The Ethical Dilemma in the Bhagavadgita

The ethical dilemma in the *Bhagavadgītā*

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Abstract

This chapter sheds new light on the much-discussed ethical dilemma in the *Bhagavadgītā* concerning whether human duty or the consequences of action should be the focus of ethical concern. According to a common view, the text advances duty-based ethics through the mouth of Krishna, whereas Arjuna appeals to consequentialist considerations. In contrast, another view argues that Krishna's ethical thinking is a distinctive kind of rule-consequentialism that conceives of the twin consequences of liberation (*mokṣa*) and the common good (*lokasaṅgraha*) as intrinsically valuable. The theophany in Chapter 11 only further complicates matters, with Krishna's stance advocating determinism that problematizes human agency and responsibility. This chapter argues that the concept of desireless action (*niṣkāmakarma*) is crucial to answering the ethical dilemma in the *Bhagavadgītā*. Several pieces of evidence suggest that the text does not associate desireless action with a desire to act for the common good but instead conveys an attitude called, for lack of a better expression, 'inaction in action and action in inaction' (4.18) toward the results and consequences of action in general. When individuals act with this attitude, they focus on the action itself (i.e., changes corresponding to the action), not its ultimate effect (i.e., results and consequences). Thus, in acting, individuals should have an attitude akin to the attitude taken in inaction, in that they do not expect the outcome of the action to be as envisioned or to be to their advantage—nor do they not consider themselves morally entitled to the outcome of the action. Such an attitude of non-ownership transcends the distinction between duty-based ethics and consequentialist ethics, for the doers of actions consider themselves as an intermediate link in the long chain of causes and effects, regardless of their personal merit, not as individuals who deserve praise for their dutiful work and accomplishments.

1. Introduction

This chapter aims to shed new light on the much-discussed ethical dilemma in the *Bhagavadgītā* concerning whether human duty or the consequences of actions should be the focus of ethical concern. The core of the dilemma is that both duty-based ethics and results-based ethics seem necessary but insufficient in covering all ethically relevant factors affecting human decision-making and behavior. The dilemma could be easily mitigated and watered down by reframing it as the question of what should be done and for what reasons; however, that question would displace the real issue, which is the notion of human agency and action.

To clarify the issue, this chapter first examines the ethical orientations represented by the protagonists of the *Gītā*: Arjuna, the commander of the Pandava army, and his charioteer, the god Krishna. In one of the best-known passages of the *Bhagavadgītā*, Arjuna hesitates before the battle at Kurukshetra because he is shocked at the thought of fighting his Kaurava relatives (1.26–2.9).

Although Arjuna orders his charioteer to withdraw, Krishna urges Arjuna to ready himself for battle and to regard pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and failure all as one and the same: only when Arjuna has renounced interest in the fruits of his actions does he find true peace (2.14–38).

Traditionally, philosophically educated audiences have understood Krishna and Arjuna's discussion as implying that the doer of deeds is *jīva*, the empirical self, equipped with a mind and body. This self, or ego, is concerned with obtaining benefits and avoiding burdens, as Arjuna's reflections demonstrate (2.4–8). However, according to the *Bhagavadgītā*, salvation ultimately derives from the recognition that the true self is not *jīva*, the doer, and thus the true self does not reap the fruits of action either (2.47). The true or transcendental (or second-order) self, *ātman*, is concerned with fulfilling social and moral duties (2.31–39) and with observing and evaluating the actions of the empirical self. Consequently, salvation is not only an ethical topic in the *Bhagavadgītā* but also a serious onto-epistemological one, for a true understanding of the self and of ultimate reality is essential to salvation (Lehtonen 2021).

According to a common view, the *Bhagavadgītā* advances duty-based ethics through Krishna, while Arjuna appeals to consequentialist considerations. This view is reiterated by Amartya Sen (2009, 23–24, 208–217), who emphasizes that the *Bhagavadgītā* should been seen as a classic debate between deontological and consequentialist ethics. However, contrary to Sen's view, one can also argue, with good reason, that Krishna's ethical thinking is a distinctive kind of rule-consequentialism that takes the twin consequences of liberation (*mokṣa*) and "the world's welfare" (*lokasaṅgraha*) as intrinsically valuable. This view is forcefully and convincingly argued by Sandeep Sreekumar (2012, 278, 299–300, 303–310), and I will return to his view later in this chapter. Furthermore, things get even more complicated in the theophany of *Bhagavadgītā* 11, where Krishna takes a stance advocating determinism, thus problematizing the ideas of human agency and responsibility. Thus, the *Gītā* not only puts forward conflicting ethical approaches but also questions the meaningfulness of practices such as praise and blame that seem to presuppose moral responsibility.

