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The *Bhagavadgītā*'s determinism and world literature

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Abstract

This chapter discusses two aspects of the *Bhagavadgītā* in light of the category of world literature.¹ In both cases, I will argue that if one understands world literature in a programmatic sense, the *Bhagavadgītā* is anomalous or heretical. Thus, despite being one of the most salient and successful examples of world literature, the *Bhagavadgītā* is an odd fit for the category. The first aspect discussed is the text's attitude to the Kurukṣetra War, which caused the deaths of more than one billion men. I will show that the *Bhagavadgītā* (*Bhg*) takes a pro-war position, particularly when understood through the surrounding text of the *Mahābhārata*. The second aspect discussed is the text's philosophical and theological determinism, which is opposed to the idea of human free will that has been widespread in cultures ancient and modern.

1 An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the Nehru Centre in London at a conference entitled 'The *Bhagavad Gītā*: Its Contemporary Relevance', 24–25 September 2015. I am grateful to the conference organisers and to the audience on that occasion, particularly Gabriella Burnel.

The *Bhagavadgītā* as a text of war

Consider the ethics of Arjuna Pāṇḍava's situation just before the Kurukṣetra War. What does Arjuna think his options are? To fight or not to fight. His preference for the latter seems to be based on his horror at the prospect of fighting, rather than on any clear alternative. He just does not think winning the war would be worth it. He says to Kṛṣṇa, his chariot-driver:

Those for whose sake we want kingdom, enjoyments, and pleasures are drawn up here for battle, ready to give up their lives and wealth: teachers, fathers, sons, grandfathers, uncles, fathers-in-law, grandsons, brothers-in-law, and other relatives. Though they would kill me, slayer of Madhu, I wouldn't want to kill them even for the sovereignty of the triple-world; how much less, then, for the sake of the earth! What joy could there be for us, Janārdana, were we to kill Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons? Were we to kill these murderers, evil would befall us; so we mustn't kill Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons, our kinsmen. For how could we be happy having killed our family, Mādava? ... It would be better for me if Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons, armed with weapons, were to kill me in battle unresisting and unarmed ... Better in this world to live on alms without killing the mighty elders; for were I to kill the elders, eager though they are for worldly gain, in this very world I would taste pleasures smeared with blood. (*Bhg*, 1.33–37, 46; 2.5)²

When Arjuna says it would be better to live on charity, he does not say whose—perhaps the charity of the Kauravas or of some other relatives or friends, or perhaps the charity of strangers as an itinerant beggar.

The *Mahābhārata* is a great work of world literature, yet there is a problem when we view it from a humanitarian perspective. The war in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is fought against a great demon, to rescue a damsel in distress, so the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s bloodshed has a moral justification. It is like the Anglo-American myth of World War II: the goodies won and the demon was destroyed, but he would not have been destroyed without the action that was taken against him, so that action was justified, despite the collateral damage. If Hitler came again—God forbid—he should be cut down again. But in the Kurukṣetra War the destruction is on a different scale, and in human terms it is comparatively senseless. It is more like the millions dying on the Western Front during World War I—the 'Great War'. The message from *that* war was:

2 For the *Bhagavadgītā* text, see Belvalkar (1968). *Bhagavadgītā* translations are adapted from Cherniak (2008).

never again must so many die for so little. The Great War was called 'the war to end all wars'. Just weeks after it began, H.G. Wells published a book about it entitled *The War That Will End War* (1914). When the war ended on 11 November 1918, David Lloyd George told the UK House of Commons: 'At eleven o'clock this morning came to an end the cruellest and most terrible war that has ever scourged mankind. I hope we may say that thus, this fateful morning, came to an end all wars.'³ The mistaken idea that the Great War would be the last war was perhaps the only way in which recent slaughter on such a scale could be comprehended or justified.

From the perspective of the analogy between the Great War and the Kurukṣetra War, we can read the *Mahābhārata* as the story of a human disgrace. More than a billion men died⁴ because two sets of royal cousins could not resolve their differences any other way. Even after each set of cousins had been given half the ancestral kingdom, they restarted their feud. If we seek someone to blame, part of the blame falls on blind King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who would not make his son Duryodhana behave; and part of it falls on Duryodhana himself, who would not even give his cousins five villages in which to live in peace. If one looks at it in this way (and it is *if*; see Brodbeck 2020), the Pāṇḍavas largely escape blame because they waged war as a last resort to rescue themselves from intolerable victimisation and, having embarked on it, they had to try their best to win. But winning does not make them happy. So, the war is a tragedy. We can hope that no-one will ever again be as intransigent as Duryodhana or as careless as Dhṛtarāṣṭra or as unlucky as the Pāṇḍavas. From this perspective—whereby war is an undesirable result—we can respect Arjuna's position: 'I will not fight.' Surely, it would have been morally correct to be a conscientious objector during the Great War.

