



Niškāma Karma and the Categorical Imperative: A Comparative Study of the Ethics of the Bhagavad Gita and Kantian Moral Philosophy

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Abstract

This paper aims at providing a comparative philosophical discussion of the moral doctrine on Niškāma Karma as presented in the Bhagavad Gita and the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant as deontological. These two traditions provide powerful descriptions of duty-based ethics, and both stress the paramount position of intention in deciding morally valuable actions. According to the doctrine of Niškāma Karma, one should perform his/her duty without any attachment to the fruits of action. The Gita teaches that, though action is an inevitable part of human life, the highest moral and spiritual happiness comes when we act not out of self-interest but out of a love for something greater than oneself, and follow it with total commitment. This moral system combines the notions of duty, detachment, and devotion and is eventually directed at the liberation and correspondence to the cosmic order.

By contrast, the moral philosophy of Kant is based on the concepts of rational autonomy and universal moral law. Kant asserts that the worthiness of an action as moral is not determined by its outcomes but its intention as a result of action. The key aspects of his ethics are the concepts of Good Will, Duty, and the Categorical Imperative where someone should always act based on maxims that can be generalized and in which humanity is always regarded as an end itself.

This comparative investigation shows that there are great similarities between the two systems, especially their disregard of consequence-based ethics, and the common focus on intention as the source of moral value. Nevertheless, there are also some underlying distinctions. Where the Gita places the duty in the context of spiritual and metaphysical system with the goal toward liberation and devotion, the Kantian ethics is based on the reason and free will of rationality. The paper, therefore, points out the similarities as well as differences between these two great ethical traditions.

Keywords: Niškāma Karma; Bhagavad Gita; Immanuel Kant; Categorical Imperative; Good Will; Duty for the Sake of Duty; Comparative Ethics; Duty-based Morality

Introduction:

Ethics as a primary area of philosophy is the study of norms or standards that govern human behavior and the basis of evaluating the actions as either right or wrong. Throughout various schools of thought, philosophers have been striving to answer the question of what moral obligation is, what forms the basis of duty, and whether intention matters in ethical living. Some of the most impactful works on the subject of ethics include

Niṣkāma Karma and the Categorical Imperative: A Comparative Study of the Ethics of... Shakespeare Malita teachings of Bhagavad Gita in Indian philosophy and the deontological moral theory that was conceived by Immanuel Kant in the Western thought. Although both traditions were developed in different historical and cultural backgrounds, both of them provide deep and structured thinking about duty, intention, and moral responsibility.

The Bhagavad Gita is an ethical vision, which is revealed by a philosophical dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna on the battle field at Kurukshetra. One of the key teachings in this writing is Niṣkāma Karma that advocates that one should do what is right without being clung to the outcome of the action. The Gita recognizes that action is a given in human life but it states that the attachment to the consequences result in bondage and suffering. Thus, the perfect moral agent is a detached agent who refers all his actions to a greater spiritual goal. In this context, the duty is not a purely social or moral duty but a way of getting spiritual liberation and unity with the universal order.

By contrast, the ethics associated with Kant is based on the independence of the rationale and the universality of the moral statute. Kant believes that the moral worth of an act is not determined by the outcome of the action but the purpose of the action and the principle that is applied. His moral theory is organized on the basis of Good Will, Duty, and Categorical Imperative that demands the person to act solely in the respect to the principles that can be generalized to all rational beings. Acts of morality do not therefore emerge as a result of inclination or desirable results but as a result of respect to the moral law.

In this paper, a comparative analysis of the two ethical frameworks will be done by looking at how these two ethical frameworks conceptualize duty, intention and moral law. By making such an analysis, the paper aims at highlighting not only the remarkable parallels but also the underlying dissimilarities between the moral teachings on ethics in both the Bhagavad Gita and the Kantian moral philosophy, thus making a contribution to a better understanding of cross-cultural ethical thought.

