Chapter 3
King Kṛṣṇa: Cosmic Self, Monarchy, and Devotional Integration

In the last chapter, I began explicating what I called a "micro-politics of the self," including key philosophical categories such as *prakṛti* (primordial matter), three *guṇa*s (constituent elements of *prakṛti: sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*), and their proper relation as envisioned through yogic discipline and rule. Importantly, the *BhG* depicts the body as a "nine-gated fortress," which depicts the self as a battlefield of contentious elements trying to pull rule either toward the higher parts of the self (*ātman*), or toward the lower parts (*indriya*s and sense objects). Proper ruling within the self then leads to one fulfilling one's dharmic duties in the world, encapsulated by one's *svadharma* (one's own, proper duty) and *varṇāśramadharma* (duties associated with social group and life stage). Such ruling is achieved through dharmic disinterestedness and a politics of effacement that requires detaching oneself from attachments to those such as family members, teachers, and friends. Relinquishing the fruits of one's actions disinterestedly allows one to participate in a broader process of socio-political and cosmological integration. However, I also argued that such integration requires participating in the deeper, cyclical-temporal structure of the cosmos and intermittent processes of destruction or disintegration for enhancing cosmic integrity and political unification. Here I examined how fire imagery plays a central role and allows the Brahmanical authors of the *BhG* to synthesize older Vedic ideas with newer ascetic ones.

While Chapter 2 focused more on how Arjuna needs to act, and why, this chapter will look more closely at Kṛṣṇa and how he serves as a model for proper rule extending from the micro- up to the macro-level, minding the basic philosophical structure covered in the previous chapter.[1] The next step in my argument requires

1 For an alternative, "this worldly" reading of Kṛṣṇa that brackets the text's claim to his divinity, see McGrath (2013). In taking an analytic-excavationist approach to the *BhG*, McGrath seeks to bring the political thought of what he views as the earlier parts of the text "down to earth," making Kṛṣṇa a purely human hero and bard-charioteer. This approach is predicated on parsing an earlier, pre-Classical and preliterate heroic stratum of the text from a later one that is Brahmanically redacted and morally didactic in nature. Such parsing of the text continues to be a point of debate regarding the *MBh* more generally. However, by excluding the premise that Kṛṣṇa is an avatar of Viṣṇu and divine in nature, McGrath brackets a tremendous amount of conceptual context, including the entire cosmological set of valences surrounding Kṛṣṇa and the *MBh*'s political thought more generally. In sum, McGrath's analysis treats Kṛṣṇa and the *BhG* more as a continuation of Vedic thought and less a part of the Classical and finished epic *MBh* as we now have it in the Pune Crit-

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111583723-005

focusing on Kṛṣṇa's cosmic pervasiveness and how he upholds *dharma* in ways that stretch throughout the cosmic totality. Discussing further the nature of *dharma* in the next section, I examine a debate that has arisen regarding the *BhG*'s stance on justice. Here I argue that a suitable concept for justice in the text is denoted by *lokasaṃgraha*, or "world welfare." However, supporting *lokasaṃgraha* requires violent and destructive acts. This section makes a key interpretive move for my argument by explaining how, from a macro-cosmic level, the *BhG* can be viewed as an internal dialogue between the higher and lower parts of Kṛṣṇa himself. On this reading, the dialogue represents a model for the movement of internal conscience, through which Kṛṣṇa convinces a *kṣatriya*-particle of himself, represented by Arjuna, to engage in battle for the purpose of *lokasaṃgraha.* The following section explains how *bhakti* more fully enacts the connection between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, thus allowing for integration with(in) Kṛṣṇa as the supreme, cosmic monarch. This interpretive move then allows me to fold each of the three conceptual-analytic layers together—micro-level of self, meso-level of interpersonal politics, and macro-level cosmos encompassed by Kṛṣṇa—not only to finish explicating the *BhG*'s political theory, but also to respond to J. M. Fritzman's (2015) critique that Kṛṣṇa's arguments are incomplete and unconvincing. In contrast, within the purview of my interpretation of the *BhG*, I alternatively argue that Kṛṣṇa's position is both complete and convincing at the dialogic and textual levels.

The present chapter's argument regarding Kṛṣṇa's political role in the *BhG* complements Chapter 2's analysis of Arjuna, providing the first systematic account of a coherent political theory found in the *BhG.* However, as I will argue in Chapter 4, once historically situated the text's political theory can also be understood as a sophisticated political ideology seeking to defend Brahmanical-Hindu interests. Rather than viewing the text simply as a mixture of different philosophical and religious systems and claims, my reading shows how the text's brahmin authors creatively synthesized these systems and claims within a single, coherent conceptual framework. The text's authors achieved this by innovating a unique mode of political ideology within the *MBh* that could accommodate several potentially conflicting or incoherent systems of thought, doing so in a way that justified a Brahmanically endorsed form of monarchical rule.[2] In other words, at the most funda-

ical Edition. Each of McGrath's books that center around major epic characters takes this analytic approach, thus diverging from the approach taken in the present book (McGrath 2004; 2011; 2013; 2016; 2017).

2 My reading thus contributes to Malinar's (2007) and Fitzgerald's (1983; 2004a; 2006; 2020a; 2020b) diachronic readings of the text, offering a new synchronic view within a distinctly political theo-

mental level the *BhG* is a political text *par excellence* and not merely a philosophical or religious text, as has often been assumed. I will contend that political theorists and philosophers should not only focus their critique on the arguments emerging from the mouths of Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa as epic characters, which has been the predominant analytic trend, but also focus on elements of the political ideology underpinning the text. Such focus, I will argue, can help prevent the text's co-optation for problematic contemporary political projects. In sum, I argue not only that the *BhG* must be understood as a seminal work of political theory *and* as a form of political ideology, but also that scholars of political theory must view this text as significant both within a South Asian context and the global history of political thought. So how do these brahmin authors of the text achieve their ideological feats? This question leads us from Arjuna to Kṛṣṇa as the primary focus of analysis.

Kṛṣṇa's Cosmic Pervasiveness and Upholding the World

The first aspect of Kṛṣṇa I would like to examine is his cosmic pervasiveness, which enlivens a fundamental interconnectedness among everything that exists and supplies the conceptual scaffolding for my analysis and argument in subsequent sections. In chapter 7, Kṛṣṇa explains:

> My material nature [*prakṛti*] is eightfold, comprising the order of earth, water, fire, wind, ether, mind, spirit, and ego. This is my lower nature, but know that I have another, higher nature which comprises the order of souls: it is by the latter that this world is sustained … Realize that all creatures have their sources therein: I am the origin of this entire universe and its dissolution. There is nothing at all that transcends me. (*BhG* 7.5–7)

Here Kṛṣṇa states several essential qualities: first, he pervades and constitutes all *prakṛti* and the manifest, material world; second, the latter constitutes his *lower* nature, but a higher nature exists in the form of the "order of souls," or *jīva-bhūtam*; third, he is the source or origin of everything in a creative sense, but also the source of everything's destruction. In this passage we see Kṛṣṇa as final cause of everything, pervading or existent in everything, and containing a hierarchy of entities extending from a "higher" to "lower" order. As J. A. B. van Buitenen explains regarding the "order of souls," these individual souls remain eternal and represent

retical framework, but also builds upon scholars' observations that the text exhibits ideological tendencies.

particles (*aṃśa*s) of Kṛṣṇa, "from whom they derive their properties as souls" (1981: 169).

Kṛṣṇa also encompasses the highest order, which constitutes the imperishable elements of Kṛṣṇa's being, beginning with the eternal *ātman*s stretching upward to *brahman*, or the unmanifest Absolute, which is the last step before reaching Kṛṣṇa. As he states in chapter 13:

> He who sees the Supreme Lord equally present in all creatures, not perishing while these creatures perish, he sees indeed. When he sees the lord equally present everywhere, he himself no longer hurts the self [*ātman*] and then goes the supreme journey. He who sees that all actions are performed by Prakṛti alone and that the self does not act at all, sees indeed. When he perceives that the variety of beings have one center from which all expand, then he is at one with *brahman.* (*BhG* 13.27–30)

Kṛṣṇa is thus present everywhere, in everything, and stands as the one center from which everything manifest emanates. We also observe a reference to the imperishable *ātman* as an aspect or particle (*aṃśa*) of Kṛṣṇa's imperishable self. A few key insights then appear necessary for undertaking "the supreme journey" to *mokṣa* (liberation): first, one must be able to fully cognize the distinction between what is perishable in the realm of Prakṛti, and what is imperishable; second, in seeing how *brahman*—and Kṛṣṇa beyond *brahman*—pervade everything, one can understand the inherent interconnectedness of everything in Kṛṣṇa. As R. C. Zaehner puts it in his commentary, the same eternal substratum underlies all beings, with God/Kṛṣṇa as the Supreme Person (*puruṣottama*) identical with Brahman yet transcending it (1969: 347). This leads to an astounding sort of knowledge and equanimical stance toward the world: "Contented in his insight and knowledge, firm on his peak, master of his senses, looking with the same eyes on a lump of clay, a rock, or a piece of gold, he is called a yogin who is truly 'yoked'. He is set apart by his equanimity before friends, allies, enemies … and relatives, before good men and evil ones" (*BhG* 6.9–10). Serene equanimity (*samatva*) can be reached through seeing "the same" in all things, made possible through proper cognition of Kṛṣṇa and his true, pervasive nature. Such equanimity is possible partly because there *is* nothing else outside of Kṛṣṇa, so no additional transcendental appeals or liberation could make any sense.

