AGENCY, AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THEISM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE HINDU RELIGIOUS TEXT *ŚRĪMADBHAGAVADGĪTĀ*

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Abstract: According to Benedictus de Spinoza (1632-1677), the idea of God and free will are logically incompatible, whereas Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) does not find them incompatible. God in Spinoza is impersonal, though determinism is complete. This 'divine determinism' will be an ideal position for any theologian from a theistic religion who believes in a personal God. And here lies the significance of the ancient religious text Śrīmadbhagavadgītā (Gītā). Gītā presents a fully deterministic worldview in which the Omniscient, Omnipresent, and all-good God controls, regulates, and predetermines everything. In this world, completely determined and regulated by Almighty God, Gītā affirms the self's full autonomy and the agent's total freedom. God here is personal, and 'divine determinism' is also total. How autonomy and free agency can exist in a completely God-regulated world has long perplexed the world's religions and their theologians. Gītā's resolution of this problem is its unique gift to them. Because the Gītā addresses this issue philosophically and rationally, other world religions and their theologians may adopt its treatment and the solutions it offers.

Śrīmadbhagavadgītā (Song of the God, or the Divine Song) is one of the foremost Hindu scriptures. It contains the essence of the Upaniṣads' teachings. In fact, the text's colophon considers it an *Upaniṣad*. Keith argues that the Gītā was originally a Śvetāśvatara-type Upaniṣad. Gītā synthesizes the various elements of Hindu thought, making it acceptable to all Hindus, regardless of creed or sect. It harmonizes Vedic philosophy of action with Upanisadic renunciation, Upanisadic Absolutism with Vaiṣṇava theism, and Vedantic or *Sāṁkhya* metaphysics with the Ethics of Yoga or action. Gītā is written in a dialogical form. It consists of 700 verses divided into eighteen chapters. The text is part of the *Mahābhārata*, the world's longest epic poem.

It appears in the sixth book of the Mahābhārata, the Bhīśmaparva, as chapters 23 to 40. As stated, Gītā comprises 700 verses divided into eighteen chapters. Each chapter is called a specific Yoga. The colophon assertively states that the text is not only a *Brahmavīdyā* but also a *Yogaśāstra*. Each chapter is a specific kind of Yoga. The eighteen chapters or Yogas of the Gītā are-

Arjuna vīṣāda Yoga

1. *Sāṁkhyayoga*
2. *Karmayoga*
3. *Jňānakarmasaṁnyās yoga*
4. *Karmasaṁnyāsa yoga*
5. *Ātmasaṁyamayoga*
6. *Jňānavijňānayoga*
7. *Akṣarabrahmayoga*
8. *Rājavidyārājagūhyayoga*

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9. *Vibhūtiyoga*
10. *Viśvarūpadarśanayoga*
11. *Bhaktiyoga*
12. *Kṣetrakṣetrajñavibhāga yoga*
13. *Guṇatrayavibhāgayoga*
14. *Puruṣottama yoga*
15. *Daivāsursaṁpadvībhāga yoga*
16. *Śraddhātrayavibhāgayoga*
17. *Mokṣasaṁnyāsayoga*

The Bhagavad Gita is the most translated text among Hindus. The first European translation was by Charles Wilkins, whose English version was published in 1785 with an introduction by Warren Hastings. This English translation was later translated into French, German, Russian, and Greek. The French translation came in 1787, and the German translation in 1802. These translations were not from the original but from Wilkins' translation. August Wilhelm Schlegel made the most significant contribution by publishing a Latin translation of the Bhagavadgītā alongside the original Sanskrit text. This work was a major resource for scholars such as Hegel and Humboldt. The first German translation of the *Gītā* from the original Sanskrit came in 1834. Similarly, Émile Burnouf produced the first French translation of the original Sanskrit in 1861.