Research Objectives:

The given research aims at conducting a critical and comparative evaluation of ethical teachings on Bhagavad Gita and moral philosophy by Immanuel Kant. The main aims of this research are the following:

- 1) To discuss the meaning of Niṣkāma Karma and study its moral and philosophical importance in the context of Bhagavad Gita.
- 2) To investigate the moral philosophy of Kant in particular in the context of the concepts of Good Will, Duty and the Categorical Imperative.
- 3) To establish and assess the philosophical parallels on Kantian ethics and the Bhagavad Gita teachings of ethics.
- 4) To discuss the basic differences between these two systems, especially in connection to the origin of duty, the character of moral law and the final goal of human life.
- 5) In order to estimate the role played by both traditions in the formation of the theory of duty in the ethical philosophy.

Research Methodology: -

The current research project is based on qualitative and comparative philosophical approach, the major emphasis is given to the textual and conceptual analysis. The study is founded on primary and secondary sources.

The two main texts are the philosophical theory of Bhagavad Gita and ethical theory of Immanuel Kant. The Bhagavad Gita passages are selected and those that concern the doctrine of Niskama Karma are analysed to conceive the ethical ideal of action done without attachment to the outcome.

In the same way, the works of Kant are analyzed to explain the most important ethical notions like Good Will, the Duty, and the Categorical Imperative. It is then followed by a systematic study of the similarities and the differences between these two ethical frameworks by a comparative approach.

Literature Review:

The morality of the Bhagavad Gita and the Immanuel Kant moral philosophy have had a significant amount of philosophical literature dedicated to them. Research about the Bhagavad Gita often dwells on the teaching of Niskama Karma, which is the teaching of selfless action without regard to consequences. This doctrine according to scholars is a combination of action, knowledge and devotion and the result of this combination is spiritual liberation. The ethical theory of Kant has found a lot of consideration in Western philosophy, especially his Kantian theory of the Categorical Imperative and the duty out of duty. Kant claims that the morality is based on reason and that moral laws have to be universal and necessary. Comparative works have suggested that there are significant similarities between these two traditions, in particular, their common focus on duty, intention, and the denial of the consequence-based ethics. Simultaneously, researchers have also identified some considerable dissimilarities, specifically within the context of the source of duty, the purpose of rationality and the ultimate aim of moral action.

The current paper is based on these academic works, and it is aimed at presenting a systematic comparative study of Kantian ethics and the teachings of Bhagavad Gita about ethics, in particular, duty, altruistic activity, and ethical reasoning.

➤ **Meaning and Significance of Niṣkāma Karma in Bhagavad Gita:**

The concept of Niṣkāma Karma occupies a central place in the ethical and spiritual philosophy of the. It is a composite term formed by 'Niṣkāma' (desireless) and 'Karma' (action). In the Gītā, karma denotes all forms of action—bodily, mental, and verbal—while 'kāma' refers primarily to sensuous desires. Thus, Niṣkāma Karma signifies action performed without any desire for personal gain or attachment to results. The Gītā emphasizes that action is inevitable for all embodied beings. As long as one exists, one cannot remain without performing action. Human life is a biologically active one when it is controlled by strong natural forces like hunger, thirst, and the other needs. So, the abandonment of action is not a possibility or a good thing. This is not the renunciation of action but a shift in attitude towards it. Any action that is executed without the right knowledge and discipline causes bondage, and action that is executed with the right understanding causes liberation.

In the Gita renunciation is not the renunciation of action, but the renunciation of the fruits of action. The sage who has discovered that the individual self (Atman) is identical with the ultimate reality (Brahman) does not stop acting but is internally in a state of detachment. Such individual is an agent of duty and does not anticipate any reward.

Thus, non-performance of action cannot be termed as actual renunciation but through detached action is actual renunciation. This philosophical problem is presented when one

Niṣkāma Karma and the Categorical Imperative: A Comparative Study of the Ethics of... Shakespeare Malita argues that someone who has learnt and overcome all desires is not bound by anything to do any action. This is supported by some of the texts, but not entirely in the Gita. Instead, it asserts that an enlightened person still acts, not because he/she has to but to maintain the cosmic order and the wellbeing of the world. This brings in the concept of lokasangraha (social welfare) as a significant ethical aspect of action.