However, in these passages we also see two potentially conflicting ideas: hierarchy and equality. I will examine the ideological components of this conflict in the next chapter in greater detail but will say a few words here about how these two ideas might be reconciled. The cosmos exists as a fundamentally interconnected body of Kṛṣṇa as the Supreme Godhead. Ontological hierarchies exist, but insofar as everything shares in Kṛṣṇa's being, everything can be reflected upon as equal to some extent, or as an equal part *of* Kṛṣṇa. This stance of equanimity relates to the

dharmic disinterestedness and politics of effacement discussed in the previous chapter. That is, these seemingly real hierarchical distinctions between friend and enemy, or a rock and piece of gold, are all false to the extent that these things are equally part of the perishable world as manifestations of Kṛṣṇa's *māyā* (illusory-creative power). Thinking that these things in the material world are what is truly real, and then falsely believing there are qualitative hierarchies between them that would justify pursuing some material things over others in an interpersonally contentious manner, people become increasingly tethered to *saṃsāra.* Being yoked to and ruled by the lower elements of *prakṛti*, we are prevented from discerning the better, imperishable things as superior to the inferior, perishable things. Moreover, attachment to materiality and physical appearances makes it increasingly difficult to perform one's dharmic duties, since one must efface specific attachments and act in accordance with action conducive to micro-, meso-, and macro-cosmic integration.

Maintaining this integrity at each cosmic level requires everyone fulfilling his or her *svadharma*, which then results in what one might gloss as "cosmic justice," or *lokasaṃgraha.* This Sanskrit term opens onto vast conceptual terrain, so I will map out some of this territory to address a lingering debate regarding one of the central political ideas expressed in the text—namely, the meaning of justice. The term *lokasaṃgraha* means, "holding the world together," but it can also refer to the "welfare or coherence of the world."[3] This term is only used twice in the *BhG*, which should also give readers pause when considering whether it is advisable to search for a single term that might capture *the* core virtue or cornerstone for the entirety of a text's political thought. The first passage reads: "For it was by acting alone [i. e., without selfish or egoistic motive] that [King] Janaka and others achieved success, so you too must act while only looking to what holds together the world [*lokasaṃgraha*]" (*BhG* 3.20). Janaka is not only a ruler, but an ideal Vedic king, which allows the authors, once again, to connect and synthesize older Vedic authoritative texts and figures with more contemporary conceptions of ideal rule as a form of personal, ascetic sacrifice and fulfillment of one's dharmic duties. In this series of passages in chapter 3, Kṛṣṇa employs the term *lokasaṃgraha* in the context of a ruler and the "best people" setting the moral-political example for everyone else, claiming:

> People do whatever the superior man does: people follow what he sets up as the standard. I have no task at all to accomplish in these three worlds, Pārtha [Arjuna]. I have nothing to obtain that I do not have already. Yet I move in action. If I were not to move in action, untiringly, at all times, Pārtha, people all around would follow my lead. … The wise, disinterested man

3 For example, see Zaehner (1969: 159).

> should do his acts in the same way as the ignorant do, but only to hold the world together. (*BhG* 2.21–25)
>
> No act binds me, Dhanaṃjaya [Arjuna], for I remain disinterested and detached from all acts. Nature [*prakṛti*] gives birth to the standing and moving creatures under my tutelage, Kaunteya, and for that reason does the world revolve. (*BhG* 9.9–10)

Here, the clear standard is acting disinterestedly because, according to Kṛṣṇa, this sets the proper example and is the only way the world can be held together or integrated in a peaceful fashion. Kṛṣṇa serves as the ultimate example, stating, "Actions do not stick to me, for I have no yearning for the fruits of my actions" (*BhG* 4.14). The second part of the compound, *-saṃgraha*, means holding or bringing together, and thus stabilizing something that is inherently or potentially unstable. This term is conceptually related to meanings surrounding the term *dharma*, whose underlying root (*dhṛ-)* can mean "to uphold or sustain." Consequently, terms with such meaning possess tremendous normative value within an inherently entropic vision of the cosmos. This now brings us squarely to examinations of justice in the *BhG*, which is one term some have used to translate the term *dharma.*

Dharma and the Nature of Justice

Scholars have debated whether the *BhG*'s conception of *dharma* and related ideas about justice are consequentialist, deontological, or some combination of both, further questioning whether the *BhG* has something valuable to teach us on the topic of justice more generally. For example, Amartya Sen (2009) has argued that an adequate theory of justice requires qualities of both deontological impartiality and sensitivity to consequences and comprehensive outcomes, claiming that the *BhG* poses Arjuna as a consequentialist and Kṛṣṇa a deontologist, with the *BhG* providing a worthwhile resource for moral and political thinking. Joshua Anderson critiques Sen's reading of the *BhG*, arguing that Arjuna is not the comprehensive consequentialist Sen claims him to be (2012: 67–68). However, Anderson's criticism that Sen does not properly identify the *BhG* as a religious text, and that Sen fails to appreciate that Kṛṣṇa's concerns are otherworldly and centered on religious liberation, is misplaced (Anderson 2012: 69). As I have argued, the text expresses a distinctive political orientation and theory, and I will attempt to elaborate further on this claim in the next chapter. Here, however, Anderson's failure to see the politics at play in this text and his claim that it is a predominantly religious text remains limited for the following reasons.

In failing to identify the text's political claims and context, scholars such as Anderson overlook the Brahmanical-ideological aspects of the text. In his critique

Anderson also overlooks the impartial spectator (key to deontological impartiality) that exists within the *BhG*'s own conceptual framework, namely the *ātman*. For his part, Sen is mistaken when he claims that Kṛṣṇa's "deontology … denies the relevance of any concern, particularly any consequential concern, in determining whether some action should be undertaken or not" (2009: 216). As I will explain in greater detail below with the concept of *lokasaṃgraha*, Kṛṣṇa's deontological position does indeed possess consequential concern with world-welfare and stability: Arjuna must fight precisely because of broader consequences. As I explained in Chapter 1, these consequences include cosmological consequences associated with the Pāṇḍavas as incarnations of *deva*s (gods) who have been incarnated for the purpose of exterminating the Kauravas as incarnations of *asura*s (demons).

In contrast to both Sen and Anderson, Roopen Majithia (2015) properly identifies what he calls the text's "ethical syncretism," arguing that the *BhG* poses a form of consequentialism that allows a place for deontological and virtue-centric intuitions.[4] The addition of virtue theory is important in understanding the *BhG*'s moral-political framework, as one can see in passages such as the following, when Kṛṣṇa describes the divine complement of virtues: "yoking of knowledge, liberality, self-control, sacrifice, peaceableness, loyalty, compassion for creatures, lack of greed, patience, friendliness and lack of pride" (*BhG* 16.1–3). Each of these traits suggests a virtue of some sort, with an according disposition to act virtuously in some manner. More specifically, each of these virtues signals a skill that allows someone to help harmoniously integrate various components of the world. Majithia's interpretation is closest to the mark, addressing the idea of "world-welfare (*lokasaṃgraha*)" and deep ontological interconnectedness, especially in the realm of *prakṛti*, which ties everything together through the same *guṇa*s. Majithia also notes the text's contemporary value insofar as the text "captures something true about the ethical dimensions of our lives: that good action involves deontological, consequential and virtue-centric aspects" (2015: 64–65, 69–70, 76). This pluralist conception of ethics and what it means to live a dharmic life signal a capacious ethics that may prove more valuable than any single ethical framework taken in isolation, at least in a world that is constantly changing and veering, entropically, toward chaos and destruction. As Majithia states, "The text's utilitarian principle of world-welfare provides the basis for assessing the nature of one's duty in a chang-

4 Another participant in this debate between Sen, Anderson, and Majithia is Fritzman (2015), who contests Anderson's critique of Sen and defends Sen, further arguing that Kṛṣṇa's arguments are incomplete and unconvincing. I will address Fritzman's argument later in the chapter.

ing world, even when faced with competing duties as in the case of moral dilemmas" (76).[5]

Importantly, one can observe the significance of change in the *BhG*'s ethical framework in its scaled levels of *dharma: kula-dharma* (family duties), *varṇa-dharma* (social group duties), *āśrama-dharma* (life-stage duties), and *sādhāraṇa-dharma* (universal duties). According to the scale, broader duties supersede more localized ones, as we see elsewhere in the *MBh:* "To save the family, abandon a man; to save the village, abandon a family; to save the country, abandon a village; to save the soul [i. e., through *mokṣa*], abandon the earth" (*MBh* 2.55.10). *Sādhāraṇa-dharma* applies to everyone and extends beyond more specific duties associated with social group or life-stage; these universal duties are often associated with the principle of self-restraint, including duties such as *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) and *satya* (truthfulness).[6] Duties may indeed conflict in particular instances, and those advancing greater world-welfare must supersede more localized duties. Concerning the principle of change, even duties within specific categories may change over time based on what Yuga one lives in, along with the concomitant level of *dharma*/*adharma* that exists in each age.[7]

For example, Kṛṣṇa's trickery and deviant behavior in particular circumstances—his seeming moral relativism—could be interpreted as appropriately dharmic or justified in an age (Dvāpara-Yuga) that is lacking in *dharma* and on the verge of spilling into preponderant *adharma* in the Kali-Yuga. Each of Kṛṣṇa's incarnations must necessarily act within the *yuga* structure and change with the shifting environment (Katz 1989: 231). Additionally, B. K. Matilal has explained the situational character of *dharma* in the *MBh* more broadly, whereby *dharma* ethics and what Matilal calls "Kṛṣṇa-ethics" are malleable (2002: 19 – 36). Matilal even goes so far as to claim that Kṛṣṇa poses a realist ethics, which would make sense in an increasingly depraved age. He reads Kṛṣṇa as the instigator of a new moral paradigm that "displays the limitations of a generally accepted moral code of truth-telling and promise-keeping," whereby "the risk of the loss of the greater good might influence a rational agent to transgress certain valued principles" (106). This "greater good," on my interpretation, could be precisely the *lokasaṃgraha* that Kṛṣṇa mentions in the *BhG*, which would supersede more localized duties,

---

5 For a direct comparison with Mill's utilitarianism and heavy utilitarian-consequentialist reading of the *BhG*, see Shukla (2014).

