Two Nobel Laureates’ Misrepresentation of Bhagavad Gita and Gandhi

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# Introduction

“He who hates no single being, who is friendly and compassionate to all, who is free from attachment and egoism, to whom pain and pleasure are equal, who is enduring, ever content and balanced in mind, self-controlled, and possessed of firm conviction, whose thought and reason are directed to Me, he who is (thus) devoted to Me is dear to Me” *Bhagavad Gita* (12.13-14)

Thinkers in ancient India developed the conceptual framework and the appropriate rules of moral conduct called ‘*dharma*’ to attain the highest form of happiness ‘bliss’ or *moksha* by getting liberation from the birth, death and rebirth cycle forever. The Sanskrit word ‘*dharma*’ means duty, uprightness and performance of good deeds. It holds a society together. According to the sages and seers in ancient India, the present life is just a transitory state but it does offer a unique opportunity to perform good deeds and to live by moral rules for achieving a permanent state of eternal bliss. This thinking culminated into the *Bhagavad* *Gita* (song of God), which, in turn, formed a part of the epic *Mahabharata*. Incidentally, the Socratic question, ‘How should one live?’ was raised and resolved at least a thousand years earlier by the ancient thinkers in India and attempts were also made to lay down the appropriate rules to lead a virtuous life in a social setting. According to the most conservative estimates, the Rig Veda, which emphasized the secular values of honesty, truthfulness, non-violence, compassion and tolerance, was composed before two thousand century BCE.

Both Prof. A. K. Sen (2000) and Dr. Henr**y** Kissinger (2014) cast the historical debate between Arjuna and Krishna, which is contained in *The* Gita, in terms of consequentialism versus high deontology. Arjuna is overwhelmed with grief at the thought that he has to kill so many of his kinsmen during the immanent war and refuses to fight. Krishna reminds the warrior Arjuna of his duty to fight irrespective of the bad consequences for him. There are two major problems for such an interpretation. First, it is inconsistent with the arguments contained in *The Gita* and apparently an attempt is made by them to forcibly conform it to their pre-conceived ideas. Since only on the surface, the dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna may appear as a clear-cut debate between consequentialism and deontology. However, if one scratches the surface it is obvious that both Arjuna and Krishna are resorting to arguments based on consequences although Krishna is focusing more on the consequences of not fighting whereas Arjuna more on the consequences of fighting. It is shown that the two Nobel Laureates’ claim is inconsistent with the contents of the dialogues between Arjuna and Krishna.

Secondly, they focus only on some parts of the first two chapters and totally ignore the material contained in the remaining sixteen Chapters that are the heart of *The Gita*. These sixteen Chapters are devoted to the articulation of the linkage of leading a virtuous life attaining bliss. It is, therefore, no surprise that they have presented Gandhi in such a sarcastic tone that could come only out of ignorance. This is briefly presented below. *The* *Gita’s* original text is in Sanskrit and there are numerous translations available. The English translation of *The* *Gita* by Janak Datta is used here.

### *The Gita* on Consequentialism versus Deontology

Sen (2000) suggests the inclusion of the state of affairs, which consists of beliefs, actions, motives, and processes as an integral part of consequential evaluation. Accordingly, it may be noted that Arjuna believed in the existence of heaven and hell, the birth- death- rebirth cycle, *Atma* was immortal and was conscience of his moral duty as a warrior. Additionally, Dhar (p 63) points out, “Arjuna cannot be faulted for the way he behaved or for the position he took on various matters, spiritual and mundane, that came up under consideration during his dialogue with the Lord. He was a man of intellect and wisdom and such a person is bound to weigh the pros and cons of his actions as also the advice he gets from any quarter.” In fact, after the lengthy discourse, Krishna leaves the decision to fight or not to fight up to Arjuna. Krishna says, “Thus has this wisdom, more secret than secrecy itself, been imparted to you by Me. Fully pondering it, do as you like (18.63).” The following classification is almost explicit in the first two chapters of *The Gita*.

