

Three Lives

In the third chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the warrior hero Arjuna steps back from his immediate concern (roughly, “What should I do here on this battlefield, where my kinsmen and teachers are ranged against me?”) to a more general concern: “Tell me surely this one thing: how I should attain the highest good.”¹ In the course of providing an answer (or perhaps, more than one answer) to this request, the God Krishna, who is serving as Arjuna’s charioteer for the great battle, unfolds three “yogas” (literally, “disciplines”), which we might think of as possible lives, or ways of directing our lives. Krishna’s three options are the life/discipline of action, the life/discipline of knowledge or intellect, and the life/discipline of devotion. This evening, we’ll consider how a few vivid passages from the *Gītā* might fruitfully be paired with selections from the Hellenic philosophical tradition, which also seem to examine those same three lives.



In the fourth chapter, Krishna offers this summation of the life, or discipline, of action:

“What is action? What is inaction?” Even the wise are confused in this matter. This action I shall explain to you, having known which, you shall be released from evil. [...] He who has abandoned all attachment to the fruits of action, always content, not dependent, even when performing action, does, in effect, nothing at all. Performing action with the body alone, without wish, restrained in thought and self, with all motives of acquisition abandoned, he incurs no evil. Content with whatever comes to him, transcending the dualities, free from envy, constant in mind whether in success or in failure, even though he acts, he is not bound.²

We find a related set of perspectives in some Stoic philosophers. Asked by a student, “To what things should I pay attention?”, Epictetus (1st/2nd century CE) replies:

In the first place to those general principles that you should always have at hand, so as not to go to sleep, or get up, or drink or eat, or converse with others, without them, namely, that no one is master over another person’s choice, and that it is in choice alone that our good and evil lie. No one has the power to procure any good for me or to involve me in any evil, but I alone have authority over myself in these matters. [...]

It is necessary first of all, then, to keep these principles at hand, and to do nothing without them, but keep our mind directed to this end, that we should pursue nothing external, and nothing that is not our own, but rather, as he who is all-powerful has ordained, pursue without reservation such things as lie within the sphere of choice, and all the rest only in so far as it is granted to us.

1 *Bhagavad Gītā* III, 2cd.

2 *Bhagavad Gītā* IV, 16, 20–22, translated by Winthrop Sargeant, slightly modified.

And next, we must remember who we are, and what name we bear, and strive to direct our appropriate actions according to the demands of our social relationships, remembering what is the proper time to sing, the proper time to play, and in whose company, and what will be out of place, and how we may make sure that our companions don't despise us, and the we don't despise ourselves; when we should joke, and whom we should laugh at, and to what end we should associate with others, and with whom, and finally, how we should preserve our proper character while doing so. Whenever you deviate from any of these rules, you suffer the penalty at once, not from anything that comes from outside, but from the very action itself.³

In this focus on the duties that come from our relationships, Epictetus sounds very much like some passages from the *Gītā*, with their emphasis on the duties that come from our social status and roles. Epictetus himself returns to this point elsewhere, including in his *Handbook*, where he advises that “In general, appropriate actions are measured by our relationships.”⁴

With both of these passages, we might wonder: do we have one “life” here, or two? We seem to get a division between doing the discipline of action in the right way, without attachment to fruits that are not up to us to control, and performing actions in the wrong sort of way. Let's keep this tension in mind as we proceed, and ask ourselves whether something similar might apply to the other two lives, also: What would it mean to *know*, or to *love*, either with or without attachment to the fruits?

We can unpack the Stoic version of this teaching with some help from the 3rd-century CE biographer and compiler, Diogenes Laertius:

[The Stoics] say the some existing things are good, others are bad,⁵ and others are neither of these. The virtues—prudence, justice, courage, moderation and the rest—are good. The opposites of these—foolishness, injustice and the rest—are bad. Everything which neither does benefit nor harms is neither of these: for instance, life, health, pleasure, beauty, strength, wealth, reputation, noble birth, and their opposites, death, disease, pain, ugliness, weakness, poverty, low repute, ignoble birth, and the like... For these things are not good but indifferents of the species ‘preferred.’ For just as heating, not chilling, is the peculiar characteristic of what is hot, so too benefiting, not harming, is the peculiar characteristic of what is good. But wealth and health no more benefit than they harm. Therefore wealth and health are not something good. Furthermore they say: that which can be used well and badly is not something good. But wealth and health can be used well and badly. Therefore wealth and health are not something good.⁶

3 *Discourses*, 4.12, §§7–8, 15–18, translated by Robin Hard.

4 *Handbook* §30. See also the lengthy commentary on this passage by Simplicius, the 6th century Platonist.

5 “Bad” translates the same Greek term, *kakos*, which was translated “evil” in the earlier quote from Epictetus.

6 *Lives of the Philosophers* 7, 101–103, translated by A.A. Long and D.S. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 58A.

Shifting back to the first century CE, and an author who can himself be identified as a Stoic, Seneca takes up a potential concern with this doctrine of “preferred indifferents”:

“Not so fast,” says the opponent. “If good health, repose, and absence of pain are no impediment to virtue, will you not pursue them?” Well, I shall do so, of course—not because they are good but because they are in accordance with nature, and because my taking them will be an exercise of good judgment. What in that case will be good in them? Just this one thing—that they are well selected. You see, when I put on decent clothing, or take a walk in the proper way, or dine as I should, it’s not the dining or the walking or the clothing this is good, but my intention in each case to maintain the measure that conforms to reason. Let me elaborate: selecting clean clothes is something a person ought to do, because a human being is by nature a clean and seemly animal. Accordingly, while clean clothing is not in itself a good, the act of selecting it is, because goodness is present not in the thing but in the quality of the selection. It is the doing that is honorable, not the actual things we do.

Now suppose me to make the same point about one’s body. This too is a sort of clothing in which nature has enveloped the spirit as its garment. But who has ever valued garments by their storage chest? A sheath does not make a sword good or bad. So I give you the same answer about the body: if the possibility of making a selection is granted me, I shall take good health and strength, but what will be good will be my judgment about them and not the things themselves.⁷



This brings us to Aristotle, who gives us a full-throated defense of the contemplative life, in explicit contrast to a life of action, in the final chapters of his *Nicomachean Ethics*:

If, however, felicity [i.e., supreme happiness/blessedness] is an energy⁸ according to virtue, it is reasonable to suppose that it is an energy according to the most excellent virtue; and this will be the virtue of the most excellent part or power. Whether, therefore this be intellect, or something else which appears to rule and be the leader by nature, and to have a conception of things beautiful and divine; or whether it is itself divine, or the most divine of all our parts—the energy of this, according to its proper virtue, will be perfect felicity.

But we have said that this energy is contemplative. And this appears to accord with what we before asserted, and also with truth. For this energy is the most excellent; since intellect is the best of all our parts, and of objects of knowledge those are the most excellent about which intellect is conversant. This energy is also most continued: for we are able to contemplate more incessantly than to perform

7 Letter 92, §§11–13, translated by Margaret Graves and A.A. Long.

8 Throughout this passage, “energy” translates the Greek *energeia*, which more recent translations typically render as “activity.”

any action whatever. We likewise think that pleasure ought to be mingled with felicity; but the energy *according to wisdom* is acknowledged to be the most delectable of all the energies according to virtue. Wisdom, therefore, appears to possess pleasures admirable both for their purity and stability. It is reasonable also to think that those who *possess* knowledge, live more pleasantly than those who *investigate*.

That too which is called self sufficiency, will especially subsist about the contemplative energy. For the necessities of life, the wise and the just man, and the rest of those who possess the moral virtues, are in want; but even when they are sufficiently supplied with these, the just man is in want to those towards whom, and together with whom, he may act justly; and in like manner the temperate and the brave man, and each of the rest. But the wise man when alone is able to contemplate; and by how much wiser he is, by so much the more does he possess this ability. Perhaps, indeed, he will contemplate better when he has others to cooperate with him; but at the same time he is most sufficient to himself.

This energy alone, likewise, will appear to be beloved for its own sake, for nothing else is produced from it besides contemplation. But from things of a practical nature we obtain something more or less besides the action itself.⁹

Krishna in the *Gītā* in his own way praises the path of knowledge and its results:

As the kindled fire reduces firewood to ashes, Arjuna, so the fire of knowledge reduces actions to ashes. No purifier equal to knowledge is found here in the world; he who is himself perfected in discipline in time finds that knowledge in the self.¹⁰



There is yet one more path, one more choice of life: the one known in Sanskrit as *bhaktiyoga*, the discipline of devotion, and which we might expand into “the path of love” somewhat more broadly. As described in the *Gītā*, we enter here into the territory of mysticism, of the devotee so consumed with burning love for his or her particular God.¹¹

The centerpiece of the *Gītā* is the magnificent theophany of chapter 11, where Krishna reveals himself to Arjuna in all his splendor as the source of all that is. The entire chapter is too long to quote here, but well worth reading, in pretty much any translation. Once the divine gift has passed, and Arjuna’s sight has returned to normal, Krishna concludes:

9 *Nicomachean Ethics*, book X, chapter 7, translated by Thomas Taylor. Italics in the original.

10 *Bhagavad Gītā* IV, 37–38, trans. Sargeant.

11 In Indian traditions, this is the *iṣṭadeva*, literally “one’s own God.” Other religious texts—some of which are even called *Gītā* in their titles—glorify some particular other God in much the same way the *Bhagavad Gītā* praises Krishna.

This form of Mine which you have beheld is difficult to see; even the Gods are constantly longing to behold it. Not through study of the Vedas, not through austerity, not through gifts, and not through sacrifice can I be seen in this form as your beheld Me. By undistracted devotion alone can I be known, and be truly seen in this form, and be entered into, Arjuna. He who does all work for Me, considers Me as the Supreme, is devoted to Me, abandons all attachment, and is free from enmity toward any being, comes to Me, Arjuna.¹²

Through devotion, then, there is a path to union, to a mystical vision of all things, within the encounter with the God who is one's beloved. As Krishna himself asks (rhetorically): "What is this extensive knowledge to you, Arjuna? I support this entire universe constantly with a single fraction of myself."¹³

Whereas in the *Gītā*, Krishna invites Arjuna to go directly to himself (that is, to a specific divine individual, in all the God's uniqueness and universality) in his devotion, Plato seems to offer an alternative perspective on this path. In both the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, Socrates is explicit that the path of Love begins with the erotic longing directed both *to* and *through* an individual human beloved. While Plato might happily endorse the 20th-century showtune, to the effect that "To love another person is to see the face of God," the human beloved never drops out of the picture, and is never simply instrumentalized; he or she is always loved, for him- or herself, in all of his or her uniqueness. Insofar as Plato steps back to consider the human beloved—even in the ideal circumstances which he'll describe below—might we start to find space for a second mode of the life of love, just as we saw two modes of the life of action?

In Plato's *Symposium*, we hear Socrates and his companions each giving one of a series of speeches in praise of Love. As the final contribution to this series—and so, by implication, the culmination of what Plato is willing or able to convey in a direct, logical mode about Love—Socrates relates the teaching he previously received on the subject from a priestess named Diotima. Here is the summation which concludes that recital:

Now to go, or to be led by another, along the right way of Love, is this: beginning from those beauties of lower rank, to proceed in a continual ascent, all the way proposing this highest beauty as the end; and using the rest but as so many steps in the ascent; to proceed from one to two, from two to all beauteous bodies; from the beauty of bodies to that of souls; from the beauty of souls to that of arts; from the beauty of arts to that of disciplines; until at length from the disciplines he arrives at that discipline which is the discipline of no other thing than of that supreme beauty; and thus finally attains to know what is the beautiful itself.

Here is to be found, dear Socrates, said the stranger-prophetess, here if any where, the happy life, the ultimate object of desire to man: it is to live in beholding this consummate beauty; the sight of which if ever you attain, it will appear not to be in

¹² *Bhagavad Gītā* XI, 52–55, trans. Sargeant.

¹³ *Bhagavad Gītā* X, 42.

gold, nor in magnificent attire, nor in beautiful youths or damsels: with such, however, at present, many of you are so entirely taken up, and with the sight of them so absolutely charmed, that you would rejoice to spend your whole lives, were it possible, in the presence of those enchanting objects, without any thoughts of eating or drinking, but feasting your eyes only with their beauty, and living always in the bare sight of it. If this be so, what effect, think you, would the sight of beauty itself have upon a man, were he to see it pure and genuine, not corrupted and stained all over with the mixture of flesh, and colours, and much more of like perishing and fading trash; but were able to view that divine essence, the beautiful itself, in its own simplicity of form?

Think you, said she, that the life of such a man would be contemptible or mean; of the man who always directed his eye toward the right object, who looked always at real beauty, and was conversant with it continually? Perceive you not, said she, that in beholding the beautiful with that eye, with which alone it is possible to behold it, thus, and thus only, could a man ever attain to generate, not the images or semblances of virtue, as not having his intimate commerce with an image or a semblance; but virtue true, real, and substantial, from the converse and embraces of that which is real and true. Thus begetting true virtue, and bringing her up till she is grown mature, he would become a favourite of the Gods; and at length would be, if any man ever be, himself one of the immortals.¹⁴

At this point, the dialogue completes a transition which has been building all through Socrates' speech, and pitches from the realm of the discursive intellect, to the realm of divine epiphany and religious mystery—as in fact it must, if the life of Love is truly to transcend the life of intellect. And yet, we learn earlier in the same dialogue that Love (or Eros, that great and mighty daimon or God) is himself a philosopher:

For wisdom is among the things of highest beauty; and all beauty is the object of love. It follows therefore of necessity, that Love is a philosopher, or a lover of wisdom; and that, as such, he stands between the adept in wisdom and the wholly ignorant.¹⁵

This invites us to consider how all three of the lives might be interconnected, or even found to be nested, each inside of the others. Perhaps no matter which life we choose, no matter which seems most suited to our own individual temperament, each of the others is in some way there inside, waiting to unfold.

14 *Symposium* 211b–212a, translated by Thomas Taylor and Floyer Sydenham. In the earliest editions, in keeping with the scholarly customs of his time, Taylor translated the title of the dialogue as *The Banquet*, since that's a word that comes from Latin, while *Symposium* is borrowed from Greek.

15 *Symposium*, 204b, translated by Thomas Taylor and Floyer Sydenham.