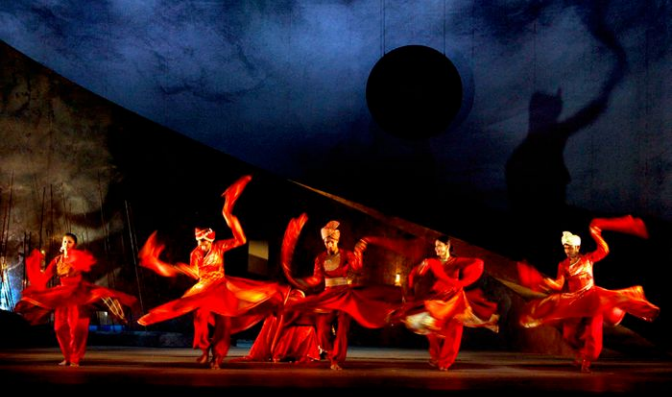

DISORIENTING DHARMA

Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the *Mahābhārata*

EMILY T. HUDSON

Disorienting Dharma

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Special thanks to Laurie Patton and Anne Monius whose guidance and support made this project possible. This book is dedicated to my husband, Parimal Patil, and to Wendy Doniger's Mahābhārata class that brought us together.

So, then, hear from me in full the news of the slaughter of the horses, elephants, and kings of immeasurable splendor in the battle. And while you are listening to what happened in the great war that gave rise to the destruction of all the world, remain calm and do not despair, O king.

—SAṂJAYA TO DHṚTARĀṢṬRA, 5.156.12–13

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Introduction

THE AESTHETICS OF SUFFERING IN THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*

> *Not* dharma, *the good life of right conduct, but* dharmasūkṣmatā *or the subtle nature of* dharma *that mixes good and evil in every act, the impossible labyrinth of the moral life, is the central theme of the* Mahābhārata.
>
> —A. K. RAMANUJAN[1]

> *Because* dharma *is subtle, dear queen, I am unable to solve your question in the proper way.*
>
> —BHĪṢMA TO DRAUPADĪ[2]

THIS BOOK EXPLORES the relationship between aesthetics, ethics, and religion in classical Indian literature and literary theory by focusing on one of the most celebrated and enigmatic texts to emerge from the Sanskrit epic tradition, the *Mahābhārata*. Widely acknowledged to be one of the most important sources for the study of South Asian religious, social, and political thought, the *Mahābhārata* is generally considered to be a major vehicle for transmitting *dharma* (moral, religious, and social duty or virtue) in the Hindu tradition(s). Indeed, the "subtle" nature of *dharma* is the central theme, if not the central problem, of the epic. However, even a cursory reading would lead many to suspect that it is less interested in communicating something conclusive about *dharma* and more concerned with charting the manifold ways in which it can be transgressed. After all, the *Mahābhārata* tells a story that involves a brutal, fratricidal war that ends in the near destruction of the world; a virtuous queen's sexual

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1. A. K. Ramanujan, "Where Mirrors Are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections," *History of Religions* 28/3 (1989): 205.

2. 2.60.40.

violation at the hands of her cousin-brothers; and a god, or more specifically God (Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa), who decides to descend to earth and take human form, ostensibly to aid the side of *dharma*, but who encourages some of the most virtuous characters in the epic to lie, cheat, and violate the rules of battle. Throughout the epic, *dharma* is placed in tension with other potentially more powerful forces, such as fate and time. The narrative describes the path of *dharma* as "scarcely discernable" (*sūkṣma*) and depicts this path as being so subtle that it resists straightforward interpretation. Characters who struggle to determine the virtuous path often lose their way, and frequently *dharma* is transgressed with disastrous, apocalyptic consequences.

This book investigates the *Mahābhārata's* seemingly subversive engagement with *dharma* in order to determine whether the epic's purpose is to expose "the impossible labyrinth of the moral life," as A. K. Ramanujan puts it, or if, as will be argued here, the work complexifies *dharma* in order to convey wider and deeper truths about it.[3] It argues that in order to comprehend *what* the epic is saying about *dharma*, one first has to understand *how* it communicates its messages about *dharma*, and that to grasp this, one has to understand how it functions as a work of literature. More specifically, this book argues that one important way in which the

3. It is important to note that this study is not the first to focus on the question of the text's confounding presentation of *dharma* and how—and if—it imparts a moral lesson. For example, A. N. Bhattacharya has argued that the *Mahābhārata* contains many unethical actions in order to expose the evils of *adharma* (the absence of *dharma*) and warn against them (A. N. Bhattacharya, *Dharma-Adharma and Morality in Mahābhārata* [Delhi: S.S. Publishers, 1992], 5). In a similar vein, V. S. Sukthankar has argued that although the *Mahābhārata* story allows evil to triumph over *dharma* for a period of time, the epic does so in order to show that the victory of evil is always short-lived and that *adharma* always carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction (*On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata* [Bombay: Asiatic Society of Bombay, 1957], 61–90). One of the best studies to date on the subject is B. K. Matilal's examination of moral dilemmas in the *Mahābhārata*. In his series of articles in *Ethics and Epics* Matilal makes the following pertinent points: first, that the *Mahābhārata* gives expression to the tradition's self-consciousness about moral values and moral conflicts; second, that the epic exemplifies the "internal criticism" of the tradition on the nature of *dharma* itself; and finally, that the *Mahābhārata* exposes the problems that are presented by a rigidly conceived ethical system constituted by a set of fixed moral principles (Bimal Krishna Matilal, *Ethics and Epics*: *The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal*, ed. Jonarden Ganeri [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], 1–122). Taking Matilal's intuitions in the direction of Sanskrit literary theory and reader-response criticism, this book explores how the presence of moral dilemmas in the *Mahābhārata* impacts the audience's understanding of *dharma* and ethics more broadly. Such an approach requires reading the epic self-consciously as a work of literature, an approach that Matilal takes implicitly, not explicitly.

Mahābhārata operates as a literary text is by conveying meaning more through what it "does" than through what it says, that is by "doing" something to its audience. Just as Joel Brereton has persuasively argued that the "solution" to *Ṛgveda* hymn 10.129 lies less in what the poem says and more in the responses it evokes in the audience, this book argues that meaning in the *Mahābhārata* is found in its poetic features, that is in its literary devices—what I call its "narrative strategies"—that are designed to impact its audience in very specific ways that are ethically relevant.[4]

Until recently *Mahābhārata* scholarship has been polarized by a debate concerning whether or not the epic should be regarded as consisting of an old narrative core surrounded by a host of later accretions or as an organic whole that is the product of a single redactor or group of redactors.[5] While scholars today still disagree about whether the epic developed in discernible stages,[6] many have decided to move the conversation forward by taking seriously the Sanskrit tradition's view that the *Mahābhārata* is a sophisticated literary object. In 1999 Alf Hiltebeitel declared that "the largest inadequacy in *Mahābhārata* scholarship is simply the failure to appreciate the epic as a work of literature."[7] He subsequently published *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, which explores the epic as a deliberately authored work of literary fiction. Several scholars have taken advantage of the new interpretive possibilities that Hiltebeitel's lead has opened up. Adam Bowles's *Dharma, Disorder, and the Political in Ancient India*, for

4. Joel Brereton, "Edifying Puzzlement: *Ṛgveda* 10. 129 and the Uses of Enigma," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119/22 (1999): 248–260.

5. The history of *Mahābhārata* scholarship has been summarized in numerous works, most extensively John L. Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998), 41–66. For a survey of more recent trends, see Aditya Adarkar, "The *Mahābhārata* and Its Universe: New Approaches to the All-Encompassing Epic," *History of Religions* 47/4 (2008): 305–319.

6. Scholars who have argued that the epic evolved in discernible stages are James L. Fitzgerald (see "Making Yudhiṣṭhira the King: The Dialectics and the Politics of Violence in the *Mahābhārata*," *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 54/1 [2001] 67–69); E. Washburn Hopkins (see *The Great Epic of India: Its Character and Origin* [New York: Scribner's Sons, 1901], 397–398); Ruth Katz (see *Arjuna in the Mahabharata: Where Krishna Is, There Is Victory* [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989], 11–12); Mary Caroll Smith (see "The *Mahābhārata's* Core," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95/3 [1975]: 479–482); and J. A. B van Buitenen (see *The Mahābhārata: The Book of the Beginnings* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973], xvi–xxiii).