2. Rights only to actions, not to their results

In order to adequately address the situation laid out above, a brief introduction to the doctrine of the *Gītā* is required. The *Bhagavadgītā*, part of the sixth book of the Hindu epic *Mahābhārata*, offers a practical approach to *mokṣa*, or liberation, and to freedom from *saṃsāra*, the cycle of death and rebirth. According to this approach, known as *karmayoga* ('the yoga of action'), salvation results from attention to duty and recognition of past acts that inform the present and that will direct the future (Singh, 1991, 107). Thus, dharma and karma—fulfilling one's duties and responsibilities in life, and retributive causation determined by how well one obeys their dharma, respectively—are assumed to be the basic factors affecting one's fate and destiny (Chakrabarti & Lehtonen 2020).

The central tenet of the karmayoga path to liberation is the principle of *niṣkāmakarma*. *Niṣkāmakarma* denotes an action performed selflessly and obediently, without any expectation of reward or result whatsoever. The *Bhagavadgītā* calls this idea 'inaction in action and action in inaction' (4.18). Even if the term does not appear in the *Bhagavadgītā* itself (Fowler 2012, p. xliii–

iv), *niṣkāmakarma* is arguably the central teaching of the text (Chakraborty 1996, 1998). At the text level, this argument is based on verse 18.6:

> But having relinquished [all] attachment and [actions'] fruits, even these actions should be performed—this is My decided ultimate (*uttama*) conviction (*mata*), O son-of-Prithā (Feuerstein 2014, 299)

However, one must be vigilant against uncritically adopting the term *niṣkāmakarma* as a shorthand for the central teaching of the *Bhagavadgītā*. The danger lies, first, in the fact that *kāma* is not as broad in its semantic signification as the English *desire*. Although there can be pure, sattvic "desires", such as the desire for liberation (18.26, 18.30), the *kāma* would generally not be used by pre-modern Sanskrit authors (i.e., *mumukṣā* is not *kāma*). Moreover, the *Bhagavadgītā* is in many ways a difficult document to interpret, not least because it deals with a wide variety of topics that relate not only to ethics but also to metaphysics, epistemology, eschatology, soteriology, yogic technique, and so on (Sreekumar 2012, 279–280). Therefore, what the central teaching of the *Bhagavadgītā* is remains an open question—and depends on one's point of view.

In the *Gītā*, Krishna advocates selfless action as the ideal path to realizing the truth about oneself and about the ultimate reality. According to Krishna, action taken without self-centered expectations or consideration of outcomes tends to purify one's mind. Furthermore, action without desire gradually enables an individual to see the value of mind control and the benefits of renouncing the action itself (2.41, 2.48–49, 6.1–4, 6.7, 6.24–27). The benefits of such renunciation essentially include liberation from an attachment to worldly bonds and suffering.

In the second chapter of the *Bhagavadgītā,* Krishna proclaims that humans have the right only to actions and not to their results, whether good or bad (2.47–48); therefore, they should not desire any results. Krishna's advice that people should not desire any results from their actions can be interpreted in different ways (Sreekumar 2012, 302). What is of utmost importance is that humans are not doomed to idleness or inactivity but instead should act according to the principles of the universal order (*ṛta*). At the same time, as they are not entitled to the results of their actions, they should not be selfishly concerned about them. Although it is admirable to perform good deeds and to participate in well-intentioned activities, the outcomes of those actions should not be associated with their actors. Instead, according to the *Bhagavadgītā*, the positive outcomes of actions should be understood as representing "the world's welfare" or, as the term *lokasaṅgraha* is often translated, the common good (3.19–20, 3.25). Thus, the outcomes of actions are not ultimately under the control of humans—who after all, are instruments of the becoming of the ultimate reality, often understood as the fulfilment of God's eternal designs (*Bhagavadgītā* 11.15–34; Singh, 1991, 107). Thus, humans have the right to use the outcomes of their actions for good, but they do not own those outcomes, nor do they deserve praise for their good deeds; rather, credit should be attributed to God—or, if a non-theistic framework is preferred, to karma and destiny.

