

CHAPTER 4

Questioning Kṛṣṇa's Kantianism

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It has been claimed that we are best off seeing Kṛṣṇa—at least as he is depicted in his conversation with Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgītā*—as a sort of deontologist, an extreme sort.¹ As the prince Arjuna's confidante and advisor, Kṛṣṇa insists that Arjuna enter into battle with his brothers, against their half-brothers and teachers who have usurped the throne. Like Kant, Kṛṣṇa speaks in terms of duties—duties whose claim on us cannot be over-ridden by any other sort of consideration. I want to dispute this characterisation of Kṛṣṇa, firstly, to contest the interpretation of the *niṣkāma karma* (desireless action) principle on which the charge of deontology rests. But I want to dispute it also, and more importantly, because I think Kṛṣṇa's moral voice is rather more rich and interesting than our classifications of “deontological” and “consequentialist” (even broad consequentialist) allow.

I. NIṢKĀMA KARMA

The best case to be made in favor of Kṛṣṇa as a deontologist is his support of the view famously articulated in that part of the *Mahābhārata* excised and treated separately as the *Bhagavadgītā*. A considerable portion of the *Gītā* dwells on the principle that one should not act with a view to the fruits of one's labors. “Work alone is your proper business, never the fruits: let not your motive be the fruit of works ...” (II.47).² Isolated from its epic context, and developed as an independent view, this principle has indeed acquired, as Amartya Sen writes, “great theological importance.”³

Is this view—*niṣkāma karma*, that perfect action is not done with a view to the fruits—rightly regarded as “high deontology”? Even where “deontology” need have nothing in particular to do with Kant's arguments, but has rather to do with a hostility to consequentialist thinking—“doing one's duty irrespective of consequences”⁴—I think the answer is “no.”

In order to count as deontological, in the strongest sense, the *niṣkāma karma* ideal would have to be interpreted as advising that we act (rightly) when we act without any regard for what *any* of the consequences are. But this is not, in fact, what Kṛṣṇa says.

In fact, Kṛṣṇa says, "... so unattached, should the wise man do, longing to bring about the welfare [and coherence] of the world" (III.25).⁵ When acting well, we should after all have an eye on some consequences—on just the sort of impersonally considered, overall, sorts of consequences familiar from classical consequentialism. The injunction to "act, longing to bring about the welfare of the world" is a strikingly utilitarian attitude. There is some way that it would be good for the world to be, and good action is that which arises out of a desire to make the world better than it is. Kṛṣṇa, however, does not quite say that this end-state is what I should look to when considering whether an action is right or wrong, good or bad. In fact, as we shall see more closely later on, Kṛṣṇa's view as the *Gītā* develops is disturbingly free from any useful or practical advice for distinguishing right acts from wrong, disturbing especially when what is at stake is whether or not to wage war on one's power-hungry brethren. But however we are to discern right from wrong action, it is at least clear that Kṛṣṇa's endorsement of *niṣkāma karma* does not rest on a rejection of *all* consequences as informing the rightness or wrongness of an act. His point is rather that I must act, if I am to act well, without concern for whether the consequences benefit me. "Hold pleasure and pain, profit and loss, victory and defeat to be the same" (II.38). I must not look to whether I get some profit from the act. I should not, when considering how to act, be looking for *rewards*—"Be without personal aspirations or concern for possessions, and fight unconcernedly" (III.30).

Now this looks deontological inasmuch as Kant, for example, argued vehemently that acting for the sake of reward—for the sake of mere happiness—destroys the moral worth of an act. Personal gain as a motivation extinguishes whatever was especially "morally" good in the action. One might think this Kantian view of the fragility (and exclusivity) of moral worth implausibly hard. For if I return the wallet in order to get the reward, it still seems something good was done, and I did the right thing, even if it was a less than perfect act; and if that greengrocer prices his goods fairly because he knows that he can only retain customers if he builds their trust, there is something good—even morally, not merely instrumentally good, or pleasant—in his fair pricing policy.

But when Kṛṣṇa advocates acting without a view to rewards, he does not seem to be endorsing something even so strong as the hard-hearted view outlined above, that there is *no* worth in action done for the sake of reward.⁶ This will be partly because “worth” is not divided between moral and non-moral: If an action is to retain any worth, it will be also moral worth, or it will be as much distinctively “moral” worth as the fully perfect action. But the *niṣkāma karma* view remains deontological in its emphasis on the importance of motivation. A selfishly motivated act may be a somewhat good one, or the partially right thing to do; but non-selfish motivation invariably issues in better action. “The act as such is far inferior to the application of singleness of purpose to it” (II.49). Right motivation alone always improves the quality of an act; but whether or not a motivation is right is determined in part by *which* sorts of consequences one looks to in deciding what to do.

There might be two reasons one might invoke to support this claim that right motivation always improves the quality of an act. Non-selfish motivation might issue invariably in better action because there is some special, intrinsic goodness to non-selfish motivations.⁷ All non-selfishly motivated action includes the fact that there has been some non-selfish motivation going on, and this is good in itself. Or, one might think that non-selfish motivation invariably issues in better action because it is only freedom from interest in reward that helps one to see clearly what is in fact to be done—what one’s duties in fact are *and/or* what overall state-of-affairs would be preferred. I think the latter is a preferable way of reading the *niṣkāma karma* doctrine, and shall have more to say about this later. It would put Kṛṣṇa, and the principle of *niṣkāma karma*, neither in the deontological nor the consequentialist camp. If we are looking for post-Enlightenment bedfellows, the principle of non-selfish action taken on its own bears more similarity to impersonalist doctrines of all sorts than it bears to deontology in particular.⁸ If fact, I think this resemblance is also illusory, and perhaps more misleading than helpful, if we are to see what is philosophically engaging in the conversation between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, in the early chapters of the *Bhagavadgītā*. But before considering this, we should look at Arjuna’s arguments against going into battle.