6 For a list of *dharma*s applicable to all *varṇa*s, see Bhīṣma's list in Book 12 (*MBh* 12.60.7– 8ab), which include speaking truth, patience, and rectitude (Fitzgerald 2004a: 109).

7 For analysis of ethical action in times of distress and relative *adharma*, or *āpad-dharma*, see Bowles (2007).

including duties that might preclude the killing of family members in certain circumstances.

Nevertheless, I would add the following observations to the accounts offered by Sen, Anderson, and Majithia as it pertains to *dharma* and questions of justice. Here I reference Sandeep Sreekumar's argument for the text's consequentialism and modify this account slightly to defend the syncretic reading of the *BhG*'s stance on ethics and justice. First, Sen and Anderson do not delve far enough into the *BhG*'s ontology and cosmology to see that the *ātman* would be the closest thing to what we might consider an "impartial spectator," since it is free from action, distinct from *prakṛti*, and thus stands on a higher, more objective perch to understand the necessity of performing one's dharmic duties so as not fall prey to the pitfalls of *prakṛti.* When we properly identify the *ātman* as such, we better see how the *BhG*'s conception of *dharma* and purported justice, expressed by Kṛṣṇa himself, might initially be considered a form of "thick consequentialism" wherein dharmic duties service the broader consequence of world maintenance, integration, and welfare. Here, Sandeep Sreekumar (2012) provides perhaps the most thorough investigation and defense of the *BhG*'s consequentialism. He has argued that the text espouses a rule-consequentialism that takes two consequences as intrinsically valuable: *mokṣa* and *lokasaṃgraha.* Sreekumar provides an impressively detailed, and largely persuasive, argument that the *BhG*'s ethical stance is ultimately consequentialist in nature.

However, I argue that this debate in its current framing remains stunted because the *BhG* frames dharmic duties and an objective impartiality as central due to the consequences they have for world welfare. We can construe the duty to act for world welfare and maintain its integrity as a self-supporting, deontological imperative, or in the *Right* because God/Kṛṣṇa deems it as such regardless of consequences. For example, those such as Sen view Kṛṣṇa's argument from detached action (*niṣkāma-karma*)—which entails indifference to the consequences of one's actions—as fundamentally deontological. If detached action is indeed Kṛṣṇa's "highest teaching" (*BhG* 18.6), then the text's theory of ethics would appear primarily deontological (Sreekumar 2012: 297). Moreover, duties often point toward consequence, but we can also disavow consequences based on the intrinsic duty of detached action. Sreekumar nevertheless explains how even the (arguably) deontological elements introduced in Arjuna's arguments—for example, the argument from committing an inherent evil [*pāpam*]—are presented and addressed by Arjuna in consequentialist terms (291). Kṛṣṇa explains that one consequence is of fundamental importance and served through detached action: namely, *lokasaṃgraha* (*BhG* 3.20, 3.25). As Sreekumar summarizes: "Krishna's claim here is that detached action is action specifically directed at bringing about a certain good consequence, namely *lokasaṃgraha*, or a state of affairs in which the world coheres in its proper

integrity, thus ensuring that the welfare of all creatures is preserved in a lawful fashion" (299). Again, Kṛṣṇa models this ethic in his own behavior: "If I were not to move in action, untiringly, at all times, Pārtha, people all around would follow my lead. These people would collapse if I did not act; I would be the author of miscegenation; I would assassinate these creatures" (*BhG* 3.24). Therefore, Kṛṣṇa must regard overarching consequences as well.

Returning to the impartiality component of the *BhG*'s ethics, it operates through dharmic disinterestedness and what I've called the politics of effacement, in which individuals efface emotional or personal attachments to particular people and things while bearing a longer and larger consequentialist view, considering what is most beneficial to the welfare of the world and all beings. This goal requires cultivating a sensibility of dharmic disinterestedness, which makes one capable of effacing destructive attachments to *prakṛti*, and further requires cultivating numerous virtues mentioned in the earlier passage. So, while Sreekumar may be correct that the text's ethics is ultimately consequentialist, I believe Majithia is also correct to point out that the *BhG*'s ethical stance should be considered a *syncretic* one.[8] In other words, we must recognize the role of duty-following and practicing the virtues as significant at various levels of the text, including its vision of what constitutes a good human life, even if the text is consequentialist in its final orientation.

Ultimately, I argue that *dharma* is too broad and multivalent a term to interpret as justice in most contexts, and that *lokasaṃgraha* is the better term to use if one wants to excavate a conception justice in the text. This term denotes the goal or purpose toward which the consequentialist, deontological, and virtue ethics components in the text all aim. While one might claim that *mokṣa* is the goal of these systems for any individual, I would argue that justice is a distinctly interpersonal concept and would thus preclude personal considerations regarding *mokṣa.* In other words, *mokṣa* remains predominantly apolitical, at least at a theoretical level. Therefore, what the *BhG* teaches us about justice comes close to what Sen proposes, insofar as it combines elements of deontology and consequentialism but also, as Majithia suggests, includes elements of virtue theory. In sum, the *BhG* expresses an idea of justice grounded, first, in the broadest possible concern for the welfare of the world and its constituent elements, and second, entailing elements of all three ethical theories since no single system or approach will be enough to address the complex factors that unpredictably emerge in any given

8 Sreekumar himself suggests as much, stating that Kṛṣṇa's normative ethical arguments are "embedded within a complex syncretistic philosophy which incorporates and fuses elements of metaphysics, eschatology, and soteriology drawn from several traditions of Indian philosophizing" (2012: 291).

moral or political predicament. The *BhG*'s political ethics, therefore, is non-exclusivist.

Finally, the ultimate enemy of *dharma* and any theory of justice one can glean from the *BhG* is not a single entity or being, but rather the broader entropic reality and temporality that human beings find themselves within, which cannot ultimately be escaped but only kept at bay through dharmic disinterestedness and the politics of effacement. According to the *BhG*'s vision of a natural and cyclical entropy, one must be able and willing to view the world from the broadest and least egoistic perspective possible. Such egoism, as I've been arguing in the case of the *BhG*, is attached to materialism and the physical world, especially the lowest parts of *prakṛti.* In fact, one of the lowest levels of the self in the realm of *prakṛti* is the *ahaṃkāra*, which sometimes gets translated as "ego" but literally means "I-maker." Therefore, I have argued for an interpretation that views the self as a battlefield and the body as a fortress, using political vocabulary in a seeming non-political space to highlight what the *BhG* views as the broader stakes of yogic self-rule. If one does not adopt a micro-political standpoint, as Kṛṣṇa suggests,[9] then meso- and macro-level entropic processes would presumably intensify or accelerate. This syncretic ethico-political vision entails a politics of effacement that requires an understanding of the self as a political battleground of sorts, which then points us toward a series of deontological steps that ultimately serve a "thick" consequentialist position and brings us to the impartial spectator that is the *ātman.* Once one yokes oneself to these duties through dharmic disinterestedness and reaches the *ātman*, further realizing its oneness with *brahman*, and merges with it, one then arrives at the Supreme Godhead (Kṛṣṇa) and thus achieves liberation from *saṃsāra.* As I will argue below, this culminates in Kṛṣṇa's own self-realization and enlightenment, inducing selflessness in upholding *dharma* insofar as he has convinced a particle of himself (namely, Arjuna) to undertake its proper *kṣatriya-dharma* for the consequence of sustaining cosmic integrity as much as possible within a macro-temporal entropy headed toward destruction. In other words, from a macro-level perspective the entire *BhG* can be read as a parallel macro-/micro-cosmic, internal dialogue that models how any micro-cosmic self should conscientiously think and act. Beginning with the self and broader cosmological context, and not with ethical theories of justice or *dharma* as many scholars have done, is therefore essential, and we can see this point expressed and exemplified in the dialogue between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa if we step back to consider what

9 This is essentially what Kṛṣṇa is doing on the field of Kurukṣetra, which represents this micro-political standpoint from the macro-level perspective of Kṛṣṇa as Supreme Godhead. I elaborate on this point at greater length later in the chapter.

is happening in this dialogue from the aforementioned "meta" or macro-cosmic perspective.