3. Consequentialism in the *Gītā*

Contrary to the established view that the *Bhagavadgītā* advances duty-based ethics through the mouth of Krishna, Sandeep Sreekumar (2012, 278, 299–300, 303–310) argues that the text advances consequentialism instead. Sreekumar forcefully defends the view that Krishna's ethical thinking is a distinctive kind of rule-consequentialism that takes as intrinsically valuable the twin consequences of liberation (*mokṣa*) and the common good (*lokasaṅgraha*). For the sake of clarity, it should be noted that in moral philosophy rule-consequentialism refers to the ethical view that the rightness or wrongness of an action depends entirely, not on the overall goodness or badness of its consequences (as in act-consequentialism), but on whether the action accords with the set of moral rules which would have the best consequences if everyone accepted or followed them. According to Sreekumar (2012, 301), the core of the doctrine (or should we say rule) of *niṣkāmakarma* is that the agent must detach themself from all those consequences of action that contribute directly or indirectly to their personal advantage.

This view seems to correspond well with Krishna's teaching in the *Bhagavadgītā*. Krishna recommends focusing not on personal benefits through outcomes of actions but on duties and the common good, which should be performed without attachment and selfish desires. Textual evidence for this interpretation abounds, as the following examples show:

> In action alone is your rightful-interest (*adhikāra*), never in [its] fruit. Let not your motive be the fruit of action; nor let your attachment be to inaction (*akarman*). Steadfast in Yoga, perform actions abandoning attachment, O Dhanamjaya, [always] remaining the same in success and failure. Yoga is called equanimity. (2.47–48; Feuerstein 2014, 107, 109)

> Therefore, always perform unattached the deed to be done, for the man (*puruṣa*) performing action [while being] unattached attains the Supreme. By action indeed [King] Janaka and others attained [spiritual] consummation. Even considering only the world's welfare, you ought to act. (3.19–20; Feuerstein 2014, 125)

> Just as the unwise perform [their deeds] attached to action, O descendant-of-Bharata, so the wise should act thus unattached, desiring to accomplish the world's welfare. (3.25; Feuerstein 2014, 127)

> Renouncing all actions in Me, with the mind [turned toward] the basis-of-self, [and] having become without hope, without [the sense of] "mine," [with your] fever-of-anxiety departed—fight! (3.30; Feuerstein 2014, 129)

> [He who is] yoked, having relinquished the fruit of action, attains ultimate peace. The unyoked [individual], acting from desire and attached to the fruit [of action], is bound [by karma] (5.12; Feuerstein 2014, 151)

> He who performs the action to be done, regardless of action's fruit, is a renouncer and a *yogin*; not [so is he who is] without the [sacrificial] fire and is inactive. (6.1; Feuerstein 2014, 157)

> [When] he performs necessary action that is indeed to be done, O Arjuna, and by relinquishing attachment and the fruit [of one's action]—the relinquishment is deemed [to be] *sattva*-natured. (18.9; Feuerstein 2014, 301)

Moreover, Krishna proclaims that performing actions without intertwining them with desires will bring release from the cycle of rebirth (*Bhagavadgītā* 2.51; 4.18–20). Thus, right action with right attitude brings liberation.

In Chapter 3, Krishna adds that

> [those] fooled by the primary-qualities of the Cosmos [become] attached to the actions of the primary-qualities. The knower of the Whole should not upset those dull-witted knowers of the non-Whole. (3.29; Feuerstein 2014, 127)

In his discussion of this verse, Georg Feuerstein (2014, 127 n. 40) explains that most translators understand the terms *kṛtsnavid* and *akṛtsnavid* as 'complete knower' and 'incomplete knower', respectively. Feuerstein, however, assumes that something deeper is implied. Therefore, he chooses to take *kṛtsna* as referring to the Ultimate, the Whole, rather than as qualifying the knower. Thus, the ignorant person does not see the total or whole picture but has only a partial perspective, whereas the wise person sees the Whole as it is. Feuerstein also explains the "*niṣkāmakarma* verse" (4.18) in accordance with this interpretation:

> He who sees inaction in action and action in inaction is wisdom-endowed among humans; [he is] yoked, performing whole action (Feuerstein 2014, 139)

Feuerstein observes that the phrase *kṛtsnakarmakṛt* ('performing whole action') plays on the idea of wholeness. 'Whole' (*kṛtsna*) deeds are actions that preserve and bear out the Whole. Furthermore, Feuerstein emphasizes that the structure of the Whole asserts itself in performing such deeds. These doings are spontaneous and naturally good because they reflect the universal order (*ṛta*) (Feuerstein 2014, 139 n. 18). This interpretation, even if not unavoidable, nicely concurs with the concept of divine providence presented in Chapter 11. That concept is crucial for understanding the role of human action in the *Gītā*, as will be seen in the following sections.

4. Is Krishna bluffing?

Simon Brodbeck (2004, 84, 89, 92–93, 95, 98, 100) has sharply criticized any attempts to positively interpret Krishna's advice on the importance of duties and claims instead that Krishna is bluffing. According to Brodbeck, Krishna ultimately takes a stance advocating determinism—the view that all that happens occurs inevitably and that nothing may happen in any other way. With that stance, he fools Arjuna, the commander of the Pandava army, into believing that he can and should decide to fight, even if such a decision is impossible: after all, Arjuna is not free to choose but acts according to the force of destiny.

In Brodbeck's view, Krishna cleverly does not try to convince Arjuna of the reality of determinism but instead appeals to Arjuna's duty as a soldier. Thus, although Krishna foreknows what will inevitably happen, he "makes a virtue out of a necessity" and, for Arjuna's sake, frames his future in terms of fulfilling his duty. Brodbeck's radical interpretation, though intriguing and coherent, is debatable.

For if everything—including intentions and opinions—is predetermined, then being concerned about changing oneself through liberation would be as pointless as being concerned about the impossibility of such change. Thus, the following dilemma arises: Self-change, if possible, would be highly advisable, but self-change is impossible; therefore, entertaining self-change, such as Arjuna changing his mind, is pointless and counterproductive. This is suggested in the following verses:

> For, not even for a moment [can] anyone ever remain without performing action. Every [being] is indeed unwittingly (*avasha*) made to perform action by the primary-qualities born of the cosmos. (3.5; Feuerstein 2014, 121)

> As kindled fire reduces its [wood] fuel to ashes, O Arjuna, so the fire of knowledge reduces all actions to ashes. (4.37; Feuerstein 2014, 145)

> Me-minded, you will transcend all difficulties by My grace. But if out of ego-sense you will not listen [to Me], you will perish. Resorting to that ego-senses, you [might] think, "I will not fight!" [But] this resolve of yours [would be in] vain, [because] the Cosmos (*prakṛiti*) will compel you. [That] which out of delusion (*moha*) you do not wish to do, even that you will [have to] do unwittingly, bound [as you are] by [your] own action born of [your] own-being, O son-of-Kuntī. (18.58–60; Feuerstein 2014, 317)

As can be seen, Brodbeck's interpretation is not without textual basis. At the same time, if one is determined either to entertain the thought of self-change or to fear the consequences of not changing, then that person cannot but consider changing. Krishna, for his part, successfully persuades Arjuna to do his duty and fight, but Krishna is a god and has powers that humans do not have—including the power to change human minds and mindsets.

Since the assumption that Krishna is bluffing (and that the *Bhagavadgītā* advocates such a complex perspective on desires and liberation) is radical and revolutionary, it is understandable that several authors have construed Krishna's advice (i.e., that people should not desire any results from their actions but should fulfill their duties) more conventionally, interpreting it to mean that people should perform deeds out of a sense of duty and of selflessly contributing to the common good, not for self-centered gain (*Bhagavadgītā* 3.19–20, 3.25, 18.9) (Sreekumar 2012; Chuang 2015; Lehtonen 2021). Thus, Krishna's advice has been interpreted to mean that individuals who want to act without desire (i.e., followers of *niṣkāmakarma*) can still be goal-oriented, pursue unselfish goals, and remain both indifferent and uncommitted to personal benefit. Christina Chuang (2015) has labeled this interpretation of Krishna's advice "benevolent action".

