

A Study of the Role of Virtue Ethics in *Bhagavad Gita*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to understand the role of virtue ethics in *Bhagavad Gita* for good society. This paper attempts to solve the problem that is why the role of virtue ethics is important to construct the better society. Tentative solution is that virtue ethics is based on humanistic mind-set guidelines of doing good deeds. Descriptive and evaluative methods will be used to describe the characteristics of virtue and to evaluate the concept of virtue from the ethical point of view. Through the principle of humanity, tentative solution can be proved that *Bhagavad Gita* can provide the ethical and spiritual cultivation in accordance with ways of thinking and ways of life from daily life to lifetime. And, this paper contributes to building a better society led by the virtuous people with humanistic mind- set in order to maintain a peaceful and progressive one.

Keywords: Virtue ethics, humanistic mindset, ethical and spiritual cultivation

Introduction

The *Bhagavad Gita* is an ancient Indian text that became an important work of Hindu tradition in terms of both literature and philosophy. It is composed as a poem and it contains many key topics related to the Indian intellectual and spiritual tradition. Although it is normally edited as an independent text, the *Bhagavad Gita* became a section of a massive Indian epic named “The *Mahabharata*”, the longest Indian epic. There is a part in the middle of this long text, consisting of 18 brief chapters and about 700 verses: this is the section known as the *Bhagavad Gita*. It is also referred to as the *Gita*, for short.

It has been suggested that the *Bhagavad Gita* was originally an independent text as, except for the first chapter, the *Bhagavad Gita* does not develop the action of the *Mahabharata*. Furthermore, the *Bhagavad Gita* is at odds with the general style and content of the *Mahabharata*. Once the *Gita* is over, the narration of the *Mahabharata* resumes. The *Gita* was written during a time of important social change in India, with kingdoms getting larger, increasing urbanization, more trade activities, and social conflicts similar to what was happening when Jainism and Buddhism developed. This ancient Indian text is about the search for serenity, calmness, and permanence in a world of rapid change and how to integrate spiritual values into ordinary life.

Around the time when the *Gita* was written, asceticism was seen in India as the ideal spiritual life. Ascetics from different sects along with Jains and Buddhists all agreed that leaving everything behind (family, possessions, occupations, etc.) was the best way to live in a meaningful way. The *Gita* challenges the general consensus that only ascetics and monks can live a perfect spiritual life through renunciation and emphasises the value of an active spiritual life.

The plot of the *Gita* is based on two sets of cousins competing for the throne: The *Pandavas* and the *Kauravas*. Diplomacy has failed, so these two clans’ armies meet on a battlefield in order to settle the conflict and decide which side will gain the throne. This is a major battle and it takes place in *Kurukshetra*, “the field of the *Kurus*”, in the modern state of Haryana in India.

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Arjuna, the great archer and leader of the *Pandavas*, is a member of the *Kshatriyas* caste. He looks out towards his opponents and recognizes friends, relatives, former teachers, and finally reasons that controlling the kingdom is not worth the blood of all his loved ones. Emotionally overwhelmed *Arjuna* drops down, casting aside his bow and arrows and decides to quit. He prefers to withdraw from battle; he prefers inaction instead of being responsible for the death of the people he loves.

His chariot driver is the god *Vishnu*, who has taken the form of *Krishna*. *Krishna* sees *Arjuna* quitting and begins to persuade *Arjuna* that he should stick to his duty as a warrior and engage the enemy. The *Bhagavad Gita* is presented as a conversation between *Arjuna* and *Krishna*, a man and a god, a seeker and a knower.

This paper examines the ethical conception of the most well-known and much discussed Hindu text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, in the context of the Western distinction from the standpoint of virtue ethics. Most of the materials published on the *Gita* make much of its conception of duty; however, there is no systematic investigation of the notion of virtue in the *Gita*. The paper begins with a discussion of the fundamental characteristics of virtue ethics, before undertaking a discussion of the conceptions of duty and virtue in the *Gita*. The paper clearly demonstrates that (1) the concept of virtue coexists in the *Gita* and (2) the *Gita* accords virtue an important place.

The Role of Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics not only deals with the rightness or wrongness of individual actions, it provides guidance as to the sort of characteristics and behaviours a good person will seek to achieve. In that way, virtue ethics is concerned with the whole of a person's life, rather than particular episodes or actions.

