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CALLING KṚṢṢṆA'S BLUFF: NON-ATTACHED ACTION IN THE
*BHAGAVADGĪTĀ**

INTRODUCTION

The sanctity, fame and longevity of the *Bhagavadgītā* are due in no small part to the idea that it contains a blueprint for a certain special manner of acting, which can restore some measure of dignity to imperfect human endeavours by allowing the actor to proceed efficiently, untroubled by the doubts, guilts and other disruptions usually attendant on the knowledge that one has acted, that one has set a certain chain of events in motion.

The universal applicability of this manner of acting is explicitly stated by the text. KṚṢṢṆA's response to Arjuna's pre-war paralysis is presented in terms of certain truths about human action in general (3:19):

So, always non-attached, perform the task to be done: for the non-attached person practicing action reaches the highest.¹

The effect of this is that Arjuna is urged to adopt this manner of acting, not just in the specific action facing him, but in all his actions. Moreover, this manner of acting is urged upon the text's audience: KṚṢṢṆA's philosophy is intended to apply beyond the boundaries of the narrative.

My purpose in this article is to call KṚṢṢṆA's bluff, as it were, by interrogating his philosophy of action as such. I wish to move his words from the context of Kurukṣetra to the context of any human life. Such a move will not be to the taste of many students of the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Mahābhārata*, who are interested in these texts solely in the context of the development of ancient Indian society and tradition. It is clear that the 'appeal to the audience' takes its place first and foremost within a specific historical and geographical context. But the audience of the text has increased steadily, and the *Bhagavadgītā* is now acknowledged as a classic of world spirituality, plundered for its wisdom by Hindus and non-Hindus alike, suggesting that KṚṢṢṆA has been quite successful in setting out his philosophy of action. More to the point, it means that Arjuna's

* Many thanks to Paul Dundas for suggesting this title.

¹ *tasmāḥ asaktaḥ satataṁ kāryaṁ karma samācara / asakto hy ācaran karma param āpnoti pūruṣaḥ ||*



situation, despite its martial specificity, strikes a deep human chord, and, consequently, that an examination of the text in these terms is at the heart of what the study of religions must be.

There is an inevitable problem of translation here, not just from Sanskrit to English, but also from praxis to discourse and *vice versa*. There is no reason to suppose that Kṛṣṇa's philosophy, to be applicable successfully, must be expressible successfully in words. The proof of the pudding, after all, is not in the recipe: many would say that good cooking depends on experiment and observation rather than on recipes, and others might suggest that good eating has nothing to do with good cooking in the first place. This is a problem for the academic study of religions as a whole, insofar as it proceeds by way of exchange of texts. For my part, I must insist that the context of this article is that of academic discourse: it is not intended to damage anyone's practical attempts to negotiate serenity in their own life.

ARJUNA'S PROBLEM

Kṛṣṇa appears to supply Arjuna with a technique by which he might kill his relatives and *gurus* in the forthcoming war without suffering the unpleasant consequences that would normally follow from such activity.

The availability of such a technique is mentioned elsewhere in ancient Indian literature. In *Kauśītaki Upaniṣad* 3.1 Patardana Daivodāsi asks Indra what the highest human boon is:

Indra said to him: Perceive just me. This I consider most suitable for a person, that they perceive me. I killed the three-headed son of Tvastṛ; I offered the Arunmukha ascetics to the dogs; violating many agreements, I crushed the Prāhlādīyas in the sky, the Paulomas in the intermediate region, and the Kālakañjas on earth. In doing so, not a single hair of mine was damaged. Whoever knows me does not have their world damaged by any action whatever, be it stealing, infanticide, matricide or patricide. Having committed a sin (*pāpa*), their face does not pale.²

² *taṃ hendra uvāca mām eva vijānīhi / etad evāham manuṣyāya hitatamam manye yan mām vijānīyan / trīśīrṣāṇaṃ tvāṣṭram ahanam arunmukhān yatīn sālāvṛkebhyaḥ prāyaccham bahviḥ sandhā atikramya divi prahlādīyān atṛṇam aham antarikṣe paulomān pṛthivyām kālakañjān / tasya me tatra na loma canāmīyate / sa yo mām veda na ha vai tasya kena cana karmaṇā loko mīyate na steyena na bhrūṇahatyayā na mātṛvadhena na pītṛvadhena / nāsya pāpaṃ cakṛṣo mukhān nīlam vetīti //* My translation follows Roebuck (2000, p. 290). Olivelle (1996, pp. 215–216) reads *lomo* (hair) rather than *loko* (world) in the penultimate sentence. Here and elsewhere I translate personal pronouns with a plural in the interests of gender neutrality.

At *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4:23 Yājñavalkya mentions a similar possibility:

Knowing [*ātman*], one is not stained by bad deeds.³

In the *Bhagavadgītā*, as in these examples, particular knowledge is the key.

We would like to be absolutely clear what kind of damage or unpleasant consequences are to be obviated by the technique in question. The *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* example mentions damage to the body, to one's world (*loka*), and to one's existential and psychological state after the deed. Likewise in Arjuna's case the potential damage is diverse. Arjuna, though his opponents outnumber his allies, does not explicitly fear bodily harm:⁴ he expresses his misgivings first of all in terms of anticipated loss of *śreyas* (the good, 1:31), *prīti* (joy, 1:36), and *sukha* (contentment, 1:37). These terms seem to indicate the existential problem of living with himself thereafter. This is then tied to kinship responsibility: the anticipated act is contrary to *kuladharmā* and *jātidharma* and will precipitate *varṇasaṃkara* and *kulakṣaya* (class-mixture, tribal destruction, 1:39–42) through the corruption of the *kula*'s womenfolk (1:41). *Kula* here is conceived as containing the already dead and the yet to be born, each group dependent on the other in equal measure. *Naraka* (hell, 1:42, 44) denotes the oblivion of this particular *kula* as an entity, as well as serving as a postmortem location (in contrast to *pitṛloka*) for its individual members.

Kṛṣṇa's insistence that death in battle leads to *svarga* (heaven, 2:2, 32, 37) does not solve the problem of *kulakṣaya*. The issue is left unresolved for the time being, and though Aśvatthāman later strikes all Pāṇḍava women barren, threatening a discontinuity of descent, Kṛṣṇa's miraculous intervention ensures that Arjuna's *kula* survives (*Mahābhārata* 10.13–16, 14.68).⁵ Moreover, Kṛṣṇa is instrumental in ensuring that this *kula* is enriched by Bhīṣma's extensive teachings to Yudhiṣṭhira. It is interesting that Arjuna should stress the survival of the *kula* in terms of female sexual behaviour and the identity of fathers, since he and his brothers do not know

³ *taṃ viditvā na lipyate karmaṇā pāpakena* // See also *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 4.14:3 and *Maitrī Upaniṣad* 6:20. *Īśā Upaniṣad* 2 alludes, albeit cryptically, to the same idea.