The humanitarian perspective is a humanistic ethical perspective and it has implications for the understanding of world literature. If we want world literature to be literature that is good for the world, then knowing what we do about the damage that war does, we might want the world's great war stories to tell us *to* avoid war and *how* to avoid war. From this perspective, the *Mahābhārata* as a work of world literature would teach us how not to be like Duryodhana and Dhṛtarāṣṭra. And it can do that.

3 Available from: en.wikiquote.org/wiki/David_Lloyd_George.

4 Some 1,660,020,000 men were killed in the war, with a further 24,165 missing in action (*Mahābhārata*, 11.26.9–10). For the *Mahābhārata* text, see Dandekar (1971–76). The *Bhagavadgītā* is *Mahābhārata* 6.23–40 (vol. 2, pp. 1158–85).

There is no need to be programmatic about world literature. David Damrosch's definition is neutral: 'I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language' (2003: 4). Nonetheless, a programmatic notion of world literature has some pedigree. In their *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels made the connection between processes of globalisation and a new literary paradigm:

In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature. (Marx and Engels 1967: 46–47)

The history of the *Mahābhārata*'s interpretation includes a very important chapter, which took place largely after Marx and Engels wrote the above words, wherein the *Mahābhārata* was understood primarily as a national text, and the struggle of the Pāṇḍavas against the Kauravas was understood as a cipher for the nationalist struggle against the colonial British (Lothspeich 2009). But that interpretive perspective is dependent on its specific context. Other perspectives on the text are available and have often been evident—for example, the theosophical interpretation shared by Mahatma Gandhi, whereby the Kurukṣetra War is seen as one between opposed forces within the human psyche.⁵

Discussing the role played by Yugoslavia's various regional intelligentsias in creating the conditions for the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, Aijaz Ahmad warns that

the idea of a 'national literature' can quite easily cease to represent the legitimate cultural rights of a people and become a retrograde—even murderous—force as soon as it gets sundered from the more progressive moorings in ideas of cultural diversity and universalist civilization. (Ahmad 2000: 17)

5 On Gandhi's interpretation, see Sharpe (1985: 113–22); Robinson (2006: 60–64); and Davis (2015: 136–45). On its theosophical roots, see Sharpe (1985: 91–94, 117). Similar in this respect are the interpretations of V.S. Sukthankar (1957: 91–115), Bede Griffiths (Robinson 2006: 80–85), Swami Vivekānanda (pp. 86–87), Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (p. 91), Swami Śivānanda (p. 97) and Annie Besant (p. 108).

The roots of mass killing may lie in ethnic or national exclusivism; so it is that '[w]riting that addresses some of the worst horrors and crimes of humankind, genocide and war, has a particular position in world literature', partly because of its potential to 'warn the future' (Thomsen 2008: 103, 106).

In this perspective, being a global ethical actor involves sitting in judgement on oneself and each other. So we respect Arjuna for taking his business so seriously, and that is a large part of the *Bhagavadgītā*'s contemporary relevance. But when Arjuna decides not to fight, that is just the start, for his decision is wrong. He does not understand the war or his own role in it. His journey in the *Bhagavadgītā* is the journey from thinking that he cannot and will not fight, to knowing that he must and will.

The *Mahābhārata* explains that Kṛṣṇa is the great god Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa, who has been born on Earth, along with various other celestials, on a special mission of destruction, according to a divine plan. Details are given in *Mahābhārata* 1.58–61. From J.A.B. van Buitenen's summary of *Mahābhārata* 1.58:

[I]t became the golden age. But the Asuras [demons], defeated by the Gods, reincarnate themselves in prideful and oppressive kings. Tyrannized, Earth seeks mercy from Brahmā, who orders that the Gods incarnate themselves. Indra and Nārāyaṇa compact to this purpose. The celestials descend, and wreak havoc on the demons. (van Buitenen 1973: 125)

Mahābhārata 1.61 gives details of which celestials descended as which humans. The celestial business is also mentioned after the war, in *Mahābhārata* 11.8. From James Fitzgerald's summary:

[To Dhṛtarāṣṭra] Vyāsa recounts overhearing a past conversation among the Gods in which Viṣṇu told Earth that Duryodhana would soon be the occasion for the Gods' fulfilling their promise to relieve her of her burden. Vyāsa lectures Dhṛtarāṣṭra on his sons' wickedness and on the fact that they were born on earth in the interests of destruction. He tells him the Pāṇḍavas were blameless, while his sons were vile and harmed the earth. All this is the 'secret of the Gods'. (Fitzgerald 2004a: 29–30)

In the account given in *Harivaṃśa* 40–45,⁶ the origin of the Earth's problem is slightly different (see Viethsen 2009; Brodbeck 2022: 103–17), but the solution is the same: massive destruction arranged by the gods, led by Viṣṇu.⁷

