

Article

Rebirth According to the *Bhagavad gītā*; Epistemology, Ontology and Ethics

Ithamar Theodor

Department of Religion and Spirituality, Zefat Academic College, Safed 1320610, Israel; theodor@orange.net.il

Received: 22 July 2017; Accepted: 10 August 2017; Published: 14 August 2017

Abstract: This paper is engaged with the topic of reincarnation in the *Bhagavad gītā*, better termed “rebirth”. It first looks into the epistemological aspects of rebirth, and highlights the type of knowledge or terminology underlying the vision of rebirth, as opposed to a different type of knowledge that is not suitable for this purpose, and which leads to a different vision of reality. It then looks into the ontological aspects of rebirth, and having highlighted some *Upaniṣadic* sources, it highlights major *Bhagavad gītā* sections describing the soul and rebirth. Finally, it looks into the ethics derived from the concept of rebirth; it first characterizes these as “ethics of equanimity”, and then expands these into the “ethics of enlightened action”, which refer to action grounded in the idea of rebirth.

Keywords: *Bhagavad gītā*; reincarnation; rebirth

In a previous work, I have offered the metaphor of a three-storey house in order to describe the structure of the *Bhagavad gītā* (Theodor 2010, p. 5). Accordingly, the *Bhagavad gītā*¹ is divided into three metaphysical tiers or layers that could each be described in terms of epistemology, ontology and ethics. The lower level is humanistic and may be termed “the world of *dharma*”; the second level is spiritualistic and may be termed “the world of yoga”, and the third level is liberated and may be termed “the world of *mokṣa*”. The aim of this paper is to expand upon the middle level, which is grounded in the concept of rebirth or reincarnation. It aims at highlighting the epistemology or type of knowledge in which the idea of rebirth is grounded in the *Bhagavad gītā* (*Bhg*), and then looking at the ontology of the self or soul, which forms the foundation of rebirth. Finally, it aims at highlighting the type of ethics derived from the concept of rebirth, which is the ethics of equanimity.²

In general, while Hinduism does not necessarily denote a religion with clearly defined boundaries, it nevertheless denotes a group of traditions united by certain common features, such as shared ritual patterns, shared revelation, belief in reincarnation (*saṁsāra*), liberation (*mokṣa*), and a particular form of endogamous social organization or cast (Flood 2003, p. 2). The *Bhagavad gītā* is one of the central doctrinal texts for Hinduism, and serves as a major source for doctrines and ideas concerning reincarnation. It is one of the three founding texts of the *Vedānta* tradition, known as *prasthānatrayī*, along with the *Brahmasūtra* and the *Upaniṣads*. The *Bhg* propounds, among other things, doctrines underlying the *Vedānta* traditions, of which the concept of reincarnation is central. In examining the topic of reincarnation or rebirth, the terms used by the *Bhg* to indicate the transmigrating entity may be examined; these are *dehin*, *śarīrin*, *dehabhṛt*, *dehavat*, and *kalevera*. All of these terms indicate a soul clearly distinct from its material body (Goswami 2015, p. 50). One may also look into the term *bhūta*, whose origin is in the verbal root *bhū*, which means to be, but also often means to become. In this sense, *bhūta* means one who has come-to-be, i.e., one who has become. The *Bhg* makes clear early on that the individual souls have always existed. Thus, what comes to be is not the soul itself, but rather

¹ Hence *Bhg*.

² Special thanks are due to my research assistant Mr. Omer Lahav for his help.

the soul's ephemeral persona, produced when the soul enters the body. A different way of stating this would be to say that *bhūta* arises when matter and spirit combine (Goswami 2015, p. 48).