Table 1: Relationship between Good and Right

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Deontology | |
|  |  | Right | Wrong |
| Consequentialism | Good | D11 | D12 |
| Bad | D21 | D22 |

There are four possibilities: the top left cell (D11) is the best possible because there is no conflict between the good and the right and similarly the bottom right cell (D22) is both bad and wrong and would be rejected both by the consequential**i**sts and the non-consequentialists and does not create any controversy between them. But the other two possibilities capture the conflict between the consequentialists and the non-consequentialists. The top right cell (D12), which indicates good consequences but wrong, may be acceptable to the consequentialists but not to the consequence-independent thinkers. Similarly, the bottom left cell (D21) which captures the possibility of being right but having bad consequences may be acceptable to the non-consequentialists but not to the consequentialists.

Since according to the conflict case (D12), Arjuna would like to fight but Krishna persuading him not to fight, would be irrelevant here. Sen (2000) believes that Arjuna’s conflict belongs to the other conflict case D21. He (2000, p 481) states, “Krishna points to Arjuna’s duty to fight, irrespective of evaluation of the consequences. It is a just cause, and as a warrior and a general on whom his side must rely, he cannot waiver from his obligations (no matter what results from that).”

Kissinger (2014) also believes that Arjuna’s conflict belongs to D21. He states, “The Hindu classic the Bhagavad Gita framed these spirited tests in terms of the relationship between morality and power. Arjuna, “overwhelmed by sorrow “on the eve of battle at the horrors he is about to unleash, wonders what can justify the terrible consequences of war. This is the wrong question, Krishna rejoins. Because life is eternal and cyclical and the essence of the universe is indestructible. Redemption will come through the fulfillment of a preassigned duty, paired with a recognition that its outward manifestations are illusory because “the impermanent has no reality; reality lies in the eternal”. Arjuna, a warrior, has been presented with a war he did not seek. He should accept the circumstances with equanimity and fulfill his role with honor, and must strive to kill and prevail and “should not grieve.”

While Lord Krishna's appeal to duty prevails and Arjuna professes himself freed from doubt, the cataclysms of the war ­ described in detail in the rest of the epic ­ add resonance to his earlier qualms. This central work of Hindu thought embodied both an exhortation to war and the importance not so much of avoiding but of transcending it. Morality was not rejected, but in any given situation the immediate considerations were dominant, while eternity provided a curative perspective. What some readers lauded as a call to fearlessness in battle, Gandhi would praise as his “spiritual dictionary”.”

According to the logic of situated evaluation, it might be Arjuna’s moral duty to fight but only he was going to experience the unbearable pain (bad consequences) from killing his kinsmen. Krishna, according to Kissinger and Sen, was trying to convince Arjuna that case (D21) should be acceptable to him since it was his moral duty as a warrior to fight irrespective of bad consequences for him.

Chapter One of *The Gita* lists Arjuna’s reasons against fighting the war and Chapter Two contains Krishna’s arguments for fighting the war. Slokas 38 to 45 in Chapter One contain Arjuna’s five arguments against fighting: (i) it was a sin to kill one’s own kinsmen and a passage to hell, (ii) his cousins (Kauravas) were blinded by greed but he was wise enough not to be, (iii) could not enjoy the victory after killing so many including the grandfather Bhishma and his teacher Drona, (iv) so many women would become widows and consequently there would be intermixing of castes and a destruction of the purity of lineage**,** and (v) winning the war was uncertain. Arjuna’s first two reasons are deontology-based and the next two are consequence-based. Thus, according to Arjuna, fighting was wrong as well as had bad consequences, that is, it was case D22 and not D21 as claimed by both Kissinger and Sen.

