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To Act or Not to Act: Understanding Arjuna's Inaction in *The Bhagavad Gita* from Existential Perspective

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Abstract

From the Western Existential point of view, Arjuna's baffled state of mind in the *Gita* is an almost anachronistic precursor of the modern day intellectual trying to cope with the absurdities of the universe. Seen in a somewhat secular light, the opening chapters of the *Gita* are indeed an elaboration of the moral-philosophical debates regarding the question of choice; in this case, to be made by Arjuna, the 'agent'. He must recover from his death-drive and bring his stasis to an end. Is Krishna an outside agency here, or just a non-participating factor which makes the choice possible? Also the question of predestination further problematizes the whole affair. Arjuna must break the loop of time by playing his *sva-dharma*, and go beyond facticity. Killing, for Arjuna, seems as absurd as self-annihilation. But finally he does prepare his mind for *Nishkam Karma*. Thus he proves himself to be an existential hero, an authentic agent par excellence.

Keywords: Action-inaction, Agent, Choice, *Karma*, Existentialism, Absurd

Introduction

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the 19th century American transcendentalist, considered *The Bhagavad Gita* (globally known by its shortened title *Gita*) as "the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of

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the same questions which exercise us." (Miller 23) The temporal as well as spatial gap should give birth to some serious difficulty among the Western readership to relate to the essence of the *Gita*, which is usually read in translations. Yet, the *Gita* appears to be amazingly adaptable and relatable due to its exploration of a basic human condition – Arjuna, the every/any individual baffled by the seemingly erratic and arbitrary nature of the universe, seeking for guidance. This seems to underscore the human encounter with the absurd universe at the very rudimentary level; a situation which has been explored by a group of Western philosophers known as Existentialists. It is no doubt a daring, essentially anachronistic, project to align a considerable portion of the *Gita*, regarded as by far the most important religious scripture of Hinduism, with a 20th century philosophy globally acclaimed for its markedly atheistic outlook. In a lecture delivered in 1945, Jean-Paul Sartre described existentialism as "the attempt to draw all the consequences from a position of consistent atheism." Existentialism however means neither the acceptance nor the rejection of God; it leaves everything on the choice of the individual. The first two chapters of the *Gita* (Arjuna's Dejection or *Arjunabishadyoga*, and the Knowledge of the Self or *Sankhyayoga*) are remarkably secular, or rather moral-philosophical, with their sole focus on the 'being-nothingness' dualism of the prospective 'authentic' agent. The present article attempts to focus on these two chapters from an Existential point of view, and decode the universal messages that reach out to people across the globe irrespective of their time and space.

Main Findings

In the very first chapter (*Arjunabishadyoga*) of the *Gita*, the sight of his friends and relatives leads to Arjuna's dejection and his refusal to fight. Although there is no teaching, this is one of the most poetic chapters of the *Gita*. "…O Janardana! We can see the sin that comes from destroying the family line. Why should we not have the knowledge to refrain from committing this sin?" (Debroy 39)

The final act on the part of both the opposing forces is to get engaged in the war; it is however the approach of the participant which determines the nature of the act. Like the existential hero, Arjuana is fully aware of all the guiding motives, moral dimensions and consequences of his proposed act; i.e. the complete destruction of his own relatives. It is however this very knowledge that makes it really difficult for this agent who is currently suffering from existential angst. Literally speaking, he is in the 'middle' of a battle, as he says to Krishna: 'O Achyuta! Place my chariot in between the two armies.' (Debroy 21) On a visual level too, this turns out to be a

beautiful metaphor for his moral impasse that prevents him from 'acting'. In a vein that would resonate to the Western reader/audience the basic problems faced by Shakespeare's Hamlet, Arjuna seems to have been caught between the seemingly 'good' option (i.e. resorting to the non-violence dictum) and the 'right' one (i.e. killing his opponents objectively).

