

FREE WILL AND NON-ATTACHMENT IN THE  
BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ

In this paper I shall attempt to prove that, when the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (hereafter cited as BG) is viewed from the absolute perspective of KṚṢṆA (Viṣṇu) as Brahman, i.e. Ultimate Reality, then, in *no* sense is there room for determinism in the *Gītā*. I will argue that in its highest philosophical form the BG holds an *impartial indeterminism*. This may sound untenable and unwarranted, at first, without textual support. In fact, my above stated thesis statement may appear to contradict the traditional view that the BG holds a moderate stance on free will and determinism. The "moderate stance" or traditional scholarly perspective, on the BG, holds that there is a vein of determinism or Divine pre-determinism found therein. This "moderate stance" is held in varying degrees by different scholars, however, it always entails at least one of the following three causes or forms of determinism. Some scholars, e.g. E. Deutsch hold all three forms. The three are as follows : 1) the nature of the lower *Prakṛti*, i.e. the physical world, is constituted by the three *guṇas*, and their (physical) intreraction is a necessary one, i.e. empirical-material-determinism; 2) given the spacio-temporal-causal nexus of the material world, the embodied soul (*Puruṣa*) must act (*karma*) to maintain life and these acts (*karmas*) cause future impelling acts (*karmic* effects) to necessarily occur, i.e. *karmic*-impelling-determinism; finally, 3) it is held that the *Gītā* maintains a Divine pre-determinism. As P. T. Raju states, "The Supreme Person is the controller of this process." (Raju, p. 213).\* In the course of this paper,

I will examine these three forms of determinism more closely, but I must state from the outset that I will *not* attempt to refute this view of "moderate determinism". I, personally, do not think that it can be refuted, for it is valid from its own perspective. I will attempt to point out that "moderate determinism" is limited in its relative perspective. Therefore, I shall attempt to prove that from the Ultimate perspective (*nirguṇa Brahman*), there is an impartial indeterminism in the BG when one understands that nature (*Prakṛti*), is a manifestation of the divine (*Puruṣa*), is the field in which all potential actions or ethical choices occur.

I will also attempt to show that this impartial indeterminism can only be understood from the perspective of non-attachment or detachment, i. e. that is something like *tyaj* a cutting of the bonds (*bandha*) of the ego-centric perspective. It seems to me that with the attitude of non-attachment, as it is taught in the BG, applied to knowledge (*jñāna*) especially knowledge of how *prakṛti* functions, action and its impelling effects (*karma*), and devotion (*bhakti*) to a personal god, one can then and only then *realize* that there is no determinism in nature, actions and their impelling effects, nor the "Supreme Person" (*Puruṣa* or *Brahman* as a personal god). I contend that what appears to be deterministic in the BG, are but the underlying conditions in and through which free ethical choices can be made. For example, I will attempt to show how detached devotion (*bhakti-yoga*) leads the devotee to relinquish her/his ego and the ego-desires for a protecting personal god. Thus, the devotee of *bhakti-yoga* should *realize* that ultimately his personal god (*Iśvara*) is an impersonal absolute one (c. f. no-thing, absolute, *nir-guṇa*) without attributes, and as such *it* cannot be said to control or pre-determine the world. Since the absolute is existence (*sat*), with qualification one may say, then, that the

Absolute provides the "field" for actions within which ethical choices are made. Of course, if this "field" for action is seen as an *attribute*, it will not apply to the Absolute. Thus, my thesis of "impartial indeterminism" is a limiting concept in itself, and it too must be surpassed or overcome in the process of realization and/or emancipation. Ultimately, one can only point toward the absolute, freedom, ethics, and so on, for they are in themselves ineffable.

Since the concept of a "free will" presupposes that of *freedom*, I could restate my thesis of "impartial indeterminism" as an attempt to prove that freedom is a necessary condition for the ethics of the BG, and these ethics are based on detachment. To substantiate these two claims of 1) necessary freedom, and 2) detachment, I will begin by defining "detachment". I will then discuss some of the underlying concepts of the BG which have a strong bearing on the topic of freedom and determinism. I will point out that the BG assumes many of the social conventions presented in the *Code of Manu*, e. g. the four *āśramas* or "stages of life", the four *putuṣārthas* or "goals of life," and the four *varṇas* or social castes. Although the *Code of Manu* is dated to the third to second centuries B. C., and the BG assumes many of its doctrines, nevertheless the germinal ideas of these three concepts are found in the Vedic and Upaniṣadic literature; thus we cannot say that the BG only dates to the second or third centuries B. C. based on the dating of the *Code of Manu*. The dating of the BG is beyond the scope of the paper. What is important here is that these four divisions of "life" and the "goals of Life" and "society" appear to present a theory of social determinism. However, I will show that when these concepts are rightly understood in the context of the BG, i. e. the setting of *war*, then and only then can one recognize that the "freedom of choice to participate in the social-

