

**ETHICAL INSIGHTS FROM THE BHAGAVAD GITA, UPANISHADS, AND PLATO'S
EARLY DIALOGUES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comparative study of ethical insights derived from these seminal philosophical texts: the **Bhagavad Gītā**, the **Upaniṣads**, and Plato's early dialogues(**Euthyphro**, **Apology** and **Crito**). Each of these are rooted in distinct cultural and philosophical traditions that offer perspectives on ethics, duty, and virtue. The **Bhagavad Gītā**, a cornerstone of Indian philosophy, navigates complex moral dilemmas through its exploration of duty (*dharma*) and selfless action (*niṣkāma karma*), guiding individuals to align their actions with the cosmic order. In contrast, the **Upaniṣads** delve into the relationship between ethical behavior and spiritual realization, advocating for virtues such as non-injury (*ahimsā*) and truthfulness (*satya*) as manifestations of unity with the ultimate reality (Brahman). Meanwhile, Plato's early dialogues, including **Euthyphro**, **Apology**, and **Crito**, employ Socratic questioning to probe ethical principles, emphasizing concepts of virtue, self-discipline, and moral knowledge. Socrates' method challenges conventional beliefs and underscores the importance of rational inquiry and adherence to one's principles in ethical decision-making. Through a detailed analysis of these texts, this study uncovers both commonalities and divergences in their ethical teachings, illuminating how each tradition addresses fundamental moral questions.

Keywords: Bhagavad Gita, Duty, Dharma, Ethics, Morality, Plato's Early Dialogues, Selfless Action, Virtue, Upanishads.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethical philosophy has long served as a foundational pillar of human thought, engaging with essential questions regarding the nature of morality, the essence of virtue, and the principles that govern just behavior. This comparative study seeks to delve into the ethical insights offered by: the **Bhagavad Gītā**, the **Upaniṣads**, and Plato's early dialogues, specifically **Euthyphro**, **Apology**, and **Crito**. The word Ethics is derived from the Greek word '*Ethos*' meaning 'character'. It deals with human conduct and is defined as a systematic study of the nature of value concepts such as good, bad, right, etc. What we ought to do forms its subject matter.

Ethics in Indian Philosophy is a normative science rather than a purely descriptive one. It presupposes the conception of an ultimate value & what is the end or supreme good of man. Indian Philosophy generally accepts that only metaphysics can tell us what our supreme good is and asserts that ethics must be grounded in metaphysics (Neelakhantan, 2012). Even Immanuel Kant considered it difficult to detach ethics from metaphysics, for, he considered the existence of God, free will and immortality of the soul as essential Presuppositions of ethics.

The **Vedas**, regarded as the oldest surviving literary expressions of the Aryan intellect, mark the origins of Indian philosophy (Sharma, 2000). The term "**Veda**," derived from the Sanskrit root "**Vid**", meaning "to know," signifies knowledge itself. The **Śruti** texts—comprising the **Upaniṣads**, **Brahma**

Sūtras, and *Bhagavad Gītā* constitute the authoritative triple canon of Indian philosophy (*Prashana trāya*). These texts are characterized by their dialogical form (*Samvāda* in Sanskrit), encapsulating the compassionate guidance of a guru and illuminating the path to self-realization through allegorical narratives, metaphors, and philosophical discourse. *Adi Śaṅkarācārya*, in his commentary on the *Gītā*, refers to it as the *samṣṭa-vedārtha-sāra-saṅgraha*, or "the collection of the essence of the Vedas" (Ranganathananda, 1995). The *Gītā* presents a dialogue between Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna that addresses themes of duty (*dharma*), righteousness, and the nature of action. Set against the backdrop of the epic *Mahābhārata*, it navigates Arjuna's moral dilemmas on the battlefield, advocating for selfless action (*niṣkāma karma*) and adherence to one's duty (*svadharma*).

The **Upaniṣads**, which literally means "sitting near a guru," represent the concluding portion and essence of the Vedas. They offer insights into reality (*Brahman*), individual self (*Jīva*), and the world (*Jagat*). These texts emphasize the pursuit of spiritual knowledge (*jñāna*) and advocate for a life rooted in truth, non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), and self-discipline (Ballantine, J. R., 2015). They present ethics as inherently linked to spiritual enlightenment and personal transformation, guiding individuals toward essential spiritual truths that transcend creed or race.