6 For the *Harivaṃśa* text, see Dandekar (1971–76, vol. 5).

7 On this 'secret of the gods', see also Fitzgerald (2004b: 56–59) and Hildebeitel (2011: 571–80).

Emily Hudson (2013: 115, 138–39) seeks to stress that this explanation for the war is just one among many. Since this explanation is a secret that is not available to most of the protagonists, there are naturally others within the discourse, and to this extent Hudson is correct. But the divine explanation for the war is placed in a superordinate position for the listening King Janamejaya and for us, because it is presented in advance, before the story of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas begins, as a primary tool for that story’s understanding. And the divine explanation must largely be sidelined if one wishes to focus on the *Mahābhārata* in terms of humanistic ethics.

The Kurukṣetra War was the main event, during which the massacre arranged by the gods occurred. But most of the characters acting in the war do not know or do not remember this ‘secret of the gods’. Indra, for example, has incarnated a portion of himself as Arjuna, to kill in this battle; but Arjuna does not know this. Only Kṛṣṇa knows. Kṛṣṇa is the leader of the war party and he must ensure that the necessary destruction takes place. That is why he must make Arjuna fight. Kṛṣṇa is not able to say ‘Remember yourself!’ to Arjuna in the same straight way that he says it to Baladeva in *Harivaṃśa* 58 (Brodbeck 2019: 180–81), because Kṛṣṇa and Baladeva are Viṣṇu in a way that Arjuna is not, despite Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa’s connection as the Nara–Nārāyaṇa pair (see Biardeau 1991), and despite their connection as two of the several Kṛṣṇas (alongside Vyāsa and Draupadī; see Hildebeitel 1991). So Kṛṣṇa does not reveal the secret of the gods (the divine plan) to Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgītā* as such. But in the theophany of *Bhagavadgītā* 11, Kṛṣṇa shows Arjuna the results of the divine plan in advance. Arjuna, beholding the godhead, says:

All those sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and the armies of kings, and Bhīṣma, and Droṇa, and [Karṇa] that son of a *sūta* and all our best warriors rush into your terrifying mouths with their horrible fangs; I can see some stuck between your teeth with their heads smashed. These heroes of the world of men pile into your blazing mouths like the many rivers running into the sea; as moths rush to their deaths in a burning flame, so these men accelerate into your mouths to meet their doom. (*Bhg.* 11.26–29)

Kṛṣṇa replies:

I am Time, the destroyer of people, ripened, and here I am busy crushing people. Even without you, all the warriors drawn up in the opposing ranks will cease to exist. So get up and win your fame! Conquer your enemies and enjoy the full sovereignty. I have myself

long since doomed them to perish; you just be the instrument, left-handed archer. Droṇa, and Bhīṣma, and Jayadratha, and Karṇa, and other heroic warriors too: kill them, for I have already slain them. Don't hesitate! Fight! You will conquer your rivals in the battle. (*Bhg*, 11.32–34)

The message to Arjuna is: you do not understand what is happening. You do not need to and you will not be able to. But it is under control; and it is out of your control. Because, as Kṛṣṇa goes on to say in *Bhg* 18:

When you indulge your ego and think 'I won't fight', this resolution of yours is spurious, for nature [*prakṛti*] will force you to. Fettered by your proper activity, Kaunteya, which is determined by your very nature [*svabhāva*], you will do what in your confusion you don't want to do, even if it be against your will [*avaśo 'pi*]. (*Bhg*, 18.59–60)

The situation is special, because Kṛṣṇa is God and because Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa's cousin, brother-in-law and best friend, has God Viṣṇu as his best friend. How is that supposed to make the rest of us feel? As for Kṛṣṇa being God: becoming a person or some other kind of creature to affect the world is just something that God does sometimes. South Asian examples are given in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the Purāṇas, and in more recent texts (Granoff 1984). Examples could be multiplied, in South Asia and elsewhere.

Meeting God and then doing what he says is one thing. That is what I would do if it happened to me. But from our point of view, there is also the idea of a more general claim about human action, as if the myth of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna were a dramatised illustration of an abiding prior certainty to human deeds. Does the *Mahābhārata*'s claim about divine business in human affairs only apply to Arjuna and his contemporaries in relation to the Kurukṣetra War for which this myth is told? Arguably, something more general is being said (Hill 2001: 345–52; Brødbeck 2004, 2010: 138–39).

