



# “Thy Will Be Done ?” Autonomy in the *Bhagavad Gītā* and Kant

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## I. Introduction

Matthew MacKenzie in “The Five Factors of Action and the Decentering of Agency in the *Bhagavad Gītā*” argues that the philosophy of the *Gītā* is incompatible with that of Kant because in the end it amounts to the view that “not my will, but thine, O Lord.”<sup>1</sup> In his article, MacKenzie gives three basic areas in which Kant and the *Gītā* purportedly differ. First, the account of action in the *Gītā* has it that humans are ultimately no more than the puppets of the Lord (*Gītā* 18:61), thus human agency is decentered as the locus of moral responsibility, whereas for Kant responsibility is a product of individual agency. Second, in the *Gītā*, achieving the goal of liberation brings with it freedom from moral responsibility (18:17), whereas for Kant only a being with a holy will can escape moral responsibility, and this is not a goal to be aimed for. Third, in the *Gītā*, the surest path to liberation is that of surrender to the will of Lord Kṛṣṇa, whereas for Kant surrender to any external source of moral guidance can only be heteronomy.

In this paper, however, I will argue that the reasons he gives for the incompatibility of Kant and the *Gītā* are not the relevant<sup>2</sup> differences between the two. Each of the purported differences given above can be explained away, to a certain degree, by closer readings. Rather, the key differences separating the two are Kant’s view of universal reason versus the *Gītā*’s view of the prevalence non-enlightenment and Kant’s view of the link between virtue and happiness as a goal to be sought and the *Gītā*’s view of the

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<sup>1</sup> MacKenzie, Matthew D. “The Five Factors of Action and the Decentering of Agency in the *Bhagavad Gītā*.” *Asian Philosophy* 11 (3), 2001, p. 149.

law of karma being already in effect and knowable. Nevertheless, in spite of their differences, and indeed through their differences, the two end up converging on a vision of the sublime moral self.

## II. Agency and the true self

MacKenzie's account of the difference in models of personal agency between the *Gītā* and Kant begins with *Gītā* 18:13–15, which lists the five causes of an action: the seat of action or body, the agent or doer (*kartā*), the instruments or sense organs, activities or vital functions, and fate or divine providence (*daivam*). Because of the importance of other factors besides that of the agent, the *Gītā* concludes (18:16),

This being true  
the one who sees  
his own self  
as the only agent  
is hard-headed,  
and does not see,  
because of insight  
which is incomplete.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, we are told in *Gītā* 18:61 that

the lord of all beings  
dwells in the place  
of the heart,  
and causes all beings  
to wander in illusion [*māyayā*],  
as if following  
a great cosmic map.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Any comparison of Kant and the *Gītā* must of necessity confine its interest to “relevant” differences. To a large degree, what ought to surprise us the most in any comparison of the two is that there are any similarities between them at all, separated as they are by thousands of years and miles. Moreover, the metaphysical assumptions of Kant and the *Gītā* are quite different, and even their basic philosophical vocabularies—Kant is obsessed with apriority and reason, and the *Gītā* with untranslatable terms like karma, dharma, and *guṇa*—overlap on the edges if at all. As such, a certain amount of liberty must be granted to the one making the comparison to decide which differences are relevant and which are not. This will always be somewhat arbitrary, but if the comparison casts light on both the subjects of the comparison and the aspects of the world the subjects attempt to describe, then the effort can be considered fruitful and its arbitrariness forgiven.

<sup>3</sup> *Bhagavad Gītā* translations by Laurie Patton (Penguin, 2008) unless otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup> For this same verse, Winthrop Sargeant gives the translation “as if fixed on a machine” from the Sanskrit *yantra*.

Seeing that the agent cannot be assigned sole agency and the importance of divine agency to human action, MacKenzie concludes that this is incompatible with Kant's ethics and moral psychology, since

To be a moral agent, for Kant, is to be self-legislating. In order to be self-legislating, no external source can be the motivation for moral action. All moral obligations must arise from the rational will.<sup>5</sup>

This summary of Kant is certainly correct as far as it goes. But it is not at all clear that Kant would disagree with the *Gītā*'s account of mechanical divine causation of human action or that the account of mechanical and divine causation given in the *Gītā* would rule out the kind of moral motivation that Kant requires for moral action. To see why, we must dig into the metaphysics of freedom a bit, since neither the *Gītā* nor Kant is either straightforwardly compatibilist or straightforwardly incompatibilist about freedom and human action.