The Gītā further explains that the root cause of human suffering is not desire itself, but attachment. Therefore, rather than eliminating all desires—which is practically impossible—one should eliminate attachment to the objects of desire. Even when one becomes free from conscious desires, certain natural actions such as breathing continue. Hence, action is an unavoidable aspect of existence.

This idea is expressed in the famous verse:

“na hi kaścit kṣaṇam api jātu tiṣṭhaty akarma-kṛt” (Bhagavad Gita,3.5) – no one can remain even for a moment without performing action.

The doctrine of Niṣkāma Karma is further elaborated through important verses in the Gītā. In Chapter 2, Verse 47, it is stated:

“karmaṇy evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana |
mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr mā te saṅgo 'stv akarmaṇi | |” (Bhagavad Gita, 2.47)

This verse establishes that one has a right only to action, not to its fruits. Action should not be motivated by the desire for results, nor should one become attached to inaction. This forms the foundation of Niṣkāma Karma.

Similarly, Chapter 2, Verse 48 teaches:

“Yoga-sthaḥ kuru karmāṇi saṅgam tyaktvā dhanañjaya |
siddhy-asiddhyoḥ samo bhūtvā samatvaṁ yoga ucyate | |” (Bhagavad Gita, 2.48)

Here, the Gītā emphasizes the importance of equanimity. “One should perform actions with a balanced mind, remaining indifferent to success and failure”. This state of mental equilibrium is described as Yoga.

In Chapter 3, Verse 19, it is stated:

“tasmād asaktaḥ satataṁ kāryaṁ karma samācara |
asakto hy ācāraṁ karma param āpnoti pūruṣaḥ | |”. (Bhagavad Gita, 3.19)

This verse advises the continuous performance of duty without attachment, leading to the attainment of the highest goal. Further, in Chapter 3, Verse 20:

“karmaṇaiva hi saṁsiddhim āsthitā janakādayaḥ |
lokasaṅgraham evāpi sampāśyan kartum arhasi | |”. (Bhagavad Gita, 3.20)

This highlights that even great individuals attained perfection through action and that one should act for the welfare of society.

The idea of dedicating action to a higher principle is expressed in Chapter 3, Verse 30:

“mayi sarvāṇi karmāṇi sannyasyādhyātmacetasā |
nirāśir nirmamo bhūtvā yudhyasva vigatajvaraḥ | |”. (Bhagavad Gita, 3.30)

Here, the Gītā teaches that one should surrender all actions to God and perform duties without expectation or attachment.

The Gītā also harmonizes action (karma) and renunciation (tyāga). It asserts that both the path of knowledge and the path of action ultimately lead to the same goal:

“ekam sāṅkhyam ca yogaṁ ca yaḥ paśyati sa paśyati” (Bhagavad Gita, 5.5)

At the same time, it emphasizes that without renouncing desire-driven intentions, one cannot become a true yogi:

“na hy asaṁnyasta-saṅkalpo yogī bhavati kaścana” (6.2)
(Bhagavad Gita, 6.2)

Thus, the Gītā integrates knowledge and action into a unified philosophical system.

Devotion is another significant point in Niṣkāma Karma. The Gita clarifies that knowledge does not suffice, and it has to be accompanied by devotion. True piety is not a blind faith but one of ethical purity, absence of self-interest and emotional moderation. An ardent follower is one who is not concerned with pleasure and pain and does things without attachment.

