Svadharma and Situational Ethics in the Bhagavad Gita: An Alternative to Kantian Absolutism

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Abstract

Most major ethical theories in Western philosophy can be classified within either consequentialism, deontology, or virtue ethics. The centrality of 'duty for duty's sake' in both Kantian ethics and the Bhagavad Gita invites comparison, yet the two traditions diverge profoundly in how they understand and define the scope of 'duty'. This paper examines whether Svadharma and situational ethics in the Bhagavad Gita offer a more flexible, holistic and contextually responsive moral framework compared to Kant's absolutist deontology. The objectives are threefold: to analyse the foundational principles of Kant's moral philosophy; to outline the Gita's conception of dharma focusing on its distinctions between general, contextual and personal duties; and to demonstrate how the Gita's model of svadharma provides a compelling alternative to the rigidity of deontological ethical reasoning. By drawing these traditions into dialogue, this paper argues that the Gita's approach to ethical dilemmas — rooted in self-knowledge and responsibility — offers a richer and more adaptable paradigm for real-world moral issues than the categorical and absolutist rules of Kantian ethics.

Keywords: bhagavad gita, kantian ethics, svadharma, dharma, categorical imperative, applied ethics.

Introduction

Most major ethical theories in Western philosophy can be classified within either consequentialism, deontology, or virtue ethics. If we think of the notable names, such as Bentham's consequentialist theory of Utilitarianism, the Aristotelian Virtue Ethics, and Kant's deontological approach of the Categorical Imperative, we can observe that almost every milestone literature in ethical study within the Western framework prioritises

normative ethics over its application[1]. Mokhtari (2021) mentions how there is a "prevailing view" that "applying any normative theory can solve practical ethical dilemmas.[2]" But that is a rather diminutive and restrictive perspective to look at applied ethics from. Ethics, as a discipline, has arisen out of the practical needs of human living and functioning within a societal system. It cannot be reduced to the formulation of ready-made theoretical solutions because the problems we are aiming to address in the discipline are ever-evolving. Thus, many philosophers and professional ethicists reject this deductive way of addressing the application problem. They instead support a derivative or procedural approach to applied ethics. From this perspective, applied ethics cannot rely solely on fixed a priori principles from normative ethics; it must also draw on concrete human experiences in their respective contexts.

In this regard, the comparison between Kantian deontology and the conception of dharma as the primary ethical guideline in the *Bhagavad Gītā* becomes a central example of diverse approaches to ethics that uphold the dichotomy previously addressed. The centrality of "duty for duty's sake" in both ethical frameworks often invites comparison, yet the two traditions diverge profoundly in how they understand and define the scope of 'duty'. It can be understood by examining how the question of the relation between the means and the end and the place of contextual factors in moral decision-making are addressed in each system. Kantian ethics holds that the moral worth of an action depends entirely on the nature of its underlying maxim, independently of its outcome. The Gītā, however, while insisting that the means must be pure and grounded in dharma, does not negate the importance of the end, especially when that end concerns the protection of cosmic order (*ṛta*) or the welfare of all beings (*sarva-bhūta-hita*). Thus, the Gītā introduces a more context-sensitive, situationally grounded and practical approach[3] to duty, one in which the righteousness of action is inseparable from the complex interplay of intention, circumstance, and a broader ultimate spiritual purpose.

Within this backdrop, the aim of the present paper is to examine whether Svadharma and situational ethics in the Bhagavad Gītā offer a more flexible, holistic, and contextually

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[1] Pathak (2013) notes that there are two distinguishing characteristics of Western philosophy: first being its tendency to prioritise normative philosophy over practical philosophy and the second being its insistence to strictly separate the scopes of philosophy from that of religion.

[2] Majithia, R. (2015). The Bhagavad Gītā's ethical syncretism. Comparative Philosophy, 6(1), 56–79.

[3] Ancient Indian commentators often describe the Gītā as a "yoga-śāstra," meaning a scripture that synthesizes philosophical doctrine with practical discipline, a nuance that is often lost when the text is read solely as an ethic of duty (Radhakrishnan, 1948)

responsive moral framework compared to Kant's absolutist deontology. The objectives of this paper are threefold. Firstly, we aim to analyse the foundational principles of Kant's moral philosophy. After that, we proceed to outline the Gītā's conception of dharma, focusing on its distinctions between general, contextual, and personal duties. Finally, we endeavour to demonstrate how the Gītā's model of *svadharma* provides a compelling alternative to the rigidity of deontological ethical reasoning. By drawing these traditions into dialogue, this paper argues that the Gītā's approach to ethical dilemmas, being rooted in self-knowledge, and responsibility, offers a richer and more adaptable paradigm for real-world moral issues than the categorical and absolutist rules of Kantian ethics.