In contrast, Christopher Framarin (2009, 2) has problematized prioritizing unselfish desires. He observes that contemporary readers almost unanimously contend that, since all action is motivated by desire, desireless action is an oxymoron; consequently, action can be performed *without selfish desire*, meaning that unselfish desire is permissible. However, Framarin points out that arguments for that view are unconvincing, since the doctrine of desireless action should be taken literally: as advice to act without any desire at all (see also Chakrabarti 1983). Following such a doctrine would

require people to act like automata, without wanting or waiting for anything before acting—which, from a psychological standpoint and based on the text evidence in the *Bhagavadgītā*, is a controversial, if not unintuitive, perspective. Krishna promises to Arjuna that if he follows Krishna's advice, he will overcome all difficulties (*Bhagavadgītā* 18.58). It is quite natural, if not ultimately necessary, to interpret following advice as presupposing deliberation and intentional decision-making. Therefore, I think that Framarin's argument is debatable and to be supported would require the view that Krishna is bluffing.

How, then, should the *Bhagavadgītā* be understood? To adequately answer this question, the following point needs to be added to what has been said above: in view of Chapter 11, Arjuna's conflict is not one of choosing the greater good over self-interest, since his interest is precisely that the greater good is realized—though such a realization is not possible. Krishna himself makes this evident in the theophany, where he challenges Arjuna to perform his dharma in full awareness that his dharma will satisfy neither his own self-interest nor the greater good, since "all these warriors" will die whether Arjuna performs his *kṣatriya* dharma or not (11.32–34). Thus, Krishna problematizes all human desires, be they selfish or unselfish, and introduces the view that divine providence has a necessary influence and direction over all matters. This inevitably leads us to take a closer look at different interpretations of *niṣkāmakarma*.

5. Different interpretations of *niṣkāmakarma*

As regards the meaning of *niṣkāmakarma*, in my earlier article (Lehtonen 2021) I have suggested, in line with other authors such as Chuang (2015) and Sreekumar (2012), that Arjuna is advised to act not for the sake of personal interest but instead on behalf of the common good or for the benefit of the other. As explained above, the problem with this view is that the central ethical dilemma of the *Bhagavadgītā* is not self-interest versus the common good. Arjuna already aligns the two in the first two chapters, but he is unable to perform his *kṣatriya* dharma precisely because he cannot discern the action that will serve the common good; there are no beneficial consequences available to the other, as Krishna later makes clear in Chapter 11's theophany. With respect to Krishna's comments in the early chapters (e.g., Ch 3) when he calls on Arjuna to act for the sake of "the world's welfare", they constitute a weak argument—and, importantly, one that he himself knows is weak but provides anyway, in order to elicit further questioning from Arjuna concerning liberation, selfhood, and desireless action.

These are reasons to think that the *Bhagavadgītā* does not associate desireless action with a desire to act for the common good but rather conveys a humble and serene attitude toward results and consequences in general. Humans should not take the outcomes of their actions as something they have a right to or are entitled to but should instead accept positive outcomes as (undeserved) gifts and not complain (too much) about negative outcomes.

However, things become more complicated when the notion of liberation in the *Bhagavadgītā* is considered. The *Gītā* repeatedly advises human beings to seek liberation (*mokṣa*) as the final goal of life (2.64–66, 2.70–72, 4.19–23, 6.15, 6.36, 17.25). One may wonder whether the concern for

liberation contradicts selflessness and desirelessness: why would one be concerned about liberation unless one thinks of oneself as something whose liberation is desirable? The *Gītā* does not provide a straightforward answer to this question; instead, it argues (3.20, 3.25, 18.5–7) that dutifully and selflessly contributing to the common good is a proper way to attain liberation (Sreekumar 2012, 277–278, 308–310). It is possible that the concept of *niṣkāmakarma* mitigates the tension between altruistic and self-interested concerns by emphasizing that liberation occurs through desireless action and through contributing to the common good; however, this idea may also be unable to fully remove the doubt that striving for liberation is ultimately motivated by self-interest and selfishness. The situation is different if determinism is the case, for if one's destiny and outlook on life are finally and irrevocably determined by factors that are beyond one's own influence and control, then liberation is ultimately something that one cannot freely strive for or achieve. In this context, liberation should be viewed as a gift, or providence, which is an idea that Chapter 11 of the *Bhagavadgītā* brings up when Krishna reveals his divine form to Arjuna (11.10–13, 11.47) and assures him that only Arjuna will survive the battle (11.32–34).