Krishna argued against Arjuna’s giving up the fight. Since, according to Krishna, it was not only the right thing to do but also was good for him implying case D11. (i) Krishna said to Arjuna that he called himself learned while behaving otherwise. Because the learned people knew that *Atma* never dies and human body is perishable implying that he could not kill *Atma* and why experience any pain for destroying the perishable objects. (ii) His enemies would call him a coward and history would not be kind to him. (iii) Moreover, if he won he would enjoy the earth and if died during the war he would go to heaven. Either way he could not lose.1 Twenty-eight Slokas in Chapter Two starting from eleven to thirty-eight are sufficient in addressing Arjuna’s five concerns.

In the light of the above arguments made both by Arjuna and Krishna, it would be more appropriate to classify their discussion centered on case (D22) since Arjuna thought fighting involved killings, which were both bad (painful) and wrong (a sin) and additionally could have bad social consequences by corrupting women. Similarly, Krishna also understood that Arjuna was grief-stricken because of both anticipated personal guilt and pain from killings. He tried to convince Arjuna that fighting was both personally and morally desirable for him and he would be in situation D11 and not in D22 as he thought. Thus, it was not a debate just between strict consequence-independent and consequentialism as claimed by Kissinger and Sen.

Sitansu Chakravarti (2003) also concludes, “In the above I have shown that Sri Krishna advises Arjuna to fight on consequential consideration.” Chakravarti (2006) pursues this theme in depth and provides convincing arguments in support of this conclusion. Also Ray (1999, p 16) notes, “In the *Mahabharata*, even Lord Krishna, tells a few lies and practices deception on a few occasions. These were all justified on the ground that they were required to uphold dharma.” The point is that Krishna was not that fixated on deontology as claimed by Kissinger and Sen.

J. N. Mohanty (1999) provides another insight. He (pp 297-98) observes, “Arjuna’s “despondency,” as the First Chapter’s title goes, may be understood as arising out of the internal conflict between different parts of the total *dharma*: *varnadharma* (that is, *dharma* of caste) points in one direction, the *kuladharma* (that is, the *dharma* of family) in another, and the *satharandharma* (the *dharma* common to all persons in all contexts) in still another. As a member of the caste of warriors, Arjuna knows he ought to fight a battle if the cause is righteous. As a member of a family, he ought not to kill his “grandfathers, uncles and cousins.” In any case, he is subject to the universally binding rule of “non-injury.” How is he to reconcile these conflicting demands?” Clearly, Nobel Laureates’ position is not tenable.

Krishna tried every possible means to avoid war and pleaded with Duryodhana to share the kingdom with his cousins. More importantly, Krishna realized that the choice was between two evils: resorting to violence to eliminate unrighteousness and allowing the spread of unrighteousness, which would destroy everything necessary for preservation of a society. That is, if there is no dharma, there is no society. Thus, violence is recommended only as a last resort to address the serious problem of negative externality and save the society from destruction.

Clearly the battlefield, perhaps, is more of a metaphor. Dhar (2003) provides a much deeper interpretation of *The Gita*. He (p 83) describes it as: “In the story of Geeta, Arjuna is the soul of a man. He is in the middle of the battle of his inner self. He is afraid of death. He is reluctant to kill his desires, passion, lust, ego and all that he considers his own and that is dear to him. These are the forces of evil that are up to destroy the forces of virtue and righteousness in him. Sri Krishna is the guide of this soul who comes to his rescue. He gives him the lessons in knowledge, action and devotion. Knowledge, about the reality of the forces of virtue and evil, action, that will enable him to win the battle and devotion unto the Lord that will ensure for him both gain and security.”

Steven Crimi (1984) remarks, “The whole of the *Bhagavad Gita* is an enactment of this process, moving from a stuck perspective to the ability to discriminate many perspectives; from discriminative knowledge to a direct experience of the radical grounding vision; and finally into an ability to live through this vision.” Similarly, Dhar (2003, p 65) notes, “The study of Geeta, in effect, covers a journey of the mind from the position of grief to the position of renunciation.” It is also obvious that in comparison to Krishna, Sigmund Freud looks pale. What Krishna achieved in few hours, Freud most likely would not have helped resolve such a deep personal crisis in a life time.