On the surface, one might conclude that the *Gītā* is arguing for pessimistic incompatibilism: libertarian free-will is necessary for true agency but it is lacking, and as such we are only fooling ourselves if we believe the self is truly an agent. On the other hand, to the degree that the *Gītā* wants to allow that attributions of moral responsibility can be correctly made, it should also hold that individuals are responsible for their actions in spite of the abundance of other factors leading to the action. We see this tension played out in chapter 16 of the *Gītā*, which both condemns those of demonic character for erroneously proclaiming, "This has been gained by me today!" (16:15) and explains that it is their clinging to anger, desire, arrogance, force, and "I"-making that causes them to be reborn in lower and lower realms (16:18–9). It seems that the *Gītā* is trying to have it both ways by both denying agency to the demonic and condemning them for their actions anyway.

Similarly, we see in *Gītā* 13:29,

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<sup>5</sup> MacKenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

One who sees  
all actions  
done wholly  
by means of matter [*prakṛti*]  
and that  
one's own self  
is not the agent,  
that one sees clearly.

Thus, it is matter not self that acts. But *Gītā* 18:60 claims,

Son of Kunti,  
through that which arises  
out of your own nature [*svabhāva-jena*],  
bound by your own action  
in confusion  
you will do  
even that which  
you do not want to do.

Which makes it seem as though it is Arjuna's own nature (*svabhāva*) which is the cause of his (confused) actions, though we were previously told that only matter, not self, acts as the agent. The resolution of this dilemma is that for the *Gītā*, the true self is not to be identified with any part of the empirical world. The true self is the knower of the world and not a material thing in the world, whether as matter in the Western sense or as *prakṛti* with its expanded sense of encompassing "mental matter" as well as physical matter. Furthermore, the proper disassociation of the true self from empirical self is an achievement to be sought—enlightenment. Doing so resolves the tension between the *Gītā*'s incompatibilist emphasis on the ineffectiveness of the agent and its compatibilist insistence on the karmic responsibility of the agent. The agent is an empirical aspect of the individual and thus partially causes various actions and suffers their consequences. Those of demonic character are wrong to think that "This has been gained by me today!" both because the gain is only temporary and because it was brought about only partially by the empirical agent and not at all by the true self. The true self did not cause the action and so will remain aloof from its consequences.

There is a similar tension between compatibilism and incompatibilism in Kant. All actions in the world will be found to have an empirical cause when we investigate them, and human actions are included in this. At the same time, however, for an action to be morally right, there must be something outside of mere empirical causation that bears on the action in question, namely super-empirical causation by the moral law. Thus, we might expect that Kant would be an incompatibilist and a pessimist about freedom, yet he quite clearly believes in freedom. He details his position in the first Critique when examining the third antinomy of reason, the antinomy of freedom:

[I]f we could explore all appearances of his power of choice down to the bottom, there would not be a single human action that we could not with certainty predict and cognize as necessary from its preceding conditions. In regard to this empirical character, therefore, there is no freedom [...].

But if we examine the same actions in reference to reason—not, however, speculative reason in order to *explain* them in terms of their origin, but reason solely insofar as it is itself the cause *for producing* them—in a word: if we compare these actions with reason in a *practical* regard, then we find a rule and order quite different from the order of nature.<sup>6</sup>

To understand what Kant means by comparing actions with reason in a practical regard we must recall his claim that the human being is “on the one hand a phenomenon, but on the other hand—viz., in regard to certain powers—a merely intelligible object.”<sup>7</sup> Since human beings are both phenomenal and noumenal, it is not impossible that our noumenal selves could also have some influence over our actions, but since noumena are objects outside of the experiential categories of time and space, any such noumenal “causation” would express itself not as a spontaneous violation of the ordinary laws of nature, but as conditions that set the possibilities for the laws of nature in the first place. As Kant writes in the second Critique, even if we were independent of the four factors of action listed in the *Gītā* besides the agent, this would not be sufficient to give us true freedom, since

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<sup>6</sup>. Kant, Immanuel *Critique of Pure Reason* (tr. Werner S. Pluhar, Hackett Publishing), A 550/B 578.

