

Revisiting The Concept Of Action In The *Bhagavad Gita*

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Alfred North Whitehead once remarked that 'A science which hesitates to forget its founder is lost.'¹For this reason, different theories and inferences in social science are now believed to be wrong. But, philosophical theories or ideas cannot be altogether rejected as wrong or finalised as right. In other words, the concepts of philosophy are not undisputed like that of science. From this aspect, Philosophy is different from scientific theories. Our intention of saying this is that there are several interpretations of the concept of action in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. But, the interpreters differ from each other and there is not a unanimous conclusion regarding it. As D.D. Raphael writes, "Philosophy lives by constant criticism. It arises from doubt and criticism of existing ideas, and it remains vigorous and healthy only if it is self-critical also."²

This paper is an attempt to show that the concept of action in the *Gītā* is neither metaphysical nor mystical. Rather, it is a concept of applied ethics. We have shown how the concept of *nikāmakarma* is a product of mindset. We have analysed the concept of *karma*, *akarma*, *vikarma* and *nikāmakarma* altogether in a different way to show how the remodelling of conceptual framework happens in the *Gītā*. We want to show that the relation between the action and the result presented in the *Gītā* is neither causal nor a rational

justification of an action. Rather, it shows the limitations of both the explanations and thereby transcends both.

The explanation of human action is a matter of interest not only in the field of Ethics, but also a very important subject in the philosophy of mind and in social philosophy. In philosophy of mind, the actions of human being are distinguished from the movement of other objects due to the distinguishing features of human creatures i.e. they possess mind. In social philosophy, human actions are explained in terms of either causes or reason. An explanation of human action helps us to identify the causes for action and also the reasons for them. Causal explanation helps us to identify causes of our actions. Rational explanation justifies our action. According to Donald Davidson the causal relationship can be known on the basis of inductive evidence, whereas one can know the reason for one's own action without such evidence. He explains human action by considering reason as the causes of action.³

When we talk about action in ethical sphere, we consider the actions of human being who are treated as moral creatures, as either good and bad or right and wrong. All the actions of human being do not come into the purview of ethics. In ethics, we do not consider the unintentional actions as either right or wrong. Again, the very same action may be intentional under one description and it may not under other. Like Logic, ethics is a condition of the world as Wittgenstein puts it succinctly and the *Bhagavad Gita*'s concept of action shows that this is so in the most vivid and graphic way.

The concept of 'action' or '*karma*' is one of the vital concepts in the *Bhagavad Gitā*. The *Gitā*'s concept of action brings out a vivid picture of the concept of action and what is an ideal action? If the ideal action is practised by an individual, it will not only affect his own

spiritual being but also his nature makes a dent on the society to which he belongs. One's action affects the man in the society depending on the time and circumstances that prevails in the respective society.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is one of the canonical texts of *Sanatanadharma*. Its view of action is essentially regarded as a mandate of action. The ethical views of the *Gita* is widely accepted and appreciated by the thinkers across the world. Let us discuss its view of action. The Sanskrit term '*karma*' literally means action. It often refers to the entire spectrum of physical, mental and moral action of human beings. Sometimes, the term '*karma*' when related to the process of rebirth refers to the result or residue of human actions that determines an individual's future life. We are not employing action in this sense here. Generally, there is a classification of actions which are ordinarily performed by agents. This is done on the basis of moral sanction. Thus, *karma* is permitted action and *vikarma* is prohibited action. It is clear that all the actions are not judged as right or permitted or wrong or prohibited. These actions which affect either other human being or the world around us come under the purview of ethics or moral sanction. The *Gītā* considers an action as good or bad not only with reference to other social being but also with reference to the inanimate world on which we acted upon.

An agent can perform an action only if he exercises his free will. The *Gītā* considers free will as a precondition of agency. All the deliberations that are done based on the very supposition that the listener is a free agent. One might care to listen or not to listen. This is so, because he is free. Śrī Krishna cautions Arjuna not to lay open the tenets of the *Gītā* to one who does not care to pay heed to the same (*na āsrave*). Similarly, after Śrī Krishna laid open all the possibilities and their presuppositions and implication

before Arjuna, who very carefully listened to those, put forth his doubts for clarification and received the clarifications of the master very well, he told Arjuna: “*yathā icchasi tathā kuru*” (“Do as you deem proper”). This evinces that the moral agent is always free. It is definitive of him. We can say that freedom of will is the flip side of rationality. Now, one may will to act, or one may not will to act. But, none the less, the capacity of will is there with the agent.