life-cycle-structure " is always presupposed. As such this "social determinism" is no determinism since it is based on the idea of freedom of choice. I will then return to the above discussion of reinterpreting the traditional three forms of "moderate determinism" via *Prakṛti*, *Karma*, and Divine pre-determinism. In conclusion, I hope to show that from the Ultimate perspective of the teaching of the BG that freedom is a necessary condition for the ethics of the *Gītā*, and thus an "impartial indeterminism" or a concept of complete freedom is the real ethical basis of the *Gītā*. I will now turn to a brief discussion of the meaning of non-attachment or detachment in the BG.

I must point out at the outset that the concept of detachment or equanimity, as it is taught in the BG, is a unique one. Professor Upadhyaya has stressed this unique concept or rather practice; he states, "Unlike Buddhism according to which detachment or renunciation should be both inner and outer, the B. G. seems to lay exclusive emphasis on inner detachment." (Upadhyaya, p. 458). Above all else then, detachment or renunciation is an *attitude* one assumes toward the world. To assume or practice this attitude has a twofold consequence for my argument of properly understanding "free will" in the BG. First, the state of detachment implies free will in that the practice of the attitude of detachment must be done by a "free" moral agent. That is to say that regardless of the necessary causal interactions of the three *guṇas*, i. e. *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, the impelling effects of *karma*, and any restraints imposed by the divine power of "creation" (*māyā*), still the moral agent (mankind) is absolutely free to choose to live by the attitude of "inner detachment" to all possessions and in all actions. Second, the attitude of renunciation or detachment if taken seriously, then it tells us to reject the empirical perspective on material and causal, i. e., *prakṛti* and *karma* determinism. That is to say that

the BG preaches a hierarchy of self-control or detachment. That is, to control the body (matter) one must control the sense, and to control the sense one must control the mind, and to control the mind one must control the intellect, and to control the intellect one must control the spirit. Thus the BG states, "*indriyārtheṣu vairāgyam etaḥ jñānam*", i. e. to be wise...turn away from what the senses tell you..." (BG 13.8; Bolle, p. 155 & p. 300). The concept of *vairāgyam* or *vairāgya* is that of detachment or renunciation or turning away from the defective causes of ignorance, i. e., sense data and the theoretical stance derived from sense data—empiricism. Thus the freedom of the spirit to assume or practice the attitude of non-attachment or detachment (*vairāgya*—equanimity of mind or inner renunciation) provides the main synthesis in the thought of the BG. As Professor Upadhyaya states, "Desireless or disinterested action (*niṣkāma karma*) is thus made the central point in which all the paths are shown to converge. This is how B. G. tries to establish unity amidst diversity." (p. 471). Thus it is little wonder that detachment or non-attachment serves as the basis from which we can best understand the role of absolute freedom in the BG.

I must point out that the BG does not maintain a constant use of only one term to discuss detachment or renunciation; rather, it uses a number of terms to discuss and describe this attitude. Some of these terms are as follows: 1) *Vairāgya* or the ascetic practice (BG, 6.35) or turning away from the senses (as discussed above, BG, 13.8 & 18.52); 2) *tyāga* or abandonment or renunciation (BG, 12.12, 16.2, 18.1, 4, & 9); 3) *tyaj* or to cast off or (to do) with detachment (BG, 2.3 & 2.41; 4) *sangam tyaktvā* without attachment (BG, 5.11) and various other terms are used, (Bolle, p. 300). Further the one who practices this attitude of non-attachment is given various titles, e.g.

*samnyāsin, tapasvin, yogin* (a person of discipline) and so on. The important point here is that the BG does stress the concept of detachment, not as a unique ideal only attainable by superhumans, as a goal which is attainable by mankind as men contain the absolutely free spirit (*puruṣa*) which can exercise self-control or self-restraint on the "lower" nature (*prakṛti*).