7. Alf Hiltebeitel, "Reconsidering Bhṛguization," in *Composing a Tradition: Concepts, Techniques and Relationships*, ed. Mary Brockington and Peter Schreiner (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1999), 156.

example, approaches the *Āpaddharmaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* as a unitary work of literature and explores the poetic techniques that make it a cohesive unit.[8] In *Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage*, Arti Dhand, interpreting the *Mahābhārata* as a "bounded literary work unified by considerable thematic coherence," presents a critical study of sexuality in the epic.[9] Finally, Simon Brodbeck's *The Mahābhārata Patriline* approaches the epic as "an integral literary unit" in order to investigate the relationship between the text's internal narrators and the members of the family whose story they tell.[10]

Building on the renewed appreciation of the *Mahābhārata's* literary merits, this book has three main goals. The first is to discuss how the *Mahābhārata* functions as a work of literature to convey ethical meaning. The primary way in which the *Mahābhārata* "does what it does" is through what I call its "aesthetics of suffering." The aesthetics of suffering refers to the ways in which the epic's literary devices, or narrative strategies, use the theme of suffering to impact its audiences in ethically significant ways. I say "ethically significant" because the epic's aesthetics of suffering

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8. Adam Bowles, *Dharma, Disorder, and the Political in Ancient India: The Āpaddharmaparvan of the Mahābhārata* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007).

9. Arti Dhand, *Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage: Sexual Ideology in the Mahābhārata* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 18.

10. Simon Brodbeck, *The Mahābhārata Patriline: Gender, Culture, and the Royal Hereditary* (Farnham, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009). Brodbeck and Brian Black write of a current "vibrant critique of the analytic approach" and argue that the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* is "a natural inclusion in any broad category of world literature." See their introduction to *Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 8. Other recent works that have focused on the text's literary merits are James Hegarty, "An Apprenticeship in Attentiveness: Narrative Patterning in the *Dyūtaparvan* and the *Nalopākhyāna* of the *Mahābhārata*, *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 54/1 (2001): 33–62 and "Extracting the *Kathā-āmṛta* (elixir of story): Creation, Ritual, Sovereignty and Textual Structure in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*," *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, 14/2 (2006): 39–60; Eric Huberman, "A Note on the Multi-Centered Imagination of the *Mahābhārata*," *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 4/3 (1996): 151–160; A. K. Ramanujan, "Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*," in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 419–443; Tamar C. Reich, "Ends and Closures in the *Mahābhārata*," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 15/1 (2011): 9–53; Arvind Sharma, "Of *Sūdras, Sūtas* and *Ślokas*: Why is the *Mahābhārata* Preeminently in the *Anuṣṭubh* Meter?" *Indo-Iranian Journal* 43/3 (2000): 225–278; David Shulman, "Toward a Historical Poetics," and "The Yakṣa's Questions" both in *The Wisdom of Poets: Studies in Tamil, Telugu, and Sanskrit* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 21–39 and 40–62; and Lynn Thomas, "Disappearing Dragons and Russian Dolls: Unpacking the *Vṛtahatya* in the *Āraṇyakaparva*," *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 14/2 (2006): 9–38. Since this book was submitted for publication, James Hegarty has published a monograph on the *Mahābhārata* and narrative entitled *Religion, Narrative, and Public Imagination in South Asia: Past and Place in the Sanskrit Mahābhārata* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

initiates a critical inquiry into the nature of the vexed relationship between suffering and *dharma*. A disturbing question that the aesthetics of suffering persistently raises for the audience, for example, is "Why is the path of *dharma* implicated in so much suffering and sorrow?"

A second goal for this book is to offer a new method for reading literary texts by "lifting out" of the aesthetics of suffering the more general but implicit literary theory of the *Mahābhārata*. In order to identify and articulate this implicit theory, I use the resources of Sanskrit literary theory, reader-response theory, and narrative ethics. In particular, I rely heavily on three aesthetic categories taken from Sanskrit literary theory, namely *dhvani*, or suggestion; *sahṛdaya*, or the sensitive reader/spectator; and *rasa*, or aestheticized emotion. By examining how these categories help one to locate meaning in the *Mahābhārata*, this study also seeks to illustrate the enormous interpretive potential that could be opened up by bringing these concepts from Sanskrit literary theory to bear on other works of religious and literary art.

Finally, the *Mahābhārata* is a daunting text. Its sheer size and intractable nature have frustrated Indologists and intimidated nonspecialists for centuries. Perhaps because of its encyclopedic design and confounding nature, many have been wary to embark on its journey. In short, many students have struggled with how to read it; academics have wrestled with how to teach it. At the most basic and perhaps most ambitious level, the purpose of this book is to introduce audiences to the pleasures of reading what is in my opinion one of the most profound literary texts to emerge from premodern India. The *Mahābhārata* has "new" ideas to offer us about literature and how it works, and as the world literature movement is transforming comparative literature departments and the general reading population has taken an interest in contemporary Indian fiction, the time is ripe to make these ideas better known.

The opening chapter of this book introduces the *Mahābhārata* by briefly discussing its history, its central story and concepts, and some of the basic literary features that will be drawn upon in greater detail in the chapters that follow. It also lays out the basic argument of the book by discussing the aesthetics of suffering, which is made up of five components that work together to produce meaning in the text. These five components are (1) the concept of suffering, both as a central theme and an aesthetic principle, (2) narrative strategies, (3) the sensitive reader/receiver (*sahṛdaya*), (4) characters, and (5) conceptual categories. These five components are discussed particularly in terms of how they work together to

encourage the audience to accept the epic's ethical and religious vision, which centers on confronting the pervasive presence of suffering in the world.

What Is the Mahābhārata*?*

The *Mahābhārata* is one of the two major Sanskrit epics from classical India.[11] Along with its epic "twin," the *Rāmāyaṇa*, it is a foundational text of the Hindu tradition(s). The epic has traditionally been calculated to contain 100,000 quatrains, making it about seven times the length of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined. Scholars have compared the place and importance of this great epic in world literature to that of the Bible, the works of Shakespeare, the Greek epics and tragedies, and the *Qur'an*. It contains the *Bhagavadgītā*, which is considered by many to be the central statement of Hinduism and is among the most popular and most translated texts in the world. Like the Greek epics, the story of the *Mahābhārata* has provided the material for many literary adaptations, especially in Sanskrit drama. It has been recast into many Indian vernacular languages and retold through countless dramatic performances, visual representations, musical works, and most recently, weekly podcasts.[12] In the 1990s it was broadcast serially throughout India on television; this 'Doordarshan *Mahābhārata*' became one of the most popular programs ever presented on Indian television. Because the story has been told and retold in a variety of mediums and languages, it is fair to say that the *Mahābhārata* is not just one text but a vibrant tradition spanning well over two thousand years of history.

Unfortunately, very little is known about the composition of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. Even the most basic questions, such as where the text was composed or who composed it, are difficult to answer. Vedic texts, the earliest Sanskrit works of India dating to the last centuries of the second millennium BCE, mention the names of some of the characters of the story and even refer to a struggle over royal power, but the text that we can

11. For a justification of the use of the term "epic" for the *Mahābhārata*, see Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 2–15; 34–38.

12. www.mahabharatapodcast.com.

reconstruct from the manuscript sources dates from a significantly later period.[13]

According to the tradition, the author of the *Mahābhārata* is the sage Vyāsa, who is also a character in the story (he is the grandfather of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, the principal actors in the story). However, most scholars agree that the epic was in fact compiled over several centuries, from the first half of the first millennium BCE to the fourth century CE.[14] Recent scholarship has begun to view the text as we have it now as the careful compilation of a final redactor or group of redactors.[15] According to this view, the *Mahābhārata* is, despite being the product of many authors composing over a significant span of time, a work of conscious design.[16]

Until recently, most scholars believed that the text was originally an oral composition that was later committed to writing. Most now agree, however, that the *Mahābhārata*, in the form that we now have it, was composed in an environment in which writing and orality were intertwined in complex ways.[17] Alf Hiltebeitel has gone so far as to argue that orality in the epics is a literary trope "that should be understood against a background of redaction and above all writing."[18] The oldest extant manuscripts of the *Mahābhārata* date from the medieval period, after the formation of the two major extant recensions: the northern and southern. The Critical Edition is the result of the collation of a large number of

13. Sheldon Pollock, "The Mahabharata of Vyasa," in *The Longman Anthology of World Literature, Vol. A: The Ancient World*, 2nd edition, ed. David Damrosch (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2009), 830.