1. Epistemology

Before entering the topic of reincarnation, we would like to look into the underlying epistemological assumptions, as epistemology is engaged with the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope (Pearsall 1998, p. 620), which may be relevant for our study. The *Bhg* defines three categories of knowledge. The first category is that by which the soul is to be understood, whereas the second and third categories are not conducive for the discussion of the soul and reincarnation:

18. 19 Knowledge, action and the agent are indeed of three kinds, divided according to the *guṇas*; hear now how is this division depicted through the *guṇa* doctrine. 20 Know that knowledge to be of the nature of goodness, through which one sees a single imperishable reality in all beings, unified in the diversified. 21 Know that knowledge to be of the nature of passion, through which one sees through division a variegated reality of many sorts in all beings. 22 Knowledge that attaches one to one kind of activity, as if it were all, which is not based on a reasonable cause, which does not aim at the truth, and which is minute and meagre, is said to be of the nature of darkness (Theodor 2010, p. 134).

Apparently, the first category of knowledge, which is defined as *sattvic* or transparent, is the relevant category. As such, according to this type of knowledge, the varieties of bodies seem secondary to the reality of the soul or self, which seems primary. As opposed to this category, according to the second category or type of knowledge, which is defined as *rajasic* or passionate, the varieties of bodies seem primary, whereas the soul seems secondary. The third type of knowledge, which is the *tamasic* or dark, is the lowest or most obscure; as such, it obscures the ability to see or to understand the soul and its reality, and is the least relevant for the study of the soul and rebirth. The present discussion may be approached from a different point of view, which considers: how does the self reflect upon itself when it thinks in terms of the first or *sattvic* category, or what kind of knowledge of itself does it have? In other words, the idea of the self implies a kind of detached vision, according to which one examines the working of the body from an external point of view. The *Bhg* offers a reflective vision according to which one thinks of oneself as detached from the body and mind, which are in actuality operated by *prakṛti*, or nature:

5. 7 He who is absorbed in *yoga*, who is a pure soul, who is self-controlled and has subdued his senses, and who is deeply related to all living beings, is never defiled even though he acts. 8–9 'I am not really doing anything', reflects the knower of the truth absorbed in *yoga*. While seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, walking, sleeping, breathing, evacuating, receiving, opening or closing his eyes, he meditates and considers all these as nothing but the senses acting among their sense objects (Theodor 2010, p. 56).

As opposed to this detached self-reflection, which is grounded in the first or *sattvic* type of knowledge, one would think of himself differently while seeing through the *rajasic* or second category of knowledge.

3. 27 Although actions in every respect are performed by the *guṇas* of material nature, the spirit soul, confused by the ego thinks: "It is actually me who is the doer" (Theodor 2010, p. 46).

Apparently, this vision of oneself as the doer of actions is the *rajasic* vision, and it expands into a system of knowledge that identifies the self with the body, gross or subtle, as opposed to the *sattvic* vision, which expands into a system of knowledge that sees the self as a detached entity residing in the body but not directly operating it. This may raise the question of what is the differentiating element between the two types of knowledge, or wording the question differently: how is it that one person sees the self as detached from the body and mind, whereas another person sees the self

as identical with the body and mind? The *Bhg* addresses this question and considers lust or *kāma* to be the degrading force, i.e. that which, when absent, determines whether one is able to maintain a dispassionate vision of reality, and when present, clouds one's knowledge in such a way, so that the vision of the detached self is lost and replaced by the vision of the body and mind as the self.

3. 36 Arjuna said: What is it that impels one to commit evil, even against his will, as if driven by force, O descendent of Vṛṣṇi? 37 The blessed Lord said: It is lust, it is anger, originating from the passion-*guṇa*, and it is the great evil and the great devourer; know that to be the enemy. 38 As fire is obscured by smoke, as a mirror is covered by dust, and as the embryo is enveloped in the womb, so the living being is obscured by lust. 39 This eternal enemy covers even the wise one's knowledge, O Kaunteya, having taken the form of this insatiable fire—lust. 40 It is said to abide in the senses, the mind and the intelligence; through these it deludes the embodied soul and clouds its knowledge.

