

Action, Freedom and Determinism: A Gita Perspective

Dr. Sangita Sahu¹

Received: 20 September 2026 / Accepted: 27 September 2026 / Published online: 29 September 2026
Copyright © 2026 Author(s). Published by Siri Research Foundation. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

Abstract

Events are caused whereas actions are willed. The presence of human agency, along with the capacity to reason and will, distinguishes 'action' from an 'event'. The advocates of Strong determinism dispute the thesis of 'Autonomy of will' in arguing that the act of willing is also caused by non-rational factors. On the other hand, the libertarians argue that human beings are absolutely free to act in spite of the influence of circumstances. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, there is room for both 'determinism' and 'freewill'. Human beings are free in respect of choosing a course of action from among the plurality of choices. An action having been performed, the consequences necessarily follow the action, as an effect follows the cause in the state of nature. In so far as human beings are goaded to act under the influence of the *gunas* of Prakṛti, actions are not free, but human beings possess the potentiality to overcome the limiting influence of *gunas* and act in the way they choose to act. This amounts to the 'compatibilism' which holds that freedom makes sense against the backdrop of determinism. The doer of an action enters into karmic bondage on account of performing the action, good or bad. Act one must. This leaves no room for liberation from karmic bondage. *Niskamakarma* holds out the secret of performing action without being bound to the consequences of actions, provided one can imbibe the sense of instrumentality (*nimitta*) by construing transcendental subject (*Purusottama*) as the ultimate doer (*karta*). Hence, in the *Gita* it is urged that the human agent ought to act by considering oneself as a mere instrument in order to translate the will of the 'Divine'. Consequent upon the suspension of the sense of agency (*kartabhava*), the doer (*karta*) develops non-attachment for the consequences of action (*kartabhavavya*). Hence, whatever follows the action is rightfully offered at the altar of the Divine. Thus, every action becomes an instance of sacrifice (*jsajna*). The *Gita* further enjoins that every action has to be directed to one ultimate end, i.e. collective wellbeing (*lokasamgraha*). *Niskama karma* spells out the secret by which one can continue to perform action without being bound to the cycle of birth and death.

Keywords: Causality, Free will, Determinism, Libertarianism, Compatibilism, Nimitta, Niskama Karma, Jajna. Lokasamgraha.

¹ Guest Faculty, Department of Philosophy, Dharanidhara University, Odisha, India

✉ Dr. Sangita Sahu, E-mail: sangitasahu348@gmail.com

Action is different from an event. Event is causally determined, whereas action is willed by a human agent. Non-human behaviour can be classed along with events because it is determined by antecedents. Given the antecedents, the effect can be predicted, whereas given a situation, it is not possible to predict how a human being would act or react. The presence of 'free will' distinguishes 'action' from 'event'. So, 'action' is human-centric. 'Reason' and 'freedom of will' are the unique possessions of man. Reason is the discriminative faculty that enables one to distinguish between right and wrong, whereas 'free-will' is the ability to choose a particular course of action rather than another. One encounters situations in life when there are multiple courses of action to undertake, and the human agent is free to exercise 'freewill' and choose to act in a particular way. 'Will' is always directed at a goal (end). In other words, action is willed and has intentionality. The ethical merit of an action is determined not by appeal neither to the consequences of action nor the nature of the action but by the 'intention' behind action. It is quite possible that the intention is good but the consequences turn out to be bad. For example, a surgeon takes a knife and operates but the patient dies. But the doctor is not taken to the gallows because the 'intention' was to save the patient. The intention may not be good, but the consequence is good. For example, during winter, a politician, on the eve of an election, distributes blankets among the poor. Here, the intention is not good, as he does it with the intention of winning over the electorate, but the consequence is good because it helps the poor to ward off the cold. The moot question is, if action is determined by the will, what is the nature of 'freewill'? Is 'will' free? Is it not determined by one's mindset and circumstantial conditions? In such a case, 'freewill' shall be a misnomer. If what one wills is determined by factors beyond one's control, 'freewill' would be a myth. There are two extreme views about the nature of free will. The proponents of 'strong determinism' opine that since the act of willing is determined by non-rational or non-cognitive factors, there is no room for freedom of will. On the other hand, the 'libertarians' hold that unlike the causal sequence in the state of nature which is subject to strict determinism man has the freedom to act which distinguishes man from the non-human species. But the notion of 'freedom of will' as conceived in the *Bhagavad Gita* steers clear of the extremes of 'strong determinism' and 'libertarianism'. There is clear scope for both according to the *Gita*; both 'freedom' and 'determinism'. Action has three distinct components, namely, Agent (*karta*), Action (*karma*) and consequences (*karmaphala*). The human agent is absolutely free in choosing a course of action out of the multiple courses of action. But the action having been performed, man is not free to choose the consequences of action because action and consequences are necessarily related. Thus, there is room for 'freewill' in respect of choosing the action, but action having been performed, there is no scope for choosing the consequence of action. Thus, in an action situation, 'freedom of will' and 'determinism' are accommodated. The maxim, '*As you sow, so shall you reap*', points to karmic determinism. As there is causal determinism in the state of nature, there is karmic determinism in the moral domain characterized by the presence of 'human agency'. Compatibilism seeks to reconcile 'freedom' and 'determinism'; in arguing that 'freewill' is meaningful only against the backdrop of 'determinism'. One is free to act only when there are actual or possible constraints which man overcomes by exercising one's 'freewill' to attain the intended goal. The *Gita* advocates determinism because it is argued that human beings tend to act having been prompted by the *gunas* of Prakrti.