The credit for popularizing Bhagavadgītā among the masses goes to the Vedāntins; conversely, we may say that the credit for popularizing Vedānta among the masses goes to *Bhagavadgītā*. *Bhagavadgītā* is one of the foundational texts of Vedānta- *prasthānatrayī*-the triple canons of Vedānta, the other two being the *Upaniṣads* and the *Brahmasūtra*. Traditional scholars of Vedānta believe that all three texts carry the same teaching. The question is, what is that teaching? In answer to the above question, we have various schools of Vedānta. These schools present Vedānta's teaching in various ways. Hence, we have various interpretations of *the Bhagavad Gītā*. Three readings of the text deserve mention and discussion. These are the absolutistic reading, the theistic reading, and the third, based on human action, which we will discuss specifically in this lecture. Interestingly, most of the commentators agree that Gītā carries all three types of teaching- Jñānayoga, *Bhaktiyoga,* and *Karmayoga*. The dispute is regarding emphasis and primacy.

Saṁkarācārya and his followers, the Advaita Vedāntins, present an absolutistic, non-dual reading of the Bhagavadgītā. More than thirty-nine commentaries have been written on the Bhagavadgītā in light of Advaita Vedānta, including Śaṁkara's monumental commentary, the earliest available commentary on the text, and commentaries by *Ānandagirī, Madhusūdana Sarasvati, Dhanpati Sūri,* and *Anubhūtisvarūpa*. The central doctrine of Advaita Vedānta is that only one non-dual reality exists: God (Brahman). God is indeterminate and impersonal. All that appears apart from God is illusory. The world of manifoldness is false. The individual soul (*Jīva*) is nothing but God itself.

All the Advaitins follow Śaṁkara's interpretation that Gītā presents the essence of the Vedās, which talk about twofold Dharma- *Pravṛtti* and *Nivṛtti*, Action and Renunciation, *Karmayoga* and *Jñānayoga*. *Karmayoga* purifies the mind, preparing us for *Jñāna*. Only through Jñāna can one attain liberation. Karma (action) and *Jñāna* (knowledge) cannot go together. *Mokṣa* is a state of self, so it has to be realized, not obtained. It is not an event, an effect, a product, or a modification; hence, it cannot be attained through Karma or actions. Only through knowledge or *Jñāna* can one get liberation- *Ṛte jñānānna muktiḥ*, *jñānādeva tu kaivalyam*. *Ānandagirī* says that the relation between *Karmaniṣṭhā* and *Jñānaniṣṭhā* is that of means and end- *Upāya-upeyabhāva*. *Jñānaniṣṭhā* is the immediate cause of *Mokṣa*; *Karmaniṣṭhā* is the cause of *Jñānaniṣṭhā*. *Ānandagirī* also indicates that Gītā consists of three sections- Karmakāṇḍa, *Upāsanākāṇḍa,* and *Jñānakāṇḍa*. *Madhusūdana Sarsvati* later explicates this in his *Gūḍhārthadīpikā*. He says that the Vedās Gītā comprises three sections: Karmakāṇḍa,

Upāsanākāṇḍa (Bhaktikāṇḍa), and Jñānakāṇḍa. Each section (*Kāṇḍa*) consists of six chapters. Because of the trenchant opposition between Karma (action) and Jñāna (knowledge), Bhakti, or Upāsanā, is *placed* between the two. Bhakti removes and reconciles this opposition between *Karma* and *Jñāna*. The main theme and subject matter of Gītā is the explanation of the major statement of the Upaniṣad- *Tattvamasi*. The first six chapters illustrate the nature of *tvam* (Jīva), the next six chapters discuss *tat* (God), and the last six chapters explain the identity of *tat* and *tvam*. The individual self is God itself- *Jīva* is the Brahman- this is the ultimate principle of the Gītā and Vedānta.

The theistic Vedāntins, or Vaiṣṇavas, do not accept Śaṁkara's advaitic interpretation. They believe that God is not indeterminate or impersonal. God is personal. He is omniscient, omnipotent, and all-loving. He is the principle of creation, preservation, and dissolution. God has created this universe, so this beautiful world of pluralities and manifoldness cannot be *Māyā* or illusory as the Advaitins think. The world is real, and so are the individual souls. An individual soul cannot be the Brahman. Man is man, and God is God. Man cannot be God. Man's destiny is to realize one's 'fallen existence' and strive to unite with the Divine. Bhakti, or intense love towards God (God is here personal; personal in the full sense, he is *Viṣṇu* or *Kṛṣṇa*) is the only means by which one can join the city of God and be united with the all-mighty, all-loving God. All Vaiṣṇava Vedāntins share this view. They hold that *Bhakti* is the principal teaching of Vedānta. *Bhaktiyoga* is the main purport of the *Bhagavadgītā*.

