, Arjuna's actions would not incur sin.

The ultimate solution

Thus far the problem is handled from an ethical point of view. In the course of Krishna's arguments comes the philosophical view that Arjuna's fears of killing his kin are baseless since the soul is immortal and the body perishable (II.18). Hence there is no room for lamenting the soul and no use lamenting the body, for the wise do not regret the inevitable (II.11, 13). The immortality of the soul is argued out on the hypothesis that nothing that has being as its nature ever loses its existence, just as nothing that does not exist ever comes into being. Things cannot change their nature. This opens up doors for further philosophical exposition of the real nature of the soul as the ultimate basis of the theory of *karma-yoga* and the goal – liberation – to which its knowledge leads. The *Bhagavad Gita* only touches on this subject here, leaving its elaboration to a subsequent occasion.

The rational solution

The two solutions introduced above do not apparently have the desired effect on Arjuna for several reasons. The purely pragmatic arguments based on the consideration of worldly gain or loss is too superficial to have effect on a person who is sensitive to the dictates of conscience. The argument based on the ultimate truth also fails to convince, for it is a partial adoption of the philosophical view that treats all worldly considerations as irrelevant to the philosophical goal. From this standpoint, all worldly ways including fighting for a just cause are as ultimately untrue as death. Even the advice to abide by sacred law is untenable. It is all right for one who is taught to act on orders like a soldier; but how would it satisfy one who examines its rationale and goes deeper into ethics?

It is such a situation that calls for the brilliant exposition of the *Bhagavad Gita* theory of dispassionate action (II.38) – *karma-yoga* – addressed not so much to Arjuna as to the ordinary person cherishing spiritual aspirations, as argued out in the previous article, *Context and Themes*. Its formula in brief is: do your duty without being involved in it, i.e. without making a claim on the rewards of your actions (II.47); you will thereby withdraw your authorship of the actions and not be responsible for their consequences, good or evil. Claim not rewards, and you will not face liability. Physical actions do not a bondage stake, in the same way

as ‘stone walls do not a prison make.’ But why should one do one’s duties at all if one is not interested in their rewards? The *Bhagavad Gita*’s reply to this possible question on a pragmatic level is: to keep ordinary people on the right path as they tend to imitate their superiors (III.21). This is what the *Bhagavad Gita* terms the ideal of *loka-sangraha*, setting an example for the people (III.25). A responsible person should never behave in a way that would confuse or destabilise the unenlightened people (III.26, 29).

The logic of *karma-yoga*

It is apparently puzzling, almost absurd, that one can act and yet not be responsible for the action, so that one is not involved in its consequences. The logic of this situation can be explained by a familiar parallel. A judge sentences a criminal to death for the murder of a man and an executioner puts him to death; but the two officials are not regarded or punished as killers, for they do their duty without an eye to personal gain, – in other words, they are not motivated in the resulting death. It is thus the involvement of the performer of an action in its results, and not the action itself, that makes him or her responsible for its consequences. In legal terminology, there is motivation behind the killing by the criminal which is missing in the legal procedure resulting in the killing of the criminal. That is why a death caused inadvertently – say, by a father, of his son by an unfortunate accident – is not considered a crime. When such a position is possible – nay, actually prevailing – in common practical life, there is no reason why it should not find a place in the philosophical outlook. In mathematics, any number, howsoever large, is reduced to nil when multiplied by zero. The *Bhagavad Gita* has discovered a philosophical zero which reduces any number of actions to nil.

The rationale

To find a philosophically satisfactory justification of such an outlook, it is necessary to understand the rationale behind the difference in the evaluation of apparently similar acts; and for this it is necessary to analyse an action. The *Bhagavad Gita* views an action on two levels: mental and physical, motivational and actual (XVIII.18). An action takes place first at the mental level, then at the physical. Of these it is the action at the mental level that involves the performer in the results of the action; if mental involvement is negated, the performer is not bound by the consequences of his action (XVIII.17). This is clear from the parallel cited above from the domain of justice. The *Bhagavad Gita* view is that it is possible, and also advisable, to negate the mental aspect of the action, disown responsibility for it and escape its consequences. How does one become responsible for an action? – By doing it consciously and with a desire for its fruits. If, then, one gives up the desire for fruits or benefits, it would be logical to hold that one is not responsible for the fruits or results. This desire in its turn is rooted in the consciousness of the performer – the ego – that he or she is doing the act, and for a purpose (III.27). If one succeeds in negating the ego and forgoing the benefits, one can be said not to have done the action (IV.20), even if the action

takes place on the physical level because of the movements of the body and organs (V.8-9); and how can one be held responsible for what one has not done?

***Karma-yoga* as renunciation**

After the constitution of an action is thus made clear, and the justifiability of non-involvement despite the performance of the action is established, the *Bhagavad Gita* goes on to say that the most effective and practical way of renunciation is *karma-yoga* (V.6). Thus, *karma-yoga* is in effect *karma-sannyasa*, – in other words, performance is non-performance (V.5, XVIII.9). This situation is brought out by the *Bhagavad Gita* in its occasional riddle-like style: one who sees inaction in action, and action in inaction, is the wisest of all (IV.18). Shankaraacharya explains it in his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*: Imagine a man sailing in a boat in a river and looking at the trees on the banks. His impression is that the trees are moving and he is steady; the reality is quite the opposite. The above conundrum is to be understood in spirit, and not in word; in fact *karma-yoga* paves the way for a meaningful *karma-sannyasa* (V.6). This incidentally shows that the ultimate goal of *karma-yoga* is the same as that of renunciation, viz., liberation (II.51, V.5). In other words, action without involvement is not the same as action without motive; and the motive, being release from worldly life, can in no way bind the performer in worldly ties.

Can actions be totally renounced?

The paradoxical statement above is significant also because total renunciation is never possible on the physical level (XVIII.11). One can stop doing one's prescribed duties; but can one stop breathing or seeing or hearing, for instance? Are they not actions? Can one ever hope to renounce these, unless of course one ceases to live? In brief, no one even for a moment can be said to remain without acting, if the vast domain of action enforced by nature is taken into consideration (III.5). Willy-nilly, one continuously goes on doing these actions throughout one's life. They can never be renounced.

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