

ETHICAL TEACHING OF ŚRIMADBHAGAVADGĪTĀ: A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT:

Śrīmadbhagavadgītā, the holy book of the Hindus, is often regarded as an important book in Indian philosophical thought. The *Bhagavadgītā* is the part of the great *Mahabharata* epic that is being presented in the ‘*BhīṣmaParva*’, chapter 25-42. Beyond religious views, the *Gītā* has a highly ethical and philosophical significance. It comprises eighteen chapters and seven hundred verses (*slokās*). It is mainly a dialogue between Sri Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna on the battlefield of *Kurukṣetra*.

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’. They clearly say 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. This article, primarily, is an attempt to show that the ethical theory of *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* is not deontological, rather it is very much teleological.

KEYWORDS: *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, *niṣkāma karma*, utilitarianism, teleological, deontological, *Lokasaṃgraha*.

In the very outset, we should frankly admit that those who think that the ethical theory of *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* is deontological have strong arguments in support of their own observation. First, let us explain the arguments which may be produced by them in support of their own views. By the deontological theory, we mean a theory

which is independent of the consequences of the action. According to the deontological theory, an action is morally right by virtue of its own nature, irrespective of its consequences. So far as verse no. 47 of Chapter Two of the *Gītā* is concerned, there is no room for any doubt that the ethical theory of *Śrimadbhagavadgītā* is deontological:

karmaṇy evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana/

mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr mā te saṅgo 'stv akarmaṇi/ (BG.2/47)

Secondly, the teleological theory may otherwise be called the utilitarian theory. The utilitarian theory has different versions, but the most popular version of utilitarian theory is the theory propounded by John Stuart Mill. According to this version, an act is morally good if and only if it promotes the greatest balance of good (happiness) over evil for the greatest number. It clearly implies that teleological theory gives much more importance to the greatest happiness. But so far as *śloka* no. 56 and 48 of Chapter Two are concerned, a *karmayogī*, who is otherwise known as *Sthitaprajña*, must remain indifferent to both happiness and unhappiness, or in other words, he must look upon both of them as equal.

Thirdly, the follower of the utilitarian theory must give priority to the satisfaction of the demands of the sense organs. The demands of the sense organs can be properly attributed to *kāma*. But the ethical theory of *Śrimadbhagavadgītā* advises us to perform *niṣkāma Karma*. In *śloka* no. 54 of the Second Chapter, Arjuna wants to know the nature of a *karmayogī* or *Sthitaprajña* (*sthita-prajñasya kā bhāṣhā samādhi-sthasya keśhava sthita-dhīḥ kiṁ prabhāṣheta kiṁ āsīta vrajeta kiṁ*) (BG 2.54).

In reply to this question, *Śrī Kṛṣṇa* says in the immediately following verse of the same chapter that the *Sthitaprajña* must be devoid of *kāma* (desire) of all sorts. This once again establishes that the ethical theory of *Śrimadbhagavadgītā* cannot be teleological or utilitarian. No doubt, the arguments that may be produced by those

who consider the ethical theory of *Śrimadbhagavadgītā* as deontological are highly convincing.

But I think that all those arguments can be countered by some other arguments given below. First, in the very introduction of the ethical theory of *Śrimadbhagavadgītā*, *Śrī Kṛṣṇa* repeatedly speaks of its consequences. The ethical theory of *Śrimadbhagavadgītā*, which is otherwise known as *yoga* or *niṣkāma Karma* or *buddhi yoga*, has been introduced in verse 39 of the Second Chapter:

eṣā te 'bhihitā sām̐khye buddhir yoge tv imām śṛṇū/

buddhyā yukto yayā pārtha karma bandhaṁ prahāsyasi// (BG.2/39)

Here *Śrī Kṛṣṇa* clearly says that if one follows *Karma yoga* or *buddhi yoga* taught by the *Gītā*, he must be free from the bindings of *Karma*. Again, in the next verse, that is, in verse 40 of the same chapter, *Kṛṣṇa* says that if one follows the same, then thereby he must be free from the greatest fear. Obviously, by greatest fear, the *Gītā* refers to the fear of death and suffering. Besides this, we come across the consequences of *Karma yoga* in verse no. 20 of the Third Chapter. In verses no. 39 and 40, the *Gītā* refers to one consequence of *niṣkāma Karma*, but verse no. 20 of Chapter Three mentions twofold consequences of the same- one is *mokṣa* for the individual concerned, and the other is *Lokasaṁgraha* or the well-being of society. So far as the consequences of *Lokasaṁgraha* are concerned, it appears to match with the teleological theory of J. S. Mill. *Lokasaṁgraha* literally means the well-being of society or people. *Niṣkāma Karma* establishes *Lokasaṁgraha*; it implies that it ensures the greatest good for the greatest number. Thus, it is seen that so far as the concept of *Lokasaṁgraha*, the second consequence, is concerned, it refutes the second argument given above by the opponent.

