



Understanding the moral and ethical dimensions of the Bhagavad Gita



Authors:

Mathias Yuvan Shunmugam¹ 
Maniraj Sukdaven² 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology, Faculty of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

²Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Mathias Shunmugam,
ysshunmugam@gmail.com

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In Hinduism, there is a distinction made between dharma and karma. Both are essential for the purpose of reaching moksha. Dharma (moral) is the cosmic law or moral principle that governs an individual's conduct and Karma is the result of past, present and future actions. To achieve good karma (ethical), it is important to live according to dharma. Therefore, in terms of morality in Hinduism, there is an obligation to fulfil one's destiny as prescribed by the cosmic principle. Karma, on the other hand, serves as the ethical principle in achieving this moral obligation. This distinction is observed in the dilemma, which is played out in the story of Krishna and Arjuna as expressed in the Bhagavad Gita.

Contribution: As a result, the contribution to understanding the morality of the Bhagavad Gita rests on Sri Krishna's strong argument that an individual must set aside their own desires and aspire solely to perform actions that are aligned with the cosmic principle. This means that an individual has the moral obligation to perform those actions irrespective of whether they agree or disagree with the prescribed action. This article engages with the moral obligation and karmic actions, which seem to be at odds with each other, yet the moral obligation takes precedent.

Keywords: Hinduism; morality; ethics; Bhagavad Gita; karma; dharma; religion studies.

Introduction

The Bhagavad Gita, as one of the most famous Hindu texts, is regarded as the embodiment of the essential Hindu values (Fosse 2007:10). The Bhagavad Gita documents the conversation between Sri Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra amid the battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas.

In the conversation between Sri Krishna and Arjuna, the difference between Dharma and Karma in Hinduism is brought to light. Arjuna endures a moral crisis where he is concerned with the Karma he is about to incur by partaking in a war against his family. Sri Krishna, nonetheless, encourages Arjuna to perform the divine task prescribed to him, which is to engage in war. Sri Krishna advises Arjuna that as such he will be upholding Dharma and therefore Arjuna should not be attached to the results of the Karma he is to perform. Bhangaokar and Kapadia (2009) add to this by stating that Karma:

[C]onstitutes a system of natural consequences to educate man morally [as] Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita urges Arjuna to be aware of his dharma as a warrior and do his karma of fighting in the battle... leaving the results to God. (p. 21)

Additionally, Karma as action, and Dharma, as law or righteousness, are to be understood as two separate concepts that function in a mutually dependent relationship. Simply, 'dharma without karma is lame and karma without dharma is blind' (Bhangaokar & Kapadia 2009:21).

Arjuna's dilemma between Dharma and Karma is materialised into a conflict between morality and ethics. Arjuna's complex dilemma suggests that Dharma (as the law) implicates an ethical obligation to do the right thing – that is to liberate the oppressed – whereas Karma (as the consequences of actions) presents moral implications as, in principle, that war is wrong. This conflict between ethics and morality then presents the stance of Hinduism (as constructed by investigating the Bhagavad Gita) as one that subscribes to the tenets of moral particularism.

This article begins with an introduction to the Hindu understanding of morality before exploring the conversation between Sri Krishna and Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. The conversation between Sri Krishna and Arjuna points to the challenge of reconciling morality and ethics resulting in the Bhagavad Gita offering a contextual interpretation for the praxis of morality and ethics. Arjuna's dilemma is then explored to conceptualise the Bhagavad Gita's position on morality and ethics.

Defining morality

Hinduism is a religious tradition that is misunderstood, both by members of other religions and by Hindus themselves (Nallusamy 2007:399). The misunderstanding of Hinduism has often led to studies on Hinduism failing to actively represent the significance and importance behind certain concepts. One of these concepts is the concept of morality. Pennington (2001:592) remarks that Hinduism has been portrayed as a 'monstrous' religious system. Adding to this, Stewartt (2016:292) notes that, historically, there was a view which portrayed Hinduism as 'morally deprived'.