Considering the removal of lust, the cloud that obscures the knowledge of rebirth, the question may be raised: what is the self's role in the process of knowing? Apparently, the self is manifested in the knowing operation itself, and could be considered as self-manifesting or self-revealing (*sva-prakāśa*). The existence of the self can thus be perceived by its self-luminous nature. The self is the cognizer of the objects only in the sense that under certain conditions of the operation of the mind, there is the mind-object contact through a particular sense, and, as the result thereof, this object appears in consciousness (Dasgupta 2000, p. 69). As such, ideas of the mind, concepts, volitions, and emotions appear in consciousness and themselves appear as conscious states, as consciousness seems to be a natural and normal character of a person.

The *Bhg* indirectly speaks of knowledge, as seeing when it states that the soul possesses knowledge by nature (*jñānin*), but that ignorance covers or conceals it. Thus, five times in the *Bhg* it is stated that knowledge is covered or concealed (*āvṛtam*): by lust and anger³, by one's eternal enemy lust⁴, by "unknowledge" (*ajñāna*) or ignorance⁵, and by darkness⁶. Light discovers what darkness covers, thus by dispelling the world's darkness. The sun enables one to see, and as such the *Bhg* twice compares knowledge in the sense of awareness to the sun; when knowledge destroys ignorance, then that knowledge, like the sun, illumines all around it⁷. Just as one single sun illumines this entire world, so the knowing soul, owner of the field representing the body, illumines the entire field with consciousness⁸. Nature's lower *guṇas* of *rajas* and *tamas* cover the soul's innate knowledge, but in contrast, the highest *guṇa* of virtue or goodness (*sattva*) permits the light of knowledge to shine, enabling one to actually see. Thus, four verses explicitly link virtue or goodness to higher knowledge: goodness, being unsullied, enlightens⁹; when all the body's gates (senses) are illumined, when there is knowledge, then one should know that goodness prospers¹⁰; when the converse occurs—when there is no light-, then the darkness mode prospers¹¹; indeed, the light of knowledge symphonizes virtue¹² (Goswami 2015, pp. 99–100).

³ *Bhg* 3.38.s.

⁴ *Bhg* 3.39–40.

⁵ *Bhg* 5.15.

⁶ *Bhg* 14.9.

⁷ *Bhg* 5.16.

⁸ *Bhg* 13.34.

⁹ *Bhg* 14:6.

¹⁰ *Bhg* 14.11.

¹¹ *Bhg* 14:13.

¹² *Bhg* 14.22.

2. Ontology

Having offered this epistemological discussion, we may look deeper into the various aspects highlighting the nature of the soul or self. In general, the *Bhg* no doubt shares the vision according to which the universe is perceived as a place of constant rebirth:

8. 16 All the worlds, up to Brahmā's world, are subject to repeated births (Theodor 2010, p. 78).

Under Karmic laws, the soul in different bodies cycles through a universe that itself moves in endless cycles. On earth, one may observe cycles of days, night, and seasons, based on the cyclical motions of the earth, sun, moon, and other celestial bodies. The *Bhg* teaches that the entire universe, and the countless souls that populate it, move through grand cycles of cosmic creation and dissolution (Goswami 2015, p. 18). In doing that, it adopts the visions of both *Vedānta* and *Sāṅkhya* traditions by associating itself with both classical *Sāṅkhya* and the *Brahmasūtra*:

13. 1 The blessed Lord said: This body is known as the field, O Kaunteya, and one who knows it, is declared by the wise to be the knower of the field. 2 You should know me as the knower of the field as well, situated in all fields, O Bhārata. I deem knowledge of the field and of the knower of the field to be knowledge indeed. 3 Hear from me in summary what this field and its nature is, how it transforms and comes into being, who the knower of the field is, and what his powers are. 4 Seers have chanted this in many *Vedic* hymns in varied ways, as well as in the *Brahmasūtra* aphorisms, all of them authoritative and well-substantiated. 5–6 The great elements, the concept of ego, the intelligence and the unmanifest, the ten senses and the additional sense, the five sense objects, attraction and repulsion, happiness and distress, the aggregate, consciousness and inner conviction—all serve to sum up the nature of the field and its transformations (Theodor 2010, p. 103).