⁴ Deshpande (1991) says that Arjuna fears defeat, and sees this as stated by him at 2:6, but he is surely mistaken: the verse simply says that, given the consequences of killing relatives, it may be better for the Pāṇḍavas to lose the battle.

⁵ *Mahābhārata* references are to the so-called critical edition: Sukthankar, Belvalkar, Vaidya *et al.* (1933–1972). Many such references will be of little use to non-Sanskritists, so references are also given to the Ganguli / Roy (2000) edition, whose chapter numbers often differ. The chapter numberings of book 10 are the same in both editions; critical edition 14.68 = Ganguli 14.69.

their fathers. Considerable narrative pains are taken to assimilate them, dharmically,⁶ to the Kaurava patriline.

Whatever becomes of himself and his brothers after death, Arjuna envisages disaster in immediate terms. He portrays deliberate kin-destruction as an act henceforth traumatizing its protagonists. As he sees it, the trauma is connected with the action. Kṛṣṇa respects this connection and addresses it directly. His technique is not one of relating to a specific past act in a certain way so as not to be retrospectively traumatized by it – such as might be achieved by establishing a justification of one’s behaviour – but is a comprehensive deconstructive philosophy of deliberate behaviours. As such, when this technique is applied, it applies to all past, present and future deliberate behaviours of the person applying it. This means that any trauma connected with past actions may be truncated and extinguished by the application of the technique, but more pertinently – since Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa are speaking immediately before the war – the action at hand may proceed without any trauma at all.

In speaking of his technique, Kṛṣṇa introduces a developed picture of the soul trapped in *saṃsāra* by *karmabandha*, the residual power of acts, until released to *mokṣa* by the neutralization of *karmabandha*. Arjuna has not expressed himself in these terms. He is not interested in the pursuit of *mokṣa*, and so there is a teleological discontinuity between Kṛṣṇa’s presentation and his own. Though slightly puzzling on the narrative level, this is to the text’s advantage on the rhetorical level, since the audience may relate to Kṛṣṇa’s technique in terms of any of several premortem and postmortem soteriologies.

KṚṢṆA’S SOLUTION

In his first lengthy response to Arjuna’s outburst (2:11–53), Kṛṣṇa makes it clear that his proposals for Arjuna depend on Arjuna’s knowing what the wise know, and begins to expound it. He describes *dehin*, ‘the one in the body’, whose bodies are successive and manifold (2:25, 30):

It is unmanifest, unthinkable, said to be untransformable. So, knowing it thus, you ought not to grieve . . . This *dehin* is always inviolable in anyone’s body, so you ought not to grieve for any creature.⁷

⁶ That is, through the mechanism of *niyoga*. See *Manusmṛti* 9:59–68, where the practice is accepted and then condemned. On this contradiction, see Dange (1984, pp. 72–77). See also Sutherland (1990).

⁷ *avyakto ’yam acintyo ’yam avikāryo ’yam ucyate / tasmād evaṃ viditvainaṃ nānuśocitum arhasi // dehī nityam avadhyo ’yam dehe sarvasya bhārata / tasmāt sarvāṇi bhūtāni na tvam śocitum arhasi //* In my translations I have omitted the vocatives.

Understanding of *dehin* (also known in the *Bhagavadgītā* as *ātman*,⁸ *puruṣa* and *kṣetrajñā*) is to be practically applied through *buddhi*, mental awareness, being unitary, concentrated and resolute. In such application, envisaged fruit does not constitute a motive (*hetu*, 2:47, 49) for activity, and the person in question is said to be without attachment (*saṅga*, 2:48, 62), equanimous, with senses controlled, unmoved by desire (*kāma*) or intention (*saṃkalpa*, 4:19, 6:2, 4, 24).

ACTION WITHOUT DESIRE?

Let us situate Kṛṣṇa's thesis in the context of ancient Indian philosophies of action. Compare the view expressed by the following extracts:

(Yājñavalkya, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4:5) Whatever desire arises, that resolve arises; whatever resolve arises, one does that action; whatever action one does, one obtains it[']s fruit].⁹

(A hunter, *Mahābhārata* 3.201:2–3) First mind (*manas*) stirs for the sake of human understanding, attaining which it partakes of desire and anger, then the great one [that is, *buddhi*] strives for their sake, undertakes action and pursues the repetition of the desired images and smells.¹⁰

(Manu, *Manusmṛti* 2:2–4) The nature of desire is not praised, but there is no desirelessness in this world. Vedic study and engagement in Vedic action are indeed derived from desire. Desire is rooted in intention (*saṃkalpa*); rites (*yajña*) originate from intentions; all vows, disciplines and *dharma*s are known to be born of intentions. Never is any activity of a desireless one seen in this world. Whatsoever anyone does is the doing of [their] desire.¹¹

⁸ *Ātman* in the *Bhagavadgītā* is often simply used as a reflexive pronoun denoting the individual person: see Hara (1999).

⁹ *sa yathākāmo bhavati tat kratuḥ bhavati / yat kratuḥ bhavati tat karma kurute / yat karma kurute tad abhisampadyate //*

¹⁰ *vijñānārthaṃ manuṣyānāṃ manaḥ pūrvaṃ pravartate / tat prāpya kāmaṃ bhajate krodhaṃ ca dvijasattama // tatas tadarthaṃ yatate karma cārabhate mahat / iṣṭānāṃ rūpagaṇḍhānāṃ abhyāsaṃ ca niṣevate //* Ganguli 3.209. Although the text here makes it clear that it is speaking of the human individual, the terminology is reminiscent of cosmogonies such as *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4:3, 17, in which the cosmos is the result of the desires of a primeval cosmic person. See van Buitenen (1964); on 'the great one' see further Schrader (1916, pp. 72–75). Action without desire or intention was later imputed to the male creator by making him create involuntarily and automatically (van Buitenen, 1981, p. 166, note 4 to chapter 9; Heimann, 1939, p. 129), or at the behest of a subordinate female partner (de Nicolás, 1976, p. 120, translating 9:8).

