

Moral Dilemma of Arjuna: A Psychological analysis

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Abstract

The *Bhagavad Gita* presents one of the most profound explorations of moral conflict and psychological crisis in classical Indian philosophy through the character of Arjuna. On the battlefield of Kurukshetra, Arjuna faces a severe inner dilemma when he realizes that his opponents are his own relatives, teachers, and loved ones. This crisis, described in the opening chapter as *Arjuna Vishada Yoga*, reveals a complex psychological condition characterized by fear, grief, compassion, attachment, ethical confusion, and emotional paralysis. Rather than portraying weakness, Arjuna's breakdown represents a deeply human moral struggle that arises when personal emotions collide with social duty and ethical responsibility. This paper offers a psychological analysis of Arjuna's moral dilemma from the perspective of Indian psychology, which views mental suffering, moral reasoning, and spiritual ignorance as interconnected. It examines the psychological causes of Arjuna's despair, including attachment (*moha*), ego-identification, and imbalance between emotion (*manas*) and intellect (*buddhi*). The paper further analyzes Lord Krishna's teachings as a form of philosophical and psychological therapy aimed at restoring mental clarity, emotional balance, and moral determination. Key concepts such as *Atman* (the eternal Self), *dharma* (righteous duty), *karma yoga* (selfless action), *samatva* (equanimity), and the theory of the three *gunas* are explored as psychological tools for resolving moral conflict. By integrating ethical action with self-knowledge and detachment, the *Bhagavad Gita* presents a holistic model of moral psychology that remains relevant to modern discussions on stress, ethical decision-making, and mental well-being. The paper concludes that Arjuna's transformation from despair to clarity exemplifies the Indian psychological ideal of harmonizing emotion, intellect, and action, offering timeless insight into the resolution of moral dilemmas.



Keywords: Arjuna’s dilemma, Indian psychology, Bhagavad Gita, moral conflict, Vishada, Dharma, Karma Yoga, equanimity

Introduction

The *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the most influential philosophical texts of Indian tradition, forms a part of the *Mahabharata* and is structured as a dialogue between Prince Arjuna and Lord Krishna. Although its setting is the battlefield of Kurukshetra, the *Gita* is primarily concerned with the inner battlefield of the human mind. At the beginning of the war, Arjuna experiences a deep moral and psychological crisis that prevents him from performing his duty as a warrior. His refusal to fight is not rooted in fear alone but in a profound ethical conflict shaped by compassion, attachment, and concern for moral consequences.

Indian psychology does not separate mental health from ethics and spirituality. It understands psychological suffering as arising from ignorance of the true Self and excessive attachment to worldly identities and emotions. Arjuna’s breakdown in the first chapter, known as *Arjuna Vishada Yoga*, provides a detailed psychological account of moral confusion, emotional instability, and existential anxiety. This paper seeks to analyse Arjuna’s moral dilemma using concepts drawn from Indian psychology and the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*, with special attention to emotion, cognition, duty, and self-realization.

The Context of Arjuna’s Crisis

Arjuna’s moral dilemma emerges when he asks Krishna to place the chariot between the two armies so that he may observe those assembled for battle. When he sees his elders, teachers, cousins, and friends standing on both sides, he is overwhelmed by sorrow and compassion. He describes his condition vividly: “Seeing my relatives arrayed for battle, my limbs fail, my mouth dries up, my body trembles, and my hair stands on end” (*Bhagavad Gita* 1.28–29). These verses reveal severe psychological distress accompanied by physical symptoms, which modern psychology would associate with acute anxiety or emotional shock. Arjuna’s bow slips from his hand, and he feels incapable of action. He declares that he sees no good in killing his own people even if victory and kingdom are assured (1.31). From the standpoint of Indian psychology, Arjuna’s reaction is rooted in *moha*, or delusion caused by attachment. His compassion, though ethically admirable, becomes psychologically disabling because it lacks discrimination (*buddhi*). Emotional identification with family roles overwhelms his rational understanding of duty and justice.



Moral Reasoning and Ethical Conflict

Arjuna's arguments against war are emotionally intense and morally charged. He fears that war will destroy family traditions and social order: "With the destruction of the family, the ancient family duties perish; when duty is destroyed, unrighteousness overwhelms the whole family" (1.40). This reasoning shows that Arjuna is not indifferent to morality; rather, he is deeply concerned about ethical consequences. Psychologically, however, his reasoning is selective and emotionally biased. He emphasizes the negative outcomes of action while ignoring the consequences of inaction. Indian psychology recognizes such imbalance as a disturbance of mental equilibrium caused by the dominance of emotion over intellect.