II. ARJUNA’S NON-CONSEQUENTIALISM

There is something else wrong with the picture of Kṛṣṇa as the arch-deontologist, oblivious to consequences, trying to persuade a consequence-

sensitive Arjuna to fight. While it is true that Kṛṣṇa recommends that Arjuna fight because it is his duty, Arjuna's reluctance to fight is equally based on a sense of duty. In fact, he is eager to clarify that it is not consequences that he has in mind when he considers whether the war is right: "I do not long for victory," he says, "nor for the kingdom nor yet for things of pleasure" (I.32), "I do not want to kill them, though they be killers, Madhusūdana, even for the sovereignty of the three worlds, let alone earth!" (I.35)—all of these being the best possible consequences that could come from war, from Arjuna's point of view. He is duty-bound—in fact, everyone is duty-bound—not to wage war on their teachers, elders, and brethren. "For, Kṛṣṇa, were we to lay low our own folk, how could we be happy? And even if, bereft of sense by greed, they cannot see that to ruin a family is wickedness and to break one's word a crime, how should we not be wise enough to shun this evil thing, for we clearly see that to ruin a family is wickedness" (I.37–39). Arjuna is not just expressing a preference, reluctant to face up to a rather unpleasant but (morally) necessary task—giving an honest opinion of an elderly aunt's hideous hat, or telling the axe-wielding psychopath at the door where to find the kids. Arjuna counters Kṛṣṇa's claim that it is his duty to fight with the counterclaim that it is equally, or more, his duty *not* to fight. "We have *no right* to kill the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and their kin" (I.37).⁹ Arjuna appeals to very general—universalisable—claims about what is to be done and not to be done.¹⁰ It is not his duty in particular, but *everyone's* duty to refrain from waging war on one's family and teachers. Waging war on one's family is not to be done—ever, by anyone. The point is cast in quite impersonal terms at I.40 *ff.*, concluding with Arjuna's dismay that "we have resolved to commit a great crime as we stand ready to kill family out of greed for kingship and pleasures" (I.45). And a few lines later, Arjuna says, "Better were it here on Earth to eat a beggar's food than to slay [our] teachers" (II.5).¹¹ Finally, in an argument typically invoked against consequentialists, Arjuna adds, "Besides, we do not know which is for us the better part, whether that we should win the victory or that they should conquer us" (II.6). Since both the actual consequences, and the relative value of various consequences is not something we can judge in advance (or perhaps at all), we must, in deciding what to do, stick to certain principles.

If we still thought Kṛṣṇa a deontologist, it might look now as if we've got *two* arch-Kantians on our hands, locked in dispute over just which maxim, in this particular instance, can in fact be willed universally without contradiction. Such disputes can certainly arise, even in the

Kantian moral world in which only the possible can be morally necessary; Kant's description—or rather re-description—of moral dilemmas as the conflict between a “ground” for action (Ross's “prima facie duties”) and an actual reason (determining a moral duty) would make such a dispute, in certain circumstances, likely.¹² Sometimes, some thing has all the look of a moral duty, but it is not one. And it is natural to suppose that disputes would in such cases arise—what else could be the point of exercising public reason?

Yet if we consider further the progression of the discussion between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, we have reason to doubt whether this is a battle between two deontologists over what is morally required, reasons that go beyond our interpretation of the *niṣkāma karma* principle.

III. DIVINE COMMAND—A CAVEAT, AND RESTATEMENT OF THE PUZZLE

In describing “Kṛṣṇa's view” in the *Mahābhārata*, and particularly in the *Bhagavadgītā*, I shall be considering primarily the first few chapters of the discussion between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna—I shall be considering, that is, those chapters in which there is something resembling a discussion. In so doing, I will be setting aside several chapters in which something with perhaps more right to be called “Kṛṣṇa's view” is developed. In order to explain why, I shall summarize the remainder of the *Gītā*, as it relates to the pressing question: Should Arjuna do battle against his wicked kin?

Kṛṣṇa's first attempt to give Arjuna a reason to fight relies on the immortality and unparalleled value of the soul. The soul is eternal, and it alone has value—therefore, we should not fear killing someone, since after all we do his immortal soul no harm. “The wise are not sorry for either the living or the dead. Never was there a time when I did not exist, or you, or these kings, nor shall any of us cease to exist hereafter” (II.11–12). Arjuna is rightly dissatisfied with this response to the problem. For even if it makes it the case that killing one's kin, or anyone else, does not annihilate them, neither is it a strong argument in favor of such a course of action. Arjuna notes that if the soul generally is supremely valuable, then far from giving reason to fight, Kṛṣṇa has given Arjuna reason to devote *himself* to the life of the mind. “If you think that the soul is loftier than the acts,” he asks, “then why do you command me to do a cruel deed?” (III.1)

Kṛṣṇa responds by introducing the principle of *niṣkāma karma*. And he grounds the value of detached action (at least in part) in the fact that

this is the sort of action God engages in. “In the three worlds there is nothing that I need do,” says Kṛṣṇa, “nor anything unattained that I need to gain, yet action [is the element] in which I move” (III.22). And further, Kṛṣṇa argues that while He has done the work of establishing the order of the universe (especially the social order), “I am the doer, [the agent]” and yet “[I am] the Changeless One who does not do [or act]. Actions never affect Me. I have no yearning for their fruits ... Knowing this the ancients too did act, though seeking release: so do you act as the ancients did in the days of old” (IV.13–15). The argument seems to put together two common ideas: (1) God is self-sufficient, and not in want of anything,¹³ and (2) to make ourselves as like God as possible is to make ourselves as good as possible.¹⁴ In Kṛṣṇa's view, since God acts without wanting to get anything out of it, so too should human beings act. This desireless acting is presented by Kṛṣṇa as a devotional act. The appropriate attitude to take into deciding how to act is a devotional rather than an acquisitive one. Thus action is taken in the spirit of a sacrifice (IV.24–33).