Nallusamy (2007) adds that:

At present it can be safely said that many Hindus are dwelling with negative influences. There is a wide erosion of knowledge about their religion. The stress on modern civilization and its subsequent materialistic thinking may have contributed to this growing disinterest... Many leaders, teachers and scientists are finding it increasingly difficult to explain the paradox of scientific progress and the deteriorating spiritual and morality status. The claim is that materialism based on Western modernity is the root cause. The copying of the Western fashions, styles, sophistication, and religious conversions seem to be some of the significant issues ... The main reason for the lack of faith may be the ignorance of the wealth of knowledge in our rich literature and also the absence of proper guidance and bad examples set by fellow Hindus. (p. 400)

Pennington (2001:592), Nallusamy (2007:400) and Stewartt (2016:292) display that Hinduism has been severely misunderstood and misrepresented. This calls for a decolonial approach to Hinduism that actively represents the vast, ancient, knowledge that is embedded within the Hindu tradition. Furthermore, as Hinduism has been depicted as 'morally deprived' (Stewartt 2016:292), studying Hindu perspectives on morality demands that researchers remove any prior disposition that endorses stereotypical ideas of what Hinduism is or may be. As such, understanding the dimensions of morality and the subjectivity of what morality may entail is of vital importance. Understanding morality as a subjective, cultural and social construct that is diverse is necessary to exploring the Hindu notion of morality in a decolonial manner that respects and dignifies this grand tradition.

On defining morality, Ying Jin and Peng (2021:1) state that morality or moral judgement is the 'evaluation of a certain

behaviour as good or bad, or as right or wrong'. A simple definition of morality is then an understanding of what is the 'right' and 'wrong' way of behaving (Ellemers et al. 2019:1). According to Sevim (2021:136), morality is perceived differently depending on time, society and culture. Sevim (2021:136) states: '... concepts of good and bad, right and wrong may differ from society to society', for example, female circumcision.

As such, morality can be understood as a social construct that is subject to a particular community's definition of morality. Simply, there are similarities and differences in how different communities perceive morality. Defining and exploring the dynamics of morality is an extensive project that requires understanding deontological and utilitarian perspectives (Ying Jin & Peng 2021:1), along with behavioural patterns and social constructs.

In this article, morality is understood as a community's understanding of what is right and wrong within their context. As this article examines the Hindu perspective of morality, the Hindu community and their understanding of what is right and wrong (their understanding of morality) are examined.

Unlike other religious traditions, Hinduism is not based on one text. Instead, it draws moral and philosophical lessons from several texts and from the lived experiences of Hindus. Despite the variety of Hindu scripture, the Vedas are regarded as the oldest and most sacred of Hindu texts. Subsequently, all other texts are perceived as established or authoritative texts that expand on the wisdom teachings of the Vedas. Srivastava et al. (2013:283) acknowledge the importance of the Vedas as a source for understanding the Hindu perception of morality; however, they also mention the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and Brahma Sutras as equally important texts.

On the Bhagavad Gita, Srivastava et al. (2013) state that:

The Bhagavad Gita has always been of utmost importance and is arguably, one of the most revered religious texts of the Hindus. (p. 285)

In this statement, Srivastava et al. (2013:285) lend support to the decision taken by the authors of this article to use the Bhagavad Gita in exploring the Hindu notion of morality.

On the Hindu understanding of morality, Sanmee (2020) states:

The fundamental standard of morality in Hinduism is mainly derived from metaphysical and theological views, which are based upon the teachings of the Sruti scriptures, the Vedas. There are a lot of Smriti scripture to add moral principles and virtues in detailed manners i.e., the Ramayana, the Bhagavadgita, and the six systems of philosophy etc., are accepted as the Hindu moralities in the present time also. Each and every moral idea of man in Hinduism supports the attainment of the highest goal, that is salvation, which is identical with Brahman. (p. 333)

The argument by Sanmee (2020:333) is based on discussing the concept of Hindu morality as per the Vedas and Smriti texts, where the Bhagavad Gita is, once again, given the status of one of the most important texts of Hinduism.¹

Defining ethics

Ethics and morality have often been used as synonymous terms that refer to the customs, rules, values and norms that guide an individual in understanding how they should act (Bartneck et al. 2021). Despite their usage as synonymous terms, ethics and morality can be distinguished from one another by viewing morality as the set of rules that determine the actions of people, whereas ethics refers more to the theory of morality (Bartneck et al. 2021; Khatibi & Khormaei 2016; Rauche 2000; Tazuddin 2020).

