

Consequentialism and the Gītā: A Response to Amartya Sen

by

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Modified text has been highlighted in yellow.

Hyperlinks to resources on philosophical terms: consequentialism, etc., embedded by
Sunthar V.)

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Prologue

[p.276>] “Consequential Evaluation and Practical Reason” by Amartya Sen appears as the very first essay of the September 2000 issue of *The Journal of Philosophy*, published by the Department of Philosophy, Columbia University, New York. *The Journal of Philosophy* is a reputed philosophy journal in North America. Many trend-setting articles by top-rate philosophers of the West appeared in it in the past. Amartya Sen is a Nobel-laureate economist

of Indian origin who is well known in the field of Ethics in Philosophy. In this article he contests the position of Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the Gītā, without arguing out the issue in detail with the help of needed references to the text as well as the vast body of philosophical literature available on it in the tradition. His stand in the paper does not lead to any meaningful reference to the huge corpus of the epic, the Mahābhārata, in which the scripture is embedded. The primary thrust of the article, we must note, is not directed against the position of the scripture, which is mentioned only as an illustration to show how wrong [deontology](#) could be in Ethics, in order for the author to be able to establish, in contrast, the viability of his own thesis of broad [consequentialism](#). Sen apparently does not give enough importance to the scripture so as to devote a full-length paper in support of his position against it. He does not refer in his writing to any single of the very many analytical commentaries on it that developed over the millennia. As academics, we do expect to see that his argument is based not just on a cursory reading of the scripture, perhaps from a translation of the original for that matter, while our search for evidence of [[276-277](#)] detailed scholarship is frustrated. In fact, Sen fails to provide grounds for his expertise in the field of Indian philosophy at all in order to be effectively able to demonstrate the viability of the point he is making. Be that as it may, it is, however, quite likely that many of the readers of his article in the first-rate journal devoted to philosophy would take his summery rejection of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's position in the Gītā for granted, mistaking him for an authority in Indian Philosophy. Since the Western readers of *The Journal of Philosophy* are primarily interested in philosophical issues, and not history of ideas, they would not go to check out the exact interpretation of the Gītā for themselves, but would be satisfied with the broader philosophical points made by Sen. Taking Sen as an authority on Indic Studies, hoisted on the pedestal of his Nobel-laureate status, it would be quite normal for them to simply take for granted, after having read the article, that the Gītā after all is worth nothing. Thus, positing Śrī Kṛṣṇa's position as highlighting the 'classic argument' of 'high deontology' in order to illustrate its utter poverty in the face of his own, Sen succeeds, even if unintentionally, in laying bare to his Western readers the sheer frivolity of Hinduism in so far as it is grounded on the scripture. He does not appear to have taken enough academic caution to inquire into the relevant supportive evidence, short of which his unguarded conclusions are apt to have an adverse impact on people all over the world, across the various faiths, in so far as they have found solace in the secular teachings of the Gītā, and of Hinduism as such. This lack of caution

on Sen's part might have been prompted, at least to an extent, by the possibility of a lack of academic response to the issue from qualified Indian readers, given the state of the study of humanities, including Indic Studies, in the subcontinent. After all, is it not simply amazing that the scholars in India are not even aware of Sen's article? Despite these troubling facts, however, in this rejoinder I have preferred only to raise academic issues pertaining to the philosophical debate involved.¹ If I succeed in conveying my point, I will also have succeeded in showing that Sen has made statements on the Gītā, which are plainly erroneous, apart from being supported by inadequate evidence, in a casual, methodologically suspect fashion, straying into areas apparently beyond his jurisdiction. The publication of his personal beliefs in an academic journal of Philosophy indeed hurts the image of the cultural tradition of India in as much as India is looked upon as having "expressed herself in the Bhagavad Gītā" and "the preacher of the Gītā" is viewed as having "given a unified shape to the thought of India at one single place" in it ("Dhammapadam" 461). To make it perhaps a little awkward for Sen, these remarks are from Tagore whose insights generally bear some weight of reverence for him, so much so that his own views in the area deserve to carry the support of due scholarship in his writing in the face of the lofty words of eulogy coming from the poet in favor of the scripture.