14. For an extensive discussion of the text's growth and development see John L. Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, 130–158. Recently, Alf Hiltebeitel has argued for a narrower chronological span of composition from the mid-second century BCE to the year zero. Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 18. He also provides a good discussion of the scholarly debates regarding dating of the epic, Ibid., 10–17.

15. Madeleine Biardeau, "Introduction," *Le Mahābhārata* (Paris: Flammarion, 1985–86), 27 and Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 19.

16. For the most recent debate concerning the merits and pitfalls of a "synchronic" versus a "diachronic" reading of the *Mahābhārata*, see James L. Fitzgerald, "The Many Voices of the *Mahābhārata*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 123/4 (2003): 812–816, and Alf Hiltebeitel, "On Reading Fitzgerald's Vyāsa," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 125/2 (2005): 241–261.

17. Tamar C. Reich, "A Battlefield of a Text: Inner Textual Interpretation in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1998).

18. Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 4.

manuscripts from both of these recensions. The aim of the editors of the Critical Edition was to recreate what they considered to be the ancestor of all the manuscripts that they examined and collated, a goal that in the end they could only approximate.[19] When this book refers to the *Mahābhārata*, it refers to this reconstituted Poona text, unless otherwise noted. While it is not without its flaws, the Poona text is widely regarded as being a generally successful representation of a *Mahābhārata* that is as early as the manuscript evidence will allow us to go.[20]

The Story

The *Mahābhārata* is a story about a war, a brutal, fratricidal, apocalyptic war, between two sets of cousins, the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, who are fighting over the kingdom of the Bhāratas—hence the title of the epic, the Mahābhārata or "The Great Story of the Bhāratas." The story focuses on how this war came about, the course of the war, and how those who survived it, particularly those who felt that they were responsible for it, bore living in the aftermath of an apocalypse. This war has often been described as a war over a royal throne. A close reading of the epic, however, shows that this is somewhat of a mischaracterization. While it is true the Pāṇḍavas care a great deal about power in the beginning of the epic, after their thirteen-year exile, they care more about peace than power. Book 5 of the *Mahābhārata* details the extreme measures that the Pāṇḍavas take to avoid war. They fight because there is no option left to them. Surely they are the most reluctant warriors in world literature. Indeed, why the war takes place, what the war is really about, and whether it actually could have been averted are the questions that provide the engine for the unfolding of the central narrative as well as some of the epic's most fundamental riddles.

For those who are not familiar with the central story of the *Mahābhārata*, a summary of the epic is provided here. Any attempt to summarize a

19. For a helpful overview of the creation of the Critical Edition, see Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, 56–61, and James L. Fitzgerald, "The *Mahābhārata*," in *The Hindu World*, ed. Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby (New York: Routledge, 2004), 68–70.

20. For thoughtful reflections on some of the weaknesses in the way that the editors of the Critical Edition conceptualized the development of the *Mahābhārata* manuscript tradition, see John Dunham, "The *Mahābhārata*: A Survey Discussion" in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991) 1–18 and Brodbeck, *The Mahābhārata Patriline*, 5–6.

literary text of this magnitude risks draining it of life. Therefore, I also recommend John Smith's abridged translation of the *Mahābhārata*.[21] In the following summary, a dizzying array of characters will parade into and out of the story. To aid the reader, a glossary of characters is provided in the appendix.

The Build-up Toward War

Our story begins with three brothers and a throne. These brothers, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pāṇḍu, and Vidura belong to the ruling family of the Bhāratas. Because Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the eldest, is born blind, he is ineligible to become king.[22] Thus his younger brother Pāṇḍu is given the throne. Vidura, the youngest of the three, is the son of a *śūdra*, a lower-class woman, and therefore also ineligible. To say that this is unfortunate is somewhat of an understatement: Vidura is the wisest of the three brothers; he also happens to be the incarnation of the god Dharma.

Pāṇḍu decides to renounce the kingdom and repair to the forest with his two wives, Kuntī and Mādrī. Dhṛtarāṣṭra takes over as king, but the precise nature of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's regency is left open to question. What is not clear is whether Dhṛtarāṣṭra is actually given the throne (with his sons standing in the line of succession) or whether he is simply watching over the kingdom until Pāṇḍu's heirs come of age.

One day while hunting for sport in the forest, Pāṇḍu shoots a buck mating with a doe; the buck is really a sage and the doe is his wife. The dying sage curses Pāṇḍu: if he ever makes love again, he will die in the act. This curse is especially severe since Pāṇḍu has no children. His wife Kuntī, however, has a solution. When she was young, she acted as a hostess to a wandering ascetic who gave her a magic *mantra* that allowed her to summon any deity she wished to impregnate her with a son. To test the *mantra*, Kuntī called upon the sun god Sūrya. The result of their liaison was a son, Karṇa. Terrified of being found out (Kuntī was still very young at this point and unmarried), she placed the infant in a basket and

21. John D. Smith, trans., *The Mahābhārata: An Abridged Translation* (London: Penguin Books, 2009).

22. See 1.102.23. The biological father of all three brothers is Vyāsa, the epic's author. When Vyāsa impregnated Dhṛtarāṣṭra's mother, Ambikā, she closed her eyes out of fear due to his frightful appearance. Thus, her son, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, was born blind. Balarāma links Dhṛtarāṣṭra's physical blindness with his moral blindness at 3.119.11.

set it afloat upon the river. He was discovered on the banks of the river by a lower-class charioteer—a *sūta*—and his wife, and was raised by them.

When Pāṇḍu learns of Kuntī's boon, he begs her to use it to produce heirs. She calls upon the gods Dharma, Vāyu, and Indra and she gives birth in successive years to Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, and Arjuna. Kuntī allows Mādrī to use the *mantra* as well, and Mādrī calls upon the two Aśvins, subsequently giving birth to twins, Nakula and Sahadeva. These five boys are the Pāṇḍavas, the heroes of the epic.

Soon after the births of his sons, Pāṇḍu takes Mādrī into his arms and attempts to make love to her. The sage's curse is activated and Pāṇḍu dies in Mādrī's embrace. Grief-stricken, Mādrī follows her husband to the funeral pyre, leaving Kuntī to raise the Pāṇḍavas alone.

Meanwhile, Dhṛtarāṣṭra marries the virtuous princess Gāndhārī, who out of devotion to her blind husband blindfolds herself for life. After two years of a painful pregnancy, Gāndhārī attempts to abort her fetus and discharges a single ball of flesh. Vyāsa (the epic's ostensible author and father of Pāṇḍu, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and Vidura) arrives and divides the ball into a hundred and one clay pots from which are born the Kauravas: one hundred sons and a daughter. The eldest son, Duryodhana, although conceived before Yudhiṣṭhira, is born after him, making Yudhiṣṭhira, ostensibly, the rightful heir to the kingdom. Duryodhana's birth is accompanied by inauspicious omens. Seeing the ominous portents, Vidura informs Dhṛtarāṣṭra that his son will cause the extermination of the Bhāratas. He urges him to abandon Duryodhana, since the peace of the family depends on it. Dhṛtarāṣṭra refuses to listen to him, because of his "love for his son" (*putrasneha*).

The Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas are raised together in Hāstinapura under the tutelage of their great uncle, Bhīṣma, and their uncle Vidura. They are all trained in the art of war by Droṇa and Kṛpa, brahmins who are skilled in the art of weaponry. However, the Kauravas, led by Duryodhana, are jealous of the Pāṇḍavas and plot to kill them in various ways. On one occasion Duryodhana ties Bhīma up in fetters and throws him into the river.