So far as the third argument given by the opponent is concerned, we agree with them. But we think that this argument is not so strong that it can refute the view that the ethical theory of *Śrimadbhagavadgītā* is teleological. What is most important to note

in this regard is whether it has consequences or not. But so far as our discussion is concerned, it is very clear that *niṣkāma Karma* has at least two consequences, and both of them are profound. This is more than sufficient to establish that the ethical theory of *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* is teleological. Here someone may raise an objection against our observation. They may argue that deontological theory never says that actions are devoid of consequences. All actions must have some consequences, either positive or negative. What the deontological theory maintains is that when we perform our action, we have to perform the same being indifferent to its consequences. So when someone maintains that the *Gītā* refers to the consequences of *niṣkāma Karma*, thereby they actually cannot deny the view of the opponent. Anybody will agree that this objection is a sound objection. But we think that the question here is not only referring to the consequences of *niṣkāma Karma*. If we carefully go through the whole *Gītā*, then we can easily understand that the spirit of the *Gītā* is to encourage us to follow *niṣkāma Karma* in order to achieve the consequences. Say, for example, the 66th verse of Chapter 18 runs as:

sarva-dharmān parityajya mām ekaṁ śharaṇaṁ vraja/

aham tvām sarva-pāpebhyo mokṣhayiṣhyāmi mā śhuchaḥ//
(BG.18/66).

This clearly encourages us to do the same in order to achieve *mokṣa*, the consequence. In this way, a number of verses can be mentioned which prove that the *Gītā* encourages us to perform our actions with the intention of attaining consequences. Then how can it be deontological?

In the *Bhagavadgītā*, the activity of Lord *Kṛṣṇa* is not deontological; rather, it is very much teleological. Now we explain why we say that the activity of Lord *Kṛṣṇa* is not deontological but rather teleological. In verses seven and eight of Chapter Four, *Kṛṣṇa* says:

yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata/

abhyutthānam adharmasya tadātmānam sṛjāmy aham// (BG.4/7)

paritrāṇāya sādḥūnām vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām/

dharma-saṁsthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge// (BG.4/8)

Now we explain a small observation about incarnation (*avatāra*). The main purpose of an incarnation is to restore balance by destroying excessive evil when it becomes problematic and threatens the order and regularity of creation. Its purpose is somewhat similar to that of a self-correcting mechanism or a safety valve. By nature, God is impartial. He does not take sides. God has no desires, bias, partiality, or interest whatsoever. However, to make the worlds work and control the forces of evil, he often sides with the good and the divine, and even engages in direct conflict. Besides restoring balance and fighting evil, an *avatāra* has other functions. We can explain it in the following way.

Lord Kṛṣṇa says that His manifestations in this world in every age are for the following purposes:

For the defense of the good: To protect those who lead lives of truth and righteousness, who use their bodies in community service, who are free from selfishness, anger, hatred, lust, and greed, and who dedicate their lives to divine contemplation.

For the devastation of the evil-doers: For the removal of evil tendencies in those who lead a life of injustice, who break the laws of society, who are vain, dishonest, and greedy, who harm others, who seize others' property by force, and who commit all kinds of crimes.

For the establishment of *dharma*: When *dharma* is protected and evil is destroyed, society lives in accord with *dharma* and provides opportunities for its members to lead a spiritual life. It connotes the cosmic and moral order.

We think that Hindu ethics cannot be deontological. We all know that Hindu *śāstras* propose four *puruṣārthas*- *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kāma*, and *Mokṣa*. Among them, *Mokṣa* is considered the highest or supreme *puruṣārtha*. The principal objective of human life, according to Hindu *śāstras*, is the attainment of *Mokṣa*. So *Mokṣa* is the principal end of human life. To attain this end, four fundamental means, which are otherwise called *mārgas*, have been prescribed by Hindu *śāstras*. Among them, *niṣkāma Karma* or *Karma yoga* is one. Since *niṣkāma Karma* is a means or cause, and the attainment of *Mokṣa* is the end or consequence, it cannot be deontological.