But this, so far, is a purely procedural consideration—it indicates a rule for *how* to do what we do, not for what to do. Again, Arjuna notices that this does not adequately address the question; it gives him no more reason to fight than not to fight. Thus in Chapter VIII, he is still asking, “What is that which appertains to self? What, O best of men, are the works? What is that called which appertains to contingent beings? What is that which appertains to the divine?” (VIII.1). Kṛṣṇa's advice seems to be, “Whatever you do, do it out of devotion to God, and not for personal profit.” But as far as that goes, it seems perfectly compatible with Arjuna dropping his weapons, and walking away from the fight—not in order to save his own life, nor in order to avoid killing his kin, but simply in the spirit of devotion. We might say, for example, that Arjuna is renouncing the battle-field glory, sacrificing it to Brahman, and thus his action—walking away from the battle—is a pure and good one. Procedural constraints alone, where these are explained in terms of maintaining a certain mindset, cannot decide which of two actions ought to be done (devotionally).

I do not mean to dismiss the claim that devotion as a virtue should have on us. But it does not answer Arjuna's question, and at least for a spell, Arjuna realises this, and presses the point. We still need to know what works or deeds it is that God requires or recommends we do out of devotion to Him—unless He is equally happy with whatever we do, so long as we do it disinterestedly (in which case Arjuna would have no reason in particular to fight).

This line of thought is precisely the one that Kṛṣṇa follows in the *Bhagavadgītā*. For ultimately, the reason he gives Arjuna to fight is that He, Kṛṣṇa, is God—and He says, “Fight.” This, of course, does give Arjuna a good reason to fight. When God truly shows Himself, and says, “Do X,” then we are rightly overwhelmed as Arjuna is, by awe and humility and devotion (XI.14, 34), and see incontrovertibly that X is to be done—for that is what God commands. “Here I stand with no more doubts. I shall do as you say” (XVIII.73). Such a reason needs no further explanation, for a genuine divine command is pretty much the best reason there can be for an action, given the nature of God.¹⁵

But taking Kṛṣṇa as a character within a dialogue trying to determine what is right, and why, we are still left with a mystery on our hands. For divine command merely tells us what Arjuna ought to do, and why *he* is motivated to do it. But we still do not have an argument for *why* Arjuna should fight. Why, we still wonder, is Kṛṣṇa so determined that Arjuna should fight? Kṛṣṇa presumably knows that, whatever the outcome of the battle, it will involve near-universal devastation on all sides. After all, Arjuna’s suggestion is not the cowardly one that he alone should skive off, save his own skin but leave the others to the dirty business of killing and dying. He wants rather that his side of the war as a whole should give up their just claim to the kingdom, thereby averting mass destruction of many innocent and worthy lives (I.31–39). Is Kṛṣṇa’s rejection of this suggestion simply wilful and wanton—He wants to see a good fight, and a good fight He will see?—or beyond our understanding? Perhaps it has not given us to peer into the mind of God, or to *understand* what makes something good and right, or bad and wrong.

While this may ultimately be the best interpretation of the *Gītā* available to us, Kṛṣṇa does, at first, try to give Arjuna *arguments*, and *reasons*. And, in fact, even after Arjuna has seen and accepted Kṛṣṇa’s divinity, his dissatisfaction merely returns in a different form: Granted that we are to do what is commanded by God, how, Arjuna asks, do we reliably distinguish what is divine, or divinely commanded, from what is not? Thus after seeing Kṛṣṇa’s divine form, but before agreeing that his duty is to fight, Arjuna asks, “How may I know you, yogin, in my constant meditations? In what various modes of being may I meditate on you, my lord?” (X.17). Looking at the many reasons Kṛṣṇa tries to give for pressing Arjuna to battle, we find a less capricious sort of explanation for why it is good and right that Arjuna lead his brothers into battle. For Arjuna, this

will play itself out in the various ways in which “meditation on the self” can inform one of the right course of action.

IV. KṚṢṂA'S PARTICULARISM—*SVADHARMA*

For all that certain modes of expression sound superficially like an impersonal universalism, both Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa acknowledge as morally relevant aspects of the situation that could only have extremely narrow application. Thus the reasons given will sometimes be reasons personal to Arjuna. Thus if we look at the terms in which Kṛṣṇa casts his appeal to duty (*dharmā*), they are not usually of the “Kantian,” universalisable kind, nor are all of them even loosely deontological (universal), or general principles or obligations. On the contrary, in *svadharmā* (“one’s own duty,” or “one’s personal duty”) there is a notion of duty at work irreconcilable with a Kantian sort of duty.