In the annals of intellectual history, few figures stand as prominently as *Socrates*, the enigmatic Athenian philosopher of the 5th century BCE. Revered as the progenitor of Western philosophy, Socrates' influence resonates across millennia, shaping the very fabric of philosophical inquiry, ethics, and human thought (Brickhouse, T. C., & Smith, N.D., 2004). He was a student of Anaxagoras (428-500 BCE), one of the early philosophers of Greece, & at first, spent his time studying cosmology but later abandoned it in order to dedicate himself exclusively to morality and ethics. Despite his significant contributions, he left no written records; our understanding of his philosophy primarily derives from the dialogues of his student **Plato**, as well as accounts by **Xenophon** and others. These works depict him as a man of great insight and integrity, who dedicated his life to encouraging others to seek truth and virtue through rigorous questioning and self-examination. His commitment to philosophical discourse ultimately led to his trial and execution on charges of impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens, a fate he accepted with remarkable composure, viewing it as a testament to his principles. The dialogues *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and death scenes from *Phaedo* are frequently studied together as early or "Socratic" dialogues. These texts provide some of the earliest and most authentic representations of Socratic thought in ancient literature.

2 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Across the vast expanse of time and culture, two distinct traditions, Socratic thought and yoga, have profoundly impacted human thought and practice. Though seemingly disparate, they converge in their concern for ethical living, inner transformation, and the pursuit of truth.

The **Bhagavad Gītā** is a synthesis of metaphysics and ethics, often described as **brahmavidyā** (knowledge of the ultimate reality) and **yogaśāstra** (the science of union with that reality) (Radhakrishnan, 1948). Authored by the revered sage **Vyasa**, it comprises chapters 23 to 40 of the **Bhīṣma Parva** within the larger epic, the **Mahābhārata**. It narrates the intricate struggle for power between two factions of a royal family—the **Pandavas** and the **Kauravas**. Set on the battlefield of **Kurukshetra**, the *Gītā* unfolds as Prince **Arjuna** confronts a moral crisis regarding his participation in a war against his own kin. Through a dialogue with **Lord Kṛṣṇa**, who serves as his charioteer and divine guide, Arjuna grapples with fundamental themes such as duty (**svadharma**), righteousness (**dharma**), and ethical action. The *Gītā* synthesizes various philosophical ideas prevalent in ancient

Indian thought, incorporating concepts from **Vedanta**, **Sāṃkhya**, and **Yoga**. It presents a comprehensive framework for understanding ethical behavior as deeply intertwined with spiritual enlightenment and self-realization. Central to its teachings is the principle of **niṣkāma karma**, or selfless action, which emphasizes performing one's duty without attachment to the results. Duty for Duty's sake says Immanuel Kant. This ethical vision encourages individuals to act in accordance with their responsibilities while fostering a sense of unity with the community.

In contrast, Plato's early dialogues—such as *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito*—emerge from the rich intellectual milieu of ancient Greece, where **Socratic elenchus** (the method of questioning) and rational inquiry serve as vital tools for exploring concepts of virtue, goodness, justice, and moral knowledge, which he believes are importantly for morality. These dialogues engage with ethical issues through Socratic dialogue, emphasizing the role of reason and philosophical inquiry in defining and understanding virtue and morality. In his view, a true account of a virtue should show that all the virtues are really the same virtue, which is knowledge of the good. Knowledge of the good is also knowledge of the 'fine' (kalon) and morally right and the knowledge of the agent's own welfare or happiness (eudaimonia) (Irwin, 2007).

In *Apology*, he defends his life's work of seeking truth and wisdom, asserting that he is only wise in this respect- Socrates is aware of his Ignorance, he neither knows nor thinks that he knows. In his speech, he tells the Athenian's- "Are you not ashamed of heaping up money... and honor and reputation, and caring so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all?". In *Crito*, Socrates discusses the importance of adhering to one's principles even in the face of death, highlighting moral responsibility over societal pressures. He famously asserted that "the unexamined life is not worth living," emphasizing the importance of self-reflection and moral integrity in human existence.

3 THE BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ : ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES

The *Bhagavad Gītā* insists on the unity of the life of spirit which cannot be resolved into philosophical wisdom, devoted love or strenuous action. Work, knowledge and devotion are both complementary, when we seek the goal and after we attain it. One may climb the mountain by different paths but the view from the summit is identical for all. Wisdom is personified as a being whose body is knowledge and whose heart is love.