To really show that this doctrine of absolute freedom does serve as the foundation of the *Gītā's* system of ethics, I must briefly discuss some of the cultural presuppositions of the BG. In particular, I would like to direct our attention to the four *varṇas* or the "caste system" and the four *puruṣārthas* or "goals of life." From the Western perspective the division of society into rigid castes and the prescription of exact *aims* which correspond to the four stages of life (the *āśramas*) would be viewed as a form of social determinism. However, if these concepts are understood from the Indian perspective, they do not imply determinism; rather this strict system implies the free choice of the individuals who make up the society at large, and some do choose to go against the system. In fact, the very setting of the BG, i.e. the battle field (of life) shows that some will choose the ultimate evil of working against the spirit (*puruṣa*) by following ego-centered desires to the extent of wanting to kill others to fulfil those desires. The BG explicitly seems to support the four *varṇas* (see 4.13 and other places). The BG affirms the doctrine of the four goals of life in a more indirect manner. The four goals of life are: 1) *dharma*, 2) *kāma*, 3) *artha*, 4) *mokṣa*. The BG states again and again that duty for duty's sake (*karmayoga*) is the way to complete freedom or emancipation (*mokṣa*), and this doctrine is reinforced by giving a special emphasis to *dharma* or social duty, and this is to emphasise the concept of "specific duty" or *svadharmā*. (Upadhyaya, pp. 470-471). As the *Gītā* states, "*śreyān svadharmo viguṇaḥ paradha-*

*rmāt svanuṣṭhitāt...*, i.e. One's own duty in its imperfections is better than someone else's duty well performed." (BG, 18.47, Bolle, pp. 206–207). Furthermore in various places, the BG discusses the two "lower" goals of life, *kāma* and *artha*, as those ego-centered desires which maintain attachments, especially inner attachments, and the cycle of rebirths (*saṁsāra*). As I stated above, from the Western point of view the four *varṇas* and the four *paraṣārthas* present a form of social determinism. Thus, many western scholars stress some form of determinism based on *dharma*. For example, although E. Deutsch does not use the term "social determinism" nevertheless he does associate *dharma* with determinism in that one's *dharma* or social duty is determined via the impelling effects of one's past actions (*karma*). (Deutsch, p. 183). However, such a perspective completely overlooks the facts that the moral agent must choose to fulfil his *dharma*, and to make such a choice implies that the moral agent has a free will to make such a choice. The spirit or *puruṣa* is the eternally free moral agent. It alone is responsible for life and the evolution toward complete freedom or self-realization (*mokṣa*). Although the caste system and the four goals of life are taken for granted in the BG, still one must keep in mind the general setting of the BG. In this respect, I am especially thinking of the fact that context of this *Gītā* is twofold. First and foremost it is a story of the *Avatāra* of Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, teaching his disciple Arjuna, and secondly it is taking place on a battle field. The first aspect of the story is symbolic of the absolutely good free will. The second aspect is symbolic of the absolutely evil free will. The question, "How can evil arise in a world determined by nature or god?" seems to point toward the impartial indeterminism of the *Gītā*, viz the moral agent is free to choose evil to appease its desires (*kāma*) or for material gain (*artha*). Furthermore, the fact of the *Avatāra* shows that the moral agent, the spirit, even the supreme *puruṣa* or *nirguṇa Brahman*, is also free

to choose to do good, viz 1) to maintain life, 2) to maintain the evolution toward *mokṣa* and when necessary to 3) remove hindrances to this goal especially evil. The ethics of the BG is based on the distinction of good and evil or liberation and bondage; both men and gods are confronted with the ethical choice. Thus, the twofold nature of BG, i.e., the *Avatāra* and the war, respectively show the choice between good and evil. The choice between good and evil implies that there is a free moral agent. That the *puruṣa* can ever "begin" (in a logical sense and not the temporal) to generate *karma* and the impelling effects either negative, toward evil and bondage, or positive toward good and liberation, stands as evidence that the moral agent, at least, is absolutely free in making ethical choices. This is to say that ethical choices are compelling events. Thus, given the relative history of an embodied spirit (*jīva*) the particular "place" one finds oneself at is based on the impelling effects of past choices, i.e., actions (*karma*); however, one is always free to alter one's present lot by making positive choices, i.e. compelling one toward *mokṣa*.

In discussing detachment, I pointed out that it is the main path to achieve *mokṣa*. I also showed how free will was implied in the ability to take on the attitude of detachment. In the preceding discussion, I showed that what might appear to the Western reader as a form of social determinism actually implies the free choice of the moral agent participating in the social-life-cycle-structure. I also showed how the main theme of the BG, i.e., the *Avatāra* as war consultant or the choice between good and evil also implies the free will of the moral agent. I would now return to a discussion of the view of "moderate determinism".

As I stated in the introduction to this paper, the traditional scholarly stance on the BG is to hold, at least one of the following three forms of determinism, i.e., determinism in the lower



*prakṛti*, determinism via the impelling effects of *karma* and divine pre-determinism. I would now like to examine each of these three forms of determinism to see if in fact they can actually be said to be deterministic in the context of the BG. I must, however, reiterate that I do not believe that these three forms of determinism can be argued against or refuted, for from the empirical stance they are present and true. I am contending that by applying the higher perspective of the *yogin* in practice, what appeared as determinism or pre-determinism comes to be seen as the ethical context in which action are made. First, allow me to examine the stance on pre-determinism.