¹ The author expresses his thanks to the Infinity Foundation for a grant that made it possible for him to do the major part of the paper. In its earlier versions it was delivered at the Friday Philosophy Seminar, 2002, Calcutta; WAVES conference, 2002, University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth; and the International Vedanta Conference, 2002, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. Thanks are also due to Thomas Loree and Ananda Chakravarti for their help in editing. I am indebted to my friend Prasanta Sarkar for his constant encouragement. The paper is incorporated in the author's forthcoming book, *Ethics in the Mahabharata: A Philosophical Inquiry*. All translations of passages from the original Sanskrit and Bengali are by the author, except when otherwise mentioned. This article appeared in the 2004 issue of *Evam*. I am specially thankful to the editor Makarand Paranjape for having resurrected it from oblivion, an inevitable destination for it, indeed, amid the prevailing practice that a "scholarly" paper denigrating Hinduism and its associated culture finds an easy way into an academic journal in the West, while a rejoinder to it is likely to be set aside by the vigilant referees for being "apologetic", even when the assigned "experts" may palpably lack in the most rudimentary knowledge of the hardcore Indian Philosophy.

The Rejoinder

I. The problem Sen poses

In his article ‘Consequential Evaluation and Practical Reason’ (477-502), Amartya Sen makes it known to the readers his philosophical disapproval of Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s advice to Arjuna in the Gītā, vis-à-vis the latter’s stand regarding not to fight and kill people “for whom he has affection.” In the wake of defending his broad-based thesis of consequentialism, to be contrasted with the narrowly focused variety known as [utilitarianism](#) on the one hand, and the non-consequential deontological theses on the other, Sen dwells at considerable length on the “classic argument” (479) of the [[277-278](#)] deontological variety, believed to be found in the Gītā, where he notices that “insistence” is laid “on making **consequence-independent judgments**” (479). Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s “high deontology,” according to Sen, consists in his preoccupation that it is “Arjuna’s duty to fight, irrespective of his evaluation of the consequences” (481), in as much as the cause is just and the latter belongs to the fighter caste.² Arjuna, for his own part, is disturbed by the possible consequences of his action, viz., mass killing that would certainly include people for whom he has special affection. He is not particularly convinced by Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s argument that “he cannot waver from his obligations (no matter what results from that)” (481), when he refuses to cause the devastation he considers highly undesirable. Sen finds Arjuna’s consequentialist position commendable in the face of the allegedly deontological one posed by Śrī Kṛṣṇa, for “one must take responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions and choices ...” (482). Sen is apparently at a loss that tradition in India has not sided with Arjuna’s point of view, and has failed to find a detractor even in the modern pacifist of the stature of Mahatma Gandhi. Sen is rather amazed by the influence that Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s position holds in

² Madhusūdana Sarasvatī, in his commentary *Śrīmad-bhagavad-gītārtha-dīpikā*, to *śloka* 2.31 of the Gītā, refers to the saying of Parāśara:

The *kṣatriya* will preserve the world according to *dharma*, protecting his subjects, arms in hand, meting out justice, while vanquishing others’ soldiers.

Śrīdharaswāmi, in his *Subodhinī Tīkā*, a commentary to the Gītā, comments that for the *kṣatriya* there is no preferable preoccupation “to the just war.”

Hindu theology with his “gradual transformation from being a noble but partisan patron of the Pāṇḍavas in the epic to being an incarnation of God, as he is in later Hinduism ...” (479).