<sup>7</sup>. *Ibid.*, A 547/B 575.

even if I assumed my entire existence as being independent of any foreign cause (e.g., God), so that the determining bases of my causality and even of my entire existence are not outside of me at all, this would still not in the least convert that natural necessity into freedom.<sup>8</sup>

Even self-direction by the empirical agent does not count for Kant as freedom. Freedom is rather the ability for the moral law to drive action through the non-empirical means of noumenal causation. That is to say, freedom is freedom from inclinations. Freedom must be transcendental or else “it would basically be no better than the freedom of a turnspit, which, once it has been wound up, also performs its motions on its own.”<sup>9</sup> He suggests a test by which we can imagine what this noumenal causation is like,

Ask yourself whether, if the action you propose were to occur according to a law of nature of which you yourself were a part, you could indeed regard it as possible through your will.<sup>10</sup>

For properly moral action, one ought to be able to will that the laws of nature would have been such that one would naturally follow the particular course of action under consideration. To be truly moral, an action for Kant must, as MacKenzie writes, “arise from the rational will,” but the means by which this arising takes place will be completely inscrutable in empirical appearances.

Of course, Kant’s description of noumenal causation is not entirely clear and multiple interpretations of it are possible. The metaphysics of *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* (pure consciousness) are similarly opaque, and there are a large variety of descriptions of their exact relationship in classical Indian metaphysics. Whatever the precise details of Kant or the *Gītā*, the two accounts seem to be similar enough for basic compatibility in the sense that both agree that observable human actions can always be traced to prior causes but beyond this level there is a deeper self that is not revealed in this casual chain, yet this true self, which is not a part of the causal chain, is nevertheless vital for the existence of the causal chain. Thus, for Kant, like the *Gītā*, a surface incompatibilism is resolved by

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<sup>8</sup>. Kant *Critique of Practical Reason* (tr. Werner S. Pluhar, Hackett Publishing), Ak. V, 94.

<sup>9</sup>. *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>10</sup>. *Ibid.*, 69.

recourse to a non-empirical self. For both, moral action is action which takes the true self as the source of normativity in action and takes freedom or liberation as the ability to acausally follow the causation of the true self.

### III. Liberation and responsibility

MacKenzie's next charge is that the attitude of the *Gītā* towards moral responsibility is incompatible with Kant, since the aim of the *Gītā* is to escape entanglement in ordinary morality by becoming a liberated or enlightened individual (*jīvanmukta*). Indeed, we see in *Gītā* 18:17,

The one who has  
no sense of 'mine'  
and whose insight  
is not stained,  
that one is not bound  
and does not kill,  
even when he kills  
these very people.

Thus, an enlightened individual is not constrained by morality in an ordinary way. MacKenzie characterizes this by explaining, "the liberated person no longer creates karma, and therefore does not have responsibility for his or her actions."<sup>11</sup> Of course, the *Gītā* is not wholly antinomian. MacKenzie writes that, "deep knowledge, purity, and austerity are necessary conditions of the renunciation of agency,"<sup>12</sup> hence *Gītā* 18:17 is not suggesting that the enlightened have license to kill indiscriminately. On MacKenzie's interpretation, it only suggests that moral responsibility per se has been left behind because a state of moral virtuosity has been achieved, at which right actions come to the individual effortlessly.

In contrast, Kant distinguishes sharply between a good will and a holy will and holds out no hope of humans ever achieving the latter.<sup>13</sup> Humans may hope to achieve worthiness of happiness in the hereafter, but even this will only be an infinite series of

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<sup>11</sup>. MacKenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

<sup>12</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

incremental moral progress by the soul, never the reaching of the finish line. MacKenzie writes,

Indeed virtue for Kant just is the continual constraint of choice by the will. Virtue must involve *struggle*; the pure will's maxims will always accord with the categorical imperative and so virtue has no place.<sup>14</sup>

Although MacKenzie's account is correct here—Kant and the *Gītā* really do have radically different visions of human potential—I will argue that the locus of this difference of vision is not that the enlightened person of the *Gītā* is amoral from the point of view of the *Gītā* but that Kant and the *Gītā* have very different visions of enlightenment and the realizability of the highest good.

