

SIMILARITIES BEYOND DIFFERENCES: MILL'S
UTILITARIANISM AND THE CONSEQUENTIALISM OF THE
BHAGAVAD GITA

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Abstract: It is often argued that the Gitā spouses the ideal of nishkām karma i.e. a disinterested performance of one's moral obligations and is inherently incompatible with all kinds of consequentialism. In this paper, I challenge the above interpretation of the Gitā. I argue that even though nishkām karma plays an important role in the assessment of moral motivations in the Gitā, it is certainly not the only factor. On numerous occasions in the Gitā, we see lord Krishna paying serious attention to the worldly consequences and using them to convince Arjuna to fight an eminent war. I use Krishna's insistence on consequences to support my claim that there is an alternative theory of moral motivations in the Gitā, and that this theory is much more sympathetic to utilitarian consequentialism. Accordingly, I conclude that both the Gitā and J. S. Mill have a sophisticated notion of moral agency and that their consequentialism is a mirror image of the same.

To begin with it seems extremely problematic to attribute any kind of consequentialism to the *Bhagavad Gitā*.¹ The Gitā is usually associated with the doctrine of nishkām karma which enunciates a non-attached performance of one's moral obligations (Easwaran, 1985/2007, p. 54).² I intend to discuss the implications of nishkām karma in a moment but for now let me note its two most traditionally

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¹In this paper I will be using Eknath Easwaran's translation of the *Bhagavad Gitā* (Easwaran, 2007/1985). Henceforth as a matter of practice I shall keep the use of italics to minimum and not italicize the frequently used Hindi or Sanskrit terms in this paper.

²Indeed the Gitā has been interpreted differently by different scholars – and to different effects. I wish to note two distinct yet often intermixed streams of thought in this context: spiritual, and political. On the one hand, some scholars (S. Radhakrishnan in particular) have emphasized the spiritual and philosophical intimacy of the Gitā with the Upanishads and compared it with the Kantian notion of duty, arguing that the Gitā is superior to Kant in that it does not simply provide freedom to its moral agent in the noumenal realm – as Kant does, but also in the phenomenal realm (Bayly, 2010, p. 289). On the other hand, many have also argued that the spiritual message of the Gitā cannot be construed in an abstract religious and metaphysical sense, and that it must be translated in the real life of an individual, including her political experiences. This politicized conception of the Gitā came to the front and center of the Indian National Movement in the nineteenth and twentieth century, and was, in its pure form, a source of much inspiration and strength to Mahatma Gandhi; however, opinions differ on its application in the writings of Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Shri Aurobindo (Chakrabarty and Majumdar, 2010, pp. 338-342). Both these interpretations shrug off the value of practical consequences in human affairs. This paper is a modest response to the above omission.

accepted outcomes. First, it is said that the doctrine of nishkām karma unequivocally upholds the sanctity of an individual's intentions and requires her to perform her duties diligently without thinking about the *phala* or fruits of her actions (Radhakrishnan, 1948/2010, p. 151); and so by implication nishkām karma appears to reject the idea of all kinds of profits, rewards and consequences as the motivational ground for an individual's conduct. Secondly, it is also held that the Gitā under the influence of the *Sāṅkhya*, Yoga and Upanishadic traditions of Indian philosophical and religious thoughts takes a metaphysical view of ethical actions and views its moral agent as an individuated soul – or *purusha*, engaged in the process of *samsāra* or worldly attachments, and yet at the same time seeking her spiritual and moral perfection or moksha as well (Mackenzie, 2001, pp. 147-48). Thus in the above sense, the doctrine of nishkām karma – at least on its 'traditional reading'³ - becomes synonymous with an individual's spiritual transcendence of her temporal being.

Now I am not aware if Mill ever directly responded to the doctrine of nishkām karma as developed in the Bhagavad Gitā. However in his writings, *Utilitarianism* in particular, Mill appears to associate the traditional interpretation of nishkām karma that the consequences of an action are immaterial to its moral worth with Immanuel Kant and chides him for the same. Taking note of one aspect of Kant's moral thought, which requires universalizability of all moral principles, Mill writes that "[Kant] fails, almost grotesquely, to show that there would be any contradiction, any logical (not to say physical) impossibility, in the adoption by all rational beings of the most outrageous immoral rules of conduct. All he shows is that the *consequences* of their universal adoption would be such as no one would choose to incur" (Mill, 1861/2002, p. 263). It is not surprising then that Mill believes that the moral worth of an action can only be measured in terms of produced consequences (Donner & Fumerton, 2009, pp. 15-16). As far as the Gitā's metaphysical underpinning of ethics is concerned, it may be difficult again to gather Mill's proper response. But it is obvious that Mill was an empiricist and that he was not terribly fond of unfounded metaphysical speculations. So it should be explicit by now that any comparison of Mill's utilitarianism and consequentialism of the Bhagavad Gitā would require us to engage in fresh theoretical construction and insight. In what follows, I intend to argue that the differences between Mill's thought and the Gitā are all too obvious in terms of their epistemological and methodological convictions and conclusions, but beneath their differences resides a possibility of convergence of their views. I shall employ three kinds of arguments to carry my conclusions. I wish to show in the first place that the traditional reading of nishkām karma captures only one aspect of the Gitā and leaves out some other equally important aspects, and that those aspects take consequences a

