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(Presented at Peking University, Department of Philosophy, 12 December 2007; published [in Chinese translation] in the Peking University Dept. of Philosophy journal, *Beide Journal of Philosophy*, in 2008)

The Experience of Authority and the Authority of Experience: the *Bhagavad-gita* in dialogue with modern ‘religious experience’ discourse

Abstract

The *Bhagavad-gita*, a key religious text of most Hindu traditions, is here briefly examined as a tool for the methodical cultivation of ‘religious experience’, as the beginning of an effort to consider the text’s relevance to reconstructive postmodernism. In so doing, the paper explores this work’s treatment of the tension between authority and religious experience, suggesting that its final aim is to draw one into participation with the principal speaker of the *Gita*, namely Bhagavan Krishna. In such participation, both ordinary and extraordinary experience give way to the perpetual experience of *bhakti* (devotional immersion).

Introduction

The *Bhagavad-gita*, a relatively small section of the ancient Sanskrit Indian epic, the Mahabharata, has since the late eighteenth century gained considerable notoriety in the West.¹ Its western cultural presence is clearly evident in its becoming one of the three most translated works in English, along with the Bible and the *Daodejing*. The *Gita* (as it is widely known), cited by William James in his Gifford Lectures of 1901-1902 (later published as the now classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience*),² invites examination as an early Indian text offering both its

¹ I wish to thank Professor Lai Pan Chu and Professor Tam Wai Lun for kindly inviting me to participate in this conference. The *Bhagavad-gita*’s first translation directly from the Sanskrit into English was that of Charles Wilkins, published in 1785.

² James refers to the *Gita* only once, in his lecture XIV or XV, “The Value of Saintliness,” by way of underscoring his point that true saints need not practice extreme asceticism. “As the *Bhagavad-Gita* says, only those need

ancient and its modern readers and listeners a tool for the methodical cultivation of what only in modern times we would identify explicitly as ‘religious experience’. More specifically, a significant current cultural indicator of such aspirations for religious experience can be found in today’s worldwide and growing practice of yoga in a variety of forms, forms largely traceable to yoga teachings found in the Gita. One might well ask, just what is the appeal of this premodern and strongly devotion-oriented yoga text today, and conversely, is there something in this text that can serve to illuminate or enrich our modern or postmodern understanding of the category ‘religious experience’?

My larger project is an effort to situate the *Bhagavad-gita* plausibly within reconstructive postmodernists’ aim to “preserve the concept of worldview [that is abandoned by deconstructive postmodernism] and to . . . reconstruct one that avoids the liabilities of both premodernism and modernism” (Gier 2000: 44).³ Here I briefly consider one important component of this project, namely understanding the Gita’s notions of authority and religious experience and their relationship to each other. The impetus for this inquiry is the tension – assumed or real – between these two principles as represented in contemporary discourse on religious experience, which, at least from the time of William James but arguably long before, is placed in opposition to religious institutions as the locus of religious authority.⁴

Indeed, while modern and contemporary religious experience discourse participates in the centering of religious authority in the individual, it may be said to typically postulate a common core of reference for such experience – namely an ultimate reality to which individuals attain lesser or greater, and various sorts of, access. In the case of the *Bhagavad-gita*, as an important work of Hindu Vaishnava philosophical/theological tradition, one notices a remarkable emphasis on the notion of individuality, the individual’s prerogative to self-cultivation, and individual

renounce worldly actions who are still inwardly attached thereto. If one be really unattached to the fruits of action, one may mix in the world with equanimity.” (*Varieties*, p. 280).

³ Nicholas Gier’s project as presented in his two volumes (see Bibliography) is my inspiration for this endeavor. but while his presentation of Hindu traditions is fairly dismissive as being too narrowly premodern in perspective, I would argue that the *Bhagavad-gita* represents an important move within Hindu thought that shows at least seeds of what we may now call “reconstructive postmodernism.”

⁴ Indeed, the *Bhagavad-gita* can be seen as an important early Indian landmark of the attempt to bring together into synthesis some of the growing oppositions to, but also within, brahmanical orthodoxy.

experience in relation to what it claims to be an ultimate religious authority, namely Krishna, the speaker of the text.