The earliest text written in the light of the theistic Vedānta on the Bhagavadgītā is *Gītārthasaṁgraha* by *Yāmunācārya*, the teacher of *Rāmānujācārya*. We find references to commentaries by *Bhāṣkarācārya* and *Yādavaprakāśa,* which have not yet been made available. *Gītārthasaṁgraha* may be called a concise gloss on *Gītā* consisting of just 32 verses. The gist of each of eighteen chapters has been presented in eighteen verses; the first four verses introduce the theme, and the last ten verses present the import of the text. In the very beginning, *Yāmuna* makes clear that the ultimate reality of the Gītā is not one non-dual, indeterminate Brahman of Śaṁkara but the Supreme Lord, the personal God, *Nārāyaṇa*. God can be approached not by *Karmayoga* (way of action) or *Jñānayoga* (way of knowledge) but only by *Bhaktiyoga* (way of devotion). *Karmayoga* leads to *Jñānayoga* and *Jñānayoga* to *Bhaktiyoga*. Here, Yoga means Upāya (means), as Vedāntadeśika clarifies in his commentary on *Gītārthasaṁgraharakṣā*. *Rāmānuja* further explicates this thought in his famous commentary, the Gītābhāṣya, and argues that the Gītā is primarily a text of ultimate devotion – Bhakti. Bhakti is the main teaching of Gītā, not *Karma* (action) and *Jñāna* (knowledge). *Karma* and *Jñāna* are subordinate to Bhakti, through which we can attain our final end. *Karma* leads to *Jñāna,* and *Karma* and *Jñāna* both lead to *Bhakti*. Thus, the ultimate end, as *Rāmānuja* states in his preface, can be achieved only through bhakti accompanied by Jñāna-karma. Vedāntadeśika, in his commentary on Rāmānuja's *Gītābhāṣya* called *Tātparyacandrikā,* showed that Yāmuna's *Gītārthasaṁgraha* was like a sutra-text and *Gītābhāṣya* was like a commentary thereon. *Vedāntadeśika*'s major contribution is that he rejects any sort of the theory of 'joint venture'-Sammucayavāda. Karma is the *Sādhana* of Bhakti, but it is not a joint venture. Bhakti is the sole purport of the Bhagavadgītā.

Madhvācārya has written two works on Gītā- one *Gītābhāṣya* and another *Gītātātparyanirṇaya*. He holds that Gītā, being part of Mahābhārata, contains the essence of all the śāstras, for nothing is outside Mahābhārata. Mahābhārata is superior to other Śāstras, and Gītā is superior in Mahābhārata- *bhāratam sarvaśāstreṣu bhārate gītikā varā.* The realization of Brahman or God (Bhagavadprāpti) is the subject matter of both the Mahābhārata and the Gītā. Though other subjects, like dharma, etc., are also described there, they are secondary and serve only as means to God-realization, which is the goal of the Gītā. *Jayatīrtha* has written *Prameyadīpikā* on *Madhva's Gītābhāṣya* and *Nyāyadīpikā* on *Gītātātparyanirṇaya*. According to him, the Gītā is not only equal to the Mahābhārata but, in fact, more than that, because the Lord himself speaks it. This makes Gītā greater than all Śāstras. The subject matter of the Gītā is Dharma; the goal is Mokṣa; one who desires God-realization is an eligible reader; and the outcome is the realization of God. Thus, Gītā is a text meant for God-realization (*bhagavadprāpti*)- unification

with *Viṣṇu*. From the second to the fifteenth chapter, Gītā takes the devotee on this spiritual journey. The first chapter lays the groundwork for the journey, and the last chapter concludes it.

Keśava Bhatta Kaśmīrī wrote a commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā* in the light of *Dvaitādvaita Vedānta*. Its name is *Tattvaprakāśikā*. It is believed that *Nimbārkācārya* also wrote a commentary, but it is unavailable to date. *Keśava* holds that the relation between the world of souls and matter and God is neither sheer difference nor non-difference. The relation is of difference cum non-difference-*Bhedābheda*. He agrees that the Gītā has three sections (kāṇḍa), each containing six chapters, and that the last chapter presents the text's conclusion, where we find its gist. From *Rāmānuja* to *Keśava Kaśmīrī,* all Vaiṣṇavācāryas believe the Gītā ends in utter self-submission (śarṇagati), the text's main theme. All doubts are resolved here. Arjuna chooses utter self-submission, saying, *kariṣyevacanam tava. Keśava Kaśmīrī* talks about seven hundred forty-five verses in Gītā. He propagated Vaiṣṇavism in *Kaśmīra* and initiated *Brajeśācārya* in Vaiśṇavism from Śāktism.