³I use the expression 'traditional reading' in a generic sense, placing under its rubric all interpretations that maintain that the Gitā demands an absolute detachment in a moral action. This reading can be associated in varying degree with various interpreters. In its most ideal form it is manifest in the writings of S. Radhakrishnan (Bayly, 2010, pp. 291-292), Eknath Easwaran and Mahatma Gandhi (Chakrabarty and Majumdar, 2010, pp. 351-352). Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Aurobindo Gosh are said to carry a somewhat problematic instances of the same reading (Chakrabarty and Majumdar, 2010, pp. 338-342).

lot more seriously and are largely in agreement with Mill's consequentialism. Secondly, following some eminent Mill scholars such as Wendy Donner, Roger Crisp, and Fred Berger, I shall argue that Mill's concept of self and moral action is much more profound than ordinarily admitted. Indeed I shall show that Mill's conception of self provides adequately for the finer possibilities of social actions that the *Gītā* seeks out to establish. Finally, I shall use my findings to support my view that though Mill and the *Gītā* differ substantially on some fundamental issues, they also share significantly a common conception of human good.

I. The Concept of Self and Moral Action in the *Gītā*

Let me note some key suppositions that the *Gītā* uses time and again to win over its readers. In the first place, the *Gītā* believes that all realities can be divided into two types: the phenomenal and the transcendental (*Gītā* 7: 3-7). The phenomenal reality, according to the *Gītā*, is constituted by an amalgamation of the three *gunas* (elements) and is conditioned *māyā* or pure ignorance (*Gītā* 14: 5-8). The transcendental reality on the other hand consists of the pure spirit or Brahman and exists on its own without any external or material support (*Gītā* 7: 12 & 24-26). Furthermore, the *Gītā* also subdivides the phenomenal reality broadly into two types: the conscious and the unconscious, the *para* and the *apara*, and appears to place all living beings, especially humans, in the first category, and the rest of material existence in the second (*Gītā* 7: 6-9; Radhakrishnan, 2010, p. 461). And finally, the *Gītā* makes an effort to bridge the gap between the phenomenal and transcendental reality by holding that the conscious parts of phenomenal reality or the *jivas* carry with them an elemental approximation of the transcendental reality such that they are capable of realizing Brahman by removing the veil of *māyā* and breaking the yoke of three *gunas* (*Gītā* 8: 3-4). Indeed the above realization of Brahman or the supreme spiritual reality appears to constitute the ultimate goal of all moral actions in the *Gītā*.

Thus understood the moral agent of the *Gītā* turns out to be a composite entity, possessing three *gunas*/elements (Easwaran, 1985/2007, p. 222). These elements are: *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* (*Gītā* 14: 5). It is indeed debatable if these elements can be adequately rendered into English, but we should not be far too off in our characterization if we describe them respectively as purity or pure thought, energy or action, and inertia or total indifference. Each of these elements signifies a particular kind of life and lifestyle and is compatible with a specific kind of moral personality. Moreover though all these elements are found simultaneously in each human being, they cannot operate in equality. That is to say, in order to express itself, an element must overcome the other two. When *sattva* dominates *rajas* and *tamas*, an individual acts in thoughtful manner in accordance with the principles of *dharma*, follows scriptures and respects *rita* or the moral order. And when the *rajas* supersedes *sattva* and *tamas*, one acts in an energetic and passionate way; but such actions may or may not be good depending upon the objects of their pursuit. Unlike a *sattvic person*, a *rajasic person* does not always strive for moral and spiritual goodness – well sometimes she does and sometimes she does not. However, unlike a *tamasic person*, a *rajasic person* is never morally sluggish, idle and indifferent. Note that even though

the three *gunas* are radically different from each other in their nature and character, taken together they constitute the overall existential fiber of human beings (Gitā 14: 5-8). Interestingly the Gitā also maintains that the three *gunas* dominate separately not only in three different kinds of people but sometimes in the same person on different occasions. In other words, it is possible that an individual acts in a *sattvic* manner on one occasion, *rajasic* on another and *tamasic* on the third. Eknath Easwaran remarks: “The same individual will have times when he is bursting with energy and times when inertia descends and paralyzes his will, times when he is thoughtful and other times when he is moving so fast that he never notices those around him. The person is the same; he is simply experiencing the play of *gunas*” (Easwaran, 1985/2007, p. 46).