*Prescribed Moral Conduct*: Krishna describes the characteristics of a virtuous person as: “Absence of pride, freedom from hypocrisy, non-violence, forbearance, straightness of body, speech and mind, devout service of the preceptor, internal and external purity, steadfastness of mind and control of body, mind and the senses (13.7).” He adds, “Non-violence in thought, word and deed, truthfulness and genially of speech, absence of anger even on provocation, disclaiming doership in respect of actions, quietude or composure of mind, abstaining from malicious gossip, compassion towards all creatures, absence of attachment to the objects of senses even during their contact with the senses, mildness, a sense of shame in transgressing against the scriptures or usage, and abstaining from frivolous pursuits (16.2).” He continues, “Worship of gods, the Brahmanas, one’s elders and wise men, purity, straightness, continence and harmlessness – this is called bodily penance (17.14).” According to *The* *Gita*, non-violence, compassion, tolerance and self-control are the cardinal virtues.

*The Gita* and Gandhi: *The* *Gita’s* main message is non-violence but also it preaches ‘steadfastness of mind and control of body’. Most probably, Gandhi derived courage and moral strength from *The Gita* to wage a struggle against the most powerful Empire to get India freedom from slavery. It appears that equally important to him was to win an internal battle against ‘desire, anger and greed’ the three gates of hell. The teachings of *The Gita* inspired him and provided guidance and moral strength to him in overcoming these evils. He lived a life of austerity, discipline and sacrifice. Many people would think that he lived a life of a poor voluntarily. *The* *Gita* was his constant companion. In the light of above statements from *The* *Gita*, it should be no surprise why Gandhi worshiped it and practiced its teachings to the fullest extent.

Sen remarks, “Krishna’s high-deontology has been deeply influential in moral debates in the subsequent millennia. It is, I suppose, a tribute to the power of pure theory that even Mahatma Gandhi-no less-felt deeply inspired by Krishna’s words on doing one’s duty irrespective of consequences, even though the duty in this case was for Arjuna to fight a violent war (not in general a cause to which Gandhi could be expected to warm).” Similarly, Kissinger sarcastically calls *The Geeta* as Gandhi’s ‘spiritual dictionary’. First of all, as discussed above, their premises are wrong. *The Geeta* is not about war. Gandhi himself answers it as follows: “Thus the author of the Gita by extending meanings of words has taught us to imitate him. Let it be granted, that according to the letter of the Gita it is possible to say that warfare is consistent with renunciation of fruit. But after 40 years’ unremitting endeavor fully to enforce the teaching of the Gita in my own life, I have, in all humility, felt that perfect renunciation is impossible without perfect observance of ahimsa in every shape and form.”2

### Conclusion

*The Gita* provides a comprehensive, well-argued and consistent set of the virtues of truthfulness, compassion, tolerance and non-violence and a practical guide to living a virtuous life. Crimi concludes, “Thus the story is the vision, to be recalled and lived through, moment to moment.” *The Gita* not only helps a person in resolving an existing crisis but more importantly also prepares him in preventing a crisis. As shown above, these two Nobel Laureates provide no valid arguments to justify their claims. However, I am no Lord Krishna to remove their self-inflicted delusion/confusion.

* Helpful suggestions from Sitansu Chakravarti and Bhoopendra Sinha are deeply appreciated

End Notes

1 हतो वा प्राप्स्यसि स्वर्ग जित्वा वा भोक्ष्यसे महीम् ।

तस्मादुत्तिष्ठ कौन्तेय युद्धाय कृतनिश्चय: ॥ (२/३७)

(Slain, you will attain the felicity of heavens; victorious, you stand to enjoy the pleasures of the earth. Therefore, stand up, O! Son of Kunti, determined to fight.)

इस तरह भगवान ने अर्जुन के दोनों हाथों मे लड्डू पकडा दिये।

2 This is taken from <http://www.gandhibapu.com>

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