Applying this to understand a Hindu sense of ethics, the Dharma of Hinduism – as derived from the Vedas, Upanishads, Brahma Sutras, Bhagavad Gita and other sacred texts – constitutes the philosophy and theory of what may constitute Hindu ethics (Frazier 2021). The foundation of Hindu ethics is based on the Dharma of Hinduism that is largely derived from the teachings of the Vedas where Dharma is envisioned as the basis of the universe that compels individuals to a sense of ‘right-being’ (Rao 1926:20).

Because of the vastness of Hinduism and the multiplicity of religious sects and scriptures, understanding Hindu ethics is mostly understanding a Hindu ethic – that is one approach to what may constitute an understanding of Hindu ethics (McKenzie 1922; Perrett 2005). As such, this article constructs an approach to defining Hindu ethics by reflecting on the Bhagavad Gita and the exchange between Arjuna and Sri Krishna, where there appears to be a conflict between Ethics (the theory of morality as articulated by Sri Krishna as upholding Dharma and righteousness) and Morality (as Arjuna expressed concern regarding the consequences of his actions – Karma). In illustrating this, Ethics is then defined in this article as the theory of morality.

Prior to discussing the dilemma of Arjuna between Dharma and Karma, the following sections provide an account of some of the moral lessons derived from the Bhagavad Gita that contribute to understanding a Hindu approach to Morality and Ethics.

Moral lessons in the Bhagavad Gita

As one of the most important texts of Hinduism, the Bhagavad Gita makes important contributions to understanding the Hindu concept of morality. Menon, Narayanan and Bhade (2021) list four concepts² from the Gita as concepts that contribute to moral development:

Detachment: a lesson performing one’s responsibility without any form of attachment to the consequences of the actions that

1.Sanmee (2020:340) describes the Bhagavad Gita as the ‘jewel of Hindu literature and a container of the cream of the Upanisads’.

2.Menon et al. (2021:658) call these ‘The Four Ds’.

are performed. The relevant verse for this lesson is Gita 2.47–48. Considering Gita 2.47–48, Individuals are encouraged to perform selfless or desireless acts. The lesson of Gita 2.47–48 is also known as Nishkama Karma (Shunmugam 2022:20) and contributes to morality as individual by encouraging the performance of righteous actions without seeking any rewards. Simply, do good and expect no reward for it. (p. 658)

Doer and the concept of Self: the moral lesson here is on understanding the individual self as part of the ‘universal Self or cosmos’ (Menon et al. 2021:658). The aim is to encourage selfless acts as if one were performing actions for themselves. The relevant verse for this lesson is Gita 4.20.

Dharma or Duty: Menon et al. (2021:658) explains that, in context of the Bhagavad Gita, Dharma does not only mean duty, but also includes ‘upholding ethical principles’ to ensure that one can successfully complete their duty. Simply, Dharma is the ensuring that one strives to ensure that all possible efforts are made to successfully perform one’s duty. The relevant verse for this lesson is Gita 2.31 and 18.48.

Dhyana or Meditation: the lesson on this point is on ‘meditation as a spiritual practice’ (Menon et al. 2021:660). Practicing meditation is emphasised to improve one’s mental health and general physical health so that one is able to successfully perform one’s task. The practice of meditation is also encouraged to ensure mindfulness that will enable the successful practice of detachment. The relevant verse for this lesson is Gita 5.27 and 6.2. Menon et al. (2021:660) notes that Dhyana or Meditation contributes to an individual’s ability to have a steady, focused, and clear mind that enables good judgement and reasoning skills for determining the difference between morally good and bad actions.