Accordingly, the Gitā recognizes that different human beings exhibit different moral and spiritual properties on different occasions and that a reasonable evaluation of their conduct must require an adequate appreciation of their mental and emotional states, the difficulties that they face in life and the circumstances that shape their responses (Gitā 14: 11-15). To state it in another way, we have it on the doctrine of *gunas* that our ethical considerations must not simply insist on a perfect moral rule such as the strength of character, which is undoubtedly required by dharma, but also account for the weaknesses that arise out of human nature itself due to the play of *gunas*. And in this sense, the Gitā shows tremendous compassion and care for its moral agents, encouraging them to pursue their perfections and remaining forgiving even when they fail to respond. In the Gitā, we see on numerous occasions that Arjuna remains skeptical and unconvinced by Krishna’s suggestions but he is hardly ever chastised for his weaknesses. Krishna recognizes the depth and dilemma of Arjuna’s soul and seeks out to remove his worries and confusions in a sympathetic way (Gitā 6: 40). He reminds Arjuna of their previous associations and friendships, and encourages him again and again to grasp the true nature of his soul and being. Eknath Easwaran captures the above sympathetic aspect of human perfection in the Gitā thus: “The *gunas* form the basis of the most compassionate account of human nature I have come across in any philosophy or psychology, East or West. They not only explain differences in character; they describe the basic forces of personality and allow the possibility of reshaping ourselves after a higher ideal” (Easwaran, 1985/2007, p. 46).

The higher ideal that Eknath Easwaran is alluding to is explained in the Gitā as the uncovering of true nature of individual self and its relation with the Ultimate spiritual reality or Brahman. But how is it done? Or more precisely how does Arjuna realize his true nature or self and his relation with Brahman? It is precisely in this context that the doctrine of *nishkām karma* unfolds. Krishna tells Arjuna: “You have a right to work, but never to the fruit of work. You should never engage in action for the sake of reward, nor should you long for inaction. Perform work in this world, Arjuna, as a man established within himself – without selfish attachments, and alike in success and defeat. For yoga is perfect evenness of mind” (Gitā 2: 47-48).

The traditional interpretations of the above passage have taken it to mean as an exhortation of a non-attached performance of one’s duties, which it surely implies in some ways. In addition to this, the traditional interpreters have also conflated their

reading as the only authentic representation of the *Gītā*. This has occurred in two main ways: historical, and allegorical. On an historical level, the detached actions performed by an individual are said to have no negative consequences for his karmic cycle. As early as June 15, 1897, Tilak used this justification to make sense of Shivaji's actions in association with Afzal Khan. He argued that the detached Shivaji could not be blamed for his actions because "he murdered Afzal Khan for the good of others..." (Chakrabarty and Majumdar, 2010, p. 340). On an allegorical level, the *Gītā* found its strongest champion in Gandhi. Against the historicity of all moral theaters, Gandhi argued that the primary fight between good and evil, violence and non-violence, has to be waged at the level of the inner self (Sinha, 2010, pp. 310-311). The reasoning behind the historical as well as allegorical position seems to be quite straightforward. They insist that there are two main ways to perform one's duties: an attached way, where an individual wants to do something for the sake of some outcome/reward or *moha*, and an unattached way, when an individual does her duties for the sake of duties alone and not for any selfish interest (Radhakrishnan, 1923/2008, p. 487). The *Gītā*, traditional interpreters claim, approves only an unattached performance of one's duties. On the face of it, we cannot deny that the traditional interpretation looks attractive in more than one way.

First, the traditional reading employs *nishkāma* karma to transcend the barriers imposed by world and its other phenomenal derivatives. The world is a corollary of three *gunas*. The *gunas* themselves are the manifestations of *prakṛiti* (material causation) which is the fundamental force behind creation. As a matter of fact, the *Gītā*, much like the *Sāṃkhya* school of Indian philosophy, maintains that *prakṛiti* starts the process of worldly creation by inducing *puruṣa* (spiritual agent) and luring it under the string of *gunas*. In this metaphysical sense, the *gunas* are said to constitute the genesis of soul's individuation in the form of an ego as well as a mortal being: "The *gunas* constitute the triple cord of bondage. So long as we are subject to them we have to wonder in the circuit of existence. Freedom is deliverance from the *gunas*" (Radhakrishnan, 1923/2008, p. 451). The *nishkāma* karma is essentially meant to help us break this cycle of *gunas*.

An individual's attachment to the consequences, according to the *Gītā*, is another name for her attachment to the *gunas*. More clearly, the things that we desire in life, the goals that we want to achieve, the projects that are so dear to our hearts are all a subtle and sophisticated form of three *gunas*, and that by themselves they have no existential or moral standing. Now the *gunas*, we have noted earlier, spring from *prakṛiti* while she (*prakṛiti*) attracts the *puruṣa* or pure individual soul and starts the process of creation. But neither the *gunas* nor *prakṛiti* is truly real, they both are a shadow-image of Brahman. Likewise the captivated *puruṣa* or soul lacks true reality and certitude. For its existential import, *puruṣa* too finally depends upon the Brahman. Indeed Krishna raises the stakes in the *Gītā*: "whosoever realizes the true nature of Puruṣa, Prakṛiti, and the *Gunas*, whatever path he or she may follow, is not born again" (*Gītā* 13: 23). A withdrawal or *nivṛitti* from the worldly attachments and also from the consequences of one's actions is a necessary first step towards the realization of the Brahman (Radhakrishnan, 1923/2008, pp. 487-489).