With Yudhiṣṭhira's approaching maturity, the problem of royal succession becomes pressing. Duryodhana urges his father to take measures to secure the kingdom. Dhṛtarāṣṭra at first refuses, worried that their subjects would kill them if they were to oust the much-loved Yudhiṣṭhira. Duryodhana assures his father that he has a plan: they will send the Pāṇḍavas off to the city of Vāraṇāvata so that their subjects will forget them. Dhṛtarāṣṭra readily agrees with his son.

After Duryodhana makes a particularly vicious attempt on their lives while they are living in Vāraṇāvata, the Pāṇḍavas fake their deaths and go into hiding disguised as brahmins. During this time, they hear that King Drupada is holding a *svayaṃvara*, or marriage contest, for the hand of his daughter, Draupadī, and decide to attend. At the *svayaṃvara*, they first meet Kṛṣṇa, their cousin (the son of Kuntī's brother, Vasudeva). Arjuna wins the contest, and when the Pāṇḍavas bring Draupadī home to meet Kuntī, she instructs Arjuna to share his prize with his four brothers (Kuntī's back is turned so she is unaware of what the prize is). Thus Draupadī becomes the wife of all five Pāṇḍavas.

When news spreads that the Pāṇḍavas are still alive and that, further, they have grown powerful due to their alliance with Drupada, Dhṛtarāṣṭra reluctantly decides (at Bhīṣma's prompting) to give them half the kingdom, the eastern half, in the region called Khāṇḍavaprastha. There the Pāṇḍavas establish their capital at Indraprastha, and a magnificent palace is built for Yudhiṣṭhira. He, proud of his sumptuous abode, sets his mind on performing the royal consecration, a lavish ritual asserting his universal kingship. He seeks the advice of Kṛṣṇa on the matter (it is at this point in the story that Kṛṣṇa's divine status as the creator of the universe is revealed[23]) and Kṛṣṇa urges him to undertake the consecration. Rulers from across the land attend, bearing gifts and swearing allegiance to Yudhiṣṭhira. This arouses the jealousy of Duryodhana once again and when he returns to Hāstinapura, he plots with his uncle Śakuni to devise a way of robbing the Pāṇḍavas of their kingdom. They settle upon the idea of challenging Yudhiṣṭhira to a game of dice, a proposal that Dhṛtarāṣṭra first refuses (primarily because he knows his wise brother Vidura is against it) and then accepts.

Yudhiṣṭhira is summoned to Hāstinapura. In the "rigged"[24] game that follows, Yudhiṣṭhira pledges and loses his kingdom, his wealth, his brothers, himself, and finally Draupadī. Draupadī is subsequently dragged into the assembly hall by Duḥśāsana (Duryodhana's brother), her hair

23. See 2.12.20–30.

24. Whether the game is really rigged or not is open to question. Śakuni claims he was playing fairly, but who can trust Śakuni? Most characters believe that Yudhiṣṭhira was tricked, but not all do. David Shulman explores this question in his article "Devana and Daiva" in *Ritual, State, and History in South Asia: Essays in Honour of J. C. Heesterman*, ed. D. H. A. Kolff, A. W. van den Hoek, and M. S. Oort (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 350–365.

undone, her robe stained with menstrual blood. She is insulted, humiliated, and sexually assaulted by Duryodhana, Karṇa (Kuntī's son with Surya and thus the Pāṇḍavas' half-brother who has reentered the story through forming an alliance with Duryodhana), and Duḥśāsana while the elders in the hall and the staked-and-lost Pāṇḍavas watch and do nothing. Finally, the howls of jackals prompt Dhṛtarāṣṭra to intervene and grant Draupadī her freedom as well as the freedom of her husbands.

As the Pāṇḍavas journey to Indraprastha, Dhṛtarāṣṭra recalls them for one last "all or nothing" throw. If the Pāṇḍavas win, their kingdom will be returned to them; if they lose, they must live in exile for twelve years in the forest and one year in disguise. Yudhiṣṭhira unwillingly returns, and when the game is resumed he loses once again. The Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī prepare to depart for the forest. Clad in deerskins they form a sorry procession as they file away from the capital. Evil omens accompany their departure while Droṇa warns Duryodhana that in due time the Kauravas will be massacred by the Pāṇḍavas.

In the forest, a dejected Yudhiṣṭhira reflects on his sorrowful state repeatedly asking why he, who is virtuous, suffers misfortune while his enemies, who lack virtue, prosper. He is visited by a variety of sages who narrate beautiful stories about the instability of human life and the importance of practicing *dharma*. Meanwhile, Arjuna journeys to heaven to procure weapons and receive instruction in the art of battle. Draupadī is abducted by the Sindhu King Jayadratha, but is quickly rescued by her husbands. To console a very upset Yudhiṣṭhira, Mārkaṇḍeya, a visiting sage, recounts the story of a woman who was in even greater distress than Draupadī—Sītā, wife of Rāma and heroine of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

After sorrowfully carrying out their twelve years in the forest, the Pāṇḍavas find refuge in the kingdom of Virāṭa, the king of the Matsyas, for their last year in exile, which is to be carried out in disguise. Their year in Virāṭa's kingdom passes uneventfully until Draupadī attracts the attention of the commander of Virāṭa's army, Kīcaka. Draupadī attempts to shun his advances by running into Virāṭa's assembly hall where Yudhiṣṭhira is sitting. Kīcaka grabs her by the hair and, while Yudhiṣṭhira looks on, he throws her down on the floor and kicks her with his foot. Because he is afraid of revealing their true identity, Yudhiṣṭhira does nothing. Draupadī complains to Bhīma about the miseries of being married to Yudhiṣṭhira who cares about nothing but *dharma*. Moved to tears, Bhīma promises to seek revenge. The next evening, he lies in wait for Kīcaka and kills him by breaking every bone in his body.

After their thirteen-year exile, the Pāṇḍavas send an envoy to Hāstinapura to demand that Duryodhana keep his end of the covenant and return their kingdom. Otherwise, they will declare war. However, midway through his negotiations with Saṃjaya, the envoy of the Kauravas, Yudhiṣṭhira makes a stunning concession. In order to avoid war, the Pāṇḍavas will withdraw the demand for their kingdom and will accept five villages. When Duryodhana refuses even this concession (he will not, he says, give the Pāṇḍavas even a pinprick of land),[25] the Pāṇḍavas urge Kṛṣṇa to go to the Kauravas as their envoy and sue for peace. Bhīma, Yudhiṣṭhira, and Arjuna all implore Kṛṣṇa to do everything in his power to secure peace and it is assumed that the five-village option is still on the table. When Kṛṣṇa returns and reports that his peace mission has failed, Yudhiṣṭhira, seeing that there is no option left, reluctantly prepares for war. However, even at this moment, after he has done virtually everything in his power to avert war, Yudhiṣṭhira hesitates. It is at this point that Arjuna urges Yudhiṣṭhira to accept the fact that there is no option left but to fight. According to Arjuna, even Vidura, their wise uncle and the incarnation of the god Dharma, has come to this conclusion.

The War

After peace negotiations fail, and war is clearly inevitable, Dhṛtarāṣṭra asks his aide Saṃjaya to narrate the events of the war to him. Saṃjaya agrees to this, but offers the king instructions on how he is to hear the narration: he is to remain calm and not despair (*sthiro bhūtvā . . . śrutvā mā vimanā bhava*).[26] Vyāsa visits Dhṛtarāṣṭra and offers him the gift of vision so that he may see the battle events. Dhṛtarāṣṭra refuses Vyāsa's offer, telling him that he does not wish to witness the deaths of his kinsmen; he prefers to hear of the events. Vyāsa then bestows upon Saṃjaya the gift of a divine eye so that Saṃjaya may observe all the events of the war and report them in full detail to the blind king.

After the armies are arrayed for battle, Arjuna, gazing at his family members and his elders on the Kaurava side, throws down his weapons in despair. Kṛṣṇa preaches the *Bhagavadgītā* to him. At the conclusion of Kṛṣṇa's divine teaching to Arjuna, the fighting begins and continues for

25. 5.57.10–19.

26. 5.156.13.

nine days. On the tenth day, Arjuna kills Bhīṣma, his great uncle and the greatest warrior on the Kaurava side. Bhīṣma, however, who has been granted a boon to choose the day of his death, remains conscious lying on a bed of arrows throughout the rest of the battle.