I have elaborated elsewhere (Lehtonen 2019, 2020) that the viewpoint provided by the "prisoner's dilemma" scenario can enhance our understandings of selflessness and desirelessness. The prisoner's dilemma presents and illuminates the two basic strategies of decision-making: focusing on self-interest versus pursuing the greater good. Moreover, the prisoner's dilemma suggests that these strategies do not necessarily go hand in hand, which is exactly what Krishna indirectly points out in the *Bhagavadgītā* when he warns against acting for personal gain (2.47–48, 6.1). Most importantly, the prisoner's dilemma reveals the rationality of striving to advance the common good—a prominent teaching in the *Bhagavadgītā* (3.19–20, 3.25)—and a move away from self-interest. However, as seen, there are good reasons to think that the *Bhagavadgītā* does not associate desireless action with a desire to act for the common good but rather conveys a more complex, even paradoxical attitude toward the results and consequences of action in general.

As explained above, *niṣkāmakarma* denotes an action performed without any expectation of reward or outcome whatsoever. According to an established view, the *Bhagavadgītā* calls this idea 'inaction in action and action in inaction' (4.18). The idea can be understood and interpreted in different ways, only two of which can be discussed here. First, it can be interpreted to refer to determinism, or the view that every event has a preceding cause sufficient for its occurrence. This view argues that human action is ultimately governed by causal necessity, or by divine guidance and providence. Therefore, what looks like human action is actually human inaction in conformity with necessity, be it natural or divine. Divine determinism echoes the tone of the theophany in Chapter 11. Second, the expression 'inaction in action and action in inaction' can be interpreted to refer to the idea that the focus of action should be on the action itself (i.e., changes corresponding to the action) rather than on its ultimate effect (i.e., results and consequences). Thus, when humans act, their attitude should be like that of inaction, to the effect that they do not consider themselves as the reason for, let alone the owner of, the outcome. In line with this interpretation, Krishna proclaims in the second chapter of the *Bhagavadgītā* that humans have rights only to actions and not to their results, whether good or bad (2.47–48). These two interpretations are compatible, as they concern different dimensions or levels of consideration: the 'determinism' interpretation is metaphysical, while the 'attitude' interpretation is psychological.

If one reads Krishna's teaching—briefly, that people should not desire results—with a sensitivity to philosophy, the advice seems problematic and strange, for an action and its results are internally related. For example, if I manage to open a window, then the window's being open is directly due to my action (Kim, 1993, p. 26). Of course, interpretations of Krishna's teaching are inevitably subject to the loose and ambiguous use of language in translation. In the *Bhagavadgītā* (2.47), the Sanskrit term for *result* is *phala*, or 'fruit', which many translators translate as either "result" or "reward". In this context, the term *reward* relates to the idea of the universal moral bookkeeping of karmic merits as the basis for rewards. Clearly, the *Bhagavadgītā* thus distinguishes an action from its outcomes, whether those outcomes are called "results", "fruit", or "rewards". Therefore, according to the *Bhagavadgītā*, performing a deed is distinct from its result. Another possible interpretation is that in using the term *phala* vaguely, the *Bhagavadgītā* conflates the results of an action with its consequences. Indeed, along with its results, an action can have intended or unintended consequences. While the relationship between an action and its result is intrinsic, the relationship between an action and its consequences is extrinsic or causal (von Wright, 1963; Raz, 1975).

In an elaboration on the difference between the results and the consequences of an action, Georg Henrik von Wright (1963, p. 39) explains:

> By the *result* of an act we can understand either the change corresponding to this act or alternatively the end-state […] of this change. Thus by the result of the act of opening a certain window we can understand either the fact that the window is opening (changes from closed to open) or the fact that it is open. On either way of understanding the notion of a result of action the tie between the act and its result is intrinsic. […]. Unlike the relation between an act and its result the relation between an act and its consequences is extrinsic (causal).

To reveal how complex the issue can be, von Wright adds that

> [o]ne and the same change or state of affairs can be both the result and a consequence of an action. What makes it the one or the other depends upon the agent's intention in acting and upon other circumstances. (p. 40)

According to von Wright's analysis, the agent's intention determines whether a state of affairs is the result or the consequence of an action. The consequences of opening a window can include fresh air or a fly coming into the room; fresh air is often an intended consequence, whereas a fly is more likely an unintended one. Moreover, one can interpret opening a window as the act of letting in fresh air, in which case fresh air is the result of the action.