¹¹ *kāmātmata na praśastā na caivehāsty akāmatā / kāmyo hi vedādhigamaḥ karma-yogaś ca vaidikaḥ // saṃkalpamūlaḥ kāmo vai yajñāḥ saṃkalpasambhavāḥ / vratāni yamadharmaś ca sarve saṃkalpajāḥ smṛtāḥ // akāmasya kriyā kācid dṛśyate neha karhicit / yad yadd hi kurute kimcit tat tat kāmasya ceṣṭitam //* 2:2d, which I have translated 'and engagement in Vedic action', may also be translated 'and Vedic *karmayoga*', alluding

According to this view, which is also expressed by Mañki at *Mahābhārata* 12.171:23,¹² renouncing *kāma* and *saṃkalpa* would mean renouncing action. Kṛṣṇa is adamant that renunciation of action is both impossible (3:5) and undesirable, and so clearly has an alternative analysis. His theory certainly precludes the performance of *kāmya yajñas*, to qualify for which one must be subject to a specific desire which is then fulfilled as a consequence of the rite.¹³ Yet the tradition holds the necessity of performing many rites whose fruit is intangible, as Jaimini acknowledges (*Pūrva Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* 11.1:26–28):

In ordinary life, the action is determined by the need. Since the action is subservient to the need, and the need is perceptible, the actions should be regarded as complete only on the accomplishment of the purpose. Contrariwise, when it is purely a matter of *dharma*, and thus there is no visible result, the action will be complete [by doing it] exactly according to the text.¹⁴

Here the term *dharma* denotes actions unrequited by desire or fruit. Their performance is traditionally held to be a necessary part of the cosmos, without which chaos would prevail.¹⁵ Kṛṣṇa describes this as *lokasaṃgraha*, the holding-together of the world/s (3:25):

As the unknowing ones act, attached to action, just so should the knowing, non-attached one act, desiring to effect *lokasaṃgraha*.¹⁶

Two points are important here. Firstly, as far as Yājñavalkya, the hunter, Manu and Mañki are concerned, *lokasaṃgraha* (in Kṛṣṇa's presentation) and *dharma* (in Jaimini's) are being made to serve the motivating function peculiar to desire and intention. In conventional terms, which seemingly necessitate a mentally phenomenal motivation, we might have to say that the non-attached actor has *lokasaṃgraha* as a desire/intention/envisaged fruit. Yet Kṛṣṇa insists that there are no desires, intentions or fruits at play in this actor's *buddhi*. Tilak puts the matter as follows:

A man should not entertain the proud or desireful thought that 'I shall bring about *lokasaṃgraha*' ... a man has to bring about *lokasaṃgraha* merely as a duty.¹⁷

directly to the technique Kṛṣṇa sets out in the *Bhagavadgītā* and insisting that it cannot proceed without desire.

¹² Ganguli 12.177.

¹³ See Gonda (1977, pp. 467–468); Lariviere (1988).

¹⁴ *loke karmārthalakṣaṇam / kriyāṇām arthaśeṣatvāt pratyakṣo 'tas tannirvṛtyāpavargaḥ syāt / dharmamātre tv adarśanāc chabdārthenāpavargaḥ syāt / Translation from Clooney (1990, pp. 135–136).*

¹⁵ See Gonda (1966, pp. 72, 150 note 1).

¹⁶ *saktāḥ karmaṇy avidvāṃso yathā kurvanti bhārata / kuryād vidvāṃs tathāsaktaś cikīsur lokasaṃgraham // See also 3:20.*

¹⁷ Tilak (1936, p. 466). I have refrained from introducing '[sic]' into gender-specific quotations.

The psychology of the non-attached actor is thus obscured. This duty is broken if ever noted as such by its performers.¹⁸

Secondly, and relatedly, a question arises as to how such a person knows what to do. For Jaimini, actions not dictated by the teleology of desire are dictated by 'the text', but Arjuna's situation is one in which 'texts' are found to contradict each other. *Kṣatriyadharmā* and *kuladharmā* pull in different directions, and Kṛṣṇa has given no reasons for preferring one *dharma* over the other.

YAJÑA: TWO CONFLICTING APPROACHES

The obscurity of the non-attached actor's psychology is compounded by Kṛṣṇa's discussion of *yajña*. Regardless of the relative chronology of the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā Sūtra*, it is clear that he draws on ideas from within the brāhmaṇical ritual tradition, but these are then interpreted far beyond their original remit.

3:9 states that the only actions that do not generate *karmabandha* are those performed for the sake of *yajña*. The following section then explains how *yajña* sustains the ecosphere (3:14):

Creatures arise from food, the arising of food is from the raincloud, the raincloud arises from *yajña*, *yajña* arises from [creatures'] action.¹⁹

This same 'wheel of *yajña*' is described at *Ṛgveda Saṃhitā* 1.164:51, *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.7.1:18, 7.4.2:22, 11.6.2:6–10, and *Manusmṛti* 3:76. It traces fertility causally to the fire-offering. The *Bhagavadgītā*'s 'creatures arise from food' has an obvious nutritional sense, and may also suggest the idea that human partuition depends on 'human seeds' fallen from above in rain and passed through plants and food into men and then into women.²⁰ In any case, *lokasaṃgraha* here is clearly caused by fire-*yajña*, so we can see why Kṛṣṇa would want to exclude such rites from the

¹⁸ This has hampered sociobiology as a discursive practice, since many of the 'dharma's' it discovers naturally operate at a non-conscious level. On *lokasaṃgraha*, see Gelblum (1992).

¹⁹ *annād bhavanti bhūtāni parjanyaḍ annasambhavaḥ / yajñād bhavati parjanyo yajñāḥ karmasamudbhavaḥ ||*

²⁰ See *Mahābhārata* 1.85:10–11 (Ganguli 1.90); *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2:8–14; *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.10:4–9; Peter Hill (2001, pp. 5–11). In this connection it is suggestive that the 'fathers' of Arjuna and his brothers were *devas* summoned from above by *mantra*. We may speculate that a version of the 'human seeds' idea might have predated the discovery of biological paternity. Butzenberger (1998, pp. 71–85), however, would suggest that the 'human seeds' idea postdates the practice of cremating the dead, since it is through fire that the essence of the deceased is transported aloft.

set of actions that cause *karmabandha*. In the absence of Jaimini's specific 'need', fire-*yajña* would be 'purely a matter of *dharma*'.

At 4:25–33, however, after reiterating that *yajña* acts do not generate *karmabandha*, Kṛṣṇa lists a host of action-types as *yajña*. These include a variety of gnostic, ritual, ascetic and yogic practices, and the section ends with the claim that 'knowledge-*yajña* is better than substance-*yajña*'.²¹ Although this allows many types of active people to be classed as non-attached actors, there is no causal connection between most of these activities and *lokasaṃgraha*: this has only been established in the case of substance- (*i.e.* fire-) *yajña*. Kṛṣṇa wants to include these alternative practitioners within the purview of his philosophy for ecumenical reasons, but as a result he has marginalized the most obvious sense in which *yajña* sustains and is dharmic.