In this context, the observation of the *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* is worthy to note. Generally, it is believed that *Karma* cannot be the means for the attainment of *Mokṣa*; it is the cause of our rebirth and bondage. We come across a fundamental theory known as *karmavāda* in Hindu philosophy. According to *karmavāda*, our *Karma* gives rise to some result or consequence. It also holds that the result of the *Karma* done by an individual must be enjoyed by the agent of the *Karma* himself or herself. It also assumes that all the results or fruits of all the actions performed by one individual in a particular life cannot be enjoyed by that individual within that life. Some of the fruits remain to be enjoyed. So, to enjoy the same, he has to take the next birth. But, like the former birth, in the next birth he continues to perform some actions, and like the earlier birth, some of the fruits of some actions remain to be enjoyed. So, to enjoy the same, he has to take a third birth. In this way, the endless series of births continues. To take birth is to suffer from different diseases, old age, and other problems. So *Karma* is the cause of our endless birth and bondage.

Thus, it is seen that *Karma* cannot be the means for attaining liberation or *Mokṣa*. But the *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* does not agree with this view. The *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* advises us to perform our actions following *yoga*. *Yoga*, according to the *Gītā*, is nothing but a particular art of doing our actions- '*yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam*' (BG 2.50). It is a well-known fact that the poison of a snake is the cause of our death, but if the same poison is converted into medicine

following a particular technique, then it saves our life. In the same way, milk for some individuals is the cause of indigestion, but the same milk, when turned into curd following a particular technique, becomes helpful for digestion. In like manner, the *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* observes that if our actions, following a particular technique suggested by it, are turned into *yoga*, then they give rise to *Mokṣa* instead of bondage. The principal objective of the *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* is to motivate all people, irrespective of caste, creed, gender, and religion, to follow the path suggested by it and thereby convert all their actions into *yoga* and attain *Mokṣa*. *Karma yoga* or *niṣkāma Karma*, thus, is always a means to attain the end or consequence. So, it is necessarily consequence-oriented and therefore teleological.

It is worthy to note that deontological ethics may be possible within the philosophy of *Vaiṣṇavism*. *Vaiṣṇava* philosophy undermines *Mokṣa*, unlike the other schools. The *Vaiṣṇava* school of Hinduism ignores *Mokṣa*. The school of *Vaiṣṇavism* proposes another *puruṣārtha*, which is known as the fifth *varga* or fifth *puruṣārtha*. The fifth *puruṣārtha* of the *Vaiṣṇava* school is *Prema*. *Prema* stands for unconditional love for *Śrī Kṛṣṇa*. It is love for the sake of love. The *Brajagopīs* are considered to be the most superior among the *bhaktas*. They love *Śrī Kṛṣṇa* without any self-interest; they do not want to have anything in return from *Kṛṣṇa* for the love or affection they have towards Him. So far as the teaching of the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* is concerned, this love is of different forms, which are variously known as *mādhurya*, *dāsyā*, *sakhya*, *vātsalya*, and *mādhurya*. The last one, that is *mādhurya*, is the climax of the state of *Bhakti* or *Prema*.

In this state, the relation between a *bhakta* and *Bhagavān* is like the relation between a lover and the beloved. In our social life, we come across different types of social relations, for example, the relation between brothers and sisters, the relation between neighbours, the relation between friends, the relation between children and parents, the relation between husband and wife, and the relation between a lover and the beloved. But among all relations, the

last one- that is, the relation between a lover and the beloved- is the most intimate and pure. This love is unconditional and, in that sense, spiritual, which is otherwise called platonic love. In the case of other forms of love, the relation is conditional. In most cases, one friend loves another if some interest of the former is fulfilled by the latter. Likewise, one brother loves another for the fulfilment of some interest. In most cases, parents also love their children to get something back in return; they think that when they grow old, they will be looked after by their children. In this way, most social relations are conditional and self-interest-oriented. But the ideal love underlying the lover and the beloved is unconditional. The lover loves her beloved without having any desire to get anything in return, and the beloved also loves her lover for the sake of love. In like manner, the relationship between Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Rādhikā, the supreme devotee, is purely unconditional, pure, and spiritual. Rādhikā loves Kṛṣṇa for the sake of love; she never wants anything from Kṛṣṇa in return. Thus, it is seen that the fifth *varga* or *puruṣārtha* suggested by *Vaiṣṇava* philosophy is purely unconditional, and therefore it is very much deontological. Like deontological theory, the fifth *puruṣārtha* of *Vaiṣṇavism* is independent of consequences.

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