The four moral concepts of the Bhagavad Gita, as explained by Menon et al. (2021:658–660), provide a summary on the major moral lessons of the Bhagavad Gita.

For a deeper enquiry into the nature of morality in the Bhagavad Gita, Sanmee (2020:341) explains that the Bhagavad Gita makes a clear distinction between righteous and unrighteous behaviour. According to the Bhagavad Gita, unrighteousness is evident in attachment (*raga*), hatred (*dvesa*) and delusion (*moha*) (Sanmee 2020:341). Righteousness is the absence of such traits resulting in purity and freedom of thought, which further results in the realisation of the unity of all of creation (Sanmee 2020:341).

Sanmee (2020) states that Sri Krishna explains morality as:

A man of self-control, who moves among the objects with the senses under his control and free from attachment [*raga*] and hatred [*dvesa*], he attains the serenity (Gita 2.64). It is further said: When your intellect will go beyond the mire of delusion (*moha*), then you will become indifference to the difference between what is worth listening to and what is actually heard (Gita 5.25). (p. 341)

Agreeing with Sanmee (2020:341), Ranganathan (2021) states that the Bhagavad Gita’s contribution to understanding Hindu morality is:

... completed by the defense of two procedural ethical theories that prioritize the Right choice over the Good outcome. The first

of the two normative theories is the Gita's version of Deontology, called karma yoga, a practice of one's natural duty that contributes to a world of diversity. The second of the two normative theories and the fourth in addition to the three theories of conventional ethics, is a radically procedural option unique to the South Asian tradition, namely Yoga, which the Gita calls bhakti yoga. (Ranganathan 2021:1)

Sanmee (2020:341) and Ranganathan (2021) explain that a Hindu understanding of morality, as per the Bhagavad Gita, is one that strongly encourages the practice of self-control. This is evident in the emphasis of karma and bhakti yoga.

Shunmugam (2022:45) refers to karma and bhakti yoga as two of the four 'paths to moksha' of Hinduism. Karma yoga is the path to moksha that emphasises the attainment of moksha through one's actions. Karma yoga emphasises the practice of 'right action' and the abstinence from 'futile action' thus allowing for the attainment of moksha (Shunmugam 2022:45). Bhakti yoga is the path where an individual aspires for moksha by practising love and devotion. Bhakti yoga emphasises frequent chanting and meditation that affirms the love and devotion that practitioners have for Sri Krishna (Shunmugam 2022:45).

The central thought of morality in the Bhagavad Gita rests on emphasising principles of self-control (Sanmee 2020:341), detachment (Ranganathan 2021) and service and love (Gowda 2001:86).

Despite these valued contributions to a Hindu perception of morality, the theme of the Bhagavad Gita is based on the conversations that Sri Krishna had with Arjuna. During these conversations, several lessons on moral behaviour were taught through the exchanges between Sri Krishna and Arjuna. Srivastava et al. (2013:285) note that the Bhagavad Gita is centred on the moral dilemma that Arjuna faces on the battlefield.

As Arjuna enters the battlefield, where he is set to battle with the Pandavas, Arjuna is overwhelmed with the idea of fighting against his family, friends and teachers. Srivastava et al. (2013) state:

His dilemma is whether it is appropriate for him to kill his own cousins Kauravas and other close associates for the sake of the Kingdom, despite it being his legitimate claim. It is then that Lord Krishna enlightens him through the teachings that together form the Bhagavad Gita... the main intention of these teachings is to help humans, with the task, which is, perhaps the most difficult, that is, to discriminate, choose and perform actions that are moral and righteous, especially when one is going through an emotional crisis. (p. 285)

The moral dilemma of the Bhagavad Gita is Arjuna's confusion and internal struggle with protecting the kingdom and killing his kin. In Bhagavad Gita 1.26 (Prabhupada 1989:55), it states that Arjuna saw, as part of the army he was about to enter battle with, his 'fathers, grandfathers, teachers, maternal uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons, friends, and also his fathers-in-law and well-wishers'. Seeing this Arjuna

became 'overwhelmed with compassion' (Gita 1.27) and says the following, which contributes to understanding the moral dilemma faced by Arjuna:

... seeing my friends and relatives present before me in such a fighting spirit, I feel the limbs of my body quivering and my mouth drying up (Gita 1:28).