Kant's Moral Philosophy

Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) moral philosophy stands as one of the foundational pillars of Western philosophical thought. Kantian deontology is fundamentally concerned with the identification of unconditional moral duties based on rationality. He argues that since consequences are always uncertain, contingent, and influenced by factors beyond our control, they cannot reliably ground moral obligation and only a principle that can be willed universally can serve as the foundation of morality. Thus, Kant emerged with the notion of the Categorical Imperative (CI) which refers to an unconditional command grounded in pure reason, binding on all rational beings regardless of personal desires, in other words, a command which is directed at an agent who is capable of both obeying it as well as disobeying it. Kant classifies moral obligations as Categorical Imperatives as opposed to being Hypothetical Imperatives which refers to an action which is "good to some purpose" (Kant, 1785) which may be possible or actual. The Hypothetical Imperative also addresses us as rational beings but does so conditionally as such imperatives instruct us to will certain means *because* we are already motivated to reach a particular end. Yet not every conditional directive qualifies as a hypothetical imperative in Kant's strict sense; only those that express the rational necessity of adopting the means required for achieving an end one has chosen meet this standard.

Goodwill And Duty

In the opening of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant asserts that the "good will" is the only thing that can be considered good without qualification (Kant, 1785). He argues that the only thing good without qualification is a good will. Other qualities of a

person can be used for good or ill depending on the intentions of the agent, only the will that acts from respect for the moral law can be unconditionally good. This brings forward Kant's famous concept of duty.

Duty is the necessity of an action performed out of respect for law. Because human beings are driven by desires that may conflict with moral requirements, we experience the Moral Law as a duty, a constraint on inclination. Thus an action has genuine moral worth only when it is done from duty, not merely in accordance with duty. Actions motivated by sympathy, self-interest, or happiness may be admirable, but their conformity to duty is accidental; had circumstances been different, the agent might not have acted morally.

Duty for Kant is thus entirely divorced from personal interest or situational incentives. This strictness is what led some scholars, such as Foot (1972), to criticise Kant's morality as essentially inflexible.[4] Nevertheless, Kant's insistence on universal obligation has profoundly shaped Western moral thought and continues to influence contemporary debates in ethics.

The Universal Law of Nature

Kant states that "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (Kant, 1785). According to this, to determine whether an action is morally permissible, we must consider whether a certain action would be sustainable if everyone in the world did the same. If the maxim cannot be universalized without contradiction, then the action is morally impermissible.

Critics argue that the test is too rigid and often fails to account for important contextual details. For example, Kant famously insists that lying is always wrong, even if lying would save a life. Because one cannot will that everyone lies when convenient, the maxim fails the 'universalisation test'. However, such an uncompromising view seems counterintuitive in situations where lying could promote the greater good in the long run.

Pathak (2013) notes that this rigidity arises directly from Kant's rejection of consequences as morally relevant. It is here that Kantian ethics diverge most strongly

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[4] "The conclusion we should draw is that moral judgments have no better claim to be categorical imperatives than do statements about matters of etiquette. People may indeed follow either morality or etiquette without asking why they should do so, but equally well they may not." (Foot, 1972, p9) She further goes on to argue that actions that arise out of virtues such as charity, sympathy, sense of identification can also lead to morally just action all the while being based on a hypothetical imperative rather than a categorical one.

from the Bhagavad Gītā's context-sensitive approach. While the Gītā also condemns actions driven by attachment or selfish motives, it does not rule out lying or violence categorically.

Dharma in Bhagavad Gītā

According to Austin (2019) most researchers agree that the core of the epic took shape between the 3rd century BCE and the 3rd century CE, with the earliest surviving portions dating to roughly 400 BCE. The Bhagavad-Gītā, embedded in the 6th book of the Mahābhārata— the Bhīṣmaparva, is traditionally dated between 1000 and 500 BCE and has become one of the most influential texts of classical Hinduism (Pathak, 2013). Written in the form of a dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, set on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra, it addresses questions of human nature, the meaning and purpose of duty (dharma), and the role cultivation of detachment plays in determining the right course of action that will lead to the ultimate aim of spiritual self-liberation.