II. The Answer

In this response I would like to contest Sen’s readings of the points of view of Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna. I will attempt to show that Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s position is consequentialistic, and not deontological, contrary to Sen’s claim. As evidence of my argument, I will draw upon the interpretations of the text in the Gītā in the age-old tradition of Indian Philosophy, over and above the straight readings of it, while treating it as embedded in the epic, the Mahābhārata. In the end I will indicate in passing the contribution that Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s variety of consequentialism may offer to Sen’s.

Before starting our assessment of the line of thought as presented by Sen, I feel tempted to make a quick comment on his remark on the historical transition of Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the Hindu tradition of later days. If we look at “Bhīṣma Stavarāja” (Mahābhārata 12.47), for example, we see the great Bhīṣma extolling Śrī Kṛṣṇa as God incarnate. Unless we are determined to categorize any such passage in the Mahābhārata as interpolated, thus taking an *a priori* stand on the issue to start with, we must admit that even during Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s lifetime people were prone to accept him as a laudable incarnation of the supreme. This, indeed, is a minor point in the line of thought Sen advances in his paper in so far as the philosophical issues he deals with do not in any way depend on its validity. We, therefore, should move straight to the main ideas involved.

We have to keep in mind that the Gītā contains the words of counsel [[278-279](#)] offered by Śrī Kṛṣṇa to his friend Arjuna when the latter is gripped by dejection, a situation diagnosed as coexisting with the predominance of *tamas* (lethargy and darkness), and considered detrimental to one’s spiritual as well as psychological well-being. While taking note of the parameters pertaining to the state of affairs in which Arjuna should be spiritually, and morally, counseled, Śrī Kṛṣṇa does not lose sight of his dear friend’s giving way to *tamas*. He surely does not “insist on an impoverished account of a state of affairs in evaluating it,” (491) in so far as he includes the *sattva-rajās-tamas* (satisfaction-excitement-lethargy) dimension in it, in order to pay “particular attention to ‘comprehensive outcomes’ (including actions undertaken, processes involved, and the like, along with the final outcomes, instead of confining attention to

only the ‘cumulative outcome’ (what happens at the very end)” (491). The total process that Arjuna is involved in, in Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s eyes, is certainly richer and more stratified, according to the requirements of Sen’s broader consequentialism, than merely the killing or its absence. Śrī Kṛṣṇa takes a lot more into consideration while analyzing Arjuna’s sudden spurt of “affection” toward his near and dear ones that Sen is so keen to highlight in order to bring to our attention the fact that Śrī Kṛṣṇa might have ignored it owing to his allegedly deontological moorings.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa, we should not forget, was not intent on the war to start with. It was never a deontologically foregone conclusion for him. He had tried his best to avert it, even at the cost of severe possible privation for the five Pāṇḍavas, when a proposal was made to settle for the share of the kingdom with the Pāṇḍavas’ entitlement restricted to five villages only. The war was arrived at consequentially. Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s exhortations to Arjuna are not dictates. At the very end of the long deliberation in the Gītā, he asks Arjuna, “the friend of his choosing,” to act “as he thinks best” (Gītā 18.63-4). Given Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s theological position of omnipotence in the Gītā, he does not need Arjuna’s help to win the battle. However, he wants Arjuna to be existentially involved in the state of authentic existence when the latter is in an extreme state of dejection with his “mouth parching,” “limbs weakened,” “body trembling,” so much so that the bow Gāṇḍīva, that he refuses to part with ever, “slips off the hand,” his “brain is whirling round and round,” and he “cannot keep standing any longer” (Gītā 1.28-30). This certainly is not a state of *sāttvika* compassion (i.e., love in its true form) that Arjuna has for his near and dear ones, but one of loss of life’s balance, some kind of cowardice that has infected the great hero.³ Instead of considering it as a reaction in the field of morality, we need rather to consider Arjuna’s refusal to fight as a psychological reaction on his part which it is incumbent on the friend at hand, viz., Śrī Kṛṣṇa, to take care of, through the process of counseling. In order to be able to make the right moral decision, the former must have the right psychological balance first. All this, needless to say, is consequential calculation on Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s part. [[279-280](#)]

Śrī Kṛṣṇa does not insist that an action constitutes duty for all, for he knows that,

³ Ānanda Giri, in his commentary to *śloka* 1.29 of the Gītā says that the expression “trembling” signifies fear. Swami Vivekananda in his *Karma-Yoga* says, “Arjuna became a coward at the sight of the mighty army against him...” (39).