Kṛṣṇa levels a whole battery of arguments against Arjuna’s unwillingness to fight. Some of these can be implied from the name-calling that is supposed to humiliate Arjuna into going into battle. For example, “Do not act like a eunuch, Pārtha, it does not become you! Rid yourself of this vulgar weakness of heart, stand up, enemy-burner!” (II.3) It is not *fitting* for Arjuna to act “unmanly”; perhaps it would be suitable for someone who was genuinely weak, ill-prepared, or accustomed to other sorts of tasks to back out of the battle. But none of these is true of Arjuna. Hesitation now, in the final hour, is specifically a “cowardice unseemly *to the noble*” (II.2).¹⁶ The final name Kṛṣṇa applies to Arjuna evokes the sort of quality that is properly his—“enemy-burner.” Naturally, in the context of epic verse, it is common for persons to be addressed by a multitude of names, many of them descriptive. But the choice of that description here emphasizes that it is of Arjuna’s character not to leave his enemies standing; and that it is unseemly for such a person as Arjuna is to walk away from the battle. In Arjuna’s case, to walk away now would be to *play* the eunuch—to act the role of someone he is not.

Recalling Arjuna to himself, as grounds for entering into the fray, does not just take the form of appealing to his particular personality, however. While Kṛṣṇa argues that killing is irrelevant, for the killed are not destroyed, he directs his argument specifically to Arjuna as having a certain place in society. Arjuna is the generic “strong-armed prince” (II.26). Twice, he is appealed to specifically as the “son of Kuntī” (“Kaunteya,” II.15,

II.38), and twice as Pārtha, the son of Pr̥thā (another of Kuntī's names,¹⁷ II.21, II.42). As Kṛṣṇa moves from this argument into the *niṣkāma karma* doctrine, via an argument about the importance of “singleness of purpose” (II.41), Arjuna becomes the “scion of Kuru” (II.42), or literally “bull of the Kuru (clan/family/race).”¹⁸ Again, the claim is not that it is somehow extraordinary that Kṛṣṇa should call Arjuna by his patronymic, or in this case metronymic; rather that just these epithets are used here in order to recall to Arjuna his social situatedness—he has certain relations within a particular family, he is a son of just this woman and no other. This place he holds within a certain family, and particularly as the son of just this woman, has a claim on him. It is *as* the son of Kuntī that Arjuna should “rise up, resolved upon battle” (II.37). It is as the great hope for the honour of the Kuru race, as the bull of the Kurus, that he should be unhesitatingly resolved to act. In the same 35 couplets, before the “desireless action” doctrine is introduced (II.11–46), Kṛṣṇa three times addresses Arjuna as “Bhārata,” identifying him as a descendant of the universal monarch who gave his name to the people arrayed on both sides of the battle lines, thus calling attention to another aspect of Arjuna's social identity (II.15, II.18, II.28), and perhaps recalling to him the expectations and mores peculiar to his people.

These epithets are finally accompanied by an explicit appeal to the values of his station. For Arjuna is a prince of the warrior class. And for *him*, it would be a great evil to live in shame, although it may not be a great evil for another sort of person: “for one who has been honored, dishonor is worse than death,” says Kṛṣṇa (II.34). “There is nothing more salutary for a *kṣatriya* than a lawful war. It is an open door to heaven” (II.31–32). It is appropriate to recall that Arjuna's objection to fighting was that it *must* be unlawful to kill one's kin, even if they have wronged you, humiliated you, dispossessed and tried to assassinate you. By insisting that the battle now with the offending kinsmen is a lawful one, Kṛṣṇa implicitly recalls their offences. In arguing for war, Kṛṣṇa is arguing also that these offences committed against Arjuna and his brothers require punishment by Arjuna.

Especially humiliating to Arjuna is the thought that, if he turns away from the battle now, people will not only say that he is a coward: his “ill-wishers will spread many unspeakable tales about [him], condemning [his] skill—and what is more miserable than that?” (II.36) Arjuna is the star pupil of the foremost archer of his time; his bow, Gāṇḍīva, is a gift from the Gods in honor to Arjuna's skill. From such renown and accomplishment, to be

reduced to cowardly *and* incompetent in the mouths of men is insufferable. Moreover, in bringing these thoughts forward, Kṛṣṇa asserts that it is not wrong to take such “personal” considerations into account. It would mean something for *Arjuna* to turn away from battle, that it would not mean for an ordinary foot-soldier to do the same. And this difference in meaning must be taken into account as one of the real factors determining the rightness of a course of action. Thus one of the reasons why Arjuna should fight is that he has, through no choice of his own, the stature to act as an example to others. “For it was by acting alone that Janaka and others achieved success, so you too must act while only looking to what holds together the world. People do whatever the superior man does: people follow what he sets up as the standard” (III.20–21).

These questions of station, of reputation and skill, of family, amount to “one’s own law”—*svadharma*. They ground the duty or duties binding upon Arjuna in particular. He is not the exclusive author of his own law; the social order into which he was born, the place he was born into, the endowments with which he came to it, and even his personal history (where this refers only very partially to his own choices), wrote a “law” just for him. It is in virtue of these that he has a fate, or destiny, which is appropriate to him, and not merely the workings of a capricious but inexorable necessity.¹⁹ It is to his own, his proper, duty or law (*svadharma*) that Arjuna ought to look (II.31), and it is *svadharma* which he betrays in refusing to fight (II.33).²⁰ It may be that to act contrary to duty involves an irremediable loss of self, of integrity or dignity. Or it may be that it is just plain wrong. It is not entirely clear from the arguments Kṛṣṇa gives; he suggests the latter rather than the former when he says of action motivated by self-interest: “From this interest grows desire, from desire anger; from anger rises delusion, from delusion loss of memory, from loss of memory the death of the spirit, and from the death of the spirit one perishes” (II.62–62).