Gosvāmī Vallabha (different from *Vallabhācārya*), in his Tattvapradīpikā and Puruṣottam in Gītāmṛtatariṇgiṇī, presents the teachings of the Bhagavadgītā in light of Śuddhādvaita. Vallabha holds that the first chapter depicts suffering (viṣāda), the second chapter Sāṁkhyayoga, the next eight chapters describe Maryādābhakti, and the last eight chapters are about Puṣṭi-bakti. Puruṣottam says that SrīKṛṣṇa preached the Gītā to Arjuna after making him his own- *svīyatvena.* This personal, intimate relationship matters most. Here lies the key to *Puṣṭi-bhakti*. In his preface to Gītāmṛtataringiṇī, Puruṣottam refutes the doctrine of Śaṁkara and Madhusūdana sarsvatī and endorses the view of Rāmānujā and Śrīdharasvāmī that Bhakti is the Gītā's main teaching. Puruṣottam argues that, to the extent that mokṣa or liberation is not the purpose of Gītā, it is meant for utter self-submission-Śarṇāgati. He also criticizes Madhusūdana's view that the Gītā consists of three sections of six chapters (ṣatka) and that their subject matter is the exposition of *tattvamasi.*

Followers of Caitanya Viśvanātha Cakravartī and Baldeva Vidyābhūṣana wrote commentaries in the light of Gauḍīya Vedānta. Viśvanātha's commentary is Sārārthavarṣiṇī and BaldevaVidyābhuṣana's commentary is Bhūṣanī. Viśvanāth Cakravartī believes the first six chapters of the Gītā are dedicated to Niṣkāma Karmayoga, the next six to Bhaktiyoga, and the last six to Jñānayoga. Bhaktiyoga is unique, subtle, and principal, which is why it has been placed in between. Without Bhakti, Karma and Jñāna are both meaningless. Cakravartī summarizes each chapter. He holds that the last chapter depicts the secret of Bhakti-*guhyasāratamābhakti*. Baldeva Vidyābhuṣana expands on Cakravartī's thought. He also finds the Gītā divided into three sections (kāṇḍa) of six chapters (ṣatka): karmaṣatka, bhaktiṣatka, and jñānaṣatka. The division is based on the principal contribution, though each section also depicts the remaining two. The eighteenth chapter presents the gist and conclusion of the Gītā, where the doctrine of utter submission in the mood of servitorship (*dāsyapūrvikāprapatti)* is proposed as the principal and most effective way to attain God-realization.

Contrary to the Vaiṣṇava theistic Vedāntins and Advaitins (the absolutists), Tilak, in his monumental commentary on the Bhagvadgītā, Gītārahasya, holds that the Gītā is primarily a Karmayogaśāstra; it is neither a text of Sanyāsa (renunciation) nor a text of devotion. Jñāna and Bhakti, Saṁyāsa and Bhagavadbhajana are not the Gītā's subject matter; the Gītā is primarily a text of Karma, or action. Gītā provides a complete science of human actions. Six criteria used to ascertain the text's main purport suggest that Karma, or action, is the Gītā's main problem. At the very beginning of the text, Arjuna is reluctant to perform his duty. Kṛṣṇa repeatedly preaches to him, and finally Arjuna becomes ready to perform his duty. Gītā is against any life-negating philosophy, any sort of asceticism. Gītā calls us to engage fully in life. Here, many believe a proper theory of human action can be provided only in a spiritual framework. A life-affirming, action-based worldview tends to imply spiritual humanism and, ultimately, atheism. But here comes the real significance of the Bhagavadgīta. Gītā teaches that a proper theory of

human action is not incompatible with theism. An engaged life is not against the theistic worldview. The world is not to be escaped from. In fact, it is the continuation of God, his expression, manifestation, extension, a part, or, as Gītā says, the body of God. The whole reality is his body and God, the divine soul. In this worldview, our duty is to unite our will with the divine will. We should act or will what God wills, and never do or will what is against the Lord's will. God has created us and given us free will. We may will what the divine will wills, or we may will against it. We may obey him, defy him, or be indifferent. For the last few centuries, we have been becoming more and more secular, more and more worldly, more and more atheistic. This suggests that our freedom of will is actual. God could have made us fully determined; he could not have given us freedom, but then humans would not have been humans. God was not making machines; he wasn't creating puppets. He created humans as a unique creature and made them free.