Duryodhana appoints Droṇa to replace Bhīṣma as commander of the Kaurava army and the fighting resumes. Droṇa, a master strategist, diverts Arjuna to the southern part of the battlefield, away from center stage, and directs his warriors to form an impenetrable battle formation. Other than Arjuna, only Abhimanyu, Arjuna's young son, knows how to break into this formation. However, he does not know how to exit it. At Yudhiṣṭhira's urging, Abhimanyu enters the formation, and he is immediately surrounded by the most powerful Kaurava warriors (Droṇa and his son Aśvatthāman included) who divest him of his weapons and mercilessly kill him. This event, which occurs on the thirteenth day of battle, marks a major turning point in the war. It initiates a cycle of revenge that causes the fighting on both sides to become devious, vicious, and inhuman.

On the fifteenth day the Pāṇḍavas plot the death of Droṇa, their beloved teacher. Kṛṣṇa assures the Pāṇḍavas that the only way to stop Droṇa is to lie to him, telling him that his son Aśvatthāman is dead. Bhīma kills an elephant named Aśvatthāman, and Yudhiṣṭhira, renowned for his commitment to truth-telling, reluctantly informs Droṇa that Aśvatthāman is dead, muttering the words "the elephant" under his breath. Because he hears the news from Yudhiṣṭhira, Droṇa does not question it. Utterly dejected, he withdraws from the war and enters a yogic trance. Dhṛṣṭadyumna, Draupadī's brother, beheads the now passive Droṇa and tosses the head before the Kaurava troops. Aśvatthāman, enraged by the unrighteous way in which his father has been killed, vows to destroy all the Pāṇḍavas.

After the death of Droṇa, the fighting on the part of the Pāṇḍavas becomes even more underhanded, and while it secures their victory over the Kauravas, it renders their triumph a disturbing one. Bhīma kills Duḥśāsana, Duryodhana's brother who had dragged Draupadī into the assembly hall in Book 2, tears open his chest, and drinks his blood. Arjuna, at Kṛṣṇa's prompting, kills Karṇa when his chariot is incapacitated, and Bhīma, again at Kṛṣṇa's prompting, defeats Duryodhana in a mace battle by shattering his thigh, an area of the body deemed off-limits by the warrior code of conduct. With the death of Duryodhana, the Kauravas are defeated.

The cycle of revenge culminates in *The Book of the Night Massacre* (Book 10), the book that brings the war to a bloody close. Aśvatthāman, Droṇa's son,

seeking revenge for the unrighteous ways in which both his father and his king (Duryodhana) are killed, enters the Pāṇḍava camp at night and massacres everyone as they sleep. When Yudhiṣṭhira hears the news, he falls to the ground in despair, declaring that his victory has ended in defeat. At the close of the war there is only a handful of warriors left standing on both sides. The number of the dead is staggering: 1,660,020,000.[27]

After the War

After the war, Dhṛtarāṣṭra mourns the loss of Duryodhana and his other sons. Saṃjaya, Vidura, and Vyāsa offer him words of advice in an attempt to console him. Gāndhārī is given a divine eye by Vyāsa so that she may witness the carnage of the battlefield. Movingly, she describes to Kṛṣṇa the details of the carnage as well as her own mixture of emotions—sorrow and resignation—upon seeing Duryodhana's body. She also mourns the loss of her other sons. After concluding her description of the battlefield scene, Gāndhārī blames Kṛṣṇa for the disaster. Accusing him of having ignored the mounting hostility between the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas, she curses him: in thirty-six years he will slay his own kinsmen and then die. Kṛṣṇa, smiling slightly, declares that he already knows this to be the case. The Pāṇḍavas, bewildered by Kṛṣṇa's response, become despondent and lose their will to live.

In perhaps the greatest blow of all to the Pāṇḍavas, particularly Yudhiṣṭhira, Kuntī reveals Karṇa's true identity as their brother. Yudhiṣṭhira says that his grief at knowing that he was responsible for the slaying of his brother is a hundred times greater than his grief over the deaths of his nephew, Abhimanyu, or his sons.[28] Together with his family members, Yudhiṣṭhira performs the sacred water rites for Karṇa.

With the time for mourning over, Yudhiṣṭhira finds himself unable to move beyond his grief and assume his role as king. He blames himself for the deaths of his kinsmen, loses his will to live, and yearns to retire to the forest to expiate his sins. Arjuna, Bhīma, Nakula, and Sahadeva attempt to dissuade him from his renunciatory yearnings but to no avail. Vyāsa offers a discourse on the transitory nature of life and the universal nature of

27. 11.26.

28. 11.27.17–19.

suffering to assuage his grief. Finally Kṛṣṇa persuades Yudhiṣṭhira to seek words of advice from Bhīṣma, who is still lying near death in a bed of arrows on the field of battle. In a state of illumination granted by Kṛṣṇa, Bhīṣma instructs Yudhiṣṭhira on a variety of topics including the duties of kings, the nature of *dharma*, the means to eliminate sorrow, and the path to heaven. The irony of the fact that this discourse on *dharma* is delivered by a felled warrior, his body pierced by a multitude of arrows, a victim of *kṣatriya dharma* (the proper conduct of the warrior class), is surely not to be missed.

Bhīṣma finally succumbs to death. Despite Bhīṣma's lengthy discourse, Yudhiṣṭhira is still disconsolate. Vyāsa suggests that he perform a horse sacrifice to expiate his sins. Yudhiṣṭhira does so and, afterwards, is ready to rule at last.

Fifteen years into Yudhiṣṭhira's rule, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, still mourning the deaths of his sons, decides to retire to a forest hermitage. Gāndhārī, Vidura, and Kuntī accompany him. The Pāṇḍavas, disconsolate in their absence, visit them. Upon seeing Yudhiṣṭhira, Vidura, emaciated and with matted locks, uses his yogic power to enter his nephew. Vyāsa arrives and Gāndhārī tells him that they (Gāndhārī, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and the Pāṇḍavas) have been suffering for sixteen years and have not been able to forget their loved ones who died in battle. She requests that they be given a vision of their sons. Vyāsa agrees to grant her request and, after bathing in the river, he summons the deceased warriors. A deafening sound is heard and thousands of kings rise up out of the river, dressed in celestial robes. Reunited for one joyful night, the Pāṇḍavas reconcile with Karṇa, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra sees his sons for the first time. Soon after, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's abandoned sacrificial fire ignites the surrounding forest and the old king, his wife, and Kuntī are consumed. Saṃjaya escapes and departs for the Himālayas.

Thirty-six years after the Bhārata war, ominous portents begin to appear. The Pāṇḍavas receive news that Gāndhārī's curse of Kṛṣṇa has been fulfilled. In Dvārakā, a number of noisy youths from Kṛṣṇa's clan, the Andhakas and Vṛṣṇis, attempt to trick some holy sages by disguising one of Kṛṣṇa's sons as a pregnant woman. The sages curse him to give birth to an iron club that will be the destruction of his people. The club is ground up and thrown into the sea. Later a drunken brawl breaks out, and the Vṛṣṇis and Andhakas begin to fight. Kṛṣṇa remains a passive observer until he witnesses the slaying of his own son. He then picks up blades of grass and each blade turns into an iron mace. Kṛṣṇa wipes out every last person in his clan. Afterwards, he departs for the forest. As he sits in

meditation, a passing hunter named Jarā, or "old age," mistakes him for a deer and fatally shoots him.

Arjuna hears the news of Kṛṣṇa's death, and, heartbroken, he journeys to the hermitage of Vyāsa for comfort. Vyāsa tells him that his work in the world, like Kṛṣṇa's, has come to an end and it is time for the Pāṇḍavas to depart. Hearing of the slaughter of the Vṛṣṇis and Andhakas, Yudhiṣṭhira too decides that it is time to renounce the world, telling Arjuna that time "cooks" every creature. Arjuna agrees, by simply replying, "Time, time."[29]

The five brothers along with Draupadī and a dog set out for their final journey. They first circumambulate the world, then proceed northward into the mountains until, one after another, Draupadī, Sahadeva, Nakula, Arjuna, and Bhīma fall down dead. Yudhiṣṭhira leaves them where they fall and continues on without looking back. Indra appears and tells Yudhiṣṭhira to climb into his chariot so that he may be taken to heaven. Yudhiṣṭhira refuses to leave the dog. Indra insists that he do so, but Yudhiṣṭhira repeatedly refuses. Suddenly, the dog is transformed into the god Dharma, Yudhiṣṭhira's father. He tells Yudhiṣṭhira that he had assumed the disguise of a dog in order to test his son. Dharma, pleased with Yudhiṣṭhira, urges him to enter heaven.