A good person is someone who lives virtuously - who possesses and lives the virtues. It's a useful theory since human beings are often more interested in assessing the character of another person than they are in assessing the goodness or badness of a particular action. This suggests that the way to build a good society is to help its members to be good people, rather than to use laws and punishments to prevent or deter bad actions.

But, it wouldn't be helpful if a person had to be a saint to count as virtuous. For virtue theory to be really useful, it needs to suggest only a minimum set of characteristics that a person needs to possess in order to be regarded as virtuous. It is more than having a particular habit of acting, such as generosity. A right act is the action a virtuous person would do in the same circumstances. Virtue ethics is based on person rather than action: it looks at the virtue or moral character of the person carrying out an action, rather than at ethical duties and rules, or the consequences of particular actions. More importantly, it means having a fundamental set of related virtues that enable a person to live and act morally well. Virtue ethics teaches:

- An action is only right if it is an action that a virtuous person would carry out in the same circumstances.
- A virtuous person is a person who acts virtuously
- A person acts virtuously if they "possess and live the virtues"
- A virtue is a moral characteristic that a person needs to live well.

Most virtue theorists would also insist that the virtuous person is one who acts in a virtuous way as the result of rational thought (rather than, say, instinct). Most virtue theorists say that there is a common set of virtues that all human beings would benefit from, rather than

different sets for different sorts of people, and that these virtues are natural to mature human beings - even if they find it difficult to acquire.³

This poses a problem, since lists of virtues from different times in history and different societies show significant differences. The traditional list of cardinal virtues was: (1) Prudence, (2) Justice, (3) Fortitude / Bravery and (4) Temperance. The modern theologian James F Keenan suggests: (1) Justice requires us to treat all human beings equally and impartially. (2) Fidelity requires that we treat people to be closer to us with special care. (3) Self-Care: We each have a unique responsibility to care for ourselves, affectively, mentally, physically, and spiritually. (4) Prudence: the prudent person must always consider Justice, Fidelity and Self-care. The prudent person must always look for opportunities to acquire more of the other three virtues.⁴

The chapter begins with a discussion of the fundamental characteristics of virtue ethics, before undertaking a discussion of the conceptions of duty and virtue in the *Gita*. The importance of duty is stressed in the ethics of *Bhagavad-Gita*. Both the empirical and spiritual aspects of *Dhamma* (duty) are enunciated and both views of duty are regarded as equally worthy, ennobling and divine. It would be erroneous to overlook the instrumental value of social professional duties and to neglect the highest spiritual value of complete self-surrender to God.

The main purpose of the *Bhagavad-Gita* is to resolve the conflict of duties which is bound to arise in the life of a conscientious and ethical individual. With its purpose of resolving ethical conflict, we can proceed with the interpretation of its main doctrines. The four main doctrines of *Bhagavad-Gita* are: (1) the ideal of stable intellect (2) the path of knowledge, (3) the path of action and (4) the path of devotion.

Duty as Virtue Ethics

Deontological (duty-based) ethics are concerned with what people do, not with the consequences of their actions.

- Do the right thing.
- Do it because it's the right thing to do.
- Don't do wrong things.
- Avoid them because they are wrong.

Under this form of ethics, you can't justify an action by showing that it produced good consequences, which is why it's sometimes called 'non-consequentialist'. The word 'deontological' comes from the Greek word *deon*, which means 'duty'. Duty-based ethics are usually what people are talking about when they refer to 'the principle of the thing'.

Duty-based ethics teaches that some acts are right or wrong because of the sorts of things they are, and people have a duty to act accordingly, regardless of the good or bad consequences that may be produced. Deontologists appear to do it the other way around; they first consider what actions are 'right' and proceed from there. So a person is doing something good if they are doing a morally right action. There are some good points of duty-based ethics as following:

³James F. Keenan. (1995). *Proposing Cardinal Virtues: Theological Studies*. Boston: Boston College School of Theology and Ministry. pp. 712-722.

⁴Keenan, James F. (1995). *Proposing Cardinal Virtues: Theological Studies*. Boston: Boston College School of Theology and Ministry. p. 712.