6. *Niṣkāmakarma* reconsidered

With these considerations, von Wright provides useful means for interpreting Krishna's advice that people should not desire results. According to that interpretation, individuals, when they are acting, should focus on changes corresponding to the actions, not on their ultimate effect(s). A suitable metaphor for this interpretation is the Zen archery competition at which a master advises his

disciples to focus their attention on aiming, not on scoring (Herrigel, 1999). Similarly, the controlled performance of a gymnastics routine is arguably more important for one's focus than the points given by a panel of judges. For further clarification of this issue, the Western Aristotelian distinction between doing and making (or between action and production) is illuminating. Gymnastics, along with dance and music, are examples of Aristotelian *praksis* ('action'), the result of which is not separate from but are included in the activity. Making and producing, or *poiesis*, in contrast, is an activity in which the result is separate from the action, as in housebuilding and thesis writing (*Nichomachean Ethics* I.1, 1094a1–5, VI.4, 1140a1–24, VI.5, 1140b6–7, 1140b7; Aristotle, 1999, 1, 88–89). In line with this, Krishna's advice can be interpreted as encouraging concentration on doing or performing and not on the outcome or end-state of those activities. However, that solution is not fully satisfactory, especially in the context of production, because it diminishes the value of the result (i.e., profit or loss) that is fundamental in, for example, financial performance or sustainability efforts. Therefore, as a solution, it can be suggested that in making and producing, one should view the sought result not as a personal achievement or merit but as a link in the long chain or great matrix of events, for which the doer of the deed cannot take credit or glory.

Situations in which one acts without considering its outcomes include:

1. When one does not wait for anything related to acting, but simply acts (e.g., out of duty or gratitude);
2. When one is in a state of flow or so deeply immersed in an activity that they perform an action without thinking about its results or consequences; and
3. When one acts like an automaton and does not know or understand what they are doing.

The first two—not waiting for anything before acting and acting in a state of flow—are more plausible interpretations of Krishna's advice, for he does not make any reference to acting unthinkingly.

Based on the aforementioned analysis, Krishna's advice that people should not desire any results from their actions should be interpreted as the wisdom of concentrating on doing an activity, not on its outcome. However, this wisdom also has its limitations, including the risks of passivity and indecision; persons following Krishna's advice may be unable to decide between actions, or between action and inaction, because of their exclusion of result-based expectations. However, as an antidote, the *Bhagavadgītā* emphasizes doing one's duty and being unattached (3.19, 18.9):

> Therefore, always perform unattached the deed to be done, for the man (*puruṣa*) performing action [while being] unattached attains the Supreme. (3.19; Feuerstein 2014, 125)

> [When] he performs necessary actions that is indeed to be done, O Arjuna, and by relinquishing attachment and the fruit [of one's action]—the relinquishment is deemed [to be] *sattva*-natured. (18.9; Feuerstein 2014, 301)

Even if divine providence, or chance, decides the course of one's life, the role of humans is to follow their duty and be disciplined (2.64–65, 13.7), focusing on sharing rather than owning the outcomes of their actions (3.20, 3.25). How well, and to what extent, humans succeed in fulfilling their duties depends on divine providence, or factors out of individuals' control, but that is

something that humans should not be concerned with or worried about, as the results are in the hands of God or the 'cosmos' (i.e., the reality with its causal structure) (18.59) anyway.

Based on this analysis, *desireless* does not mean purposeless, indifferent, or unintentional, but dutiful: conscientiously or obediently fulfilling one's duty, or being motivated by duty instead of by the potential of reward. Moreover, because duty implies obligation, fulfilling one's duty is, by definition, obligatory and necessary.

The discussed interpretations of Krishna's advice are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Different interpretations of Krishna's advice

1.	Perform deeds out of duty.
2.	Pursue the common good instead of personal benefit.
3.	Focus on action rather than on its outcomes.

