Philosophies of Happiness

Appendix 13: The Bhagavad Gītā in the Mahābhārata

The opening of the Bhagavad Gītā is often presented by Western scholars in the following way. The young prince Arjuna is on the battlefield of sacred duty. He is confronted with his cousins and kinsmen, and he simply does not want to fight them; he does not see what good can be accomplished by killing his own kinsmen. Thus he is caught in a conflict between two obligations of sacred duty (dharma): his duty as a warrior to fight a righteous battle and his duty not to kill members of his own family.¹ However, Emily Hudson argues that reading the Bhagavad Gītā in the context of the Mahābhārata as a whole offers a somewhat different view.² Arjuna already knows what he has to do. Since Duryodhana is a genuinely evil character, it is clear that he is faced with a righteous war and that Arjuna cannot let evil take over the world. She notes that the opening scene of the Gītā features many images of seeing. Arjuna’s vision is clouded; he is not seeing clearly. It is grief that has clouded his vision and prevented him from seeing what he must do. The Gītā is thus an argument for yoga as a way to overcome and discipline emotions such as grief that cloud our vision. Arjuna is overwhelmed because he knows that all the people before him are going to die. The teaching of the Mahābhārata is that time is the inexorable destroyer of all; time ripens and destroys all creatures through the cycle of birth and death known as “the wheel of samsāra”.

Arjuna learns that the wise do not grieve. Krishna will teach him yoga as a yoke or discipline against grief and overwhelming emotion; this discipline will free him from the bondage of action and its consequences—the law of karma. The metaphor is agricultural; actions ripen and bear fruit, All beings act; thus attempting to renounce all action leads to self delusion. However, Krishna will teach Arjuna a way to act without keeping him tied to the world of action: this is non-attached action (karma yoga).

If the problem of the Mahābhārata is the way time ripens and destroys all things, Krishna is prompting Arjuna to look at his actions without thinking about time. The goal is to act now, to be fully engaged in action, and not concern himself with the consequences of time. Grief and fear overwhelm us
when we worry about the future. When we remain in the now, we become calm and peaceful and know just what we need to do. Clear thinking leads to clear action.

Thus, in the theophany of Book 11, Krishna reveals himself to Arjuna as time, the destroyer of all. Arjuna witnesses the world from a cosmic perspective, seeing all things in a process of continual birth and re-birth, over and over again. He is therefore awakened from his small emotions to broader emotions such as graceful acceptance and peace. As readers of the Gītā, we are thus shifted from our small, individual perspective to a larger perspective, in which all things are continually transforming, through cycles of birth and death. In the end, this can help us overcome our grief and pity.

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\(^1\) See, for example, Angelica Malinar, *The Bhagavadgītā: Doctrines and Contexts*, 55-62, 227-228.

\(^i\) Emily Hudson presented this view in a lecture to Boston University Core Curriculum, Fall 2011.