Even if we allow *lokasaṃgraha*, as it were, not to count as an object of desire/intention/attachment, yet still to function as some kind of rationale for action, the use of the word *yajña* to help us understand how this might work has now been denied. In addition, the question of how the non-attached actor knows what to do has deepened. If fire-*yajña* were the only non-attachedly-performable action,²² at least the Vedic texts (said, appropriately enough, to be coeval with the cosmos, of transcendental origin) detail its performance. Even if the other types of *yajña* are detailed in authoritative texts, which authority to prefer? Although Kṛṣṇa repeatedly says that a basic set of rites must be performed (3:8, 18:5–11), the situation is confusing.

THE MECHANICS OF HUMAN BEHAVIOURS

We now return to the question of how the non-attached actor can proceed without desire or intention. George Teschner has provided a radical solution (1992, p. 66):²³

To engage in action without concern for the fruits of action is to act without depicting the action in thought and speech as having its reason for being in a projected goal. The

²¹ Kṛṣṇa later says: 'I am the *japayajña* [a ritual of muttering *mantras*] amongst *yajñas* (10:25), which could then be taken as indicating the best of all knowledge-*yajñas*. Bhīṣma discourses on *japa* at 12.189–193 (Ganguli 196–200), where he points out that *jāpakas* may attain *mokṣa* or rebirth, depending on whether they are non-attached or not. The latter would not, according to Kṛṣṇa's definition, be performing *japa* as *yajña*.

²² This perspective could yield a narrative necessity for the *Mahābhārata* war to end in a conflagration. See Jatavallabhula (1999).

²³ Many thanks to Daud Ali for drawing this article to my attention.

consequence of this is becoming aware of the conditions for action as the state of insentient nature and the facility of our social situation.

That is to say, the *Bhagavagītā* in analyzing action

... removes it, as a topic, from moral philosophy altogether and places it under the paradigm of the behavioural sciences (*ibid.*, p. 76).

On this view, and as we have already begun to suspect on the basis of internal evidence, *lokasaṃgraha* as a 'projected goal' is a red herring, featuring in the text to ensure the continuity of the brāhmaṇical ritual tradition with its conventional analysis of the causes of action. Although Teschner fails to acknowledge that his thesis is contradicted by the text on this point, it is clear that we cannot make philosophical progress without ignoring some of what Kṛṣṇa says.

By doing so, we are able to do justice to the text's deconstruction of agency (3:27–28, 5:8–9, 18:40–41):

Actions are being done wholly by the qualities (*guṇas*) of material nature (*prakṛti*). The one who is bewildered by ego (*ahaṃkāra*) thinks 'I am the doer'. The knower of the truth of the distributions of actions and of *guṇas*, thinking 'the *guṇas* are moving amongst the *guṇas*', does not attach themselves.²⁴

While seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, eating, moving, breathing, sleeping, speaking, ejecting, grasping, waking and sleeping, the yoked truth-knower should think 'I am doing nothing at all', reflecting that the senses (*indriyas*) are moving among their objects.²⁵

Neither on earth nor again in the heavenly region among the celestials is there an entity that could be free from these three *guṇas* born of *prakṛti*. The actions of *brāhmaṇas*, *kṣatriyas*, *vaiśyas* and *śūdras* are apportioned by the qualities arising from [their] own-nature (*svabhāva*).²⁶

Here, in Sāṃkhyan terminology, we have the behavioural analysis of action mentioned by Teschner. The cause of action is never an independent human being, but is always *prakṛti*, the material world as a whole, of which any individual person is an arbitrary subsection. The teleological view of actions as initiated and owned by individuals is, quite simply, a mistake.

The theory of *dehin* set forth by Kṛṣṇa in chapter two of the text is a vital component of this philosophy, as it describes the *dehin* in such a

²⁴ *prakṛteḥ kriyamāṇāni guṇaiḥ karmāṇi sarvaśaḥ / ahaṃkāravimūḍhātmā kartāham iti manyate // tattvavit tu mahābāho guṇakarmavibhāgayoḥ / guṇā guṇeṣu vartanta iti matvā na sajjate //*

²⁵ *naiva kiṃcit karomīti yukto manyeta tattvavit / paśyan śṛṇvan spṛśaṅ jighraṇaśnan gacchan svapan śvasan // pralapan viśṛjan grhṇann unmiṣan nemiṣann api / indriyāṇīndriyārtheṣu vartanta iti dhārayan //*

²⁶ *na tad asti pṛthivyām vā divi deveṣu vā punaḥ / sattvaṃ prakṛtijair muktaṃ yad ebhiḥ syāt tribhir guṇaiḥ // brāhmaṇakṣatriyaviśāṃ śūdrāṇāṃ ca paraṃtapa / karmāṇi pravibhaktāni svabhāvaprabhavair guṇaiḥ //*

way that it could never be part of the machinery of action. *Dehin*, being unchangeable, is restricted to the role of a witness. Because of the psycho-physical separation and internal privacy of organisms, what it witnesses is packaged out as individual conscious entities conventionally known as selves, each comprising a body, a set of senses, and a mental complex composed of *manas*, *buddhi* and *ahaṃkāra* (literally the ‘I-maker’). The mental complex responds to sensory input by initiating various actions, but the causal networks at play are all within the domain of *prakṛti*, the self-sufficiency of which follows from the aloofness of *dehin*.

The human person is thus seen to be, at root, a cause and effect machine. It is clear, however, that the details of the mechanism may not be observed by us. The three *guṇas*, acting upon each other in various localized proportions, provide a theoretical account of the dynamic process at work, but there is no indication that we should be able to measure them or track their exact workings. The *Bhagavadgītā* contains a lengthy section (17:1–18:44, with occasional digressions) sketching the different types of activity, preference, experience and capacity proceeding from the preponderance of different *guṇas*. This rough guide explains how similar sensory input may result in a large range of output activities depending on the constitution of the individual concerned. Although the section ends by establishing the four-*varṇa* social system on the basis of *guṇa*-differentials (18:41–44), this is clearly a taxonomic simplification for hermeneutic purposes: the notion of *svabhāva* used here must logically be specific to individual people rather than to individual *varṇas*. We would even want to go further and describe *svabhāva* as variable within one lifetime: in this way, the change generally digitized in successive lives by the Indian tradition can be rendered in an analogue manner.

THE CAUSAL COSMOS

Kṛṣṇa’s insight that all events are causally constrained is shared by Laplace (1952, p. 4):

Given for one instant an intelligence which could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings who compose it – an intelligence sufficiently vast to submit these data to analysis – it would embrace in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atom; for it, nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past, would be present to its eyes.