In heaven, Yudhiṣṭhira does not see his brothers and Draupadī. Rather, he encounters Duryodhana! Enraged, Yudhiṣṭhira tells Indra that he wants no part of heaven if he has to share it with Duryodhana, since it was because of Duryodhana that his friends and kinsmen were killed and that Draupadī was so horribly mistreated.[30] Instead, Yudhiṣṭhira wants to see his brothers and his wife. A celestial messenger is called to lead Yudhiṣṭhira to his family. The messenger takes Yudhiṣṭhira on a path that is "inauspicious and dangerous and frequented by evildoers."[31] After traveling on this path for some time, Yudhiṣṭhira decides to turn back. As he does so, he hears the voices of his brothers and Draupadī crying out in pain, suffering the torments of hell. At first stupefied and then enraged, Yudhiṣṭhira censures the gods and his father Dharma. He tells the messenger to return to heaven without him; he will remain in hell, since his presence eases the suffering of his loved ones. Instantaneously, the darkness disappears and

29. 17.1.4.

30. 17.18.8–9.

31. 18.2.16.

an auspicious breeze blows. All the inhabitants of heaven appear. Indra tells Yudhiṣṭhira that his experience of hell was an illusion that all kings must experience. Now he may enter heaven and join his family members. Yudhiṣṭhira does so and beholds Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna, Bhīma, Draupadī, Pāṇḍu, Kuntī, and all the others.

Some Distinctive Literary Features of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*

In the history of scholarship on the *Mahābhārata* a great divide has existed between the traditional view of the text as one of the most celebrated poems in the history of Indian literature containing a unified aesthetic vision and the Euro-American view that the epic was a "literary unthing,"[32] a "monstrous chaos,"[33] "a huge and motley pile."[34] Indeed, for many early twentieth-century Euro-American scholars the *Mahābhārata* was hardly a text at all, much less one with literary merit; it was, instead, a confused confabulation of layers from earlier and later time periods that could be mined for its historical, philological, and mythological treasures. Alf Hiltebeitel writes:

> The epic has been mined for Indo-European myth, Indo-European epic, Indo-European goddesses, non Indo-European goddesses, oral epic, a prior epic cycle, a pre-Brahmanic Kṣatriya tradition, an historical kernel; a textual kernel; the "old" narrative beneath the final written 'surface'; *etc.*[35]

Fortunately, as previously mentioned, *Mahābhārata* scholarship in the West has undergone a tectonic shift in the past few decades and scholars are now increasingly willing to view the epic with what could be termed "a hermeneutics of respect."[36] A hermeneutics of respect seeks to listen to rather than disembowel the text; it assumes that what is most interesting about the

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32. "*literarisches Unding*," Moriz Winternitz, *Geschichte der indischen Literatur* (Leipzig: C. F. Amelangs Verlag, 1908–22), 272.

33. "*ungeheuerliches Chaos*," Hermann Oldenberg, *Das Mahābhārata: Seine Entstehun, Sein Inhalt, Seine Form* (Gottingen: Vandenhoek und Ruprecht, 1922), 1.

34. Hopkins, *The Great Epic of India*, 363.

35. Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 2.

36. I am grateful to Paul Courtright for this phrase.

Mahābhārata is what the great epic has to say for and about itself, rather than what it has to say about its pre-history or its future.[37] Indeed, scholars today are beginning to see that many of the literary features that their early twentieth-century predecessors held in disdain—its size, its riddles, its open-endedness, even its dark worldview—are integral to the epic's distinctive literary genius. Before turning to a discussion of how the *Mahābhārata* "works" as a literary text to convey ethical and religious meaning, it may be helpful to discuss some of the epic's distinctive literary features, since the substantive chapters that follow will refer to and draw from these features significantly.

Let us begin with the *Mahābhārata*'s mind-boggling size. Why is the epic so long? Its length is due no doubt to what many scholars identify as the epic's outstanding characteristic, its encyclopedic drive. The *Mahābhārata*, in addition to being a story about a conflict between two sets of cousins, is also a story about "everything else"; it is, in some sense, a summation of an entire culture. Through its complicated narrative structure, the *Mahābhārata* tells its story via stories within stories, and many of its substories, which include legends, ritual lore, myths, folktales, and philosophical passages, are only loosely connected to its central story. Thus the *Mahābhārata* boasts in perhaps its most famous passage, "what is here is elsewhere; what is not here is nowhere else."[38] As David Shulman notes, "Vyāsa, it is said, left behind him (in his work) the entire world."[39] Here we see something of the purpose behind the *Mahābhārata*'s mind-boggling encyclopedic drive: it refuses to view itself as a bounded text; it is not a representation of the world; it *is* the world. And through the logic of its own frame structure (examined in detail below) that narrates the details of the epic's first two tellings, the text makes the point that wherever its story is told or heard *becomes* the *Mahābhārata*. Thus the text never really ends nor does it begin; existence *is* the *Mahābhārata*.[40]

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37. See Peter Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action in the Mahābhārata: A Study in the History of Ideas* (New Delhi: Munishiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2001), xxii. van Buitenen, in his critique of Georges Dumézil's Indo-European approach to the epic and Biardeau's Purāṇic one, writes that "neither shows great respect for, or even much interest in, the possible integrity of the *Mahābhārata* as a unique product in the growth of Indian civilization: the text seems fated to be relevant to anything but itself." J. A. B. van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*. Vol. 3, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 163.

38. 1.56.33; 18.5.38.

39. David Shulman, "Toward a Historical Poetics," 26.

40. Ibid., 26.

Another literary feature of the text that is closely related to its encyclopedic drive is its "riddle-question design." This text above all is a text that raises questions, imbues them with life-or-death import, and then refuses to answer any of them in a straightforward manner, if at all. Insightfully, J. A. B. van Buitenen writes, "The epic is a series of precisely stated problems imprecisely and therefore inconclusively resolved, with every resolution raising a new problem until the very end, when the question remains: whose is heaven and whose is hell?"[41] Many of the "problems" or riddle-questions that the *Mahābhārata* raises and never conclusively resolves revolve around two related issues: the power of human agency and the complexities of the moral life. To what extent do human beings have the freedom to make decisions and act, and to what extent are they bound like puppets on a string—a common motif in the *Mahābhārata*—to forces beyond their control, forces like time or fate? To what extent does being good and following the right course of action (i.e., following *dharma*) ensure happiness and well-being? If the path of *dharma* does not lead to happiness or perfection, or worse, leads to suffering, is it worth following? Precisely why, in spite of many characters' intentions to follow *dharma*, did events turn out in the disastrous way that they did? Who or what is responsible for the *Mahābhārata* war, the tragic devastation of the great Bhāratas, and the near annihilation of the world?[42] Questions such as these, which recur in ever-changing form, provide the text with its "coherence," which David Shulman refers to as "a coherence of doubt and ambiguous riddles."[43]

The *Mahābhārata* itself includes a story about why it contains so many riddles or "knots." A popular though probably late passage describes how the *Mahābhārata* was written down directly from the mouth of Vyāsa. Once upon a time, Vyāsa, the compiler of the Vedas, conceived the *Mahābhārata* in his mind and sought out Gaṇeśa, Lord of Obstacles, to

41. J. A. B. van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata: Book 2: The Book of the Assembly Hall; Book 3: The Book of the Forest*, Vol. 2 (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 29. Hiltebeitel points out that what van Buitenen describes is really a series of deferrals. See *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 277. Even so, these "deferrals" are not resolved. See Reich, "Ends and Closures in the *Mahābhārata*," 22.

42. Reich calls this the most problematic of all the unresolved questions in the epic. See "Ends and Closures in the *Mahābhārata*," 37.