Conscience and Necessary Violence: Kṛṣṇa's Internal Dialogue and Relationship to Arjuna

To understand this macro-level perspective, one must revisit the epic relationship between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa. While Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna stand as two distinct entities in the epic at the meso-level, they are often characterized not as a duality but rather a unity, and this characterization is not without political and philosophical significance. Kevin McGrath points out that "Kṛṣṇa in the great Bhārata epic is nearly always linked with the warrior Arjuna ... They are joined grammatically as 'two *kṛṣṇas*', *dvau kṛṣṇau*, as well as being partners in fighting and intimate and playful cousins" (2013: 18). McGrath then cites a key line from Book 9 of the *MBh:* "Both Kṛṣṇas combine one spirit towards each other" (18; *MBh* 9.3.10). In one important observation, McGrath highlights how Kṛṣṇa is responsible for the death of Duryodhana ("slain by the mind of Vāsudeva [Kṛṣṇa]," *MBh* 1.1.152), and how it is Kṛṣṇa's friend Arjuna "who performs the *violence*" while Kṛṣṇa somehow performs the *slaying* (2013: 19, emphasis mine). Therefore, both characters participate in killing the enemy, Duryodhana, but the text explains that Kṛṣṇa is the final agent and slayer. Further merging the figures of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna into a unity, Kṛṣṇa serves not only as Arjuna's friend but also a counselor or advisor. As McGrath notes: "It is the role as friend or counselor that will be Kṛṣṇa's key role in the narrative, particular during the battle books when he becomes charioteer or driver for the hero Arjuna, and the poet Saṃjaya is said to speak about the *ekātmyaṃ* (unity or complicity) of these two heroes" (20; *MBh* 1.2.144). We can further identify this complicity and the special relationship between the two figures insofar as Kṛṣṇa informs Arjuna, during his theophany, that nobody beside Arjuna has ever laid eyes on Kṛṣṇa's supernal form (*BhG* 11.47). As counselor, one might consider Kṛṣṇa as the "higher mind" for Arjuna, even an impartial spectator, who can see the entire "field" that is the cosmos from past, to present, and into the future.

In these textual passages and McGrath's observations, we can see how Arjuna is subsumed within or deeply complicit with the figure of Kṛṣṇa, and this is no coincidence. I will further explicate the text following McGrath's observations to make an interpretive move that allows us, from a philosophical perspective offered by the *BhG*, to read this text as an internal dialogue *within* the Supreme Godhead

(Kṛṣṇa) himself, which can then provide a subtle political philosophical message for the audience or reader of the text.[10]

A key interpretive point helps frame the remainder of my analysis in this chapter: the *BhG* ("Song of the Lord"), from a macro-cosmic perspective, is an internal dialogue between Kṛṣṇa as the non-manifest absolute and an aspect of himself in the form of Arjuna's unmanifest *ātman* in embodied form on the battlefield. In the dialogue, Kṛṣṇa is trying to convince a lower part of himself—a part of himself extending down into the material realm of *prakṛti*, represented by Arjuna—that he must disinterestedly fight this battle to fulfill *dharma.*[11] As James Fitzgerald puts it, Kṛṣṇa, as the *paramātman* (highest self), represents the transcendent Self existing outside of time while Arjuna, as the *jīvātman* (lower self), represents the contingent, embodied self that acts in material, human form within historical time (2020a: 42). In philosopher Stanley Cavell's language, albeit in a different sense of the phrase, Kṛṣṇa is imploring Arjuna to "become who he is," as he has forgotten his many past births (*BhG* 4.5).

For example, Duck-Joo Kwak and Hye-Chong Han have applied Cavell's thinking to the *BhG*, turning to Cavell's position on autonomy in the sense of "becoming what you are or having the will to be responsible to yourself" (2013: 57). In my interpretation, Kṛṣṇa implores Arjuna to become what he is—a *kṣatriya*, divine Nara—and to have the will to be responsible to himself, in the sense of being responsible to Kṛṣṇa as a higher part of himself. As Hiltebeitel explains, "Kṛṣṇa subordinates himself to Arjuna as *buddhi* to *ātman*; and Arjuna subordinates himself to Kṛṣṇa as *jīva* [embodied soul] to Paramātman [highest self]" (2011b: 508). Here Arjuna can be interpreted as a potentially rogue particle of Kṛṣṇa, which is in danger of not acting out its *kṣatriya-dharma.* Therefore, Kṛṣṇa attempts to convince Arjuna to undertake his *svadharma* to sustain the cosmic structure that the Supreme Being has created and sustains—a creation that is always hurdling toward entropic dissolution. Following Kṛṣṇa's advice to Arjuna as an aspect of his higher self, the first challenge is not being addicted to *prakṛti* and its material seductions, including the illusion that death is the worst thing that can happen to us. One should engage in neither full ascetic rejection of action and physical life, nor overattachment to life in the form of individual physical desire and the fruits of one's actions. The second major challenge confronting us entails fulfilling the duties and actions necessary for preserving the world and its structural integrity. In the *BhG*, Arjuna's

10 See also Hiltebeitel (2011b: 485–512) for analysis on the singular relationship between the "two Kṛṣṇas."

11 A multi-perspectival interpretation and framework is key to analyzing the text: on one (macro-) level, Arjuna's self is a lower part of Kṛṣṇa's self, but on another (micro-) level, Arjuna's *ātman* is the highest part of his own self.

duty to act as a *kṣatriya* reflects this challenge because he must act as a necessary instrument in preserving the world by annihilating the Kauravas, who represent a destructive earthly force.

To help support this interpretation, one can turn to one of the foremost Indian commentators on the *BhG*, namely Rāmānuja (ca. 1017–1137 CE). As a leading theologian of Viśiṣṭādvaita, or qualified non-dualism, he argues that individual selves (*ātman*s) are modes (*prakāra*s) of the *paramātman* (God) and ultimately dependent on him. Therefore, the individual self and God are fundamentally connected to one another but not completely identical. Rāmānuja explains that *brahman*—which is *īśvara*, Lord, and the creator—is the one supreme self, or *paramātman.* This one supreme and pure self, untainted by *karma*, transforms itself into individual selves, or *jīvātman*s, through the creative process of *māyā* (Gray and Hughes 2015: 382).[12] Arjuna is thus a particular particle (*aṃśa*) or aspect of Kṛṣṇa as one of these *jīvātman*s, which has a duty to uphold *dharma* for broader cosmic purposes. This philosophical context helps explain the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna from a macro-cosmic perspective, including the deep connection and unity between them. Ruth Cecily Katz, relatedly emphasizing the devotional component to this relationship, explains: "his [i.e., Arjuna's] position vis-à-vis God … seems, rather, to be one of qualified union, permitting the devotional relationship to exist" (1989: 232). I will discuss this devotional element at greater length later in the final section of the chapter, but here I agree with Katz that this "qualified union"—in Viśiṣṭādvaita's philosophical language, qualified non-dualism—intimates an important chain of reasoning in support of the *BhG*'s devotional political thought.

Considering this interpretation, we can deduce a few additional points. First, Arjuna's appeal to Kṛṣṇa for advice and understanding represents a lower part (*ātman* or *jīva*) of the *paramātman* consulting the higher part of itself. This then models the ontology and political philosophical claims I began examining in Chapter 2. Namely, Kṛṣṇa explains how the higher parts of the self must rule over the lower parts, especially since these lower parts, within the realm of *prakṛti*, can become overly attached to the material world and relationships. These ideas parallel what is happening in the dialogic action of the text itself. Namely, Arjuna's overattachment to his former teachers and cousins on the Kaurava side, along with his belief that egoistic concerns for political gain had motivated his action, made him despondent on the battlefield. Consultation with Kṛṣṇa thus models and represents an internal dialogue whereby the highest part of any self must properly

12 See also *BhG* 7.1–5, which describes how a part of Kṛṣṇa is made up of all the individual souls, which would include Arjuna.

bring its lower self around to an understanding of the true nature of the world. This dialogue therefore provides reasoning as to why Arjuna, as an embodied *kṣatriya-ātman*, must engage in battle and why this is simply *prakṛti* acting upon *prakṛti*, with the true selves remaining imperishable. The destructive (*kṣatriya*) component of the Supreme's self, embodied in the figure of Arjuna, also connects to a devotional context in which double identities, here Viṣṇu and Śiva, are viewed as united, with Kṛṣṇa representing Viṣṇu and Arjuna representing Śiva: "For just as the epic insists … on the identity of Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, so it insists on the reciprocity and ultimate ontological unity of Śiva and Viṣṇu. … [with] Arjuna retaining his identity with Śiva as the destroyer, thus linking Arjuna's warrior activities … with the Śiva who periodically destroys the universe" (Hiltebeitel 2011b: 510–511). As Hiltebeitel explains, Kṛṣṇa understandably subordinates himself to Arjuna as Arjuna's charioteer in this theological context in his destructive dimension as a form of Śiva (512). Not only is Arjuna a destructive *kṣatriya*-portion of Kṛṣṇa, but Arjuna also takes on the identity of Śiva throughout the epic, which further unites major deities (here, Viṣṇu-Śiva) as well as major divinities (Nara-Narāyaṇa). As I have explained since Chapter 1, the true nature of the world is not only one of world-creation and maintenance, but also one of destruction, even necessary destruction, aiming toward greater stability and unity.