Even the divine example supports this principle. Kṛṣṇa declares:

“na me pārthāsti kartavyaṁ triṣu lokeṣu kiṁ cana |
nānavāptam avāptavyaṁ varta eva ca karmaṇi ||”
(Bhagavad Gita, 3.22)

Although He has nothing to achieve, He continues to act to set an example for others. Similarly, the wise should act without attachment for the welfare of the world:

“saktāḥ karmaṇy avidvāṁso yathā kurvanti bhārata |
kuryād vidvāṁs tathāsaktaś cikīrṣur lokasaṁgraham ||” (Bhagavad Gita, 3.25)

Thus, Niṣkāma Karma represents a synthesis of action, knowledge, and devotion. It resolves the apparent contradiction between action and renunciation by advocating action without attachment. It does not encourage withdrawal from the world but promotes active engagement with a transformed consciousness. In this way, action becomes a means of liberation rather than bondage, leading to self-realization and inner peace.

➤ Kant's Deontological Ethics: -

1) **The Moral Philosophy of Immanuel Kant**

Immanuel Kant relies on the moral philosophy whose principle is that morality has its basis on reason. A human being can be considered to be really moral in case, he is a rational agent with the ability to apply his intellect and volition in making decisions and selecting actions, that is, according to Kant. Human beings cannot be attributed to be simply guided by their emotions, desires, or individual interests but they have the ability to judge rationally. Due to this intellectual ability, they can identify general moral standards, and behave following them. According to Kant, morality cannot be determined by consequences and happiness of an individual. In this case, morality would be determined by its consequences, and a single action would be moral in one instance and immoral in the other. Hence, Kant argues that a real basis of morality should be a general and objective thing. This universal basis in his case is rational duty that cuts across all rational beings.

According to Kant, moral laws are found by the power of reason and should be observed as respect to the laws. An ethical good individual is thus one who does not do

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things because of his or her inclination or because of impulse but because he has an obligation in accordance with sound principles.

2) The Concept of Good Will

The concept of Good Will is also one of the most significant ideas in the ethical theory described by Kant. It is well known that Kant claims that there is nothing in the world which can be absolutely and unconditionally good except a good will. Most of the qualities that people would perceive to be good like intelligence, courage, wealth, or power are not always good since they can be applied to malicious extremes. Their worth will include their uses. Good will is however good in itself. It is not rated against the outcome of its actions. Although a morally good action does not accomplish what it was intended to accomplish, such action still has a moral value provided it was done in good will. To Kant, what is moral about an action had to be the intention or motive behind the action and not the outcome. When an individual acts because of the moral law, then he or she is guided by the good will. As an illustration, when one assists another individual, just to receive the compliment or fame, or for his or her own personal gain, then the deed might seem to be good, but not inherently pure. But when the same action is carried out due to its being right, then it is a matter of good will, and has the real moral value.

3) Duty for the Sake of Duty

The principle of the Duty for the sake of Duty is the other basic concept in the ethical theory of Kant. Kant maintains that the moral excellence of an act is based on the inference whether it is carried out as a matter of obligation or through desire/ self interest. According to Kant, there are three types of actions. The former involves the actions opposite in duty and are contrary to moral law and thus they are morally wrong. The second category involves behavior that is both duty-based and driven by personal motive or desire and it may involve behaving in a certain way to receive appreciation, be rewarded or simply be motivated by emotional fulfilment. Despite the fact that such acts might look morally good, they do not possess any moral values since they do not have the guidance of duty.

The third category is the kind of actions that are adopted simply because of duty and in this case a person does the action solely because the action is known to be morally obligatory. Only actions like this one have a real moral worth according to Kant. Doing something out of duty is the respect toward the moral law and is the highest kind of moral dedication.

4) The Categorical Imperative

The Categorical Imperative is the major tenet of the Kantian moral philosophy. According to Kant, it is an unconditional moral command that guides an individual to do something in a specific manner without considering his or her desires, interests, or the consequences. In contrast to hypothetical imperatives, which are conditional and require the goals of a person, Categorical Imperative applies to all rational beings. Some hypothetical imperative might state: You should exercise, in case you want to be healthy. Such commands depend on personal desires. Categorical Imperative, in its turn, dictates a course of action on the basis of its rightness in a moral sense.

Kant expressed the Categorical Imperative through several formulations, each explaining the same moral principle from a different perspective.

(a) The Formula of Universal Law

The first formulation states:

“Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”

This maxim can be described as an individual rule or principle that determines how one acts. Kant says that when an individual decides to do something, first he or she should ask himself or herself whether the rule that underlies the action can become universal law that can be applied by all other people.

This is what is termed as the test of universalizability. When a principle does not apply to all people without contradiction, then the action is morally wrong. To take one instance, lying cannot be universalized in the sense of the fact that the entire world would fail to trust and communicate in the event that everyone lied. Accordingly, lying does not pass the ethical test.

This idea is known as the test of universalizability. If a principle cannot be consistently applied to everyone without contradiction, then the action is morally wrong. For example, lying cannot be universalized because if everyone lied, trust and communication would collapse. Therefore, lying fails the moral test.

(b) The Formula of Humanity

The second formulation states:

“Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always as an end and never merely as a means.”

This Formulation puts strong stress on the humanity and inherent value of human beings. Kant asserts that all humans have an intrinsic value since they are rational and independent agents who can think morally.

Hence, people should never be viewed as means of accomplishing individual ambitions. Deception, exploitation, coercion, manipulation and all other such actions are always ethically wrong in that they treat others as a means and not as an end.

Therefore, individuals must never be treated merely as tools for achieving personal goals. Actions such as exploitation, deception, coercion, and manipulation are morally wrong because they treat others only as means rather than as ends in themselves.

This principle establishes a moral duty to respect the dignity, rights, and autonomy of every human being.

© The Formula of the Kingdom of Ends

The third formulation states:

“Act according to maxims of a universally legislating member of a merely possible kingdom of ends.”

This formulation presents the idea that rational individuals should consider themselves as law-makers in a moral community governed by universal moral laws. When individuals act morally, they are not simply obeying external rules but participating in the creation of universal moral laws through their rational will.

- **Similarities and Dissimilarities between Kantian Morality and the Morality of the Bhagavad Gita:**
- **Similarities between Kantian Morality and the Ethics of the Bhagavad Gita**

1. Rejection of Utilitarianism

The rejection of utilitarianism is one of the most major similarities in Kantian ethics and the moral philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita. Utilitarianism considers actions in terms of their effects, in particular the quantity of pleasure or happiness that they cause. But the consequence-based approach is heavily criticized by both Kant and the Gita.

Kant is convinced that the goodness or badness of a deed does not depend upon its consequences but rather on the intentions of the deed. The morality of an action can be defined as being morally right only when it is done because of a sense of duty as well as in compliance with the moral law. On the same note, Bhagavad Gita explains that people should do actions without considering their outcomes. It is the intention that is used to carry a given action rather than the consequences.

2) Importance of Intention

The two ethical systems attach much importance on the motive of an action. To Kant, there is only the good will that is good without any qualification. Good will is the will to perform as addressed to duty and moral law. Although the action may turn out to be a failure, it still has got moral value as long as it is done with good will.

According to Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna instructs Arjuna to do things without attaching to the consequences. This is called Niṣkāma Karma, and it is the principle of selfless action, which is done without any selfish interest. Therefore, Kant and the Gita are both of the view that the moral worthiness of an action is based on the purity of intent but not the outcome.

3. Duty-Based Ethics

One more similarity is that they are focused on duty. The morality of Kantian is essentially deontological, or duty-based. According to Kant, humans should make a decision based on respect towards the moral law even when it is in contravention of their desires or interests.

Another principle of Bhagavad Gita is the need to be duty-oriented. Krishna teaches Arjuna to do his duty as a warrior free of doubts and attachments. Through Gita, it is learned that to uphold cosmic order and moral harmony, one is obliged to perform his/her duty. Thus, the two systems consider duty to be the main directing principle of ethical living.

4. Moral Principles are A Priori in Nature.

Kantian ethics and the ethics of the Bhagavad Gita both hold the view that there are independent moral principles that are not dependent on experience. Kant believes moral laws come about as a result of pure reason and as such, moral laws are universal and necessary. These are a priori principles that are in existence before and independent of empirical experience.