When someone has found delight, peace and satisfaction in the Self, he is not bound by the constraint of duty.

He has nothing to gain in the world by action, nor anything to lose by refraining from it. He is independent of all considerations regarding things. (Gītā 3.17, 18)

Such a person belongs to another world, with presuppositions for life being absolutely different for him, as contrasted with the others around. Since Arjuna has not reached such a state yet, Śrī Kṛṣṇa counsels him to fight, which, indeed, the former had come prepared to do, till he lost his psychological balance. Apart from Arjuna's need to go back to the required state of mind from where he can grow psychologically, ethically and spiritually, it seems that once he has come to the battlefield with his responsibility to give leadership to the Pāṇḍava army as a General, it may be quite questionable whether he can relinquish his commitment all of a sudden, at the very last moment. At any rate, he has to get over his stupor immediately, which he is confusing with compassion, in order, finally, to be in a position to make the decision that suits him. It is weakness and cowardice against which Kṛṣṇa incites Arjuna, not love. In fact when love takes the form of cowardice, it indicates a real existential fall. We wonder if Sen would mind counsel offered to the chief of the army fighting against bin Laden (supposing the chief to be the cousin of the latter), as the chief gives up his arms in the battlefield and starts trembling, overcome with emotion at the prospect of fighting his very dear cousin. When maintenance of justice is the principle involved, it is incumbent on the *kṣatriya* (the warrior) to adopt the appropriate means, including taking up arms, if need be (see footnote 2). Here Śrī Kṛṣṇa is inciting Arjuna to fight in the consequential consideration of maintenance of justice

III. Karma Yoga and Consequentialism

To repeat, Arjuna has yet to grow psychologically, and spiritually, to be able to attain the state of freedom where all duties evaporate. Till then, he must perform the duties pertaining to his station in life, according to his *sva-dharma* (specific constitution), in the proper way, i.e., in all seriousness, maintaining a phenomenological detachment from the possible results of the actions undertaken, be they successes or failures. Actions **are** undertaken toward success, although success, or its opposite, failure, must not overshadow the psyche of the one

performing them. The sense of duty dictates that there must not be any slackness in the actions performed in anticipation of the result. Arjuna is a General, indeed a *kṣatriya*, of the *rājasika* (extrovert) type, and Śrī Kṛṣṇa knows that fighting for the just cause is in his very nature. He diagnoses Arjuna's refusal to fight not as *ahimsā* (non-violence) but as stupor triggered by infatuation. "If, in your vanity," he says to Arjuna, "you think you will not fight, your resolve will verily be in vain, for your nature will induce you to the act" (Gītā 18.59). Thus, Śrī Kṛṣṇa inspires the latter to take up his arms in a battle he is justified to fight. Executed in the right spirit, the act will prepare him for the state of freedom, which is yet another consequential consideration on Śrī Kṛṣṇa's part. Kṛṣṇa certainly does not subscribe to the Kantian categorical imperative in so far as we see him taking the consequences of an action into consideration while maintaining the mystic, phenomenological detachment, which ensures the quality of life and a greater effectiveness in handling things. Fighting, or its absence, is not [[280-281](#)] deontologically Arjuna's duty. Here it is both the act as well as the attitude associated with it that relate to the concept of duty in a consequential frame of reference. This is the upshot of *karma yoga* (i.e., the *yoga* of action).