Human beings are unable to achieve this level of prediction, and hence exact science is restricted to those events whose causal antecedents are limited in number and measurable to the required level of exactitude. In

complex systems, prediction is only possible in terms of probabilities, by generalizing over a large range of similar events.²⁷

In the *Bhagavadgītā* Kṛṣṇa plays the role of Laplace's God-like intelligence, insofar as he reveals himself to be not just a human being, but also the great Lord of the universe. When he demonstrates this aspect of himself to Arjuna in the theophany of chapter eleven, Arjuna sees that Kṛṣṇa incorporates events that have yet to happen. Kṛṣṇa says (11:32–34):

All the warriors who are stood in the opposed armies will not survive, except for you . . . These were killed by me previously: be the instrumental cause. Droṇa and Bhīṣma and Jayadratha and Karṇa and the other warrior-heroes too: kill those who have been killed by me!²⁸

Kṛṣṇa incorporates future events because he incorporates the entirety of *prakṛti*'s causal web. Just as the human person is a superimposition of *deha* and *dehin*, so is the cosmic person: his *deha* comprises *prakṛti* and the individual *dehins* superimposed upon it (7:4–5, 13:2, 15:7, 16), and his *dehin* is the transcendent, acosmic *puruṣottama* (highest *puruṣa*, 8:20–22, 15:17–18), whose embodiment, like that of the *dehin* of creatures, is cyclic, taking the form of the many days of *brahman* (8:17–19, 9:4–8, 10).²⁹

Bearing this analogy in mind, it is to be noted that Kṛṣṇa's knowledge of the future is not the same as that of Laplace's God. Kṛṣṇa as *puruṣottama* does not know what is going to happen on any particular day of *brahman*, any more than the creaturely *dehin* knows what the body it is superimposed upon is going to do. Rather, the cosmic person, because it contains all of *prakṛti*'s particular configurations, contains the future in exactly the same way as it contains the present and the past. We might say that the aspect of the cosmic person which constitutes Laplace's 'intelligence sufficiently vast to submit these data to analysis' is, in fact, *prakṛti*.

²⁷ Given the existence of people who abrogate *varṇadharmā*, *varṇa* may be seen as such a generalization. See also note 37.

²⁸ [kālo 'smi lokakṣayakṛt pravṛddho lokān samāhartum iha pravṛttaḥ /] ṛte 'pi tvāṃ na bhaviṣyanti sarve ye 'vasthitāḥ pratyanīkeṣu yodhāḥ // [tasmāt tvam uttiṣṭha yaśo labhasva jītvā śatrūn bhuñkṣva rājyaṃ samṛddham /] mayaivaite nihatāḥ pūrvam eva nimittamātraṃ bhava savyasācin // droṇaṃ ca bhīṣmaṃ ca jayadrathaṃ ca karṇaṃ tathānyān api yodhavīrān / mayā hatāms tvam jahi [mā vyathiṣṭhā yudhyasva jetāsi rane sapatnān //]

²⁹ The full extent of this analogy has not been fully realized by previous commentators, whose misunderstandings have been fuelled by the text's catholic terminology. Van Buitenen (1981) has clarified the differing uses of *avyakta* (unmanifest) by using an initial capital when the word describes the *puruṣottama*: p. 166, note 7 to chapter 8, notes 1 and 2 to chapter 9. 15:16 has caused problems by referring to *prakṛti* as a *puruṣa*. My interpretation follows that of W.D.P. Hill (1928, pp. 240–241), shared by Sharma (1986, p. 78). For other interpretations see Zaehner (1969, pp. 366–367), following Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja, and Patel (1991, pp. 118–121).

From the perspective of the cosmic person, time has no power to hide the future in the way it does for human beings. This, for our purposes, is the sense of Kṛṣṇa's assertion that, as revealed to Arjuna, he *is* time (11:32). That Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva knows the future is a consequence of his being the cosmic person, present as a particular apparently human being. The considerable philosophical difficulties entailed by this eventuality do not concern us here: what matters in the current context is the causal consistency of the world in process, not the details of the manner in which Arjuna came to know of the same.

ACTION WITHOUT DESIRE

It is now clear what Kṛṣṇa means when he says, towards the end of the *Bhagavadgītā* (18:59–61):

If, having had recourse to *ahaṁkāra*, you think 'I will not fight', this, your resolution, is false: *prakṛti* will impel you. Bound by your own action, born of *svabhāva*, that which, from confusion, you do not want to do, you will do, even unwisely. The Lord stands in the heart-region of all beings, causing, by *māyā*, all beings, mounted on an apparatus, to move round.³⁰

These implications are in line with the conclusions we have reached thus far. Human beings are not able to predict exactly what they are going to do, and so such predictions as are made, in the form of intentions, are liable to be incorrect. This analysis fits with our experience, since we often intend to do things that we then do not do.

The passage just quoted may seem to give the impression that Arjuna, were he not to have been disabused of his illusions by Kṛṣṇa's self-revelation, might have found himself being forced to fight by *prakṛti*, even as he was still telling himself 'I will not fight'.³¹ Such a radical incongruity between intention and action is contrary to experience and philosophically unacceptable. The idea that Arjuna might fight unwisely must, then, mean that, for Arjuna to fight, it is not necessary that he entertain the wish,

³⁰ *yad ahaṁkāraṁ āśritya na yotsya iti manyase / mithyaiṣa vyavasāyas te prakṛtis tvāṁ niyokṣyati // svabhāvajena kaunteya nibaddhaḥ svena karmaṇā / kartuṁ necchasi yan mohāt kariṣyasi avaśo 'pi tat // īśvaraḥ sarvabhūtānāṁ hṛddeṣe 'rjuna tiṣṭhati / bhrāmayan sarvabhūtāni yantrārūdhāni māyayā //*

³¹ It is important to realize that, according to Kṛṣṇa's argumentation, this kind of hypothetical reasoning is extremely queer. We are not at liberty to draw meaningful conclusions from 'what if' scenarios, since we cannot re-configure the world to be other than it (four-dimensionally) is. Hence the absurdity of the notion of free will, which, if it is to have any descriptive sense at all, constitutes an assertion that, all things being equal, one could have done otherwise; an assertion, that is, which no evidence could support.

desire or intention to fight. All that is required is that, in the process of causing Arjuna to fight, *prakṛti* must also cause him to shed his particular intention not to do so.

So what are we to make of the things we do that seem to follow causally from our intentions? According to Kṛṣṇa's analysis such activities are perilous, since even if we manage to sustain the intention to the extent of performing the intended action, the intention implies an envisaged future which is unlikely to match the actual one, and suffering will result. Hence actions requiring a corresponding antecedent intention are to be avoided.