Next, the Gitā's call for a non-attached performance of one's duties by overcoming the consequentialist considerations appears to gravitate around its unconditional theism. The Gitā believes in the existence of a loving god, but unlike some other theistic conceptions of god, the god that the Gitā champions is an integral part of the material world – not in the sense of an actual participant but in the sense of a witness (Gitā 7: 12-15). Moreover, the Gitā depicts a truly human god with magnificent divine characteristics (Gitā 7: 8-9). Krishna approaches Arjuna as a *sakhā* or friend, literally (Gitā 2: 10-13 & 11: 41-42)). It may be puzzling to many how the creator of the universe can be friends with us mortals in any real and potent sense; but this is not so for the Gitā (Gitā 11: 41-42). The *Atman* and *Brahman*, the self and God, according to the *Advait Vedantins* are the two sides of the same reality and their difference is caused by *māyā*. The Gitā represents the same *Advaitic* spirituality and philosophy. Radhakrishnan writes: "A man bound up with gunas is a *jivatma*, or individual soul; when freed from them, he is *paramātma*, or supreme soul" (Radhakrishnan, 1923/2008, p. 470).

In order to realize the *paramātmāhood* or one's true spiritual nature a *jiva* must realize the limits of phenomenal world (Gitā 2: 14-15). In other words, as an individual I must understand that even though I am born with capacities to work, I have no ultimate control over the consequences (Gitā 3: 10-12). More often than not this lack of control over consequences causes problems in the utilitarian ethics. But in the Gitā, under the law of karma, lord Krishna himself assumes the responsibility of determining the outcomes of an individual's actions. He categorically states that if an individual follows her dharma and acts according to her *svabhāva* (nature), she will descend to heaven and realize a pure communion with Brahman (Gitā 2: 31-33, 3: 35), or *moksha*. Indeed the traditional interpreters of the Gitā take the above ideal seriously and view all moral actions in the same spiritual context. However their reading of the Gitā can be challenged. D. C. Mathur writes:

...It is to be recognized that viewing every moral action in the context of the ultimate end of Moksha undermines the autonomy of moral action and subordinates it to a metaphysical precommitment. In such a case concrete situations cannot be evaluated and assessed in terms of the problems they arise but are lifted out of their concrete contexts into the haze of metaphysical doctrines. This can be used to justify all kinds of status quo and obscurantist actions (Mathur, 1974, p. 35).

To some extent, I share Mathur's concerns. He is right in suggesting that too much preoccupation with metaphysical precommitments can easily undermine the autonomy of an individual's moral actions. Furthermore, it is equally true that such precommitments can sometimes be used to justify oppressing social structures that have no proper justification on rational grounds. In this context, we are easily reminded of the degeneration of the Gitā's ideal of *svabhāva* (acting according to one's nature) and *svadharma* (acting according to one's station in society) into a corrupt caste system in Indian society. It is my thinking, however, that the Gitā forwards a series of metaphysical principles, which can help us grapple with the dynamic nature of the world that we live in and the realities that surround us. To state

this more clearly, metaphysical precommitments cannot detain an individual beyond a certain point unless she turns them into personal prejudices. So I think that it should be possible to challenge the traditional reading of nishkām karma without raising issues with the sanctity of *moksha* or diminishing one's trust in a loving god. I wish to note two arguments to the same effect.

In the chapter two of the *Gītā*, just before laying down the doctrine of nishkām karma, Krishna offers a strong consequentialist argument to convince Arjuna to follow his dharma as a warrior and to fight the good fight if he wants to avoid the consequences that would ensue due to his failure to do his duty. He says: "The story of your dishonor will be repeated endlessly: and for a man of honor, dishonor is worse than death. These brave warriors will think you have withdrawn from battle out of fear, and those who formerly esteem you will treat you with disrespect. Your enemies will ridicule your strength and say things that should not be said. What could be more painful than this?" (*Gītā* 2: 34-36). In addition Krishna also reminds Arjuna of a potentially win-win situation if he fights the war: "Death means the attainment of heaven; victory means the enjoyment of the earth. Therefore, rise up, Arjuna, resolved to fight!" (*Gītā* 2: 37). These passages show that Krishna is not shy of employing consequentialist considerations if they can help him motivate Arjuna to assume his moral and religious responsibilities.