I do not see how any good can come from killing my own kinsmen in this battle, nor can I, my dear Krsna, desire any subsequent victory, kingdom, or happiness (Gita 1:31).

O Govinda, of what avail to us are a kingdom, happiness or even life itself when all those for whom we may desire them are now arrayed on this battlefield... why should I kill them, even though they might otherwise kill me? O maintainer of all living entities, I am not prepared to fight with them even in exchange for the three worlds... (Gita 1:32–35).

... it is not proper for us to kill the sons of Dhrtarastra and our friends. What should we gain, O Krsna, husband of the goddess of fortune, and how could we be happy by killing our own kinsmen? (Gita 1:36).

... who can see the crime in destroying a family, engage in these acts of sin? With the destruct of dynasty, the eternal family tradition is vanquished, and thus the rest of the family becomes involved in irreligion (Gita 1:39).

... how strange it is that we are preparing to commit greatly sinful acts. Driven by the desire to enjoy royal happiness, we are intent on killing our own kinsmen... Better for me if the sons of Dhrtarastra, weapons in hand, were to kill me unarmed and unresisting on the battlefield (Gita 1:44–45).

After having said these words, Arjuna then threw aside his bow and arrows and sat down on the chariot, his mind overwhelmed with grief (Gita 1:46).

After these statements by Arjuna, the first chapter of the Bhagavad Gita concludes. The abovementioned statements by Arjuna indicate the struggle he faces in reclaiming his throne. Arjuna struggles to accept that, for him to reclaim the kingdom, he must fight and kill members of family. This struggle leads him to question the worth of the kingdom and his life, considering that he must kill his family and friends. Chapter 2 of the Bhagavad Gita begins with stating that Sri Krishna saw Arjuna filled with compassion, a troubled mind and teary eyes. The Bhagavad Gita continues the discourse between Arjuna and Sri Krishna, where Arjuna echoes his struggle with killing members of his family in statements such as 'If they are killed, everything we enjoy will be tainted with blood' (Gita 2:5).

In response to the points raised by Arjuna, Sri Krishna offers lessons on obligatory duty and morality. Some of the statements made by Sri Krishna that engage the points raised by Arjuna and contribute to understanding morality in the Bhagavad Gita are:

... While speaking learned words, you are mourning for what is not worthy of grief. Those who are wise lament neither for the living nor for the dead (Gita 2:11).

... the person who is not disturbed by happiness and distress and is steady in both is certainly eligible for liberation (Gita 2:15).

One who has taken birth is sure to die, and after death one is sure to take birth again. Therefore, in the unavoidable discharge of your duty, you should not lament (Gita 2:27).

All created beings are unmanifest in their beginning, manifest in their interim state, and unmanifest again when annihilated. So what need is there for lamentation? (Gita 2:28).

Considering your specific duty as a Ksatriya, you should know that there is no better engagement for you than fighting on religious principles; and so there is no need for hesitation (Gita 2:31).

If, however, you do not perform your religious duty of fighting, then you will certainly incur sins for neglecting your duties and thus lose your reputation as a fighter (Gita 2:33).

Do though fight for the sake of fighting, without considering happiness or distress, loss or gain, victory or defeat – and by so doing you shall never incur sin (Gita 2:38).

You have a right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of action. Never consider yourself the cause of the results of your activities, and never be attached to not doing your duty. Perform your duty equipoised. O Arjuna, abandoning all attachment to success or failure ... keep all abominable activities far distant by devotional service, and in that consciousness surrender unto the Lord. Those who want to enjoy the fruits of their work are misers (Gita 2:47–49).