I do not think it an accident that these frequent reminders of Arjuna’s social, and particular familial relations should so immediately precede the introduction of the argument for desireless action, nor that the resolution of the dilemma should lead directly into the considerations of the nature of the self for which the *Bhagavadgītā* is best known. I had suggested earlier (sec. I, p. 84) that there are two different ways we might understand the “improving” power of right motivation. Right motivation might just be a good in itself; or it might be something through which, and in virtue of which, we are able to properly assess our overall situation, and discern

which relations, obligations, and potential consequences ought to weigh with us, and to what extent. Naturally, right motivation could be improving for both reasons, and the emphasis Kṛṣṇa puts on the devotional quality of action without a view to reward suggests the former rather more than the latter. But the appeal to family and position immediately preceding the introduction of desireless action returns explicitly, when it is realized that acting with a certain motivation, or quality of heart, cannot on its own determine *which* course of action one should (devotionally) embark upon.

Thus after the explication of desireless action, and of the ultimate immortality of all beings, Arjuna still wonders what words and deeds are right. “What does one whose insight is firm say? How does he sit? How does he walk?” (II.54). Even was he to master the principle of acting devotionally, rather than for one’s own happiness, Arjuna still would need to know whether he should kill his kin “desirelessly” or walk, without desire, away from the battlefield. Proper motivation, as thus far understood, is not enough. In Kṛṣṇa’s own words: The wise man “has no reason at all to do anything or not to do anything” (III.18?). If, however, we couple the principle of acting without desire for reward with the injunction to attend to the self, Arjuna begins to get an answer to his question (III.1: “Why urge me to this fearful action?”). For although ultimately, the self which he should recognize is the eternal self which can be a part of the divine, for practical purposes, the immortal self of Arjuna is embodied and embedded in social life in a particular way. And it is looking to this complex self, or the self as it is implicated here and now, that Arjuna should consider the question of whether to enter the battle. “Even the man of knowledge,” as contrasted with the man of action (III.3), “behaves according to his nature” (III.33). While the life of the mind may lead to correct insight and action, so too may the *vita activa*; and, although Kṛṣṇa does not say this explicitly, presumably what Arjuna is supposed to know about himself, when he comes to consider the question, is that he was born and bred for the active life. All of Kṛṣṇa’s epithets and arguments up to this point have been reminding Arjuna of this. Active engagement with worldly concerns belongs to him properly, while other types of worthwhile life do not. And it is for this reason that he would be doing wrong to walk away from the battle in meditative absorption. Kṛṣṇa again appeals to Arjuna’s particular obligations: “It is more salutary to carry out your own law poorly than another’s law well; it is better to die in your own law than to prosper in another’s” (III.35).

It is appreciation of a situation as a whole, with judgement unclouded by desire for profit (III.37–43), which provides one with the ability to discern what is the required action, here and now, from less worthy alternatives. Regarding a situation without concern for personal gain will allow one to see it clearly, and will resolve doubt (V.25). “The knower of *brahman* who stands upon *brahman* is steady of spirit and harbors no delusions” (V.20). This perspective is attained by those who “have tamed their thinking and know themselves” (V.26). And while knowing oneself will of course involve knowing oneself as related to God, it will also involve knowing oneself as related to one’s fellows, and as related to the whole order of creation (XI.1).

V. DESTINY & INTEGRITY

A closer consideration of the reasons Kṛṣṇa gives in the first part of the *Gītā* thus suggests that it is because Arjuna is just the person he is, with just the particular family, social status and history that he has, that it has become *Arjuna's* duty to fight. To be sure, Kṛṣṇa is not arguing in terms of what will please Arjuna or make him, or anyone else, happy—in this sense, his argument is no more consequentialist than it is Kantian. Rather, Kṛṣṇa seems to think that duties are generated in idiosyncratic ways, depending upon the particular relations in which individuals stand to one another, and depending upon the irreducibly particular past which shapes a person and a situation into the individual he, she or it is. When Kṛṣṇa enjoins Arjuna to “look to your own law (*svadharma*)” (II.31), he resembles nothing so much as a moral particularist.

This is in keeping with what B. K. Matilal has said in defense of Kṛṣṇa’s “deviousness” throughout the *Mahābhārata*.²¹ Kṛṣṇa is not unprincipled, if by that one means unscrupulous or wanton. He has a keenly developed sense of what is to be done—it is uncompromising, he feels himself bound by it, and difficult though it may be to articulate in advance, the constraints on what is and is not to be done are fully captured neither in consequentialist, nor in deontological terms. Justice must be done, and that means that oaths must be kept and the greedy punished; honest Yudhiṣṭira must lie, thus betraying himself in order to save his brothers and kingdom, just as he had betrayed his brothers and wife through gambling them and their kingdom away. And Arjuna, foremost archer, bearer of Gāṇḍīva, embracer of battle and of role,²² must fight.

Thus the sort of particularism I attribute to Kṛṣṇa—and to Arjuna insofar as he is responsive to the *arguments* Kṛṣṇa gives, rather than merely to the fact that it is god giving them—is as distinct from “hard case” particularism as it is from “Sartrean particularism.” On the one hand, one might make the weak claim that there are *some* cases of moral judgement for which there is, and can be, no universal rule.²³ There are hard cases, and these hard cases show us that morality is not always a matter of universally applicable principles, but is sometimes one of personal judgement. As I have been describing it, *all* judgements about what is to be done should, according to Kṛṣṇa, be made with a view to “one’s own law.”

But this should not be confused with the view that morality is merely a matter of personal judgement—with heavy weight on the word “personal.” The extreme of this line of thought is frequently taken to be Sartre, who seems to claim that decisions generally are at once constructive of and expressive of who we are as persons—and that is pretty much all there is to be said on the matter of rightness and wrongness.²⁴ The only standards of success and failure applicable are those used for evaluating the degree to which we “stand behind” our decision, fully and sincerely endorse what we do and therefore who we are, without self-deceit.