- Duty-based ethics emphasis the value of every human being,
- Duty-based ethical systems tend to focus on giving equal respect to all human beings.
- This provides a basis for human rights - it forces due regard to be given to the interests of a single person even when those are at odds with the interests of a larger group.

Duty-based ethics don't suffer from this problem because they are concerned with the action itself - if an action is a right action, then a person should do it, if it's a wrong action they shouldn't do it - and providing there is a clear set of moral rules to follow then a person faced with a moral choice should be able to take decisions with reasonable certainty.⁵

The study that has been conducted up to this time concerning the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gita* would have revealed to us that we are born with a duty, and we can never be free from some duty or the other. It also implies that we have no rights; we have only duties, contrary to what one would expect from the point of view of common human nature. The fight for rights is out of point in a world of duties, which is inescapable under the set-up of things.

Duty Ethics in *Bhagavad Gita*

The duty that we owe to ourselves is that everything around us is a necessary conclusion that is to follow from the nature of our relationship with things in general. The connection between us and the world at large is such that there is a mutual obligation, as it were, between ourselves and the world. This obligation is not a compulsion, but a necessary conclusion, automatically followed by the essential character of Being-itself. Thus, duty is an empirical manifestation of true being.

Here is the sum and substance of the great gospel. Our organic relationship with things is the reason behind the duty to which we have to owe to, and this also is the reason why we don't need to expect any fruit from the duty that we perform in respect of anyone or anything. To expect a fruit is a mistake as follow:

You have a right to your actions,

But, never to your actions' fruit.

Act for the action's sake.

And do not be attached to inaction.⁶

It means that human beings have a duty. They have an obligation to do, but they have no right to expect a particular consequence or result or fruit to follow from what they do. This is a very difficult, pithy enunciation in the *Bhagavad Gita* – which we have duties but we cannot expect any fruits from the duties that we perform. This may look very odd and unpleasant to the selfish individual, but as I have tried to mention earlier, the law of the universe is not necessarily a pleasant dish that is served to the ego of man; it is a principle that operates, and it is neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Its reactions, under given conditions of personality, appear to be pleasant or otherwise.

The duty that we owe to anyone or anything is the homage that we pay to the vastness of the atmosphere in which we are placed, and the grandeur of the relationship that between us and the whole of creation. There is a majesty ruling the whole cosmos; and it is this superabundance of magnificence, which is the law of the universe, that inexorably operates

⁵ Kerstein, Samuel J. (2002). *Kant's Search for the Supreme Principle of Morality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 3.

⁶ Stephen Mitchell. (2000). *Bhagavad-Gita: A new translation*. New York: Three Rivers Press.p.54.

and impartially dispenses justice without any favour or disfavour in regard to any person or thing. It is difficult to understand what all this means if we study this theme merely as an abstract science of logical philosophy.

The privilege that you expect in this world, the right that you are craving after performing a duty, is something which you do not need to expect – it will follow. When the sun rises, there will be light. Likewise, whatever you need, which is called your expectation or the fruit, will follow spontaneously from the very fact of having performed your duty. You need not ask for the fruits; they shall drop from the skies, even without being asked.

While you have to perform duty, the nature of the consequence that follows from the performance of duty is not clear for your mind. So, to expect a particular result to follow from a particular action would be like a blind man groping in the dark and catching hold of something what he does not know. Under the given circumstance of your existence, you have an obligation towards things, which are to be clear for your mind, you cannot clearly perceive the result that will follow from that action because results are conditioned by infinite factors, not necessarily the thing that you do from the point of view of your limited understanding. There are other factors of things according to the condition.

You can present a case before a court, but you cannot decide the case yourself – that has to be done by the judge. If you already decide the case, there is no need of presenting the case at all. So, the performance of duty is something like presenting a case and the judgment is not in your hands, and as a result, you do not need to expect the fruits.

There are instincts that are emotional in nature, impulses which are sometimes overwhelming and impetuous in their action. They can even confound the intellect and the reason of man. When a passion preponderates, reason subsides; the intellect will not work when the emotions are too strong.

A man perpetuates offences though he knows that there is a law which will not permit the perpetration of this act. A person who does wrong under normal conditions knows that such an action is wrong. But, when a person is in height of passion, he is not a normal person – the normalcy is absent there. He becomes a temporary ‘out of gear individual’ who has lost the common sense that is required for a normal human individual.