Another argument which has a significant consequentialistic overtones and which runs through entire *Gītā* is expressed in the form of a continuous emphasis on the welfare of all beings. Or to put this thought in the utilitarian terminology the greatest happiness of the greatest number of sentient beings appears to be the stated ideal of the *Gītā* – both on the empirical as well as transcendental level. Additionally, the *Gītā* goes a step further than the utilitarians and removes the possibility of any real clash of interests between two good people by pointing out that all such clashes emerge out of a selfish consciousness and that they have no place in an individual's refined ethical conduct: "They live in wisdom who see themselves in all and all in themselves, who have renounced every selfish desire and sense craving tormenting the heart" (*Gītā* 2: 55). Thus according to the *Gītā*, an individual's selfish attachments diminish her soul and place it the spell of *māyā* and three gunas. Finally, such attachments constitute a serious obstacle to an individual's pursuit of *moksha*.

If my interpretation of the *Gītā* is plausible then it would follow that the *Gītā* does not ignore the value of consequences in ethical considerations. Instead it puts them on a firmer foundation by guarding against the attachments that often frustrate the practice of an individual's moral principles: "Throughout the 16th – 19th centuries,...Indian philosophers continued to engage with the *Gītā*. What is certainly very clear is that, notwithstanding the popular notion of the *Gītā* as a text that above all embodies the idea of nishkām karma, it was well understood that the *Gītā* lent itself to more complex interpretations".⁴ And so it may no longer be persuasive to say that that the doctrine of nishkām karma relieves us completely of all consequential considerations – indeed that would be a thin characterization of both karma yoga and consequentialism. A nishkām karma yogi is bound to be concerned with the outcomes

⁴Anonymous referee, *Journal of East-West Thought*.

of her actions as long as she occupies a physical body and goes through the process of human life. But she approaches these consequences in the spirit of peace, equanimity, fellowship and grace. Consequences matter to her, like they matter to others, but they do not bother her, the way they bother others. D. C. Mathur rightly observes: “Therefore a more sensible and fruitful interpretation of nishkām karma would be to hold that while we should be firmly committed to achieve the goal after a rational assessment of the situation, we should not be so egoistically involved in the issue as to calculate what, in terms of pleasure or pain, prosperity or otherwise, will be its likely effect on our personal fortunes” (Mathur, 1974, p. 38).

II. Mill and His Utilitarian Morality

In the previous section, I argued that though the three gunas give an expression to an individual’s natural propensities, they fail to capture her spiritual and moral being. According to the Gitā, the highest spiritual and moral perfections can only be obtained by transcending the barriers of the natural sphere (Gitā 13: 22-23). Unlike the Gitā, Mill does not draw any such distinctions between an individual’s natural and moral ends (Mill, 1861/2002, p. 234). He believes that all such distinctions make an arbitrary division between an individual’s happiness and her moral pursuits, and leave us with a one-sided view human nature and personality (Mill, 1861/2002, pp. 235-236). Moreover by removing the consequences from the realm of our ethical considerations, they make our actions empty – lacking in rational justification and emotional fulfillment. As a moral agent, I am not allowed to calculate the possible outcomes of my actions, no matter how hard I strive for a good moral conduct. I must prioritize the normative aspects of my being over all natural considerations. Mill questions this call for prioritization of one aspect over the other and contends that upon examination the so called moral ends turn out to be nothing more than a disguised form of our natural ends. Accordingly, for Mill, the pursuit of happiness alone constitutes the crucial vista of utilitarian self and morality:

The creed which accepts the foundation of morals ‘utility’ or the ‘greatest happiness principle’ holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to promote produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure” (Mill, 1861/2002, p. 239).

Mill is laying down two most fundamental requirements of the utilitarian morality. First, Mill recognizes that human beings have an inherent propensity for happiness and an inherent aversion for pain. That is to say, they like the experiences which are pleasurable and dislike the experiences which are painful. Mill also believes that pleasure is intrinsically good and pain intrinsically bad and that our moral principles ought to confirm to this truth. Secondly, even though Mill appears to emphasize pleasure and pain as two moral categories, he is not a straight forward hedonist. It is almost a settled fact in Mill scholarship that Mill’s insistence on pleasure and pain is much more refined than the known shades of hedonism (Crisp, 1997/2006, pp. 26-28). Unlike a total hedonist, Mill is not overly preoccupied with an individual’s personal

gratifications of pleasure and avoidance of pain. He holds that on moral grounds an individual must be able to rise above her personal considerations of pleasure and pain and act in favor of the maximization of overall utility (Mill, 1861/2002, pp. 244-245). But this moral obligation to the maximization of utility raises additional questions: Why should I desire happiness and not some other moral good? And why should I act in favor of the greater utility and not my own interests? Or why should I sacrifice my happiness for the happiness of others? Mill has no satisfactory answer to the above questions within the framework of utilitarianism – never mind his most extravagant argument that since we desire happiness, it becomes desirable (Moore, 1903/2005, pp. 67-69). This gap in argumentation has caused much difficulty to Mill's interpreters, and some have even gone on to suggest that "Mill is after all an intuitionist" (Crisp, 1997/2006, p. 82) and that "the debate between him and his opponents was ultimately about not intuitionism itself but which intuitions we should accept" (Crisp, 1997/2006, p. 83).