In the 2nd chapter of the *Gītā*, Arjuna is distraught and despondent at the thought of killing his own kind, fratricide and is ready to give up his duty, leave the battlefield and become a monk. Lord Krishna reminds Arjuna that it is far better to perform one's natural prescribed duty, even if it is tinged with faults. In fact, it is noble to die in the discharge of one's duty, than to follow the path of another, which is fraught with danger.

swa-dharma nidhanam śhreyah para-dharma bhayāvahah

He further tells Arjuna that he's only slaying the body, for the soul is eternal and can never be harmed. The central teaching of the Gita is to inculcate in its readers action based on their own inherent nature (*svadharmā*). A craftsman cannot perform a salesman's job or vice versa, similarly Gita advocates action based on one's innate capacity .

Central to the Gita's ethical teachings is the concept of selfless action (**niṣkāma karma**), which advocates for acting in accordance with one's duty without attachment to the fruits of one's actions. This principle is designed to align individual behavior with cosmic order, ensuring that actions contribute to the greater good rather than personal gain. Additionally, the Gita addresses the moral

complexities of war and conflict, guiding Arjuna through his ethical dilemma by encouraging him to fulfill his warrior duty while maintaining a higher spiritual focus (Malhotra, R., & Babaji, S D., 2020). Through its teachings, the Bhagavad Gita integrates moral conduct with spiritual wisdom, presenting a holistic approach to ethics that balances action with spiritual intent, and duty with detachment.

4 THE UPANISHADS: ETHICAL DIMENSIONS

The Upanishads contain vastutantrajñāna, knowledge of reality as it is (Śaṅkara' commentary on B.S. I. 1. 2).

These central texts in Indian philosophy offer a comprehensive framework for understanding ethical dimensions through their exploration of metaphysical concepts and spiritual practices. Unlike prescriptive ethical codes, the Upanishads integrate moral behavior with profound spiritual insights, presenting a vision of ethics that is deeply intertwined with the pursuit of ultimate truth. At the core of Upanishadic thought is the concept of Brahman, the ultimate reality or cosmic principle, and Atman, the individual self or soul. The Upanishads propose that ethical behavior is a manifestation of one's alignment with these higher truths. They emphasize that understanding the unity between Brahman (Universal Consciousness) and Atman (Individual Consciousness) is essential for living a moral life. This realization is achieved through practices of self-discipline, truthfulness, and non-injury (*ahimsā*), which are seen not just as ethical mandates but as means to spiritual enlightenment. Central ethical teachings of the Upanishads include the emphasis on non-violence and truthfulness. Ahimsa, or non-violence, is considered a fundamental virtue because it reflects the underlying unity of all existence and minimizes harm to others, thereby aligning one's actions with the cosmic order. Truthfulness (*satya*) is equally important, as it signifies living in accordance with the ultimate reality and maintaining integrity in one's actions and speech as quoted in the Mundaka Upanishad- Truth alone wins, not falsehood.

Satyameva Jayati nāṅṛtaṁ satyena panthā vitato devayānaḥ. (Lokeswarananda, S., 2017). Furthermore, the Upanishads advocate for self-control and ascetic practices as means to overcome desires and attachments that lead to ethical transgressions.

5 PLATO'S EARLY DIALOGUES: ETHICAL INQUIRY

Plato's early dialogues, such as "Euthyphro", "Apology", "Crito" and the death scene from "Phaedo", explore ethical inquiry through Socrates as the interlocutor. These dialogues are instrumental in understanding Plato's approach to ethics, focusing on virtue, justice, and the nature of moral goodness (Nicholson, A. J., 2010). Socrates, the central figure, employs his signature method of dialectical questioning to challenge conventional beliefs and stimulate critical thinking about ethical concepts & virtues. He believes that his inquiries are important for morality suggesting that if one claims to have virtues, then they ought to answer his questions and failing to do so, one ought not to count themselves as virtuous (Irwin, 2007).

The Euthyphro is a conversation between Socrates and the self-styled religious expert (Euthyphro) that takes place in front of King-archons office, where Socrates had been ordered to appear to hear the exact nature of charges against him. In this dialogue, Socrates questions the nature of piety, challenging conventional beliefs about morality and concludes a morally adequate definition of the pious which not only analyses the concept of pious, but also gives an account of the property of piety (Brickhouse, T. C., & Smith, N.D., 2004).