It is difficult to convey the meaning of dharma in its entirety within a single definition. The word itself comes from the Sanskrit root *dhṛ*, meaning "to hold," "to support," or "to sustain." Over centuries, across regions and historical contexts, its significance has continually shifted. Within Indic traditions, *dharma* may denote ethics, law, duty, personal calling, religion, teaching, or righteousness. (Howard and Cates, 2025). As Bina Gupta explains: "Dharma in its normative aspect refers to the ethical rules of actions, duties to be performed. It encompasses all forms and activities that shape and sustain human life" (Gupta, 2002, p19).

The Gītā's opens with the phrase *dharma-kṣetre*[5] which means "the field of dharma". Here the battlefield represents the inner arena where ethical decisions must be made. This showcases the dynamic nature inherent in the Gītā's understanding of morality. Majithia (2015) describes Gītā's moral framework as "essentially consequentialist yet capacious enough to allow a place for deontological and virtue-centric intuitions to be satisfied." This means that while the Gītā does consider outcomes relevant, its teleology is not utilitarian in the Western sense. The highest end it pursues is freedom (mokṣa), not the maximization of pleasure or utility. Because this consequentialism is metaphysically grounded in the

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[5] dharmakṣetre kurukṣetre samavetā yuyutsavaḥ | māmakāḥ pāṇḍavāś caiva kim akurvata sañjaya || BG. 1.1
Dhritirashtra. Ranged thus for battle on the sacred plain-/On Kurukshetra- say, Sanjaya! say/What wrought my people, and the Pandavas? (Arnold, n.d.)

attainment of liberation and the maintenance of cosmic harmony, it differs significantly from modern secular consequentialism. This broader conception of consequences allows the Gītā to avoid the pitfalls of both utilitarian reductionism and absolutist rigidity.

Types of Dharma

In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the term **dharma** is primarily employed in three distinct senses: *sādhāraṇa dharma*, *svadharma*, and *varṇāśrama dharma* (Chakraborty, 2017). *Sādhāraṇa dharmas* refer to universal virtues and obligations, including *nitya* (regular), *naimittika* (occasional), and *kāmya* (voluntary or that which are desirable to the agent) duties[6]. This general ethical code consists of moral norms considered binding on every individual, regardless of caste, gender, location, or historical period. Classical texts identify these universal duties as *ahiṃsā, satya, asteya, brahmacarya,* and *aparigraha.* The *Mahābhārata* frequently discusses these virtues, sometimes aligning with these five and at other times expanding the list, consistently giving special prominence to truthfulness, particularly in the *Ādiparvan.* The underlying assumption is that cultivating such moral qualities is indispensable for a person's spiritual progress; hence, there is no sphere of human life in which their value is not acknowledged.

Another layer of dharma recognized in the Gītā is *varṇāśrama-dharma* which is determined by one's social role (varṇa) and one's stage of life (āśrama). There are four classes in the hierarchy and therefore four broad functions in traditional Indian society according to these texts: the *brahmin* or priestly class that is responsible for sacred and educational work, the *kshatriya* or warrior class that is concerned with the administration and defense of the state, the *vaiśya* or working class that undertakes agricultural and economic work, and the *śudra* class for menial work in the service of the other three classes. The stages of life too are fourfold and undertaken serially. In the *brahmācārya* or student stage, the individual is given the appropriate education befitting his place in society. In the *gṛhasthya* or householder stage, the individual takes on the responsibilities of family and work. The *vansprasthya* or semi-retirement stage is given to social service, where the individual begins to withdraw from worldly life, a process that is then completed in the final ascetic stage of *sannyāsa* or world-renunciation. Thus a student member (brahmācari) of the warrior class

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[6] The category of obligatory action such as nittya karma, naimittika karma, and kāmaya karma are part of a larger scheme of actions that also include forbidden actions (pratiṣiddha karma).

(kshatriya) will have different duties from a more mature member (grahastya) of the same class.

Many misunderstand dharma to mean *varṇāśrama-dharma* only which is a rather misleading interpretation of the complexities that underlie the explication of the principles of dharma in the Gītā. As Pathak (2013) had stated dharma comes "prior to *varṇāśramadharma.*" That is to say, the broader concept of dharma forms the basis for the formulation of the concept of *varṇāśrama-dharma.* Thus, *varṇāśrama-dharma* in actuality only constitutes one facet of dharma which in itself is a rather flexible structure for determining the most appropriate and ethical course of action for an individual.

But the most prominent ethical concept explored in the Gītā is that of *svadharma.* The term *svadharma* combines *sva*, i.e., "one's own", with *dharma*. Svadharma refers to the duties arising from the combination of a wide range of factors such as one's inherent nature (svabhāva which is shaped by the three *guṇas*—sattva, rajas, and tamas), temperament, talents, responsibilities towards society and the maintenance of the wider cosmic order instead of being determined by only a limited number of variables. This is what distinguishes it from other iterations of dharma.

