
COMPARING THE *BHAGAVAD-GITA* AND KANT: A LESSON IN COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: This paper examines the often-mentioned similarity in comparative moral philosophy between the Hindu Text *Bhagavad-Gita*'s notion of duty and Kant's notion of duty. It is commonly argued that they are similar in their deontological nature where one is asked to perform one's duty for the sake of duty only. I consider three related questions from *Gita*'s and Kant's perspectives. First, What is the source of our duties: Self or Nature; second, How do we know that an act x is our duty, and third, what would be an acceptable example of a duty. In all these three cases I show that their respective answers diverge quite clearly and conclude by arguing that the reason for this divergence lies in their respective contexts: while the ideal of Kantian morality is to become a member of the 'kingdom of ends', the aims of the *Gita*'s system of duties are the sustenance of the social order and the realization of one's identity with the Supreme Self.

Introduction

Many introductory ethics texts, especially those written from a comparative perspective, note the striking similarity between Kant's non-consequentialist morality and the *Bhagavad-Gita*'s (hereafter *Gita*) teaching of disinterested ethics. The similarities are not difficult to notice. In the *Gita*

Krishna tells Arjuna, "...he who performs a prescribed duty as a thing that ought to be done, renouncing all attachment and also the fruit – his relinquishment is regarded as one of 'goodness'" (*Gita*, 158, XVIII: 9). In a similar spirit Kant points out in the 'first proposition of morality' "that to have genuine moral worth, [i.e., to be considered good], an action must be done from duty" and from nothing else (Kant, 15-16). Thus morality for both these two theorists require that one should perform one's duty for the sole reason that it is her duty. No other consideration, about inclinations, emotions, feelings or outcomes should cloud one's mind in following one's duties.

Unfortunately, however, in this celebration of similarities, these texts fail to take into account the interesting fashion in which these theories of duty come to diverge. It seems to me that the success of comparative philosophy can not lie in mere appreciation of similarities but in an informed appreciation of ways in which similar system come to differ and why. In this paper I want to explicate three points of divergence between the *Gita*'s and Kant's theory of duty by comparing their answers to three questions dealing with various aspects of duty.

Question 1: The Source of our Duties: Self or Nature?

The first question that I want to raise is what serves as the source of duties for these two theories. Gauchhwal ((1964), while emphasizing the similarities between these two moral systems, argues that an individual's duties are the same for Kant and the *Gita* since in both they spring from self-determination. But *how* do duties spring from one's self-determination? For Kant duties follow from one's reason. In the *Foundations*, Kant starts with the pronouncement that only good will is unqualified good, i.e., good without respect to anything. From this he concludes that only the willing of an action should be considered good or not. In order to develop the notion of a will that is good Kant brings in the concept of duty. Duty for Kant is the "practical unconditional necessity of action" (Kant, *FMM*, 1995, 42). An action is from duty if it binds one with a necessary obligation to perform it. Kant points out that duties derive their unconditional necessity by being derived from laws or imperatives that have their sole source in reason. Reason for Kant is the essential faculty of all human beings. In following the laws or duties determined by such laws of its reason, the will is also autonomous since it is being determined by itself and not something external i.e., heteronomous to it. So ultimately duties for Kant come from human reason and not from something external to it.

What would be the spring of duties for the *Gita*? The *Gita* takes duties to be the 'prescribed actions' that need to be performed by the members of the different castes. A brief review of the *Gita*'s idea of the fourfold orders will be useful in understanding the source of various duties in the *Gita*. Relying on the *Samkhya*¹ theory of nature (*prakriti*) as constituted by three *gunas* (modes or quality), the *Gita* points out that everything that exists including the Gods in the heaven are constituted by innumerable different admixtures of these three *gunas*. These qualities are present in different variations in different things. These variations consist of the predominance of one *guna* in different degrees over the other two. Krishna also tells Arjuna that he is the creator of the fourfold orders or the system of four castes (*Gita*, 117, IV: 13).² So it is reasonable to conclude that He creates the different orders (castes) depending on the predominance of one *guna* over the other two.³

The *Gita* then lists different duties for the various castes which, Krishna argues, are "born of [their] nature" (*Gita*, 160, XVIII: 41).⁴ So we can say that the source of one's duties is one's nature, more specifically the predominance of one *guna* or mode over the other two in one's nature. In short for *Gita* one's duties are determined by one's nature.