However, in contrast to modern conceptions of religious experience as belonging to a private sphere, here I will suggest how the Gita holds a strongly public and relational orientation to experience that anchors the Gita's discourse on experience-as-religion (or experiential religion) in its own idiom of cosmic order (dharma). At the same time it holds out the promise that all individuals have the potential for experiencing spiritual fulfillment through reciprocity with an infinite "experiencer". In part it is surely this promise that appeals to contemporary readers, possibly because it contributes to the recovery of what is valuable in premodernism and modernism while seeking to "avoid the liabilities" of both as well as of late- or postmodernism. Indeed, while the Gita clearly has the marks of its premodern origins, it nevertheless belongs well within the period identified by Karl Jaspers as the pre-Christian 'Axial Age' from which a nascent modernism and even postmodernism can be identified.⁵

It may therefore be seen as an historical irony that the Gita thus functions for many people today (not only people of Indian or Hindu background) as an authoritative text for the cultivation of religious experience, reminding us that religious experience typically, if not always, occurs with reference to (usually as confirmation of) one or more texts considered authoritative by a community of 'religious experiencers'.

After sketching some of the *Bhagavad-gita's* ways of representing experience, with these in mind I will consider its notions of divine and individual authority, to conclude with a brief consideration of the text's emphasis on *bhakti* as 'total reciprocity' in order to suggest a direction for viewing the Gita within both contemporary popular yoga culture and reconstructive postmodernism.

1. Three Types of Experience

Working within a gnostic blend of classical Sankhya and Vedanta ontologies of *prakṛti* (nature), *puruṣa* (self) and *brahman* (ultimate reality), the Gita in the main distinguishes between ordinary and extraordinary experience had by selves, of either *prakṛti* or *brahman*.

⁵ Jaspers, Karl (1949). *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (1st ed.). München: Piper Verlag.

Ordinary experience is characterized by dualities: As a consequence of their self-alienated condition, persons ordinarily experience themselves and their surroundings in terms of oppositions such as desire and hate, happiness and distress, longing and lamentation, fame and infamy.⁶ That such dualities can be acutely problematic for individuals is dramatized in the Gita through the person of the renowned warrior Arjuna, a man of the world who agonizes over questions of duty in the face of an impending war between himself and his brothers against their cousins.⁷ Arjuna's questioning of his friend and charioteer, Krishna, and the latter's answers, constitute the 700 verse couplets of the Bhagavad-gita.

Whereas in the *Bhagavad-gita* ordinary experience is the product of the self's disorientation to ultimate reality through ignorance, extraordinary experience is constituted of both the process and the product of self-integration through *yoga*, or 'the discipline of yoking'. The term *yoga*, a cognate to the English word 'yoke', embraces both aspects of the dual sense of the English term 'experience' as (1) 'being experienced', in the sense of having knowledge or skill as a result of practice and repetition; and (2) having unmediated subjective reception of and engagement with some object.

The Gita's didactic thrust lies substantially in its offer to guide an individual from temporal, constricted, dualistic and ordinary experience to perpetual, liberated, integrated and extraordinary experience.⁸ As I indicated earlier, this focus on personal reform or self-cultivation is one important indicator of its participation in the nascent modernism exhibited in the so-called 'Axial Age' texts of its time, and this self-reformative ethos surely contributes to the text's contemporary popularity.

Important to note is that beyond both ordinary and extraordinary experience of individuals, the Gita claims that there exists a third category of experience, namely that which is enjoyed by one unique and supreme conscious Being, identified variously as *brahman*, *paramatman*, *bhagavan*, *purusottama*, and indeed as the Gita's main speaker, Krishna. In contrast to both ordinary and extraordinary experience of individuals, the experience of this super-ordinate Self is not restricted by limitations of memory, nor by limitations of place, time,

⁶ See for example Bg. 2.14; 2.45; 2.64; 7.27.

⁷ Arjuna expresses his anguish at the prospect of fighting in Bg. 1.28—2.8.

⁸ Among several verses illustrating this didactic thrust, I would point to Bg. 7.1; 9.2; and 14.1-2.

or the confines of individual bodies.⁹ There are important implications to this claim with respect to our theme, especially that authority of experience finds its locus in this supreme and supremely conscious Being, in which individuals participate. We will return to this idea shortly.

2. Authority, the Individual, and World Order

In pursuit of its didactic aim the Gita reflects and attempts to resolve a tension reverberating throughout the *Mahabharata* between two sorts of authority structure which are in turn characterized by two ideologies. One is a ‘this-worldly’ ideology of engagement, or action (*pravrtti*); opposed to this is an ‘other-worldly’ ideology of disengagement, or inaction (*nivrtti*). The former conceives a world governed by *dharma*, a cosmic principle characterized by hierarchical structure and norms of sacrificial action (*karma*) centered in the sustaining of world order and the affirmation of one’s place in that order. The object of experience is in this case the goods of the world (*kama*), along with the assurance of obtaining future goods (*artha*), and the satisfaction of contributing to *dharma*’s sustenance. In contrast, the latter ideology (*nivrtti*) rejects as false the temporal world with its dharmic order, replacing submission to that order with the determined practice of ascetic life (*sannyasa*) governed by knowledge of *brahman*, ultimate and sublime reality. True or extraordinary religious experience, according to this second ideology, arises exclusively in such rigorously disciplined withdrawal from the world, leading to liberation (*moksa*).

