

## Chapter Four

### A Comparative Study between Kant's Moral Action and the Moral Action of Bhagavadgītā

The main objective of this Chapter is to make a comparative study between Kant's moral action and the moral action of Bhagavadgītā. In the previous chapter, we have outlined the concept of moral action; the source of action, the aim of moral action from the perspective of Bhagavadgītā. We have seen that Kant's moral actions differ from the moral actions of Bhagavadgītā. However, there are some similarities and dissimilarities between them. To make a comparative study, let me spell out the similarities and dissimilarities about moral action concerning Kant and Bhagavadgita.

#### 4.1: Similarities between the moral actions of Kant and Bhagavadgītā

- i) The first similarity between them is that both the ethics of Kant and the ethics of Bhagavadgītā on moral actions are based on some presuppositions. In Kantian ethics, Kant accepted some postulations such as freedom of will, the immortality of the soul, summum bonum, and the existence of God for formulating his moral action. Kant has accepted freedom of will for establishing the possibility of the categorical imperative *as a synthetic a priori proposition*. There is nothing wrong to say that the idea of freedom is a fundamental necessary postulation in Kantian ethics. According to Kant, a moral agent must be free and he must enjoy freedom. That is why he talks in favor of 'the freedom of the will'. It is a condition under which one's morality is possible. To establish morality, Kant also accepted the immortality of the soul, summum bonum, and the existence of God. Here it should be noted after Kant that to have moral worth in our action, we should not do our action for getting *summum*

*bonum* rather we should do our action *for the sake of action*. Our ultimate end is the duty, but not *summum bonum*.

On the other hand, in the case of *niṣkāma karma* of Bhagavadgītā, Lord Kṛṣṇa, like Kant, accepted some postulations for formulating the concept of *niṣkāma karma*. These are the freedom of will, *svadharma*, *paradharmā*, *sādhāraṇadharmā*, bondage, *Mokṣa*, and so on. We have also seen that there is an important role of *svadharma* in establishing moral action in Bhagavadgītā. In Bhagavadgītā the freedom of will is also accepted as a postulation of moral action.

- ii) Another similarity between Kant's moral action and the moral action of Bhagavadgītā is that both Kant and Bhagavadgītā emphasize on actions. For them. actions should be worshiped for a moral life. For Kant, if we do actions for the sake of actions then our actions can be treated as moral actions. One can lead to moral life by doing moral actions. On the other hand, Bhagavadgītā, like Kant, also holds that we have the right to act alone (*karmaṇy evādhikāras te*).<sup>175</sup> We are always bound to do actions because we are created by three *guṇas*. For this reason, we are determined to do our actions. We can get a moral life by performing our prescribed actions. As a result of that, we can get a peaceful life. Thus, the ethics of Kant and the ethics of Bhagavadgītā intended to say that we should do our moral actions for getting moral life even though the criteria of moral actions differ from each other. That means if we accept either the moral action of Kant or the moral action of Bhagavadgītā then we can easily lead a moral life.
- iii) Another similarity between them is that according to both Kant and Bhagavadgītā, moral action is needed to determine the meaning of life. For Bhagavadgītā, one can

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<sup>175</sup> Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, A.C., *Bhagavad-gītā, As It Is*, Chapter-02, *Śloka* 47, op. cit., P. 121.

lead a good life if he would be a moral agent in the true sense of the term. This is where the relevance of *Lokasamgraha* actually hinges on. On the other hand, Kant also said about the meaning of life. However, the meaning of life of Kant is very similar to Bhagavadgītā. For Kant, a moral agent would be one who becomes a member of the kingdom of ends. He can find the meaning of real life. Therefore, according to both Kant and Bhagavadgītā, the genesis of moral action or desireless action is to determine the meaning of life and to reveal the reality in the true sense of the term. There are some dissimilarities between Kant's ethics and the ethics of Bhagavadgītā on moral actions. Let me discuss this.