The Bhagavad Gita follows the discussion between Arjuna and Sri Krishna where, as Arjuna raises concerns, Sri Krishna engages those concerns by encouraging Arjuna to perform his duty of fighting the battle. Srivastava et al. (2013) state:

Arjuna finally decides to fight the Kauravas. However, it was not because he didn't like them for cheating him and his brothers. It was because that was the most logical course of action based on his Dharma [*morality*] that demanded that by fighting the Kauravas and defeating them, he would ensure that justice had been delivered. (p. 285)

Srivastava et al. (2013:285) suggest that despite Arjuna's unhappiness with the Kauravas, he still did not wish to fight and kill them. This is supported by Arjuna's statements in Bhagavad Gita 1:31, 1:36 and 1:44–45. However, Sri Krishna's advice of performing one's duty irrespective of emotional sentiments convinced Arjuna to set aside his concerns and to focus on the task that was given to him – that is to ensure that justice prevailed.

Srivastava et al. (2013:285) also mention that Arjuna's understanding of Dharma is his morality. In Gita 1:39, Arjuna mentions 'irreligion' as part of arguing about the morally wrong act of fighting and killing members of one's own family; however, this is engaged by Sri Krishna in Gita 2:33. Sri Krishna in Gita 2:33 suggests that, within this context, Arjuna's participation in the war was a religiously ordained act and that should Arjuna fail to comply, he would then be acting against his dharma.

Critics of the Bhagavad Gita would argue that Sri Krishna's discourse with Arjuna encourages violence and acts of war. However, reflecting on Bhagavad Gita 2:47–49, it is evident that Sri Krishna does not intend of inciting violence; instead,

Sri Krishna teaches on the importance of detachment and the performance of actions without having any concerns for the rewards or the effects of those actions. Simply, Sri Krishna's responses to Arjuna (as found in Gita 2:47–49) are solely for the purposes of explaining the importance of adhering to the actions that are prescribed upon an individual.

Wayne (2017) adds:

The Bhagavad Gita is certainly not intending to justify vile acts like homicide or rape, but the moral theory it puts forward is hardly a foundation by which we could call such things objectively wrong ... the body's actions ultimately do not matter, whether they are virtuous or wicked ... To reach enlightenment, one must accept that evil is as divine as good and thus stop making distinctions between them ... when Hindus do good things; when they act on the moral conscience that God has given to all mankind, they are acting on a foundation borrowed from outside their own worldview...

As a result, the contribution to understanding the morality of the Bhagavad Gita rests on Sri Krishna's strong argument that an individual must set aside their own desires and aspire solely to perform actions that are aligned to the will of God. This means that, if an action is prescribed unto an individual by God, an individual has the moral obligation to perform those actions irrespective of whether they agree or disagree with the prescribed action. This is the notion put forth in Gita 2:47–49 and is also known as Nishkama Karma – that is desireless action.

Arjuna's dilemma between morality and ethics

The previous section displayed Arjuna's distress challenge between Dharma and Karma. This is evident in Arjuna's challenge with reconciling his actions of violence (that is Karma, in Gita 1:28, 1:31 and 1:36) and Sri Krishna's counsel of upholding righteousness (that is Dharma, in Gita 2:11, 2:27, 2:31, 2:33 and 2:38). Arjuna's dilemma between reconciling Karma and Dharma exemplifies a conflict in the Gita between ethics and morality.

Ethically speaking, Arjuna understands his duty as a Ksatriya to fight for religious principles (as expressed by Sri Krishna in Gita 2:31) but struggles to reconcile this with the moral act of killing his own kin (Gita 1:31). Addressing this conflict, Frazier (2021:1) describes the Gita as adopting a utilitarian approach where there is 'no universal intrinsically valuable goal or Good, but aims only to sustain the world as a prerequisite for choice'. The utilitarian approach to morality in the Bhagavad Gita showcases the pressure that is placed on individuals to identify what is 'good' and what is 'bad', and how challenging this can be as Arjuna wrestles with the thought of upholding righteousness versus engaging in acts of war (Frazier 2021).