Initially, it seems, Arjuna feels drawn towards and driven by the easiest way out; i.e. not performing his assigned 'task'. But unlike the typical existential hero, Arjuna is not blessed with 'Free Will'. As a part of the predestined ordeal, he must play the role he has been assigned with. His unwillingness to act, despite its non-violent glory and nobility, sounds like the excuse for an act of cowardice: "With me unarmed and unresisting, if the sons of Dhritarashtra, with weapons in their hands, should kill me in the battle, that will be better for me." (Debroy 46)

This is a sudden death-drive of Arjuna, and here is an unmistakable echo of the opening lines of *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus:

> There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest - whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories - comes afterwards. These are games. (Camus 1)

What follows is detailed in the words of the secondary narrator Sanjaya. Sanjaya said: "Saying this, in that battlefield, Arjuna sat down in his chariot. He threw away his bow and arrows, his mind overwhelmed with grief." (Debroy 47)

As per the Existential worldview, Arjuna is a "thinking, feeling, acting individual" who is baffled by the core problems of human existence just prior to the Battle of Kurukshetra, the grand defining moment of his illustrious career as a warrior. The very first chapter, rightly entitled Arjuna's Dejection (*Arjunabishadyoga*), indicates Arjuna's "existential angst", the starting point for all existential heroes. Like a true existential protagonist, he seems haunted by a sense of dread, disorientation, confusion, and anxiety in the face of an apparently meaningless or 'absurd' ordeal; i.e. the war itself. Before he engages in a dialogic interaction with Krishna, he is troubled by various issues related to the meaning, purpose and value of human existence. He is not a coward. What restrains him is a lack of moral-philosophical conviction, rather than courage or strength. Unless he finds 'meaning' in the act he is supposed to perform, the whole thing becomes pointless, absurd. But the aforesaid meaning can only be ascribed by the agent himself, and not by some external moral counsel. It is crucial that following the criterion mentioned by Soren Kierkegaard, Arjuna is the

individual – not society or religion – solely responsible for giving meaning to life and living it sincerely or "authentically".

The 'existence precedes essence' dictum of Jean-Paul Sartre perfectly matches with the current situation of Arjuna – unless he provides meaning or 'essence' to his existence by acting consciously, he won't be considered as an authentic existent. This view is however problematized as it gets posited alongside the role Krishna plays as an outside agent influencing Arjuna's actions. Is Arjuna solely responsible for the essence his existence is applying to itself by bringing his angst and inaction to an end? Or is it being externally imposed by the 'Other' agency or the *deus ex machina* that Krishna happens to be? The question is, do we consider Arjuna's movement from stasis to action as a deliberate, authentic act, or, is it an instance of essence preceding existence in the largely predestined universe? Of course the 'existence' one speaks of is already there, since Arjuna has already been recognized as a pivotal cog in the motion of the wheel of time. Yet, attaching 'essence' or meaning requires one to be able to detach oneself emotionally from one's past. It is the proper utilization of the present moment that defines the individual and shapes the future. "[Krishna] 'O descendant of Bharata! Beings are not manifest in the beginning. They are manifest in the middle and are not manifest again after death. What is there to sorrow over?'" (Debroy 28)

Unless he performs his given task accordingly, he will get stuck in the loop of time (the ancient Hindu notion of *karma* and reincarnation). His dejection thus results not from a sheer ignorance, but out of a knowledge of the role he plays in the grand scheme of history (or is it mythology?) in making. This is the knowledge regarding a narrative that is 'always already' written. Like Oedipus, Arjuna cannot change what is written, but his adopting a proper attitude can definitely make or mar his role as the free agent. Arjuna is fully aware of the exact means as well as ends he is looking for; what he lacks is the conviction, or rather a moral and ethical justification, that will help him take the plunge without any doubt or reservation.

The *Gita* discusses and synthesizes the three dominant trends in Hinduism: enlightenment-based renunciation, *dharma*-based householder life, and devotion-based theism. The major point of departure that Existentialism apparently shows from the basic premise of the *Gita* is that it opposes the traditional religious (in this case Abrahamic) perspective, which establishes that life's purpose is the fulfillment of God's commandments. However, Krishna's moral preaching is not necessarily religious, nor is it proper to consider the *Gita* as a strictly 'religious' text. Unless one considers Krishna as the incarnation of Lord Vishnu, his words might well be regarded