While Śāṅkara and the Advaita school do take the *Gītā* to be basically antinomian (since on their view, only knowledge or *jñāna* is needed for enlightenment), this is not the only possible interpretation of *Gītā* 18:17. Indeed, since innumerable Kantians have drawn up programs that seek to clarify the conditions of just war or morally justifiable capital punishment, *Gītā* 18:17 should not be taken on its own to signal a major break in substance from Kant, though it is quite different in tone. A natural reading of the *Gītā* in light of verses like 18:47 that instruct, "One's own *dharma* however badly done, is a higher good than another's *dharma*, however well done," is that the conventional duties of the caste apply even after liberation (presuming that liberation is attainable in the body). From this point of view, "that one is not bound and does not kill, even when he kills" means that for one who is liberated, actions like morally justified killing do not create any negative karmic consequences and *therefore* they are moral. The *Gītā* is not instructing us on how to escape morality but how to finally fulfill its demands: by doing the right actions (dharmic actions) with the right attitude (a detached attitude). Thus,

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<sup>13</sup> Among other references, cf. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak. V, 122, "Complete adequacy of the will to the moral law, however, is *holiness*, a perfection of which no rational being in the world of sense is capable at any point of time in his existence."

<sup>14</sup> MacKenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

a proper characterization of the dispute between Kant and the *Gītā* is not that one is a human ethical project and the other is a divine super-ethical project, but that the one sees no end to the human project of ethical attainment and the other sees a means by which to achieve the goal of its project.

The deeper disagreement that MacKenzie has brought to the surface here is the disagreement about the very possibility of liberation, or, to pun a little, individual enlightenment *versus* the Age of Enlightenment. As befits an Enlightenment thinker, Kant is radically democratic about human capabilities. As he writes in the first Critique, “the highest philosophy cannot get further than can the guidance that nature bestowed upon the commonest understanding,”<sup>15</sup> and the second Critique is filled with praise for the moral understanding evinced even by common people.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, in classical Indian thought the commonest understanding is considered to be mired in ignorance or *avidyā*. The *Gītā* repeatedly explains that *tamas* (darkness, ignorance, sloth) is one of the three *guṇas*, or basic qualities of material existence. While Kant was of course well acquainted with the existence of ignorance around us, he considered the project of freeing ourselves from ignorance to be essentially historical and political, not individual, since the individual human being can only expect to progress as far as our common human nature will permit us to go, whereas there is no external limit for the collective application of reason by humanity as a whole.<sup>17</sup>

To understand how Kant differs from classical Indian thought in regard to the question of personal liberation as the highest good, we must examine his own concept of the highest good. Kant explains in the second Critique that,

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<sup>15</sup> *Op. cit.*, A 831/B 859.

<sup>16</sup> Eg. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak. V, 153ff.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Kant, “Idea For A Universal History With A Cosmopolitan Purpose” in *On History* (1963) tr. L. W. Beck, “In man (as the only rational creature on earth) those natural capacities which are directed to the use of his reason are to be fully developed only in the race, not in the individual,” p. 13. Works like this and “What is Enlightenment?” show that while Kant certainly focused on the individual as the locus of freedom, he nevertheless accepted the full development of the individual was partly contingent on social arrangements.

Now, inasmuch as virtue and happiness together amount to possession of the highest good in a person, and thereby happiness distributed to persons quite exactly in proportion to their morality (as a person's worth and his worthiness to be happy) amounts also to the *highest good* of a possible world[...].<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the rational will is compelled to hope for a world in which happiness becomes linked to virtue in such a way that it is only by deserving to be happy (that is, by being virtuous) that one can actually be happy. The need for such a link creates for Kant "the antinomy of practical reason," since it is unclear how a connection between virtue and happiness can be secured in such a way as to fulfill reason's demands. As with the antinomy of freedom, he annuls this antinomy by appealing to the noumenal realm. Virtue for Kant is "consciousness of [the] power of a pure practical reason through the deed," hence the exercise of virtue gives us a feeling "similar to bliss" as we experience the exercise of our transcendental freedom.<sup>19</sup> Virtue is what allows us to be actually driven by our autonomous will, rather than being mere agents of heteronomous choice. It allows us to enjoy the freedom from inclinations that is our birthright as rational beings. Accordingly, "this enjoyment is thus analogous, at least in its origin, to the self-sufficiency that can be ascribed to the supreme being."<sup>20</sup> We will return to this particular remark below, but for now we must note that it is only through the hope of practical reason that we can know of this bliss-like state. It is not and cannot be known through speculative reason, and so it is a matter of what Kant calls "pure rational faith."