This is not quite the kind of personhood that Kṛṣṇa’s particularism implies or is interested in. The person who is the locus of individually tailored obligations is not primarily something one constructs through one’s actions, but something constructed socially, historically, and to a certain extent “objectively.” One is born a prince, or one is not, and certain things follow or not accordingly. One’s elder brother is a scrupulously honest compulsive gambler (not an ideal combination) or not, and one’s teacher has or has not attempted to assassinate and defraud one of one’s kingdom. Finally, this prince of a great kingdom has seen his wife publicly humiliated by one’s cousins, or he has not. But if he has, and if his exile has been endorsed by the archery teacher of whom he was the star pupil, and if he twice followed his brother in an attempt to regain the throne, if he learned avidly and excelled all others in the skills appropriate to a warrior, ... and so on, then certain things are his duty that a deontologist could never have imagined in advance. Out of the immense weight of the detail of who one is, a destiny arises—the obligation to respond to and enact the future fitting for such a past, the behavior and characteristics integral to and befitting who one has become. This might resemble, if anything, the Stoic view of individual duty being determined by our four *personae*—our rational nature, our natural endowments, the careers

we have chosen, and the positions we occupy by chance.²⁵ But it should be clear that the grounds which generate obligations, and determine virtues, should not be restricted to “roles”; Arjuna's *kṣatriya* persona is only one aspect of the situation which determines that his path lies in the battle ahead, and it is an aspect still not sufficiently well-described to be fully determining. This, I suggest, is how we should understand the force of Kṛṣṇa's appeal to *svadharma*, as opposed to, say *kuladharmā* (duty peculiar to the family) or *varṇāśramadharmā* (duty peculiar to class). The fact that Arjuna has consistently taken on, or embodied in a specific way, what it means to be a warrior, through his own choices and actions, figures in making it meaningful that Arjuna fight this battle, in a way it is not necessarily meaningful for the “generic” *kṣatriya*. Moreover, the way Arjuna has been treated (what has been done to him) and the expectations others have of him also play a role in determining whether it is his duty to fight here and now.

Thus, when hermit Utaṅka criticises Kṛṣṇa for failing to avert the war, Kṛṣṇa explains that it was out of his hands. “It is impossible,” he says, “to transgress destiny (*diṣṭam*) by either intelligence or might” (*MBh.* 14.LII.16).²⁶ Utaṅka is beside himself with outrage at this excuse: “Since, though able, Kṛṣṇa, you did not rescue those foremost ones of Kuru's race ... I shall, without doubt, curse you! Since you did not forcibly compel them to forebear ... I shall, filled with wrath, denounce a curse on you” (*MBh.* 14.LII.20–21). Before revealing his divine identity, and that it would be therefore very imprudent for Utaṅka to lay a curse on him, Kṛṣṇa *apologizes* for having been unable to avert the war (*MBh.* 14.LII.23). Since we see Kṛṣṇa in the *Gītā* bending over backwards to persuade Arjuna to enter the fray, we might be tempted to see Kṛṣṇa's appeal to fate and his apologies after the fact as disingenuous. But if destiny is something constructed socially, through the combination of one's actions and characteristic with the values and social system, as well as the character and acts of others (Yudhiṣṭhira's gambling; Duryodhana's mercilessness; Droṇa's disrespect for moral teaching), then *once the characters have declared themselves*, within the context in which their actions take one very specific significance, the die is cast. As Kṛṣṇa explains it, “When I live in the order of the Nāgas, I then act as a Nāga, and when I live in the order of the Yakshas or that of Rākshasas, I act after the manner of that order. Born now in the order of humanity, I must act as a human being. I begged them (the Kauravas) piteously. But stupefied as they were and deprived of their senses, they refused to accept my words. I frightened them, filled with wrath, referring

to some great danger. But once more I showed them my usual (human) form. Possessed as they were of unrighteousness, and enveloped by their proper time,²⁷ all of them have been righteously slain in battle, and have without doubt gone to Heaven” (*MBh.* 14.LIII.18–21). There are modes and manners appropriate to each form of life, and persons within that form of life are constrained by these. They draw the most general circle around what can and ought to be done. Here, Kṛṣṇa specifically attributes the inevitability of the war to the obstinacy of the Kauravas. There must be many such reasons, culminating indirectly in the duty of Arjuna to fight. Even Kṛṣṇa cannot make the meaning of the lives of each of the persons involved something other than what all the characters and social elements of all jointly combine to make it.

Although the obligations falling to Arjuna are specific to him, they are none the less obligations for that. And although they are his duty in virtue of his past, his circumstances, his station and relations to others, including his skilfulness in arms, they are not in any way necessarily his personal wishes. What it becomes his duty to do in virtue of who he is, is not at all what he would choose to be his duty, and not at all what he would want to do, or can even fully comprehend as right and justified, so long as he thinks in absolute terms, without reference to things that are true of him in particular and no one else. It is his objectively constructed identity, including his current circumstances, together with his past choices (e.g., to try in the first place to regain for his elder brother the throne that was rightfully his) which compels certain things to be his duties, and ultimately his destiny. And thus he needs persuading to begin the war that marks the beginning of the end of the *Mahābhārata*; and thus when Kṛṣṇa persuades him, he does so by reference to “duties” and “law”—not to ends, but also not to impersonal principles, or maxims.