#### **4.2: Dissimilarities between the Ethics of Kant and the Ethics of Bhagavadgītā on Moral Actions**

Dissimilarities between them are as follows:

- i) The first dissimilarity between them is about the nature of moral action. According to Kant, if an action is done for the sake of duty alone then it would be treated as moral action. If an action is done with the desire of getting something then it would not be treated as moral action. If we do our action for the sake of some specific ends then such kind of action has no moral value. For Kant, such type of action can be treated as socially good, but it has no moral value.

On the other hand, in Bhagavadgītā, if an action is done with the desire for *lokasamgraha* then it would be treated as moral action. Bhagavadgītā does not suggest us to do the action for the sake of duty alone. If an action is done without any egoistic desire to the result thereof then it would be treated as moral action.

- ii) We have seen after Kant that the highest good is good will.<sup>176</sup> Good will is unconditional good. It is unqualified good. Its goodness is not dependent on any context. It has intrinsic value. It is good in itself. Under the human condition, a will is acting for the sake of duty is called good will. It should be noted that there is no necessary connection between good will and duty. We have also seen that it is also different from complete good or *summum bonum*. *Summum bonum* includes both virtue and happiness. In Kantian ethics, it should be noted that Kant did not deny happiness. However, according to him, happiness must not be the motive for pursuing morality. It means that happiness can be accepted if it is not in conflict with the moral law. Good will also differs from the supreme good in Kantian ethics. In Kantian ethics, virtue is the supreme good.

On the other hand, in Bhagavadgītā, *Mokṣa* is the highest good. One can get infinite bliss of contact with the Supreme Being in Liberation. According to Bhagavadgītā, we should do our action for getting the ultimate end, which is nothing other than *Mokṣa*.

- iii) Another difference between them is that Kantian ethics about action is known as deontological. For Kant, an action is done from duty has its moral value, not in the intention to be attained by it. If an action is done solely from the principle of will then it has moral worth. For Kant, if an action is performed irrespective of all objects of the faculty of desire then it has moral worth. Kant's deontology is called rule deontology by some scholars. For them, Kant did not accept any exception in his morality.

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<sup>176</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, op. cit., P.64.

On the other hand, we have seen that the ethics of *Bhagavadgītā* about moral action is neither deontological nor teleological. First, let me explain why is the concept of *niṣkāma karma* not deontological? According to *Bhagavadgītā*, we should do our actions for *Lokasamgraha*. All desires would not be eradicated in *Bhagavadgītā*. If there is a desire in our action for getting *Lokasamgraha* then it has moral worth. That is why such type of action would be treated as moral action. Thus *Bhagavadgītā* does not suggest us to do an action for the sake of duty alone. On the other hand, for Kant, an action should be done for the sake of duty alone. In this regard, we can say that the doctrine of *niṣkāma karma* of *Bhagavadgītā* is not deontological like Kant's theory of moral actions.

Let us see, whether the concept of *niṣkāma karma* is teleological. Some scholars interpret *niṣkāma karma* in a relative sense. They claimed that the concept of *niṣkāma karma* is teleological because the concept of *niṣkāma karma*, like the teleological concept, is logically rested on some specific ends and it prescribes *karma* hypothetically. Primarily it seems that their views on *niṣkāma karma* are right. As we have seen that the concept of *niṣkāma karma* is used in a relative sense and it is logically rested on some specific ends, i.e., *Lokasamgraha*, *Mokṣa*. However, it is not enough to justify that the concept of *niṣkāma karma* is teleological. The reason for that if we look carefully then we see that we have to understand the concepts of *svadharma*, *paradharmā* of *Bhagavadgītā* for interpreting the concept of *niṣkāma karma*. As if one does an action for the welfare of the world (*Lokasamgraha*) by performing *paradharmā* then his action is not treated as moral action. Such type of action is forbidden in *Bhagavadgītā* because doing *paradharmā* is bad for the doer

and society. We have also seen that for *Bhagavadgītā*, an action is done with the spirit of *paradharmā*, which binds one to worldliness, however glorious it might be. For doing *niṣkāma karma* we have to do our *svadharmā*. Thus, we can say that we cannot understand the concept of *niṣkāma karma* without understanding the concept of *svadharmā* or *paradharmā*. Here nothing is wrong to say that *svadharmā* is an integral part of *niṣkāma karma*. It would also be noted that the concept of *niṣkāma karma* is mixed with the concept of *svadharmā*. On the other hand, we do not see any concept like *svadharmā* or *paradharmā* in the doctrine of teleology. In this regard, we can say that the concept of *niṣkāma karma* is not teleological. Therefore, we can say that the concept of *niṣkāma karma* is neither a deontological concept nor a teleological concept. The concept of *niṣkāma karma* is unique. It has its own identity.