Returning to the classical Indian context, we see that what Kant has taken for the loftiest flight of practical reason is one of the grounding assumptions of all of the orthodox Vedic schools and even of many of the non-orthodox schools, namely the "law of karma." It is an assumption of the law of karma that certain actions are linked to happiness and others to suffering. However, it is also a central tenet of classical Indian thought that the highest bliss comes from *escaping* the realm of karma and no longer being subject

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<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.*, Ak. V, 110.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 118. The translator's note of Pluhar is particularly helpful here.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

to the link between action and (temporary) happiness. On the other hand, a Kantian must hope that some day happiness becomes linked to virtue and indeed “It is a duty to make the highest good actual to the utmost of our ability.”<sup>21</sup> Kant does claim that there is a subjective need of pure practical reason to believe in God, in order that we may have rational faith that a-law-of-karma-like necessary link between virtue and happiness will come about. This faith, however, must always be faith and not knowledge, since if it were knowledge, it would destroy morality by making all actions motivated merely by instrumental concern with legality.

Here we find a strange convergence of the *Gītā* and Kant. For the *Gītā*, the law of karma just is a basic fact that is widely known about but nevertheless must be escaped from by performing actions without any desire for their fruits. For Kant, the necessary linkage of virtue and happiness is something that cannot be known by speculative reason, since otherwise we would not be able to perform actions out of respect for the moral law rather than a desire for their fruits. In such a situation,

Everything would be sheer hypocrisy; the law would be hated or perhaps even despised, although still complied with for the sake of one’s own advantage. The letter of the law (legality) could be found in our actions, but the spirit of the law could not be found at all in our attitudes (morality) [...].<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the enlightened individual of the *Gītā* would be amoral or merely legally correct for Kant if that individual were by virtue of enlightenment able always to see the consequences of actions through the law of karma and act correctly according to his or her prescribed dharma in order to gain the rewards of such action. *But* since the enlightened individual must always act without any regard or attachment to the fruits of action, this cancels out what for Kant would have been the most dangerously morality annihilating aspects of enlightenment. Although the enlightened individual does not have the moral friction that comes from resisting inclinations, that individual does have

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<sup>21</sup>. *Ibid.*, 143 n.

<sup>22</sup>. *Ibid.*, 152.

to find a source of motivation other than the obvious karmic consequences of the action. Thus, the moral task of enlightenment is done in the realm of attitude, not action. Though MacKenzie is right to say that for Kant “Virtue must involve *struggle*” —an element that is distinctly lacking after an individual is enlightened—still the fact of the enlightened individual’s acting apart from the desire for consequences negates what for Kant would be the most pernicious aspects of universal knowledge.

The remaining disagreement between the two is thus best characterized as a disagreement about the possibility of such moral attainment by a non-holy being. There are still very serious differences between Kant and the *Gītā*, but in this case at least they are led to the same place by alternate paths, a place in which right action is never motivated by the bliss it is sure to create.

#### **IV. Heteronomy and surrender**

MacKenzie’s final criticism of a connection between Kant and the *Gītā* is that the highest path laid out by the *Gītā* is one of surrender to the will of Kṛṣṇa, but this path is ruled out for the Kantian. He explains that in the *Gītā* right knowledge takes the form of command that we must obey:

[F]or one who understands the command, action follows directly. Further, given the views on surrender and agency in the *Gītā*, one would not expect such knowledge in the form of self-legislated commands. Rather, one suspects that in most instances the knowledge which commands action is external, therefore leading to what Kant would term heteronomy. And yet, according to the *Gītā*, it is not through Kantian autonomy, but through renunciation and *surrender* that one finds liberation.<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, there is a case to be made that such Vedic injunctions are not external at all. After all, Kṛṣṇa proclaims in *Gītā* 10:37, “Among the Pandavas, I’m Arjuna, winner of wealth.” On an Advaitan reading of the *Gītā*, we should take this straightforwardly and identify the true self of Arjuna with the cosmic self of Kṛṣṇa. This dovetails nicely with the aforementioned passage in the second Critique where Kant claims that the

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

enjoyment of freedom is “analogous, at least in its origin, to the self-sufficiency that can be ascribed only to the supreme being.” Thus, one interpretation of the *Gītā* would make the path of liberation through identification with Kṛṣṇa no different than the path of following one’s true self as it expresses itself in freedom. Vedic injunctions on this reading are like the advice Kant gives in the Doctrine of Method section of the second Critique—a pragmatic means of training the empirical self to follow the real directives that come from knowledge of the true self.

