

THE *BHAGAVAD GITA*'S ETHICAL SYNCRETISM

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ABSTRACT: *Syncretism of various kinds is clearly in evidence in the Bhagavad Gītā, yet no attempt has been made to show how a consistent ethical syncretism might be articulated and defended in the scholarship. I attempt to do so here by trying to defend a form of consequentialism that allows a place for deontological and virtue-centric intuitions. At the same time, I show that because such consequentialism has freedom (mokṣa) as its highest end, it is more consistent than, and not reducible to, standard western variations of consequentialism.*

Keywords: *syncretism, consequentialism, deontology, virtue ethics, Bhagavad Gītā, Indian Ethics, dharma, mokṣa*

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The *Bhagavad Gītā* seems clearly to be a syncretistic text that attempts to reconcile various tensions in the Indian tradition. The text is thought to subsume, for instance, early Sāṃkhya's dualism under some version of Vedantic monism and to reconcile the life of action with that of contemplation, thereby moderating the extremes of a decadent Hinduism and a regnant Buddhism.¹ Contemporary scholars have also thought that a syncretistic approach might help us understand the *Gītā*'s discussion of *karma* and *dharma* better,² yet this approach has not been extended to attempt to understand the precise nature of the text's ethical position. Thus, scholars have taken

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¹ So, for instance, a version of the Sāṃkhya's dualism is subsumed under monism in Chapter 13 of the *Gītā*. See Upadhyaya 1969 and Gopalan 1987 for a description of the attempted reconciliation between Hinduism and Buddhism on action and contemplation. For yet other aspects of the *Gītā*'s syncretism, see Van Buitenen 1957, Olivelle 1964 and Upadhyaya 1987.

² See, for instance, De Smet 1977 and Bilimoria 1995.

the *Gītā*'s core ethical position to be some version of a contemporary ethical theory.³ My approach will show that the text's ethical vision is essentially consequentialist yet capacious enough to allow a place for deontological and virtue-centric intuitions to be satisfied. Such a view, if it is right, has the advantage of synthesizing the variegated phenomena of the moral life that do not otherwise seem amenable to a reductionism in which one kind of ethical intuition assumes primacy.

It might make sense therefore to begin by quickly defining the two leading ethical positions in contemporary discourse that are relevant for our immediate discussion. Consequentialism is the position in which an action is right or wrong depending on the state of affairs it brings about, since only states of affairs have intrinsic value and can therefore be specified as good or bad. So, on this view, there are no intrinsically good or bad actions, only good and bad states of affairs, which right and wrong actions bring about. While consequentialists disagree on what counts as a good state of affairs, they all agree that the nature of right action is subordinate to the good state of affairs it brings about and thereby determined by it. They also agree that the good is agent-neutral so that bringing about the intrinsically good state of affairs does not depend on whether it does so for the agent as well (Alexander and Moore 2012, Sinnott-Armstrong 2011).

Agent-centric deontological theories, on the other hand, are not agent-neutral in that they argue that it is precisely because of who the agent is that s/he has certain moral obligations that are not merely subjective. Thus a doctor has a moral obligation to her patient as a doctor that no one else has, a parent to his child, and, even more generally, a human as human to other humans, and so on. Such moral obligations or duties, it is important to note, are grounded in differing moral norms that agree only in being consistently non-consequentialist. On such views, then, right action is undertaken even if it produces less than ideal consequences precisely because the right has priority over the good here (Alexander and Moore 2012).

How then does the *Gītā*'s syncretism work if deontology and consequentialism's stances on consequences are diametrically opposed? Even a cursory reading of the *Gītā* makes it clear that the language of duty based on one's stage and station in life (*varṇāśramadharmā*) is pervasive. I will argue that these deontological elements in the text are concerned with how right action must be *undertaken*, which is distinct from how right action is *justified*. Such justification comes in broadly consequentialist terms of world-welfare, as I have already hinted. But the point of this endeavour is not to reduce the *Gītā*'s ethical theory to a variant of a western theory, since the centrality of liberation or *mokṣa* in the *Gītā*'s position makes this impossible, as we will see. Rather, the *Gītā*'s is a transformative synthesis that shows what it will take to make an agent-neutral consequentialism work consistently.⁴

³ Primarily deontological readings of the *Gītā* include: Radhakrishnan 1914, Gauchlwal 1958, and Sen 2000. Primarily consequentialist readings of the *Gītā* include: Brodbeck 2004, Anderson 2012, Dowd 2011 and Sreekumar 2012. The exception is Bina Gupta's virtue-based approach that attempts to reconcile a version of deontology in the *Gītā* (Gupta 2006).

⁴ The poetic syncretism of the *Gītā* is neither systematic as Upadhyaya (1987) points out, nor argumentative as Edgerton (1994, 6) says, which is therefore the job I propose to undertake here.

The *Gītā*⁵ opens with its protagonist, Arjuna, the preeminent warrior of his time, facing a classic moral dilemma: should he or should he not go into battle against his Kāurava cousins and extended family, his former friends and teachers?⁶ Arjuna stands between the battle lines with his friend and charioteer Krishna, sees his family, friends and teachers arrayed against him, and finds himself faced with the full force of a moral dilemma. Going into battle will allow him to fulfill his personal duty (*svadharma*) as a warrior (*kshatriyā*), or what is also referred to as his class duty (*varṇadharma*). But he sees very clearly now that this civil war will also involve the death of many members of his extended family, and the possible destruction of society as he knows it (*BG* 2.39-43). This has often been conceived as a violation of the universal duties that all human beings have qua human, or what is called *sādhāraṇa dharma*.⁷ If he were not to fight, then he would not have the blood of his family and loved ones on his hands, though he would not be living up to his obligations as a warrior and a brother. He can either fight or not fight, but he cannot do both. Yet any choice he makes violates his obligations in some way, which is precisely what is meant by a moral dilemma. It is no wonder then that he sets his bow down in despair and seeks the advice of his friend and charioteer Krishna, who also happens to be the Divine incarnate. The rest of the text consists of Krishna's multi-dimensional justification for why Arjuna should fight. The rest of this essay will be devoted mainly to the analysis of the ethical, psychological and soteriological aspects of Krishna's justification.

2. DUTY IN THE *GITA*

As can be inferred from the introduction above, the language of duty (*dharma*) is pervasive in the *Gītā* and it is therefore not surprising that readers have taken the text's views to be deontological. 'Deontology' after all, is the *logos* or study of *deon*

⁵ All references to, and translations of, the text of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (*BG*) are from Sargeant 1984. Modifications to the translation will be noted explicitly in the footnotes.

⁶ The *Bhagavad Gītā* is a 700-verse, 18-chapter interlude in the *Mahabhārata*'s chronicles of the life of the Bhārata family. Arjuna is one of the five Pāṇḍava brothers who are scions of the kingdom of Hastināpur, which they lose to their Kāurava cousins in a game of dice. The Kāuravas promise to return the kingdom provided the Pāṇḍavas survive a thirteen-year exile, a promise that they fail to keep when the Pāṇḍavas return. Every effort is made to reach a peaceful settlement, including a last-ditch offer from the Pāṇḍavas in which they agree to settle for a fraction of kingdom. But Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kāuravas, is unwilling to compromise and a fratricidal war, which has been brewing for decades, is now upon them. The enmity between cousins originates in a shared childhood during which the famed teacher Droṇa, under the guidance of their uncle Bhīṣma, gives them a martial education befitting future kings.

