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The Bhagavad Gita through the Prism of Kantian Ethics

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Abstract. The study analyzes one of the main works of Hindu philosophy, the Bhagavad Gita, which tremendously influenced the development of the Eastern image of the world in general and the Hindu in particular. The concept of paths leading to liberation and cognition of “Self”, God, being and non-being is considered. The authors conclude that the path of knowledge (Djnāna Marga), although it should contain both intellectual principles and rational tools, contains the subordination of intellect to intuition, which contradicts the European philosophical thought. Another path of liberation is the path of action (service) – Karma Marga, the most difficult task of which is to overcome the interest in performing an action. Service should be free from selfish considerations. Here Kant expressed views very close to Karma Marga, focusing on the philosophical analysis of the moral and legal. As proof, the authors analyze examples of human actions that cannot be evaluated unambiguously. The third path of the Gita is the path of love (devotion), gaining unity with God. There is no clear commentary in the work on which of the paths is most important, but the path of love itself is a result that the other two paths only strive for. The authors conclude that there is a difference between Western and Eastern culture. In Eastern philosophy, the truth is revealed not on the path to rational knowledge, but on the path of the aesthetics of love. However, the authors note that Western religion includes the concept of love, but it has a fundamentally different character. In Western Christianity, a person places God in their heart, and in Indian systems, a person must find a way to the heart of God.

Keywords: Kant, Eastern philosophy, the path of knowledge, the path of service, the path of love, the ethics of love

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Бхагавадгита сквозь призму кантовской этики

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Аннотация. Исследование посвящено анализу одного из основных произведений индуистской философии «Бхагавадгита», которое оказало колоссальное влияние на развитие восточного образа мира в целом и индуистского в частности. Рассматривается концепция путей, ведущих к освобождению и познанию «Я», Бога, бытия и небытия. Автор приходит к заключению, что путь знания (джняна-марга) хоть и должен содержать и интеллектуальное начало и рассудочный инструментарий, в основе своей содержит подчинение интеллекта интуиции, что является противоречием европейской философской мысли. Еще один путь освобождения – а путь действия (служения) – карма-марга, самой сложной задачей которого является преодоление заинтересованности в совершении действия. Служение должно быть свободно от эгоистических соображений. И тут Кант выразил весьма близкие карма-марге взгляды, акцентируя внимание философского анализа морального и легального. В качестве доказательства авторы анализируют примеры человеческих поступков, которые нельзя оценивать однозначно. Третий путь Гиты – пути любви (преданности), обретения единства с Богом. В произведении нет четкого комментария, какой из путей наиболее важен, однако путь любви сам по себе есть результат, к которому два других пути лишь стремятся. Авторы приходят к выводу, что тут возникает разница между западной и восточной культурами. В восточной философии истина открывается не на пути к рациональному познанию, а на пути эстетики любви. Однако авторы отмечают, что в западной религии есть концепция любви, но она носит принципиально иной характер. В западном христианстве человек поселяет Бога в сердце своем, а в индийских системах человек должен найти путь к сердцу Бога.

Ключевые слова: Кант, восточная философия, путь знания, путь служения, путь любви, этика любви

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Introduction

Besides the political purposes, the “heretical” teachings of India posed the Kshatriyas’ fundamental problem. That was the correlation of social and moral duty, which turned out to be unresolved within the framework of Brahman theory

(Brahmanism or Brahminism). The fact is that the Brahmans saw the way to achieve the Moksha on the path of beneficence and contemplative knowledge of the Absolute. This was unacceptable for the Kshatriyas, whose social duty called not for contemplation, but for action, not for beneficent deeds, but for military activity. There was a peculiar contradiction between the moral ideal and social duty. One excluded the other, but, at the same time, both were a necessary condition for karmic perfection. A way out of this ideological impasse was already impossible within the framework of the traditional interpretation of the Samhitas and the Upanishads.

In the Bhagavad Gita, an attempt is made to get out of this impasse with minimal loss. The general pathos of this remarkable poem is aimed at solidarity with the Vedic-Brahman religious and philosophical system. Even the supreme impersonal cosmic principle retains its name Brahman (although Bhagavat, acting in the avatar of Krishna, is proclaimed as the supreme deity in the poem). Just as in Brahmanic literature, the Gita proclaims the cosmic mind as the only truly ontological principle. All existing things are the result of Maya, a cosmic illusion. Accordingly, the goal of the knower remains a certain state of consciousness in which the unreality of the material world and the reality of the only genuine transcendent being, the only really existing Brahman, becomes apparent. Enlightenment, as well as in orthodox literature, is interpreted by the Bhagavad Gita as an understanding of the absence of the world duality, the absence of a boundary between subject and object, Atman and Brahman, Self and God, being and non-being.