Misinterpretations arise depending on whether *sva* is understood in its social sense based on one's assigned status or metaphysical sense taking into consideration the deeper spiritual self). The Gītā ultimately emphasizes the latter: svadharma refers primarily to the duty that arises from one's inner moral nature, though it may also take on a social expression. The central ethical question[7] in Gītā is whether one should yield to the pull of desires or follow the guidance of reason and the inner self *(svabhava)*. This, in essence, is the message conveyed through the Gītā's narrative: it offers a resolution to this moral conflict by teaching the principles of *svadharma*, guiding one toward action rooted in reason and spiritual duty rather than desire.

Dharma Sankata and Apaddharma

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[7] Pathak (2013) points out the " metaphorical implications" in the battle of Mahabharata: the vast Kaurava army represents a person's sensory cravings or *icchābhāva*, while the Pāṇḍava forces symbolize the pure self or rational nature that acts in accordance with one's innate righteousness (*svabhāva*). Just as the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas are locked in conflict, there is a constant internal war between our sensuous impulses and our higher reason or soul.

A distinct and commendable feature of the Gītā's ethical framework is its explicit recognition of *dharma-saṅkaṭa* which refers to situations where multiple moral duties conflict. In such cases, a normative application of universal rules is impossible. This framework anticipates what contemporary ethicists call "moral dilemmas," where no single rule suffices.

Western philosophers and theologians have long debated whether true moral dilemmas exist. One influential understanding of a moral dilemma describes a situation in which an individual is bound by two conflicting moral requirements but can satisfy only one of them. Any action they take will necessarily involve neglecting another duty they are equally obligated to perform. As Christian ethicist Edmund Santurri argues, if a circumstance is genuinely dilemmatic, then "whatever course of action we take will embroil us in some moral transgression" (Santurri, 1987, p. 2). There are several western philosophers who have denied the existence of moral dilemmas, Kant himself being one of them. Kant argues that in a moral law guided by pure reason, conflict of duties is an impossible condition (Kant 1785).

While many scholars translate *dharma-saṅkaṭa* as "moral dilemmas," this translation is inadequate as the scope of dharma extends far beyond what contemporary ethicists typically designate as the moral domain. As Howard and Cates (2025) note, "Dharma saṃkaṭas arise, not only from the existence of "moral" duties that sometimes require of a person different and incompatible actions, but also from entangled personal and social relations and the contextual obligations that these relationships entail."

In the narrative of the *Mahabharata*, Krishna frequently appears to subvert conventional moral norms. Yet these apparent transgressions are almost always undertaken in pursuit of a higher ethical purpose or the welfare of the larger world. This reflects the notion that no fixed or stereotypical moral formula can adequately guide action in every circumstance. The *Śānti Parva* recognizes this difficulty explicitly. Within it lies the subsection *"Apaddharma Anuśāsana Parva,"* comprising forty-three sections that address various critical or perilous situations and the forms of conduct appropriate to them[8]. *Āpaddharma* or duty in times of calamity, thus, functions as a solution or a guideline for navigating and resolving a *dharma-sankata* in an extreme situation which is a direct

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[8] In section CIX, Bhīṣma openly concedes that the nature of dharma is itself elusive by stating, "It is difficult to say what righteousness is. It is not easy to indicate it. No one in discoursing upon righteousness can indicate it accurately. Righteousness was declared (by Brahman) for the advancement and growth of all creatures."

juxtaposition to absolutist morality[9]. When faced with a crisis that presents a *dharma-sankata*, *Āpaddharma* provides the framework for determining the higher dharma (*dharma sukshma*) that must be followed under those specific, urgent circumstances.

Niṣkāma Karma: 'Duty for Duty's sake'

While the basic structure of the Bhagavad Gītāis rooted in scriptural instructions presented in the Vedas and Upanishads, Krishna also proposes certain revisionary changes to the traditional doctrines which form the basis of the unique moral framework advocated by Gītā. One such change is the emphasis on the necessity of detachment.

2.47 Your right (*adhikarā*) is to action alone;

Never to its fruits at any time.

Never should the fruits of action (*karmaphala*) be your motive (*hetur*);

Never let there be attachment (*saṅgo*) to inaction in you.

2.48 Fixed in Yoga, performing actions,

Having abandoned attachment (*saṅgam tvaktvā*), Arjuna,

And having become indifferent to success or failure.