In stanzas 4.7 & 4.8 of *Bhagavad-Gita* state as follow:

*Whenever righteousness falters
And chaos threatens to prevail,
I take on a human body
And manifest myself on earth.
In order to protect the good,
To destroy the doers of evil,
To ensure the triumph of righteousness,
In every age, I am born.⁷*

These words are to be written in golden script in the history of the spiritual adventure of man. Now, I revert for a few minutes to what I told you a little earlier – that we are born with a duty, perhaps we die with a duty. We do not need to be frightened about the word ‘duty’, as we might be, because of a mistaken understanding of the meaning of the word

⁷ Stephen Mitchell. (2000). *Bhagavad-Gita: A new translation*. New York: Three Rivers Press.p.73.

‘duty’. This is the reason why we are asking for privileges and rights rather than our will to do our obligation for others, or do our duties.

Everyone has created a feeling in our minds that is something imposed up on us by others. “This is something which I will not do if I am entirely free.” But you cannot be entirely free until you do your duty – here is the answer to your question. Don’t say, “I shall not do anything if I am totally free.” That freedom cannot be bestowed upon you; it is unthinkable if you are not to do your duty.

Duty and freedom go together – I have already mentioned it. Now, the duty that you are expected to perform in the world is not something imposed upon you by a government, or a social mandate from outside. It is the law of your own nature expecting you to do what is necessary, under the very structure of your own individuality, or your personality.

Bhagavad Gita as Virtue Ethics

The place of virtues in the *Gita* are (1) providing a list of those virtues that occur in the text and where they are to be found; (2) systematizing these virtues; and (3) ranking them in order to ascertain their meaning and significance related to the ethical conceptions of the *Gita*. In the process, I will also show, wherever relevant, similarities between the conceptions of virtue found in the *Gita* and Western conceptions, namely the conceptions of virtue found in Aristotle.

The task of assessing the role of virtues in the *Gita* is a difficult one. There is no word in Sanskrit that corresponds exactly to the term “virtue.” This, however, should not dissuade us from undertaking the task at hand. One finds similar obstacles in the Western context. Contemporary Western moral philosophers generally accept four cardinal virtues: courage, justice, temperance, and wisdom. However, both Aristotle and Aquinas classify the last wisdom comes under the category of intellectual virtue rather than that of moral virtue.

In addition to this general account of virtue and vice, the *Gita* also talks about the qualities or natural born dispositions that are specific to one’s place in society: Serenity, self-control, penance, purity, patience and uprightness, wisdom, judgment and piety, are natural born dispositions of a priest [*The Bhagavad Gita* 18:42]. Heroism, vigour, firmness, skill, not fleeing even in a battle, charity and leadership, are the natural born dispositions of a warrior [*The Bhagavad Gita* 18:43].⁸

The virtues noted above occur repeatedly in the *Gita*. For the sake of understanding, I will continue to attempt to systematize these virtues and determine whether or not they can be ranked in some coherent and informative fashion. Given below is an initial inventory of the verses in which specific virtues occur in the text of the *Gita*:

Using this self-regarding/other regarding distinction, the virtues in the *Gita* may be categorized as follows:

Self-Regarding Virtues are Patience, determination or resolve, self-control, evenness of the mind, endurance, restraint, simplicity, abstinence, purity, heroism, vigour, truthfulness, penance or austerity, simplicity, fearlessness, humility, modesty, gentleness, detachment, and sincerity.

Other-Regarding Virtues are Forgiveness, patience, compassion, friendship, absence of fault finding, amity, non-hatred, non-anger, non-greed, reverence, charity, non-violence, and peace. Using Vatsyayan classification, these virtues may alternatively be categorized as follows:

⁸ Stephen Mitchell. (2000). *Bhagavad-Gita: A new translation*. New York: Three Rivers Press. p.190.

Virtues of the Body are Simplicity, abstinence, endurance, charity, gentleness, purity, heroism, vigour, and non-violence.

Virtues of Speech are Truthfulness and absence of fault finding.