"Apology" is the defence of Socrates who's facing a trial for impiety and corrupting the youth. He starts off by telling the jury, "I am confident in the justice of my cause..." (Plato, 2010,

Apology 17c5). Further goes on to say: "I tell you that virtue is not given by money, but that from virtue comes money and every other good of man, public as well as private" (Plato, 2010, Ap. 30b5). Talking about his self discipline he admits: "I did not go where I could do no good to you or to myself; but where I could do the greatest good privately to every one of you... and sought to persuade every man that he must look to himself and seek virtue and wisdom.." (Plato, 2010, Ap. 26c2,). Throughout the speech, he is urging the Athenian citizens to find reason behind every action, disregard materialistic pleasures and focus on the summon Bonum or the chief good to life, i.e., to seek wisdom or Aretē. In the dialogue Theaetetus (149a) Socrates compares his own function in life to the midwife's art. Positing himself as a moral gadfly, he challenges the Athenian society's understanding of virtue and justice just as the midwife helps women in bringing their bodily children to birth, so Socrates' practices on men, and the children which he assists into the world are offspring not of the body but of the mind. His approach is characterized by a focus on rationality and the intellectual pursuit of the good. Socrates' defense highlights his commitment to truth and moral integrity, even in the face of death, illustrating his belief that ethical living requires a steadfast adherence to one's principles.

In "Crito," the dialogue extends Socratic ethical inquiry into the realm of justice and personal responsibility. Socrates, imprisoned and awaiting execution, discusses with Crito the implications of escaping from prison. He starts off by telling Crito that it is more important to uphold justice and obey the laws of the state than to seek personal gain or avoid suffering and one cannot use injustice to retaliate against injustice. He reminds Crito that not only has he lived happily for 70 years in Athens but the state has also provided education to his children and was free to practice his dialectical skills anywhere he chose . He fought bravely for Athens in the Pitedian campaign and besides, since he agreed to the trial, he placed his fate in the hands of the jury and even if the decision is unjust and unfavourable, he will abide by it. Socrates firmly believes that he has done no wrong to anyone and so God will be his judge in this life and the next.

Ethical decisions should be guided by a commitment to justice and the principles of right action, rather than mere self-interest. Overall, Plato's early dialogues reveal a methodical approach to ethical inquiry that emphasizes rational analysis, the pursuit of virtue, and the importance of justice. Socrates' dialectical method challenges assumptions and encourages a deeper understanding of moral principles, laying the groundwork for subsequent philosophical exploration of ethics.

6. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Sir Charles Eliot in his assessment of East-West Conceptions maintains that when the west "generally aims at teaching a man how to act: Eastern ethics forming a character. A good character will no doubt act rightly when the circumstances require action, but one need not seek occasion for action (Neelakantan, 2012).

Ethical insights from the Bhagavad Gita, Upanishads, and Plato's early dialogues reveal both shared themes and distinct philosophical perspectives. Central to all three texts is the exploration of duty, virtue, and the nature of justice, yet each approaches these concepts with its unique cultural and metaphysical framework. The Bhagavad Gita emphasizes duty (svadharma) as integral to the cosmic order, advocating for selfless action (nishkama karma) as a means to spiritual liberation. In contrast, Plato's dialogues, particularly "Apology" and "Crito" focus on the individual's duty to seek wisdom and the common good, linking ethical conduct to the health of the soul and the well-being of the state. Both the Upanishads and Plato's works explore the connection between virtue and knowledge, though

the Upanishads view virtue as aligned with spiritual truths and self-realization, while Plato ties virtue to the intellectually understanding and pursuing of the good.

Ethical duties are conceived differently in these traditions; in the Bhagavad Gita, it is following one's svadharma (inherent nature) and thus align their actions with the cosmic order, whereas in early Platonic dialogues, Socrates says there is nothing greater than wisdom (*arête*) and one's duty is to seek it for harmony of both the soul and the state. The study also highlights the differing roles of metaphysics in these texts. The Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita integrate ethics with metaphysical teachings, where moral actions are paths to realizing higher truths. Plato, while acknowledging the metaphysical realm of forms, primarily views ethics through the lens of knowledge and rationality. Despite these differences, the convergence in their ethical inquiries suggests a universal concern with how individuals should live, what constitutes a virtuous life, and how justice is to be understood and practiced.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this comparative study of ethical insights from the Bhagavad Gita, Upanishads, and Plato's early dialogues underscores the depth and diversity of philosophical thought on ethics across different cultural and metaphysical contexts. Despite the distinct frameworks and conceptualizations of duty, wisdom and virtue presented by each tradition, commonalities emerge in their shared concern with moral conduct and the pursuit of a good life. The Bhagavad Gita's emphasis on selfless action within the cosmic order, the Upanishads' integration of virtue with spiritual self-realization, and Socrates' focus on reason and wisdom (*Arête*), all reflect an engagement with morality and ethical thought.

This study not only highlights the richness of each tradition's ethical framework but also demonstrates the value of cross-cultural philosophical inquiry in deepening our appreciation of ethical principles. The research offers valuable insights into the universal aspects of ethical thought and encourages ongoing dialogue between diverse philosophical traditions.

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