⁷ The dilemma has been variously conceived. Agarwal (1992, 134-135) suggests that the dilemma arises from a conflict between utilitarian considerations and duty (*dharma*), though Arjuna specifically speaks of being bewildered about his duty (*BG* 2.7). Berg (1995, 21-22) and Brodbeck (2004, 87) suggest that the dilemma arises because of a conflict between duties to one's family (*kuladharmā*) and class (*varṇadharma* or, specifically, *kṣatriyadharmā*). But the problem with this variation is that aspects of his *kuladharmā* (i.e., his duty to his elder brother, Yudishthira) require him to participate in the battle, even if it is against his cousins, uncles and other family members.

or duty. But while ‘duty’ is an appropriate translation of ‘*dharma*’ in many contexts, ‘*dharma*’ has a much-discussed wider meaning that is useful to review briefly. The Sanskrit root of ‘*dharma*’ is *dhṛ*, which literally means to uphold, maintain or support. ‘*Dharma*’ means not only whatever is necessary to maintain the social order, but the cosmological one as well, a combination that is originally found in the Vedic term *ṛta*. But even in the *Rg Veda* (which is a *śruti*⁸ text), as (Halbfass 1988) notes, *dharma* connotes more than scriptural injunctions regarding rites and rituals and often means ‘law’ in both the legal and cosmological sense. Thus, depending on the context, ‘law’ (both moral and natural) is an appropriate translation; ‘essential characteristic’ or ‘function’ is legitimate (i.e., an entity’s *dharma* or essential characteristic gives us its role in nature or in society); as is ‘virtue’, ‘duty’, or ‘justice’ in the human context (insofar as humans either do or do not live up to their *dharma*).⁹

This human *dharma* is best understood in the context of an individual’s stage and station in life (*varṇāśramadharmā*), discussed extensively in the *smṛiti* texts of the *Dharmaśāstras*.¹⁰ In these texts one’s life path is carefully mapped out and enmeshed in a social grid of such trajectories, and which in turn is part of the vast play of cosmic *dharma*.¹¹ *Dharma*, along with *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*, constitutes the 4 ends of human life. *Artha* is concerned with the material aspects of human life such as wealth and power. *Kāma* is concerned with bodily pleasure, especially having to do with sex and love. Finally, *mokṣa* is concerned with freedom from the concerns of the

⁸ ‘*Śruti*’ or ‘that which is heard’ is usually contrasted with ‘*smṛiti*’ or ‘that which is remembered’, and refer to two kinds sacred texts in Hinduism. The *śruti* texts are thought to be of either divine origin or having no origin, and represent the truth about reality, a kind of aural blueprint if you will, transmitted through ancient sages. The *smṛiti* texts, on the other hand, represent the customary knowledge of the tradition as it evolves, and thus are of human origin.

⁹ A full (though dated) discussion of the term can be found in Kane 1968. A shorter, more current version can be found in Bilimoria, Prabhu and Sharma 2007. A discussion of some of the issues in translating ‘*dharma*’ can be found in Creel 1972. A good study of the continuities between the social and cosmological order can be found in Koller 1972.

¹⁰ There are four classes in the hierarchy and therefore four broad functions in traditional Indian society according to these texts: the *Brahmin* or priestly class that is responsible for sacred and educational work, the *kshatriya* or warrior class that is concerned with the administration and defense of the state, the *vaiśya* or working class that undertakes agricultural and economic work, and the *śudra* class for menial work in the service of the other three classes. The stages of life too are fourfold and undertaken serially. In the *brahmācārya* or student stage, the individual is given the appropriate education befitting his place in society. In the *gṛhasthya* or householder stage, the individual takes on the responsibilities of family and work. The *vansprasthya* or semi-retirement stage is given to social service, where the individual begins to withdraw from worldly life, a process that is then completed in the final ascetic stage of *sannyāsa* or world-renunciation. Thus a student member (*brahmācari*) of the warrior class (*kshatriya*) will have different duties from a more mature member (*gṛhasthya*) of the same class. (Broadly speaking we may say that the former’s duty is to learn and the latter’s is to apply what he has learnt.) Similarly, two householders of the warrior and priestly class will have different though interrelated duties from each other.

¹¹ The category of obligatory action includes actions that must be performed daily or on special occasions (*nitya* and *naimittika karma*), and are part of a larger scheme of actions that include non-obligatory actions (that are desirable to the agent, *kāmaya karma*) and forbidden ones (*pratiśiddha karma*). For more on these distinctions, see Van Buitenen 1957, Potter 1991 (36-46), Shetty 1993 and Sharma 1995.

other three ends of human life. Such freedom is variously conceived, for instance, as a life in Heaven according to *Vedas*, or the freedom of the Higher Self (*dehi* or *ātman*) from the lower self (*dehā*) and hence from the possibility of future reincarnation according to the *Upanisads*. Thus, there seems to be an in-built tension between *mokṣa* and the other ends of life, especially if the emphasis is on conceiving *mokṣa* as freedom from the other ends. This in turn has led some to think *mokṣa* displaces *dharma*'s supremacy in what was originally a triadic scheme.¹² But, a more conciliatory approach, which suggests that the *raison d'être* of the *dharma*-scheme is to make *mokṣa* eventually available to all, has also been suggested.¹³ On this view, individuals rise through the class hierarchy over several lifetimes by the diligent performance of action (*karma*) assigned to them by the *dharmaic* scheme in all of aspects of life including those concerned with *artha* and *kāma*, which in turn makes them eligible for *mokṣa*. Whether *mokṣa* itself is a function of ritual (*yajña*), knowledge (*jñāna*) or meditation (*dhyāna*), access to it only *eventually* available to all, and is limited by class and gender. This conciliatory reading of the relation of *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma* on the one hand and *mokṣa* on the other is actually more consistent with the *Gītā*'s own views, though it will take matters further, as we will see. Most importantly for our purposes, and consistent with the requirements of deontology, both the *śruti* and *smṛiti* traditions make clear that dhārmic duty is ultimately justified by scriptural injunction.

Returning now to the *Gītā*, we see that there is much in its own discussion of *dharma* that is continuous with that of the tradition. Broadly speaking, the four classes (*varṇas*) of society are explicitly mentioned and their roles upheld (*BG* 4.13), as are the duties or virtues (*dharma*) of each of the classes (*BG* 18.42-44). The text insists that all physical entities are forced to act by the very impulses in nature itself (*BG* 3.5). This is true of the individuals as well, for all of us have to follow our particular natures (*BG* 3.33). The stage and station in life scheme (*varṇāśramadharmā*) as a part of larger *dharma* of the cosmos anticipates the broad tendencies of our individual natures and slots them in appropriately. Hence the text specifically says that past actions (*karma*) determine one's nature by determining birth, and birth in turn determines one's station in life and allows the individual to undertake purposeful action (*karma*) to fulfill his *dharma* (*BG* 6.40-45, 8.3). So here too we find that an individual's obligations in life are tightly prescribed by his stage and station in life (*varṇāśramadharmā*). In fact the *Gītā* repeatedly tells us that we ought to do our duty regardless of what it is and how poorly we end up doing it, even if we could conceivably undertake someone else's duties better (*BG* 3.35, 18.47). More particularly, as we saw above, and as Arjuna explicitly says (*BG* 2.7), his dilemma is conceived in terms of competing duties, and is therefore conceived in terms of the *dhārmic* scheme. Furthermore, Krishna unambiguously tells Arjuna to fight because it is his overriding duty as a warrior to do so (*BG* 2.31). Finally, Krishna explicitly says

¹² See, for instance, Van Buitenen 1957 and Ingalls 1957. Sreekumar (2012, 277-278) presents a variant of this view by suggesting that world-welfare understood as a function of *dharma* is the highest end along with *mokṣa*.

¹³ See, for instance, Coomaraswamy 1970 (chapter 1, especially 21-22) and Koller 1972.

that scriptural injunction is the only way to determine what should be done or not done, since the other alternative is to act based on desire, which leads to rebirth in increasingly adverse circumstances (*BG* 16.19-24). Clearly, then, the moral norms that ground the *Gītā*'s conception of duty are based in scriptural injunction. Yet the traditional position is complicated by revisions proposed by Krishna on at least two fronts.

Let us then turn to these revisionary considerations in the text that others too have noted.¹⁴ Since the *Vedas* or revealed texts (*śruti*) are the ultimate basis for the dhārmic scheme, the first sign of reform comes in Book II, when Krishna denigrates those who simply follow the letter of the sacred texts for their own personal gain (*BG* 2.42-44). It should be noted that at this stage of the revisionary process, Krishna criticizes how the *Vedas* are followed – i.e., for the purpose of achieving heaven or power and enjoyment for the agent – and not that they should be obeyed, (so that scriptural injunction is still very much the basis of right action here). Hence, he says:

2.47 Your right (*adhikarā*) is to action alone;
Never to its fruits at any time.
Never should the fruits of action (*karmaphala*) be your motive (*hetur*);
Never let there be attachment (*saṅgo*) to inaction in you.

2.48 Fixed in Yoga, performing actions,
Having abandoned attachment (*saṅgam tvaktvā*), Arjuna,
And having become indifferent to success or failure.
It is said that evenness of mind (*samatvam*) is yoga.¹⁵

For the sake of convenience, all future references to the principle of 'action without concern for its fruit' articulated here will be in terms of 'detachment'.¹⁶ Krishna has already said that Arjuna should do his duty and fight (*BG* 2.31); hence here he seems to be asking Arjuna to fight without concern for the fruit of the action, or with detachment. Given that he has, just prior to these verses, criticized the way in which prescribed action based on scriptural injunction has been undertaken for the sake of fruit that accrues to the agent (wealth, power, etc.), clearly he is asking Arjuna to fight without concerning himself with precisely these consequences. This also involves, as 2.48.3 above tells us, not being concerned with whether or not the duty-

¹⁴ See, for instance, Gopalan 1987, Matilal 1989, and Hiriyananna 1993 (chapter 4 among others), all of whom think that the *Gītā*'s primary innovation is that it offers up the possibility of renunciation *in* action as opposed to the Buddha's position of renunciation *of* action altogether.

¹⁵ Sargeant 1984, 131-133.

¹⁶ I take detachment as the English shorthand for several Sanskrit terms: *karmaphalahetur* above; *asaktaś* (*BG* 3.25), literally 'not attached'; *na sajjate* (*BG* 3.28) literally 'not joined or attached'; *tyaktasarvaparigrahaḥ* (*BG* 4.21) literally 'abandoning all acquisitiveness'; *sarvakarmāṅgisamnyasa* (*BG* 5.13) literally 'renouncing all action'; *sarvakarmaphalatyāgam* (*BG* 12.11, 13.2), literally 'sacrificing the fruit of one's actions'; *saṅgarahitam* (*BG* 18.23) or *asaṅgam* literally, 'free from attachment'; *aphalākāṅkṣibhir*, literally 'the fruit not desiring ones'; and variants thereof.

bound action is successful, which is different from undertaking to perform the action to the best of one's ability; for success and failure are fruits that accrue to the agent.

Krishna's response seems reasonable from Arjuna's perspective as well, because it is precisely how Arjuna thinks about his duty as a warrior: in terms of the consequences that affect him. In the articulation of his dilemma, Arjuna clearly voices concern about being able to live with the consequences of victory that would accrue to him, both good (such as kingdom, wealth and pleasure (*BG* 1.32-33)), and bad (such as the pain, sin and unhappiness of being responsible for the death of friends, teachers and family (*BG* 1.36-38)).

Finally, that detachment is clearly concerned with personal consequences is clear from the fact that attachment is defined in just these terms. Those with demonic endowments who might be taken to be exemplars of attachment, for instance, are described as making the gratification of their desires as their highest goal. Such desire is for wealth, happiness and the satisfaction of lust, and manifests itself in hundreds of ways in such a life (*BG* 16.8-15). Similarly, those seeking the fruit of their action are spoken of in terms of being concerned with the gratification of the senses in terms of their objects (*BG* 18.27, 38). Presumably, setting aside what accrues to the agent allows the agent to undertake his prescribed duty without personal or selfish considerations getting in the way.¹⁷ Now one may think this odd, given that the *dharma* scheme is usually quite explicit about what needs to be done (as discussed above in terms of one's stage and station in life). But in fact it is not odd at all. For instance, Krishna says that good (*sattvic*) gift giving is not only that which is undertaken without expectation of return (i.e. with detachment), but performed at the right time and place, and towards the right person. On the other hand, self-interested (*rajasic*) gift giving is usually undertaken with the expectation of some kind of return (*BG* 18.20-22). So we can easily imagine how deliberations might lead to different decisions depending on how these actions are undertaken, especially in situations where both the good and the selfish individuals agree on the need for gift-giving itself. For instance, if a selfish agent expects too much or too little in return from the act of gift-giving, it might result in her giving too much or too little herself. Whereas appropriate gift-giving assesses the situation without bringing into play what the agent might get in return, precisely because such considerations are left out of play by the good individual. This, then, would at least be partial justification for why Krishna thinks Arjuna should act with detachment.

Thus everyone is to do their duty, which is prescribed by their class and stage in life (*varṇāśramadharmā*), and which is ultimately justified by scriptural injunction. Given how pervasive this scheme is, it is usually clear what an agent is to do. Such duty must be undertaken without concern for fruit that accrues to the agent including success and failure, and because it is one's duty or *dharma*. At a first approximation, then, Krishna sounds like a classic deontologist for he seems to be saying that duty is

¹⁷ Such a view is broadly supported in the scholarship, most recently by Chatterjea (2002), though there are exceptions, such as Framarin (2006) who I discuss more fully below. Yet there is more to detachment than not being concerned with personal consequences, as my discussion in section 3 will show.

based in scriptural injunction and must be undertaken for duty's sake, and not from considerations like personal consequences that are extraneous to duty.

But this is not the extent of Krishna's innovation, for detachment is a central motif in the *Gītā*, around which he reformulates much of the letter of the law as well. As one would expect, he insists that the tradition's three great duties of ritual sacrifice (*yajna*), alms giving to the poor and to the mendicants (*dāna*), and austerity (*tapas*) are to be performed, and performed with detachment (*BG* 18.5-6; 17.11; 17.20). More importantly, the scope of the duties, especially of ritual sacrifice and austerity, is widened extensively so that these now encompass many aspects of life. Sacrifice is broadened to include not just the usual acts of offering up fire-sacrifice, but also the offering up of sensation and sense-objects, material possessions, spiritual exercises, food and even the pursuit of knowledge (*BG* 4.23-32). Violent austerity is denigrated (*BG* 17.5), without removing from it the disciplined activity of detached meditation (*BG* 6.10-28; 6.35-36). But now the disciplined mindfulness and restraint is extended to include our interactions with others (respect, continence, non-violence, uprightness, truthfulness, beneficence, etc.) (*BG* 17.14-17).

Krishna, as the Divine Incarnate, is obviously allowed to reformulate the dhārmic scheme without justification, but he suggests one regardless. He says he takes on a human avatar to protect good people when *dharma* and hence the world is in decline, and *adharma* or injustice increases (*BG* 4.7-8; 8.17-20). That the world and not just *dharma* is in decline is a sentiment that the *Gītā* shares with the *Māhābhārata*, its mother-text; for the unfolding of the story in the *Māhābhārata* itself signals the end of the *dvapara yuga* and the beginning of the *kali yuga*, the last and worst stage of the cosmic cycle before the cosmos is destroyed and reabsorbed into the unmanifest, and the whole process of evolution begins anew (*BG* 9.4-8).¹⁸

Presumably, then, the reformulation of *dharma* is part of Krishna's strategy to protect humanity, and especially those who follow *dharma*, though we need to draw out how this is so. The widening purview of traditional duties suggests an attempt to maintain some aspects of the status quo as the world descends into chaos in the *kali yuga*. But it seems that it no longer matters if the dhārmic scheme is functioning ineffectively, so that there is no guarantee that members of society are indirectly and hence eventually in line for *mokṣa* or freedom. (Such freedom, it should be remembered, requires them to work their way up to through the classes over several lifetimes, and for women it requires a sex change in addition.) For Krishna's formulation of detachment is potentially universal because it means that freedom (*mokṣa*) from the dhārmic scheme becomes directly available to every member of society, including women and the so-called 'low-born' or *śūdras*, so long as they undertake their respective duties with detachment (*BG* 9.32). This is so because in the *Gītā*, *mokṣa* is no longer just the eventual result of knowledge (*jñāna*) through meditation (*BG* 6), and, as it is in the *Upaniśads*, or exclusively of ritual (*BG* 3.8-16),

¹⁸ I do not therefore think that my reading of the reformulation of *dharma* is inconsistent with readings that suggest that the reformulations are a response to the decadence of Brahmanism as well as to a rise in heterodox views like those of the Buddha. As far as Krishna is concerned, these changes in society could be symptomatic of the decline of *dharma*.

as it is in the *Vedas*, but of action (*karma*) undertaken with detachment (*BG* 2.47-53; 12.12; 18.45).¹⁹ The revolutionary aspect of the *Gītā*, then, is that it makes knowledge (*jñāna*) and hence freedom (*mokṣa*) directly available to all by making it a function of detached *dhārmic* action and possibly in this lifetime.²⁰ Such a move is consistent with the text's view that all life is equal since it is established in the Divine (*BG* 5.18-19; 6.29-32).

Yet this revolution reveals potential problems for Krishna's views on the relation between *dharma* and *mokṣa*; for it now becomes clear that detachment disallows the agent from pursuing *dharma* as a means to *mokṣa*. After all, if *mokṣa* accrues to the agent, it cannot be an explicit consideration in the agent's deliberations concerning her *dharma* since detachment requires her not to consider consequences that might accrue to her. Second, it is not clear why detached action in general as opposed to detached action that is in accordance with one's *dhārmic* obligations in particular, is not acceptable; for if such action is acceptable, it can raise additional philosophical difficulties, such as the possibility of detached criminal action.²¹ If such action is not acceptable, there has to be a basis for why it is not. Third, despite Krishna's saying that it does, it is still not clear how detachment makes it directly possible for women and members of the lower castes to attain *mokṣa* directly. I will address the first and second issues in the next section on consequentialism in the *Gītā*, and the third issue in section 4 on virtue theory in the text.

3. CONSEQUENTIALISM IN THE GITA

So far, it is clear that Arjuna is to undertake his duty with detachment, and this duty, according to Krishna, is to fight. While I have suggested above that one's duty is pretty clear in the context of one's stage and station in life or *varṇāśramadharmā*, this is not so for those who face a dilemma. Arjuna's situation, therefore, is not as straightforward as it might seem since it is not clear why his personal duty as a warrior (*svadharmā*) trumps his universal duties as a human being (*sādhāraṇa dharmā*), even if detachment helps him set his own interests aside. Perhaps moral dilemmas arise only because *dharma* is in decline, in which case Krishna still needs to offer additional help to Arjuna (and others).

Conceivably, Krishna can resort to how duties are justified in the first place, to see if that might help Arjuna; after all, what we have focused on so far is how duty is to be undertaken. Recall that the original purpose of *dharma* is to maintain and uphold the social and, by extension, cosmological order that is, on one reading at least, ultimately conducive to *mokṣa*. So a duty's ultimate justification comes in consequentialist terms of maintaining this order. Normally, an agent does not have to worry about this justification, since one's duties are usually clearly prescribed by one's stage and station in life. But since *dharma* is in decline, what one's duty might

¹⁹ I can only mention in passing that *mokṣa* is a function of action through devotion (*bhakti*) as well, which is another revolutionary aspect of the *Gītā* (see especially *BG* 12).

²⁰ But see Matilal 1989 for a different view on the revolutionary aspects of the *Gītā*.

²¹ As suggested, for instance, by Weiss (1954, 254-55) and Berg (1995, 30).

be is not always obvious, as exemplified by moral dilemmas. In such situations it is plausible that an agent such as Arjuna, as opposed to Krishna, has to independently consider what might in fact promote or maintain social, and by extension, cosmological order. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Krishna articulates such guidance explicitly in terms of the principle of world-welfare:

3.25 While those who are unwise act
From attachment to action, O Arjuna,
So the wise should act without attachment (*asktas*),
Intending to maintain the welfare of the world (*lokasaṁgraham*).²²

This is an important verse not simply because it presents the consequentialist principle of world-welfare, but because it does so in the context of the deontological-sounding language of detachment. Krishna can advise those who are wise and in pursuit of perfection this way because detachment has to do with how duty is undertaken which is always agent-relative to her state and station in life. Whereas the principle of world-welfare is the basis of how duty is justified, which is agent-neutral because it holds for all agents regardless of their stage and station in life. So now we can see how the *Gītā* marries deontology with consequentialism. The deontological-sounding aspects of the text, we saw, conceives right action in terms of rule following without concern for personal consequences, whereas consequentialism understands right action in terms of whether or not a good state of affairs are promoted by such action. The *Gītā* asks us to follow *dharma* regardless of a certain kind of consequence and at the same time recognizes that *dharma* is grounded in a different kind of consequence that promotes world welfare. So it is not unreasonable to say that the text's seeming deontology is ultimately grounded in consequentialism, even though detachment's exclusion of a certain kind of consequence might lead us to think otherwise.

The *Gītā* discusses other kinds of consequences that are not concerned with the justification of action but with its efficacy. For instance, Krishna says that good (*sattvic*) gift giving is not only that which is undertaken without expectation of return (i.e. with detachment), but performed at the right time and place, and towards the right person. Here, clearly, good action that is guided by one's *dharma* involves being mindful of certain kinds of consequences, since assessing these consequences helps the agent determine what appropriate gift giving is in that situation. Nor does it change the fact that it also means that these consequences do not justify *dhārmic* action as much as they help determine the specific content of the action of gift giving.²³ In contrast, as we saw earlier in section 2, bad action is either avaricious (*rajasic*) precisely because it emphasizes consequences that accrue to the agent, or ignorant (*tamsic*) because it is unconcerned with any consequence (*BG* 18.20-22).²⁴

²² Sargent 1984, 182.

²³ But cf. Nikam 1953 and Sreekumar 2012, 297-299.

²⁴ A similar tripartite contrast in terms of work in general, as opposed to gift-giving in particular, can be found in *BG* 18.23-25.

So it would seem that consequences of two kinds have a role in dhārmic duty undertaken with detachment: one kind that is explicit and helps determine the best fitting action that would instantiate that duty in a particular circumstance, and another that is concerned with world-welfare either implicitly or explicitly. Implicitly since consequences concerning world-welfare are built into *dharma*, and explicitly when it is unclear which duty will promote world-welfare. Even in instances of the latter, it should be reiterated, it is still the case that action is undertaken without concern for personal consequences and in line with the spirit of scriptural injunction and therefore seems deontological to that extent.²⁵ Presumably, Krishna thinks Arjuna's fighting is required by the principle of world welfare because the world is worse off if Arjuna doesn't fight, perhaps because victory cannot be secured without him, or, at the very least, because it would set a terrible dhārmic precedent.²⁶ This understanding of detachment, with its built-in notion of world-welfare that is ultimately conducive to *mokṣa*, helps us see how obvious instances of detached criminal action at least are implausible; for such action would clearly be against the letter and spirit of *dharma*.²⁷

Given the hybrid nature of Krishna's emerging ethical position, we should not be surprised if his consequentialism, like his deontology, is very different from Western versions. One way to parse the difference is to see how Krishna's view differs from classical consequentialism as it is found in John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism*.²⁸ Mill, following Bentham, thinks that right actions are those which promote happiness and wrong actions are those which produce its reverse, not just for the agent but for all those who are affected by the action, or what Mill calls 'happiness altogether' (*Utilitarianism*, 7-11). Even though Krishna does not agree with Mill in conceiving

²⁵ Radhakrishnan (1914, especially 473) and Sen (2000, 481; 2009, 216) are the most influential proponents of a purely deontological reading of the *Gītā* in the last hundred years. For them, such a reading is justified because of their view of the detached undertaking of duty (based presumably on scriptural injunction). Perhaps influenced by Kant, they suggest that detachment is lack of concern for any consequence, though they do not make an explicit case for such an understanding of detachment. Whereas I hope I have shown that such a reading does not take into consideration all that the text says, explicitly and implicitly, about consequences that should or should not be set aside.

²⁶ Cf. Dowd (2011, 43-44), who makes a similar point, though he thinks *dharma* is an intrinsic good whereas I think it only needs to be undertaken as such and that the only intrinsic good is *mokṣa*. I will say more about this below.

²⁷ It has been objected that even the vilest of criminals are acceptable to Krishna so long as their criminal action is undertaken as an expression of devotion to him, which strongly suggests that the related notion of detached criminal action is acceptable to Krishna. Such a view is based on *BG* 9.30, which reads, "If even the evil doer Worships Me with undivided devotion, He is to be thought of as righteous, For he has indeed been rightly resolved." We may read the verse to be saying that the evildoer's vicious actions are acceptable so long as they are an offering of devotion to Krishna while they are being performed. But because such a reading skews what we would normally mean by 'devotion', another reading that does not, might be more plausible. On this latter view, the reference to the individual's evil actions are to those in her past, and her devotion to Krishna more reasonably signals the beginning of a conformity to *dharma* that eventually allows her to become virtuous, as the very next verse (*BG* 9.31) suggests. Such a reading is also suggested by Śankara in his commentary on the *Gītā* (*ad loc*).

²⁸ All references to Mill's views are from Mill 2001.

world-welfare in terms of happiness understood as pleasure or the absence of pain, the consequentialist parallels are clear enough.

Where Mill and Krishna differ even more radically though, is on the agent's welfare. Mill thinks that the pursuit of happiness altogether may require that the agent's well-being be set aside; for the agent is required to be strictly neutral when it comes to his happiness and that of others (*Utilitarianism*, 11). Given that he grounds his view on the obvious empirical fact that everyone pursues their own happiness, he cannot deny that a particular agent's own welfare has a place in her deliberations especially when her actions don't affect others. But, in general, Mill thinks that education should establish an 'indissoluble connection' between the agent's happiness and that of others (*Utilitarianism*, 17). Whereas in Krishna's view, as we saw, the agent's interests are *always* set aside, whether she has to simply follow her duty, and thereby implicitly undertake the welfare of the world, or explicitly do so when her duty is not obvious. This difference between Mill and Krishna will be crucial in determining the viability of their respective versions of consequentialism.

It is one thing to say that one must never consider (Krishna) or be indifferent (Mill) to what might accrue to the agent, but it is quite another to plausibly defend such a move. Mill thinks his view is justified by empirical considerations, for it is easy to see that people in general choose to act in pursuit of their own happiness (*Utilitarianism*, 8). The problem is that it is an entirely different matter to say, based on empirical considerations, that people in general act out of concern for happiness altogether. While it might be the case that this is what people ought to do, this is not something that can be empirically justified based on what they actually do (which is usually to pursue their own interests).²⁹

Krishna, on the other hand, justifies his view based on a radically different conception of empirical agency. He thinks that selfish action of the sort that causes Mill problems is based on an incorrect notion of the lower self. Almost immediately after his discussion of world-welfare, he says:

²⁹ See MacIntyre (1981, 60-75), who follows Sidgwick in making this point. To be fair, Mill acknowledges this problem and spends chapter 3 attempting to justify why we ought to pursue happiness altogether rather than our own, or what he takes to be the problem of the ultimate sanction of the principle of utility (*Utilitarianism*, 27ff). But, it is unclear whether his attempt succeeds since he wants to ground the principle of utility in the fellow feeling we have for others, even though he recognizes that this feeling is not universal (*Utilitarianism*, 27-29). Yet he insists that this feeling is natural to us even though it has to be acquired, just as the ability to build cities is natural yet learnt. But now 'natural' takes on such a broad meaning so that it can include almost anything, including the acquisition of hatred for one's fellow human beings. This in turn forces Mill to seek a more obvious and indissoluble basis of sentiment grounding utilitarian morality, which oddly enough he takes to be the fellow feeling itself, and which therefore opens him up to the charge of circularity. He says: "But there is this basis of powerful natural sentiment; and that it is which, when once the general happiness is recognized as the ethical standard, will constitute the strength of the utilitarian morality. This firm foundation is that of social feelings of mankind – the desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures, which is already a powerful principle in human nature, and happily one of those which tend to become stronger, even without express inculcation, from the influences of advancing civilization." (*Utilitarianism*, 31-32)

3.27 Actions in all cases are performed
by the strands (*guṇāih*);
of material nature (*prakrateḥ*)
He whose self is confused by egoism (*ahamkāravimūḍhātmā*)
Imagines, “I am the [only] doer.”

3.28 But he who knows the truth, O Arjuna,
About the two roles of the strands and action, thinking,
“The strands work on strands,”
Is not attached.³⁰

Krishna thinks that a person (*ātman*)³¹ is constituted by an immaterial, unchanging Higher Self (*dehi*) -- which I will return to below-- and a changing, material, lower one (*dehā*) that acts (*BG* 2.11-22).³² But because the immaterial aspect is unchanging this means, unlike in standard western dualism, it is the material aspect or Nature (*prakṛati*) that constitutes the physical and psychical features of human nature, including the intellect (*buddhi*), mind/will (*manas*), sense, ego or literally ‘I-sense’ (*ahamkāra*) and their activities (*BG* 13.1-6). So what Krishna is essentially saying in 3.27 is that the I-sense, which is constituted by the strands of Nature (*guṇas*)³³, is only one aspect of all that determines actions; for action is a function of all the constituents of Nature, or what he calls ‘the strands working on strands’ in 3.28.3 (though this only becomes obvious to the sage, as we will see in Section 4).

Now this move from the individual to Nature as actor seems like a large leap, and later sections of Chapter 18 help us understand Krishna’s move. There he says there are five immediate factors or causes (*kāraṇāni*) of physical and psychical action, of which the self-reflective actor (*kartā*) is but one;³⁴ the others include the body (*adhiṣṭānam*), the various organs (*karṇam*), numerous motions or activities we are

³⁰ Sargeant 1984 (184-185), with modification of the third line (*guṇā guṇeṣu vartanta*), which originally reads: “The qualities work among the qualities.”

³¹ In the *Gītā*, *ātman* often means “person” rather than simply the spiritual correlate of Brahman (for e.g. *BG* 2.43; 3.40; 5.26; etc.).

³² Since the material self in the *Gītā* includes the psychical aspects of mind in ways that are not standardly the case in western versions of dualism, I will leave the Sanskrit (*deha*) untranslated in what follows, to help mark the distinction.

³³ The *guṇas* are the primordial strands of nature, and like strings in string theory, are the very basic stuff of the universe. Thus all subtle matter (from which visible gross matter is constructed) is made up of the three strands of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* in various proportions and configurations. *Sattva*’s essential nature is luminosity or what we might say is that which makes things knowable, and a critical mass of its preponderance in nature leads to the possibility of consciousness; in the *Gītā*, *sattva* its presence is therefore said to be illuminative and healthy. Motion in the universe would not be possible without *rajas* and its presence in life, according to the *Gītā*, it is the basis of passion and craving. *Tamas* is essentially heavy and is potentially the materiality of the universe. Its heaviness is juxtaposed with the lightness and luminosity of *sattva* so that *tamas*’s preponderance in humans in the *Gītā* is often represented as that which is slothful, dark and opposed to possibility of knowledge. Much of Chapter 14 is devoted to an explication of the *Gītā*’s interpretation of the *guṇas*.

³⁴ I take ‘*kartā*’ (literally ‘the doer’) to include the intellect (*buddhi*), mind/will (*manas*) and the I-sense (*ahamkāra*).

predisposed or inclined towards (*cheṣṭā*), and providence (*daivam*) (*BG* 18.13-15), which collectively constitute the *dehā* (or material or lower self). This is important because Krishna is not saying that these factors are necessary conditions of action as much as they are constituents of it.³⁵ Thus agency does have a role in making decisions (hence Arjuna does face a real choice to fight or not to fight), but it is not the only factor. Moreover, once the factors within the individual are broken down in this way, it is not difficult to see how these extend beyond the individual as well. This is because each of these factors in turn is causally interconnected and continuous with other physical facets of the *guṇa*-constituted world. For instance, a healthy body will influence a *dehā*'s food choices differently from an unhealthy one, where the body itself originates in another body and is shaped by its environment. How the senses perceive their objects (and not just the fact that they do) for instance, with pleasure or pain, will play a role in decision-making, as will the kinds of sense-objects they encounter. What we are predisposed toward based on our own past actions and what we inherit from our ancestors (for example, physical strength and natural courage) will factor in our choices. Finally, the circumstances that a person like Arjuna finds himself in will constrain and therefore be factors in his choices even if these don't determine them.³⁶ Thus the *guṇa*-constituted world forms a vast, interconnected web that is ceaselessly shifting and interacting. Nature is here conceived as a living organism (as seen in the descriptions of it as a world tree in *BG* 15, for instance), so that there is no radical discontinuity between factors within and without the individual that are responsible for action.³⁷

Let us now consider some of the problems with, and implications of, what I have said above. First, if what I say above is true and the *dehā* (or lower self) is continuous with nature, then this explains why the *dehā*'s interests must be set aside some of the time, perhaps even much of the time, but surely not *all* of the time, as detachment stringently requires. After all, *the dehā* is still part of nature, and therefore is justified in considering its interests at least some of the time. In other words, since the *dharma* scheme and the *dehā*'s ultimate concern is with *mokṣa*, we are back to asking the question at the end of section 2: how is it appropriate for *the dehā* to pursue her own

³⁵ This formulation seems to be clearly connected to early Buddhism's version of the empirical self as a composite of five aggregates or *khandhas*: perception (*samjñā*), feeling (*vedanā*), volitional dispositions (*samskāras*), intelligence (*vijñāna*) and form (*rūpa*). The biggest difference is the place of divine providence in the *Gītā* and hence the empirical self's continuity with the rest of a nature that is explicitly unified within the Divine, in ways that have no place in the Buddha's purported atheism. Yet this emphasizes our text's clearly syncretistic approach in this context.

³⁵ But see Mackenzie (2001, 143, emphasis is mine), who says, for instance, that the *cheṣṭā* are "...the vital functions of the living body such as breath...digestion, pulmonary, and homeostatic activities. These functions are what keep the body alive and healthy, *allowing for agency*."

³⁶ I cannot fully defend my conception of the constrained freedom of the *Gītā*, except to say that it is very much along the line of argument developed in (Sharma 1979).

³⁷ I follow Śankara 1977 (108) in suggesting that the *guṇas* constitute all of nature and not just living entities, contra Briggs Stansell 2008 who follows Ramanuja 2001. Even if Briggs Stansell is right in suggesting that the *guṇas* only constitute living entities, the world can still be conceived in terms of *guṇas* since the *Gītā* speaks of the world as a living organism more than once (see, for instance, *BG* 14.3-4; 15.1-3).

interests (i.e., *mokṣa*), given the constraints detachment places on such pursuits? The *Gītā*'s unequivocal response is *mokṣa* does not apply to the material, lower self (*dehā*) but to the immaterial, Higher Self (*dehi*), despite the fact that the latter is unchanging (*BG* 5.14-16, 13.29-33, 14.23).³⁸ It is the *dehi*'s relation with the *dehā* that causes the binding over multiple lives (*BG* 5.15; 2.20-25); and it is the undermining of the relation by the *dehā* by setting aside its interests that sets the *dehi* free from any connection to the empirical world (*BG* 14.19-20; 8.16).³⁹ (How exactly the relation between *dehi* and *dehā* is undermined by detachment will become clearer in section 4.) It turns out, therefore, that the detached action is directly concerned with the *mokṣa* of the agent's *dehā* on the one hand, and indirectly with everyone else's on the other, since it promotes world-welfare.⁴⁰ After all, world-welfare is about maintaining and promoting the dhārmic scheme, which in turn is concerned with promoting the possibility of *mokṣa* for all. Such a view also avoids the problem of consistency that arises between detachment, understood as an absence of desire for fruits that accrue to the *dehā*, and the desire for *mokṣa*, understood as the desire for liberation of the *dehi*. This is because the *dehā*'s desire is not for fruit that accrues to itself.⁴¹

Thus the *Gītā* makes a simple yet profound point: the origin of the moral impulse is ultimately grounded in and justified by our interconnected empirical nature; and because our empirical nature is not of ultimate concern, Krishna can ask the *dehā* to set aside her interests at all times. Hence the *Gītā* can consistently ask us to implicitly or explicitly act from considerations of world-welfare in ways that Mill cannot. Krishna is represented by the text as someone who does have more than a theoretical understanding of this interconnectedness, which is, in part, a sign of his Divinity. So for Krishna, as for the sage, there is no sense of obligation, no 'ought', since his action flows freely from this perspective. Whereas there is such a need in Arjuna as is evidenced by the action guidance that *dharma* or the principle of world welfare

³⁸ There are exceptions such as in 13.21 where it is suggested that the Higher Self enjoys the modes of nature, and thereby acts. But this literal reading is not usually accepted since just a few verses later in 13.29 and then again in 13.31-32, we are specifically told that the Higher Self is not an actor. Thus in 13.21 the Higher Self is thought to enjoy the modes of nature by extension, just as a king is said to be victorious in war even when it is his army that actually partakes in battle.

³⁹ The relationship between the *deha* (Higher Self) and Brahman is vexed, and is at the heart of a traditional controversy that is over a thousand years old. Śankara thinks the relationship between Brahman and the *deha* is one of identity, Ramanuja qualifies this by saying that the relation is like that between soul and body, whereas Mādhva thinks that Brahman and the *deha* are distinct entities. All three can and do find legitimate basis in the text, though Ramanuja's views probably do the most justice to the whole text by virtue of reconciling the extremes in Śankara and Mādhva. For a discussion of the various positions and issues involved, see Sharma, 1986.

⁴⁰ Cf. Sreekumar 2012 (304) for a similar claim. It therefore seems odd for Sreekumar to suggest (306) that Krishna brings agent-relative considerations into play by qualifying his consequentialism in terms of the agent's salvation; for the relevant agent is the *deha*, whereas liberation applies to the *dehi*. See Potter 1958, who agrees that while *dharma* does lead to *mokṣa*, it is futile to say so to one who is not ready to understand this claim. He therefore emphasizes the importance of context to reconcile claims in the *Gītā* that take dharmic action as an end in itself and a means to *mokṣa*, whereas my reading suggests that *dharma* and *mokṣa* apply to different subjects to effect the reconciliation.

⁴¹ Cf. Herman 1995.

provides, as does the encouragement and advice of Krishna. Practicing detached action allows an agent like Arjuna to act in a way that is consistent with this world-view, even if Arjuna has no more than a theoretical understanding of it. It is in trying to understand how detachment and its prerequisite training bridges this distance between Arjuna and the sage that we see the place of virtue in the *Gītā*.

4. VIRTUE IN THE *GITA*

Given the hybrid deontological consequentialism we have seen so far in the *Gītā*, we can expect to find in it a virtue theory at best, rather than a virtue ethics. A virtue ethics emphasizes the development of the right kind of character constituted by a range of virtues from which good action stems. The virtues themselves are multi-track dispositions with emotional and rational components that are developed by the activities of habituation and education, as we will see below. Good action is thus a function of what a good person does, based on her understanding of the complex circumstances in which moral choices are made, rather than the result of the application of rules or principles. A virtue theory, on the other hand, is an account of how the virtues are developed within the context of theories such as deontology and consequentialism that rely on the application of principles to determine moral action. In other words, a virtue theory is concerned with how a particular ethical principle becomes embedded in human character traits such that we have a good person who acts virtuously in ways that are in accord with the said principle.⁴² So our task will be to understand how the virtues are discussed, developed and deployed in relation to the *Gītā*'s key principle of detachment.⁴³

Since 'dharma' is translated as 'virtue' as well as 'duty', we should be clear that our focus here is not on specific actions that are virtuous and constitute our duty, as much as on the dispositions or virtues that are the basis of such action. These virtues are discussed in three different ways: First, in terms of the natural endowment of the virtues (or predispositions) that individuals like Arjuna possess at one end (*BG* 16.1-5), and the fully realized versions of these in the sage at the other (*BG* 2.55-57; 2.69-72; 12.13-20; 13.7-11; 14.22-25). In between them lives the often-implicit developmental story of the virtues that we will need to pull together from Krishna's advice to Arjuna.

The predispositions themselves are discussed in two different but related ways, the most obvious of which is in terms of *varṇa* (or class) and *guṇas* (or strands). In section 2 we saw that the divinely ordained *varṇa* scheme anticipates the broad tendencies of individual natures such that individuals are slotted by birth into

⁴² See Hursthouse 2012 for more details.

⁴³ I take detachment to be the *Gītā*'s key principle for three reasons: First, because it is repeatedly emphasized in the text as a central motif, as we saw in section 2. Second, in the concluding book of the text, Krishna emphatically tells us detached action is his highest teaching (*BG* 18.6). Third, because detachment subsumes the principles of unselfishness and world-welfare, and the latter in turn subsumes all dharmic action since dharmic action implicitly promotes world welfare.

appropriate classes. The mechanism by which distinct kinds of human nature are categorized is described by the text in terms of *guṇa* configurations. Accordingly, for instance, individuals in whom *sattva* predominates over *rajas* and *tamas* are born as *Brahmins* (or priests), since *sattva* is the *guṇa* responsible for the possibility of consciousness and, according to the *Gītā*, attracts us to knowledge (*BG* 14.6). Appropriately enough, each *varṇa* has a distinct set of virtues associated with it; *Brahmins* (priests) possess tranquility, restraint, purity and (interest in) knowledge (*BG* 18.42). *Kshatriyas* (warriors) possess heroism, majesty and firmness, and so on (*BG* 18.43). Clearly, the text does not mean to suggest that the individuals are born with the full-fledged virtues. At best these are what Aristotle might call natural virtues that need to be developed, which is why, for example, some individuals tend to be braver than most, others naturally inclined to knowledge, and so on.⁴⁴

Krishna additionally classifies predispositions as divine or demonic and assures Arjuna that he has the former (*BG* 16.1-4). The use of ‘*sāmpadam*’, which is translated as ‘endowment’ in this context, suggests that it is something that will bear fruit in the future (as is clear from another plausible rendering of the term as ‘destiny’).⁴⁵ The endowments, which are spoken of in terms of the virtues and vices here as well, are so categorized depending on whether or not they are conducive to a higher birth and eventually *mokṣa*, or to lower ones that are ultimately hellish (*BG* 16.19-21), and their classification is therefore broadly consistent with the *varṇa* (class) categorization. The twofold classification and the division by class of the predispositions are additionally amenable to being understood in terms of the different paths to *mokṣa* that the text discusses. Fortitude, fearlessness, perseverance, and vigor, clearly have a place in the path of action (*karma yoga*), as much as they do in the life of a warrior. Freedom from malice, forgiveness, compassion, gentleness and modesty seem appropriate to a life of devotion (*bhakti*) and in the lives of the working classes. Purity, study, truth, perseverance in knowledge would appear to be essential for the path of knowledge (*jñāna yoga*) and to the life of a *Brahmin*. So next we turn our attention to the way in which the text thinks these predispositions are developed into working dispositions.

Regardless of whether the virtues are discussed in terms of path or class, their development can be articulated in broadly intellectual and emotional terms, and it is a story of self-control in which detachment plays a key role. Intellectual and emotional stability are important for any class or path if their respective duties are to be undertaken successfully and, at the same time, allow for the full development of the virtues. The intellectual aspects of such self-control include an unagitated mind (*anuvignamanās*), firm mindedness (*prajñā pratiṣṭhitā*) (*BG* 2.55-56), disinterestedness (*anapekṣas*, *udāsīnas*) (*BG* 12.16), contentment with one’s own duty (*svakramaniratas*) (*BG* 18.45), and even-mindedness (*samatvaṁ*, *samacittavatvam*) (*BG* 2.48; 13.9). In addition, it is important that the goals of action be clearly

⁴⁴ Aristotle’s discussion of natural virtue can be found in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.13.

⁴⁵ It is quite plausible that the *sāmpadam* understood as a predisposition here is the basis for the *ceṣṭās*, which together form one of the five factors of action discussed in Section 3, and which I have translated as predisposed activities.

conceived, both in terms of an immediate grasp of the duties in a particular context (*BG* 18.20; 18.30), as well as faith in their larger setting in the *dharma* scheme and its grounding in the divine (*BG* 16.8; 17.4). The rational choice of dhārmic action itself is based on consistent assessment of consequences of three types, as we have already seen in our discussion of detachment. First, is the action being undertaken for the right kinds of reasons, (i.e., without concern for personal consequences). Second, is the assessment of how one might best satisfy the particular requirements of, say, the duty of gift-giving, in a particular situation. Does the situation, recipient, obligation, etc. call for a large gift, or a small one? Will this act of giving relate consistently to other acts that the agent must undertake in the future, or has undertaken in the past, etc.? Third, in situations where one's duty is unclear, as in Arjuna's case, the agent aspiring to virtue must be able to determine what will best promote world-welfare, for which a much broader set of consequences must be assessed.⁴⁶ Clearly, then, the developmental story of the intellectual virtues centrally involves the practice of detachment.

The moral (as opposed to intellectual) virtues are not simply emotions, according to virtue ethics, but how we are disposed to feel; in the context of the *Gītā*, it has mainly to do with the restraining of emotion and therefore with detachment. This is because detached dhārmic action involves not just the calculation of consequences but also being able to act on them, which is where emotional control is critical. The intellect (*buddhi*) can make all the calculations and decisions it wants, but in the development of the virtues, these decisions, especially in the initial stages of moral development, can very easily be undermined by undisciplined emotions (*BG* 2.60-61; 2.66-67).⁴⁷ We have seen that individuals are born with different predispositions which give them some natural advantage when it comes to control over some emotions, such that some are more inclined to be fearless, others to be modest or tranquil and so on. Each of these predispositions is developed and exercised in the context of the duties of the relevant class or path. For instance, the warrior's training is particularly concerned to cultivate courage and fearlessness (*BG* 12.15), which is then exercised and maintained in undertaking of the warrior's duties, and helped by the development of indifference to pleasure and pain (*samaduḥkhasusukhas*) (*BG* 12.13-18; 14.24-25), being the same towards friend and enemy (*samaḥ śatrāu ca mitre ca*) and towards honour and disgrace (*mānāpamānayoḥ*). Similarly, tranquility (*śamas*), restraint (*damas*), and patience (*kṣāntir*) (*BG* 18.42) are developed and exercised in the life of a *Brahmin* in order to promote the pursuit of knowledge, as is steadiness (*acāpalam*) (*BG* 16.2).

Revealingly enough, the text moves from the language of emotional control in the context of the developmental story of virtue, to the absence of desire and emotion when it describes the sage. The sage is said to have left behind desires (*prajahāti kāmān*) (*BG* 2.55), whose passion, fear and anger have disappeared (*vītarāgabhayak-*

⁴⁶ Cf. Berg 1995 (25), who is therefore at least right in suggesting that part of the *Gītā*'s greatness lies in seeing that acting ethically is not simply a matter of applying rules, though he would not agree with me in thinking that this is accomplished by the text's virtue theory.

⁴⁷ Cf. Upadhyaya 1969 (especially 167-169).

rodhaḥ) (BG 2.56; 5.28), who is indifferent to pleasure and pain (*samaduḥkhasukhas*) (BG 14.24), who has transcended the *guṇas* and hence the desires, feelings and attachments that originate in them (*guṇātītas*) (BG 14.25), who is without desire (*vigatasprahaḥ*) (BG 18.49; 18.54). This seems like an extraordinary view, for Krishna suggests that emotional control eventually leads to the elimination of the emotions as part of the practice of detachment, which in turn is key to insight (*jñāna*) and hence to freedom (*mokṣa*). Understanding Krishna's view here in turn requires an understanding of how the emotional aspects of virtue are developed through sense control, an analysis which applies to all the moral virtues regardless of class or path.

Sense objects (house, land, wealth, possessions, etc.) cause attachment through desire. That is, when an agent desires things, her desire binds her to them (BG 2.62); and the success or failure at obtaining what one desires generates a wide range of emotions: pleasure, contentment, the need for more, anger, pain, disappointment, etc. (BG 2.55-68). Hence Krishna advocates training in sense-control as a way of controlling desire and eventually eliminating the emotions, a practice whose origins can be traced all the way back to the early *Upaniṣads*.⁴⁸ Sense control means to withdraw one's senses from sense objects, with the aim of ultimately avoiding their pursuit altogether (BG 2.58). Such control in turn helps in the pursuit of one's duties with detachment by reducing the concern for the fruit that accrues to the agent from such action, since the fruit is usually construed in terms of sense objects that are either possessed or consumed. There are at least two broad stages in this process that the text mentions, which maps nicely onto the developmental story here (BG 2.59). In the first, the senses are in control though the taste for sense objects remains, which is when the virtues are in the process of being developed. Such a person feels desire to a lesser and lesser extent but these still continue to exist in the person; this incremental self-control allows her to set aside personal consequences more readily in ways that we have seen are essential for detachment. The second is when, with insight and therefore with the full virtue of the sage, even the taste for sense objects is eliminated as a result of consistent and continuous sense control.⁴⁹ It is only here that detachment in the fullest sense obtains, since the basis of the concern for personal consequences – the desire for sense objects – has been eliminated.

The elimination of desire and hence emotion seems to have important implications for the sage's insight or knowledge (*jñāna*), which is the basis of her eventual liberation (*mokṣa*) (BG 4.39). We have seen that it is the agent (*karta*) that is bound to sense objects through desire and emotion. The elimination of desire paves the way for the insight that action is not just a function of the agent. This occurs because of the way in which sense control works by weakening the hold of both the sense object and subject (i.e., the *karta* or doer) that desire relates to (BG 16.10-20). What the weakening does is make obvious that action is the function of all of the factors of action (the agent, the predisposed activities, the organs, the body, and

⁴⁸ See, for instance, the *Katha Upaniṣad* 3.1-8.

⁴⁹ Presumably, this is similar Aristotle's notion of continence, which marks a stage somewhat beyond the midpoint between vice and incontinence on the one hand and virtue on the other. Aristotle's discussion of continence can be found in *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.1-10.

providence) and through them of all Nature (as we saw in Section 3). Hence the text repeatedly describes the sage as the living instantiation of the recognition that action is nothing but strands acting on strands (*BG* 3.27-28; 4.7-8; 13.19; 13.23), such that desire seems not to have a role in it. Full-blown detachment, therefore, is when the basis of the concern for personal consequences has been undermined and the need for calculated consequences rendered unnecessary, since action is in sync with nature understood as the actor (*BG* 13.29). The other aspect of insight here is into the nature of the Higher Self (*dehi*), which the text suggests occurs because the power of *rajas*, the strand that drives desire and movement, has been curtailed by sense control; and *sattva*, the strand that is involved in the activity of rational decision-making in sense control and detached action, and which is in general the basis of knowledge, is ascendant (*BG* 3.38; 4.39; 5.26).

Finally, this should also make obvious why the *Gītā*'s view is at best a virtue theory rather than a virtue ethic: for on its virtue theory, *mokṣa* ultimately concerned with the undermining of character and personhood that is central to a virtue ethics. This is so because action ultimately is, as we saw, the action of desireless strands acting on strands in perfect accord with the universe. Thinking about the *Gītā* in terms of virtue theory helps us see the crucial distinction between those who are in the process of becoming detached – and therefore act in terms of personhood, desire, and character – as opposed to those who are already detached – to whom such language only applies at best analogically.⁵⁰

Thus the *Gītā* not only tells us how renunciation *in* action leads to wisdom, though in keeping with its syncretistic approach, it does not deny that renunciation *of* action can do so as well. More importantly, it also shows how such renunciation in action and hence wisdom is possible through sense-control in a way that is accessible to one and all. Yet the detached sage is a difficult ideal, though this should not be held against it since this is true of any ethical ideal, Western or otherwise. While it is true that the distance between the ordinary person and the sage is a large one, I hope it is a distance that this understanding of the *Gītā*'s virtue theory begins to traverse.

5. FINAL THOUGHTS

It might be fruitful to conclude by considering some of the advantages of the *Gītā*'s hybrid ethical theory. The *Gītā* is one of the earliest texts in any tradition to

⁵⁰ Hence I am in broad agreement with Brodback 2004, Framarin 2006 and 2009, who think detached action is desireless action, and with Teschner 1992, who thinks that detached action is non-teleological action in the way a nervous tick is non-teleological. In addition, I would add that in the fully detached sage the *deha* most closely approximates the Divine *dehi* in being without desire, and in a way recalls the Greek view that ideal human action emulates that of the Divine (see, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* Book X, for instance). The caveat is, of course, that this is not so for the one who is the process of becoming detached; for her actions do in fact involve desire and ends insofar as she is concerned with pursuing certain kinds of consequences and avoiding others. Thus, interestingly enough, humans are free in some limited sense in pursuing a choice over others (as in the case of Arjuna) even though he may not have insight. Whereas the sage, who has insight and will eventually obtain *mokṣa*, does not have freedom of choice in the traditional sense.

emphasize that it is important not just to do one's duty, but to do it in a certain kind of way; i.e., with detachment. The text's utilitarian principle of world-welfare provides the basis for assessing the nature of one's duty in a changing world, even when faced with competing duties as in the case of moral dilemmas. Of course, it helps on the grounds of consistency that the duties themselves are ultimately derived not from a deontological principle but a utilitarian one. Yet this raises another issue, for one of the problems that many versions of utilitarianism often have is that these result in agents being alienated from their own projects, since agents are required to pursue the greater good for all (even if, as we saw in the case of Mill, such a move is not always easily justifiable).⁵¹ The *Gītā* actually converts this into an advantage since it justifies this implication by suggesting that the empirical agent's projects are not of ultimate concern, since not pursuing the *dehā*'s (lower self's) personal goals is actually conducive to *mokṣa* for the *dehi* (Higher Self). In so doing, the text also gives a metaphysical basis for selflessness and other-concern, by pointing to an extended and ultimately empty conception of the *dehā* that is intricately interconnected with all of nature.

Finally, the *Gītā*'s virtue theory shows how the sage is the culmination of a long process of training and what constitutes such training, in a way that completes its ethics. Yet, we might wonder if we have an ethical theory here since ethical theories apply to agents, and in the final analysis, the sage can hardly be described as an ethical agent if in fact action is nothing but strands acting on strands. Perhaps recalling something else that Mill says might be useful here: that utilitarianism (and hence consequentialism) is essentially concerned with the assessment of actions and not of agency (*Utilitarianism*, 18). But this can hardly be an ultimately satisfactory answer unless of course the agent is ultimately irrelevant, as is the case for the *Gītā*.

The *Gītā*'s ethical syncretism captures something true about the ethical dimensions of our lives: that good action involves deontological, consequential and virtue-centric aspects. Moreover, implicit in the text is the view that these aspects may be combined in the moral or dhārmic life, in ways that I hope I have shown. In the main, though, the *Gītā* makes clear that the moral life needs to be contextualized in relation to *mokṣa*; where *mokṣa*, for the first time in the orthodox tradition at least, is consistently conceived as directly available to all.

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⁵¹ See Williams 1973, 116-117.

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