It is interesting to note Kant's comment in the preface of his *Foundations* (*FMM*) in this regard. Kant writes, "[Everyone] must concede that the ground of obligation here [in the case of moral duty] must not be sought in the *nature of man* or in the circumstances in which he is placed but a priori solely in the concept of pure reason, ..." (Kant, *FMM*, 1995, 5 emphasis added). The reason for Kant's insistence here is that he takes human beings to be essentially rational and also takes autonomy to follow from the fact that the laws determining one's duties come from what is essential in every human being. Autonomy understood in this way can be taken to mean self-determination (See Gauchhwal 1964, 10). That is to say, a will is autonomous if the duties that it follows come from internal source thus binding oneself internally. Note here that Kant takes human nature and other factors like environment etc. as extraneous determinants of the will. A human will is determined by itself only when it can be said to be determined by its reason, i.e., the only non-causal source of one's action. Now in the *Gita* one's duties are determined according to one's castes and one's caste is determined by the predominance of one constitutive quality over the other two in one's nature. It is interesting to note in this regard the argument of Gauchhwal to the effect that autonomy in the *Gita* derives the same way as it does in Kant, that is, from self-determination. He points to the verse where Krishna says, "Better is one's own law though imperfectly carried out than the law of another carried out perfectly. One does not incur sin when one does the duty ordained by one's own nature" (*Gita*, 161, XVIII: 47; also see 115, III: 35). This Gauchhwal takes to imply that one is being autonomous in fulfilling one's duties since they come from one's own self. Now let us see more carefully how analogous this case is to that of Kant.

First of all, Kant takes autonomy to flow from the fact that one's duties are determined by the essential rational nature of one's noumenal self. But duties of a human being, according to the *Gita*, are determined not by what is essential of every human being (in fact of everything in the world), namely the presence of Krishna in everything constituting what the *Gita* often calls the higher self of a man. Because if that were the case then everyone would have the same duty determined by the same Self that resides in everything in this world. Rather as we pointed out above duties for the *Gita* are derived (or determined) by the predominance of one quality over the other two and these three qualities constitute the nature or the lower self of everyone. Realization of one's own self and therefore freedom, according to the *Gita*, consists of overcoming the influence of the lower self by one's higher self. Thus nature or the three qualities are not the real self and duties determined ('born of') in accordance with these qualities are not really self-

determined. Gauchhwal refers to the verse where the *Gita* says it is better to do one's own duties imperfectly than to perform other's duties perfectly and he takes this to mean that one's duties have to be determined by one's own self. But what I have tried to show in the above discussion is that one's duties in the *Gita* are not really determined by one's self but rather by one's nature. Thus if we unpack the idea of autonomy in terms of self-determination in Kant, autonomy can not be applied in the same sense in the *Gita*.

Question 2: How do we know about our duties?

Let us turn our attention to a slightly different question now: given that this is how one's duties are determined how does one *know* (or *recognize*) one's duties? We have noted in our reply to the first question that one's duties come from one's reason for Kant. So what would Kant say about our knowledge about such duties? How do we become aware of our duties? First of all Kant points out that it is the conscience that would ultimately tell a person what her duties are or whether a particular action is from duty or not. "The consciousness of an internal court of justice within man is *conscience*" (Kant, *MPV*, 1995, 100).

About this conscience Kant writes that the voice of the conscience is 'unescapable'. It is within every man, an "authority watching the laws within him". Though a person may not heed to the advice of his conscience "but he cannot avoid hearing its voice" (Kant, *MPV*, 1995, 100-101). It does seem that reason's advice through the voice of conscience is always there and also that its presence is quite transparent.⁵ The same conclusion can be reached from a slightly different direction. These duties, Kant argues, derive from pure reason which is also a priori. Relying on the view of his time, Kant can further argue that in order to know something that is a priori one does not have to rely on anything that is external to oneself. Therefore, introspective consultation with one's own reason should enable one to recognize what one's duties are.

We can also look at the different formulations that Kant offers of the categorical imperative in order to see how one comes to know that a particular action is one's duty. In the first formulation Kant tells us that an action is one's duty if such action is universalizable and the alternative is not. What he means by universalizability is that such action can be accepted as a duty by every human being. So an action is universalizable and therefore a duty, if I can think of that action as every other human being's duty without involving self-contradiction. An example of such action would be one of the cases that Kant provided in the *Foundations*. Kant asks, can the motive of a

person who borrows money without any plans of ever returning it be universalized? Or can he will his maxim to be a universal law? It does not seem so since if everyone borrows money without planning to ever return it then the whole institution of borrowing would disintegrate. Thus this maxim cannot be universalized without contradicting the institution of borrowing. Now what does it take to realize that this maxim can not be willed to be universal? It is one's consultation with one's reason that shows either that such attempt involves contradiction (thus implying that a world in which such a maxim holds cannot exist), or that even if such a world is possible, one can not will such a maxim. So it is evident from our above discussion that according to Kant an autonomous being should be able to find out what his duties are by consulting his reason alone i.e., by performing the morality-check and without getting any external help.