Some scholars, e. g., Raju and Deutsch, hold that there is a doctrine of Divine pre-determinism in the BG. Furthermore, there is some strong textual support for this view. For example in chapter eleven sections thirty-two to thirty-three, Kṛṣṇa claims to be time itself and the destroyer of the human world instructing Arjuna to be an instrument (*nimitta*) of the divine plan. Or in chapter eighteen section sixty-one where it is said that it is the magical power (*māyā*) of the Lord that maintains the universe. It must be kept in mind that from the relative perspective (*saṅgūna*), it does appear that the Lord creates and controls the activities of the world. However, one must not forget that an entire chapter of the BG is devoted to giving a symbolic expression to the ineffable and absolute (*nirguṇa*) nature of the Lord. As I stated above (page 376), *bhakti-mārga* or the way of devotion when combined with detachment becomes *bhakti-yoga*. The devotee of *bhakti-yoga* in its pure practice, cannot be said to be practicing devotion to a personal god. In a sense, chapter eleven, where Kṛṣṇa presents his absolute formlessness in a symbolic fashion so that Arjuna's limited sense modalities can perceive him, as the direct immediate experience of the *nirguṇa Brahman*, is the ultimate goal of the

*yogin* or devotee of *bhakti-yoga*. Thus, it is not too surprising that one also finds passages in the BG which directly contradict the above notion of a Divine pre-determinism. For example, chapter nine section nine present the lord as a detached onlooker amidst the process of change. Furthermore, to say that the *Gītā* necessarily presents a form of divine pre-determinism would appear to go against the grain of the entire theme of the BG. If the world were completely divinely pre-determined, then one would have to say that evil was divinely caused. But if evil was truly caused by the divine will, then why would the divine incarnate to prevent evil from dominating mankind? Of course, at this point, the discussion must come to an end, for to attempt to assume "rational behavior" on the part of the absolute is a meaningless task. I shall now turn to a discussion of the second form of determinism attributed to the BG.

I must point out, at the out set, that Professor Upadhyaya has emphasised time and again that both *karma* and *prakṛti* are deterministic *only* in an impelling sense (*Ibid.*, p. 525). Upadhyaya has shown that *prakṛti* does not compell one to act; we do have the freedom to "...curb the influence of *prakṛti*..." (*Ibid.* p. 522). As regards the impelling effects of *karma*, Upadhyaya has shown that, of the five necessary conditions or responsible factors for carrying out an *act*, destiny (*daiva*) is but one of conditions, and furthermore, effort or endeavour (*ceṣṭā* = will power?) is another of the responsible factors for an action to occur (*Ibid.*, p. 525). I would like to modify Dr. Upadhyaya's view that the *Gītā* holds a partial determinism, by taking a non-empirical-material perspective which stresses the freedom of the higher nature or spirit (*puruṣa*); such that the spirit is seen as ultimately free *from* the material conditions of nature, and it is free *to* choose its future actions—particularly those actions that will lead it toward *mokṣa*. This is what I

mean by “impartial indeterminism.” Some scholars hold that *karma* is a binding determinism, and it is developed via one’s *dharma*. For example, “... (man) is bound by his own past actions (*karma*) as this crystalizes into a law (*dharma*) of his own nature;...” (Deutsch, p. 183). Now it is surely Arjuna’s *dharma* (both as his personal nature and his social nature) to be a warrior and to fight; however, if the BG held the view that *dharma* based on *karma* was deterministic, then chapter one, i. e., Arjuna’s despondency could not arise, could not be written. On the contrary, as the troops make ready for war, Arjuna at first picks up his bow, but then he reflects on the events at hand, and he then casts away his bow (BG, 1.20 & 47). The point is that Arjuna as a highly developed spirit *is free* to make ethical decisions: the impelling effects of his past *karmas* and the conditions of his inner and social law (*dharma*) do not automatically compell Arjuna to fight like some blood thirsty creature.