Returning to the concepts of *prakṛti* and violence, Arjuna's initial attachment to *prakṛti* and concerns about killing and death means he must appeal to his higher self, just as each person's *indriya*s (senses) and *manas* (lower mind) must turn to the *buddhi* (higher mind) and ultimately the imperishable *ātman.* As stated above, this *ātman* is one aspect of the Supreme Godhead and achieves *mokṣa* by merging with the *paramātman*, or Kṛṣṇa. This interpretation helps make sense of a passage in chapter 11 where "Kṛṣṇa states that he himself will destroy the army of the Kauravas, and that Arjuna will be merely his instrument" (Fritzman 2015: 328; van Buitenen 1981: 117). My reading explains, at the cosmological and ontological levels, how this is so: Arjuna is ultimately a *kṣatriya*-instrument and element of Kṛṣṇa, so it is really Krishna that is destroying them: "I myself have doomed them ages ago: Be merely my hand in this, Left-handed Archer [i. e., Arjuna]!" (*BhG* 11.33). The Sanskrit term that Kṛṣṇa uses here is *nimitta-mātra.* The philosophical meaning of *nimitta* is the instrumental or efficient cause of something, and *mātra* is elementary matter, so the compound nicely captures the idea that Arjuna is a material-instrumental element of Kṛṣṇa acting in the realm of *prakṛti.* In chapter 10, to connect this interpretation with a passage that relates Kṛṣṇa as ruler to Arjuna as his *kṣatriya*-instrument, we see Kṛṣṇa explain: "Among the Vṛṣṇis I am Vāsudeva, among the Pāṇḍavas Arjuna … I am the stick [*daṇḍa*] of those who chastise, the statesmanship [*nīti*] of those who seek to triumph" (*BhG* 10.38). As we know about Brahmanical political thought surrounding the turn of the millenni-

um, which also finds clear expression in Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*, governance or ruling is also called *daṇḍa-nīti* (application of the rod of punishment or coercion), so Kṛṣṇa is stating that he is the "rod of punishment" and the science of its application. Relatedly, Kṛṣṇa effectively coerces Arjuna to fulfill Arjuna's dharmic duty, as a sort of *kṣatriya-daṇḍa*, by revealing his terrifying cosmic form during his theophany. It's as if Kṛṣṇa is telling Arjuna: become who you are as my instrumental, *kṣatriya-daṇḍa* and disinterestedly complete the violent, destructive act for the sake of the greater good. Kṛṣṇa as *paramātman* thus models proper rule in the *BhG*'s ontology by ruling over the macro-cosmic body, as the *ātman* should rule over the inferior components of the micro-cosmic self and body.

This internal, macro-cosmic dialogue also represents the movement of conscience resulting from interactions and tensions between the multi-tiered layers of the self. At the dramatic narrative level, the *BhG* insinuates that such moments of conscience often emerge in situations where some sort of harm or violence is imminent, and one begins questioning what standards to apply in deciding whether to act violently. Arjuna's embracing this moment and imminent violence in this context is not, as we might otherwise think, something to be shunned. This point connects with one of the major interpretive points I've been advancing: within both the *MBh* and *BhG*, sometimes destruction is a necessary and fruitful thing to combat further entropic slippage into *adharma*, which can result in positive integration and political unification under a hierarchical order. In this internal dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and a lower part of himself, we see him appeal to the fact that this part of himself—namely Arjuna—is a *kṣatriya* and thus ontologically meant to fight, and must do so in dharmic fashion (i. e., disinterestedly fulfilling his dharmic duty). This stands as another example, and layer, of political integration. Consequentially, if this *kṣatriya*-particle were not to engage in battle, the righteous Pāṇḍavas would presumably not be victorious, and the unrighteous Kauravas would prevail. This moment symbolizes a point I made earlier that what happens internally at the micro-level of the self has an external impact on both the meso-level of politics and macro-level of cosmic integrity. Below I expound on some of the implications of this interpretation.

To start, such moments of conscience can be viewed as internal dialogues between the higher (Kṛṣṇa) and lower (Arjuna) parts of oneself as it comes into contact and interacts with the external world of *prakṛti* and physio-material relations —for example, political relations between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. The higher parts of oneself, according to the *BhG*, must be increasingly impartial when confronting one's respective duties, standing aloof from attachments that may prevent one from fulfilling these duties. As such, a type of moral perspectivism emerges first within the self and then extends outside oneself. Connecting this back to the narrative drama surrounding the dialogue, Arjuna's initial lamentation at

the thought of killing family members represents an internal sense of guilt that many people might feel when they confront a situation where they may have to engage in destructive or coercive behavior for some higher purpose, especially circumstances that may require perpetrating some degree of force or violence for some broader good, such as world-welfare (*lokasaṃgraha*). If we read the *BhG* from this perspective—namely, as an internal dialogue within Kṛṣṇa himself, with a martial particle of his being whose duty is to fight and kill—we get the very model for thinking I have suggested connects ontology with morality and politics. That is, if we understand how the cosmos operates, then we also understand how and why we must do our best to sustain it given the circumstances any one of us faces at a given time, which will change over the course of time, and requires participating in a politics of effacement and dharmic disinterestedness expressed by Kṛṣṇa himself. This dutiful detachment finds disturbing expression in the theophanic destruction and mass death revealed to Arjuna within Kṛṣṇa's supernal form—Kṛṣṇa remains unperturbed by its necessity. These points display the importance of the micro- for the macro-, and why political relations must first be recognized within oneself to understand how one must act in the world.

These interpretive points reintroduce us to yogic self-rule and its implications, now exemplified by Kṛṣṇa in this dialogue and clearly possessing political consequences on the battlefield of the self while standing metaphorically on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra. Against the backdrop of cyclical entropy and the broader context I started outlining for the *BhG* in Chapter 1, the dialogue could be viewed as providing a somewhat tragic vision of justice and politics: sustaining life, the world, and their stability or integrity through *dharma* is difficult and sometimes forceful or violent business, as it calls us to efface some of our most deeply felt connections to particular things and people, which further requires deep self-sacrifice and non-egoism.[13] However, such tragedy is mitigated because yogic self-rule allows one to understand the purposeful nature behind everything in joining Kṛṣṇa through devotion. Cyclical entropy, or fate understood as the inevitable progression of *yuga*s, would likely lead toward a fatalistic attitude were it not to gain meaning in the devotional layer of the text.[14] This, I take it, is one of the central moral lessons of the *BhG* and its political thought. Just action may entail violence, but if we are self-critical enough to inhabit a more impartial perspective, as Anderson notes, one's moral obligations can be seen as "transcending the boundaries of

13 For an elaboration of the tragic socio-political aspects of the *BhG*, see Minnema (2013: 146–152).
14 Ruth Cecily Katz puts it nicely: "The great difference between fate and God's will is this: their relationship to God gives favorable meaning to events that would lack such meaning or, at the human level, be construed as unfavorable, when viewed as mere products of fate; nothing is negative or meaningless when viewed through the eyes of devotion" (1989: 230).

any particular community and are exacting, a failure to act on one's duty ... is equivalent to supporting injustice" (2012: 73). In the dramatic narrative of the *BhG*, Arjuna failing to fight would be equivalent to supporting the Kauravas, and thus injustice.

Finally, this dialogue reveals a sort of dialectical relationship that aims at peaceable integration and stability, both internally and externally, further resulting in a dyadic monarchy exemplified in the "two Kṛṣṇas" and Nara-Nārāyaṇa framing. To invoke a theme discussed last chapter, we see a gradual movement away from legitimate political plurality in the form of the *saṅgha* (assembly) toward monarchical political visions in the *MBh* and *BhG*, whereby political pluralities move toward unification and harmonious integration under a single king and godhead. This unification for the purpose of the maintenance of the world, as Katz has claimed, finds expression in the Nara-Nārāyaṇa pairing: "Any mention of the two in the epic carries with it implicitly the eternality and perfection of their friendship: it is said that as a [unified] pair, Nara and Narayana are born *yuga* after *yuga*, 'for the sake of maintenance of the world', Arjuna and Krishna incarnating the pair in the present age" (*MBh* 7.172.81; Katz 1989: 215). One of the most significant innovations in Brahmanical political thought can be seen in its ability to create a conceptual framework that offers a totalizing cosmology and ontology, providing coherent political parallels at three different levels: self, interpersonal politics, and cosmos. For example, in describing Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna as *two* Kṛṣṇas, the text dissolves any absolute distinction between the two as heroes, suggesting they are actually two aspects of "Kṛṣṇa." Here, a duality becomes a unity, and in the philosophical context I laid out in the previous section, we can see how the figure of Kṛṣṇa takes on a unified monarchical aspect when it comes to ruling relations.

Henotheistic Politics Revisited: *Bhakti* (Devotion) and Monarchy

A central concept that helps tie each of these levels (self, politics, cosmos) together and provides a framework for legitimating such unification and monarchy, is *bhakti.* The political framework of monarchy allows Brahmanical political thought to unify disparate elements of the cosmos that might provide alternative forms of legitimating political power, centralizing them in the figure of Kṛṣṇa. As Angelika Malinar (2007) argues, Kṛṣṇa as political model expresses a "cosmological monotheism," wherein ideal human kings are representative of yet remain subordinate to Kṛṣṇa as the cosmic monarch, protecting *dharma* and doing so in a detached or disinterested fashion. Importantly, she specifies the cosmic-apotheotic nature of

this monotheism, explaining, "the *BhG* develops a new theological doctrine in that the highest god is regarded as the lord of yoga, the ruler and creator of the cosmos, as well as the ever-detached highest self guaranteeing liberation from rebirth" (237). One must first understand what *bhakti* entails and how it leads one to Kṛṣṇa as a cosmological-monarchical figure, and this begins by relinquishing or renouncing the fruits of one's actions to Kṛṣṇa:

> Relinquish all your acts to me with your mind, be absorbed in me, embrace the *yoga* of the spirit [*buddhi-yoga*], and always have your mind on me. With your mind on me you will by my grace overcome all hazards; but when you are too self-centered to listen, you will perish. If you self-centeredly decide that you will not fight, your decision is meaningless anyhow: your nature will command you. Fettered by your own task, which springs from your nature, Kaunteya, you will inevitably do what you in your folly do not want to do, Arjuna. (*BhG* 18.57–60)

Thus, relinquishing and devoting oneself to Kṛṣṇa entails not being "self-centered" because one's true self, including Arjuna's, leads inevitably back to Kṛṣṇa. Here, being self-centered might mean that Arjuna thinks he is an apodictic, independent source for decision-making, which is incorrect given the framework Kṛṣṇa provides.[15] Moreover, if we pan out to the macro-cosmic perspective of the *BhG* being an internal dialogue, Kṛṣṇa informs Arjuna that the latter's nature is to fight and will ultimately command him, which "fetters" this aspect of Kṛṣṇa to its *kṣatriya*-nature. Passing ultimate responsibility to Kṛṣṇa also allows for greater equanimity and dharmic disinterestedness: "Beloved of me is the devotee who is dependent on nothing, pure, capable, disinterested, unworried, and who renounces [the fruit of] all undertakings. Beloved of me is the devotee who neither hates nor rejoices, does not mourn or hanker, and relinquishes both good and evil" (*BhG* 12.16–17). In devoting oneself to Kṛṣṇa, much human, existential angst can be transferred so that one becomes less troubled by objects of desire and anger.