as providing a moral and philosophical insight into the basic human condition in this universe, cutting across the barriers of time and space. His utterances are not really 'commandments' because they are not forcibly imposed on the active agent Arjuna. It is the latter's plea for illumination and guidance (i.e. willing subscribing to the discourse that follows) that results in the preaching. Also, the dialogic format in which the arguments (and not one-sided oracles) develop once again refers to the active participation of the 'free' agent in this well-balanced power equation. The only instance of the employment of such 'dialogue' form in the development of philosophical arguments that immediately comes to the mind is the bulk of work ascribed to Plato. The Platonic discourses are essentially secular, and yet they come very close to the mood prevailing in the first two or three chapters of the *Gita*. It is the eager enquiry of the disciple Arjuna that leads the guru Krishna from one topic to another. The dialogic form, if the reader remembers, is permanently at work, as the frame story that encapsulates the Krishna-Arjuna dialogue is in fact the dialogue between the blind king Dhritarashtra and his attendant Sanjaya. As per the ancient Indian tradition which held arguments and debates in really high esteem (consider the gymnasium of Plato-Aristotle as a European point of reference), it is no wonder then that Krishna will not resort to implementing undisputable injunctions, nor would he expect from Arjuna unquestioning devotion and observance. This only makes it easier for one to apply the basic tenets of Existentialism.

In Krishna's continuous emphasis on the need to detach oneself from the desired goal and focus instead on the current moment that solely comprises the process involved, one sees a well-conceived rejoinder against what Sartre would call 'facticity' or 'in-itself' in his *Being and Nothingness*. (Sartre 24) The idea of facticity delineates for humans the modalities of being and not being, and Arjuna must make the proper decision and act sincerely to prove his 'being-ness'. He must in the process alienate himself from the trap laid by his past as well as his future. In a dramatic way, Krishna, with his superhuman grasp over elements, pauses the flow of time and starts discussing all the cornerstones of Indian philosophy. This is a moment of Epiphany or revelation for Arjuna, and it must go beyond the restrictions of time and space. This is the enactment of the basic human condition (remember in *Waiting for Godot* the condition of Vladimir and Estragon, who seem eternally trapped within a temporal impasse). This in effect appears to be an eternal 'present' moment which continues to exist until the dialogic encounter between the agent and the series of problems meets a resolution. Arjuna is reminded of the importance of going beyond the facticity of past (i.e. his familial relationship with the very persons

he is supposed to destroy in the battlefield) as well as of future (i.e. the rightful ownership of the kingdom which currently appears to him as absolutely pointless). As regards the Existential views regarding the future, projecting oneself into the future would be to put oneself in denial of oneself and would be inauthentic. This realization will drag Arjuna out of his inaction and lead him towards exhibiting a more meaningful approach to life.

Arjuna is advised by Krishna to do his *sva-dharma*, a term that can be interpreted in various ways – one's own duties, or principles, or values, or judgements, or moral-ethical-intellectual considerations, or even religion (only in the more contemporary usage though). In any case, there is an obvious interplay of freedom and restriction. The prefix '*sva-*' might indicate 'the individual's', thereby emphasizing the freedom an agent enjoys in determining one's future. But it can also refer to the role and duty one is destined to play. In context of predestination, a philosophical-cum-spiritual standpoint almost globally accepted, the root word '*dharma*' then turns into a set of inviolable injunctions. Still, the prefix '*sva-*' then leaves at least some space for the agent, as the term '*sva-dharma'* then implies the individual's unique handling of the regulations prepared for all. It also implies that each individual is entitled to find what *dharma* (i.e. the morally sanctioned path) is at a given time. This makes the whole concept of *dharma* quite flexible, and the individual is asked to make a well-balanced combination of well established rules of the human society and the individual perception of them.

The next question that Arjuna raises seems to destabilize the basic premise of the Kurukshetra War: Is it morally proper to kill? Apparently this is not quite an out of context question in ancient India which has always extolled *ahimsa* (non-violence) to be the highest and divine virtue of a human being. Even Krishna's preaching throughout the *Gita* only establishes this view on a firmer basis. But the real problem is that Arjuna starts considering the pros and cons of the violence that the war ensues only when in the middle of the event itself. Questioning the moral ground of the war itself might nullify the entire *dharma-adharma* dichotomy working throughout the epic *Mahabharata*. The larger notion of the *dharma* now overshadows Arjuna's *sva-dharma* in that once he has set the huge machine into motion (or at least he has consented to the whole affair), there is no turning back.