Karmayoga and Bhaktiyoga are not mutually exclusive. In fact, Śaṁkara says that Upāsanā may be understood as a sort of Karma. Upāsanā, Pūjana, Bhajana, Vandana, Archana, and Sevana are like Yajana. They are karmas, the actions. Actions or karmas may be classified as religious or non-religious (secular). The message of the Bhagavadgītā is that so-called secular or non-religious actions should also be performed in a way that makes them religious. Karmayoga makes this possible. Gītā is Yoga or Karmayoga. In the Gītā, Yoga and Karmayoga have the same meaning. Yoga is the specific skill of performing action- *yogaḥ karmasukauśalam.* This skill makes karmas, or actions, religious, and the profane sacred. Only karma born of attachment and desire binds us; performed without attachment and desire, it does not. Gītā provides the technique for that. Do your duty by submitting it to God. Perform your action without attachment to its fruits. Leave them in God's hands. Do your duty. Do the duties assigned to you. Do them without having any attachment to the fruits of those actions, without attaching yourself to the results. By performing one's duty disinterestedly, one can attain summum bonum.

God has given us freedom to choose; God has given us free will. He has given us agency and autonomy. It is up to us what to make of this free will. We may make this world as secular and atheistic. We may make this world the city of God. God has given us a choice.

The difficulty with the Karmayoga, or action-based, interpretation of the Bhgavadgītā is that it seems to run counter to the theory of reality or metaphysics presented in the Gītā. The other problem is free will, for we find a number of verses in the Gītā that clearly and explicitly state that free will is illusory, that everything is completely predetermined and regulated by Nature or Māyā under God's supervision. We shall take both these issues one after another. First, let us consider the theory of the Gītā's reality or metaphysics. Scholars have interpreted the theory in various ways. The Advaitins have described this reality as the non-dual absolute, and the Vaiṣṇava-vedāntins and Śaivites as theists. Some may find it as dualistic as well. But in whatever way we conceive the reality in the Gītā, whether as absolutistic or theistic or dualistic of the Saṁkhyan way, Jīva, or the individual soul, has never been considered as the real doer or agent. The true nature of the individual soul is pure consciousness and bliss; only when the Jīva falsely identifies itself with the psycho-physical organism, or with the set of mind, body, and senses, does it assume itself as the doer and enjoyer. But if the individual soul or the Jīva is not an agent or a doer, then what does it mean to prescribe a yoga of the type of Karmayoga? If Jīva is not a doer, then karma, or a philosophy of karma and action, has no meaning or value. Here, the above objections mainly arise in the Absolutistic or dualistic framework of reality. In the theistic framework, the problem does not arise. In various schools of theistic Vedānta, we find an organic relation among God, souls, and the material world. The relation may be conceived as that of a living organism, or, more clearly, as more living and personal. Here, God is personal, and in most Vaiṣṇava schools, the individual soul too cannot be conceived as having the nature of pure and abstract consciousness and bliss. They have to be understood as knower, doer, and enjoyer. God and the soul must both be conceived as personal. Only then can we explain the nature and different kinds of Mukti and Bhakti (sālokya, sāmīpya, sārūpya and sāyujya). Bhakti is the intimate and personal relation of the Jīva (soul) with God.

But even if the first objection is met and the issue is resolved by taking recourse to the theistic interpretation of the Bhagavadgītā, the second issue still remains unresolved. It becomes even more serious in theism. If God is omniscient and omnipotent, how can the jivas, the individual souls or humans, be called free? The idea of an omniscient and omnipotent God and human free will are not compatible. Free will is not compatible with theism or the theistic model of reality. (And if there is no free will, then a theory of human action or a Karmayoga-type philosophy has no meaning.) In the Bhagavad Gita, several verses explicitly assert that the Lord controls and regulates everyone, and that the idea of free will is a false self-conceit or pride.