Equally, the Bhagavad Gita puts forth its moral doctrine as truths that are universal and eternal. Even though it considers the nature of man and the social roles, its major principles are not limited to specific situations and have a universal spiritual connotation.

5. Non-Hedonistic Character

The two systems do not regard hedonism as a moral system. According to Kant, pleasure is not a basis of making moral judgment since it is subjective and different among individuals. Ethical worth has to be founded on rationality and obligation.

Similarly, Bhagavad Gita states that pleasure and material enjoyment cause one to get into bondage and sufferings. It recommends self-control, detachment and discipline as virtues. In this way, both systems do not support the fact that pleasure is the end-goal of human life.

6. Respect for Human Dignity

Kant points out that all human beings should be treated as an end and never as a means. This principle emphasizes the inherent dignity of persons and their value.

N The bhagavad Gita, which is in a spiritual format, also encourages respect to all creatures. It does teach that all people have the same divine nature and thus they should be compassionate, non-discriminative, and respectful towards one another.

➤ Kantian Morality and the Ethics of the Bhagavad Gita Dissimilarities.

1. Source of Duty

One of the significant differences in the two systems is the origin of the duty. Reason is the source of duty, in Kantian ethics. Rationality in the form of the categorical imperative gives us a moral law that we can apply to everyone.

Conversely, the Bhagavad Gita bases duty on the notion of svadharma, which is defined by the nature of the person, as well as his or her qualities (gunas) and societal position. Therefore, when Kant supports a universal interpretation of duty, the Gita has a more situational interpretation.

2. Highest Good

Kant defines the highest good as the good will as per the moral law. The ultimate goal of a moral life is to do what is right and honorable to the universal law.

In Bhagavad Gita, a spiritual understanding of the highest good is introduced, however. Realisation of God and liberation (moksha) is the ultimate goal of life. Moral action is one way of achieving spiritual enlightenment and oneness with the divine.

3. Purpose of Actions

Kant is adamant that only duty must be followed. Any act driven by individual preference, want or self-interest is not of true moral value.

Bhagavad Gita on the other hand in promoting desireless action also acknowledges the role of lokasamgraha or the good of the society. Actions can be taken not only because they are a duty but also because of social harmony and common good.

4. Distribution of Duties

The moral law proposed by Kant is universal and fits all rational beings regardless of their social and personal disparities.

However, the Bhagavad Gita allocates responsibilities according to the character of a person and to his social status. Therefore, responsibility is shared among people in a different manner depending on their character and place in the society.

5. Nature of Ethical Principles

The ethical principle proposed by Kant is absolute and unconditioned. The principle is universal and does not depend on circumstances or situations.

In contrast, the ethical principle proposed in the Bhagavad Gita is not fixed and may depend on various qualities (gunas) that individuals exhibit.

Conclusion:

Comparative analysis between the morality of Kantian and the teaching in the Bhagavad Gita indicates that there are great similarities and also there are major differences. Although the two systems appeared in different cultural, philosophical backgrounds, they are all based on the primacy of duty, the value of intention and the insensitivity of moral value to consequences. Bhagavad Gita with its doctrine of Niškāma Karma urges one to do duty without expectation of outcome, thus encouraging selflessness, inner discipline and spiritual development. Similarly, the Immanuel Kantian philosophy of morality emphasizes the primary role of Good Will and states that morally valuable actions should be performed as a duty in accordance with universal moral law. His Categorical Imperative state formulation is rational standard of moral behaviour which is universally binding. The two systems are however different in their orientation. Ethics according to Kant is based on rational independence and universality, and the ethics of Bhagavad Gita incorporates the life of ethics with spirituality, devotion and ultimate goal of liberation (moksha). Also, the Gita makes it possible to have a more enlarged concept of ethical action in which personal responsibility is combined with the good of the world. Finally, Kantian ethics and Bhagavad Gita also have much to contribute to the moral philosophy that is quite complementary. They are all a part of the comprehension of duty, intention and the greater aim of human action.

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