No one can ever remain for a moment without
doing work, everyone is made to act helplessly
by the impulses born of nature.¹

At the same time, there is room for 'freedom of will'. Having explained everything, Lord Krishna asks Arjuna to weigh the pros and cons by his discriminative intellect (*buddhi*) and act as he deems proper. It means that though there is determinism with regard to the influence of the *gunas* of Prakrti, the human agent has the potentiality to overcome the push and pull of the forces of Prakrti and act with a particular end in view. Thus, the claims of 'determinism' and 'freedom' are clearly accommodated when the human agent overcomes the temptations of the lower self or baser propensities (*vrttis*). This is indicative of the transformation in the agent. Herein lies the importance of knowledge (*jnanayoga*), whereby one understands that though action is apparently done by the human agent, the real agency rests on the supreme agent or *Purusottama*. So long as one acts with a sense of agency (*kartabhava*), one is bound to reap the consequences of action and fall into karmic bondage. Act one. The very exigencies of life demand that one must act.

As is the action, so is the consequence. An action may be either good or bad. But in either case, the human agent remains bound to reap the consequences of action. This, *prima facie*, leaves no room for liberation. One has to either act righteously or wrongly, but in either case, one falls into karmic bondage. Here lies the significance of *Niskama Karma*, which spells out the secret of performing action without being bound to the consequences of action. Action and consequences form a causal nexus. By performing action, one enters into the karmic cycle. Apparently, there is no room for getting liberated from the karmic cycle. One has to take birth again in order to reap the consequences of action, the reactions of which have not been experienced in the past life. It is only action which is one's own because after the disintegration of the body one takes rebirth depending on the nature of the actions performed. Action provides the missing link between past, present and future. Lord Krishna asked Arjuna to act with a sense of being an instrument (*nimitta*) because so long as the agent has the sense of 'doer-ship' one remains morally but metaphysically bound to undergo the consequences of action. Hence, the only way to escape from the karmic nexus is to imbibe the sense of instrumentality. The crux of the issue is: if the agent performs action, thinking oneself to be a mere instrument, then who is to be taken as the agent? The answer is explicit in the *Bhagavad Gita*; it admits of one supreme agent, i.e. *purusottama*. This is clearly brought out in the notions of *ksetra*, *ksetrajna* and *purusottama*. *Ksetra* refers to the psycho-physical complex constituted by the *gunas* of Prakrti, whereas *ksetrajna* refers to the Self, which is the reflection of the transcendental subject (*Purusottama*) in the psycho-physical complex. It appears as if the Self is bound, but it is not really so because the Self is eternally liberated. It appears to be bound because of the lack of discrimination between self and not-self (body-mind complex). Hence, the secret of liberation (highest freedom) is to cultivate discriminative knowledge (*vivekajnana*) so that the Self is conscious that it is neither the body nor the mind but the supreme consciousness that inhabits in the psycho-physical habitat, which is subject to birth, death and rebirth. Thus, discriminative knowledge comes to the rescue of the moral agent to act in a manner such that the

consequences of action do not accrue to the Agent. Since the action is not one's own, the *Gita* clearly states that all actions should be directed to one end, i.e. collective wellbeing (*Loksangraha*). Thus, *Loksangraha* becomes the ultimate 'end' towards which all actions are to be directed. Even if an action is directed towards collective wellbeing, one has to think that one acts as the instrument to fulfil the will of the 'divine'. The agent does not have any personal end to achieve but to translate the will of the cosmic according to one's ability. Herein lies the significance of *Varnadharma*. In Indian classical texts, the fourfold division of human beings into *Vipra*, *Ksatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Sudra* is not hereditary but according to *guna* (disposition) and *karma* (ability to act).

