

## THE STATUS OF THE ETHICAL THEORY OF ŚRIMADBHAGAVADGĪTĀ: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

KRISHNA PAUL

*The Bhagavadgītā occupies the central place in the ethical history of Indian philosophy. It is the quintessence of Hindu culture and the sum and substance of Indian philosophical theory and practice, metaphysics and ethics, religion, mysticism, tradition etc. For millions of people it is the gospel of truth, the message of divine life and an inspiring and stimulating ideal for the conduct of life. Anyone, in any social status, sex, religion or society, can derive practical guidance from it. Hence I would like to discuss about the status of the ethical theory of Śrimadbhagavadgītā.*

*Mainly this article is an attempt to show that ethical theory advocated in Śrimadbhagavadgītā is not deontological as rather it is an amalgamation of ethical egoism, ethical universalism which is popularly known as utilitarianism and also virtue ethics. It starts with ethical egoism and passes through virtue ethics and ultimately reaches at utilitarianism.*

**Keywords:** *Śrimadbhagavadgītā, niṣkāma karma, virtue ethics, ethical egoism, utilitarianism, Lokasaṁgraha.*

There is a long controversy regarding whether *niṣkāma karma* is teleological or deontological or something else. The popular notion describes *niṣkāma karma* as deontological. This notion also proposes to identify *niṣkāma karma* with the deontological theory of Kant 'duty for duty's sake'. I think so long as the verse no 47; chapter II of *Śrimadbhagavadgītā* goes the observation of the above mentioned popular notion is quite justified. This verse runs as

*Karmaṇy evā dhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana/  
mā karmaphalahetur bhūr mā te saṅgo stv akarmaṇi// 2/47*

To action alone hast thou a right and never at all to its fruits; let not the fruits of action be thy motive; neither let there be in thee any attachment to inaction.<sup>1</sup> That is, we have the right to perform the action only if we do not have the right to desire the fruit of the action because obtaining or not obtaining the fruit of the action is not in our control and we must not perform the action expecting the fruit of the action, i.e., our fruit of the action must not be the cause of the performing action and that is why we must not give up the action, since we have no hope of fruit.

This verse clearly says that one has his right upon his act only and not upon the fruits or consequences of one's activity. So, there is no room for ambiguity that *niṣkāma karma* is deontological. But I cannot agree with this view. This popular view is the result of misunderstanding of the real sense of the above verse. This view sees the above verse in isolation from the context.

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<sup>1</sup> Radhakrishnan S. *The Bhagavadgītā*, George Allen & unwin Ltd., 1963, p. 119

But we know that the real sense of any statement can be understood only when it is seen in the light of the context in which it is used. We see that the verse no 47 mentioned above is preceded and succeeded by so many verses where *Kṛṣṇa* repeatedly assures *Arjuna*, the representative of all people living in society, of reaping the consequences of his activity. In the beginning of the second chapter Lord *Kṛṣṇa* describes *ātmatattva*, the real nature of soul. Subsequently, he advises Arjuna to engage in fighting. *Kṛṣṇa* describes the battle of *Kurukṣetra* as *dharmayuddha*. *Kṛṣṇa* reminds *Arjuna* of his *sadharna*. As he is *kṣatriya* his *varṇa* – *dharma* i.e. *sadharna* is the discharge of the duty of fighting in the battle field. Nothing can be more beneficial to him other than performing his *svadharna*. (*Sadharme nidhanam śreyaḥ paradharma bhayāvah* 3/35). In this context *Kṛṣṇa* takes the help of the verses 33-40 to convince *Arjuna* how he can be benefited if he discharges his noble duty meant for his own *varṇa*, i.e. *Kṣatriya*. These verses are given below:

*Atha cettvamimam dharmyam saṁgrāmam na kariṣyasi/  
Tataḥ svadharmam kīrtim ca hitvā pāpamvāpsyasi// 2/33*

But if thou doest not this lawful battle, then thou wilt fail thy duty and glory and will incur sin.<sup>2</sup> It means if you abstain from fighting you will gain sin and lose your fame and *sadharna*.

*Akīrtiñcāpi bhūtāni kathayiṣyanti teheavyayān/  
Sambhāvitasya cākīrtīmarañādatiricyate// 2/34*

Besides, men will ever recount thy ill-fame and for one who has been honored, ill-fame is worse than death.<sup>3</sup> People will blame and criticize you. Death is superior to infame.