43. Shulman, "Toward a Historical Poetics," 29. For a discussion of the distinction between a riddle and a *praśna*, or question, see Shulman, "The Yakṣa's Questions." For a discussion of *praśnas* in the *Mahābhārata*, see Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 240.

serve as his scribe.[44] Gaṇeśa agreed, but with one condition: that Vyāsa dictate his story without pause. Vyāsa consented, but with a condition of his own: Gaṇeśa had first to grasp the meaning of Vyāsa's verses before transcribing them. Gaṇeśa agreed and the recitation and writing began. Whenever Vyāsa needed time to think about what was to come next, he mysteriously wove "knots" or complicated passages into his composition in order to stump Gaṇeśa. This strategy gave Vyāsa ample time to compose many verses in his head. As a result, it is said that no one even today is able to penetrate this "very tightly woven" collection of verses because of the depth of their secret meaning.

Another distinctive—and innovative—feature of the *Mahābhārata* is its use of frame stories. I use the term "innovative" because Christopher Minkowski has argued that the *Mahābhārata* is the first work of literature to employ this device.[45] The text possesses an embedded structure of stories within stories. One story often leads to the telling of another so that they are embedded in a complex web of interlocking narratives, which exist at varying points in time. The effect is dizzying; one often feels that one has completely lost track of where one is in the grand scheme of the narrative. Further, the *Mahābhārata*'s frame stories are self-referential; they are stories about the telling and reception of another story.[46] The frame stories in the *Mahābhārata* tell us when, where, by whom, and to whom a particular story was told. Thus, audience reception is built into the design of the *Mahābhārata*. "Textualized audiences" are created whenever a character tells a story to another character.[47]Indeed, many of the epic's stories, sub-stories, and repetition of stories are woven together through questions asked by a built-in audience member of his or her narrator.

For example, the *Mahābhārata* contains two outer frames that introduce the narrators and the audience members of the first two tellings of

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44. For scholarship on Gaṇeśa's role as the *Mahābhārata*'s scribe, see Paul B. Courtright, *Gaṇeśa: Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 151–153.

45. See Christopher Z. Minkowski, "Janamejaya's *Sattra* and Ritual Structure," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109/3 (1989): 412. For scholarship on the framing device in the *Mahābhārata*, see Brian Black, "Eavesdropping on the Epic: Female Listeners in the *Mahābhārata*" in *Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata*, ed. Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black (New York: Routledge, 2007), 53–78; Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 92–130; Reich, "A Battlefield of a Text," 4–6, 56–64; and Minkowski, "Janamejaya's *Sattra*,"401–20.

46. Minkowski, "Janamejaya's *Sattra*," 402.

47. Black, "Eavesdropping," 57.

the epic.[48] The outermost frame—as well as the *Mahābhārata* itself—begins when Ugraśravas, an expert in telling stories about kings, meets a group of brahmins, headed by Śaunaka, who ask him to tell them the story of the *Mahābhārata*. Ugraśravas agrees and begins by recounting the story of where, when, and with whom he first heard the story of the great Bhāratas. This took place at King Janamejaya's snake sacrifice (Janamejaya is a descendant of the Bhāratas)[49] where Vaiśaṃpāyana told the story of the *Mahābhārata* to Janamejaya in the presence of the epic's ostensible author, Vyāsa.

This context, that of Janamejaya's snake sacrifice, is the inner frame story of the *Mahābhārata*. When Ugraśravas introduces Vaiśaṃpāyana's narration of the *Mahābhārata*, then Vaiśaṃpāyana's voice as narrator takes over; this is signaled by the words "Vaiśaṃpāyana *uvāca*" or "Vaiśaṃpāyana said."[50] Once it begins, the Vaiśaṃpāyana-Janamejaya frame story is carefully maintained throughout the epic.[51] At almost every transition in the story, the reader/listener is reminded of this frame because Janamejaya, an active participatory listener, often asks a question or requests elaboration of a story that Vaiśaṃpāyana has narrated.[52] Thus, Janamejaya's questions often prompt the direction of the story. The presence of the outermost Ugraśravas-Śaunaka frame is less pervasive. For the most part, Ugraśravas's presence as narrator is cited in the first fifty-four chapters of *The Book of the Beginning*. Once Vaiśaṃpāyana is introduced as the narrator, Ugraśravas is mentioned only rarely.[53]

The *Mahābhārata*'s framing technique does not exist only at the text's borders; it is pervasive throughout. For example, the four battle books, Books 6 through 9, have a frame story. In the frame of these books,

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48. Hiltebeitel adds a third frame, which he calls variously the outer/middle/cosmological frame. However, Hiltebeitel and I disagree on what constitutes a frame. I am using the term "frame" to refer to a story about the telling of another story, a story which, by definition, opens and closes the story which it frames. On the other hand, Hiltebeitel seems to use the term to refer to different levels of the narrative, these levels being "historical or genealogical" (his inner frame); cosmological; and authorial (his outermost frame). See Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 94, and Black, "Eavesdropping," 74n15 where he too takes issue with Hiltebeitel's definition of a frame.

49. He is Parikṣit's son and Arjuna's great grandson.

50. This takes place at 1.55.1.

51. Minkowski, "Janamejaya's Sattra," 403.

52. Ibid.

53. But not "never" as Minkowski suggests (Ibid., 405).

Saṃjaya narrates the events of the war to the oft-lamenting Dhṛtarāṣṭra.[54] Minkowski considers the Saṃjaya-Dhṛtarāṣṭra frame to be "the most highly elaborated of the frame stories" as well as the most "tense and emotional," since the lamenting Dhṛtarāṣṭra often blames his son Duryodhana for the war and Saṃjaya insists that Dhṛtarāṣṭra must face the fact that he (Dhṛtarāṣṭra) is to blame.[55]

Minkowski has called the *Mahābhārata*'s use of frame stories "an inalienable part of the *Mahābhārata*'s narrative identity."[56] This book argues that much of what the *Mahābhārata* "does" it achieves through its framing-embedding technique. The frame stories allow the text to foreground the significance of audience reception, since Janamejaya's questions in many cases drive the narrative. Further, these framing devices provide the text with the opportunity to present itself in specific ways. The epic not only begins by telling us when and where it was first told,[57] but it also tells us what it is about (i.e., *dharma*,[58] and "that which concerns the soul"[*adhyātma*]),[59] the merits of listening to it (i.e., to purify one's sins;[60] to cause one to never despair, even in dire situations [*na kṛcchreṣv avasīdati*])[61], and its genre (*kathā*, *purāṇa*, *ākhyāna*, *veda*, *śāstra*, etc.[62]). Third, the framing device gives the text the ability to manipulate time, a trajectory that will be explored in more depth in chapters 3 and 4.

A final distinctive feature of the *Mahābhārata*—its most powerful—is the relentless manner in which it tells its dark tale, "the most harrowing in world literature."[63] The *Mahābhārata* fashions its tale in such a manner that

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54. Thus V. B. Athavale calls the *Mahābhārata* "a triple dialogue." V. B. Athavale, "The Roles of Vyāsa, Sañjaya, Vaiśampāyaṇa and Sauti in the Kuru War Narration," *The Journal of the Ganganatha Jha Research Institute* 3/2 (1946), 121–141.

55. Minkowski, "Janamejaya's *Sattra*," 406. See chapter 3 for a more extensive discussion of this frame.

56. Ibid.

57. According to Minkowski, the story of the epic was first narrated "in its monumental form" at King Janamejaya's snake sacrifice. He bases this claim on 1.1.8–9. "Janamejaya's *Sattra*," 402.

58. 1.1.14.

59. 1.1.96.

60. 1.1.191.

61. 1.1.199.

62. 1.1.8–20.