The tension between these two ideologies is at least in part due to what might be termed the paradox of individuation. To act in the world, in perfect accord with *dharma*, is to ultimately deny the self as individual in favor of a socially harmonized and idealized citizenship that tends to evaporate selfhood into nonexistence. Yet to deny the world in pursuit of the self as autonomous being, while presumably rewarded by individuation, is to gain separate existence without a face: the perfect ascetic is the perfect stranger, the *other* whose identity is constituted solely of *otherness*.¹⁰ One might characterize *pravrtti*-ideology in its most radical form as a central problem of premodernity, namely holistic order at the expense of a distinct self; conversely *nivrtti*-ideology in its extreme form echoes a central problem of modernity, namely the isolation and exaltation of the self at the expense of relationality (Gier 2000).

⁹ See Bg. 4.5-6; 7.26; 13.2; 13.13; 13.22; 13.32; 15.15.

¹⁰ See Olson (1997: 49-71) for a relevant discussion on the Indian renouncer as stranger.

The Gita seeks to resolve this paradox largely through redefinitions on both sides of the ‘equation’ – a redefinition of *dharma* on the one side and a redefinition of renunciation on the other – coupled with a repositioning of cosmic authority from a principle (*dharma*) to a supreme experiencing and concerned Deity, who is identified as the locus of all experience (*bhoktr* – 5.29) and the establisher of worldly order (*dharma-samsthapaka* – 4.8). Dharma, Krishna advises Arjuna, is now to be acknowledged and supported through action (*karma*) in accordance with divine will, or ultimate ‘personalized’ authority (Bg 10.8), and renunciation is to be understood as an attitude of detachment from the results – good or bad – of one’s actions. The text designates this redefinition as *karma-yoga*, the ‘integrative discipline of action’. From *karma-yoga* the *Bhagavad-gita* moves into further re-conceptualizations whereby key terms in the Sankhya, Yoga, and Vedanta philosophical traditions are to be understood in light of the Gita’s most definitive notion, namely *bhakti*, or what we may call “integrated religious experience.”

3. The Hermeneutic of Immediacy

The principle of reciprocity of experience with divinity engendered through yoga practices is emphasized repeatedly in the Gita text. I will return to this point momentarily, after briefly mentioning two further important considerations, namely, first, the text’s assurance of individual indestructibility, and, related to this, second, what we might call the text’s “hermeneutic of immediacy.” An instance of this latter principle and how it builds the argument for the former is in Krishna’s well-known example of bodily change to suggest the plausibility of the existence of a nontemporal self: “As in this body, the embodied [self] continues through childhood, youth, and old age, similarly upon reaching death [it obtains another body]; a sober person is therefore not bewildered [by death, or the change of body]” (Bg. 2.13). Here the argument turns on common experience of the body changing over time with a definite sense that *something* persists unchanged. The “common sense” reasoning engendered from this common (dare I say, universal) experience is concluded with an assertion from Krishna’s claimed position of all-knowing authority, followed by elaborations on the eternal individuality and indestructibility of the *dehin*, the “possessor of a body.” While we know that these verses indicate the *Bhagavad-gita*’s participation in anti-Buddhist rhetoric during the time of its

composition,¹¹ the message of eternal individual experiencing selves clearly contributes to the work's popularity today.

The “hermeneutics of immediacy” is further evident in several other Gita passages, deserving brief attention. Typically these are in the form of simple analogies, whereby the unfamiliar is pointed toward and made possible to be grasped or comprehended by extension from the familiar. Sometimes employed to teach theological abstractions about the super-ordinate Self, equally such analogies serve to illustrate yogic practices through which the individual self can experience and eventually commune with the super-ordinate Self. Thus, for example, the tortoise's habit to withdraw its limbs within its shell upon perceiving danger – a well-known sight to any curious schoolboy – serves to illustrate how a yogin practices *pratyahara*, sense-withdrawal, in preparation for higher yogic experience (Bg 2.58). Another important example is the text's employment of an image common to the Sankhya philosophical tradition, identifying the body as a *kshetra*, or field, to distinguish it from the self as *kshetra-jna* (knower of the field) and to both distinguish the self from and relate it to the super-ordinate Self, which is also a *kshetra-jna* present in and thus experiencing “all fields” (Bg. 13).