The utilitarian approach causes Perrett (2005) and Frazier (2021) to question whether there is, in fact, a Hindu understanding of morality and ethics. Responding to this,

Patra (2020:1025) argues that the Gita is 'more a treatise on ethics than a serious philosophical text'.

Patra (2020:1026) argues this as Arjuna's dilemma is reconciled by the 'ethics of Niskama Karma', which mirrors Immanuel Kant's 'ethics of "Duty for duties sake"'. Perrett (2005), Patra (2020) and Frazier (2021) agree that, although it is challenging, the Bhagavad Gita does provide an insight into what may constitute as Hindu ethics.

However, in addition to a utilitarian stance, Arjuna's dilemma offers another insight into what a Hindu understanding of morality and ethics may be in view of the Gita. As Arjuna contends with the idea of killing, Sri Krishna's counsel on the subject mirrors the position of moral particularism.

Moral particularism suggests that morality [*and ethics*] are not constant but are applicable under certain contexts (Blum 2000; Echelbarger 2014; Green 2014). This mirrors moral generalisation where moral principles are generalised according to different considerations and essentially asking 'What makes right actions right?' (Echelbarger 2014). Moral particularism then suggests that, while moral principles can be quantified, a morally 'right' action is determined by its context (Schwind 2006).

Considering Arjuna's dilemma between Karma and Dharma, morality and ethics, Sri Krishna's responses as adopting a position of moral particularism offer a reconciliation on a Hindu ethics of the Gita. Simply, Karma (as per Arjuna's argument) strongly opposes the act of killing and Dharma (as per Sri Krishna's guidance) invokes a religious obligation to perform the duty of a Ksatriya that may include acts of violence when necessary. A moral particularist approach to this suggests that while killing is morally wrong, Arjuna's context required him to engage in violent acts for a 'greater good' that was required at the time as a duty to society (Gita 2:31, 2:33, and 2:38).

Arjuna's complex between morality and ethics is then reconciled by Sri Krishna's guidance that resembles moral particularism – suggesting that under certain contexts, moral principles are determined by the appropriate course of action, which ultimately contributes to what is 'good' and 'right'. This further suggests a moral particularist and utilitarian approach to understanding the ethics and morality of the Gita.

The Hindu concept of evil and the concept of karma

The lessons on morality in the Bhagavad Gita illustrated in the previous section are easier to understand when one factors in the Hindu understanding of evil. The Hindu concept of evil is unlike that found in the Abrahamic religions resulting in it being a major point of interest in religion studies discourse on religious perspectives of good and evil. According to Willet (2015):

... Hinduism does not dichotomize good against evil. Hindu mythology depicts evil as being created alongside the rest of the universe. Thus, there is not the perspective that evil is unnatural and must be vanquished or conquered... Much of Hindu Theology, in fact, focuses on the idea of maintaining balance between order and chaos, *dharma* and *adharma*. Even though Hinduism predominantly treats evil as a natural force of the universe, it still holds that people should strive to live their lives in a good way as opposed to an evil way. (p. 44)

Willet (2015:44) presents a key feature of Hinduism, that good and evil are seen as necessary for the cosmic balance. Furthermore, Hinduism does not suggest that evil is something, which proves an ongoing battle between good and evil. A common observation made regarding the Hindu Yugas and evil notes that in Satya Yug, good and evil existed in two different worlds (Devaloka and Asuraloka). In Treta Yug, good and evil existed in the same world (Ram and Ravana). In Dwapara Yug, good and evil existed within the same family (the Pandavas and the Kauravas) and in Kali Yug (the current era), good and evil is now suggested to exist within the individual.³ At the end of Kali Yug, evil and ignorance dominate the human mind resulting in the destruction of the cosmos. The circular Hindu concept of time then comes into effect as Satya Yug begins with the recreation of the cosmos.

As Hinduism sees the concept of evil as necessary for cosmic balance, emphasis is placed on individuals to perform actions that enable them for liberation (moksha). The performance of actions is also known as Karma. All actions performed by an individual are regarded as Karma and the concept of Karma is closely associated with the concepts of rebirth and moksha (Chakraborty 2014:192). Karma includes all actions that were performed, all ongoing actions and all actions that will be performed.