iv) Another difference between them is that Kant did not recognize the concept of *svadharmā* in his ethics. It means that Kant gave his moral theory for all rational beings. It is not limited to any *varṇa*, creed, group, etc. According to him, one as a rational being should do an action for the sake of duty. On the other hand, we have seen that Lord Kṛṣṇa holds that there are four *varṇa* in this world and they are created by Him based on *guṇas* and *karma*. There are some prescribed duties for every *varṇa* in society. These prescribed duties are called *svadharmas*. For Kṛṣṇa, everyone is born in particular *varṇa* based on the result of actions of one's previous birth. So, we have to perform our *svadharmā*. It is also noticeable that if an action is granted for a brāhmana then it would not be granted for a kṣatriya. It means that an action may not be valid to all *varṇas*. A brāhmana's action is called *paradharmā* for a kṣatriya.

*Paradharma* means duty (*dharma*) of another person.<sup>177</sup> For Kṛṣṇa, if any *varṇa* performs *paradharmas* for *Lokasamgraha* then such type of actions do not lead to *lokasamgraha*. It means that such type of effort is gone to vain. *Paradharma* is forbidden for every *varṇa*. *Paradharma* is bad for doer and society. It means that by performing *paradharma* one cannot get *Mokṣa*. Thus we should do our *svadharma* for getting *Mokṣa*. However, there is no reference to the *varṇa* system in Kantian ethics. Kantian ethics remain completely silent about the *varṇa* system.

- v) Another difference between them is that there is no place of any desire to the result of an action that is either egoistic or altruistic in Kantian ethics for doing moral action, except reverence for the law (moral). According to Kant, if we act based on any desire which is either egoistic or altruistic then our maxim about action is to be treated as a material maxim. Material maxim is dependent on our sensuous inclinations. Such type of material maxim refers to the desires goals. It entails that if an action is done with material maxim then it has no moral value. Thus the maxim of an action is done for the sake of duty must not be material. However, it should be formal. A formal maxim is a kind of maxim that is not dependent on desire ends.
- On the other hand, we have seen that Lord Kṛṣṇa did not advise to eradicate all desires in *Bhagavadgītā*. He just wanted to say through Arjuna that everyone should eradicate his egoistic desire for performing actions. When one can go beyond the circle of ‘I’ ness and ‘My’ then one can know one’s real nature. As a result of that one can do *lokasamgraha*. By acting for *Lokasamgraha* one can get *Mokṣa*. According to *Bhagavadgītā* if any action is enveloped with a desire for the welfare of the world (*Lokasamgraha*) then it gathers ethical value. Thus, according to

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<sup>177</sup> Srinivasa Chari, S.M., *The Philosophy of the Bhagavadgītā*, op. cit., P. 286.

Bhagavadgītā, egoistic desire should be sublimated. Those actions which are not concerned with egoistic ends, they should be treated as moral actions even if there are some desires behind them.

- vi) Another difference between them is that in Kantian ethics, according to the formula of the end of itself, we should always treat humanity as an end; never simply as a means. It means that for Kant, we as rational persons should treat ourselves and also other rational beings as ends in themselves. In this regard, Kant remarks, “I cannot dispose of man in my person by maiming, spoiling, or killing.”<sup>178</sup> Here Kant may desire to say that we cannot kill any rational person for any reason. That is why he did not accept any exception in his morality. For Kant, every rational being is an end in itself. We should be members of a kingdom of ends. Every rational being should act as a law-making member of a kingdom of ends. It means that if we treat any rational being simply as a means then our action is not treated as moral action. Such type of action does not lead *summum bonum*. Thus the killing of a rational being is not granted in Kantian ethics.