Karma yoga is the "technique of action" (Gītā 2.50). One might, however, suspect it to have a deontological mooring in view of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's advice to Arjuna to fix his attention to the "domain of the action only, and not its consequences" (Gītā 2.47). The idea is: If one is encouraged to dissociate from the consequences of the action, how can the theory be said to promote consequentialism? Our position, in the light of all that has been said already, is that the theory is indeed consequential, based on the consideration that it allows us to choose and plan for a course of action to follow. If, however, *karma yoga* implies distancing oneself totally from whatever consequences result from the action undertaken, then it is virtually impossible to plan a course of action in the context where the results of a set of actions become the basis for other actions to be undertaken toward the completion of the plan. If Śrī Kṛṣṇa is advising Arjuna to be insensitive to consequential considerations in the war he is encouraging the latter to fight, it may not be possible for the latter to heed the words of his friend to take part in the fight without, at the same time, going back on those very words in not following the consequential strategies fighting necessarily involves. Śrī Kṛṣṇa is aware that in as much as deciding on courses of action according to the rational process of evaluative choice is in one's own hands, success or failure following the courses of action pursued, is not. He advises Arjuna not to be

overpowered by success or failure even as actions are undertaken on consequentialistic considerations. According to Śaṅkara, Śrī Kṛṣṇa is advising Arjuna to get rid of the “thirst for the result of the action” (Śaṅkara’s Commentary, Gītā 2.47), that is, a greed for it. The only consequentialistic parameter, in other words, that he advises Arjuna to rise above is extreme attachment manifest in intense joy of achievement, or grief for loss (Gītā 2.38). Greed, often suspected as the motivating force behind modern civilized society, is rooted in extreme attachment that isolates individuals in the society, instead of providing a unifying bridge between them. Śrī Kṛṣṇa counsels Arjuna, and certainly does not dictate, to get over it, to an extent, in an existential process, by dissociating himself attitudinally from the joys of achievement and frustration of failure, in the midst of the planning process toward maintenance of justice, that includes the consequential consideration of others’ benefits (Gītā 3.25). A minimal of mastery of this attitude to life is a must for all actions performed, including the ones pertaining to welfare economics toward its proper functioning and success. The motive for action here is not pleasure but the attainment of unconditional joy, to be aware of, in other words, what is innately present, which indeed is an overarching consequential consideration, as we hinted before.⁴ In his commentary on verse 2.46 of the Gītā, Madhusūdana Sarasvatī says:

The intention (in Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s words to Arjuna here) is this: When your mind is pure with practice of actions without attachment, the consciousness of the self will dawn, and you will partake of the joy of the *Brahman* (the ultimate Truth). The urge to partake of petty pleasures will evaporate when all Joy is with you. Therefore, practice action without attachment in order to [[281-282](#)] reach the highest joy on the basis of the highest knowledge.

⁴ It is worth developing a model in ethics and philosophy of religion here, paralleling the linguistic model of Chomsky, incorporating some of its broad features, which would point to the universality of ethics and spirituality. With all their richness and complexity, the universal elements are innate at the deep level, and manifest themselves in the variant surface forms in societies, giving rise to different ethical customs and religions. The Gītā specifically speaks about the same goal for the divergent ways of religious pursuit (e.g., 4.11, 7.21-2, 9.23).

It is worth noting that in keeping with the spirit of the Gītā, the Ramakrishna Mission accepts “one’s own freedom as well as benefit to the world” as its goals.

The Gītā and Sen’s broader Consequentialism

To my mind, Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s exhortations to Arjuna could very well be accommodated under the broader consequentialism that Sen advocates, with the important proviso that the precondition for performance of any action considered a duty in the Gītā is an attempt at distancing oneself from greed. Success at that attempt, even in a limited measure, “saves one from great fears,” says Śrī Kṛṣṇa (Gītā 2.40). This overall precondition for action, too, as we noted already, has a consequential ring about it. The goals are peace and satisfaction, for the individual in society, in and through a balance that prevails in justice. Here satisfaction is interpreted not in sensual terms, but in reference to a psychology where pleasure is subsumed in the phenomenological state of peace and harmony. Peace coexists with an inner and outer balance, in a broad, over-encompassing spell of justice that touches the ecological, the individual and the social levels.