Virtues of the Mind are Amity, modesty, non-hatred, non-anger, non-greed, humility, freedom from delusion, self-control, forgiveness, patience, compassion, friendship, evenness of the mind, determination or resolve, faith, penance or austerity, renunciation, and peace. Therefore, cultivation of virtue is not possible in isolation, but rather only in a community of people who strive to achieve the same excellences.

Conclusion

Gita depicts *Arjuna* as a hero caught between the mandates of social code and obligations for his family and friends. It is important to remember that the *Gita*'s conception of duty is very different from what we find in either Kant or Mill. In the Western philosophy, irrespective of whether one is speaking from a Kantian or Utilitarian framework, the goal is to determine a single moral principle by which one can derive all second-order moral principles. That is, a moral principle in duty ethics is supposed to work as the criterion by which one can decide what one ought to do in all situations. For Kant, this principle is the universalizability of maxims of action without contradiction; for Mill, it is the principle of utility.

Duty ethics hopes to identify a principle from which all our duties can be derived, so that all of our duties are the applications of this principle. Thus, whereas in the Western philosophy norms for human behaviour are derived from reason and are to be met by individuals, *Dhamma*, in the Hindu tradition, is comprised of rules that have been handed down over generations and are needed for social cohesion.

A moral rule in the Hindu philosophy is not a categorical imperative; the *Gita* too, supports this view. However, these *Dhammas* are not universally obligatory for everyone, not even for members of the same community, but they are obliged only under certain circumstances. In short, the *Gita* is deontological ("duty for duty's sake") insofar as the motivation of an action is concerned.

One should do his or her duty without concern for the possible consequences to himself or herself. The expected consequences of one's actions should not serve as the motivation for doing one's duty (or failing to do it). It is important to remember that there are various kinds of *Dhammas*, not all of which are intended as a means of self-realization.

Furthermore, in addition to those individual duties, which are conditional upon one's position in society and other contingent facts, there are universal or common duties, for example, to speak the truth, to act kindly, to act compassionately, and so on. These duties are binding upon all human beings, irrespective of their caste, station in life, creed, and the like.

By assessing the place of virtue in the *Gita* are (1) providing a list of those virtues that occur in the text and where they are to be found; (2) systematizing these virtues; and (3) ranking them in order to ascertain their meaning and significance related to the ethical conceptions of the *Gita*. In the process, wherever relevant and similarities between the conceptions of virtue found in the *Gita* and Western conceptions, namely the conceptions of virtue found in Aristotle.

Thus, according to the ethical conceptions of the *Gita*, each person has his inborn nature and it is his duty to follow this nature. So, the *Gita* argues that there are two components of human nature: the bad, that is those desires and passions that moral agents should try to overcome, and the principle of goodness which constantly struggles to free itself

from the influence of others. The cultivation of a life of virtue is understood more on the analogy of a musician practicing to be a good violinist than trying to do one's duty (e.g., Kant's imperfect duty to cultivate one's talents).

In Hindu ethics, irrespective of whether one is looking at its beginnings, or at its later formulations, the subjective has consistently been emphasized, although objective morality is exhibited in some external code of acts, which must be performed to ensure the well-being of society as a whole that is also to be recognized. It is important to underscore one important point here: in Hindu ethics, the term "*Dhamma*" is used for both "duty" and "virtue." There are two components of *Dhamma*, the subjective and the objective. The subjective *dharma* is concerned with inner purification, purification of the mind, inner discipline; the objective *Dhamma* is concerned with duties, including universal or common duties and those duties that depend on a person's particular position in society and stage of life. One cultivates virtues in order to conquer one's passions and desires.

Virtues are character traits that find expression in habitual actions; they are good for the individual and in turn are conducive to the well-being of society as a whole. Virtues subdue the impious and manifest the pious. This explains why there are more self-regarding virtues in the Gita than other-regarding virtues, and more virtues of the mind than virtues of the body or speech. The idea is that cultivation of virtues will translate into the right kinds of actions.

To sum up, the above description makes it obvious that the cultivation of virtues is important in the overall conception of the Gita. Its ethical conception also includes a theory of duty. It instructs an individual person to do his duty as a social being, and to do so by cultivating certain excellences so that his duties become a part of his nature, an expression of his abiding character. It does not present any conflict between duty and virtue; duty is not incompatible with virtue, but with the two complement of each other.

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