How would the *Gita* reply to our above question? How does one find out what one's duties are? Is introspection, that is to say, inner reflection sufficient in determining what one's duties are for the *Gita*, as it is for Kant? The *Gita* does not give any clear answer to this question. Of course from Arjuna's following plea to Krishna one can conclude that one needs at least in some cases external help in figuring out what one's duties are: "My very being is stricken with the weakness of sentimental pity. *With my mind bewildered about my duty*, I ask Thee. Tell me, for certain, which is better" (*Gita*, 106, II: 7, emphasis added). But could one say that if Arjuna were not overwhelmed with pity, if his mind were not clouded by emotions then he would have known what his duties are just by reflecting on his mind? Certainly Gauchhwal suggests this when he writes, "It was in this state of spiritual impotency that he [Arjuna] could not realize that what could cut asunder the knot of doubt and resolve his inner conflict was something not to be begged or borrowed from without but to be experienced from within the depth of his being" (Gauchhwal 1967, 11; also see Gauchhwal 1964, 3). But the point that I want to make is that mere introspective consultation with one's being, whatever that may amount to, seems insufficient for determining and recognizing what one's duties are in the *Gita*.

We have already noted that in the *Gita* duties are determined by one's nature, or more specifically by the predominance of one mode (quality) over the other two. So it is reasonable to suppose that if duties have to be known or recognized introspectively then one's nature or its particular constitution should be recognized introspectively. It is not at all clear what such introspection would amount to. But even if we grant that one has such introspective access to one's nature, it is far from showing that one also discovers one's duties in such access. This is because these

modes by themselves don't have the duties inscribed on them. These constituents of nature are inert, incapable of moving anyone to action. Now from our above discussion it seems reasonable to surmise that Krishna being the creator of the fourfold orders also assigns the different duties to different orders. The imminent purpose of the fourfold orders and the assignment of different duties is the sustenance of the world and more specifically of the order of the society and family. From this it is reasonable to argue that these different duties for the members of different castes are typically given in the familial or social context of a person. In such a scenario one learns what one's duties are from one's familial and/or social environments. Thus, it can be concluded that while for Kant one can recognize one's duties by internal reflection, in the world of the *Gita* one needs the help of one's external, social and/or familial or even scriptural, environments in order to recognize what one's duties are.

Question 3: An Example of duty

With this above discussion in mind I now turn to the third question: what are some of the duties that are accepted by Kant and by the *Gita*? My motivation for asking this question is to explore whether there can be actions that would be rendered one's duty by the *Gita* and not by Kant or *vice versa*. I want to argue that it is here that the similarity in their moral ideals comes apart most noticeably. For our purpose here let us focus on the duties that are assigned to the members of the fourth order namely the *sudras*. The *Gita* tells us "... work of the character of service is the duty of a *sudra*, born of his nature" (*Gita*, 161, XVIII: 44). It might be interesting to see what could be the nature of the members of the caste *sudra* which makes their duty as the service to others. However, for our present concern I will focus on whether any such action will be considered a duty of human being by Kant. Now what would be an example of an action of service? Let us take Kant's example of a servant who is asked to lie by his master (Kant, *MPV*, 1995, 97). In such scenario lying seems to become a part of the servant (*sudra*)'s service and therefore a duty to his master. However, Kant tells us in clear terms that the servant, in being a rational being himself, has a duty to himself which is violated by lying even though the lie was instructed by his master. The point that Kant makes is that every human being irrespective of his nature or his station has same duties determined by his reason. As Kant writes, "[One's] insignificance as a human animal cannot injure the consciousness of his dignity as a rational animal" (Kant, *MPV*, 1995, 97). Kant also talks about "self-esteem" which is a duty of every man to oneself. I take such self-esteem to consist of the consciousness of a person of the fact that he be on the 'footing of equality' with all other rational beings.

Now it seems quite safe and reasonable to say that *sudras* are denied any right to such feeling of self-esteem in the *Gita*. It is interesting to note in this regard what Barbara Stoller Miller takes the *Gita* to suggest. She argues that in the *Gita* there is no absolute right or wrong; rather everything is based on one's caste (Miller 1986, 3). If one reads this to mean that the members of different castes have different even contradictory duties then it seems quite evident that such intuition will not be shared by Kant.

This above distinction can also be reached if we consider the second formulation of the categorical imperative that Kant offers. This formulation states, "Treat other rational beings (i.e., human beings) as ends, not merely as means" (Kant, *FMM*, 1995, 16). Now in our above example it is hard to maintain that the master is treating the servant as someone with independent ends or worthiness of respect and not merely as means. But it is hard to fault the master either because in specifying the duties of a *sudra* as the 'work of the character of service', Krishna never instructs the master that he has to treat the servant (*sudra*) as an end and not merely as a means. As I will note in the next section, this distinction ultimately points to the different contexts of these two moral systems.

