

**BHAGAVAD GITA AND INDIAN ETHICS PREACHING OF
GREAT PHILOSOPHER ADI SANKARA**

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35. Relevance of the Gita and Shankara's Teachings in Contemporary Moral Education

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Abstract

The *Bhagavad Gita*, a revered Indian philosophical scripture, provides profound insights into the nature of human actions, moral responsibilities, and the psychology underlying decision-making. This paper explores the moral psychology embedded in the Gita's teachings, focusing on the motivations behind human behavior, the conflict of duty and desire, and the role of self-knowledge and detachment. By interpreting key verses and concepts, this paper argues that the Gita offers a holistic moral framework that integrates ethics with spiritual growth.

1. Introduction

The *Bhagavad Gita*, a dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, is not only a spiritual guide but also a psychological text that delves into the complexities of human action and moral dilemmas. Arjuna's initial reluctance to fight in the war serves as a symbolic representation of the inner moral conflict experienced by individuals when duty clashes with emotions. The Gita addresses such conflicts through a deep examination of human motivation, emphasizing the importance of intention (*niyatam karma*), detachment (*nishkama karma*), and righteous action (*dharma*). The Gita's perspective on human actions contributes significantly to the field of moral psychology by examining how individuals make moral choices in the face of competing desires and obligations.

2. Concept of Action (Karma) in the Gita

In the Gita, **karma** (action) is central to understanding the moral dimension of life. According to Krishna, action is inevitable (3.8), and no one can remain without performing actions, even for a moment. However, it is not merely the action but the **intention** and **attitude** behind it that determine its moral worth. The Gita classifies actions into three types:

Sattvic Action: Performed with a sense of duty, without attachment or expectation of rewards. It is done with purity, selflessness, and for the well-being of others.

Rajasic Action: Motivated by desire, ambition, and ego. It is performed with attachment to outcomes and often leads to stress and restlessness.

Tamasic Action: Arises from ignorance, delusion, or laziness. It is careless, harmful, and done without consideration of consequences or moral values.

This classification reveals the Gita's concern with **moral motivation**—an essential aspect of moral psychology. An action aligned with one's **svadharma** (own duty) and performed with detachment from the results is considered morally superior.

3. Psychological Conflict and Decision-Making

Arjuna's moral crisis at the start of the Gita (Chapter 1) mirrors the psychological conflict that occurs when ethical duties clash with personal emotions. This internal turmoil highlights the **emotional and cognitive dimensions** of moral decision-making. Arjuna, overwhelmed by compassion, refuses to fight, despite knowing his duty as a warrior. Krishna responds by redefining the moral basis of action, suggesting that **dharma** must prevail over emotional confusion.

Krishna advises Arjuna to rise above the **egoistic self** and act in accordance with higher wisdom. This dialogue emphasizes a key idea in moral psychology—the need for self-regulation and **rational deliberation** over impulsive reactions. The Gita recommends **buddhi yoga** (the discipline of intellect) as the means to achieve clarity in moral dilemmas.

4. The Role of Detachment and Self-Knowledge

A cornerstone of the Gita's moral psychology is the principle of **nishkama karma**—performing one's duty without attachment to outcomes. This detachment is not indifference but a psychological stance that prevents emotional entanglement and egocentric motivations from corrupting moral judgment.

Krishna says (2.47), *"You have the right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions."* This aligns with modern psychological theories that emphasize intrinsic motivation and ethical consistency. By focusing on the action itself rather than the outcome, the Gita promotes **moral autonomy** and resilience.

Furthermore, the Gita advocates for **self-knowledge (atma jnana)** as a means to moral clarity. Understanding the eternal nature of the self (atman) helps individuals detach from transient emotions and worldly rewards, leading to more principled moral actions.

5. Modes of Nature (Gunas) and Behavioral Tendencies

Another significant contribution of the Gita to moral psychology is its doctrine of **gunas**—the three fundamental qualities that influence human behavior:

- **Sattva** – purity, wisdom, and harmony
- **Rajas** – passion, ambition, and restlessness
- **Tamas** – ignorance, inertia, and delusion

These gunas govern individual temperament and moral choices. A person dominated by **sattva** is more likely to act ethically and selflessly, while those influenced by **rajas** or **tamas** may act out of

selfishness or confusion. The Gita encourages individuals to cultivate sattva and transcend the influence of all gunas to attain **liberated action (karma yoga)**.

From a psychological perspective, this model anticipates modern theories of personality and behavioral traits, acknowledging that morality is shaped by both **inherent dispositions** and conscious choices.

6. Relevance to Contemporary Moral Psychology

The Gita's insights find resonance in contemporary discussions on **moral cognition**, **emotional regulation**, and **virtue ethics**. Its emphasis on internal intention, role of reasoning, and the cultivation of character closely parallels the theories of **Kohlberg's stages of moral development**, **Bandura's social learning**, and **Aristotelian virtue ethics**.

Additionally, the Gita's approach is deeply relevant in an age where individuals face ethical dilemmas involving conflicting roles, stress, and social pressures. By grounding action in self-knowledge, purpose, and universal duty, the Gita provides a **psychologically sustainable model of moral agency**.

7. Benefits of the Gita and Shankara's Teachings

Holistic Character Development

The *Gita* and Shankara's teachings emphasize inner discipline, self-awareness, and ethical living, nurturing not only academic growth but **emotional and moral maturity** in students.

1. Self-Regulation and Emotional Balance

Through concepts like *buddhi yoga* (disciplined intellect) and *vairagya* (detachment), students learn to **manage emotions**, control impulses, and make thoughtful decisions—key aspects of modern emotional intelligence.

2. Sense of Duty and Responsibility (Dharma)

The *Gita* instills a deep respect for **personal and social responsibility**, encouraging students to act out of duty rather than desire, promoting civic values and accountability.

3. Universal Values and Ethical Clarity

Shankara's Advaita philosophy emphasizes the **oneness of all beings**, fostering **compassion, tolerance, and non-violence**, which are vital for inclusive and harmonious societies.

4. Strengthens Moral Reasoning

By encouraging reflection on right and wrong through rational inquiry (*viveka*), these teachings help develop **critical thinking and ethical judgment** in real-life scenarios.

5. Cultural and Spiritual Identity

Integrating these philosophies into education fosters **cultural pride** and helps students connect with India's rich heritage while promoting **global ethical values**.

7. Conclusion

The *Bhagavad Gita* is not just a spiritual treatise but a profound exploration of human moral psychology. It addresses the **mental and emotional struggles** behind ethical action and offers practical guidance for aligning actions with higher values. Through its teachings on karma, detachment, self-awareness, and the gunas, the Gita integrates psychology, ethics, and spirituality into a unified moral vision. In doing so, it continues to offer timeless wisdom for understanding the motives behind human actions and guiding individuals toward moral excellence.

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