Of course, an Advaitan reading of this verse is not the only one possible, and many orthodox schools of Indian thought take this verse to be merely analogically expressing Kṛṣṇa’s greatness. So, to robustly refute the charge of heteronomy, we cannot rest on this sect-specific means of escaping the accusations against the *Gītā* but must explore further what it is that autonomy and heteronomy consist of. Kant, for example, explains that even those ancients who took the will of God as their moral starting point were preaching heteronomy if they supposed that the will of God is an object of pleasure for us.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, Kant praises the Christian religion because in his view, “it posits even the proper *incentive* for compliance with [moral law] not in the wished for consequences of this compliance but in the conception of duty alone”.<sup>25</sup> So, for the *Gītā* to escape Kant’s charge of heteronomy, it must be extolling the Vedic injunctions not because they are the means of pleasing the gods and thus obtaining some temporal happiness, but because doing so is one’s duty, apart from all consequences. Of course, a central emphasis of the *Gītā* is that action ought to be undertaken not because of its fruits, but because it is the right action. As we read in *Gītā* 2:47, “motive should never be in the fruits of action.”

To see if the *Gītā*’s admonition to be detached from the consequences of actions is compatible with Kant’s prescription, we need to examine the motivations of each. For

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<sup>24</sup>. *Critique of Practical Reason, op. cit.*, Ak. V, 64.

<sup>25</sup>. *Ibid.*, 129.

Kant, motivation apart desire from consequences comes about from our respect for the moral law, which he calls “the *sole* and also indubitable moral incentive”.<sup>26</sup> Since we gain from pure reason alone a respect for the moral law, it is possible for action originating from duty to be free from desire to obtain any consequence. The *Gītā*, on the other hand, does not speak directly about the moral law or respect for it, so we must look elsewhere for a parallel between what motivates Arjuna to act and the motivation of a Kantian. We find this parallel in the *Gītā*’s account of knowledge as directly motivating action. As MacKenzie explains, the *Gītā* takes it that knowledge alone is sufficiently motivating for the enlightened individual. “[T]he *Gītā*’s account leaves little or no gap between knowledge and action.”<sup>27</sup> It is for this reason Kṛṣṇa spends the bulk of the *Gītā* imparting to Arjuna knowledge of how the world really is, including in its metaphysical aspects.

Unlike the *Gītā*, Kant keeps the knowledge of speculative reason very strictly segregated from the motivated action of practical reason. As we saw, he felt that this separation was necessary in order to make rational faith possible and thus leave room for morally motivated action. At the same time, he also claims that pure practical reason has “primacy” over speculative reason, such that in cases where we cannot know but we are compelled to direct our will in a certain way by pure reason, this takes priority over whatever other epistemic standards might ordinary hold sway. Thus, to the extent that the *Gītā* is claiming that the path to liberation is through knowledge of metaphysical entities like Kṛṣṇa or even the true self, this would be deemed to be out of bounds for Kant. On the other hand, we could reconcile these two systems by specifying that what the *Gītā* is teaching is not “knowledge” in a conventional self but knowledge qua moral motivation. In other words, because the *Gītā*, unlike Kant, links knowledge to action, this knowledge is therefore more like the kind of practical postulation that Kant was willing to allow could go beyond the bounds of speculative knowledge. There is a real difference

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>27</sup> MacKenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

here, but it might be partly mitigated through an adjustment of language on the basis of the principle that practical interests can go where speculative interests dare not.

One way that we might push this parallel between Kant's account of practical reason as motivated by respect for law and the *Gītā*'s account of right action motivated by true knowledge further is by examining Kant's famous declaration that

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more frequently and persistently one's meditation deals with them: *the starry sky above me and the moral law within me.*<sup>28</sup>

For Kant, meditation on the heavens fills one with proper humility regarding one's animality, while reflection on the moral law fills one with a sense of the infinity contained within the personality. The same process is at work in the *Gītā*. Kṛṣṇa clearly fills Arjuna with proper humility concerning his physical self by, among other things, revealing its relative powerlessness among the five causes of action. As MacKenzie points out, this feeling of powerless opens the way to a path of surrender in the *Gītā*. But there is also a way in which Kṛṣṇa reveals the power of the true self to Arjuna. Paradoxically, this occurs through the theophany of Kṛṣṇa's true form in the eleventh chapter of the *Gītā*. As he states in 11:47,

Arjuna,  
in favor to you,  
I showed you this highest form  
through my own *yoga*.