Arjuna's dilemma also reflects cognitive dissonance. As a *Kshatriya*, his social duty is to protect justice and fight unrighteousness. Yet his personal emotions compel him to withdraw. Unable to reconcile these opposing demands, he chooses renunciation as an escape, stating that he would rather live by begging than kill his revered teachers (2.5). This avoidance reflects psychological withdrawal rather than true spiritual renunciation.

Vishada as a Psychological Condition

The *Gita* describes Arjuna's condition as *vishada* (despair), meaning deep sorrow, despondency, and loss of inner strength. Arjuna openly admits his confusion: "My mind is confused about duty; I ask you to tell me decisively what is good for me" (2.7). In Indian psychology, despair is not merely a pathological state but a critical moment that can lead either to further ignorance or to self-transformation. Arjuna's surrender to Krishna marks a decisive psychological shift. By accepting Krishna as his teacher, Arjuna becomes receptive to insight and guidance. This moment resembles the therapeutic process in modern psychology, where acknowledgment of confusion and openness to help are essential for healing. Arjuna's despair thus becomes the starting point for self-knowledge rather than a sign of weakness.

Krishna's Teachings as Psychological Therapy

Krishna's response to Arjuna functions as a systematic psychological intervention. He first challenges Arjuna's assumptions about life and death: "The wise grieve neither for the living nor for the dead" (2.11). Krishna introduces the concept of the eternal *Atman*, emphasizing that the Self is unborn, indestructible, and eternal: "The Self is never born, nor does it ever die" (2.20). This teaching restructures



Arjuna's thinking by shifting his focus from the perishable body to the eternal Self. Psychologically, this reduces fear of death and guilt, addressing the root of Arjuna's anxiety.

Krishna further introduces *karma yoga*, the discipline of selfless action: "You have the right to action alone, never to its fruits" (2.47). By separating action from attachment to results, Krishna offers a powerful psychological method for resolving moral anxiety. Emotional balance (*samatva*) is emphasized as essential: "Established in yoga, perform action, abandoning attachment" (2.48).

Dharma and the Psychology of Duty

In Indian psychology, moral action is guided by *dharma*, or righteous duty aligned with one's nature and role. Krishna reminds Arjuna: "Considering your own duty as a warrior, you should not waver" (2.31). This teaching does not glorify violence but situates action within a larger ethical and cosmic framework. Psychologically, *dharma* provides clarity and purpose, reducing confusion and indecision. When action is performed without ego and attachment, it becomes a means of inner growth rather than bondage.

The Theory of the Three Gunas

The *Gita* explains human behaviour through the theory of the three *gunas*: *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. Arjuna's initial state is dominated by *rajas* (emotional agitation) and *tamas* (confusion and inertia). Krishna explains: "Sattva binds by attachment to happiness, rajas by attachment to action, and tamas by negligence and delusion" (14.6–8). Psychologically, Arjuna's transformation involves the cultivation of *sattva*, which brings clarity, balance, and wisdom. This shift enables moral stability and emotional regulation.

Desire, Anger and Moral Collapse

Krishna identifies desire and anger as destructive psychological forces: "It is desire, it is anger, born of rajas; this is the great destroyer" (3.37). Arjuna's refusal to fight is partly driven by fear of personal suffering and emotional discomfort. Indian psychology emphasizes that moral failure arises not from action itself but from action driven by desire, fear, and ego.

Resolution of the Moral Dilemma

By the end of the *Gita*, Arjuna attains clarity and confidence: "My delusion is destroyed; I have regained memory through your grace. I stand firm, free from doubt" (18.73). Psychologically, this signifies resolution of inner conflict and integration of emotion, intellect and will. Arjuna's decision to fight now



arises from understanding and detachment rather than impulse.

Contemporary Relevance

Arjuna's dilemma remains relevant in modern life, where individuals face ethical conflicts in professional and personal spheres. The *Gita* offers psychological tools such as mindfulness, value-based action, and emotional regulation, aligning closely with modern positive psychology and ethical counseling.

Conclusion

Arjuna's moral dilemma in the *Bhagavad Gita* represents a profound psychological study of human conflict, emotion and ethical reasoning. Indian psychology views such crises as opportunities for self-transformation. Through Krishna's guidance, Arjuna overcomes despair and attachment by cultivating knowledge, discipline, and devotion. The *Gita* thus offers a timeless psychological framework for resolving moral dilemmas by harmonizing duty, wisdom and inner peace.

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