Conclusion

In the light of these differences one might wonder if these two theories are so different then why their moral ideals seem so very similar. The point that these two moral theories of the East and the West share is reflected in the *attitude* with which they expect one to perform one's duty, namely, the attitude of disinterestedness, i.e., performing one's duty for the sake of duty only. But as I have tried to show in this paper, such similarity at the meta-ethical level does not preclude one to develop a theory of duty that is quite different from another such theory developed from the same meta-ethical starting point.

The reasons for such difference in the development of these two systems are not hard to find. Such difference directly follows from their general contexts. The Kantian project is situated in the Western enlightenment individualism that takes the ultimate 'duty of all men to think for themselves' (Kant, 2000, 402). The *Gita*'s historical context is set in the Indian epic *Mahabharata* that was composed during the centuries between 400 BCE and 400 AD. More specifically the style and tone of the *Gita* arguably reflect the attempt by the two principle castes, namely *Brahmin* and *Kshatriya*, to recapture the glory of Hinduism and reestablish Hinduism as the definitive essence of India. The need for this was caused by the emergence of alternative spiritual systems like Buddhism and Jainism that were threatening to

capture the spiritual soul of common Indians. Further, it has also been argued by scholars like van Buitenen and others that initially the core story of the *Mahabharata* was compiled by the *kshatriyas* and only later on *Brahmins* came to change and augment certain aspects especially by annexing philosophically significant parts like the *Gita*, where a clear attempt is made to provide metaphysical grounding for the caste system. So an exploration of enlightenment individualism was very far from their project.

This contextual difference is reflected in the immediate aims of these two works. The ideal of Kantian morality is to become a member of the ‘kingdom of ends’ where everyone is the legislator for oneself and for everyone else. Thus such an ideal could be summarized in Kant’s note that each man himself has an inner worth/dignity and “... can esteem himself on a *footing of equality* with” “all other rational beings in the world” (Kant, *MPV*, 1995, 97). Now such equality does seem to come about in the *Gita* when a person realizes one’s identity with the Self (Krishna). The *Gita* tells us that a person who achieves such state does not differentiate between a *brahmin*, a stone or a piece of gold. However, such equanimity is a byproduct in the *Gita*. The aims of the *Gita*’s system of duties are mainly twofold. First is the sustenance of the social order and second and more important is the realization of one’s identity with the Supreme Self. Thus the realization of the equality strictly speaking does not come about by taking everyone as the legislator but focusing on seeing the Self as being present in everyone. It is the need to go beyond the world of manyness with all its legislations and thus becoming one with the absolute reality that serves as the pivotal point for the *Gita*’s system of duties.

This above reflection also helps us clarify that Kantian disinterestedness is not entirely the same as *Gita*’s disinterestedness. True, in both these two cases, ‘disinterestedness’ manifests itself at least partly in the blocking out of thoughts about the future (or outcomes). But the disinterestedness of the *Gita* is aimed at the ultimate eradication of agency, the sense of I-ness. The disinterestedness of Kant, on the other hand, is not geared towards any such eradication. Thus Kantian disinterestedness, unlike the *Gita*’s, can make room for thoughts like ‘I am being a dutiful person’. It is here, I suggest, that the ultimate difference between these two moral systems lies. Further, it is an appreciation of this kind of situatedness of various theories of duty in their respective cultural landscapes that gives the student of comparative philosophy a deeper understanding of not only the traditions but also of the very nature of the philosophical topic.

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Endnotes

1. *Samkhya* is one of the six classical orthodox philosophical systems of India.
2. These four castes are *Brahmin*, *Ksatriya*, *Vaisya* and *Sudra*.
3. An interesting question to raise in this regard would be to ask how three qualities in their different variations produce just four castes and not more or less. But that is a topic for another occasion.
4. Here is the complete verse: “Of *brahmins*, of *ksatriyas*, and *vaisyas*, as also of *sudras*, O conqueror of the foe (Arjuna), the activities are distinguished, in accordance with the qualities born of their nature.” Krishna goes on to clarify that while the principal duty of a *brahmin* is knowledge and wisdom, the principal duty of a *ksatriya* is heroism, the principal duty of a *vaisya* is agriculture, and the principal duty of a *sudra* is service to others. See below for more on this.
5. The conscience needs to be another person, i.e., different from the person whose conscience it is, in order to avoid self-contradiction. “This other may be real person or merely an ideal *which reason creates for itself*” (Kant, *MPV*, 1995, 101).