Not only must this loyalty remain exclusive to Kṛṣṇa, but it is available to everyone. As Kṛṣṇa explains in the following passages:

> Those who, absorbed in me, resign all their acts to me and contemplatively attend on me with exclusive yoga [*bhakti-yoga*], soon find in me their savior from the ocean that is the run-around of deaths, Pārtha, for their minds are conducted to enter into me. (*BhG* 12.6–7)

> Four kinds of good men seek my love … Among them stands out the adept, who is loyal to me exclusively[16] and is always yoked, for I am unutterably dear to him, and he is dear to me. All

15 This is an essential point that Fritzman (2015) fails to consider, as I will explain below.

16 The Sanskrit term here is *ekabhakti*, which van Buitenen helps clarify as meaning those "whose loving loyalty is directed to one person only" (1981: 166).

> four are people of stature, but the adept I count as myself, for through his discipline he comes to me as his incomparable destination. (*BhG* 7.16–18)

In this second passage we see the importance of exclusive devotion and loyalty, as one returns to the source since Kṛṣṇa is "the eternal seed [*bīja*, primary cause or source] of all beings" (*BhG* 7.10). This devotion directs everything toward Kṛṣṇa: "May your thoughts be toward me, your love toward me, your sacrifice toward me, your homage toward me, and you shall come to me, having thus yoked yourself to me as your highest goal" (*BhG* 9.34). We again see the language of yoking oneself, or engaging in yogic discipline, but here it extends to Kṛṣṇa with yogic self-rule leading to integration with Kṛṣṇa through devotion. The discourse of sacrifice also plays a role. As Malinar notes, the *BhG* draws upon the language of sacrifice and Vedic tropes "to connect different levels of discourse and meaning … [and] to explore the nature of action and the chances to control its workings," including for purposes of detached action (2007: 4). Perhaps more importantly, she points out how Kṛṣṇa's paramountcy relates to sacrifice as well, as he is made "the protector of all sacrifices and asks his followers to dedicate their lives to him as a continuous sacrifice" (4). This sacrifice thus involves yogically disciplining oneself by sacrificing egoism and the self-centeredness mentioned earlier.

Importantly, anybody can reach this goal, which would purportedly take some of the Brahmanical elitism out of the *varṇa* hierarchy and help erase traditional Vedic traces of Brahmanical domination. As Kṛṣṇa explains in chapter 9:

> If one disciplined soul proffers to me with love a leaf, a flower, fruit, or water, I accept this offering of love from him. (*BhG* 9.26)

> I am equable to all creatures, no one is hateful to me or dear—but those who share me with love are in me and I am in them. Even a hardened criminal who loves me and none other is to be deemed a saint, for he has right conviction … Understand this, Kaunteya: no servitor of mine is lost. Even people of low origins, women, *vaiśya*s, nay *śūdra*s, go the highest course if they rely on me, Pārtha. So how much more readily holy brahmins and devoted royal seers. (*BhG* 9.29–33)

In the first passage plain, simple offerings are happily accepted in place of traditional, complex sacrificial rituals, making favorable access to Kṛṣṇa available to all. This passage signals an important post-Vedic development that connects with Kṛṣṇa's statements in the second passage. That is, Kṛṣṇa not only lays out the four *varṇa*s and displays a "democratized" devotional position, but he also subtly separates the lower two social groups (*vaiśya* and *śūdra*) from the upper two (brahmin and *kṣatriya*). The latter pairing evokes a more traditional, Brahmanical-Vedic reference to the "*brahma-kṣatra*" relationship, here combining theological and political authority while doing so under the cosmological auspice of

Kṛṣṇa.[17] As we see throughout the *BhG*, however, Kṛṣṇa invokes the Vedas but subordinates their traditional authority beneath himself, thus consolidating theological-political authority: "I cannot be seen with the aid of the Vedas, austerities, gifts, and sacrifices. Only through exclusive *bhakti* can I be seen thus, Arjuna, and known as I really am, and entered into, enemy-tamer" (*BhG* 11.53–54). Finally, this consolidation manifests in Kṛṣṇa's references to other deities, in statements such as the following: "But those who serve me while thinking only of me [versus the "purified Vedic drinkers of Soma"] and none other, who are always yoked, to them I bring felicity. Even they who in good faith devote themselves to other deities really offer up their sacrifices to me alone" (*BhG* 9.21–22). In other words, all cosmo-theological roads lead back to Kṛṣṇa, the unified and supreme authority.

Now we can look more closely at how the political framework of monarchy allows the text's brahmin authors to synthesize older Vedic ideas regarding political power with post-Vedic ideas in innovative ways, thus legitimating Brahmanical authority in a new, post-Vedic historical context. Brahmins had traditionally operated and oversaw sacrificial rituals through their knowledge and command of the Vedas, which allowed people to propitiate any number of gods for personal benefits. The bramanical authors of the *BhG* do not throw these ideas out entirely, but creatively integrate the essential terms and categories associated with the Vedas within a new ascetic and devotional framework. In one telling passage, Kṛṣṇa explains to Arjuna:

> There are those who, always yoked to devotion, adore me and glorify me, while exerting themselves with fortitude, and pay homage to me. … I am the rite, I am the sacrifice, I am the libation to the ancestors, I am the herb, I am the formula, I am the butter, I am the fire, I am the offering … I am … the *ṛc*, *sāman*, and *yajus*; goal, master, lord. (*BhG* 9.16–18)

Kṛṣṇa thus links himself to many of the traditional Vedic sacrificial elements: oral formulas, offerings, medium of sacrifice (fire), and the three oldest Vedas (Ṛg-, Yājur-, and Sāma-Vedas). This passage shows how Kṛṣṇa subsumes each sacrificial element, along with the whole sacrificial vocabulary, and later claims to be the godly recipient of the sacrifice as well: "For I am the recipient of all sacrifices and their master" (*BhG* 9.24). Therefore, the older Vedic sacrifice and Triple Veda, which had possessed a plurality of distinct, viable sacrificial recipients (e. g., Indra, Soma, Agni, Savitṛ), now filter into the unified, monarchical position that Kṛṣṇa inhabits. At one juncture, Kṛṣṇa openly disparages the traditional Vedic framework wherein multiple, distinct gods existed and were viewed as legit-

17 For an explanation and analysis of this *brahma-kṣatra* and brahmin-*kṣatriya* relationship in earlier Vedic political thought, see Gray (2017: 157–62).

imate recipients of a given sacrifice: "Armed with that faith he [i. e., person who propitiates other deities] aspires to propitiate that deity and obtains his desires —desires for which I in fact provide. However, the rewards of those of little wit are ephemeral: God-worshipers go to the Gods [plural], but my loyal followers go to me [singular]" (*BhG* 7.22–23). Kṛṣṇa now claims that all the traditional rewards that a sacrificer may have received from various gods come from Kṛṣṇa, and only the "witless" believe in and propitiate a pantheon of distinct gods as true sources of sacrificial rewards. Such statements are historically significant because they allow the authors of the text to incorporate elements of Vedic orthodoxy without rejecting many of its central elements *tout court*, while integrating and sublimating them within a devotional framework centered around Kṛṣṇa.

Justifying the Decision to Fight

Employing the interpretation and analyses above, I now turn to J. M. Fritzman's argument and critique that Kṛṣṇa offers incomplete and unconvincing arguments to Arjuna, which runs against the grain of the interpretations that I provide in this chapter. To start, Fritzman explains that his reading of the *BhG* is an interventionist one, which "prescinds from or suspend[s] history" and "directly engage[s] with texts as dialogical partners who share a contemporaneous present" (2015: 323). Fritzman contends that Sen takes this approach, claiming it is a viable way to read the text since the *BhG* is a "living document," further explaining that "while the history reader denies that Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa are engaged in a debate, the interventionist reader may nevertheless construe their discussion as a debate" (324). On these grounds, Fritzman provides his critique of Kṛṣṇa's position, arguing that it is incomplete and unconvincing, and that one "may examine Arjuna's considerations on their own merits … [and] may intervene on Arjuna's behalf, supplementing his reasons" (324). To begin with, I agree with Fritzman that the text can be viewed as a living document, which is a point I will elaborate on in Chapters 5 and 6. However, relying solely on an interventionist reading can present problematic interpretations that prevent a deeper understanding of the text and its multilayered contexts for Kṛṣṇa's speech and Arjuna's decision to fight. Fritzman advances some reasonable points, but I would like to critique some of his more problematic claims and interpretations to highlight some of the interpretive contributions of my own reading. I will not address each of Fritzman's analytic points, which would be tedious, but rather the ones meriting some critical response. Since he claims the "history reader seek[s] to read a text as a self-consistent whole, but the interventionist reader attends to the moments where the history reading fails," I will inversely return the favor and show where reading the text as a (somewhat)

consistent whole attends to the moments where the interventionist reading fails (324).