The main difference between Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s position and Kant’s is this. According to the latter the goodness of an action consists in the **good will** (*Metaphysic of Ethics* 11) determined by the motive of the action, apart from the benefits flowing from it as a consequence, whereas, according to the former, consequential consideration is important. Although Kant’s **good will** has welcome consequences, it is not constituted by their consideration at all. In other words, in so far as the **good will** determines the goodness of an action, the consequences are irrelevant. For Kant, once an action is considered a duty, it must be performed for its own sake, not in consideration of achievement of consequences, or following one’s inclination for them, however laudable it is. For Śrī Kṛṣṇa, performance of a good act is a spiritual journey toward achieving virtues that are sure springboards for such acts. He is ready to literally lie, on some rare occasions, if the act leads to a greater end. To be properly charged in the affective mode towards performance of a good action, that results in a greater good for the individual as well as the society, is what his advice in the Gītā is all about. The imperative, viz., that Arjuna must fight, for the *kṣatriya* has the responsibility to fight for justice, is not categorical. At most it is an instance of rule consequentialism. However, the rule here is conditional, as circumscribed by act consequentialistic considerations in so far as one must perform the kind of action most conducive to one’s unfolding toward the final existential goal of freedom. Actions undertaken

for the benefit of others, taking all of life into consideration, are part of this unfolding process. The rule for a *kṣatriya* to fight comes under such consequentialistic considerations.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa emphasizes the importance of action in the effective functioning of [[282-283](#)] society at a time when social maladies are rife and leadership is lacking. He connects performance of action in the proper spirit to spiritual practice towards attainment of freedom, which is the goal of life. Action is important and cannot be shunned, under ordinary circumstances, in the consequentialist frame of reference. Gandhi concurred with this point of view, which explains his allegiance to the Gītā. Pacifist as he was, he may be seen as having sided with the allied forces in order to put an end to oppressive moves under an emergency situation.

IV. Tagore on the Gītā

It might be of some interest to look at Tagore's ideas in this area. The poet says:

Freedom and power form a unity in continuity. Peace and beauty lie only in this. It is the confluence of the two that we search for in life – viz., of the never-ending flow of the river of action into the deep ocean of becoming. The Gītā marked this satisfying get-together, and said: "Act, but do not hanker after the result" (*Java Yatrir Patra* 469).

Again, he says elsewhere:

What is the reason for Śrī Kṛṣṇa to opt for the path of action in the Gītā as the best for humanity? The reason is that indulging in action adds strength to the capacity to act and helps build spiritual power. It is action, in other words, that channels all human tendencies, as well as restrains them.... The best course is to take to action guided by the tendencies, and give them their required shape through restraint... Trying to throttle the tendencies through denial of their food is a mere technique of spiritual lethargy. ("Ahar Sambandhe Chandrababur Mat" 463-4)

In the new value system that Śrī Kṛṣṇa introduces in the Mahābhārata, he has given a new interpretation to the expression *yajña* (meaning sacrifice). In the fourth chapter of the Gītā, in *śloka* 28, Śrī Kṛṣṇa enumerates the six different meanings for the expression *yajña* in the tradition, such as making gifts of things, undergoing self-imposed privations and austerities with a resolute will, following the steps of *raja yoga*, study of the scriptures, attempt at analytically deciphering their meanings, and mastering the virtues such as *ahimsā* (non-violence) in their universal application.⁵ However, all six kinds of sacrifice are to be subsumed under the concept of sacrifice of each and every action performed in the proper spirit of non-attachment that Śrī Kṛṣṇa advocates. Tagore says:

...The problem arises when the limitless desire of humankind is for narrow selfish ends. The human desire becomes meaningful only when it is geared toward everybody. This is what the Gītā calls the *yajña*. Society is sustained by it only. The way to this *yajña* is action without desire. Such action will never be weak, it will never be petty. However, we have to ensure that it is not meant just for one's own gain. (*Java Yatrīr Patra* 455)

No action, according to the way of the Gītā, is outside the jurisdiction of the Lord, who encompasses everything, including the performer (see *Īśa Upaniṣad*, verse 1). Thus, the right spirit is not to abstain from action, but to perform it as pertaining to God. This spirit is highlighted in the *śloka*: [[<283-284>](#)]

It is *Brahman* (the ultimate Truth) to whom the offering is made, He is the offering, made by the one who is He, in the fire that is He Himself; the ritual, which again is He, leads on to an attainment that is verily the *Brahman* (Gītā 4.24).

There is a pronounced emphasis here on an ever-encompassing, phenomenological aspect of God, apart from the ontological, later developed by Tagore in his unique way of

⁵ See commentary of Madhusūdana Sarasvatī on verse 4.28 of the Gītā. Here Madhusūdana indicates that the other *yajñas* that Śrī Kṛṣṇa has mentioned immediately before this *śloka* (viz., 26 and 27), and after (29), are subsumed within the six enumerated here.

philosophizing.⁶ Life after all is a holistic process. Knowledge coexists with *ānanda* (joy unbound), and does not sever itself from action. Once we accept the distinction between the two faces of truth, *satya* and *ṛta*—one factual and the other existential—knowledge pertaining to the latter kind transcends the cognitive dimension and spills over onto, and encompasses, the affective, connecting itself with the dimension of values that leads to action. This points to our universal “form of life” (cf. Wittgenstein) at the deep level where *karma yoga* fits in. Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s new interpretation of *yajña* is indeed intimately tied with his doctrine of *karma yoga*. The “other” can never be lost sight of. Thus, action always has its place, pointing to a new dimension of work ethics. “By doing works other than for sacrifice,” says Śrī Kṛṣṇa, “this world of men is in bondage to works; for sacrifice practice works, O son of Kuntī, becoming free from all attachment” (Gītā 3.9, trans. by Śrī Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gītā* 101-2).⁷ Needless to say, all this holds in the consequentialistic frame of reference.

V. Conclusion

In the above I have shown that Śrī Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna to fight on consequential consideration. First, Arjuna must be ready to face the eventualities of life and not be paralyzed by debilitating emotion. Second, there is the consideration of justice, both for the Pāṇḍava

⁶ For details see Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of Man* and *Sādhanā: The Realization of Life*. Also refer to Sitansu S. Chakravarti, ‘The Spirituality of Rabindranath Tagore: The Religion of an artist.’

⁷ This translation by Sri Aurobindo, along with his comments pertaining to the *śloka*, reflects the spirit of Madhusūdāna Sarasvatī’s commentary on it, where *yajña* covers all action. I feel tempted to give partial translation of this commentary:

The saying in the Smṛti (i.e., the tradition of Hindu Law), viz., “People are bound by actions” signifies that all action relates to bondage; so those desirous of attaining freedom better shy away from it. Anticipating this (objection to work as such, Śrī Kṛṣṇa) says: ...If work is done for the sake of God, it does not bind. Therefore, you, son of Kuntī, who have responsibility for action, perform it as sacrifice, without attachment, but perfectly, i.e., with all (seriousness and) respect.