The concept of free will

Here we move from considering the *Bhagavadgītā* as offending against a programmatic world-literature sensibility in terms of being pro-war to considering its offending against such a sensibility in terms of denying free will. Arjuna sees that there is no choice, because Kṛṣṇa already contains the future. It is a truth for all. Kṛṣṇa says:

īśvaraḥ sarvabhūtānāṃ hṛddeśe 'rjuna tiṣṭhati |
bhrāmāyan sarvabhūtāni yantrārūḍhāni māyayā ||

The lord sits in the heart of every being, Arjuna, and by magic power he makes all the beings put in the machine move about. (*Bhg*, 18.61; emphasis added)

This determinism complements Kṛṣṇa's Sāṃkhya-style discrimination of humans into two aspects: that of awareness, and that of activity, phenomena and substance. The aspect of awareness is called *ātman* ('the self'), *puruṣa* ('the person'), *kṣetrajña* ('the knower of the field') or *dehin* ('the one in the body'). It witnesses but cannot act. In terms of the human organism, the other aspect is the body, the senses and the mind, and this aspect is causally continuous with the rest of the world. So it is a mistake to appropriate agency to the self. Here there are three nice quotations:

Deeds are everywhere performed by the modes of nature [*guṇas* of *prakṛti*].⁸ The one who has been deluded by their own ego [*ahaṃkāra*] thinks 'I am the doer', but the one who truly knows the two divisions—the division of modes and the division of actions—realises that the modes are acting upon each other and doesn't become attached, mighty-armed one. Those who are bewildered by nature's modes become attached to the actions of those modes. (*Bhg*, 3.27–29b)

The disciplined one who knows the true reality of things should think 'I am doing nothing at all', remembering that when they see, hear, touch, smell, eat, walk, sleep, breathe, talk, excrete, grasp, and open and close their eyes, their senses and capacities are just acting upon their objects. (*Bhg*, 5.8–9)

The one who sees that all actions are performed by nature [*prakṛti*] alone, and so sees himself as a non-agent, can truly see. (*Bhg*, 13.29)

According to these verses, the phenomenal world (which means not just the physical world) is causally complete, and thus the idea of one's responsibility for one's actions is problematic and potentially illegitimate as a product of the ego—the ego that Kṛṣṇa says we must suppress. This is perhaps the *Bhagavadgītā*'s most enduringly relevant message. It strikes at the root of human suffering.

8 The three *guṇas* ('modes', 'qualities', 'strands') of *prakṛti* are *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* ('clarity', 'passion' and 'darkness'), as described in detail in *Bhg* 14 and 17–18.

The suppression of the ego is a common theme in religious literature, and in Indian philosophy Kṛṣṇa is not alone in suggesting it. The pernicious nature of the idea of 'mine' is a recurring notion in the Mokṣadharmaparvan of *Mahābhārata* 12. In a nutshell: 'Absolutely everything that is conceived of with the idea of "mine" culminates in suffering' (*Mahābhārata*, 12.168.41, translation from Fitzgerald 2015: 132). But when the suppression of the ego involves the idea of determinism, it is also heresy, because generally we are held responsible for our actions. Conventional analysis attributes human actions to a self behind and above the personal pronoun 'I' and imagines that when this self initiates an action, it is also free not to. It imagines the self as agent 'I'.

The philosophical literature on the topics of free will and determinism is enormous and contains numerous definitions of both terms. Here, I effectively follow Peter van Inwagen's notion that 'the concept of free will should be understood in terms of the *power* or *ability* of agents to act otherwise than they in fact do' (1982: 49).⁹ From this point of view, the idea of seeing the future in God's present body is powerful. Even if Arjuna saw it in dramatised or metaphorical form as warriors being crushed by God's teeth (rather than killed in battle at Kurukṣetra as they will in fact be), Kṛṣṇa implies that the world's current and past configurations imply all future configurations given the passage of time: 'I have myself long since doomed them to perish; you just be the instrument' (*Bhg*, 11.33cd).

In conventional terms, the principle of retributive justice seems to require the free will of an agentive self. This principle is presented in various religions in terms of our being rewarded or punished after death for what we did while alive—in heaven or hell or in the circumstances of future rebirth. And without thinking in post-mortem terms, legal theory involves philosophical justification of the nature and implications of moral responsibility within this life, and a host of discourses and operations, legal and otherwise, punish people, ostensibly for the common good. Thus, Kṛṣṇa's idea may seem to threaten the very system that protects us—the system, in which we collude, of ethical praise and blame. Clement of Alexandria wrote in his *Stromata*

9 Viewed in these terms, Schopenhauer (1985) and Double (1991), for example, argue, as Kṛṣṇa effectively does, that there is no free will. Schopenhauer (1985: 70–83) cites in agreement Luther, Vanini, Hume, Hobbes, Spinoza, Priestley, Voltaire and Kant. Scientific progress has implications for this issue: see, for example, Swinburne (2011); Wegner (2002), on 'the illusion of conscious will'; and Bohm (1983) and Norris (2000) on quantum mechanics and the principle of causation. 'The law of causality is established a priori as the general rule to which all objects of the external world are subject without exception' (Schopenhauer 1985: 28).

that ‘neither praises nor censures, neither rewards nor punishments, are right, when the soul has not the power of inclination and disinclination, but evil is involuntary’ (Roberts and Donaldson 1956: 319).