On this point, we approach it from two angles: that of God and that of individual souls. Through the lens of God, the Almighty creates, preserves, and fully regulates everything. There is complete and absolute determinism. God has not only created us but also cares for us every moment. He is not only the creator but also the sustainer. He preserves and sustains this beautiful creation. Whenever there seems to be a violation of his divine will, or sometimes even otherwise, he intervenes. We can understand his intervention as a miracle. He sends his messengers and reincarnates himself. On the other hand, through a human lens, we can see that man is free. Man is free to choose. Man is not only free, but he is aware of his freedom; he has a strong feeling of his free will. That makes him a free agent. He may obey God or disobey him. He may choose to be religious, irreligious, or non-religious. He may make this world a city of God or a completely secular and atheistic one. Thus, the apparent contradiction between an all-knowing, all-powerful God and human free will may be resolved if we view it through two lenses: God's and man's. Here, the two lenses/views do not mean two different levels of reality, though they might philosophically imply so. In all the varieties of theism, reality is of the same order. There may be a "gap" in reality; there may be "fall" and "leap," "forgetfulness" and "remembrance" within reality. But the level of reality remains the same. God might be far and far away from us, but never "unknown" and 'unknowable' here (in theism). He remains always approachable to us; easily available to everyone. What is needed is to unite ourselves with him, to unite our knowing, feeling, and willing with the Knowing, Feeling, and the Willing of God.

If we view things as above, we can see that this beautiful creation is God's self-extension. He created the world and all its beings. He created us and gave us freedom. (God is not a tiny or finite being limited by human freedom. God determines everything, yet there is freedom of will. There is no contradiction here. All contradictions and oppositions are resolved there; such is the inconceivable nature and power of God. No opposition exists between the agent's autonomy and the Divine (God).

Man is free in all aspects, knowing, feeling, and willing. If a soul is a knower and an experiencer/enjoyer, why could it not be a doer or agent? Gītā accepts the agent's autonomy. In fact, this is the Gītā's basic presupposition. Arjuna must make the decision. A teacher or a counselor may show us the path. But the decision to go on that is entirely in the agent's hands.

From this, we see that Karmayoga and Bhaktiyoga complement each other. Our actions, or karmas, speak to the modes by which the Divinity functions in the world. A true Karmayogī can be only a fully God-intoxicated soul, or a God-intoxicated soul can be a true Karmayogī. Work is worship for such a man.

Granted, Karmayoga and Bhaktiyoga are complementary and compatible, and Theism and a theory of human action are not incompatible. But how can both be compatible with *Jňānayoga*? How will Absolutism or Non-dualism be compatible with a theory of free actions? How do Theism and Absolutism go together? Several answers have been given to the above perplexing questions. We would like to talk briefly about two of them. One answer is theoretical, and the other is historical. First, take the latter one. The long history of Advaita Vedānta shows that Advaitins have never treated Bhaktiyoga or Karmayoga as rival theories. In fact, the Advaitins, or Absolutists, claim it has no opposition, as they do not consider anyone its opponent. The great ascetics of the past have also been great social workers, reformers, and devout, God-intoxicated devotees. Śaṁkara himself had perfected himself in *Jňānayoga* and *Karmayoga*. Most

of his followers were Jñānayogins; they were also Bhaktiyogins and Karmayogins. Thus, at least from the Advaitin side, there seems to be acceptance of Bhakti and Karma. The other answer is the Advaitic theory of levels of reality. In fact, the Advaitic theory of levels of reality makes room for accepting Bhakti and Karma. At the level of *Paramārtha,* or the ultimate, only God, Brahman, or the Absolute exists. Since nothing other than God exists, no question of action or devotion arises. But this is the level of the Absolute, the level of God. But as long as we are at the empirical or Vyavahāra level, Advaitins do not reject anything. If they do not deny anything, then how can they reject the value of Karma and Bhakti, action and devotion, Ethics and Religion? They are the most precious gems for mankind. But this is true only at the practical or empirical level. Ethics and Religion have only instrumental value. They lead us to the highest wisdom. Only that can lead us to our ultimate destiny. This is the view of Advaitins. Naturally, theists will not accept this view.

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