Bearing with this strange conclusion for the moment, it may be observed that we have now gone some way towards solving, in an unexpected manner, the two problems which dogged us earlier. The psychology of non-attached actors is indeed obscure, in that their motivations cannot truthfully be described in the kind of terms that we would ordinarily expect. *Lokasaṃgraha* constitutes a motivation only in terms of external explanation. If someone sees a non-attached actor performing the prescribed fire-*yajña*, and requests a teleological explanation of their behaviour, *lokasaṃgraha* will serve for conventional purposes. After all (3:29),

The one who knows all should not agitate the stupid who do not know all.³²

In a like manner, although we might impute desires to such a person, those desires serve a purely formal purpose. The conventional understanding of dharmic action requires them, but they are phenomenologically inaccessible (2:70, 7:11):

As waters enter the ocean, immovable and steadfast, being filled, just so do all desires enter the one who, not desiring desires, attains peace.³³

In beings I am the desire that does not obstruct *dharma*.³⁴

In fact, the non-attached actor's behaviour is motivated in the same sense as blinking, sleepwalking or digestive processes are motivated. We do not say of someone, when they blink, that their psychology is obscure. There simply is no psychology of blinking.

Similarly, one does not need to know what to do in order to do it. Sometimes *prakṛti* furnishes an awareness of a coming activity well in

³² [*prakṛter guṇasammūdhāḥ sajjante guṇakarmasu /] tān akṛtsnavido mandān kṛtsnavin na vicālayet //*

³³ *āpūryamāṇam acalapratiṣṭhaṃ samudram āpaḥ praviśanti yadvat / tadvat kāmā yaṃ praviśanti sarve sa śāntim āpnoti na kāmakāmī //*

³⁴ [*balam balavatām cāhaṃ kāmarāgavivarjitam /] dharmāviruddho bhūteṣu kāmo 'smi bharatarṣabha //* Here, in order not to upset the conventional understanding of *dharma*, Kṛṣṇa appears to allow some room for desire, but the previous quotation makes it clear that this desire is imperceptible.

advance (Duryodhana, for example, had known for some time that, the Pāṇḍavas being willing, he would go to war against them); sometimes, as for Arjuna, the awareness of the action only just precedes the action itself;³⁵ and sometimes, as with sleepwalking and blinking, one need never know of the action. The need to know what one will do is unreal; it is part of a mistaken view of the cause of activity. Choice is, when it seems to occur, only apparent. There are always good reasons for doing one thing rather than any other, but those reasons are not in any meaningful sense one's own.³⁶

IDEOLOGICAL NEGOTIATIONS

This analysis has led us to a strange and initially disconcerting position. It would seem that adopting Kṛṣṇa's technique of action will preclude many of the things we ordinarily do, especially in these times when the dominant cultural ideology is one of individual opportunity, autonomy and choice. We might say that Kṛṣṇa's technique precludes all those actions which help us establish our own individual identity. In this case it would be an advantage to live in the kind of society idealized by the *Mahābhārata*, in which one's identity is, as it were, a *fait accompli*, since the circumstances of one's birth dictate one's livelihood, and incidental individualities are put down to *karman* carried forward from past lives.³⁷ In later times the *āśrama* system complemented this picture with a diachronic prescription of individual roles.³⁸ Though the rigidity of *varṇāśramadharmā* has been criticized repeatedly in India and in the west, it is clear that having one's future already laid out in considerable detail would obviate many existential growing pains. As long as the openness of individual futures

³⁵ This may bring to mind Matthew 10:19–20: 'When they deliver you up, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you' (Revised Standard Version). We may replace 'Spirit' and 'Father' with *prakṛti* and *puruṣottama*.

³⁶ See Wegner (2002) for a wealth of empirical data on this point.

³⁷ In the *Mahābhārata* there are many characters who do not slot easily into their *varṇa* roles, but such variation is usually explained through *karman* or through the individual in question being an incarnation or partial incarnation of some other being. With the exception of certain *ṛsis* – on which see Peter Hill (1995) – the individual him or herself is not deemed responsible or accountable for the irregularity.

³⁸ See Olivelle (1993) who, following van Buitenen's dating of the *Bhagavadgītā*, places it before the development of the classical *āśrama* system (p. 105). The *Mahābhārata* as a whole knows both the 'classical' system in which the *āśramas* run in series (pp. 148–151), and the earlier system in which they run in parallel (pp. 153–155).

remains an item of faith, it is hard to envisage how one could shed the kind of view of oneself that Kṛṣṇa deplors.

The antagonism between contemporary ideology and Kṛṣṇa's deterministic worldview is a severe barrier to our understanding of ancient philosophy, and has dogged most previous attempts to expound the philosophy of the *Bhagavadgītā*. The spectre of fatalism, once glimpsed, is generally abominated. I shall not give modern examples of this, as they are legion and infuriating: suffice it to say that the tendency to extol individual freedom and sideline Kṛṣṇa's prakṛtic determinism is by no means a recent phenomenon, but is clearly visible within the *Mahābhārata* and within the *Bhagavadgītā* itself. The reasons for this are not far to seek. The text's authors constructed their document with an eye to its likely social effects. In the centuries leading up to the composition of the text, technological innovation, urbanization and population growth led to the demise of many traditional ways of life, and the judgement of individuals emerged as a powerful tool of social engineering, effected not just by social institutions but also by the mechanism of *karman*. Despite the now proven inability of this tool to eliminate undesirable behaviour, the ideology of individualism has remained in place ever since, being an important foundation of legal, religious and capitalist systems. Hence the *Mahābhārata* on many occasions extols the necessity of *puruṣakāra* (human initiative) and exhorts people to exercise control over their own lives. Yudhiṣṭhira, elsewhere one of the *Mahābhārata*'s staunchest fatalists, declares that Draupadī's exposition of determinism is heretical and threatens *dharma* (*Mahābhārata* 3.32).³⁹ This 'doublethink' is evident in many of the *Mahābhārata*'s characters, and must surely reflect conflicting views in the text's authors.⁴⁰ The arguments mustered against the deterministic view in the *Mahābhārata* are, broadly speaking, the same as those offered by commentators, namely that determinism is a pessimistic view and will lead to inactivity or undesirable behaviour. Such arguments are question-begging, resting as they do on an unsympathetic caricature of the hypothetical determinist. In fact the point of view rejected by these arguments is a misrepresentation of determinism, which, as Nietzsche points out,

... contains the fundamental error of placing man and fate opposite each other like two separate things: man, it says, can strive against fate, can try to defeat it, but in the end it always remains the winner, for which reason the smartest thing to do is to give up or live just any way at all. The truth is that every man himself is a piece of fate; when he thinks he is striving against fate in the way described, fate is being realized here, too; the

³⁹ Ganguli 3.31.