The problem of the correlation of the mundane and the divine in human life, the problem of the essence of moral duty is posed in the Gita in connection with the fratricidal war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers, comes to the battlefield and begins to doubt the morality of fighting against his countrymen. Unable to resolve the internal moral conflict on his own, Arjuna turns to his mentor Krishna for advice, who, in turn, finds a kind of compromise. Krishna urges Arjuna to fulfill his military duty, but at the same time points out the need to remain “neutral”, internally indifferent to the action. In terms of content, all subsequent chapters of the poem are no longer an epic narrative, but practical philosophical instructions.

The paths of liberation through the prism of Kant’s philosophy

If the Upanishads talk about the need for liberation from samsara on the cognition path of the Absolute, then the Gita elaborates in detail the concept of several paths leading to liberation: the path of knowledge, the path of action and the path of love. At the same time, it can be assumed that the Bhagavatism adherents place the desire for knowledge of the Absolute above the desire for virtue: “Even if you are the most sinful of all the sinners in the world, by the raft of divine knowledge, you can cross this ocean of miseries” [1]. The path of knowledge (Djnâna Marga) is understood in the Gita in the spirit of the entire Eastern tradition,

for which knowledge (Djnâna) is esoteric knowledge obtained by mystical intuition. However, the Bhagavad Gita also suggests the need for intellectual or “scientific” knowledge guided by mind tools. Intellectual knowledge can be useful as the lowest, starting stage of the cognitive process, necessary for the systematization of the phenomena of objective, “becoming” being. The most valuable result of purely intellectual knowledge lies in the inevitable realization of its insufficiency for ascension to genuine spirituality, to the truths hidden behind the material particularity of being. For the Western European consciousness, which is full of pragmatism and positivism, the transcendences of Eastern religious and philosophical systems are perceived as “the thin air of abstract speculation”. Here, again, the limitations of scientific and rational consciousness, which is afraid to overcome its own boundaries and prefers to enter the sphere of reality like a superficial glide along its objective contours, are revealed.

The path of Djnâna (knowledge) involves subordination of the intellect to intuition. The conclusion about the need for such subordination can also be reached intellectually, that is, by realizing the limits of mind. At the same time, the Gita does not deny a more cardinal way of “curbing” intellectual ambitions like the yoga practice, which is characterized by the concentration of consciousness on the soul music. Yoga, for the most part, is aimed at suppressing, or, better to say, detachment from stereotypes of intellectual worldview, from one’s own self, from one’s subjectivity. It is necessary to pay attention to the fact that in the Eastern tradition the concept of “Self” is multivalued. In this context we are talking about egoism, egocentric will, subjectivity in the worst sense. Naturally, in order to reunite with the One, it is necessary to renounce the egocentric attitude and accidental empirical manifestations of subjectivity. Having overcome ourselves, we find our true “Self” in the sense of the Atman, which is no longer a subject, but is the One with the Absolute.

Detachment from subjectivity implies freedom from verbal clichés. As Professor F. I. Girenok notes, to be out of consciousness means to save the spontaneous in the fluidity of everyday affairs. In other words, at the point of contact with the world, life is extracted, which leaves perceptions without the presence of the “Self” at the point of perception; thoughts without identification of the thinker. At the moment when consciousness is not conscious, being is not being, nothing is nothing, and thought is not thought, the proto-form of forms and the proto-image of images arise. That is, at this moment, the thought is perceived as a picture, as a sound. One can see and hear it. The image can be touched in its appearance, i.e., unspoiled by the word. In a state of zero subjectivity, the action of words and cultural signs is suspended. The rejection of oneself, of one’s own subjectivity and of subjectivity imposed by the word meanings controlled by the intelligentsia, dissolves subjectivity in the life non-subjectivity [2. P. 129–130]. At the same time, it must be remembered that Bhagavatism is not an anti-intellectual doctrine; it recognizes intelligence as the initial and highly desirable stage of ascent to knowledge. However, it is considered insufficient, and sometimes even

dangerous, when analytical abilities reveal a self-confident claim for examination of the spiritual foundations of the universe.

The path of knowledge is not the only path of liberation. Liberation can also be achieved on the path of action (service – Karma Marga). At this point, the Bhagavad Gita opposes not only the “contemplative” nature of the Vedic Brahman doctrine, but also most of the Sramana (śramaṇa) teachings calling for a departure from social reality. According to the authors of the poem, it is impossible to live in being and be free from it. Thus, the question of whether to act or not to act is resolved positively in the Gita. Therefore, attention is focused on the nature of the personal activities. Whatever the activity of a person may be, it must remain free from any interest, from selfish thoughts, from the affirmation of Self-consciousness. In other words, the action must be recognized by the actor, first of all, as a spiritual and aesthetic action: “He who sees action in inaction and inaction in action, is wise among all men” [1].