*Bhayādrañāduparataṁ maṁsyante tvāṁ mahārathāḥ/  
Yesāñca tvāṁ vahumato bhūtvā yāsyasi laghavan// 2/35*

The great warriors will think that thou hast abstained from battle through fear and they by whom thou waste highly esteemed will make light of thee.<sup>4</sup> The heroes, great fighters, will think that you are abstaining from fighting due to fear. So, you lose your respect from those who show deep respect to you today.

*Avācyavādāmśca vahūn vadiṣyanti tavāhitāḥ/  
Nindantastava sāmartyam tato duḥkhataram nu kin// 2/36*

Many unseemly words will be uttered by thy enemies, slandering thy strength. Could anything be sadder than that?<sup>5</sup> Your enemies also will pass so

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.113

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113

many heinous comments regarding you. What may be more suffering than this?

*Hato vā prāpsyasi svargaṃ jītvā vā bhokṣyase mahīn/  
Tasmāduṭṭiṣṭa kounteya yuddyāya kṛtaniścayaḥ// 2/37*

Either slain thou shalt go to heaven; or victorious thou shalt enjoy the earth; therefore arise, O Son of *Kunti* (*Arjuna*), resolved on battle.<sup>6</sup> If you die in battle then you will go to heaven but if you win the same then you will enjoy the world. So, stand up and keep engage in fighting.

*Sukhaduḥkhe same kṛtvā lābhālābhau jayājau/  
Tata yudhyāya yujyasya naivam pāpamavāpsyasi// 2/38*

Treating alike pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat, then get ready for battle. Thus thou shall not incur sin.<sup>7</sup> If you fight the battle thinking pleasure and pain, loss and gain, winning and defeat alike then you will no more be the subject of sin.

This verse is contradictory. Here one is advised to consider pleasure and pain, profit and loss etc. alike. But it is also said that if one does so then he will no more be the subject of sin. Abstaining from being the subject of sin is obviously a case of profit. So there is a sharp contradiction in this verse. If one has already in his mind the thinking of the profit of being free from sin then how can he consider the profit and loss alike?

*Eṣā tehabhihitā sāmkhya budhiryoge tvimām śṛṇū/  
Budhyā yukto yayā pārtha karmavandham prahāsyasi// 2/39*

This is the wisdom of the *Sāmkhya* given to thee, O Partha (*Arjuna*). Listen now to the wisdom of the Yoga. If your intelligence accepts it, thou shalt cast away the bondage of works.<sup>8</sup> I have dealt with the knowledge of *Sāmkhya* so far and now I am going to deal with the knowledge of Yoga. If you ascertain the same you can make free yourself from the bindings of your *karma*.

*Nehābhikramanāsahasti pratyavāya na vidyate/  
Svalpampasya dharmasya trāyate mahato bhayāt// 2/40*

In this path, no effort is ever lost and no obstacle prevails; even a little of this righteousness (dharma) saves from great fear.<sup>9</sup> .... even if someone follows this religious code to a little extent he will be free from great fear.

All the verses mentioned above clearly imply that the ethical theory underlying *Gītā* at least up to verse 40 of chapter-II is teleological but not deontological at all. It is worthy to note that this teleological theory belongs to

<sup>6</sup> Radhakrishnan S. The Bhagavadgītā, George Allen & unwin Ltd., 1963, p. 113

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 114

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 114

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 116

the category called ethical egoism simply because all above mentioned verses advise *Arjuna* to discharge his *svadharma* since it will promote his own greatest good. Here in order to substantiate our view we can cite what is said by W.K. Frankena “Teleologists differ on the question of whose good it is that one ought to try to promote. Ethical egoism holds that one is always to do what will promote his own greatest good.”<sup>10</sup>

Thus it is seen that the verses mentioned above advise *Arjuna* to perform *karma* for the sake of consequences of some sort or other. In verse no. 47 *Kṛṣṇa* advises *Arjuna* to discharge *niṣkāma karma*, “*Karmaṇye vādhikāraste mā phaleṣu kadācana. Mā karmaphalāheturbhūrmā te saṁgahastvakarmani*”(2/47). This verse goes up and transcends the desire of consequence. In the subsequent verses *Kṛṣṇa* advises *Arjuna* to uplift himself at the state of *Sthitaprajña* and thereby the ethical teaching of *Gītā* turns into virtue ethics. In this context *Gītā* beautifully explains what should be the real properties of a person who is *sthitaprajña*. *Gītā* explains the same particularly in verse no 55 and 56. They run as follows:

*Prajahāti yadā kāmān sarvān pārtha monagatān/  
Ātmanyevātmanā tuṣṭaḥ sthitaprajñastadocyate// 2/55*

When a man puts away all the desires of his mind, O *Partha* (*Arjuna*), and when his spirit is content in itself, then he is called stable in intelligence.<sup>11</sup> If a person gives up all sorts of desire and remains content in himself then that person is called *Sthitaprajña*.

