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RENUNCIATION AND THE MAN OF DISCIPLINE IN *THE BHAGAVAD-GITA*

The concept of sacred duty – *dharma* – is the central idea of *The Bhagavad-Gita*. Arjuna is reluctant to go to war with his family, the Kauravas, despite the fact that, as Krishna says, Arjuna *must* go to war with them in order to fulfill his sacred duty (36). Krishna's teachings in *The Bhagavad-Gita* are meant to dissuade Arjuna from his refusal to act – inaction – and in doing so, Krishna introduces the concept of renunciation. Krishna insists that Arjuna should not refuse to act, or renounce all action, but should instead act as a man of discipline would, according to his own sacred duty or duties. At other times, however, Krishna describes the man of discipline – one who fulfills sacred duty – as one who also engages in renunciation. This apparent contradiction undermines the logical consistency of Krishna's argument. However, upon further analysis of the text, it becomes evident that Krishna uses the word “renunciation” to address two different forms of renunciation. The first form of renunciation is one derided by Krishna – negative renunciation, or the renunciation of *dharma*. The second form of renunciation is the one praised by Krishna – positive renunciation, or the renunciation of attachment to the outcomes that follow from performing one's *dharma*. By analyzing the text with an understanding of the two forms of renunciation to which Krishna refers, many of the apparent contradictions in Krishna's argument can be resolved.

The primary inconsistency in Krishna's definition of renunciation stems from the relationship of renunciation to the idea of the man of discipline. According to Krishna, Arjuna

must *be* a “man of discipline” (72), which Krishna initially expounds upon in the Third Teaching: “Earlier I taught the twofold basis of good in this world... for men of discipline, action” (43). In the next verse, to elaborate on the nature of the man of discipline, Krishna introduces the concept of renunciation: “A man cannot escape the force of action by abstaining from actions; he does not attain success just by renunciation” (43). From these two verses, it follows that the man of discipline does not participate in renunciation. As, according to Krishna, a man of discipline – one who performs disciplined action – does not renounce, it’s clear that disciplined action and renunciation are not the same thing. In the Sixth Teaching, however, Krishna seems to make the opposite claim: “One who does what must be done without concern for the fruits is a man of renunciation and discipline” (65). In this case, Krishna has described the man of discipline as one who also engages in renunciation, despite the fact that he had previously made a distinction between renunciation and disciplined action. Krishna’s inconsistent use of the concept of renunciation presents serious problems in terms of maintaining the cohesiveness of the message of *The Bhagavad-Gita*.

In order to reconcile these contradictory conceptions of renunciation, it’s necessary to use two definitions of the word “renunciation” to interpret the text. Krishna clarifies his position on renunciation in the Eighteenth Teaching of *The Bhagavad-Gita*: “Renunciation of prescribed action is inappropriate” (136). Renunciation of prescribed action – sacred duty, or *dharma* – is negative renunciation, the form of renunciation that is not performed by a man of discipline. To renounce one’s *dharma* is the “way of dark inertia” (136), and is precisely what Krishna is trying to prevent Arjuna from doing, in convincing him to go to war against his family. When Krishna discusses the type of renunciation that a man of discipline should *not* engage in, he refers to this negative definition of renunciation. When Krishna refers to the man of discipline as a renouncer,

however, he refers to the positive definition, in which “one performs prescribed action because it must be done, relinquishing attachment” (136). Positive renunciation is performing one’s *dharma*, regardless of the outcome, and without attachment to any particular outcome. *This* is the renunciation that Krishna urges Arjuna to perform, so that he may go to war detached from the war’s possible negative (and even positive) outcomes. It is from these two senses of the word “renunciation” that Krishna’s views on renunciation and the man of discipline are given their proper context within Krishna’s overall argument.

The man of discipline renounces attachment to the outcome of performing one’s *dharma*, and so whenever Krishna uses the positive definition of “renunciation”, he does so to describe a man of discipline – one who performs disciplined action. However, there are still verses in *The Bhagavad-Gita* that seem to imply that there is a distinction between disciplined action and positive renunciation, or in other words, that disciplined action could still occur without positive renunciation. For example, in the Fifth Teaching, Krishna says: “Renunciation and discipline in action both effect good beyond measure; but of the two, discipline in action surpasses renunciation of action” (59). This distinction between disciplined action and positive renunciation appears to be problematic, but upon further analysis, it’s clear that Krishna’s conception of positive renunciation refers only to the disciplined *man*, and not necessarily to disciplined action. Though an individual can perform actions in a disciplined manner, not all individuals are men of discipline, performing *dharma* with renunciation. It is necessary to make this slight distinction because it accounts for certain uses of the word “renunciation” that appear to not conform to the definitions of either positive or negative renunciation.

The concept of *dharma* is the central idea of *The Bhagavad-Gita*, but all explanations of *dharma* must necessarily consider situations in which sacred duties are or are not followed, and

the characteristics of a person who completes their sacred duties in an optimal manner. Krishna uses the concepts of positive and negative renunciation, as well as the concept of the man of discipline, to explore these dimensions of *dharma* that are of vital importance to the text. *The Bhagavad-Gita* has been read and analyzed for hundreds of years, and though its importance has been established, in order for the reader to fully appreciate that importance, careful analysis of the work is required. Perhaps this careful analysis will reveal even more inconsistencies that must be dealt with through further analysis, but no philosophical text should be read uncritically. Ultimately, how great could a text be if it's unable to withstand criticism, even hundreds of years after it was written? *The Bhagavad-Gita* appears to have withstood this criticism, but it's only through continued critical analysis that it is able to retain its importance as a philosophical and religious work.

WORKS CITED

The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War. Trans. Barbara Stoler Miller.
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