Philosophies of Happiness

Appendix 15: The Bhagavad Gītā: Who is the Real Agent?

In 5.6, the Gītā tells us that the sage armed with discipline “reaches brahman,” and in 5.7, we appear to hear the language of Upanishadic monism, “armed with discipline, he purifies and subdues the self, masters his senses, unites himself with the Self of all beings; even when he acts, he is not defiled.” The text is thus integrating yoga discipline with the Upanishadic goal of uniting with the Self of all creatures.¹ No matter what we do, we should realize that it is the senses that engage in sense objects and as a mental discipline think, “I do nothing at all.” If we give our actions over as an offering to the infinite brahman, then we are not stained by evil. Our self is one with the eternal Self of all; we are no longer an individual ego-self engaged in action out of personal motivation. By letting go of attachment we act with a new motive: our action is for the purification of the self (5.11) We let go of the reward of action, and thus attain perfect peace, even while engaged in action. Thus we can dwell at ease in the “nine-gated city” of the body, neither acting nor causing action. Ithamar Theodor points out that while ascetic renunciation might require aversion to the world, the discipline of non-attached action allows us to live in a state of peace rather than aversion, once we have attained the stage of inner bliss.² We can remain engaged in the world, acting but not bound by our actions. When we let go of attachment to results, we are free to be fully engaged in the world; we are free to be in it, but not of it. Our actions are no longer done out of personal desire, but are undertaken for the well being of the world and to bring us liberation. This approach brings great freedom—to do what one needs to do, neither mired in attachment nor bound in karma by the results of one’s actions.

Who then is the real agent, according to the Gītā? 5.14 tells us that “the lord” does not create agency or actions or the union of the world’s actions with their fruits. It is not clear whether this is the self who is the “lord of the body” or the eternal Lord; both Śankara and Rāmānuja interpret the term lord (prabhu) here as the individual embodied self, and modern commentators tend to follow them.³ Actions and their consequences arise autonomously, out of their own nature; the qualities of nature seem to act on
their own, without a “lord of the body” controlling them. 5.15 goes on to tell us that there is an ever-present lord (vibhu) who also does not take on the effects of anyone’s actions. Here Śankara and Rāmānuja part in their interpretation. Śankara takes this as a reference to the Absolute, who is not affected by devotional actions. Rāmānuja, in contrast, takes “the all-pervading” (vibhu) to refer again to the individual self, who is unaffected by the actions it seems to undertake. On either interpretation, the text goes on to emphasize that it is only ignorance that obscures knowledge of the lord (whether lord of the body or eternal Lord). When this ignorance is destroyed by knowledge of the Self, knowledge illuminates that supreme realm of brahman. One reaches the state of not needing to return in reincarnation when one’s evils are dispelled by knowledge (5.17). Knowledge of the ātman allows us to know that we are the witness, not the doer of actions, and this opens us to knowledge of brahman. Thus, it is the qualities of human nature that are responsible for action, not the individual soul who is the lord of the body, nor the Supreme ever-present lord. Nevertheless, we have the freedom to cleanse ourselves internally so that we may detach ourselves from our karmic actions and their effects.iv “Action” takes place autonomously by the qualities of nature, but we have the freedom to choose non-attachment to these actions and thus free ourselves.

This entire section is suffused with Upanishadic language of ātman and brahman; like the Upanishads, the Gītā here extolls the discipline of knowledge as the highest, most freeing type of yoga. This knowledge enables us to see all levels of being as alike, with a mind of equanimity.v The world of brahman is a flawless equilibrium; those who have discovered this dwell in brahman and are impartial to all (5.19). The Gītā here echoes Upanishadic images of brahman as the eternal, tranquil state of the liberated soul and the Upanishads’ emphasis upon the saving quality of knowledge. In the world of brahman we do not need to take pleasure in getting what we want nor need we reject what we do not want. We need not look externally for happiness; we find happiness within ourselves. The self is disciplined by brahma yoga—a yoga devoted to brahman—and reaches a happiness that is imperishable, right here in this world (5.19-21).vi
Theodor notes the various interpretive possibilities of the phrase *sarva bhutatma bhutatma*. He writes: “Śankara takes it as supporting the advaita doctrine, in that a specific soul has become one with all souls. Rāmānuja’s interpretation is that “he finds that his self is similar to all beings. I translate it as ‘deeply related to all beings,’ thus accepting various possible relations between oneself and all beings: oneness, similarity, and considering all beings dear to oneself.” Theodor, 56, note 2; see also Zaehner, 205, Malinar, 111-113. On the notion of *ātman* in the *Gītā*, see Malinar, 113-116.


I am following here the lucid explication of Theodor, who made admirable sense of this ambiguous passage. Theodor, 57-58.

Those who attain knowledge of the supreme, all-pervading Brahman see all beings equally, from the *brahman* priest to the dog or dog-eater. (5.18)

Eliot Deutsch notes that the phrase “the self yoked in *brahman-yoga*” might mean either “his self joined by yoga to brahman’ or “his self disciplined in yoga on brahman,” Minor endorses the second in context, although suggests either is plausible. Thompson notes that while some translators prefer to interpret it as “his self is joined or yoked to Brahman by means of yoga, he, like Edgerton, prefers to take the compound *brahmayoga* as a unity an interpret it to mean a type of yoga that is devoted to Brahman. Immediately following, in 5.24-26, we find a similar compound *brahmanirva*, the sublime peace of *brahman*. *The Bhagavad Gītā*, tr. Eliot Deutsch, 148 note 8; Minor, 200, Thompson, 94 note 3; Zaehner translates, “his self integrated by spiritual exercise,” *Bhagavad Gītā*, 211.