Apparently, the author of the *Bhg* is drawing on teachings that were current in certain philosophical schools that made the ontological distinction between a mortal body and an immortal entity functioning as the owner of the mortal body. Ownership was based upon the idea of transmigration, or rather re-embodiment, characteristic of the older *Upaniṣads* and early *Sāṅkhya* philosophy. *Upaniṣadic* ideas are recalled when death is described as a chance to acquire a new body and compared with 'weaving a new cloth' (*BĀU*¹³ 4.4.5; cf. *BhG* 2.22). *Sāṅkhya* notions seem to be behind the emphasis of the transformational character of physical existence, such as the change between appearance (birth), disappearance (death), and various modifications in between (*vikāra*). This terminology is used in *Bhg* 2.25, when the immortal being is described as being the opposite of the products of nature (*prakṛti*): it is 'unmanifest' (*avyakta*), 'unthinkable' (*acintya*), 'not modifiable' (*avikārya*). Another connection with *Sāṅkhya* is established by emphasizing that death is not 'non-being' (*asat*), but only a change in appearance, because nothing that (truly) is (*sat*) can vanish into non-being (*asat*) (Malinar 2007, p. 66). As the idea of the soul or the self (*ātman*, *jīva*) is grounded in the *Upaniṣads*, before looking into the *Bhg*'s descriptions of the soul and the way it transmigrates from body to body, some *Upaniṣadic* sources may be quoted.

The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* is one of the oldest and best known of the *Upaniṣads*; many important teachings are contained in it (Radhakrishnan and Moore 1989, p. 64), such as the statement:

7 Now, people here whose behavior is pleasant can expect to enter a pleasant womb, like that of a woman of the Brahmin, the *Kṣatriya*, or the *Vaiśya* class. But people of foul behavior can expect to enter a foul womb, like that of a dog, a pig or an outcast woman. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.10.7 (Olivelle 1996, p. 142).

¹³ The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*.

The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* is one of the later *Upaniṣads*; in it, some of the ideas of the *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* philosophies—both of which are dualistic systems—and of *Advaita* (non-dualism) find clear expression (Radhakrishnan and Moore 1989, p. 89). The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, 5.9. offers a somewhat physical description of the soul's size:

When the tip of a hair is split into a hundred parts, and one of those parts further into a hundred parts, the individual soul (*jīva*), on the one hand, is the size of one such part, and, on the other, it partakes of infinity (Olivelle 1996, p. 262).

The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* is perhaps the most philosophical of the *Upaniṣads*. Among its important features are: the dialogue between Nachiketas and Yama (the god of the world of departed spirits) on the question of the immortality of the self, in which Nachiketas chooses knowledge above all worldly blessings; the theory of the superiority of the good (*śreyas*) over the pleasant (*preyas*); the view that the *ātman* cannot be known by the senses, by reason, or by much learning, but only by intuitive insights or direct realizations; the doctrine of the body as the chariot of the self (Radhakrishnan and Moore 1989, pp. 42–43). The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* indeed includes some important statements that later appear in a similar version in the *Bhg*:

2. 18 The wise one—he is not born, he does not die; he has not come from anywhere; he has not become anyone. He is unborn and eternal, primeval and everlasting. And he is not killed, when the body is killed. 19 If the killer thinks that he kills; If the killed thinks that he is killed; Both of them fail to understand. He neither kills, nor is he killed. 20 Finer than the finest, larger than the largest, is the self (*ātman*) that lies here hidden in the heart of the living being. Without desires and free from sorrow, a man perceives by the creator's grace the grandeur of the self. Sitting down, he roams afar. Lying down, he goes everywhere. The god ceaselessly exulting—Who, besides me, is able to know? 22 When he perceives this immense, all pervading self, as bodiless within bodies, as stable within unstable beings—A wise man ceases to grieve. 23 This self cannot be grasped, by teachings or by intelligence, or even by great learning. Only the man he chooses can grasp him, whose body this self chooses as his own. 24 Not a man who has not quit his evil ways; Nor a man who is not calm or composed; Nor even a man who is without a tranquil mind; could ever secure it by his mere wit. 25 For who the Brahmin and the *Kṣatriya* are both like a dish of boiled rice; and death is like the sprinkled sauce; Who truly knows where he is? (Olivelle 1996, pp. 237–38).