⁴⁰ For detailed studies of this issue in the *Mahābhārata*, see Peter Hill (2001) and Woods (2001).

struggle is imaginary, but so is resignation to fate; all these imaginary ideas are included in fate.⁴¹

Views which do not express an ideological objection to determinism are few and far between.⁴² Nonetheless, if one is prepared to take Kṛṣṇa's deterministic suggestions seriously, much of what he says can be interpreted in a new way. Given the understanding of Kṛṣṇa that is sketched above, in which he encompasses *prakṛti* with all its occurring permutations, the realization that one's actions are already contained by the world, that is, by Kṛṣṇa, and that they are not really one's own, is equivalent to the mental offering of those actions back to Kṛṣṇa.

Whatever you do, enjoy, invoke, give or undergo by way of austerity, make it an offering to me (9:27).⁴³

Here Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti*, which is equivalent to non-attached action, is seen potentially to include any activity whatsoever. If activity occurs in the knowledge that it is really Kṛṣṇa's activity, anthropocentric teleological explanations are beside the point. Hence the *Bhagavadgītā* repeatedly stresses that Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* is mental:⁴⁴ it does not involve specific devotional activities, but comprises any activity integrated with the knowledge of *dehin*, *prakṛti* and Kṛṣṇa.

We can thus see that, far from becoming worthless and meaningless, human action has, under the influence of the *Bhagavadgītā*'s determinism, become transfigured into sacred action. A less pessimistic attitude to human action would be hard to find. Action thus transfigured becomes dharmic by definition: every action of the Kṛṣṇa-*bhakta* is known to contribute to *lokasaṃgraha*, since every action is a vital part of what the *loka*, on this particular day of *brahman*, happens to be.

INADEQUACIES OF THE CONSEQUENTIALIST ALTERNATIVE

Even if one were to live one's life in obedience to preexisting norms, it is easy to imagine situations where norms conflict, and such situations,

⁴¹ Translation from Stambaugh (1972, p. 11). The extract is from section 61 of *The wanderer and his shadow* (1880, which then formed volume 2, part 2 of the 1886 new edition of *Human, all too human: a book for free spirits*).

⁴² See Chakravarty (1955) and Honderich (1993).

⁴³ *yat karoṣi yad aśnāsi yaj juhoṣi dadāsi yat / yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kuruṣva madarpanam //*

⁴⁴ 9:13, 34, 10:8, 12:14, 13:18, 15:19 and 18:65 express this with derivatives of the root *bhaj*. For the same idea expressed otherwise, see 3:30, 8:13–14, 9:22, 12:2, 6–8, and 18:57.

as Arjuna's predicament illustrates, were not unknown in ancient India. The tendency here is for analysts to see the problem in terms of morality, which leads immediately to consideration of likely consequences, means and ends. For example, Mathur says (1974, p. 36) that

... in order to resolve a moral problem one should act after a proper appraisal of the situation to achieve the *end* or the *goal* which rational reflection shows to be most desirable.

It is questionable whether Kṛṣṇa discusses the matter in terms of what we would call morality, either on Kurukṣetra with Arjuna, or at any other time when explaining the necessity of war to the Pāṇḍavas and their allies. We could, of course, impute such considerations to him: More (1995) is an attempt to do just that, deriving a thoroughgoing anti-imperialist political philosophy from Kṛṣṇa's *Mahābhārata* activities.⁴⁵ It is clear that the Kurukṣetra war is a good example of *lokasaṃgraha* being effected by individuals who do not see the wider picture but are pursuing their own ends, in this case the restoration of the Pāṇḍavas' honour following their treatment – and Draupadī's – at the hands of Duryodhana and his cronies. However, the wider picture is wider than More's work suggests. The textual evidence, though not mentioning Kṛṣṇa's humanistic philosophy, identifies the oppression of the earth by the *asuras* as the cosmic reason for the war (*Mahābhārata* 1.58 and *passim*).⁴⁶ We have been removed from issues of morality into the realm of hermeneutic secrets.

In Mathur's case (*op. cit.*, p. 38), analysis in terms of morality leads to the judgement that

⁴⁵ There is a problem here with Kṛṣṇa's claim that he himself is the paradigmatic non-attached actor (3:22–24, 4:14, 9:9), since the philosophy set out by More involves intention, desire, aversion, and consideration of outcomes. Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva's reluctance to verbalise motives for his behaviour makes him somewhat inaccessible as a character, but there may be an authorial desire to present him as non-attached. It is difficult to make sense of Kṛṣṇa's claim of non-attachment in terms of the cosmic person: since the human body and its external environment are consubstantial, human actions may be dissolved into the prakṛtic background; but the cosmic person is always the only entity of its kind, and has no background to dissolve into, hence its actions are not comparable with ours. Put differently, if humans can achieve non-attachment by knowing Kṛṣṇa (or, in the *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad*, Indra), this method must be very different to that by which Kṛṣṇa (or Indra) is himself non-attached.

⁴⁶ Ganguli 1.64. The situation here is similar to that of Jaimini's Pūrva Mīmāṃsā, in which the ritual performer '... is acknowledged, evaluated, placed, used, in a system which does not exist for his own sake even if, from his point of view, the sacrifice exists as the means to his desired results. He himself is transcended, because the event of the sacrifice is primary ...' (Clooney, *op. cit.*, p. 149). In the case of the *Mahābhārata* the sacrifice is of course the Kurukṣetra war, whose transcendental purpose is unknown to almost all of its participants.

... while we should be firmly *committed* to achieve the goal after a rational assessment of the situation, we should *not* be so egoistically *involved* in the issue as to calculate what, in terms of pleasure or pain, prosperity or otherwise, will be its likely effect on our personal fortunes.

The distinction being drawn here is too nice, and will not sit alongside Kṛṣṇa's proposed elimination of *ahaṁkāra*. Once independent individual judgement has been introduced, there is little hope of removing the independent individual from the *telos*. There is no getting around it: the extent of Kṛṣṇa's 'rational assessment of the situation', at least as far as ethics is concerned, is that Arjuna is a *kṣatriya* and so must – and will – fight. However hard we find it to identify with this, it is here that the key to non-attachment lies. Kṛṣṇa will not break the spell of *varṇadharmā* by discussing with Arjuna whether or on what grounds it may take precedence over other *dharmas*. There need not be general rules for this in any case: each prakṛtic situation throws up specific actions, whose categorization, where it occurs, is secondary.

THE DETERMINISM OF NON-ATTACHMENT

We have now reached an acceptable understanding of Kṛṣṇa's philosophy of non-attached action. A rupture is evident, however, in that while Kṛṣṇa has made it clear that Arjuna cannot but fight, his speeches are peppered with exhortations to fight. These exhortations would seem now to have lost their ordinary sense, which implies the freedom of the listener.