Other attempts have also been made to bridge the distance between Mill's idea of general human welfare and an individual's selfish pursuits, which utilitarian moral theory appears to entail at first glance. It has been suggested, for instance, that Mill's theoretical-moral framework has effective ethical mechanisms to deal with such selfish deviations. Indeed in his *Utilitarianism* as well as other works, Mill puts an extraordinary weight on the social elements of human life (Mill, 1861/2002, p. 287). He argues that these elements are found in virtually every human being who is brought up under right conditions and that they can be developed through one's associations with other human beings. These elements include an individual's sense of fellowship and sympathy with other fellow beings, her strength of character and integrity, and finally her commitment to virtues and common good. He remarks: "Genuine private affections and a sincere interest in the public good are possible, even though in unequal degrees, to every rightly brought up human being. In a world in which there is so much to interest, so much to enjoy, and so much also to correct and improve, everyone who has this moderate amount of moral and intellectual requisites is capable of an existence which may be called enviable" (Mill, 1861/2002, p. 43). In short, Mill seems convinced that it is possible to cultivate the qualities that are required to synch the difference between an individual's public and private welfare.

In her book *The Liberal Self: John Stuart Mill's Moral and Political Philosophy*, Wendy Donner has argued that there are three aspects to Mill's idea of human development and that their proper understanding and appreciation is essential to resolving the difference between an individual's personal welfare and her commitment to overall social good. These aspects are: affective, intellectual and moral. Affective development is the most fundamental kind of development. It deals with the development of an individual's feelings, emotions and other psychological qualities. Affective development starts taking shape very early on in one's life and matures with time. Moreover, affective development helps us acquire the capacities that render an experience pleasant or unpleasant, and desirable or undesirable, on the most fundamental lever of her existence, without any explicit cognitive or moral intervention. Donner writes: "Affective development enlarges the feelings and

generally teaches students to respond emotionally to appropriate objects” (Donner, 1991, p. 97).

Intellectual development is primarily concerned with the improvement of mental capacities of an individual. It sharpens her cognitive capacities for abstract thinking and enhances her understanding of theoretically complex matters requiring serious reasoning and deliberation. On a more accessible level, intellectual development provides us with complex cognitive tools that are required in the differentiation of various kinds of pleasures, or more specifically in the separation of qualitative pleasures from quantitative pleasures. Roger Crisp elucidates this issue thus: “Mill’s utilitarianism is intended partly as a guide to how to live. Living involves making choices, often between one individual instance of a kind of pleasure and an instance of another kind” (Crisp, 1997/2006, p. 39). Moreover, the two kinds of pleasures are often laced together and hard to distinguish. Hence, one must possess higher intellectual orientations to determine the precise content of each possibility and experience in life.

Moral development teaches us to take pleasure in the good and well-being of others (Donner, 1991, p. 112). A morally cultivated individual looks at her desires and pursuits from an educated standpoint and in the totality of their social context. She reflects a spontaneous inclination to contribute to the welfare of other beings and is always ready to help those who need her help. In addition, she also exhibits genuine propensities for fellowship and nobility, such that her conduct remains in agreement with social virtues and inspires confidence among others, by motivating them to act in a like manner. Fred Berger sums up this aspect of Mill’s thought succinctly: “Mill held that it is a part of human nature that we sympathize with others – take pleasure in their pleasure and feel pain at the thought of their pain” (Berger, 1984, p. 19).

If Fred Berger’s characterization of Mill’s thought is correct – and I think that it is, then Mill reaches very close to the concept of moral action propounded in the *Gītā* and some other Hindu texts as well. The *Gītā* explicitly holds that an individual who works for the welfare of other beings demonstrates the qualities of a *sattvic* moral agent and is dear to God (*Gītā* 3: 19-20). In the next section, I will argue that Mill’s consequentialism must be understood in the light of his overall moral thought and that his idea of moral agency constitutes the core of his consequentialism.

III. Consequentialism in Mill and the *Gītā*

Consequentialism, as a theory of moral evaluation of an individual’s conduct, maintains that the normative properties that make an action morally right or wrong, desirable or undesirable, are the functions of the consequences that the performed action accrues. That is to say, if the consequences of an action are good, the action is right, and if the consequences are bad, the action is held wrong. In the Western moral tradition, consequentialism has often been contrasted with deontology, which claims that the normative properties which make an action desirable or undesirable, right or wrong depend exclusively upon the intentional state of the moral agent (Kant, 2001, 3:393, 4:401, and 4:414). Accordingly, deontology claims that if the motivation leading to the performance of an action is good, the action is right; and if the

motivation is questionable, the action is wrong. Mill is a consequentialist in the above sense of the term.