Upaniṣads are emphatic in their declaration that the two are one and the same. But what is the inmost essence of a human being? It seems that the term “self” itself involves some ambiguity, as it is used in a variety of senses. As such, the *Upaniṣads* deconstruct the human person into various layers, pointing at the pure self as the innermost essence of the human and apparently the non-human person. Thus, so far, one consists of the essence of food (i.e. the physical parts of men); he is called *annamaya*. But behind the sheath of this body, there is the other self that consists of the vital breath, which is called the self as vital breath (*prāṇamaya ātman*). Behind this again, there is the other self (consisting of will) called the *manomaya ātman*. This again contains within it the self “consisting of consciousness”, called the *vijñānamaya ātman*. But behind it, we come to the final essence; the self as pure bliss (the *ānandamaya ātman*) (Dasgupta 2000, p. 46). As mentioned, the *Bhg* not only adopts the vision of the *Vedānta* tradition, but also the dualistic vision of *Sāṃkhya* as well. Accordingly, the world represents a mixture of the living entity with nature, or *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. As such, there are eight elements comprising nature, and besides them exist the spirit souls:

4. 7 Earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, intellect and ego—these eight comprise my separated lower nature. 5 But you should know that beside this lower nature, O mighty-armed one, there is another higher nature of mine, comprised of spirit souls, by which this world is sustained. (Theodor 2010, p. 70)

Having quoted some *Upaniṣadic* sources, and having pointed at the non-dual *Vedānta* vision and the dual *Sāṅkhya* vision, which both characterize the *Bhg*, we may look at this very famous section of the *Bhagavad gītā*, where Kṛṣṇa begins his speech addressed to Arjuna:

2. 10 O Dhṛtarāṣṭra, between both armies, Hṛṣīkeśa smiled, and thus addressed the dejected Arjuna. 11 The blessed Lord said: while speaking words of wisdom, you lament for that which is not to be grieved for; wise are those who do not lament either for the living or for the dead. 12 Never was there a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor all these kings, nor in the future shall any of us cease to exist. 13 As childhood, youth and old age befall the soul within this body, so it comes to acquire another body; the wise one is not swayed by illusion in this matter (Theodor 2010, p. 30).

This section clearly offers the vision underlying reincarnation, which is grounded in the existence of the soul. It commences in reinforcing the vision according to which the subject is actually eternal, and moreover, describes childhood, youth and old age as bodily states befalling or occurring to the soul. It also describes the transfer from one body to another, or birth and death. What follows is a section that echoes the *Upaniṣadic* vision of the soul and its nature:

2. 16 There is no becoming of the unreal, there is no unbecoming for the real; the seers of the truth have reached both conclusions. 17 Know that to be indestructible, by which everything is pervaded; there is none who can destroy the imperishable. 18 For these bodies the end is sure, whereas that which is embodied in them, the indestructible and immeasurable soul, is said to be eternal. Therefore, O Bhārata, fight! 19 He who deems the soul is the slayer, and he who thinks the soul is slain—both of them do not know, for the soul slays not nor is it slain. 20 The soul is never born, nor does it ever die; nor having come into existence, will it ever cease to be. Unborn, eternal, unending and primeval—it is not killed when the body is killed. 21 The person who knows the soul as eternally imperishable, that it was not born and is indestructible—whom does he kill? Whom does he cause to kill? 22 As one, having cast aside his old and worn garments, takes on other new ones, so the embodied soul, having cast aside its worn and old bodies, takes on other new ones. 23 Weapons do not pierce it, fire does not burn it, water does not wet it and wind does not parch it. 24 The soul cannot be cut, it cannot be burned, it cannot be wetted or dried indeed, for it is eternal, all pervading, stable, fixed and primeval. 25 It is said that the soul is not manifested, it is inconceivable and beyond transformation; therefore, having understood the matter in that way, you should not grieve. 26 Moreover, if you assume that it is continually born or continually dies, you still have no reason to lament, O mighty warrior. 27 Death is inevitable for all that is born, and inevitable is rebirth for the dead; therefore, you should not grieve over the inevitable. 28 Beings are not manifested in their beginnings, are manifest as they continue to exist, and not manifested at their end; therefore, O Bhārata, why lament about it? 29 For someone to see it is a wonder, for someone else to speak of it is a wonder, for another to hear of it is a wonder, and even having heard of it, no one understands. 30 The soul within everyone's body is beyond destruction; therefore, you should not mourn for any living being.

This is indeed a classic section: the nature of the soul is implicitly contrasted with that of the body; the soul is eternal and primeval, it is not subjected to birth nor to death, it changes bodies just as one changes garments, it is wondrous, difficult to comprehend, permanent, and unchanging. As opposed to the soul, which cannot be harmed by fire, water, or weapons, the body is transient and mortal by

nature. The sharp distinction between the body and the soul is also expressed through terming the soul ‘the body’s owner’, an expression that hints at a situation in which the owner exists in a bodiless state, i.e., the state of immortality or liberation. Having described the nature of the soul, the *Bhg* describes the process of transmigration from one body to another. This process apparently is centered around the mind,¹⁴ which carries the soul to its next body, according to its focus and contents:

15. 7 The eternal soul existing in this world of souls is indeed my fragment; it draws towards itself the six senses including the mind, which are all rooted in material nature. 8 When accepting a body or when relinquishing it, the prevailing soul carries along with it the six senses, just as air carries fragrances from their sources. 9 Through hearing, sight, touch, taste and smell, as well as the mind, it experiences the sense objects. 10 At times it remains within the body, at times it departs from it and at other times it takes pleasure under the *guṇas*’ spell; the deluded cannot see all this, but rather those who possess the sight of knowledge. 11 The striving *yogīs* see it as situated in the self; however, the mindless who have not achieved self-realization, will not see this however they strive to (Theodor 2010, p. 118).

The six senses gather around the soul and accompany it in its journey through *saṁsāra*; it seems that the physical form is shaped around and based on the subtle form, as when the soul migrates from one body to another, and the accompanying senses shape the new body. The soul then experiences the world through the senses that perceive their objects, while the pleasure it derives from the world depends upon the *guṇas*. This vision is somewhat mystical, and as such is not open to all; only self-restrained *yogīs* can attain it, whereas others, presumably those who are under the lower *guṇas*, are unable to see all this. Having offered a description of the soul, we may now turn to the paper’s third part, which looks at the ethics derived from the vision of rebirth.

3. Ethics

The vision of rebirth naturally entails a unique set of values. If indeed there is no rebirth, and life, particularly human life, is a single and onetime event, then thriving for prosperity and pursuing humanistic values would be natural. Alternatively, if this life is but a chapter in the ongoing experience of rebirth, and moreover, if this life is perceived as a chance to break the chain of rebirth, then the corresponding set of values may be different altogether. In this regard writes Joel Kupperman:

Bearing this in mind, we can ask just what Arjuna will be doing if he kills his relatives. In our ordinary way of looking at things, this is first and foremost his bringing about loss of life . . . In a culture that takes reincarnation entirely for granted, though, there will have to be a different ordinary way of looking at things. Generally speaking, Kṛṣṇa reminds Arjuna, to die is to enter a new life. The relatives that Arjuna is about to kill will live again. Therefore, to kill them is not in fact, to deprive them of life. How, then, can it involve harming them? This metaphysical reflection may seem to lead to an ethics of profound indifference, although in fact, it does not (Kupperman 2001, p. 45).