The fourfold order was created by Me
according to the divisions of quality and
work. Though I am its creator, know
me to be incapable of action or change.²

It means that it is not man-made but ordained by Nature (*Prakrti*). Arjuna is a warrior (*ksatriya*). Since it was the occasion to fight against the Kauravas, who symbolized 'evil' the war is termed as *dharmayudha*. Arjuna has to suspend the sense of agency and fight against the evil forces, transcending the personal considerations that they are kith and kin in order to fulfill the divine will, irrespective of the consequences. As a moral agent considers himself to be a mere instrument, one doesn't have attachment to the consequences. Non-attachment to the consequences follows from the fact that the human agent acts as a mere instrument on behalf of the divine. So, whatever follows as consequences is rightfully surrendered at the altar of the divine. Thus, every action becomes an instance of offering or sacrifice (*jajna*). That is how one escapes from karmic bondage; action provides the opportunity to move towards the state of the highest goal. The *Bhagavad Gita* is set in a war situation where Arjuna is in a dilemma, 'to fight or not to fight'. Krishna teaches Arjuna through different *Yogas* so that he would have clarity and the needed will to fight. It means that the *Gita* discourages emotive persuasion and encourages action backed by rational discrimination. In the end, Lord says that, having had the wisdom, Arjuna should act as he deems proper.

Thus has wisdom more secret than all secrets,
been declared to thee by Me, reflect on it fully
and do as thou choosest.³

The journey begins with the despondency of Arjuna, where Arjuna is bewildered by seeing his kith and kin on the other side of the battlefield. But proper knowledge (*jnana*) helps him to transcend the sway of the passions, and he is determined to fight. Unlike non-humans, human beings are endowed with the ability to exercise their reflective ability and choose a course of action which is conducive to individual and collective good. The *Gita* does not envisage any incompatibility between individual and collective good because the individual good is best taken care of in the 'collective good'. Therefore, 'freewill' has to be exercised in obedience to the cosmic will. This introduces a divine dimension in the *Bhagavad Gita* and refers to a cosmic order. *Viswarupa Darsana Yoga* is sometimes counted as challenging the thesis of 'freedom of will'. If Arjuna could see the aftermath of the war before the commencement of war, it means that everything is cosmically determined. Then, what is the role of Arjuna? What is the role of rational discrimination? The answer is that human beings are free to

act in consonance with the divine will or act contrary to the divine will. Those who act deviantly, like the Kauravas, do eventually court annihilation. The triumph of 'good' over 'evil' is divinely ordained. In this sense, human intervention has a limited role. One cannot upset the rule of righteousness. This gets its meaning from the concept of *Rta* in the Upanishads. *Rta* refers to the cosmic order which eventually prevails. Though human beings have a limited ability to try to upset it, it reigns in the long run. It is in this sense that cosmic determinism makes sense against the 'freedom of human will', which has its role in the finite moral domain. In this sense, it can be said that 'absolute morality' transcends the 'human morality'. Human morality gets meaning only when it is in consonance with the cosmic moral order (*Rta*).

Notes and References

1. *Bhagavad Gita*. III.5
2. *Ibid.*, IV. 13
3. *Ibid.* XVIII. 63

- Aurobindo. (2003). *Essays on the Gita*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Pondicherry.
- Dash. B.K. (2016). *The Philosophy of the Bhagavad-Gita*. Gyanjuga Publication, BBSR.
- Edgerton, F. (1944). *The Bhagavad Gītā*. Harvard University Press.
- Gandhi, M. K. (2009). *The Bhagavad Gita according to Gandhi* (J. S. Sharma, Ed.). North Atlantic Books.
- Mohanty, A. K. (2006). *Bhakti: Concept and Practice*. Centre of Advanced Study in Philosophy, Utkal University, BBSR.
- Panigrahi, S. C. (1994). *The concept of yoga in the Gita*. Prajnaloka.
- Prabhupada. Swamy. (1986). *Bhagavad Gita As It Is*. The Bhakto Vedanta Book Trust.
- Radhakrishnan. S. (1982). *The Bhagvat Gita*. Bombay.
- Sargeant, W. (2009). *The Bhagavad Gita* (C. Chapple, Ed.). State University of New York Press.
- Sastry, A. M. (1985). *The Bhagavad-Gita with the Commentary of Sri Shankaracharya*. Madras: Samanta Books.
- Sharma. C. D. (1994). *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd.