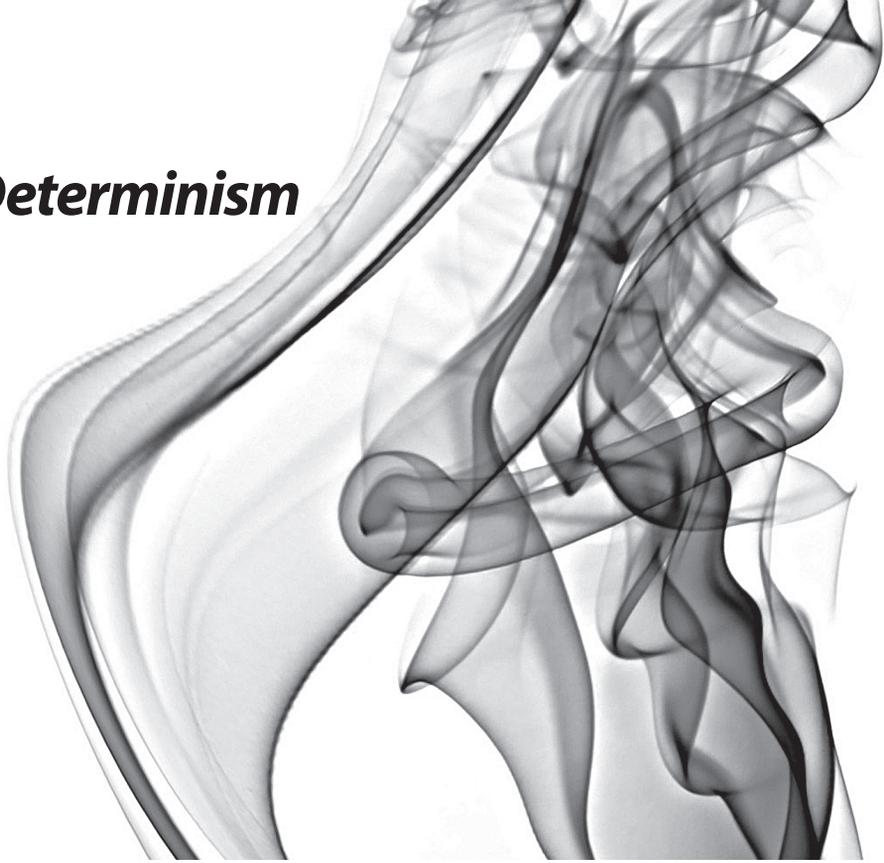


# Free Will and Determinism in Vedanta

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FREE WILL AND DETERMINISM have been approached from different perspectives by Eastern as well as Western philosophers who believe in a soul and God, and even by materialists and atheists. These issues are not limited to philosophers and religious people, they are of common interest. I will not examine in this article all the aspects of free will and determinism, rather I will focus on the views of Vedanta philosophy from the perspective of an individual.

In the context of our discussion 'determinism' refers to the view that every event that has occurred in the past or is happening now is the result of a prior action, and that every action undertaken now will produce an effect in the future. Thus, according to determinism, every event is part of a causal chain. Philosophers differ in their opinion as to how rigidly the law of causality actually works in our lives, and in Western philosophy different expressions such as 'hard determinism' and 'soft determinism' are

used to represent variations of rigidity.

By 'free will' I refer here to our power to make a choice from alternative courses of actions available to us. We are considered to be using our free will when we decide to take a certain action based on our own intention, without any coercion from any source. It should be noted that though the word 'freedom' is also used in the same sense as 'free will', in some contexts 'freedom' refers to the environment or condition within which we act, and it covers a variety of situations, external as well as internal. External situations that can limit freedom may spring from the political, financial, and social environment. Examples of internal condition include one's mental limitations, addiction, and habits.

There are six different schools of thought in Hindu philosophy: Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Purva Mimamsa, and Vedanta. These schools do not hold exactly the same view with regard to certain aspects of determinism

and freedom, although all of them admit the concept of karma. Vedanta is considered the Hindu philosophy par excellence. My primary sources of Vedanta philosophy for this article are the Bhagavadgita and a few relevant verses from the Upanishads. I will also briefly present the views of two prominent Indian philosophers and scholars of Vedanta: Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo. First I will examine the widely known doctrine of karma and then I will present the view of Vedanta.

### **The Doctrine of Karma**

The concept of determinism is represented in Hinduism by the doctrine of karma. The Sanskrit word 'karma' can mean either action or the consequence of an action, depending on the context it is used in. In Vedic literature karma means rituals. In the Upanishads karma is used in the sense of willed actions and also in the sense of the results of such actions. One of the earliest references to the doctrine of karma is found in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*: 'One indeed becomes good by good action, evil by evil action.'<sup>1</sup> In the same Upanishad the idea of karma is also presented in this way: 'According as one acts, according as one behaves, so does one become. The doer of good becomes good, the doer of evil becomes evil' (4.4.5).

The doctrine of karma is mentioned not only in Vedantic literature but also in the Puranas and the Itihasas, and there is a variety of ideas associated with this doctrine among common people. There are also some misconceptions regarding the concept of karma; for example, some people associate karma with fate. According to believers of fate, all events are predestined to happen. There is no universally agreed definition of what fate is; however, there is agreement that it is not the will of the supreme Divine. Commonly it is viewed as the will of a smaller or lesser god.

There are other words used in the same sense and these include *niyati* and *adrishta*, which also mean destiny or fate. Therefore, to equate karma with fate is wrong.

According to the doctrine of karma, every action has a consequence, which may or may not manifest immediately. The situation in which we find ourselves at a certain moment is the result of a chain of not only our past actions but of the actions of many others by whom we are surrounded. Further, the action that we undertake now will result in a consequence in the future. There is a common notion that karma is a precise system of reward and punishment based on the nature of our actions, but that is not true. Sri Aurobindo explained: 'If we touch fire, it burns, but there is no principle of punishment in this relation of cause and effect, it is a lesson of relation and a lesson of experience; so in all Nature's dealings with us there is a relation of things and there is a corresponding lesson of experience.'<sup>2</sup>

Karma is a cosmic law and is applicable to all grades of existence in the phenomenal world—the physical as well as the supra-physical worlds of life force, emotions, and mind. The rigidity with which the law of karma works depends on the grade of existence. At the physical level the law of karma is very deterministic and does not give room for freedom. On the other hand, at the mental level of human beings, where a higher level of consciousness operates, it seems that there is some room for freedom, and that is what the debate is about. In any case, the doctrine of karma does not absolve its agent from the moral responsibility with regard to his or her actions. Although it fully recognizes the effects of the past on the present, it does not deny us the possibility of choosing a particular course of action. This aspect of karma is explained by Dr. S Radhakrishnan, who wrote: 'The cards in

the game of life are given to us. We do not select them. They are traced to our past Karma, but we can call as we please, lead what suit we will, and as we play, we gain or lose. And there is freedom.<sup>3</sup> The same idea was conveyed by Swami Abhedananda: 'A believer in the law of *karma* is a free agent and is responsible for all the good and bad results of his own actions that attend to his life. He knows that he creates his own destiny, and moulds his character by his thoughts and deeds.'<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that the freedom that the law of karma offers is not granted to everyone automatically; the access to freedom requires one to act with a certain level of awareness, which all human beings do not have. We will examine this issue from the perspective of the Gita in the next section.

Before moving on I would like to mention that the doctrine of karma includes a variety of ideas, many of which are related to life after death and also rebirth. The doctrine recognizes that there are different types of karmas such as *prarabdha*, *sanchita*, *kriyamana*, and *agami*. The definitions of these types of karma and the explanation of how they operate can be found in the general literature on the doctrine of karma. However, these ideas are not mentioned in the Upanishads or the Gita, and therefore I will not discuss them in this article.

### **Vedanta's Views**

Vedanta admits determinism in the form of the doctrine of karma, according to which our actions bind us to a chain of causes and effects. Vedanta also admits the freedom of choice or free will. To understand these apparently conflicting views one must delve into a fundamental metaphysical concept of Vedanta, which is brought out clearly in the Gita. The Gita's view on determinism and freedom is based on the concept of Prakriti, nature, and Purusha, supreme Soul

or conscious Being. Prakriti, which makes up the phenomenal world, is subject to causal laws, while Purusha is essentially free. Further, the Gita and the Upanishads make a distinction between the true Soul, or higher Self, of an individual and the person's apparent soul, or lower self. The higher Self transcends nature, which constitutes the phenomenal world of time and space, and thus is free from nature's determinism. The apparent soul is *ahamkara*, the ego, and being constructed by nature is subject to its control. Ordinarily, we identify ourselves with our ego and become enslaved to nature and her modes or qualities, called *gunas*. We are driven by desires, and our will and actions are entirely determined by the causal laws of nature. In spite of that we generally feel and think that we are freely choosing our actions. In the words of the Gita: 'All the actions are being entirely done by the modes (*gunas*) of nature; the ego-deluded being regards his "I" as the doer.'<sup>5</sup>

The three *gunas*—*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*—bind us to our lower nature. In the Gita's words: '*Sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* are *gunas* born of Prakriti; they bind to the body the imperishable Dweller in the body' (14.5). Although it is not difficult to see how *tamas* and *rajas* limit our freedom, it may be difficult to see how *sattva* does it. However, the Gita is quite clear on this issue and points out that *sattva* too causes attachment to knowledge and happiness. The sense of ego does not disappear when a person acts in the mode of *sattva*.

To free oneself from the determinism of nature and its modes, one must clearly recognize the operation of the modes of nature. 'He who sees that all actions are in all ways done by Prakriti and also sees the Self as non-doer, he (truly) sees' (13.29). Next, one has to rise to a higher plane of existence and find one's higher Self, which is free. The concepts of the lower self

and the higher Self are presented in the Upanishads as well. There are two verses in the Upanishads that use the metaphor of two birds to refer to the lower self and the higher Self of an individual. The verses are as follows: ‘Two birds, closely united companions, cling to the same tree. Of these two, one eats the sweet fruit (of the tree), (and) the other looks on without eating. On the same tree a person (individual soul), immersed (in ignorance) and deluded, grieves on account of his helplessness. When he sees the other, the Lord who is worshipped, and his greatness, he becomes freed from sorrow.’<sup>6</sup>

These verses describe the two states of an individual soul. One of the birds represents the soul involved in Prakriti, which the Gita refers to as the *kshara*, mutable. This *kshara* identifies itself with the ego and remains helplessly bound up in the actions of the *gunas* and the laws of causality. Trapped in Prakriti this soul forgets its higher nature, the Atman, which is represented by the other bird. The Atman is beyond the control of Prakriti, and the Gita refers to it as *akshara*, immutable. When ignorance is removed and one’s ego is replaced by the higher Self, one gains liberation from the determinism of Prakriti and the laws of causality.

I should add that the concept of Prakriti and Purusha is found in both Sankhya and Vedanta philosophies, but there is a significant difference in their views regarding the relation between nature and Atman. Whereas Sankhya philosophy is dualistic and treats Prakriti and Purusha as two separate principles, Vedanta considers Prakriti and Purusha as two aspects of one principle, which is Brahman. Vedanta’s Prakriti is the power inherent in Purusha and the driving force of the phenomenal world. In the manifested phenomenal world Purusha loses itself in the mutable Prakriti and it seems to change with the changes of nature. The Gita refers to the

Purusha hidden in the mutable lower Prakriti as *kshara* Purusha. Purusha in its aspect of pure Being, which transcends the lower Prakriti, is *akshara* Purusha, also called Atman.

There is another important difference between Sankhya and Vedanta as presented in the Gita with regard to the relation of Purusha and Prakriti. Sankhya’s Purusha passively witnesses and sustains the actions of Prakriti, but it does not govern her actions. According to Sankhya, when Purusha withdraws its sanction Prakriti’s actions come to an end. According to the Gita, Purusha is more than just a witness and consentor; it can also be Ishvara, the Lord and controller of nature.<sup>7</sup>

The Gita does not advocate that one should completely withdraw from action and remain merged in blissful inaction with *akshara* Purusha, the inactive silent Self. One indeed can become free from the determinism of nature by realizing the Atman; that is the path followed by ‘the Sannyasin, who rejects the nature, the action altogether, so far at least as action can be rejected, so that there may be an unmixed undivided freedom; but that solution, though admitted, is not preferred by the Gita.’<sup>8</sup> According to the Gita, the first stage is to be united with the Self and remain unaffected by desire and passion, success and failure; but one must not stop there. Sri Krishna urges Arjuna to fight. The Gita wants us to be active in our life. The *Isha Upanishad* also recommends action: ‘Verily, by doing works in this world one should wish to live a hundred years. There is no other way for you but this. This way action does not stick to a man.’<sup>9</sup> But how can one act in the world and still remain free from determinism? To understand the Gita’s answer to this question we must first understand the concepts of *kshara* Purusha, *akshara* Purusha, Purushottama, and the higher Prakriti or Para-Prakriti.

Some interpreters of Vedanta view the statuses of *kshara* and *akshara* Purushas as being the only two alternatives, which for them are mutually exclusive. The Gita does not accept that view and recognizes a third status, ‘a supreme reality of the Soul’s existence of which these are two contrary aspects, but which is limited by neither of them.’<sup>10</sup> This supreme Reality is the Gita’s Purushottama: ‘There are two Purushas in this world, the immutable (*akshara*) and the mutable (*kshara*); the mutable is all these beings, the high-seated consciousness (*kutashta*) is called the immutable (*akshara*). But other than these two is the highest spirit called the supreme Self (Purushottama), who enters the three worlds and upholds them, the imperishable Lord (Ishvara).’<sup>11</sup>

The Gita recognizes that to be free from the chain of causality one must attain the status of *akshara* Purusha and become *trigunatita*, superior to the three *gunas*; but *akshara* Purusha, the Atman, is silent and inactive—*akarta*, non-doer. Therefore, by reaching *akshara* Purusha one can liberate oneself from nature’s determinism. To find the divine will one must go beyond *akshara* Purusha and unite one’s whole being with Purushottama and Para-Prakriti, which is the executive force of Purushottama. The Gita refers to it: ‘The five elements, the mind, reason, and the ego, comprise my eightfold divided nature. This is the lower. But know my other nature different from this, the supreme, which becomes the *jiva* (individual self) and by which the world is upheld’ (7.4–5).

When one is able to unite one’s whole being with Purushottama, one can find poise in *akshara* Purusha and be free from the control of Prakriti. One can also carry out one’s work in the world as an instrument of the divine will, which is in Para-Prakriti. Purusha can change the motive of Prakriti’s action and make it perform

selfless and desireless actions by unifying it with the divine will. Such work does not bind one to the causal chain.

To become egoless and find one’s higher Self, which takes one beyond the determinism of nature, is not an easy task. However, the Gita presents a practical way: a triple path of knowledge, work, and devotion. According to the Gita, we must sincerely feel that the fruits of our actions belong not to us but to the Master of the world, Purushottama. We are to consecrate to Purushottama all our actions, thoughts, and feelings. We must see God everywhere and in everything, and also see everything residing in God. Thus, gradually, we can feel oneness with all beings and lose our egoistic self and selfish desires. Finally, we must lovingly make a complete surrender to Purushottama and his will. There are several verses in the Gita that describe how one should act in order not to accumulate adverse karma. Among these, the following two verses are perhaps the most revealing: ‘Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer (in sacrifice), whatever you give, whatever spiritual austerities you perform, make it an offering to Me. Thus, you will be liberated from good and evil results, which constitute the bonds of action; with thy soul in union with the Divine through renunciation, you shall be free and attain Me’ (9.27–8).

### **The Views of Two Great Scholars**

The views of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo on free will and determinism are very similar to those of the Gita. Both of them recognize the determinism of nature manifested in the phenomenal world of time and space. Swami Vivekananda used a forceful language to make the point that there is no free will or freedom from causality as long as we live an ordinary life dominated by nature. Referring to karma, or the law of causation, he said:

It is only when ‘being’ or existence gets moulded into name and form that it obeys the law of causation, and is said to be under law; because all law has its essence in causation. Therefore, we see at once that there cannot be any such thing as free will; the very words are a contradiction, because will is what we know and everything that we know is within our universe, and everything within our universe is moulded by the conditions of space, time, and causation.<sup>12</sup>

It is very important that we do not overlook the context in which Swami Vivekananda made this and similar statements, since they may give the idea that he did not believe in freedom under any circumstances. In fact, he made other statements in an equally forceful language emphasizing the ability of human beings to rise above the limits of nature and attain freedom from causality. For example, he said: ‘The Vedanta says that Infinity is our true nature; it will never vanish, it will abide forever. But we are limiting ourselves by our Karma, which like a chain round our necks has dragged us into this limitation. Break that chain and be free. Trample law under your feet. There is no law in human nature, there is no destiny, no fate’ (2.323). He pointed out that weakness is what leads us to believe in fate: ‘We human beings are very slow to recognize our own weakness, our own faults, so long as we can lay the blame upon somebody else. Men in general lay all blame of life on their fellow-men, or, failing that, on God, or they conjure up a ghost, and say it is fate. Where is fate, and who is fate? We reap what we sow. We are the makers of our own fate’ (2.224). Swami Vivekananda makes a clear distinction between our phenomenal nature, which is determined by Prakriti and its *gunas*, and our Self, which is not bound by nature. His message is that we must find our true Self and

become free even while living our life on earth under any circumstances.

Sri Aurobindo too repeatedly points out that free will and determinism are not mutually exclusive, that one does not preclude the other. He commented: ‘All is free-will or all is destiny—it is not so simple as that.’<sup>13</sup> He also pointed out: ‘A certain absolute freedom is one aspect of the soul’s relation with Nature at one pole of our complex being; a certain absolute determinism by Nature is the opposite aspect at its opposite pole; and there is also a partial and apparent, therefore an unreal eidolon of liberty which the soul receives by a contorted reflection of these two opposite truths in the developing mentality.’<sup>14</sup>

Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy recognizes a gradation of consciousness that exists among various types of beings in the world, beginning with material objects and moving up to plants, animals, and human beings. He believes that the level of determinism varies according to the grade of consciousness. He wrote:

For practical purposes, on the surface there is an entire determinism in matter—though this is now disputed by the latest school of Science. As Life emerges a certain plasticity sets in, so that it is difficult to predict anything exactly as one predicts material things that obey a rigid law. The plasticity increases with the growth of Mind, so that man can have at least a sense of free-will, of a choice of his action, of a self-movement which at least helps determine circumstances. But this freedom is dubious because it can be declared to be an illusion, a device of Nature, part of its machinery of determination, only a seeming freedom or at most a restricted, relative and subject independence. It is only when one goes behind away from Prakriti to Purusha and upward away from Mind to spiritual Self that the side of freedom comes to be first evident and then,

by unison with the Will which is above Nature, complete.<sup>15</sup>

According to Sri Aurobindo, ‘action does not bind or limit our true being at all. Action has no such effect on the spiritual Person or Purusha or on the psychic entity within us, it binds or limits only the surface constructed personality.’<sup>16</sup>

Sri Aurobindo believed strongly in divine grace: ‘Destiny in the rigid sense applies only to the outer being so long as it lives in the Ignorance. ... But as soon as one enters the path of spiritual life, this old predetermined destiny begins to recede. There comes in a new factor, the Divine Grace, the help of a higher Divine Force other than the force of *karma*, which can lift the sadhaka beyond the present possibilities of his nature. One’s spiritual destiny is then the divine election which ensures the future.’<sup>17</sup>

The same view on karma and grace is expressed by Sri Ramakrishna through the example of a cow tied to a post by a rope. The cow’s freedom of movement is limited to the circle of space determined by the length of the rope. Similarly, an ordinary person is bound by one’s karma, which limits one’s freedom like the rope in the case of the cow.<sup>18</sup> Sri Ramakrishna also added to this example that when a person turns to God and spiritual practice, the length of the rope of karma increases; in other words, one’s freedom increases in proportion to one’s spiritual progress and the action of divine grace.

### Conclusion

Vedanta philosophy recognizes that both determinism and free will are applicable to human beings, and that how bound or how free we are depends on our spiritual awareness. If we are not conscious of our spiritual Self and do not know how to stand apart from the movements of our nature, we will be driven to action by

desires and emotions, we will be overpowered by joy and grief, the consequences of success and failure in action. On the other hand, if we are aware of the movements of nature—desires and emotions—within ourselves and can stand apart from them, we will be able to have control over nature and exercise free will. The ideal way to attain freedom is to offer every action to God and leave the results in God’s hand. In the Gita’s words: ‘Having abandoned attachment, he who acts by dedicating his actions on Brahman is not stained by sin, even as water does not cling to a lotus leaf.’<sup>19</sup>



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