Moreover, P. T. Raju has pointed out that the doctrine of *karmayoga*, duty for duty’s sake, has a twofold aim, viz 1) to maintain the process of the human world, and 2) to teach a way toward salvation (Raju, p. 215 & 216). Under first point, Raju shows that to live is to act, that even Brahman must *act* as it were via the Avatār. (Ibid., p. 216) As the *Gītā* says, “... *śarīrayūtrāpi ca te na prasiddhyed akarmaṇah*, i.e., without action, the body would stop functioning.” (Bolle, p. 40 & 41). In this respect, even the satisfaction of desires (*kāma*) is permissible (Raju, p. 216). In this sense, that all life is activity, can we really see the lower nature (*prakṛti*) and the impelling effects of past actions as deterministic? I personally think not; for under these circumstances the impelling effects (*karma*) and nature (*prakṛti*) provide the conditions for the continuation of life. They provide the “field” as it is described in chapter thirteen

in which ethical actions occur. *Karmayoga* or duty for duty's sake, again it implies action without a concern or attachment for the fruits of the labour, also teaches a means to attain salvation. This salvation is attained when the *yogin* realizes that his actions are actually the interactions of the three strands (*guṇas*) as the manifestation of Brahman maintaining human life (Raju, 217). As the *Gītā* puts it, "Whoever does not turn with the wheel... he is of evil intent ..." (Bolle, p. 43, BG. 3.16). Since *karma* does contain the way to liberation, I contend that it should not be seen as a determining force, but rather, *karma*, especially when done with detachment, supplies the form or mode through which actions and *realizations* occur.

Turning now to the form of determinism first mentioned above, i.e., that of the lower nature (*prakṛti*) composed of the three *guṇas* or strands, I would again say that taken at face value this view cannot actually be refuted: however I would like to reinterpret it. Above, in discussing how *karma* can be seen as the "field" for all potential actions, I also interpreted the concept of *prakṛti*. Therefore I will only discuss very briefly how *prakṛti* can be seen as the "field" or underlying conditions for actions and ethical choices. In this respect, chapter thirteen titled, "The yoga of the distinction between the Field and the Field-Knower." serves to support my claim that in its highest philosophical sense the *Gītā* maintains absolute freedom for ethical choices. The field appears to determine one's actions from the relative plane of existence, but those who know, in an active sense (*jñānayoga*), the distinction between the field or *prakṛti* and the freedom of beings; they can attain liberation (BG, 13.34). Thus, *prakṛti* may be seen as setting the conditions for life and activity, but it is not a determining factor over the free will of men and gods.

The BG appears to stress the transcendence of the three *gunas* to attain pure liberation. To gain release one must go beyond the three *gunas* (BG, 14.20). One must sit apart from the merry-go-round of life unmoved and unshaken (BG, 14.23). In passing beyond the three *gunas* one then attains union with *Brahman* (BG, 14.26). Furthermore Indian Philosophy, in general, and the BG, in particular, appear to stress the reality of the Cosmic will over and above the personal will (Edgerton, pp. 114–119). Thus, it might appear that free will is only an illusion until one transcends the relative plane of existence; but we must keep in mind that there is no “transcendental gap” in Indian Philosophy. Transcendence is *immanent*. Thus, the Cosmic free will is attainable by men. Therefore, I have attempted to show that the BG does hold a doctrine of absolute freedom. This freedom is embodied in action for action’s sake, but always it is done with detachment (*karmayoa*) :

You are entitled to work,

but not at all to the results.

The results of work should not be your motive,

Nor should you abstain from work.

Follow Discipline, perform your work

with detachment, Pursuer of Wealth,

Equal-minded to success or failure.

Discipline means equanimity. (Bolle p. 31; with my  
modification, BG, 2.45).

Department of Philosophy  
University of Hawai of Manoa  
2530, Dole Street  
HAWAI 96822 (U. S. A.)

JAMES D. SELLMANN

## NOTES

- \* In this paper I will avail myself of the most modern style of citing sources by giving the author and page number in the text: please, see the Bibliography for the complete citation information.

- Atreya, J. P., "The Philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gitā*," *Darshana International*, 17, Oct. 1977. 68-88
- Bhave, Vinoba., *Talks on the Gitā*, Rajghat, Sarva Seva Sangh Prakshan, 1970.
- Bolle, K. W. (trans),. *The Bhagavad Gitā; A New Translation*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1979.
- Deutsch, E. (trans),. *The Bhagavad Gitā*, New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968.
- Edgerton, F. (trans),. *The Bhagavad Gitā*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1972.
- Mutry, K. S., *Metaphysics, Man, and Freedom*, New York, Asia Press, 1963.
- Raju, P. T., *The Philosophical Traditions of India*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971.
- Sankowski, B., "Some Problems About Determinism and Freedom." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 17, Oct. 80, 291-300.
- Slote, M. A., "Understanding Free Will" *Journal of Philosophy*, 77, March 80, 136-151.
- Upadhyaya, K. N., *Early Buddhism and the Bhagavad Gitā*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1971.