

Chapter 66

Veganism in the Bhagwad Gita

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will start by giving a brief description about the most contextually relevant portions of the Bhagwad Gita (the Song of the Spirit) and go on to establish its stark opposition to egoism in general and anthropocentrism, in particular, which is responsible for most of the global problems in the age of the Anthropocene. It contends that anthropocentrism (including speciesism) is guilty for the globalized industry of animal agriculture that is responsible for large-scale suffering and various major global problems. It then seeks directions from the Gita on the appropriate principled responses to the industry, including that of changing dietary habits towards plant-based sources, before finally exploring whether the Gita would promote veganism.

INTRODUCING BHAGWAD GITA

The Plot

To a beginner, the *Bhagwad Gita* is a classical treatise involving a dialectical exchange between Arjuna- the warrior, and, Krishna- the enlightened charioteer, in the midst of the two fraternal armies of Pandavas (Arjuna's side) and Kauravas, during the fabled Mahabharata War, dated to ancient times, having possibly been fought in Kurukshetra, in present-day northern India. According to the laws and ethics of that space and age, the Pandavas are considered to be more righteous, and the war becomes an unavoidable instrument of the last resort to uphold righteousness- or a *Dharma Yuddha*. Arjuna happens to develop cold feet, deeply enmeshed in the technicalities of *jus ad bellum* and *just in bello*, that is- whether and how to undertake a war that would involve the wanton massacre of one's kith and kin, would involve utter uncertainties and travails, during and after it is over, having possible ramifications on the established political order, on social and economic stability, and would raise ethical and moral questions that mainly

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the victors would be liable to account for. Krishna, having royal as well as divine roots, being a paragon of intellectual and spiritual knowledge, comes to the rescue of Arjuna, and, engages in a dialogue, to inform the warrior of his necessary duties, of the knowledge of the absolute (and of the temporary), and the need to perform the action with utter altruism and devotion. The dialogue starts with a discussion, with both sides engaging dialectically in propositions, rebuttals and clarifications, and ends with Arjuna professing absolute devotion to Krishna and the willingness to contribute proactively in the war, after the latter had unfolded the laws of the universe, having proven how the war was indeed just, and after having revealed his *Vishwaroopam Avatar*- the personification of the universal and eternal truth.

The *Gita* (in short) may have different hermeneutical versions, based on the interpreter. A very narrow interpretation may conceive of it as a mere exposition of the virtues of warfare and of violence. However, if the lenses are sufficiently zoomed out, and the symbolisms and metaphors of characters and situations suitably read it could serve as a compass to any shipwrecked sailor to find the appropriate shore. This paper will embark on the endeavor to interpret the text selectively- in parts, and in a way that appear relevant with respect to the undertaken context of the global situation.

The paper neither claims nor disputes the scientific historicity of the events or the factuality of the characters that have been recorded in the popular versions of the texts, which would have undergone substantial additions and subtractions, through the generations, and, in the written and memorized forms are (in most probabilities) the works of error-prone humans- constrained by the knowledge of their respective ages. This paper only aims to very strategically extract some timeless and universally-relevant wisdom, purposefully in accordance with the requirements of these times in mind, while adopting as scientific an interpretation as is possible and necessary. It looks at the *Gita* as a philosophical masterpiece that can artfully be referred to as a great guide by anyone who is in need of moral and spiritual direction. Kindly bear with the issues of transliteration and of translation of complex concepts, which bear different spellings and interpretations in different sources of literature.

The Characterization and Symbolic Analysis

The Battlefield

The *Kshetra*, or the field of action which symbolizes the bivouac of life full of struggles and conflicts all around. It's an atmosphere of quandary which forces the mind to seek answers to little known questions. The great *Dharma Yuddha* is the perfect ambience which puts ample pressure on the great warrior Arjuna and sends him into a perplexed state of mind where he starts questioning his ethics. An ordinary individual may also come across such a perplexing situation in life and face a similar dilemma. The *Gita* can therefore be called a timeless classic that is relevant in every time and age.

The Chariot

The chariot symbolizes the mortal body which is driven by the mind or consciousness that is the charioteer. The five horses stand for the five sense organs (*indriyas*) that are controlled by the reins of the mind (*manas*). The passenger is the *Jivatma* or the individual soul guided by the charioteer. The ultimate destination of this journey is self-realization and *moksha* (salvation).

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