Kṛṣṇa’s argument relies on an appeal to *who Arjuna is*. His insistence is that Arjuna act according to his character, as well as with understanding of how he fits into an overall structure of a well-ordered universe. It is, in a sense, an appeal to Arjuna’s integrity. But it is in maintaining his integrity that Arjuna will participate in a war of ghastly destruction. Should we say then that the lesson of the *Mahābhārata*, and of the *Bhagavadgītā* in particular, is that sometimes one ought to act out of character? Perhaps integrity is not so important after all, and Kṛṣṇa is positively *wicked* in his exhortation of Arjuna to act according to his values, and according to the expectations that are on him (III.29).²⁸

But integrity will not be so easily dismissed, and I think to focus on the rightness or wrongness of Kṛṣṇa's action here distracts from this larger point to be got from the *Gītā*; and similarly to focus merely on whether Arjuna should in fact (in some impersonal sense) fight, distracts from at least one lesson we might take from his relation to the action of the *Mahābhārata*. Implicit in Kṛṣṇa's motivations for urging Arjuna to fight, and slightly more explicit in the reasons he gives Arjuna, is a recognition of the central role of integrity in ethical thinking. Without integrity as a virtue—a fundamental virtue—any moral code, and any world based on such a moral code, will fall apart. For this reason, it may even be more correct to regard integrity as the precondition of any virtue, rather than as a virtue in its own right to be fitted in among others. Full integrity requires in this case a thorough-going commitment to the virtues and values of the heroic code of the warrior. Unless Arjuna and his brothers, and his kin on the opposing side, follow through completely in their endorsement of, and adherence to, this heroic code, we will not get a critique of that code, and we will be tempted to mis-locate the problem. If Arjuna had walked away from the battle, more people would have survived—some of them wicked, some of them innocent, and some of them heroic according to the values and expectations embedded in the social world of the *Mahābhārata*. And had he walked away, we might criticize his act as weak or cowardly; we might praise the act as wise and self-sacrificing. The act of Arjuna walking away would be the focus of a debate of whether what he did was ignoble or a noble foregoing of his own glory. But we would not be forced to question whether the glory itself is a *good* that Arjuna sacrificed; we would not be forced to question whether the whole code that demands, or would demand, wholesale slaughter in order to be fully lived, is itself the culprit. In apportioning praise and blame within the *Mahābhārata*, and within the schema of values it represents, each side of the bloody war comes off as well—and as badly—as the other. But only because of this, and because the extreme bloodiness of the battle is a *necessary consequence* of the heroic code, a battle that becomes *necessary* within the values according to which each of the characters has conducted his life, and within the moral–social climate which prevails—only because the devastation is the inevitable consequence of the demands of *dharmā* as understood by all concerned, can the story as a whole operate as a critique of the whole system of values. Because Arjuna lives, and so many die, adhering to the demands implied by a certain moral climate and order can his story itself stand as a critique of that moral climate.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Amartya Sen, in his “Consequential Evaluation and Practical Reason,” describes Kṛṣṇa’s view as “high deontology” (*Journal of Philosophy*, vol. XCVII, no. 7, July 2000), p. 481. See also Arindam Chakrabarti, “The End of Life: A Nyāya-Kantian Approach to the *Bhagavadgītā*” (*Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1988), pp. 327–334.
- 2 *Bhagavadgītā*, translated by J. A. B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). All subsequent quotations from the *Gītā* will be from this edition, with occasional modifications according to the rendering of R. C. Zaehner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).
- 3 Sen, *op. cit.*, p. 481.
- 4 Sen, *ibid.*
- 5 See also III.20. It is not, then, so surprising that Gandhi should have found the principle an inspiring one (cf. Sen, *ibid.*, p. 481). The view that it is in terms of the best overall course of the world that we should discover what we ought to do is a highly idealistic one.
- 6 Compare Arjuna’s question to Kṛṣṇa at VI.37, and Kṛṣṇa’s response: “Still, Kṛṣṇa, a non-ascetic who, while having faith, allows his mind to stray from this yoga before he achieves the ultimate success of yoga—what becomes of him? Does he not, like a shredded cloud, fade away, a failure either way ...?” (VI.37–38) “No, Pārtha, neither here nor hereafter is he lost, for no one who does good can go wrong, my friend. He goes to the worlds which are gained by merit, and when he has dwelled there for years without end, this ‘failed yogin’ is born high in the house of pure and prosperous folk, or in the family of wise yogins” (VI.40–42).
- 7 This is usually considered distinctive of a deontological ethical framework, although according to Sen (*op. cit.*, pp. 487–492) a broad consequentialism could also endorse such a claim.
- 8 This is especially so if we follow B. G. Tilak in taking the force of Kṛṣṇa’s argument to be that “a man should not entertain the proud or desireful thought that ‘I shall bring about lokasaṃgraha ...’”(quoted by Simon Brodbeck, in his excellent “Calling Kṛṣṇa’s Bluff” (*Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32 [2004] 81–103). A rejection of the pride associated with taking credit for an action as one’s own may be precisely the move the impersonalist moral philosopher should make, in order to make a virtue out of a defect. For it is the special value of an action’s belonging to me rather than you that gets equally lost on all sorts of impersonal theories of morality, whether deontological or consequentialist (see B. A. O. Williams, “Persons, Character, and Morality” in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980*. Cambridge: Cambridge