So, Kṛṣṇa’s denial of free will has not been well received. For example, Ellen Jane Briggs (2008: 66–95) finds a counter-perspective in *Bhg* 13.22, where the *puruṣa* is described as the *anumantr* (‘consenter’ or ‘approver’), and she proposes a ‘libertarian interpretation’ of the apparently deterministic verses, whereby they are not deterministic; but she stretches the text. More faithful—and more radical—is the view of Will Johnson:

Krishna subsumes within himself both fate and agency ... In other words, the dichotomy between fate ... and human effort ... is collapsed ... In practical terms, this entails turning over the results of one’s actions to the real actor, God, and relying entirely on his liberating power. (Johnson 1997: 99)

The brief discussion of the *Bhagavadgītā* in Edwin Bryant’s paper on ‘Agency in Sāṃkhya and Yoga’ (2014: 33–37) emphasises the text’s denial of the *puruṣa*’s agency, while admitting that various commentators had problems with this. The latter situation will no doubt continue to obtain. The denial of agency can seem to endorse irresponsible behaviour and the idea of being beyond good and evil. It has received a bad press, from the time of Kṛṣṇa through to the story of Charles Manson (Zaehner 1975) and beyond.

The divinity of the world

Kṛṣṇa is only peripherally talking about a philosophical system. He responds to Arjuna’s emotional expression and begins from the individual’s messy point of view. Thus, in the *Bhagavadgītā*, it is a question of ‘facing the human condition not as anyone’s problem but as my problem, that is, a first-person problem’ (Kwak and Han 2013: 69). It is not so much about whether Arjuna *is held* responsible for his actions (and we for ours) as whether Arjuna *holds himself* (or we ourselves) responsible; whether we judge ourselves. Because if we do, we do so from a position of ignorance. In Albert Camus’s *L’Étranger* (1942), after killing the Arab on the beach, Meursault does not judge himself.

At the start of the *Bhagavadgītā*, Arjuna does not know what to do. But what he will do is already within the configuration of the world. So he is told what to do, just as a tossed coin is told, by forces and circumstance, whether to land heads-up or tails-up. But the *Bhagavadgītā*’s determinism

differs from the determinisms in philosophy books or in Camus, because in the *Bhagavadgītā* the world is divine. Kṛṣṇa explains that the various constituents of the psycho-physical world are part of him:

My phenomenal nature [*prakṛti*] is divided into eight: earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, understanding [*buddhi*], and ego. This is my lower nature, mighty-armed one; so know too my other, higher nature, namely the soul, by which this universe is sustained. Understand that all beings originate from my nature; I am the source of the whole universe, and its dissolution too. (*Bhg*, 7.4–6)

Further details are given concerning Kṛṣṇa's 'lower nature':

The great elements, the ego, the understanding, and the unmanifest itself; the ten senses and the mind, and the five sense-realms; desire, aversion, pleasure, pain, the organism, consciousness [*cetanā*], and stability: together these are said to constitute the field with its modifications. (*Bhg*, 13.5–6)

This is the field that the 'knower of the field'—the *kṣetrajña*, *ātman*, *puruṣa* or *dehin*—knows. The 'great elements' mentioned at *Bhg* 13.5 are listed at 7.4: earth, water, fire, air and ether. The 'ten senses' are listed at *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* 26 as two groups of five, the sense-capacities and the action-capacities: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching; and voice-part, hand, foot, anus and genitals.¹⁰ The 'five sense-realms' (the *tanmātras* of the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*) are the sensations gathered by the five sense-capacities.

So Kṛṣṇa contains nature with all its modes and modalities, including every organism's senses and capacities and their objects—all the aspects onto which we are to displace our misplaced agency, according to Kṛṣṇa's advice, in a gesture of pure, truthful homage to him. This is the pantheism that the early Christian commentators found so distasteful (Plumptre 1878: 17–24, 110–22). But what they found distasteful—the lack of a safe distance between us and God—is what is most relevant: a message of basic acceptance, the opposite of alienation (Chakravarty 1955). Ted Honderich argues that determinism should evoke a response of affirmation and 'a celebratory philosophy of life' (1990: 171). Before him, Arthur Schopenhauer wrote that determinism and the denial of free will 'are the most abundant source of comfort and tranquility' (1985: 62).

10 For the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* text, see Burley (2007: 163–79).

To step back and proceed chronologically. In his essay *On the Free Choice of the Will*, Saint Augustine asked: 'If sins come from the souls that God created, and those souls come from God, how is it that sins are not almost immediately traced back to God?' (King 2010: 5). In 1825, Wilhelm von Humboldt noted that the *Bhagavadgītā* 'implies a necessary fatalism', since 'the Godhead ... is, properly speaking, to be considered as the only moral agent' (1849: 126). In 1839, Schopenhauer wrote:

[T]here is no shortage of ignoramuses who proclaim the freedom of the will as actually given ... But perhaps I am unfair to them, as it may be the case that they are not as ignorant as they seem but only hungry, and therefore, for a very dry piece of bread, teach everything that might please a lofty ministry. (Schopenhauer 1985: 45)

Catherine Robinson (2006: 73) finds R.D. Griffith in 1849 'objecting to what he thought of as a determinism that tended to fatalism and a reliance on the divine that detracted from moral responsibility'. As Eric Sharpe (1985: 37) puts it, in Griffith's view, 'simple obligation is powerless to provide the motive for right action'. Griffith writes:

It will suffice to observe, that the doctrine [of the *Bhagavadgītā*] interferes with human responsibility and freedom; and whatever clashes with them, subverts itself. The transference of our actions and condition to Deity, subtracts from our moral feelings all healthful stimulus; it sheds upon us an unmanly indifference; it disorganizes the probationary and tentative economy with which we are allied; it blasts the charities of man's heart; it strips the spirit of ardour—it paralyzes its elasticity;—it breaks its wing. (Griffith 1849: xliii)

Verbiage. In 1863, Robert Caldwell, the bishop of Tirunelveli in Tamil Nadu, commented on the *Bhagavadgītā* with words that were laced with righteous disgust, but otherwise astute:

According to the Gítá, God is the Soul of the world; its material cause, as well as its efficient cause. The world is his body, framed by himself out of himself. A consequence of this doctrine, a consequence which is distinctly taught again and again, is that God is all things, as containing all things. Every thing that exists is a portion of God, and every action that is performed is an action of God. The doctrine knows no limitations, and is incapable of being exaggerated. The basest animals that creep on the face of the earth have not merely been created by God for some good purpose, but are divine, inasmuch as they are portions of God's material form; and the most wicked actions which men, vainly fancying themselves free agents, are ever

tempted to perform, are not only permitted by God, but are actually perpetrated by him, inasmuch as they are performed by his power and will, working out their ends through the human constitution, which is a part of himself. (Caldwell 1894: 25–26; also quoted in Murdoch 1894: 33)

A statue of Caldwell was erected on the promenade at Marina Beach, Madras, in 1968. W.S. Urquhart (1914: 490) similarly opined that ‘we cannot acquiesce in a facile identification of God with the world, or a perhaps less facile merging of the world in God, if we are to have any secure foundation for morality, progress and religion’. At some level, Simone Weil felt this too (Bingemer 2006: 83–86). The moral agent within the human must be significantly non-divine so that it can be responsible.

How specifically Christian this objection is I am not sure. It sought to rescue morality against a legendary Oriental fatalism that was associated with belief in karma and rebirth. But is theology to be a by-product of social planning? Compare the perspective presented by Allen Ginsburg in his 1955 ‘Footnote to Howl’:

Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!
Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!

The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! The nose is holy!
The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy!¹¹

Everything is holy! everybody’s holy! everywhere is holy! everyday is
in eternity! everyman’s an angel!

The bum’s as holy as the seraphim! the madman is holy as you my
soul are holy! (Ginsburg 1994: 27)

Concluding discussion

The *Mahābhārata*’s (retrospective) pro-war stance for the good of the Earth is contrary to the idea that war is bad. The Kurukṣetra War was good and holy. But the theological frame offends the secular gaze and can offend the ongoing world-literature gaze. After all, in addition to being the champion of the war, Viṣṇu is also the champion of the Brahmanical class system, the

11 In this line, Ginsburg mentions two of the five sense-capacities (‘skin’, ‘nose’) and four of the five action-capacities (‘tongue’, ‘cock’, ‘hand’, ‘asshole’); see *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* 26.

royalist system and the patrilineal gender system (on the theological level, the male God contains and surpasses female nature). In social terms, he embodies the *Ancien Régime*, the inheritance of privilege by birth, and all the myths spun to explain it. The only possible defence is offered: everyone gets what they deserve. Because of karma, the ribbon is tied in a bow.

The Kurukṣetra War as a population purge for the benefit of the Earth has an apocalyptic climate-crisis resonance. But if many more people must die, in masses, before their time, I hope they are not killed by each other.

If the divine pro-war position is offensive, so also is the determinism by which it is forced on Arjuna and the rest of us. We react against the reduction of our ego. We mount all manner of righteous defences on its behalf. Its reduction seems unethical and is certainly counterintuitive. Kṛṣṇa's advice is that the enemies are desire and anger (*Bhḡ* 3.37–43), but in so saying, he urges Arjuna—and, by implication, the rest of us—to try to counter those enemies, rather than just watching them do their work; and the very form of his repeated imperatives to Arjuna to 'Stand up!' and 'Fight!' can seem to imply a freely acting self (Sharma 1979: 534; Brodbeck 2010: 139).

Regarding the reduction of the ego, Sanskrit has first-person singular, dual and plural. The plural has been easily slipped into above—the 'we' or 'us' that Arjuna's position so beautifully evokes, fashioned as I please—and the dual is just me and you, dear reader, mixed in with other dual forms (self and, for example, parent, sibling, friend, lover, child, time, God). The reduction of the ego might be presented in terms of acting not for oneself but for another (as per the Good Samaritan in the Bible, Luke 10:25–37) or for a community of others (as per John 15:13: 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends').¹² One responds positively to the sentiment of the enlarged concern, but in a way, any 'we two' or any 'we' that I could imagine in advance would be my own ego writ large. So it is interesting to note the various kinds of 'we' that others attempt to co-opt one into (national, modern, social, and so on) and to imagine opting out of them. But opting out of one 'we' inevitably emphasises other kinds of 'we', and thus, eventually, a 'me'. By contrast, in the *Bhagavadgītā*, the reduction of the ego is presented in terms of acting for the world or God (Gelblum 1992).

12 For the Gospel texts, see www.nestle-aland.com/en/read-na28-online/. Translations are from www.kingjamesbibleonline.org.

Determinism is abominated. But in the *Bhagavadgītā* with Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, and elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*, determinism is presented as inclusion, where its opposite would be separation. There would only be separation if people were singled out to be judged one by one. And judgement is, in the first place, a trick of the ego. 'Judge not, that ye be not judged' (Matthew 7:1).

Why is the *Bhagavadgītā* a work of world literature? One might wish to take a neutral approach to world literature, following Damrosch (2003: 4: 'all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language'). From this perspective, the history of the *Bhagavadgītā*'s popularity since its first translation into English (Wilkins 1785) puts it immediately in that category. But that cannot be all there is to it. Since its first translation, the *Bhagavadgītā* has also been seen as world literature in a programmatic sense, and this has involved an interpretive overlay that, facilitated by the removal of the *Bhagavadgītā* from the larger *Mahābhārata*, has tended to de-emphasise the war's divine context and the implications of that context for Arjuna's freedom, and to emphasise aspects that travel better, as it were, such as Kṛṣṇa's message of selfless devotion to duty and the poetic power of his theophany. In this chapter, I have tried to remove the overlay, to reflect on what it obscures and why, and to show that when the war's divine context and its deterministic ramifications are appreciated, they are anomalous in a work of world literature in the programmatic sense.

When Johann von Goethe in 1827 opined that 'it is the time for world literature, and all must aid in bringing it about' (Bell 2016: 908; Schrimpf 1998: 362), this was a plan, and it was so in part, no doubt, because of his encounter with Sanskrit literature (specifically *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, *Bhagavadgītā* and *Gītagovinda*). There is also no doubt that the *Bhagavadgītā*'s format as a meeting between human and God facilitates a universalist projection. But can we continue to imagine world literature in a programmatic sense after Goethe, Marx and Engels, the Great War, the Soviet Union, World War II, the Holocaust and the Cultural Revolution? If so, it must be progressive, anti-war and anti-slaughter. It must be compassionate for the greater good. And, after the blood spilled in the name of religion and the advances made in the name of science, world literature must also somehow be humanistic, perhaps secular, even anti-theological, so that sacred texts, many of which are primary works to be included in the category, are only included insofar as they have the same kind of inverted commas around them as has every other work. This is what it is now for the notion of world literature to be modern or up to date: it must be viewed postcolonially. To understand the violence

of colonialism will be to understand the role of religion in facilitating it. And the notion of world literature must be supernational almost by definition, against the perversions of nationalism in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. What is left? Some global ethical frame that seeks to encourage one to respect the other—where both oneself and the other are freely choosing agents. So, this imaginary notion of world literature must be anti-deterministic. What is left? People made of straw.

I would not want to be programmatic about world literature; but at the same time, I want it to be helpful, and I suspect that the *Bhagavadgītā* stands to be more helpful without the overlay. The tension is an interesting one. Quotations follow from Damrosch and Homi Bhabha, presented here to provoke further reflections:

As we triangulate between our own present situation and the enormous variety of other cultures around and before us ... a degree of distance from the home tradition can help us to appreciate the ways in which a literary work reaches out and away from its point of origin. If we then observe ourselves seeing the work's abstraction from its origins, we gain a new vantage point on our own moment. The result may be almost the opposite of the 'fusion of horizons' that Friedrich Schleiermacher envisioned when we encounter a distant text;¹³ we may actually experience our customary horizon being set askew, under the influence of works whose foreignness remains fully in view. (Damrosch 2003: 300)

What of the more complex cultural situation where 'previously unrecognized spiritual and intellectual needs' emerge from the imposition of 'foreign' ideas, cultural representations, and structures of power¹⁴ ... [T]here may be a sense in which world literature could be an emergent, prefigurative category that is concerned with a form of cultural dissensus and alterity, where non-consensual terms of affiliation may be established on the grounds of historical trauma. The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognise themselves through their projections of 'otherness' ...

13 The horizons are the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter. On the 'fusion of horizons', see Gadamer (2004: 304–6).

14 The quotations are from Goethe (as quoted by Bhabha 1994: 11). See Bell (2016: 911) and Schrimpf (1998: 364).

If we are seeking a 'worlding' of literature, then perhaps it lies in a critical act that attempts to grasp the sleight of hand with which literature conjures with historical specificity ... As literary creatures and political animals we ought to concern ourselves with the understanding of human action and the social world as a moment when something is beyond control, but it is not beyond accommodation. (Bhabha 1994: 12)

Arjuna is in that moment, realising that fighting is beyond his control, but not beyond his accommodation. We are in that moment, too. But who is the 'we'?

Coda

To close—and to emphasise, in closing, the determinism of the *Bhagavadgītā*—I quote from the last chapter of Kṛṣṇa's story in the *Mahābhārata*, at the end of the *Harivaṃśa*'s Viṣṇuparvan. Kṛṣṇa and comrades have rescued Kṛṣṇa's grandson Aniruddha, and on the way home Kṛṣṇa tries to get Bāṇa's cows (Austin 2021). The cows take refuge in Varuṇa's ocean, Varuṇa fights Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa gets the better of Varuṇa and Varuṇa protests at length:

Remember the unmanifest primordial matrix [*prakṛti*],¹⁵ of which the manifest world is a sign. Shun the quality of darkness [*tamas*], momentous man. Why are you deluded by the quality of passion [*rajas*]? You always used to concentrate upon the quality of clarity [*sattva*], wise lord of yogis. Renounce the vices that stem from the five elements, and renounce the ego!

I'm definitely older than this manifestation of Viṣṇu, and by dint of being your elder I deserve your respect. So why do you want to burn me here? Surely a fire can't fight against another fire. Put your anger aside, supreme warrior.

No one will match you, for you're the source of the world. First, of course, you created the matrix, who dutifully transforms herself, through the ripening of karmic seeds, in accordance with good works that were performed previously. In the beginning, using only the matrix, you created this world that's made of fire and soma. So why

15 Here and below, the word *prakṛti* is translated as 'matrix'. In Cherniak's *Bhagavadgītā* translations above, it was translated as 'nature'. On *prakṛti*, see Ashton (2020).

would you, of all people, esteem the likes of me? Brilliant god, you and you alone are forever the unconquerable, eternal, indestructible, changeless, self-born nurturer of beings. So protect me. You should protect me, impeccable god! Homage to you! You're the world's prime mover—it was promulgated by you alone.

Great god, are you playing, like a child playing with its toys?

I'm certainly not hostile towards the matrix, and nor am I harming her. The matrix exists within her transformations [*vikāras*], supreme person, and when her transformations have ceased, you, as is your wont, carry on. You're the transformation of all the transformations in the house of transformation, faultless god, and you always transform the fools who don't know their duty. For indeed the matrix is always beset with faults through the quality of darkness, or stained through the quality of passion, and hence delusion occurs. But you know the precedent and the consequent, you know everything, you possess supernormal powers, and you're practically the patriarch himself, so why do you make us all go astray? (*Harivaṃśa*, 113.28c–40)¹⁶

The deterministic perspective is particularly evident as a capstone in the final paragraph. Varuṇa can be speaking of Arjuna when he says to Kṛṣṇa that 'you always transform the fools who don't know their duty'; and he is asking for us all, but most immediately himself, when he asks Kṛṣṇa, 'Why do you make us all go astray?' The *Bhagavadgītā*'s theological determinism seems to be too much for the modern ego to handle, and for Varuṇa.

One must be a fool who is transformed by God. One must fight, but not against God. In a way, Varuṇa has invited Kṛṣṇa to transform him; but after Varuṇa's speech, Kṛṣṇa laughs, avoids the questions and demands the cows. Varuṇa refuses to give them because he has promised to support Bāṇa, and Kṛṣṇa backs down and goes home. He only wanted them for his wife:

Satyabhāmā told me to bring back some of Bāṇa's cows. She said it's because they drink the milk of those cows that the great demons don't grow old. She said I should please bring some back for her as long as it didn't hinder our mission, but that I mustn't set my heart on them if it would compromise our main task. (*Harivaṃśa*, 113.9–10)

In fact, Satyabhāmā had no need of these cows, because she had already received the boon of never getting old from Aditi (*Harivaṃśa* 92.60).

16 *Harivaṃśa* translations are adapted from Brodbeck (2019).

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