*Duḥkheṣvanudvignamanāḥ sukheṣu vigatasprihaḥ/  
Vītarāgabhayakrodhaḥ sthitadhīrmunirucyate// 2/56*

He whose mind is untroubled in the midst of sorrows and is free from eager desire amid pleasures, he from whom passion, fear, and rage have passed away, he is called a sage of settled intelligence.<sup>12</sup> The person who remains calm, quite, restless and indifferent both in pain and pleasure, who gets rid of self interest, fear and anger is known as *Sthitaprajña*.

Thus it is seen that two verses advise *Arjuna* to be virtuous. Here someone may think that this type of observation cannot be accepted. How can one and the same *Gītā* propose two rival theories of utilitarianism and virtue ethics? But our close examination shows that in fact there is no contradiction between them, both of them can go hand in hand. They are complementary to each other. How can one perform good work without being good? Again one becomes good gradually through the performance of good work. Perhaps

<sup>10</sup> W.K. Frankena, *Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Prentice – Hall of India Private Limited, New Delhi – 110001, 1993, P. 15

<sup>11</sup> Radhakrishnan S. *The Bhagavadgītā*, George Allen & unwin Ltd., 1963, p. 123

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123

keeping this in view *Gītā* advises *Arjuna* to perform *niṣkāma karma* (good work) and to be a good and virtuous person otherwise called *Sthitaprajña*. Here one may think that so far as verses 47, 55 and 56 are concerned the ethical theory of the *Śrimadbhagavadgītā* can be considered as deontological. But I think problem comes when we come across verse no. 19, 20 and 25 of chapter – III. In verse no. 19 *Kṛṣṇa* says

*Tasmādsaktaḥ satataṁ kāryaṁ karma samācara/  
Asakto hyācāran karma paramāpnati pūruṣaḥ// 3/19*

Therefore, without attachment, perform always the work that has to be done, for man attains to the highest by doing work without attachment.<sup>13</sup> *Kṛṣṇa* advises *Arjuna* to perform his action being detached from the desire of fruits and if he does so he will attain his ultimate goal.

Again *Kṛṣṇa* says of *lokasamgraha*, in verse 20 of third chapter

*karmaṇaiva hi saṁsiddhimāsthitā janakādyaḥ/  
Lokasamgrahamevāpi sampaśyan kartumarhasi// 3/20*

It was even by works that *Janaka* and others attained to perfection. Thou shouldst do works also with a view to the maintenance of the world.<sup>14</sup> And also verse 25 of third chapter *Kṛṣṇa* explain the concept of *Lokasamgraha*.

*Saktākḥ karmany avidvāṁso yathā kurvanti bhārata/  
kuryād vidvāṁs tathā 'saktaś cikīrṣur lokasamgraham// 3/25*

As the unlearned act from attachment to their work, so should the learned also act, O *Bharata* (*Arjuna*), but without any attachment, with the desire to maintain the world-order.<sup>15</sup>

Here *Kṛṣṇa* advises *Arjuna* to perform his action for the sake of promoting the wellbeing of society and thereby the ethical theory of the *Gītā* which was *niṣkāma* turns into ethical universalism which is popularly known as utilitarianism. To substantiate our view the definition of utilitarianism given by W.K.Frankena may be referred to. “*Ethical universalism, or what is usually called utilitarianism, takes the position that the ultimate end is the greatest general good that an act or rule of action is right if and only if it is, or probably is, conducive to at least as great a balance of good over evil in the universe as a whole as any alternative would be, wrong if it is not, and obligatory if it is or probably is conducive to the greatest possible balance of good over evil in the universe.*”<sup>16</sup> So, as long as this definition of utilitarianism

<sup>13</sup> Radhakrishnan S. *The Bhagavadgītā*, George Allen & unwin Ltd., 1963, p. 138

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 139

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 141

<sup>16</sup> W.K. Frankena, *Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Prentice – Hall of India Private Limited, New Delhi – 110001, 1993, pp. 15-16

goes it is very clear that *niṣkāma karma* suggested by the *Gītā* is a case of utilitarianism.

### **Conclusion:**

So far as our discussion is concerned it is established that the ethical teaching of *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* is not deontological at all; rather it is teleological. It starts with ethical egoism, passes through virtue ethics and ultimately reaches at ethical universalism which is popularly known as utilitarianism.

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