I begin by examining Fritzman's claim that Arjuna's abstention from fighting would result in Arjuna being shamed and dishonored. Fritzman claims that any disapproval of Arjuna on the part of others would be based on ignorance of important facts and thus have no merit since Arjuna is in fact no coward, and only those who are sensible and understand his particular situation and reasons for acting would be in a position to pass valid (negative) judgment upon him (329). In the abstract, this critique might have some warrant, but it fails to account for an incredibly important aspect of the *BhG* and *MBh*'s political thought: namely, warrior and hero culture.[18] As Kevin McGrath states, "Arjuna Pāṇḍava Kaurava in epic Mahābhārata is a figure of warrior accomplishment who is both supernatural *and* mortally heroic" (2016: 1). While his fellow warriors may indeed be ignorant of certain details about Arjuna's situation and reasoning, this does not change the fact that they would still heap shame upon him since he is a *kṣatriya*, whose very identity is that of a heroic warrior (*śūra*) who fights and does not abstain from battle, especially when the stakes are as high as they are at the start of the war. We should also remember that Arjuna is the son of Indra, the penultimate "warrior god" extending back to the early Vedic texts. Contra Fritzman, the more significant point concerns Arjuna's *honor and reputation* and not his reasoning. Fritzman intellectualizes Arjuna's position and the situation as a philosophical debate, which is misplaced in this context. Kṛṣṇa is pointing out a basic fact about their immediate circumstances, regardless of the criticism's non-contextualized rational merit. Arjuna is a penultimate epic hero and heroes do not back down in situations such as this, regardless of the rationality involved in making such a decision.

Second, Fritzman argues that Kṛṣṇa's reasoning is contradictory since his view about shame contradicts Kṛṣṇa's sixth argument, which concerns indifference to consequences (2015: 329). On the one hand, Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna he will incur shame among his fellow *kṣatriya*s and that it is dishonorable not to fight, and on the other hand, the charioteer contends Arjuna must remain indifferent to the consequences and opinions of others and simply fulfill his duty as a *kṣatriya* in devotion to Kṛṣṇa. Fritzman thus states, "Were Arjuna to be indifferent to the consequences of his actions, he would not care whether he receives honor or shame" (329). Arjuna should indeed act indifferently, but this is one of Kṛṣṇa's "higher order" reasons, compared to the "shame/reputation reason;" the latter reason is more empirical and emotional in nature, predicated on interpersonal honor,

18 For an analysis of the Sanskrit hero and warrior culture depicted in the *MBh*, which focuses on the figure of Karṇa, see McGrath (2004).

while the former is more philosophical, based on the ontological claims that Kṛṣṇa proffers. Put another way, they are two different *types* of reasons, so pointing out a contradiction here is misplaced. Kṛṣṇa's claim amounts to the following: "here is what your fellow warriors will think of you, since you would transgress your nature as a *kṣatriya*, and besides that, you must ultimately act indifferently for a larger purpose that involves the ontology of the self and other philosophical or cosmological reasons I will provide." The point about shame is simply an observation Kṛṣṇa thinks might help bring Arjuna around, but it is not the whole story or argument. Besides, even if we were to consider this a significant contradiction, we must remember Kṛṣṇa is simply trying to get Arjuna to engage and not crafting something like a consistent philosophical argument open for dialectical critique. The dialogue is closer to a gradual cosmic revelation than a Platonic dialogue. The "shame reason" is simply a primer that pertains to Arjuna's warrior mindset and might help set Arjuna up for his gradual enlightenment and progression through higher order reasons that Kṛṣṇa lays out.

Third, Fritzman critiques Kṛṣṇa by pointing out that the war does not actually end in a dharmic fashion but rather with "the destruction of the world," so the claim that Arjuna's engagement will help hold the world together (*lokasaṃgraha*) appears patently false (2015: 331; see *MBh* 2.46.1–3, 5.156.12–13, 18.1.7–9). Citing Sheldon Pollock, Fritzman claims the *MBh* "ends, not with the restoration of dharma, but rather 'in anomie, ascetic suicide, and apocalypse'" (2015: 331; Pollock 2008: 71). Therefore, the consequences of Arjuna fighting seem to be the opposite of what Kṛṣṇa claims they will be, since they lead to world destruction. Firstly, the war itself ends with a unified monarchical structure, with the righteous Yudhiṣṭhira at the head, who is also called "King (of) Dharma." Hence, the text implies this outcome is as dharmic as it could be and an improvement from the non-unified contentiousness between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas that existed before the war. The consequences may look ugly to a modern reader and admittedly involve tremendous loss of life and pain, but read in the broader context of the *MBh*, the outcome was necessary and as positive as it could have been given the circumstances and age-transition (from Dvāpara- to Kali-Yuga) involved. Contextually, we also must remember that the Kauravas are demons incarnate and destruction is sometimes necessary for creating a more dharmic, unified political order under a single ruler.

In responding to Fritzman's critique, we must consider a few additional points. Dharma is Yudhiṣṭhira's father, so Yudhiṣṭhira becoming ruler means the offspring of Dharma reigns at the end of the war. Regarding the destructive consequences of the war, Fritzman highlights Yudhiṣṭhira's lamentation to support his point that the war's outcome was more negative than positive (2015: 331). Yudhiṣṭhira's despondency after the war is understandable, but we must also note that his personal feelings and viewpoint at this moment remain limited, as he does

not see the situation from a broader perspective in his initial moments of pain. His feelings are also limited temporally, as his *śoka* (grief) will be cyclically followed by *śānti* (peace) under his unified rule following Bhīṣma's soothing counsel in Book 12. Kṛṣṇa presents the proper context, as he alone knows why and how things must come about from a broader, cosmo-theological perspective. After all, Kṛṣṇa is the Supreme Godhead, so if this is the result he intends—and we have every indication it is—then it is a necessary outcome in the broader context of the epic regardless of Yudhiṣṭhira's lament or our own moral judgments as readers. Finally, this destruction accords with the temporal structure that I have elaborated, which shifts to the Kali-Yuga by the war's end. Due to the natural entropy and cyclical dissolution enveloping these characters, the story and action necessarily moves in this direction as *dharma* wanes. The world only gets messier and more violent as *adharma* increases, as moral ambiguity increases with the approach of the Kali-Yuga.

Moreover, putting Yudhiṣṭhira aside for the moment, Arjuna must fight at this point because he and his brothers have been pushed to conflict after diplomacy failed in Book 5, "The Book of Effort." Duryodhana has failed to treat them in a just fashion by withholding the land that is their right, so the context is not as much one of rational choice but rather necessity. As Matilal has argued, "a threat posed by Duryodhana's victory and the consequential loss of the chance for the restoration of justice, might have influenced Kṛṣṇa's decision to follow the devious course" (2002: 106–107). It is also not clear the Pāṇḍavas would win without Arjuna, who, again, is connected to Kṛṣṇa at both the meso- (political, interpersonal) and macro- (cosmic, particle of Kṛṣṇa) levels. Since Kṛṣṇa serves as Arjuna's advisor/counselor and "highest mind or self" that truly knows best what serves *loka-saṃgraha*, he must inevitably heed Kṛṣṇa's advice, which is to fight according to his *kṣatriya-dharma.*[19]

Fritzman points out that Kṛṣṇa's eighth and ninth arguments introduce additional problems. These arguments state that Arjuna cannot ultimately act independently and that Kṛṣṇa, using Arjuna as his instrument, will kill Arjuna's kin. Fritzman claims these considerations are not relevant in determining what Arjuna should decide (2015: 332). According to Fritzman, insofar as Arjuna can decide how he should act, these considerations (i. e., that Arjuna cannot make an independent decision that will affect the outcome) are not relevant to *his* deciding whether he should fight or not (332). In response, the claim that Arjuna is Kṛṣṇa's instrument can be best understood in the context of my macro-level reading: at the deepest level, Arjuna is not a fundamentally distinct agent separate from Kṛṣṇa, but rather

19 See also Sreekumar's (2012: 306) defense of this point.

a particle (*aṃśa*) of Kṛṣṇa, so Arjuna cannot act otherwise or outside the will of Kṛṣṇa because he is not a fully independent agent *at this level of reality.* On my reading, this claim about instrumentality should be read according to the fact that it is ultimately Kṛṣṇa who acts, and Arjuna represents an aspect of Kṛṣṇa's manifestation in the realm of *prakṛti* as a *kṣatriya*/warrior. Additionally, Kṛṣṇa's theophany explains how, since Kṛṣṇa *is* Time, the destroyer of all, he/Time ultimately kills these bodies, with Arjuna serving as his warrior-instrument in the war. Fritzman presumes these two figures are fundamentally distinct agents given his interventionist approach, but his approach fails to properly account for the three interpretive layers I have identified: micro, meso, and macro. The figures are distinct on the meso-level but not on the macro-level, and it is on the latter interpretive layer that this claim about instrumentality should be understood.