On the basis of exercise or otherwise (suspension) of will, actions fall into two categories, their presence (*karma*) and their absence (*akarma*, that is, *a-karma*). If one wills to act, then ordinarily, one wills to act with a purpose, objective or *telos* (end) in view, which is the desire to enjoy the result or fruit of action (*karmaphālakāṅkṣā*). But if one does not will to act, then it obviously follows that there is no desire for enjoying the fruit of action. There is an important point here. If one does not will to act, action will not stop. Change in the nature of things is perpetual (*prakṛteḥ kriyā māṇāni*).⁵ One must therefore act in conformity with nature. There is no action holiday in this sense (*na hi kaścit kṣāma api...*).⁶ Here ‘*akarma*’ does not refer to non-willed action. One might here ask for an instance of absence of action or inaction.

It needs to be clarified here that the task of the philosopher is to articulate categories, not to find out exactly to which particulars they apply, refer to or instantiate. The latter is the task of the empirical investigator. Ludwig Wittgenstein puts it aptly in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that the philosopher explains what is an object or an elementary proposition and what are their nature and function, but he is not the one to

give examples of objects, elementary propositions. In another context, he says that the philosopher would find out the logic of a concept like cow, but not give instances of cow. Whether a given case is the instance of a cow or wild cow, the person with empirical concern would take a decision depending on the context. Some commentators get perplexed over this point. Moreover, the above two classifications are of two different orders, one between *karma* and *vikarma* and the other between *karma* and *akarma* have been put together in the *Gītā*. This gives rise to the thinking that *karma*, *akarma* and *vikarma* is classification of a single order. The *Gītā* is aware that it is not easy to grasp the distinction (*kim karma kimakarme'ti...*).⁷

The aim of the classification and distinction is to introduce and articulate and elucidate the concept of a different type of *karma* by conflating *karma* and *akarma*, which, according to the ordinary view, would look like joining two opposite poles. It is *niṣkāmakarma*. But the *Gītā* does not use this term even once in the entire text. The term that it uses is *naiṣkarmya*. We may try to find out the reason behind it. *Niṣkāmakarma* is the product of a mindset. The mindset of which it is the product is. It might be noted in passing that Suresvarācārya has to his credit a celebrated Advaitic text named *Naiṣkarmyasiddhi*.

It is now due to clarify the concept *niṣkāmakarma*, apparently the fourth type of *karma*. These are not really to be reckoned as types rather than conceptions of *karma*. The mindset that induces *karma* is oriented towards relishing the result of the action one performs. This is quite ordinary. The mindset that induces *akarma* is not oriented

towards relishing the result of action as that is not there. This is obvious. The mindset that induces *niṣkāmakarma* is the mindset that induces *karma*, in a sense and is the mindset that induces *akarma* in another sense. That is, *naiṣkarmya* is the mindset that induces *karma* without being oriented towards relishing the result of the action the agent performs. Hence, *niṣkāmakarma* is like *karma* to some extent and is like *akarma* to some extent. Similarly, *niṣkāmakarma* is unlike *karma* to some extent and is unlike *akarma* to some extent. The advice of the *Gītā* is to perform an action as if one does not perform it (*karmaṇi akarmaiva*). It is a matter of mindset or perception. Here the agent perceives *karma* in *akarma* and also *akarma* in *karma*. In *niṣkāmakarma*, *karma* is there in so far as there is positive performance and *akarma* is there in so far as it is devoid of the orientation towards relishing the result of action. *Naiṣkarmya* is not abstaining from action (*na karmaṇāṁ anārambha naiṣkarmyam puruṣo'snute...*).⁸ Freedom from action does not yield perfection (*na ca samnyāsanāt eva siddhim samadhigacchati...*).⁹ Freedom in action is *naiṣkarmya* and it yields perfection. To be perfect, to attain perfection is not relishing the result of action. It is no more action in the ordinary sense. The ordinary sense of the two; action and relishing its result are transcended.

It is important here to appreciate that the duality and the irreconcilable opposition between *karma* and *akarma*, which is provided at the surface level is superseded. Such remodeling of conceptual framework and reorientation of perception is unique to the philosophy of the Advaita Vedānta.

The agent, who has this reoriented mindset *nai-karmya* is called a *yogī* and alternatively a *sam-nyāsin*. Here, the *yoga* is, in effect, a *biyoga*, not an addition, but a deletion. It is the deletion of the relishing the fruits of action. The deletion is to be added. This also sounds contradictory. But this is not so. There are such ideas in Logic and Mathematics making perfect sense. The path of *yoga* is not the ordinary trodden path of our work-a-day life. It needless to say that the path is seen when one takes moment off from one's work-a-day life looks back on for contemplation of its whole output.

Intellect provides certain organizing concepts to state what the agent thinks and does. But when it looks back, it finds many a hitch among the concepts in being related one with the other. *Karma*, *akarma* and *vikrama* are some other such organizing concepts. The intellect then seeks to go beyond itself and provide some other concepts of a higher order to resolve the hitch among the first-order concepts. Here, the higher order concept is *ni-kāmakarma*. Such hitches and tensions are brought out and resolved in the *Gītā*.