- University Press, 1981).
- 9 Following Zaehner's translation here, but the emphasis is mine.
- 10 Since there is some debate about whether injunctions such as "Thou shalt honour thy mother and thy father" are to be considered universal, in the strictest sense—since they license partiality towards certain individuals—I will settle for Arjuna's claim being a "general" one, and concede that not all would be happy with considering such a claim consistent with deontological ethics. (For some discussion, see Lawrence Blum, "Against Deriving Particularity," in *Moral Particularism*, Brad Hooker, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 208; and Alan Gewirth, "Ethical Universalism and Particularity," in *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (June 1988), 283–302). My own view is that such a principle is consistent with deontology, in spite of its superficially restricted scope ("one's kin"); for it may be that sound family relations are the basis of the trust that makes society possible. In fact, this seems to be the thrust of Arjuna's argument at I.40 ff. If one is liable to attack, rather than protection, from the family, then the constant fear and insecurity would undermine all possibility of personal relations. "Waging war on one's kin" is thus impossible to universalise without contradiction.
- 11 Again, following Zaehner here.
- 12 Kant. *Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 217–225.
- 13 See, for example, *Euthyphro* 13a–15c.
- 14 A popular view later in the European tradition, often taken to be initiated by *Theaetetus* 176b–e: "That is why a man should make all haste to escape from earth to heaven; and escape means becoming as like God as possible."
- 15 This straightforward take on the authority of divine command is defended by Paul Rooney in his *Divine Command Morality* (Aldershot: Avebury, Ashgate Publishing, 1996); but even the more cautious defenses of God's authority, resting on His power (P. T. Geach, *God and the Soul*. London, 1969), or on His benevolence, His creative and sustaining role (e.g., R. G. Swinburn, *The Coherence of Theism*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1993; esp. Ch. 11, pp. 212–213) would be adequate to explain Arjuna's compliance with Kṛṣṇa's command. A fine discussion of this issue can also be found in Robert Adams' *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 249–291.
- 16 Emphasis mine.
- 17 According to Apte, while this epithet can apply to any of the Pāṇḍava princes, it is generally applied only to Arjuna (Prin. Vaman Shivaram Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, revised and enlarged edition. Kyoto: Rinsen Book Company, 1998).

- 18 It is interesting to note about this transitional passage (II.37–II.47) that Kṛṣṇa’s first argument that Arjuna should disregard his own happiness—“holding alike happiness and unhappiness, gain and loss, victory and defeat, yoke yourself to the battle” (II.38)—is grounded in an appeal to Arjuna’s happiness. He should act without considering how the battle turns out, because however it turns out, it will be *good for Arjuna*: “Either you are killed and will then attain to heaven or you triumph and will enjoy the earth” (II.37). Given Arjuna’s vehement rejection of any good won by killing his kin, we should expect this argument to carry very little force for him.
- 19 More will be said about this in section V.
- 20 Looking to later chapters if the *Gītā*, Brodbeck (*op. cit.*) explains the sort of agency recommended by Kṛṣṇa through a metaphysical particularism that closely parallels, and may ground, the moral particularism I am arguing for here. “The notion of *svabhāva* used here must logically be specific to individual people rather than to individual *varṇas*,” he argues (p. 90), “We would even want to go further and describe *svabhāva* as variable within one lifetime.” Brodbeck does not make this connection himself; while he reverts to the less nuanced claim, “There is no getting around it: ... Arjuna is a *kṣatriya* and so must—and will—fight,” he also does emphasize the particularist nature of moral reasoning (p. 98).
- 21 “In Defence of a Devious Divinity,” in *Epics and Ethics* (Jonardon Ganeri, ed., Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 89–107.
- 22 Van Buitenen refers us to *Mahābhārata* V.151.20 *ff.*, where Arjuna replies flatly to Yudhiṣṭhira’s hesitations, “It is not right to retreat now without fighting.”
- 23 Peter Winch offers what to my mind is one of the better defenses of moral particularism in his paper “Moral Integrity.” But the moral particularism (if it is that) that he sets out there may not be “global particularism,” but rather the weaker sort. In his example from *Billy Budd*, when Captain Vere decides to try, and finally execute Billy, he makes a decision that is certainly a *moral* decision, but which neither sets nor is beholden to a standard which could be used to judge anyone else in the same (or “relevantly similar”) situation. But Winch’s example gives us no reason to suppose that all, or even most, moral thinking is of this tough kind.
- 24 Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Existentialism and Humanism* has the oft-cited example of the youth who must choose between caring for his mother and joining the French *Résistance*.

- 25 See Cicero's *de Officiis* I.107–125 for the primary formulation of this view. In his “Personhood and Personality: The Four-*personae* Theory in Cicero *De Officiis* I” (*Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 6 (1988), pp. 169–199), Christopher Gill disputes the coherence of the view; yet it remains intuitively compelling—see, for example, Richard Sorabji's interesting discussion in *Emotion and Peace of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 249–50, and Brad Inwood's “Rules and Reasoning in Stoic Ethics” (*Topics in Stoic Philosophy*, Katerina Ierodiakonou, ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 95–127.
- 26 The *Āśwamedhikaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*. Critical edition of Raghunath Damodar Karmarkar. Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute. Poona, 1960), p. 203. Translations mostly following that of Pratāpa Chandra Ray, C. I. E. Bhārata Press. Calcutta, 1894, Book 14.LIII and LIV.
- 27 Does *parītāḥ kāladharmaṇā* mean “enveloped by what their time demanded,” or “meeting their appointed hour”? If the former, then this again would point to demands of a semi-particular sort on the Kauravas—demands upon them in virtue of the time (of life, of the circumstances). Even the latter suggests fate's hand, although without suggesting that a fate belongs non-arbitrarily to a person.
- 28 “Because they are confused about these forces of nature, people identify with the actions of these forces, and he who knows it all has no reason to upset the slow-witted who do not.”