And 11:52,

Even the gods  
are eternally  
wanting to have  
the sacred sight  
of this form.

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<sup>28</sup> *Critique of Practical Reason, op. cit., Ak. V, 161.*

Arjuna learns of his blessedness and worthiness by seeing something that makes him feel terrified and worthless. He experiences something greater than himself which at the same time reveals to him his unique greatness. We can best understand how this is possible in terms of the analytic of the sublime that Kant gives in his third Critique. Kant explains that in an experience of the sublime,

What happens is that our imagination strives to progress toward infinity, while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so the imagination, our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea. Yet this inadequacy itself is the arousal in us of the feeling of that we have within us a supersensible power; and what is absolutely large is not an object of sense, but is the use that judgment makes naturally of certain objects so as to arouse this feeling, and in contrast with that any other use is small. Hence what is to be called sublime is not the object, but the attunement that the intellect gets through a certain presentation that occupies reflective judgment.

Hence [...]: *Sublime is what even to be able to think proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense.*<sup>29</sup>

Kant goes on to explain that, “The feeling that is beyond our ability to attain to an idea that is a law for us is RESPECT.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, the feeling of respect for the moral law which is the basis of moral motivation for Kant is an experience of the sublime. Similarly, by experiencing the sublime grandeur of Kṛṣṇa’s true form Arjuna has an opportunity to realize the magnificence of his own true form: the eternal self of *puruṣa* which is able to take in all of the dazzling forms of Kṛṣṇa. Thus, the path of surrender to Kṛṣṇa is not merely a servile path of self-abnegation but an enlightening path of realization of the true worth of the self, worth that Kant would identify with the moral law and its expression in freedom as a god-like self-sufficiency.

## V. Conclusion

In spite of the many parallels between Kant and the *Gītā* that have been defended here, it is quite plausible to say that even given a greater familiarity with Indian thought, Kant himself would have prejudicially dismissed it as ultimately a heteronomous and slavish devotion to superstitious anthropomorphisms. For example, in the second Critique, he

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<sup>29</sup> Kant *Critique of Judgment* (tr. Werner S. Pluhar, Hackett Publishing), Ak. 250.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

condemns followers of “Mohammed’s paradise or the *theosophists’* and *mystics’* fusion with the deity, each thinker after his own mind,” saying that if these are the product of reason then “it would be just as well to have no reason at all as to surrender it in this way to all sorts of dreams.”<sup>31</sup> Such remarks, however, need to be put into a broader context. In this case, he is condemning these systems on the theory that they operate on the basis of “administering the interest of the inclinations under the sensible principle of happiness,”<sup>32</sup> rather than on the basis of the moral law. As we have seen, such a criticism cannot be leveled against the *Gītā* unless one reads it so that the true self is no longer the source of the norms of action.

Of course, there are also significant areas of difference between Kant and the *Gītā*, such as Kant’s democratic assumption of the prevalence of reason and the *Gītā*’s metaphysical assumption of the working of the law of karma. Moreover, the *Gītā* emphasizes caste specific dharma, rather than anything like a categorical imperative. In spite of this, what is most remarkable is that in many areas in which the two seem to be drifting apart, it is their differences that allow for their ultimate reconciliation. Where Kant assumes that knowledge of karmic consequences would be poisonous to true virtue, the *Gītā* posits action apart from concern for consequences. Where Kant motivates moral action with respect for the moral law, the *Gītā* motivates with knowledge that directly prompts action. Where Kant marvels at the starry sky above us, the *Gītā* marvels at the starry sky within. *Gītā* 15:12,

The brilliance  
which comes from the sun  
lights up the world with no break;  
it is in the moon,  
and in fire;  
recognize that brilliance  
as mine.

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<sup>31</sup>. *Op. cit.*, Ak. V, 120.

<sup>32</sup>. *Ibid.*