It is said that evenness of mind (*samatvaṁ*) is yoga. (Sargeant, 1984)

The idea of action without attachment to the outcome or *niṣkāma karma* form one of the primary elements of ethics in Gītā. It requires that individuals perform one's moral duties while relinquishing all desire for personal gain, since desire corrupts action by tethering it to attachment. Action motivated by desire (*sakāma karma*) binds the agent, while action motivated by duty liberates because it is informed by perfect knowledge.[10] Thus, renouncing action but renouncing attachment. This is why Kṛṣṇa instructs Arjuna to renounce attachment but not action, in other words, he tells him to not fight for victory or vengeance but for upholding righteousness.

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[9] "Rightousness (Dharma) sometimes takes the shape of unrighteousness(Adharma)." (The Mahabharata, Shanti Parva, Section CXLII)

[10] yaḥ sarvatrānabhisnehas tat tat prāpya śubhāśubham | nābhinandati na dveṣṭi tasya prajñā pratiṣṭhitā || BG 2:57

One who, without attachment in every respect, neither rejoices nor curses upon obtaining what is correspondingly good or evil; he is established in perfect knowledge.

Both the Gītā and Kant describe human beings as possessing a dual nature: primal inclinations an *prakṛti* (materiality), and Kant distinguishes the noumenal realm of autonomous reason from the phenomenal realm of desires, but for both, moral judgement requires that action be guided by the higher aspect of the self. But that is where their similarities end. If we investigate deeper into the two traditions we find that they vary greatly in their specifications of what that moral judgement of the higher self should encompass in practicality.

What is Duty?

The discourse of duty permeates the Gītā, and it is therefore understandable that the text's ethical outlook is often interpreted as fundamentally deontological, since, deontology literally refers to the study (*logos*) of duty (*deon*). Yet while "duty" is often an adequate translation of *dharma*, the term itself has a much broader range of meanings. Along with *artha*, *kāma*, and *mokṣa*, *dharma* forms one of the four aims of human life[11]. Many scholars have proposed that the very purpose of the *dharma*-system is to eventually make *mokṣa* attainable for all. According to this view, individuals gradually ascend the class hierarchy across lifetimes by faithfully performing the duties assigned to them by the *dharmic* order, including those relating to *artha* and *kāma*, which eventually qualifies them for liberation. Whether mokṣa is achieved through ritual (*yajña*), knowledge (*jñāna*), or meditation (*dhyāna*), its accessibility is only progressively available.

According to the Bhagavad Gītā, a person's actions reflect whichever guna predominates, and thus duties arise from qualities, not lineage. The higher self embodies sattvic clarity and universal law; the lower self is entangled in desire. Svadharma becomes meaningful when guided by the higher self, echoing Kant's notion of the autonomous will that legislates moral law for itself. However, while *svadharma* is grounded in the insight that human beings are not identical rational units but complex persons with distinct psychophysical compositions which ultimately influence their moral responsibilities, Kant, on the other hand, assumes that all rational beings will derive identical moral obligations from identical universal laws, thereby minimizing the moral significance of individuality. Krishna emphasizes repeatedly that one's own duty, even if performed imperfectly, is better

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[11] *Artha* concerns material well-being, wealth, resources, political authority. *Kāma* pertains to sensual gratification, particularly love and erotic pleasure. *Mokṣa*, by contrast, concerns liberation: either liberation into the heavenly realms described in the Vedas, or, following the Upaniṣads, the emancipation of the higher self (*dehī* or *ātman*) from the lower, embodied self (*deha*), thereby ending the cycle of rebirth.

than performing another's duty perfectly. This principle reveals an ethical pluralism in the Gītā that is in stark contrast with Kant's universalism.

Conclusion

While both Kant and Krishna emphasize the importance of duty and intention, the philosophical foundations and practical implications of their views diverge sharply. Unlike Kant's deontological ethics, which derive moral obligation solely from universal rational principles, the Gītā embraces the complexity of human life by acknowledging the multitude of variables that impact a moral decision and putting equal importance on factors other than intention that also informs an action. Thus if you attempt to reconcile Gītā's principles with Kant's conception of a universal maxim, it can be said that while Kant only takes into account the universality of an action in a 'perfect setting', Gītā determines the moral worth of an action through the principle of universality of situation instead whereby it declares something a moral law only within the distinct context from which an action arises. Ultimately, the Gītā offers a richer ethical vision. Its moral teachings cultivate humility, compassion, and responsibility. It emphasises acting without selfish attachment, but never without contextual awareness. In this way, the Gītā offers a compelling alternative to Kantian absolutism, grounded in an understanding of moral life that is as spiritually informed as it is pragmatic in practical life.

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