brothers themselves and the people of the kingdom. The fight is the means to settle the brothers' scores regarding entitlement to the share of the kingdom, and it gives the people at large the opportunity to prosper under a just rule at a time when there is a void in the political landscape of the subcontinent. Peace and prosperity can be achieved only when actions are performed with a selfless attitude, i.e., as pertaining to *karma yoga*, while greed and pleasure-seeking fade away, well-entrenched though they are in the politico-economic institutions. Arjuna, the agent, is ultimately seen as taking responsibility for his own choice, at the end of a protracted deliberation, in heeding the advice of his friend and the consequences following from it. He readies himself to the goal of real [[284-285](#)] freedom to be achieved through selfless action, another consequentialistic consideration indeed present in the Gītā. It is quite appropriate that Sen refers to the message of Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the Gītā in his paper on consequentialism. However, the relevance of the message is clear only when it is understood in its proper consequentialistic moorings. The ideal for Gandhi, who is mentioned in Sen's paper, was similar to that depicted by Śrī Kṛṣṇa. No wonder, Gandhi found *karma yoga* of importance to his own goal toward its achievement in an effective way, in so far as the means help maintain the quality of life that the goal incorporates. Both Arjuna, as well as Gandhi fare, I claim using Sen's words, "well," and not just "forward" (482) in life's journey.

Epilogue

The above analysis suggests, by way of implication, that Indian philosophy and spirituality have a sophisticated, ancient scholarly tradition, stretching down to the modern times, which can hardly be ignored while any criticisms are attempted. Indeed, morality in the Indian tradition has a strong philosophical basis, grounded on an inclusive, and other-encompassing spirituality, which is able to contribute to the Western philosophical tradition today only if the latter can open itself to "outside" influence. However, there is need for a strong grounding in the Eastern system, apparently found missing in Sen's handling of the issues in the Gītā, in order for one to benefit from it philosophically. Gandhi's thoughts have had some welcome influence in the recent ethical thinking in the West. The Gītā was the inspiration behind this great soul. It is quite likely that a proper, academic study of the Gītā, and

not a cursory reading of it in bits and pieces, as seems to transpire from Sen's writing, may lead to further insights in the direction.

Before I conclude, it may not be out of place to mention my experience with regard to publication of this rejoinder in North America. I had thought it fit to first send it to *The Journal of Philosophy* where the original article had appeared. The journal readily rejected it without giving any reasons. I can only surmise that the fact that discussion on the Gītā does not occupy the central position in Sen's article may have been their reason for not publishing my rejoinder. To the average Western reader, it certainly does not matter whether there is a misinterpretation of the Hindu scripture so long as the main point in the paper is brought home to her through this illustration. However, given the magnitude and the implication of the misinterpretation, in view of the harm it can cause to the tradition of an ancient culture, with which Sen may not be acquainted well enough at its depth at the level of philosophy and spirituality, the journal owes its readers a responsibility that they be exposed to an academic, philosophical discussion on the topic from the other angle.

The other journal I subsequently sent the article to focuses on Eastern and Western philosophy. I expected that here after all the Eastern perspective would find its proper place. The "expert" referee of the paper, however, did not find it worth publishing, not because she agreed with Amartya Sen instead of me, but because she found "both clearly wrong." "The Gītā," she thought, "is not a philosophical text, and cannot be given a consistent philosophical reading one way or the other." Certainly if the Gītā goes, down, too, goes Vedanta Philosophy, which is an attempt at finding a unified meaning in the Gītā. [[285-286](#)] Indeed, she has a very consistent view that would negate the Gītā with Vedanta Philosophy, in combination. Perhaps, she can extend her sense of consistency to accommodate the whole of what goes by the name of Indian Philosophy, and declare that no such thing exists. The point that the "expert" missed, however, is really the point I have expanded on in this rejoinder—that the text of the Gītā, however resistant it may be to one reading of consistency, has a whole tradition of analysis built around it. In other words, the text does not exist just by itself, fragmentary, or as a whole, but along with the interpretations woven around, constituting its hermeneutics. Justified hermeneutics, after all, is what philosophy is about.

The upshot of the above, I think, is that we need to emphasize not just Indic studies, as accommodating Indian Philosophy, but Philosophy as such, as accommodating Indic studies. Problems indeed arise at the meeting ground of the two when people doing Indic Studies are not good enough in Philosophy or when good scholars do not pay justified attention to the Indic Studies however good they be in Philosophy.

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