In a similar manner, we must now be left in some doubt as to whether or not non-attachment is available to Arjuna in this particular activity of fighting. The difference between being and not being attached is a mental difference, located, as the text repeatedly mentions, in the person's *buddhi*. But *buddhi* is in the domain of *prakṛti*, so if *prakṛti* governs the actions that Arjuna will do, then it must also govern whether or not he will do those actions without attachment. Arjuna has been exhorted to become a *yogin*, that is, to perform his *kṣatriya* duties in a non-attached manner, in just the same way as he has been exhorted to perform them at all. Yet while Kṛṣṇa's revelation leaves Arjuna convinced that he will fight and cannot do otherwise, there is less certainty about whether he will do so without attachment.

Kṛṣṇa's words at 16:5 may seem to supply such certainty:

The celestial assemblage of qualities is considered to be for liberation, the demonic for bondage. Do not grieve: you were born to the celestial assemblage.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ *daivī sampad vimokṣāya nibandhāyāsūrī matā / mā śucaḥ sampadam daivīm abhijāto 'si pāṇḍava* // My translation of *sampad* as 'assemblage of qualities' follows Wezler (2000,

This verse follows two lists, one of celestial virtues, one of demonic (*āśura*) vices. The appearance of this dichotomy is interesting, given that elsewhere the *Bhagavadgītā* tends to list possibilities in threes, according to prevailing *guṇa*. Although the list of celestial virtues does not explicitly include non-attachment, it does include 'fixity in *yoga* and in knowledge' (*jñānayogavyavasthiti*, 16:1), two of the vital ingredients of non-attachment, and the association with liberation seems to confirm that non-attachment is implied.

Given this reading, the text is putting the matter in black and white. It seems we are to understand that there are two types of people, those who act without attachment and those who act with attachment, and that the type one falls under is, like one's *varṇa*, a matter of birth. This being the case, we will find it hard to understand why Kṛṣṇa has spent so much time explaining the technique of non-attached action to Arjuna, why he suggests that Arjuna has had recourse to *aḥaṃkāra* (18:59), and why Arjuna, later on in the *Mahābhārata*, admits that he has forgotten what Kṛṣṇa told him on the battlefield and asks for a reprise.⁴⁸

If, on the other hand, we surmise that the text is oversimplifying here, and remember that, as suggested above, *svabhāva* is a continuously variable quality, we are left with no specific information from Kṛṣṇa as to whether or not Arjuna will kill his relatives and *gurus* without attachment. Indeed, there is circumstantial evidence to suggest that Arjuna was not non-attached on the battlefield, for some days into the war he once again tells Kṛṣṇa that he will not kill Bhīṣma, and has to be reminded that he has no choice – that is to say, he has to have his *svabhāva* re-adjusted by Kṛṣṇa's words (*Mahābhārata* 6.103:85–96).⁴⁹

As far as the present paper is concerned, the question of whether or not Arjuna fought in a non-attached manner is subsidiary to the question of whether or not Kṛṣṇa's technique is available to all. Whichever approach we take, it seems that it is not. Either, following the ideas in chapter sixteen, we apply a digital whole-life hermeneutic, in which case the availability of the technique will depend on being born to the celestial assemblage of virtues, or, admitting *svabhāvas* to be in a state of continuous but inscrutable flux, the availability of the technique will depend upon the state of the particular *svabhāva* at the time of each specific action. In both cases the deterministic view means that just as one's actions are, as it

p. 445). This verse may allude to the fact that Arjuna is a partial incarnation of the *deva* Indra. If so, this would diminish the extent to which he can stand as a typical human being.

⁴⁸ *Mahābhārata* 14.16–50 (Ganguli 14.16–51), the *Anugītā*.

⁴⁹ Ganguli 6.108.

were, chosen for one, so also is the manner of their performance. We may suspect that, in some cases of non-attached action, exposure to and understanding of the philosophy of the *Bhagavadgītā* may be a contributing factor: this, however, is pure speculation, and in any case such exposure and understanding can again be dissolved into its causal antecedents.

CONCLUSIONS

It now seems that non-attached action is not a realistic and available possibility for every human actor. Though it may happen, it is not under our control. In the *Bhagavadgītā* the availability of non-attachment in action functions as a narrative fiction to explain, on the conventional level, how Arjuna can satisfactorily be persuaded to fight. The revelation that he cannot but fight is preceded by the suggestion that there is a way of fighting available to him that will minimize the terrible existential consequences he fears. We can imagine *prakṛti*'s causal networks resulting in his fighting on the basis of this information, regardless of the truth of Kṛṣṇa's claim, be this the general claim for the universal availability of his technique, or the specific claim of its availability to Arjuna in his martial activity. The causal success of Kṛṣṇa's words in this context is dependent on their being followed, as they are, by Arjuna's resolving to fight. As the sequel demonstrates, the information content of those words is subservient to this purpose.

We may say that the universal applicability of Kṛṣṇa's technique is a conceit of the way in which the text reports Arjuna's changing his mind. And just as Kṛṣṇa employed this narrative fiction in his discourse to Arjuna in order to guide the latter to dharmic action, so the authors of the text likewise employed it in their discourse to their audience in order to guide that audience to dharmic action. Although, as I have shown, the philosophy of action contained in the text contradicts, or at least undermines, the narrative fiction, this philosophy was successfully hidden between the lines.

Returning to the present-day person who wishes to use the text's philosophy in order to reduce their suffering, it seems that there are problems with such a desire. The text may of course contribute to a reduction of suffering, but if so this is likely to be incidental rather than deliberate. The selfconscious attempt to reduce one's suffering, or to find a philosophy of life that satisfies, seems to figure as a symptom of suffering rather than as a cure. It involves sitting in judgement upon oneself, not in terms of whether or not one's physical behaviour is acceptable, but in terms of whether or not one's level of suffering is acceptable. In either case, it is the judgement, the telling of a narrative in which one is the central character, that constitutes

the mistake.⁵⁰ This being the case, and with a vicious circle looming, the only way out is to realize that our mental state, the internal tone of our experience, is, like our actions, absolutely none of our business. If there is anything to be done to improve it, perhaps this will be arranged by *prakṛti*. As a wise person once said, the cure for insomnia is not to mind having a rubbish night's sleep.

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⁵⁰ Chakrabarti (1988) makes much of the 'distinction between acting for the sake of (*desiring*) happiness and acting for being *worthy* of happiness (with *hope* but not *desire* for it)' (p. 333). Either way, selfconsciousness constitutes judgement, and one becomes a victim of the autobiographical instinct. The problem here, as seen by Appelbaum (1990), is that 'we systematically attribute to the mechanical nature of our strivings the signature of our own identity' (p. 105). Appelbaum presents this systematic attribution in terms of Husserl's theory of kinæsthesi, but see also Schutz (1972, pp. 45–96).

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