Interpretations 1 and 2 are the most traditional, while Interpretation 3 directs the attention to the actual performance of the deed rather than to the result of the deed, which can be matched with both interpretation 1 and interpretation 2. The compatibility of interpretations 1 and 2 necessitates that contributing to the common good is understood as a duty—or, alternatively, that doing one's duty is understood to mean contributing to the common good. Moreover, even though interpretation 3 denies that the result of action is the focus of the agent, it does not automatically prevent the agent from focusing on the consequences of their action. This represents a consequentialist argument compatible with interpretation 2. Advice from Chapter 3 of the *Bhagavadgītā* reiterates this argument clearly: "Even considering only the world's welfare, you ought to act" (3.20; Feuerstein 2014, 125) and "the wise should act thus unattached, desiring to accomplish the world's welfare" (3.25; Feuerstein 2014, 127). In terms of the options listed in Table 1, the solution approximates what is known as "benevolent action" (Chuang 2015).

Nevertheless, it is still doubtful whether benevolence or a sense of duty as motives for action truly represent desireless or disinterested action. One answer is that it depends on the point of view. From a moral point of view, a dutiful or benevolent action can be desireless in the sense that it is not based on a desire for one's personal benefit. However, all action requires intention, as Donald Davidson (1980) points out, and fulfilling one's duty is no exception. If one's intention is to do one's duty, and if the person knows which results or end-state could fulfill their intention, then they intend to perform an action that is not desireless—at least not in any absolute sense—but rather deliberate and purposeful. This is an example of the danger of adopting the term *niṣkāmakarma* as shorthand for the central teaching of the *Bhagavadgītā* when in fact it is not used in the text.

In the social and the individual life, humans cannot avoid making decisions on actions and cannot avoid taking actions. However, whatever degree of determinism prevails in the world, human actions appear to be as much determined as anything else (Harrell 2016, 342). The phrase 'action in inaction and inaction in action' aptly expresses the assumed dual condition of humans—

determinism and the unavoidability of making decisions and acting—described by the *Bhagavadgītā*.

7. Conclusion

Having taken into consideration the above-described pluralism of interpretations, one can argue that karmic causality—which Krishna seems to take to be the correct metaphysical view of reality—provides a key to answer the ethical dilemma in the *Bhagavadgītā*. In view of that answer, the dilemma between different ethical orientations is secondary and superficial: it does not matter whether humans think they follow a deontological approach or a consequentialist approach, because either way, reality is causally determined not by human choice but by God and the law of karma.

Consequently, desireless action (*niṣkāmakarma*) is a natural recommendation, because the roles of human motivation, desire, and goal setting are nothing but "secondary framing". However, even if humans cannot avoid acting, it is better to frame human action in terms of following duty (*dharma*) and conforming to the cosmic order (*ṛta*) than in terms of achieving desirable consequences for oneself.

Thus, in view of Krishna's teaching, fulfilling tasks and duties is a more adequate life orientation and a better approximation of a correct attitude toward life than anticipating outcomes and achievements. Consequently, the dilemma in the *Bhagavadgītā* is ontological as well as ethical, and the dilemma culminates in the integration of determinism—i.e., the view that all events, including human action, are ultimately determined by causes regarded as external to the will—and human agency. Once humans are able to see their actions from a point of view that transcends one's individual perspective, the right understanding follows—namely, that conforming to one's duty and the common good is the best one can do, even if one cannot guarantee the success of their action.

Furthermore, it should be noted that a deed can be done or can be chosen to be done for its own sake, for its result, or for its consequences. The doctrine of *niṣkāmakarma* advises performing actions not for their results or consequences; fulfilling one's duties and advancing liberation are the most wholesome and recommended reasons for performing an action. The doctrine proposes that when acting, one's attitude should be like that in inaction, to the effect that one does not consider themself as the reason for the outcome.

The reader may doubt whether the 'inaction in action and action in inaction' attitude necessarily requires an active belief in determinism. I am inclined to answer "no"; nor does the attitude require fatalism or a submissive attitude to events as a result of a belief in determinism. Instead, the 'inaction in action and action in inaction' attitude is compatible with an understanding that beyond their genetic makeup, each individual, with their characteristics and aspirations, is a complex outcome of interactions with other humans and the environment. Because of this interactive dependency, it can be said, in line with the *Bhagavadgītā*, that individuals are 'inactive in action and active in inaction', meaning that human actions and behaviors are influenced by several factors that are out of individuals' control.

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