This interpretation may look biased, but in this case we are talking specifically about Western European researchers. In their interpretation, this provision of the Bhagavad Gita is often false and it does not have so much philosophical and ideological but socio-political significance. Their logic is often based on the fact that the model of disinterested action was artificially introduced by the Kshatriyas into the general ethical system in order to somehow combine the effective and often not entirely human nature of Kshatriya social activity with universal moral principles. In other words, the abstract action principle can be understood as if something is done by my hands, but against my will, and the act was committed by me, but I do not seem responsible for it. It seems that such an interpretation of an abstract action is rather vulgar and does not express its true content. And this statement first of all has a precisely moral meaning, since the actor is filled with a sense of indifference – not to the action itself or its results, but to its motives. The main task is to overcome one’s own interest, the “Self”, which can never be free from selfish thoughts. In fact, this idea became, to some extent, accessible to the European worldview only many centuries later, in the form of Kant’s theory of moral and legal acts. Indeed, I. Kant expressed views which are very close to Karma Marga, focusing the attention of philosophical analysis on the internal motivation of human action. According to his point of view, the morality of an action is determined not so much by the action itself or its results, as by the incentives which are the basis of this action. Greed, profit, interest, in short, any commitment underlying a human act, will allow us to evaluate this act only in terms of its legality or illegality, even if we talk about love for one’s neighbor. At first sight, we may ask – what could be more honorable than that? On the other hand, love means a certain interest in the object of love and, therefore, an act dictated by love cannot be assessed as purely moral. For Kant, pure moral action is an action based entirely on the moral law, an action carried out by the will outside of any sensual attachment.

We will try to model a certain life situation and evaluate it from the point of view of Immanuel Kant’s philosophy.

Suppose a man is drowning in the sea (let it be a young girl). Another person watching it (let it be a young man) is coming to help the girl and saves her.

We may ask a question whether the actions of a young man are legal or not. We will have to say that they are probably legal, since they do not contradict the law.

Then, there is a second question: how moral these actions are? Here at first sight everything seems to be obvious because they are moral. How can saving a person be immoral? However, it is not so simple and obvious.

Kant would have answered: “We cannot talk about the moral component until we understand the motivation of the man who is saving somebody”. The fact is that, depending on motivation, even saving a person can be moral, immoral (neutral to morality) or even unmoral.

Let us imagine this situation differently. Let us imagine a person that saves another person for the sake of fame, popularity, perhaps a monetary bonus. It is not unmoral, but this act becomes immoral, morally neutral, because the motive is selfish.

Let us consider another situation. The young man saves the girl because he loves her. There is nothing wrong with it, but he saves his love, his feelings, his affection. It is not unmoral but it is not moral either. This is immoral.

Then, there is a third variation of this situation. The young man saves the girl in order not to let her die easily. The situation is almost fantastic, but not impossible. In this case, this act will be qualified as unmoral.

In general, we tend to place the motive above the act itself; but let us examine how it is presented even in legal documents. As an example, we look at the article of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation “Murder” where it is written that murder, i.e. intentional infliction of death to another person, is punished by imprisonment for a term of six to fifteen years with or without restriction of liberty for a term of up to two years¹.

In the Criminal Code it is also announced that a murder is punished by imprisonment for a term of eight to twenty years with restriction of liberty for a term of one to two years, or life imprisonment, or the death penalty if it is:

- a murder of two or more persons,
- a murder of a person or his relatives in connection with the official activity and public duty of this person,
- a murder of a minor or another person who is, knowingly for the guilty person, in a helpless state as well as attended by abduction of a human being,
- a murder of a pregnant woman,
- a murder committed with heightened cruelty,
- a murder committed by a generally dangerous method,
- a murder by reason of blood feud,

¹ The Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. Available from: https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_10699/5b3e04338020a09b25fe98ea83bc9362c8bc5a76/ (accessed: 01.03.2024). (In Russian).

- a murder committed by a group of persons, a group of persons by previous concert, or an organized group,
- a murder committed out of mercenary motives by hire, or attended by robbery with violence, racketeering, or banditry,
- a murder committed maliciously,
- a murder committed with the purpose of concealing another crime or facilitating its commission,
- a murder committed by reason of political, ideological, racial, national or religious hatred or enmity, or by reason of hatred or enmity with respect to some social group,
- a murder committed for the purpose of obtaining the organs or tissues of the victim.

It is difficult not to agree that the range of punishment depends on the motive for the murder. Moreover, this range is very wide: from one-two years to life imprisonment or death penalty.

Let us get back to Kant. We should pay attention to the fact that Kant's theory of moral and legal behavior was perceived within European metaphysics quite skeptically. Academic thinkers criticized this concept for a long time for excessive "psychologism", speculativeness, detachedness from life. Kant's theory was sometimes interpreted negatively for the exaggeration of the significance of the motive of action in relation to its practical result. Kant was also vigorously criticized for contrasting duty with inclinations – both his opponents and followers criticized him for that. Schiller's caustic lines on Kantian ethics are widely known:

"Willingly serve I my friends; but, alas, I do it with pleasure;
Therefore I often am vex'd, that no true virtue I have.

...

As there is no other means, thou hadst better begin to despise them;
And with aversion, then, do that which thy duty commands" [3. P. 287].

Karma Marga of the Gita, on the contrary, can least be blamed for philosophical speculativeness if we take into account its practical significance for shaping the Indian society lifestyle.

The third path of liberation (Bhakti Marga) is completely based on the emotional and psychological perception of the world, and the Bhagavad Gita speaks of it as the path of love (devotion). This is an even more "reliable" way of gaining unity with God, available for everyone due to its neutrality towards human cognitive abilities.

While the path of knowledge assumes the connection with the wisdom of a mystical nature and an irrational effort of the spirit, the path of devotion is irrational per se since it is absolutely independent of any knowledge. This is a purely emotional path of liberation, the path not of the mind, but of the heart: "With their minds fixed on Me, those who worship Me always, with faith and sincerity, they are considered to be the most qualified in the Yoga by Me" [4].

The Gita does not have any direct indication which of the three paths is most preferable. All of them lead to liberation, to unity with God, and, in this sense, they are all equal. At the same time, the Bhakti Marga is distinguished by the statement that it is a result in itself while the other two paths only lead to some result. Mystical knowledge or detached action have no value. They only help a person to get rid of their own selfishness. Love (or devotion based on love) is a liberation from selfishness in itself and a fusion based on sympathy of the subject with the object. By sympathy, of course, we do not mean consensus like agreement, but classical *συμπάθεια* (affection). It can be said with some caveats that mystical knowledge and disinterested action can be useful only for the purpose of leading a person eventually to Bhakti, to a certain emotional and psychological attitude towards people and God. And if the state of Moksha implies unity with the Absolute, then what can contribute more to this unity than the feeling of love? Love just means co-feeling, and co-participation, and co-unity, and co-experience, and co-knowledge of the lover and the object of love. It is quite natural that such a deep unity, which reaches to complete fusion and complete identity, means overcoming the feeling of one's own "Self" as a self-valuable and self-sufficient unit of being. The true love of two people is the birth of a new personality, which cannot be reduced to a simple sum of two individuals. The true love for God is spiritual sacrament, dedication to him; such love also provides for the rejection of egocentrism in favor of the affirmation of the cosmic personality – the One. In Western Christianity a person carries God in his heart; in Indian teachings a person must find a way to the God's heart. It is not God who gets into a person, but a person who gets into God.

Conclusion

The Bhakti Marga assents the law of pure reason, bringing into it a pronounced aesthetic element. The truth reveals itself not on the path of rational knowledge, but on the path of the aesthetics of love. G. A. Yugai claims that for the "busy", practical (Faustian) mind the truth is an epistemological category: accordance between knowledge and practice is important, while for pure reason it is an ontological one: there should be an accordance between practice and the (divine, cosmic) spirit. The academic thinker noticed that practical reason is active and aims itself at endless transformations in the material, industrial sphere. To the contrary, pure reason is contemplative, aimed at the harmonization of man and the world, which can be achieved on a spiritual basis. The motto of practical reason is "knowledge itself is power" (a quote by F. Bacon). According to G.A. Yugai, the scientific practical reason is aimed at achieving social progress based on a man-made civilization that deforms the spirit and the planet. The motto of pure reason could be then "beauty will save the world" (a quote by F. Dostoevsky). The pure reason is focused on the integrity of the spirit and the planet [5. P. 12].

It should also be noted that the Bhagavad Gita had a tremendous impact on the development of the Eastern image of the world in general and of the Hinduism in particular. The hymn sung in honor of love, the idea of irrational fusion with the

Absolute defined the practical worldview of the East for several thousand years. Can Western European culture boast of at least one piece of art that has played such a significant role in shaping the overall picture of the world? It is hardly so.

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