> My normal nature has been overtaken by a sense of helplessness.
>
> Confused about what is *dharma*, I am asking you. Tell me that which is best for me. I am your disciple. I have sought refuge in you. Instruct me. (Debroy 7)

Krishna's reply (or, instruction?) is unambiguous: "But if you do not take part in this war in the cause of *dharma*, then you will forsake your natural *dharma* and fame, and sin will accrue to you." (Debroy 33)

There is a time and place for *ahimsa*, but when *dharma* is at stake, Arjuna, as the most trusted agent in Krishna's mission of restoring *dharma* at all cost, must resort to the most violent measures possible to punish *adharma*. What makes the entire prospect of taking decision a whole lot more difficult is that both options available to Arjuna (i.e. to kill, and not to kill) seem to have their valid ground. The very terminology used within the parenthesis will naturally link Arjuna's moral impasse with that of perhaps the most celebrated existential protagonist in the entire European literary pantheon.

The moral dilemma that Arjuna suffers from might appear to the Western readers as a variant of the existential impasse the eponymous character in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been subjected to. The chief philosophical problem posed in both cases is the absurdity of killing somebody with the intention of attaining redemption. Both Arjuna and Hamlet are well-versed in philosophy, logic and rational order of the world. It is their capacity to engage in moral arguments, to prove themselves as 'thinking' heroes that makes them stand apart from the largely primitive people surrounding them in a typically 'heroic' age with extreme values. Anachronistic in their subtler virtues, they almost appear as misfits for their respective societies. The most crucial point of departure that separates these two cerebral heroes is however the question of responsibility for their respective acts. Hamlet is basically a loner who must suffer alone, look for a way out singlehandedly, and finally die after resolving the philosophical-physical riddle by taking things into his own hand. Arjuna's predicament is different in the sense that in ancient Hindu philosophy the individual is an intrinsic part of the *dharma* that holds the social order tight. It is not a matter of ignominy then for Arjuna to seek for the counsel of Krishna, literally and metaphorically Arjuna's charioteer in the battle. This dependence on Krishna for guidance must not be viewed as a 'bad faith' that would diminish the glory of Arjuna as a free agent.

The dialogic form in which Arjuna-Krishna consider various issues related to ancient Hindu philosophy is one reason why the whole account might be regarded as a metaphorical representation of the inner debate of an individual regarding moral and philosophical problems. Nothing that Krishna preaches is new; all his deliberations only sum up and combine the various philosophical strands pre-existing this event. In effect, the *Gita* discusses and synthesizes the three dominant trends in Hinduism:

enlightenment-based renunciation, dharma-based householder life, and devotion-based theism. From the existential predicament too, this is the perplexed agent seeking for answers in the basic disciplines of the *dharma*.

> Sanjaya said:
>
> Seeing him thus overcome with pity, his eyes filled with tears and struck thus with grief, Madhusudana said the following words.
>
> Krishna said:
>
> O Arjuna! From where, when we have this crisis, has this kind of weakness overcome you? This does not lead to heaven or fame,and characterizes those who are not *aryas*.
>
> O Partha! Give up this weakness, this is not deserving of you. You who scorch your foes, give up this petty weakness of heart.
>
> Arjuna said:
>
> O Madhusudana! How will I use arrows to fight in this war against Bhishma and Drona? O slayer of enemies! They are deserving of worship. (Debroy 1-2)

The one aspect of this whole ordeal that might free Arjuna of the charge of inaction is that it is *his* choice to submit himself to the philosophical discourse of Krishna, and there is no compulsion or external imposition from 'others'. The fact that he questions and dares to go against the-then 'heroic' criteria and consider the pros and cons of the philosophical discourses is perhaps enough to establish Arjuna as an acting, individual hero. Even from the Western perspective, Arjuna then qualifies for the 'free agent' who even in his moral impasse retains his individuality.

Killing people, that too in the context of a *dharma-yuddha*, must not be a big deal for a warrior highly acclaimed for his martial skill. Considering the moral and ethical grounds of this act which is sanctioned by the apparently undisputable rigours of *dharma* then seems to be an act of blasphemy. For Hamlet, on the other hand, the clash is between the rigid criteria of the primitive revenge tradition and the more sophisticated, civilized, and in effect Christianized values of the post-Renaissance Europe. Both Arjuna and Hamlet resort to the momentary consideration of non-violence as a superior virtue, or rather an easier option in the face of hostile decisions. The whole prospect of committing the 'authentic' act then relies on clearing their minds of this 'bad faith' and performing the necessary task as free, objective agents. Inaction, in this respect, thus becomes a crucial act too, and the choice of *not* participating in an activity too establishes an intrinsic bond between the activity and