We also must remember that they are a unified pair (of sorts) at the meso-level, and Kṛṣṇa serves as counselor and "higher mind" for Arjuna in this scenario. In other words, we do not have two completely distinct, equal, and independent interlocutors chatting about fighting, but rather a discussion between a lower part of a (single) higher mind having a bout of conscience while faced with the possibility of killing its kin and former teachers in the realm of *prakṛti.* A deeper interpretation understands the dialogue as one of internal conscience, whereby the lower element needs the counsel and theophany that only the higher (or highest) element of the cosmic body can provide.[20]

As I have argued previously, this reading coheres with the *BhG*'s ontology of the self at the micro-level. According to this ontology, the highest part should rule and win out, so Kṛṣṇa as the highest part and Supreme Godhead must necessarily take the day. In this sense, at the normative-cosmic level Arjuna has no independent choice in the matter in the sense that Fritzman suggests; as a parallel, we should recall Draupadī's lack of choice in her own *svayaṃvara*, which is constrained by *daiva* (divine fate), and *daiva* is playing a similar role here. To get Fritzman's conclusion one would need to shoe-horn the dialogue into a narrower, meso-level of interpretation, neglecting the parts of the *BhG* and *MBh* that would allow us to make sense of this claim to instrumentality. In contrast to Fritzman's approach, I have tried to do two things: first, distinguish between three conceptu-

20 Readers should remember that conscience emerges in that moment when a tension arises between the immaterial and material world, especially when some type of destruction is necessary. Again, I argue that the fighting and killing are—or at least, can be—justified by and within the conceptual and narrative framework of the text itself, regardless of whether I or anyone else agrees with Kṛṣṇa's reasoning or Arjuna's decision to fight. Relatedly, one of the weaknesses of the interventionist approach is that it overlooks the broader context that would allow us to explain the rationale behind Kṛṣṇa's claims and Arjuna's behavior.

al-interpretive levels that exist in the text, and second, show how they should not be fully conflated but rather parallel, resonate with, and reinforce one another in ways that allow us to explain why Arjuna should, and does in fact, fight. This response renders Fritzman's critique of Kṛṣṇa unconvincing, or at least unwarranted, since recognizing what is happening at the macro-level allows us to explain some of these potentially unconvincing statements by Kṛṣṇa at an interpersonal dialogic level.

The last of Fritzman's critiques I want to address concerns questions about duty. Fritzman argues that "what is at stake is not whether Arjuna should perform his duties, but whether his duties actually require him to fight his kin, and, if they do, how they are to be reconciled to duties that require him to be loyal to and protect his family" (2015: 333). To begin with, his duties require him to fight his kin for the reasons I've given above, but also due to what I've called "scaled duties," according to which broader duties supersede more localized ones. His highest duty, as part of Kṛṣṇa, is pursuing justice as world welfare or integration, which necessarily supersedes his duty to cousins and former teachers. Accordingly, the issue is not one of total reconciliation—which is the way Arjuna problematically conceives the situation at the start—but rather an issue of scaled duties pointing toward superior, less subjective ties to particular people while recalling the principles of dharmic disinterestedness and politics of effacement. Scaled duties require the acknowledgement that duties associated with *kūla-dharma* may sometimes conflict with *varṇa-dharma*, as they happen to be in this case for Arjuna. The very logic of the *varṇāśramadharma* system bears this out. Namely, one must think less egoistically and more "objectively" according to duties that broaden one's considerations for the welfare of those extending past one's immediate family. Arjuna's duties are not based on a particular 'who' and his idiosyncratic choice of what duties he'd like to fulfill at any given moment, but rather 'what' social group he is part of, and which life stage he happens to be in.

To summarize my own position in response to Fritzman's critiques, I first want to ask: would it even matter that Kṛṣṇa's argument is not convincing, or contradictory, from an interventionist standpoint? The interventionist reading may provide an astute critique from a contemporary philosophical standpoint, taking these two figures as distinct interlocutors at a certain meso-level of interpersonal relations in the realm of *prakṛti.* On this reading, Fritzman suggests Kṛṣṇa must provide a logical and consistent philosophical argument to Arjuna, and if the argument failed, this would justify readers stepping in to help Arjuna provide a counterargument as to why he should not fight, or to explain why anyone should not fight if they were in Arjuna's shoes. I pose two responses to this position. First, contra Fritzman, Kṛṣṇa's position remains consistent, but to properly understand its consistency one must shift to the macro-level perspective of Kṛṣṇa's cosmic self,

with Arjuna as a sort of conscientious objector-particle of Kṛṣṇa, to see both the consistency and necessity in a claim to fight and kill members of his family. Second, taking the interventionist approach provides us with a misguided reading of the text for the reasons stated above, since it does not account for enough context to give a fair hearing as to why Kṛṣṇa claims what he claims, and why Arjuna behaves how he behaves. I have intimated points to this effect and will attend to it at greater length in the next chapter, but the interventionist reading also misses important points of historical context that would allow us to make sense of why the Brahmanical authors of the text are writing Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna in the way they are.

In contrast to Fritzman's interventionist approach—which, by the way, is shared by many scholars, including Sen—I think the following are more important questions: first, "*why* is Kṛṣṇa ultimately trying to convince Arjuna?" and second, "*what* happens as a result of his speech?", and not, "Is his argument philosophically convincing?" I have already covered many of the reasons why Kṛṣṇa urges Arjuna to fight, and to answer the second question: what happens is that Arjuna becomes even more devoted to Kṛṣṇa, realizes the deeper structure of his situation, and ends up fighting and killing many warriors in battle in helping lead the Pāṇḍavas to victory. These actions, then, pave the way for subsequent actions in the remainder of the *MBh.* We can speculate as to whether Arjuna should have refrained from fighting and what may have happened as a result, but I don't see nearly as much upshot in this line of analysis. Kṛṣṇa instructs, Arjuna fights, and dramatic consequences follow. Otherwise, we would not have the epic as we now have it. Regardless of our assessment of Kṛṣṇa's chain of reasoning, his appeal works and that is what matters most because it leads to the next stage in the action of the *MBh.* In the end, we are talking about the *BhG* and *MBh* as we have them, not about what we might like them to be. Engaging in interventionist and normative-speculative projects such as Fritzman's—for example, in seeing what independent lessons we could take away from the text that apply in the contemporary world—undoubtedly has some value. However, I think we can still draw such lessons without jettisoning what Fritzman calls a "history" reading. If we do not supplement the interventionist reading with a sufficient historical reading, our interpretation can miss salient points and become misleading. This is precisely what happens with Fritzman's critique. Incorporating a historicized reading or using elements of such a reading as I have, can help prevent us from dangling critical questions that can be effectively answered should we look at some additional context in both the *BhG* and *MBh.* This approach allows us to attend to the moments where the interventionist reading would otherwise fail. In short, if one accounts for sufficient textual/epic-wide and historical context, then Kṛṣṇa's position can be interpreted as both complete and convincing—to an extent.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an interpretation of Kṛṣṇa as the penultimate political model within the *BhG.* "King Kṛṣṇa" models the proper behavior for ruling, extending from the micro-level of the self all the way up to the macro-cosmic level. The hinge for my political interpretation of Kṛṣṇa is reading the dialogue as a discussion between higher and lower elements of a cosmic structure that exists entirely within the proverbial 'body' of Kṛṣṇa. I have called this a dialogue of internal conscience, in which a higher part of the cosmic structure and Supreme Being attempts to convince a lower, *kṣatriya*-aspect of itself to engage in warfare and killing for the broader purpose of *lokasaṃgraha*, or upholding world welfare. I argued that this term may be the closest we have for something like "justice" in the *BhG*, which entails fulfilling higher duties for purposes of world integration and stability. Of course, this integration and stability will be temporary within the larger cyclical-temporal structure characterized by entropy and movement toward the Kali-Yuga. Culminating in the figure of Kṛṣṇa, this text offers a henotheistic stance that requires devotion to the Supreme Godhead, further modeling a monarchical political structure. As I will explain in the next chapter, this monarchical structure is rife with ideological claims that support a Brahmanical viewpoint.

At this juncture, one might ask: what are the consequences of reading Kṛṣṇa as the ultimate political model in the *BhG?* What alternatives might there be, and what is the significance of reading this specific character within the *BhG* as the overarching model for the text's political teachings? First, reading Kṛṣṇa as cosmic monarch displaces many scholarly readings of the *BhG* as a political work situated within the *MBh.* When focusing on particular characters, scholars such as Kevin McGrath and James Fitzgerald have drawn greater attention to kingly figures in the epic, especially Yudhiṣṭhira, or the hero Arjuna, as the model for rule by *kṣatriya*s.[21] Yudhiṣṭhira undoubtedly remains an essential political figure within the *MBh*, but as I will explain in the next chapter, when considering the historical context and authorial intention of both the *MBh* and *BhG*, we see that reading Kṛṣṇa as cosmic ruler is necessary for clarifying the ideological nature of the *BhG* and some of its central political messages. On the other hand, while Arjuna remains crucial to the text's political thought, I have argued that his role is more instrumental in nature. Fighting, killing, and earning honor or fame in battle is an important element of the meaning of rule in the *BhG*, to be sure, but it does not capture what I take to be the most fundamental element. Rather, the most essential components of the text's political thought emerge when using the framework that I have expli-

21 For example, see McGrath (2016; 2017) and Fitzgerald (2004a: 128–142).

cated in Chapters 1 through 3, which express the brahmin authors' intentions to compose a text that could transcend historical context and achieve transhistorical applicability. My reading of the *BhG* as a paradigmatic political treatise within the larger epic also contrasts with those who have focused on the more explicitly political portions of the *MBh*, especially Book 12 (*Śānti Parvan*). In short, my analysis intends to bring the *BhG* to center stage as a text of political significance within the epic.

I will argue that Kṛṣṇa serves not only as an overarching theoretical model, but also an ideological model capable of transmitting Brahmanical ideas across time and space in support of a socio-political structure favorable to Brahmanical interests. In fact, viewing either Yudhiṣṭhira or Arjuna as the central political figures of the *MBh* can provide a misleading image of the text's most important political ideas. This is not to say that both figures are not crucial for understanding the epic's political thought and the *BhG* within it, but careful examination of the *BhG* has the virtue of bringing Kṛṣṇa's political significance to the forefront and into clearer focus. In the next chapter, I will unpack these claims and clarify what I take to be the deeply ideological structure of the *BhG*.