On the contrary, Bhagavadgītā holds that by performing own *svadharma* if one kills someone then it is morally granted. It means that for *Lokasaṃgraha* one can kill someone by performing *svadharma*. We have also seen that in the righteous battle, Lord Kṛṣṇa suggests Arjuna that you should prefer your *svadharma*. If you kill someone by performing your *kṣatrya* dharma then you would go to heaven and do help for the welfare of the world. As a result of that, you would not incur sin and get *Mokṣa*. For Kṛṣṇa, we should do our *svadharma*. In performing *svadharma* one can

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<sup>178</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, op. cit., P. 97.

get peace and perfectness. Thus the killing of a human being is granted in Bhagavadgītā.

- vii) We find another difference between Kant’s ethics and the ethics of Bhagavadgītā. According to Kant if an action is performed by influencing senses then it has no moral value. According to Kant, “*Duty is the necessity to act out of reverence for the law.*”<sup>179</sup> Kant further says, “What I recognize immediately as law for me, I recognize with reverence, which means merely consciousness of the *subordination* of my will to a law without the mediation of external influences on my senses.”<sup>180</sup> Thus if an action is done out of reverence for the universal law then it has moral value. In other words, if an action is done by influencing senses then it has no moral value.

On the other hand, Bhagavadgītā holds that one should perform one’s *svadharma* by way of conquering the senses (*Jita- indriyah*).<sup>181</sup> In this regard, Lord Kṛṣṇa claims that the *yogins* (men of action) act simply with the senses, abandoning attachment, only for the motive of purification of their souls.<sup>182</sup> It means that according to Bhagavadgītā if anyone performs his prescribed actions with his senses for *Lokasamgraha* or *Mokṣa* then such types of actions would be treated as moral actions.

- viii) Another difference between them is that Kant did not recognize the cycle of birth and death of the soul in his ethics. That is why he technically claims that the immortality of the soul is “an endless duration of the existence and personality of the same

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., P. 68.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., P. 69.

<sup>181</sup> Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, A.C., *Bhagavad-gītā, As It Is*, Chapter-05, *Śloka* 07, op. cit., P. 250.

<sup>182</sup> Radhakrishnan, S., *The Bhagavadgītā*, Chapter 05, *Śloka* 11, op. cit., P. 178.

rational being.”<sup>183</sup> On the other hand, *Bhagavadgītā* accepted the cycle of birth and death of the soul. The cycle of birth and death of the soul is called *bondage*. It (bondage) is the fruit of the *karma* of previous *karmas*. We can get *mokṣa* from this bondage by performing actions with *niṣkāma* manner.

- ix) Another noticeable difference between them is that Kant accepted the existence of God as a postulate of pure practical reason for protecting his morality. In this regard, Kant remarks, “The realization of summum bonum in the world is the necessary object of a will determinable by the moral law.”<sup>184</sup> He also claims, “The summum bonum is possible in the world only on the supposition of a Supreme Being having a causality corresponding to moral character,”<sup>185</sup> and that is God.

On the other hand, we have seen after *Bhagavadgītā* that the ultimate end of our action is to attain God. For *Bhagavadgītā*, everything of this universe arises from Godly existence. In this regard, Lord Kṛṣṇa asserts, “I am the father of this universe, the mother, the support and the grandsire, I am the object of knowledge, the purifier, and the syllable *om*. I am also Ṛg, the *Sāma*, and the *Yajur* Vedas.”<sup>186</sup> It means that we should do our action in *niṣkāma* manner for attaining the Supreme Being. Attaining the Supreme Being is called *Mokṣa*.

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<sup>183</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, op. cit., P.126.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., P. 126.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., P. 129.

<sup>186</sup> Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, A.C., *Bhagavad-gītā, As It Is*, Chapter-09, *Śloka* 17, op. cit., P. 422.