the agent. Arjuna's inaction however would not alter the prospect of bloodshed, since the battle will still go on under all circumstances, only the outcome will be perhaps different. Krishna then, in order to win Arjuna' conviction, has to reveal his true identity as the avatar of Lord Vishnu, thus underscoring the celestial dimension of the battle of Kurukshetra. It is therefore the reference to the supernatural connection which brings Arjuna's stasis to an end. More importantly, his lectures on the importance of *karma* will help Arjuna better deal with his own demons of doubt and confusion. For Hamlet, however, it is the connection with the supernatural (i.e. his father's ghost) that leads him towards his madness, be it real or assumed. Once again, the obvious difference of approaches is necessitated by the Western project of Enlightenment which is sharply contrasted with the ancient Indian philosophy with its obvious spiritual bent.

The whole issue of action-inaction began with Arjuna declaring 'I will not fight' and falling silent. (Debroy 9) Krishna then teaches Arjuna the path of *Karma yoga* in Chapter 3 and others. It upholds the necessity of action. However, this action should "not simply follow spiritual injunctions", without any attachment to personal rewards or because of craving for fruits. The *Gita* teaches, according to Fowler, that the action should be undertaken after proper knowledge has been applied to gain the full perspective of "what the action should be". The concept of such detached action is also called *Nishkam Karma*. Notwithstanding all the philosophical and temporal-spatial differences, the East-West dichotomy gets bridged due to Arjuna's ultimate decision to act positively and authentically putting an end to all his doubts and confusions. What is instrumental in this respect is the multiple verbal strategies applied by Krishna to turn Arjuna into a powerful agent capable of working out all his noble responsibilities:

> [Krishna]
>
> The wise don't sorrow over those who are dead or those who are alive. (Debroy 11)
>
> That which is untrue does not have an existence. That which is true cannot be destroyed. But those who know the truth realize the ends of both these. (Debroy 16)
>
> It has been said that all these bodies inhabited by the soul are capable of destruction. But the soul is eternal, incapable of being destroyed and incapable of being established through proof. Therefore, O descendant of Bharata! Fight. (Debroy 18)

> If you are slain, you will attain heaven. If you win, you will enjoy earth. O son of Kunti! Therefore, arise, resolve determinedly to fight. (Debroy 37)

Krishna's subsequent views on the*karmayoga* will further help Arjuna to take full responsibility of the tasks assigned to him, and to act as objectively as possible:

> You have the right to action alone. You never have the right to the fruit. Do not be motivated to act because of the fruit. But don't be motivated to not acting either.
>
> O Dhananjaya! Perform action by resorting to *yoga*. Give up attachment. Look upon success, and failure equally. This equal attitude is known as *yoga*. (Debroy 47-48)

A Summary of the Essential Claims

The key claims or inferences made in the present article so far are as follows:

- Arjuna might be termed as an 'Existential' agent both necessary and capable to resolve the age-old dichotomy between Choice/Free Will and Predestination
- Arjuna's dejection is quite analogous to the Existantial phenomenon known as *angst*
- Arjuna's inaction is due not so much to his lack of courage as his urge to find meaning or essence authentically
- In order to fully grasp the ambience of moral and ethical choice, one must consider the *Gita* as a moral-philosophical discourse, and not necessarily religious
- Krishna is no external authority imposing his own values upon Arjuna; his presence is necessitated by the dialogic, argumentative nature of the text

Conclusion

All this upholds the necessity of action. However, this action should not simply follow spiritual injunctions, without any attachment to personal rewards or because of craving for fruits. The *Gita* teaches, according to Fowler, that the action should be undertaken after proper knowledge has been applied to gain the full perspective of "what the action should be". The concept of such detached action is also called *Nishkam Karma*. Essentially, *this* is the crux of Existentialism. Krishna has already enlightened Arjuna regarding the terrible loneliness, or the sense of alienation (to use a typically Existential jargon), which is the most vital revelation regarding the

human predicament in the universe. This is one of the various issues related to ancient Indian philosophical and religious thoughts. The flavour of spirituality takes over the somewhat secular philosophic discourse prevailing in the first two chapters. However, the amazingly wise arrangement of the chapters of the *Gita* has already succeeded in establishing a chord with the Western reader/audience who finds the initial approach surprisingly familiar. The very fact that the *Gita* is thus open to getting associated with a theory as contemporary as Existentialism only highlights its universal approach as well as its remarkable adaptability.

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