However in recent years, we have seen that the Mill scholars are extremely divided on the proper characterization of Mill's consequentialism. Specifically, they draw a distinction between two kinds of consequentialism, act-consequentialism and rule-consequentialism, and differ on Mill's theoretical position on the above issue. I shall use Wendy Donner's characterization of the act and rule utilitarianism to advance my argument in this context. In her recently co-authored work *Mill* she writes:

Act-utilitarians claim that we decide what is morally right or wrong by examining the consequences of performing a particular act in a particular situation or set of circumstances. This employs a case-by-case methodology to determine right action and moral obligation....Rule-utilitarians claim that moral agents perform or fulfill their obligations by following general moral rules, and these rules are themselves justified moral rules (Donner & Fumerton, 2009, pp. 45-46).

The act-utilitarian interpretations of Mill rely substantially on his unqualified emphasis on the principle of utility. The principle of utility, they contend, is the only legitimate guide of moral action in Mill's thought and that if a moral agent wants to stay true to Mill's original vision then she must always perform her actions in such a way that they lead to the best possible maximization of general happiness. Note that the act-utilitarians are not necessarily opposed to all moral rules under all circumstances. On the contrary, they agree that sometimes following a moral rule can be the safest way to maximize general happiness and that on all such occasions the moral rules should be followed, they maintain. Indeed the act-utilitarians are very cognizant of Mill approval of the secondary principles of moral conduct, along with his principle of utility. So their opposition to the moral rules has to be seen not as a total rejection of all moral rules but the *inviolable sanctity* of such rules only. Simply put, an act utilitarian is happy to follow a moral rule if it serves her moral purpose, that is, maximization of utility, and equally happy to abandon such rules if they do not serve her moral goal. Richard Fumerton associates Mill with the act-utilitarians in the following manner: "[Mill] doesn't think rightness and wrongness are *defined* by rules. Rather he thinks that rightness and wrongness are a function of long-term consequences of individual acts in particular settings" (Donner & Fumerton, 2009, p. 190).

The rule-utilitarians are critical of the case-by-case approach moral deliberation adopted by the act-utilitarians and argue that such deliberations will in the long run undermine, not increase, the prospects of utility. They contend that in absence of established moral rules or conventions, a moral agent will face an uphill deliberative task while making her decisions. She will have no moral reference point that she can internalize in her day to day life. Moreover, the act-utilitarians do not help the situation by saying that such an agent can follow moral rules as long as they do not compromise the maximization of utility. On the one hand, such prescriptions intensify an individual's deliberative confusions; and on the other hand, they also weaken her

trust in the moral rules she is supposed to follow. In addition, the rule-utilitarians also remind us that such prescriptions regarding ad-hoc rule following are not in the spirit of Mill's moral theory. They insert that Mill maintains that our social and moral principles do not arise in vacuum. Such principles have a context. They emerge after years of toil and experimentation, trial and error, and as such they deserve to be respected. Mill writes in Blakey's *History of Moral Science*:

The real character of any man's ethical system depends not on his first and fundamental principle, which is of necessity so general as to be rarely susceptible of an immediate application to practice, but upon the nature of those secondary and intermediate maxims, *vera illa media axiomata*, in which, as Bacon observes, real wisdom resides" (Mill cited in Crisp, 1997/2006, p. 10).

Some commentators have also tried to bolster the rule-utilitarian interpretations of Mill by alluding to Mill's discussion of the arts of life (Donner & Fumerton, 2009, pp. 36-45). They argue that there are three aspects to Mill's arts of life, namely, Morality, Prudence or Policy, and Aesthetics. Each of these aspects reflects a different kind of priority in life and should not be allowed to meddle with other. It is also suggested that Mill draws clear limits to moral actions and considerations and that the act-utilitarians are guilty of violating those limits by requiring their moral agents to always promote utility, no matter what the circumstances. For instance, it is held that the aesthetic experience of watching a beautiful painting has some uniqueness attached to it and that the act-utilitarians are wrong in insisting on the possible conversion of all such experiences in the realm of morality. However, the difficulty with this interpretation is that it takes Mill's distinct characterization of three domains of arts of life, turns them into separate domains, and treats each of them as sacred in itself such that no exchange is allowed among them. And Mill is partly to be blamed for this interpretive confusion. On one occasion he appears to expound the distinct autonomous nature of these domains; but on another occasion he appears to quickly reinforce the overall supremacy of the utilitarian principle. And on both occasions he fails to draw a clear line of difference in his respective positions and to explain why that is so. This omission has caused tension in Mill's interpretation. Roger Crisp remarks:

Mill believes that the only valuable thing in the world is happiness or pleasure (this is part of the point of chapter 4 of *Utilitarianism*), and he is thus forced to conclude that practical disputes in the department of 'Aesthetics' are ultimately to be resolved in terms of human happiness, rather than purely aesthetic values such as beauty. This reductive welfarism also results in his distinctions between departments in the 'Arts of Life' appearing somewhat vague and artificial (Crisp, 1997/2006, p. 122).