As Kupperman rightly observes, according to the *Bhg*, the idea of death does not in fact exist; moreover, the idea that this life is but a single chapter in the sequence of lives naturally leads to what he terms “ethics of profound indifference”. A famous section presents these ethics, which may also be termed “ethics of enlightenment”; Gandhi considered this section to be the “essence of the *gītā*”¹⁵:

¹⁴ *Manas*.

¹⁵ The full section considered by Gandhi to comprise the essence of the *Bhg* is verses 2. 54–72.

54 Arjuna asked: He who is established in steady enlightenment, and situated in *samādhi*, O Keśava—How can he be described? That enlightened one—how does he speak? How does he sit, and how does he walk? 55 The Blessed Lord said: When he forsakes all desires arising from the mind, becomes satisfied in the self and by the self alone, then he is said to have attained steady enlightenment. 56 One not agitated despite all kinds of distress, whose aspiration for happiness is gone, and who is devoid of passion, fear and anger—such a sage is said to have attained steady enlightenment. 57 He who is not attracted to anything, and having attained this or that, good or bad, does not rejoice but is not averse either—his wisdom is firmly established. 58 When one is able to withdraw his senses away from their objects under any circumstance, just as a tortoise withdraws its limbs into the shell—his wisdom is firmly established. 59 When the embodied abstains—the objects of the senses fade away, but the taste for them remains; however, even the taste fades away, when one attains the vision of the Supreme.

These ethics of enlightenment or knowledge of rebirth may also be characterized as the “ethics of equanimity”; in other words, one who is established in steady enlightenment is not agitated in time of distress, has no aspirations for happiness, and is able to withdraw his senses away from their objects, just as a tortoise withdraws its limbs into the shell. The path of knowledge might at first glance appear easy, as it calls for awakening and self-realization. However, the path of knowledge is a steep path associated with the ascetic renunciation of action and rigorous, disciplined meditation; it is by and large neither practical nor accessible to the average person (Lobel 2011, p. 92). Right from the beginning, along with the preliminary exposition of the existence of the *ātman*, the corresponding ethics of equanimity are presented. Accordingly, the ethical outcome of *ātman* realization is indifference toward sensual pleasures, and steadiness in both happiness and distress:

2. 14 Heat, cold, happiness and distress—sensual perception alone produces them all, and it is impermanent, coming and going; you should seek to endure them, O Bhārata. 15 The wise one whom these do not disturb, who thus remains even tempered in both happiness and distress, is fit for immortality, O bull among men.

However, the *Bhg* does not only further ethics of equanimity and indifference; it is known also as a gospel of action. The type of action it furthers is an enlightened type of action or *Karma-Yoga*, a type of action grounded in the vision of rebirth. The question may be raised: how can the idea of withdrawal and detachment be reconciled with the *Bhg*’s call for action? In this regard, Julius Lipner writes:

The *gītā* also confronts us with the other side of the ethic of desire, viz. an ethic not of withdrawal from the world (*nivṛtti*) but of active engagement with it (*pravṛtti*) through the offering up of one’s everyday duties (*sva-dharma*) in devotion to the Lord (Lipner 2000, p. xi).

As such, the *Bhg* expands this to a set of virtue ethics, and lists a set of corresponding values that represent living in this world in an enlightened mode:

13. 7 Absence of pride and arrogance, nonviolence, forbearance, honesty, attendance upon the *guru*, purity, firmness, self control, 8 lack of attraction to sense objects, absence of ego-notion, visioning the distress and evil of birth, death, old age and disease, 9 detachment, aloofness from sons, wife, home and the like, constant equanimity toward desired and undesired events, 10 single-minded devotion to me supported by *yoga*, preferring of solitary places and avoiding the crowds, 11 constantly contemplating knowledge of the self, envisioning the purpose of knowledge concerned with the truth—all these are declared knowledge, whereas all else is ignorance (Theodor 2010, p. 104).