Again, in much of the Gita's tenth chapter, Krishna offers a litany of examples that function largely through the carry-over function of analogy to show how the super-ordinate Self is present and therefore perceivable in the world. Thus, for example, Krishna identifies himself as “the Himalaya among immovable things,” as “the banyan tree among all trees,” and as “the king among human beings.”¹² The persistent message of this litany is that amidst things and events typically experienced by human beings in this world, the outstanding or extraordinary experience or object represents, or is a metonymic signifier, of the ultimate Signified. Thus Krishna invites his readers/listeners to look about themselves and re-interpret what they see, hear, and feel, in terms of or as the presence of this extraordinary super-ordinate Self identified as the Gita's speaker, Krishna.

Conclusion: Reciprocity as experience of authority and the authority of experience

Such invitation to experience the ordinary as extraordinary is but one technique the *Bhagavad-gita* employs to bring its audience to not only a change of vision but a direct

¹¹ The *Bhagavad-gita*'s insistence on the eternal existence of substantive selves argues against the Buddhist ‘no-self’ notion (*anatma-vada*).

¹² Bg. 10.25; 10.26; 10.27, respectively.

experience of and reciprocity with the super-ordinate Self. A key statement in the Gita's fourth chapter may serve to illustrate this aim: "In accordance with how they [individual persons] approach me [the super-ordinate Self], I respond accordingly. All human beings progress along my path in all respects" (Bg 4.11). Here, along with reciprocity is suggested individual freedom to determine the particular way one might approach, or interact with, this limitlessly interactive ultimate Self. And yet readers are also reminded of the all-inclusiveness of the "path" which is claimed by the Gita's speaker to be his. It is a promise that by accepting the responsibility of individual agency persons can expect to experience immediate affirmation of their individual worth as eternal participants in the sublime experiencing of the super-ordinate Self.

Finally, we may note in the context of our theme – religious experience and interreligious dialogue – that like so much of early Sanskrit philosophical literature, the Gita comes down to us in the form of a dialogue (between Krishna and Arjuna) and urges its readers to *hear* its message with an attitude of urgent need similar to that of Arjuna, the paradigmatic seeker of religious experience.¹³ Thus the Gita as text, with its promise to lead one to the experience of selfhood in relation to a super-ordinate Self, positions itself as authoritative with respect to the means of approaching the experiential goal – a position of authority which remains dialogical as the reader progresses in a way similar to the interlocutor Arjuna. "Hear that *yoga* discipline," Krishna tells Arjuna, "by which, sheltered in me, you will doubtless know me completely, your mind attached in me" (Bg 7.1). Arjuna hears, the text indicates, and the contemporary reader joins in that same dialogue over time and as the means to transcend time.

Again, considering contemporary questioning if not outright rejection of divine authority and replacement of external religious authority with internal religious experience on the one hand, and on the other, considering the Gita's strong and unequivocal authority claims, investing in a supreme divinity an absoluteness to which all beings and all existence are subordinated,¹⁴ we

¹³ See Schweig, pp 255-56, on the layers of dialogue in which the Gita functions.

¹⁴ A further potential "demerit" of the Gita for its contemporary audience is its grounding within a tradition that is suspicious of experience as a source of higher knowledge and truth. Nonetheless, the Gita charges its readers with the task of 'discipline-through-devotion' (*bhakti-yoga*) that both recognizes the importance of experience and grounds it in a public, rather than a private, matrix of subjectivity. Perhaps even more potentially damaging to modern readers' confidence in the Gita than Krishna's unequivocal claims of supremacy is his horrifying demonstration of destructive power in his appearance before Arjuna as a *virat-rupa*, or gigantic cosmos-devouring

may well ask why the *Bhagavad-gita* enjoys the popularity that it does in modern (or postmodern) times. I hope to have given some brief hints how a consideration of the Gita from the perspective of religious experience helps to explain why the popularity of this text is understandable, and how it could serve in a reconstructive postmodernism that accommodates yoga principles of ancient India.

form (in Ch. 11). According to the text, even Arjuna, though trained as a warrior to face the horror of destruction undisturbed, is highly distraught by this vision. Yet precisely his distress at such a vision underscores the text's relevance for a modern audience: It is *not* this fearful form, but rather Krishna's human *saumya-rupa*, or pleasing form, that emerges as his most exalted form.

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