



## THE KOHLBERG- GILLIGAN CONTROVERSY AND THE GITA

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### Abstract

*Since long people have come to accept two types of moral orientations: Kohlberg's 'justice' orientation based on fairness and reciprocity and Gilligan's 'care' orientation marked by relatedness, responsiveness to others and their needs. The 'care' perspective symbolises what the Gita designates as nishkama karma - spontaneously reaching out to people to help them which has the highest moral worth for it does not involve even duty consciousness. Kantian categorical imperative actions done for the sake of duty and not merely in accordance with duty may contain the element of self – consciousness or ego involvement. But in nishkama karma actions are done completely for the sake of duty without any consciousness of it and nothing in return is ever thought of. Here the distinction between Kantian – Kohlbergian and that of Gilligan ceases to be and the three merge with the nishkama karma of the Gita which is the consummation of moral duty of man.*



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In the relatively recent discussion of situation involving actual moral conflict in the West there is adequate evidence to show that there are two distinct moral orientations, to which people address themselves. This is evidenced in studies by Kohlberg (1984), Walker (1984), Baumrind (1986) and Haan (1985). One such moral orientation relates to Kohlberg's "Justice" framework, according to which moral behaviour is fair behaviour characterized by "reciprocity". The second moral orientation is defined by Carol Gilligan as "care" orientation which is marked by a "response". A justice perspective is based on the problem of inequality and oppression and holds up an ideal of reciprocity and equal respect. A "care" perspective on the other hand, draws attention to the problem of "detachment" or "abandonment" and holds up an ideal of attention and a response to others' needs. In the form of moral

injunctions the two perspectives (of justice and care), can be defined as “not to treat others unfairly and not to turn away from someone in need” (Gilligan and Attanucci, 1988). As a matter of fact all major approaches to morality stress values such as justice, personal autonomy and in the case of medical ethics beneficence and non-maleficence (Hepburn, 1993). It is assumed that decisions are taken in a situation of equality and freedom. Kant had categorically propounded that in order to act morally, we must control our passion. Annette Baier (1995) challenges the Kantian notion and suggests that we need to cultivate desirable forms of emotional response such as loving. In this way she rejects the liberal view that we need not worry what passions persons have, as long as their rational “wills” can control them. She adds that in society characterized by inequality we must act responsibly so as not to cause injustice to others and care for those who are in need. Gilligan (1988) rightly sees two images of the self in relationship – One that encompasses the capacity for sustained commitment to duty (Kantian-Kohlbergian view) and the other marked by responsiveness in relationship. In other words human responsibility comprises “commitment to obligations and responsiveness in relationships”. According to her these two aspects of responsibility are central to mapping of moral domain. It is these two images of the self that are related with two basic human predispositions – the predisposition towards justice and predisposition towards care. Whatever be the context of particular moral dilemma (whether Kohlbergian Heinz dilemma . . . . . or it is of Sartre, or Aeneas dilemma cited by Gilligan herself or be it *Arjuna’s* most profound conflict between individual autonomy and social responsibility). The essence of any moral dilemma lies in the conflict that we have between these two images of the self – the commitment to duty and responsiveness in relationship, between the sense of justice and the sense of care. Taking recourse to meta-ethical analysis, Gilligan very rightly seems to posit a conceptual cleavage between the two domains of morality – the morality of justice and the morality of care. Drawing upon Piaget’s theory of cognitive and moral development of child, Kohlberg (1971) had propounded his theory of moral development. This theory holds that all are entitled to an equal share of goods and services unless an unequal distribution would be in every one’s advantage. The theory puts a high value on rational processes and priority on justice as the central value to be sought. The concept of justice in Kohlberg’s theory is based on Hegelian’s concept of rationality, according to which our behaviour in order to be designated as moral, must, in the first place, be rational. The term rationality, according to Hegel, involves consistency or coherence of behaviour, and acting in accordance with rules or principles which are universal in character and also subject to empirical verifiability of a public kind. Lyons (1983) while operationalizing the distinction

between justice and care perspectives in morality defines a morality of justice as “fairness resting on an understanding of relationship as reciprocity between separate individuals, grounded in the duty and obligations of their roles”. “Reciprocity is further defined as maintaining standards of justice and fairness understood differently at different developmental levels” (Gilligan, 1983). A morality of care on the other hand rests on the understanding of relationships as response to another in their terms (Gilligan, 1983 p.136). A care perspective involves question of how to act responsively and protect vulnerability in a particular situation. The two moral perspectives, according to Gilligan (1981. P. 197) are grounded in two aspects of human condition which give rise to moral concern. The two aspects are equality – inequality and attachment – detachment, which according to Gilligan (1988) characterize all forms of human relationships and all relationships can be described in both sets of terms as unequal or equal; attached or detached. She further adds that since everyone is or has been vulnerable both oppression and to abandonment, two moral visions – one of justice and another of care recur in human existence. Justice and care as two distinct moral orientations point to different moral concern, yet both these perspectives are constitutive of mature moral thinking. Gilligan and Attanucci (1988. P.83) observe the fact that “while detachment which is the mark of mature moral judgement in justice perspective, becomes the moral problem in care perspective - the failure to attend to need. Conversely, attention to particular needs and circumstances of individuals, the mark of mature moral judgement in care perspective, becomes the moral problem in justice perspective - failure to treat others fairly”. So in reaching moral decision one has essentially to lose sight of one either the care focus or the justice focus. This constitutes a significant point of controversy in these two perspectives. Both are significantly moral phenomena yet both seem to oppose each other. In the *Gita*, Arjuna addresses himself to a similar problem when he is caught up between two images of himself. As a member of the same family implicated or connected with those who for some reason or the other, stood against him to fight. How could he think of killing those who brought him up, nurtured him or even taught him and cared for him when he needed it most in his tender age. He yielded and refused to fight, to kill them. These included his own kiths and kins, his own teacher and others. Arjuna’s problem infact is, whether justice even though it involves tremendous loss of life among friends and relations, who under the force of circumstances are arrayed against each other, can constitute the right principle to be followed. Whether justice is first always? Arjuna was wavering between personal freedom and social duty and found himself drowned deep into severe moral dilemma. At this juncture, Krishna, the Lord, taught him that only ignorant seeks a distinction

between the personal and the social. We do not perform our duty for the sake of others but to serve ourselves which is no different from that of others. Our duty is our responsibility to Ishwara which is immanent in us all. If you understand what your duty is, it is to be performed for its own sake without any regard to the circumstances or fruits that it may bring to us or to what are dear to us. The ego is not the same as 'self'. Our duty is what our conscience tells us and not necessarily what the society or the law establishes. Our duty directed by our 'self', our conscience is the only moral law. The sense of personal makes it difficult for us to follow the moral law. The sense for clinging to the personal is infatuation which is always a stumbling block in our path of impersonal and disinterested action which is absolutely free and spontaneous. The flux which the *samsara* has its roots in ignorance and infatuation (*vasna*) and is run and regulated by interest or passion guided action (*trishna*). We enjoy or suffer on account of our immersed participation in the cosmic flux against which Arjuna had no personal malice. It was a sense of connectedness or caring that desisted Arjuna from fighting against them. Yet Arjuna describes himself as a man set apart, bound by his responsibility as a member of the warrior class '*Kshtriya*', whose duty is to fight against those who are on the side of injustice, whosoever, they might be including his own close relatives. The essence of the *Gita* lies in resolving the moral dilemma that Arjuna finds himself in and to enlighten him to realize the truth lies in sizing up the situation and to make autonomous decision and to act in the most appropriate manner in the situation.

Gilligan (1988) also refers to a similar moral dilemma of Aeneas. Aeneas travels to the underworld in search of his mother and was startled to come upon Dido – to discover that in fact she was dead. He exclaims that he hurt her so terribly by going that the separation tortured her and ultimately she killed herself by inflicting wounds. On one side Aeneas considers that he was the cause of her death but on the other he explains that he did not wilfully leave her. He also, like Arjuna, describes himself as a man set apart, bound by his responsibilities to his density. He exemplifies the dilemma of how to think about the self, how to represent the experience of being at once separated and connected to others through a fabric of human relationships. One may find answer to the hypothetical moral dilemma by giving reasons. But coming out of such an imbroglio in real life situation, where you are bound to take some decisions to act, it is really a difficult task. No meta ethics can bring us back when we actually have to act in a situation of moral conflict where acting in direction we have to sacrifice what is 'just' and what we therefore ought to do as a matter of our moral obligation. And acting in accordance with our moral obligation, may lead to sacrificing what is human or humane in us (the caring perspective). In the case of actual life dilemmas one has

certainly to decide and to act and bear the consequences. Whereas in the case of hypothetical dilemmas only cognition (and not action) is involved and therefore, question of bearing the results does not arise. Walker (1991) suggests that “Dilemmas that focus on personal relationships (regardless of whether hypothetical or self-generated) tend to be discussed in ‘care’ terms (P.6). Among Kohlbergian dilemmas those involving life –law conflicts (should Heinz help his wife) clearly focus more on personal relationships than dilemmas involving conscience – punishment conflicts (should the judge send Heinz to Jail)”.

A deeper thought given to ‘care’ perspective may reveal that the essence of this perspective lies in spontaneously reaching out to people to help them. Such actions are not thought out before but only spontaneously and naturally performed. These actions are in true sense what the *Gita* designates as *nishkama karma* and hence contain the highest moral worth, for they do not even have the duty consciousness. Even the Kantian categorical imperative – actions done for the sake of duty and not merely in accordance with duty, may contain the element of self – consciousness or ego involvement, but the *nishkama karma* of the *Gita* does not even have such consciousness. In following Kantian ethics (his categorical imperatives), the doer first brings duty – consciousness in his thought and then he/she performs the act. The duty consciousness essentially involves the consciousness of the I-ness or self-sense that I am the doer which divests it of the true sense of *nishkama karma*. So, the care perspective in Gilligan’s ethics may have the highest moral worth, for in such actions nothing in return is even thought. The concept of care considered in the above sense may be placed at par with the *bhakti yoga* of the *Gita*, where the doer without the least self-sense surrenders ones acts simply to His will. Such are the actions done completely for the sake of duty and yet without any consciousness of it. Here the distinction between Kantian – Kohlbergian and that of Gilligan ceases to be and the three merge with the *nishkama karma* of the *Gita* which is the consummation of moral duty of man. Taken in this sense the concept of morality ceases to be a derivative of justice (as Kohlberg would have held it), instead, the concept of justice is subsumed under the concept of morality. In the *bhakti yoga* (Gita XII-4) a special reference is made to “Sarvabhutahite ratah” which means rejoicing the welfare of all creatures. That is, the lord says that his devotees are those who rejoice in the work for the welfare of the world. In *Mahabharata*, an Indian epic, there is a prayer “O, would you tell of the sacred way by which I might enter into all the suffering hearts and take all their sufferings on myself for now and ever” (Radhakrishnan 1996 p. 292) In her book “Mapping the Moral Domain”, Gilligan (1988) on the basis of her empirical investigations found out justice and care orientations. There is a clear cut sex bias seen in males and females. Males are found to be

more justice oriented and females are care oriented. According to Gilligan (1988) women appear to be deficient in moral development when measured by Kohlberg's scale (P.18), "because they make moral judgement that are concerned with the activity of care", which seems to exemplify third stage of his (Kohlberg's) six stage sequence. According to Gilligan males score higher on Kohlberg's test than females because they make more justice oriented judgements which are classified at higher stages. So from Gilligan perspective examining moral judgement with Kohlberg's measure entail a built in justice bias. Gilligan and Attanucci (1988) concluded that although that concern about justice and concern about care - - - are not province of either sex (P.457), the care focus is primarily a female phenomenon and justice focus, a male phenomenon. This perspective difference between males and females is visible in the *Gita* also which is believed to be written thousands of years before. S.Radhakrishnan (1996) quoting the *Gita* writes in his Introductory Essay to Bhagwad Gita that as a rule, the particular qualities associated with *bhakti*, love and devotion, mercy and tenderness are to be found more in women than in men. As *bhakti* emphasizes humility, obedience, readiness to serve, compassion and gentle love - - - it is said to be feminine in character. Women expect, suffer, hope and receive. They long for compassion, mercy and peace. When they are most truly themselves, women give everything, claim nothing. They want to love and to be loved. *Radha* typifies the loving soul. In relation to God, *bhaktis* are more like women. Explaining the nature of *bhakti*, Radhakrishnan (1996) writes "*Bhakti* is not merely the flight of the alone to the alone; the soul's detachment from the world and attachment to the God, but it is active love for his divine". *Bhakti* has been distinguished from *prapatti*. While the *bhakti* requires faith and love, in *prapatti* we simply surrender ourselves to God, place ourselves in his hands, leaving it to him to deal with us as He elects. It stresses simple and austere purity of the relationship of surrender in a humble and direct attitude of trust. The difference between *bhakti* and *prapatti* is symbolized by "Ape Way" and the "Cat Way". The young ape clings first to the mother and is saved. A little effort on the part of the young is called for. But the mother cat takes her young in mouth. The young one does nothing to secure its safety. In *bhakti*, the grace of God is earned; in *prapatti* it is freely bestowed (S.Radhakrishnan 1996, P.61). The *Gita* explains what a man ought to do not merely as a social being but as individual with a spiritual destiny. The sense of personal makes it difficult for us to follow the moral law. The insensate clinging to the personal is infatuation which is always a stumbling block in our path of moral duty. The real path is the path of the impersonal and the disinterested action which is absolutely free and spontaneous.



The *Gita* in its entirety presents a most comprehensive view of morality (Dharama). It mainly talks of three kinds of yoga: The *Jnana yoga* (knowledge path), The *Bhakti yoga* (path of devotion), and The *Karma* (action) *yoga*. These three yogas are in a way symbiotically related to each other; with an organized unity without any idea of superiority or inferiority among them. It embodies almost every kind of ethical theory that the modern, medieval and even ancient Western thinkers have given us – Plato, Socrates, Kant, Kohlberg, Gilligan etc. and it still transcends them all. It is truly called by thinkers the universal ethics of mankind.

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