Both the act-utilitarian and rule-utilitarian interpretations of Mill, I think, capture two different aspects of his moral thought. Neither of them provides us with a satisfactory account of his views nor his position on consequentialism. To be sure, Mill's moral

thought appears to have affinities with the act as well as the rule utilitarianism, without being susceptible to their shortcomings. Unlike the act-utilitarians, Mill does not seem easily ready to dispense with the established moral rules or social sanctity associated with them. Against the rule-utilitarians, Mill holds that the secondary principles of morality are just that, secondary, and that they must not be conflated to another level.

It seems to me that we cannot quite resolve the questions concerning the precise nature of Mill's consequentialism without fully accounting for the conception of his moral agent or appropriator of the consequences. Recall that I have argued earlier, along with Wendy Donner and Fred Berger, that Mill develops a rich and profound conception of a moral agent. His moral agent truly recognizes the value and sanctity of human life and remains committed to promoting the welfare of all sentient beings (Mill, 1861/2002, p. 245). This promotion of the welfare others and a sense of sympathy/empathy with others is critical to Mill's theory of moral development. By implication then Mill's moral agent has some conventional moral rules deposited in her heart – including, thou shall not kill or lie; and yet it can be said on legitimate grounds that she should be able to rise to the occasion when faced with horrific consequences (Mill, 1861/2002, pp. 253-259). In other words, Mill's moral agent is neither completely rule oriented nor has a rigid case-by-case approach to her decision making. She understands the implications of both the approaches, remains open to other possibilities too, and thereby adopts a very prudential approach in her decision-making. Hence, my suggestion that we categorize Mill's moral theory not as an act consequentialism or rule consequentialism but as a form of prudential-consequentialism.

Keeping Mill's prudential consequentialism in mind, we can now proceed with our enquiry regarding the Bhagavad Gitā's consequentialistic implications. In the first chapter of the Gitā, Arjuna makes a series of arguments to avoid the looming war. He tells lord Krishna, among other things, that “the sons of Dhritarashtra are related to us; therefore, we should not kill them. How can we gain happiness by killing members of own family?” (Gitā 1: 37). In the verse 42 of the same chapter, we also find Arjuna proclaiming that the war will lead to social chaos. Indeed Arjuna is convinced that war will cause a destruction of family values and disruption in the spiritual evolution of the society; and so he wants to avoid it. Both these arguments have an explicit consequentialistic tenor: Arjuna does not want to fight the war because he wants to avoid the unpleasant consequences that would follow from his hostile engagement. Also bear in mind that I have shown earlier that Krishna himself opens the second chapter of the Gitā by offering some purely consequentialistic arguments to sway Arjuna in favor of fighting the war. Thus we see that the Gitā and Mill agree on the role of consequences in our moral considerations in a variety of way.

In closing, I wish to bring out the two main implications of the above agreement between the Gita and Mill. First, the Gitā as well Mill require an absolute impartiality from their moral agent, and they both contend that a moral agent must not be impeded by her narrow personal interests, attachments and belongings. Utility requires the maximization of the general happiness or public welfare and this goal can only be achieved by overcoming one's personal inclinations and interests (Mill, 1861/2002, p.

265). Similarly lord Krishna implores Arjuna that the whole world is imprisoned in the selfish action, but he must act selflessly, without any thought of personal profit (Gitā 3: 9). Krishna asks Arjuna to overcome his emotional ripples and become a witness of his actions. In other words, the Gitā and Mill reach similar conclusions from different standpoints. Needless to say, that the Gitā has an inbuilt ontological opposition to the natural world and so its call for the suspension of selfish attachments or gunas is theoretically inspired. On the contrary, Mill originally defends his theory of utility on experiential and psychological grounds. Later on he also exhorts his moral agent to transcend experiential conditions through refined self-development, and fellowship with others, and this might be the reason why some interpreters, including Roger Crisp, have called him “an intuitionist” (Crisp, 1997/2006, p. 82).

Secondly, the Gitā and Mill share a common conception of moral good. They both agree that different individuals can partake in a shared ideal moral good and develop their consequentialism accordingly. The Gitā believes that the protection of dharma and realization of *moksha* constitute the ultimate moral good and that every human person can engage in the pursuit of these goods; and in the case of Mill this moral good is constituted largely by utility. Despite the above spiritual and epistemological differences, they both expound a genuine possibility of cooperation with other fellow beings, and make room for the construction of mutual moral and social projects. Their conception of moral good can be contrasted with deontology which upholds that each moral agent must individually construct her moral good without any social support.

Conclusion

In this paper I have reconstructed the areas of possible moral convergence between the Gitā and Mill. I have argued that both of them expound a sophisticated version of consequentialism, i.e. prudential consequentialism. That is to say even though they pay serious attention to the involved consequences, they do not overlook other important social goods and considerations. Next, I contend that the idea of moral agency is crucial to understanding the moral thought of Mill and the Gitā as well. Finally, I have also shown that, like Mill, the Gitā takes seriously the experiential world and the consequences associated with human conduct, but reminds us at the same time that we are capable of transcending them and that we must do so as well.

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