This list of values is presented in reply to Arjuna’s request to know about knowledge, and may be termed “supportive ethical values”, as they support knowledge of rebirth. Interestingly, in his reply, Kṛṣṇa does not address the question directly; rather, he presents this list of qualities. These represent

knowledge, while their absence signifies the absence of knowledge or ignorance. In other words, the underlying logic is that the consequence of possessing knowledge of rebirth is manifesting the qualities listed. The type of knowledge under discussion is not quantitative, intellectual, or encyclopedic knowledge; rather, it is knowledge of a different sort, intuitive or perhaps even mystical, acquired through inner transformation. The values described may be termed “supportive”; they are necessary for maintaining the vision of rebirth. However, adopting a wider point of view, the *Bhg* may be read as a manual of purification, to be accomplished in the midst of life (Kupperman 1999, p. 127). This purification is based upon the vision of rebirth, and the attempt to attain the state of realization of the vision through *pravṛtti*, or engagement with the world. In this regard, Diana Lobel writes:

Action takes on a different character when this new viewpoint is adopted. We come to a new understanding of our essential identity; we realize we are not really the agent of action. Actions are affected by the three qualities (*guṇas*) of nature (*prakṛiti*). It is only when we are deluded by ego-identification that we think “I am the actor”¹⁶. We can become the witness, rather than the doer, observing the semi-autonomous movements of nature’s qualities, which we experience as human emotions: we can witness hurt, reacting to a loss; the hurt develops into sadness, and someone else’s anger arises in response. However, we ourselves identify as the eternal self who is watching the qualities of nature responding to other qualities, recognizing that our true nature is deeper and separate, unaffected by the qualities of nature. We lose our egocentric viewpoint and assume the viewpoint of the eternal Self within. We now act purely for the sake of *dharma* in both its senses: we fulfill our sacred, social duty and uphold the world order and ritual cosmos (Lobel 2017, pp. 130–31).

This description perhaps captures the essence of the *Bhg*’s ethics, which may also be termed an “ethics of enlightened action”; these are grounded in the knowledge of rebirth and take the form of an ethical ladder, or a ladder of action grounded in duty or *dharma*. This ethical ladder is transformational and composed of various stages that enable one to rise from one stage to another while undergoing transformation. As we have elaborated on this topic elsewhere (Theodor 2010, pp. 17–24), we may not elaborate on this here, but suffice it to say that this ethical ladder is grounded in the vision of rebirth, and that by rising up the ladder, each step or stage takes one further away from rebirth.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Dasgupta, Surendranath. 2000. *A History of Indian Philosophy*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, vol. 2.
- Flood, Gavin, ed. 2003. *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Goswami, Hridayananda Das. 2015. *A Comprehensive Guide to the Bhagavad gītā*. Krishna West: Gainesville.
- Kupperman, Joel J. 1999. *Learning from Asian Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kupperman, Joel J. 2001. *Classic Asian Philosophy: A Guide to the Essential Texts*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lipner, Julius. 2000. Prolegomena. In *The Bhagavad Gītā for Our Times*. Edited by Julius Lipner. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Lobel, Diana. 2011. *The Quest for God and the Good; World Philosophy as a Living Experience*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lobel, Diana. 2017. *Philosophies of Happiness: A Comparative Introduction to the Flourishing Life*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Malinar, Angelika. 2007. *The Bhagavad gītā; Doctrines and Contexts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Olivelle, Patrick. 1996. *Upanisads*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pearsall, Judy, ed. 1998. *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁶ *Bhg* 3:27–28.

Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli and Charles A. Moore, eds. 1989. *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Theodor, Ithamar. 2010. *Exploring the Bhagavad gītā; Philosophy, Structure and Meaning*. Surrey: Ashgate.



© 2017 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).