However, the *Gītā* puts forth five conditions of action, to show why the result of an action is undetermined. These are *adhisthāna* (body), *kartā* (ego), *karaṇa* (organ of perception and action), *cesta* (effort) and *daiva* (situation beyond human control). *Adhisthāna* is the physical body with the help of which work is undertaken. The physical body reacts to the world through the ego (*kartā*), which functions in and through it. The ego works through the various organs of perception (*karaṇa*). Without

these, the ego cannot come into contact with the outer world. *Cesta* means the effort of the body. In Buddhism right effort (*samyag vyāyāma*) consists in a fourfold endeavour. These are, constant effort to root out old evil thoughts, prevent evil thoughts from arising afresh, filling the mind constantly with good ideas and retain such ideas. According to Śamākhya, '*cesta*' refers to the psychological activities like *prāṇa*, *āpāna*, *udāna* etc. The *Gītā* mentions a non-human factor involved in action. This is *daiva*. Traditionally '*daiva*' means some entity or deity who controls our action. That is why, when an offering is made, a deity is invoked to give the result of the offering. But, in the *Gītā*, it simply stands for the factors which are beyond our perception and control of human agency. The explanation of *karma* by some entity called *daiva* is done from metaphysical obsession. The *Gītā* says "Neither agency nor actions, does the Lord, create for the world, nor union with fruits of actions. But it is nature (*svabhāva*) that acts".¹⁰ The *Gītā* outrightly denies the rites and rituals, and thereby obsession to the entities. Here, what is emphasized is pure sense of *karma*. Chatterjee and Datta interpret '*daiva*' as fate or destiny and mean by it the collective force of one's own actions performed in the past lives (*purvajanma-kṛta-karma*).¹¹

It can be overcome by efforts of this present life. But, the present habits must be sufficiently strong enough and opposite to the old habit to counteract it. From this point of view there is no place of fatalism or determinism in the law of *karma*. Fatalism is a form of determinism according to which events are determined by the impersonal fate. Human beings are powerless to do anything other than what we actually do. In other

words, they have no power to influence the future of their own actions. This is not right. The *Gītā* insists repeatedly that there is always a possibility to develop, to reform oneself.

Generally, it is conceived that there is a casual link between action and result, *karma* and *karma phala*. Causal link is different from logical link. In case of logical link one being the other follows necessarily. It is a self-contradiction to assert one and to deny other. For example, it would be a self-contradiction to say ‘a triangle’ and ‘not three sided’. In case of causal link, the antecedent circumstances being present the consequent follows necessarily. But, here there is no self-contradiction in saying that the antecedent is there but the result does not follow. The causal relations are predictable and objective. The scientific knowledge is based on these unalterable causal laws. Here, given the effect we can retrospectively say the causes and conditions and also given the cause and conditions we can say what necessarily follows. But, the relation between action and its result is quite different from the causal relation. We cannot predict the result beforehand. Some may object that there is an exception because we do not take into account the entire circumstance. Otherwise, under the same conditions, same situation gives rise to same result.

But, while perceiving *karma* and its result what is worth noticing that here we cannot take into account the entire situations, if we want. It is because some situations are beyond human perceptions and control. This situation is called *daiva* in the *Gītā* which makes the result of our action undetermined.

The explanation of action through reason is given in terms of the goal or the future result which is aimed at. Suppose A wants B then he will perform C to get B. But whether he will get B or not, there is no guarantee about that. The agent is the only person who can justify his action. He may give a good or bad or a suitable reason which may not be the case. We cannot verify what his actual reason is for doing the action. In our opinion, while considering *Gītā*'s view of action and its result, we have seen that the result is unpredictable. So, though freedom of will is a flip side of rationality, we can not explain the relation of action with its result by reason.

Neither cause nor reason is sufficient to explain the relation of human actions with its result. Further, the path of ideal action prescribed in the *Gītā* is not metaphysical. It is optimistic and not rigoristic. Its principle is not "Duty for duty sake". Rather, it prescribed duty for the well being of the others. In its saying, a sublime higher ideal is concealed, where doing one's duty is an automatic outflow of one's nature. It is a happiness and expression of one's concern for others. It is holistic in nature. The justification of action does not exclude the inanimate objects or trees or our surrounding. Rather, our actions are viewed as good or bad with reference to how it affects the world, the surrounding besides us.

If we will follow this path, surely many of the today's world problem like, environmental pollution, constant stress and strain between the countries will be solved. We can hand over a beautiful world with a beautiful environment to our coming generation.

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