Furthermore, 'the effects of our karma may be experienced immediately or some later time in the life of an individual' and 'there is no escape from the results of karma' (Chakraborty 2014:193). The foundational teachings of Karma in Hinduism emphasise the importance of individual introspection and accountability for one's actions. It simply teaches that an individual is responsible for their actions and will face the consequences of their decisions. These teachings are intended to guide an individual to perform actions that have a positive effect on the world around them, with the promise that such actions will, in turn, positively benefit themselves.

The inability to escape from Karma further stresses the importance of performing actions that minimise negative repercussions. Additionally, as the concept of evil is something necessary for cosmic balance, individuals are taught that evil actions are their own doing. There is no external, supernatural, force that inspires evil; instead, we freely choose whether our actions contribute to good or evil in the world. This further emphasises individual accountability and responsibility.

3. See: <https://www.thehansindia.com/posts/index/Spiritual/2015-09-10/Good-and-evil-in-Kaliya/175327#:~:text=There%20are%20four%20yugas%20widely%20accepted.&text=In%20Satya%20yug%2C%20the%20fight,rulers%20from%20two%20different%20COUNTRIES.>

Conclusion

This article provided a view of the Hindu concept of morality by paying special attention to the Bhagavad Gita. The first important point raised in this article was on defining and understanding the concept of morality in a manner that acknowledged the subjectivity and diversity of definitions on morality. This is important and necessary as the Hindu understanding of morality presented in this article differs from the 'common' understanding of morality that is found in the Abrahamic religions.

The lessons on morality gathered from Bhagavad Gita focused on the conversation between Sri Krishna and Arjuna. The main themes that contributed to understanding morality were that of detachment, self-control and performing one's prescribed duties. The conversation between Sri Krishna and Arjuna displayed the conflict that Arjuna faced with reconciling Karma and Dharma, morality and ethics. To formulate a Hindu understanding of morality and ethics from the Gita, this article suggested a utilitarian and moral particularist approach to reconcile Arjuna's dilemma.

Lastly, this article reflected on the Hindu concept of evil and Karma to further explore the Hindu understanding of morality. It is important to note that the understanding of morality presented in this article is one Hindu view on morality that uses the Bhagavad Gita as the source for investigating the Hindu understanding of morality. As Hinduism is a pluralistic tradition with a variety of different religious sects and holy texts, there are differing Hindu understandings of morality. Religious sects, such as Shaivism and Shaktism, may rely on other texts for constructing lessons on morality and are equal to the moral lessons found in the Bhagavad Gita – although they may be slightly different.

The different texts and variety of understandings on morality that may be constructed attest to the vast pool of philosophical teachings that can be found in the Hindu tradition. An example of this can also be found in the distinction between Morality and Ethics. In Hinduism, '*niti*' refers to ethics and '*niyama*' to morals (Jayaram 2019). Scientific and philosophical thought, moral lessons, values and principles constitute as *niti*, whereas *niyamas* are the rules, laws and prohibitions, which aid in ensuring that one can discern between good and bad actions (Jayaram 2019).

Despite the differing views on morality that can be constructed from Hindu texts, the general view is that good and evil are internal processes. Instead of any divine or supernatural force inspiring evil, people choose whether their actions will bring good or evil into this world. As a result, the Hindu teachings of morality emphasise the sacredness of the Vedas as the most authoritative Hindu text that provides the basis for understanding righteous and unrighteous behaviour. Hindus are encouraged to perform actions that are defined by the Vedas as righteous, so that they may be freed from accumulating Karma and being reborn. Therefore, the Hindu understanding of morality

serves a similar function in Hindu theology to that of other theologies, in that morally good behaviour is how an individual may attain salvation.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

M.Y.S. conceptualised, investigated and wrote the original. M.S. assisted with the conceptualisation, developed the methodology, supervision, reviewed and editing of the draft. Both authors reviewed and edited the final draft.

Ethical considerations

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