63. Pollock, "The Mahabharata of Vyasa," 829.

it brings its audiences to the brink of meaninglessness and then, instead of receding from it, it toys with pushing them over the precipice. Take for example the fact that the eighteen days of the *Mahābhārata* war consume five entire books, or more than a quarter of the epic (making them longer than the entire *Iliad*). The blow-by-blow progression of the massive slaughter is narrated with painstaking detail, cataloguing the infinitely horrifying ways that the soldiers' lives are cut short and the human body can be torn apart, as well as just about every possible expression of human despair:

> Some were pierced by spears and some by battle-axes, and some were crushed by elephants and others were trampled by horses. Some were cut by car-wheels and some by sharp arrows, and they cried out everywhere for their relatives, O king. Others cried out for their sons, and others for their fathers and brothers. And their many entrails were scattered and their thighs were broken, O Bhārata. And others, with arms torn off and their sides split open were seen wailing. Thirsty, they desired to live, and others overwhelmed with thirst, with little strength, fell on the battlefield on the bare ground, and begged for water.[64]

The last violent episode of the battle, the night massacre, takes the slow, steady descent into horror to an entirely new and unprecedented level that morphs into the utterly macabre. Warriors no longer die with some modicum of dignity on the battlefield, but are slaughtered at night in their beds, weaponless, begging for their lives, groveling in the dirt; human violence here turns utterly bestial. *The Book of the Night Massacre* is followed by *The Book of the Women*. In this book the Kaurava women visit the battlefield after the war and behold the carnage. Here the audience witnesses the women gasp, shriek, wail, and drop to the earth as they happen upon the severed heads and limbs of their husbands, brothers, and fathers or as they see the ghouls or beasts of prey feasting upon the corpses of their loved ones. The *Mahābhārata* perennially delivers a "sucker-punch"—the crippling blow that rips away one's comforting blinders—and then, while one is still reeling, the epic does the unthinkable: it delivers another punch. It is relentless in this respect, in a manner that is unmatched in world literature. Perhaps this is why even today the text is not stored or read within a house for fear it will consume its inhabitants. As David Shulman notes,

64. 6.44.34–38.

one reads it outside, on one's porch, and not from beginning to end, "since that progression, too, is felt to be potentially disastrous."[65]

The Aesthetics of Suffering

As previously mentioned, one important way in which the *Mahābhārata* operates as a literary text is that it conveys meaning more through what it "does" than through what it says. By "what it does" I refer to the fact that its literary strategies are designed to "do" something to its audience. This book argues that the primary way the *Mahābhārata* does "what it does" is through the "aesthetics of suffering." The aesthetics of suffering, which is my articulation of the specific way the *Mahābhārata* works as a literary text, is made up of five components that work together to produce meaning in the text. These five components are (1) the concept of suffering, both as a central theme and an aesthetic principle, (2) narrative strategies, (3) the sensitive reader/receiver (*sahṛdaya*), (4) characters, and (5) conceptual categories. This section briefly discusses these five components and how they work together to encourage the audience to accept the epic's worldview, which centers on confronting the pervasive presence of suffering in the world.

With respect to the first component, the concept of suffering, the argument here is that one of the central themes as well as one of the predominant poetic principles guiding the inner momentum of the central narrative is suffering (*duḥkha*). To say that the *Mahābhārata* is largely about suffering is, in some sense, to state the obvious. The *Mahābhārata*, after all, tells the tale of a violent fratricidal war that comes very close to destroying the entire world. Virtually every character in the epic, good or bad, either suffers a violent death—often at the hands of a blood relative or lifelong friend—or survives the war and lives out his or her days overwhelmed by grief over the loss of loved ones.[66] Even so, surprisingly few studies have considered the *Mahābhārata* in this light.[67]

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65. Shulman, "Toward a Historical Poetics," 29.

66. Tamar C. Reich in her recent article "Ends and Closures in the *Mahābhārata*" discusses how characters in the last books of the epic struggle with their feelings of grief and guilt in terms of renunciation, sacrifices, and preoccupation with the afterlife (18–82).

67. Notable exceptions are Greg Bailey, "Suffering in the *Mahābhārata*: Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira" in *Suffering: Indian Perspectives*, ed. K. N. Tiwari (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), 38–60; Black, "Eavesdropping," 53–78; Reich, "Ends and Closures in the *Mahābhārata*; and Nicholas Sutton, *Religious Doctrines in the Mahābhārata* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000), 407–421.

However, the aim here is not simply to point out that the *Mahābhārata* focuses on the theme of suffering. This point needs to be underscored because to say that the *Mahābhārata* is about any one topic is to ignore how the epic, with its encyclopedic drive, resists reductive reading. The concern here is rather with the role that suffering plays as an aesthetic principle and with the "work" that it does as such. Specifically, this work entails "disorienting and reorienting" the audience's understanding of conceptual categories (such as *dharma*, fate, and time) as well as its relationship to many of the epic's principal characters (most significantly Yudhiṣṭhira).[68] A basic argument in this book is that when specific conceptual categories and/or characters are juxtaposed with instances of palpable suffering, these instances tend to explode our understanding of that category or character. This is especially true of *dharma* or characters closely linked to *dharma*, such as Yudhiṣṭhira and Kṛṣṇa. For example, as mentioned earlier, a fundamental question that the epic persistently raises is "Why is the dharmic path implicated in so much sorrow?"[69]

To bring together the idea of suffering/sorrow on the one hand and the creation and operation of a literary work on the other is a quintessentially Indian way of conceiving of literature. For example, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, considered by the tradition to be the "*ādi kāvya*" or very first poem, begins by describing itself and poetic expression in general as born of sorrow. Vālmīki, the epic's ostensible author, feels grief when he witnesses the slaying of a male bird and hears the laments of the bird's female partner. He then goes on to compose a work of literature (the story of Rāma) in *śloka* verse that largely is structured on the theme of sorrow (*śoka*), and the pun here is intentional.[70]

In the *Mahābhārata*, the principle of suffering does its aesthetic work through what I call the epic's "narrative strategies." Generally speaking, a narrative strategy is a set of instructions that a text deploys to guide its audiences.[71] I refer to those who allow themselves to be

68. According to Paul Ricoeur, disorientation is a powerful tool that a literary text deploys to stimulate active reading. *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 3:171.

69. Or, as Bailey puts it, "In the end the sole question remains—is *dharma* worth upholding if it can be maintained only at the cost of great suffering?" Bailey, "Suffering in the *Mahābhārata*," 55.

70. Barbara Stoler Miller, "The Original Poem: Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* and Indian Literary Values," *Literature East and West* 17 (1973): 163–169.

71. Hiltebeitel too argues that the text "trains its readers" or contains instructions for how it is to be read. See "On Reading Fitzgerald's Vyāsa," 248. See also James Hegarty, "Extracting the *Kathā-āmṛta*," 57.

guided by these instructions as the "sensitive reader/spectator" (in Sanskrit literary theory *sahṛdaya*; see chapter 1). To be more specific, a narrative strategy refers to the dynamic interaction between the form and the content of the text, and its impact on the sensitive reader. Significantly, there are numerous instances where form undermines or "ruptures" content. Here meaning proceeds from the asymmetric relation between the two and the way in which this impacts the reader or listener.[72] A helpful description of the kind of work that this asymmetrical relation "does" comes, surprisingly enough, from the musician Philip Glass. He describes film-music art (or composing musical scores for film) as "observing accurately the distance between the image and the music." Alex Ross elaborates: "In other words, instead of trying to make image and music serve the same ends, you play one against the other, letting the disparity become an emotional experience in itself."[73] Similarly, one way in which the narrative strategies in the *Mahābhārata* function is to create a distance between the image (or content) and the telling (or form), and the emotional experience comes from the disjuncture between the two.

The "aesthetics of suffering" refers to the ways in which the epic's narrative strategies use the theme of suffering to impact the sensitive reader in specific ways that are ethically significant. It has two literary spheres in which it operates: (1) characters and (2) conceptual categories. The central characters in the *Mahābhārata* are flawed human beings, torn by conflict and confused by reality; their frailties and confusions often lead them into various predicaments that are marked by sorrow and grief. Indeed, the central characters tend to find themselves in one of two contexts vis-à-vis the aesthetics of suffering. The first is situations that involve dilemmas where characters must make difficult decisions the consequences of which entail the potential for enormous suffering (e.g., Yudhiṣṭhira's

72. For a strikingly similar insight, see K. Ayyappa Paniker, *Indian Narratology* (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts: Sterling Publishers, 2003), 5. Paniker identifies "interiorization" as one of eight main features of Indian narratology. Interiorization "is the processs by which a distinction, a contrast, or even a contradiction is effected between the surface features of a text and its internal essence." It is the notion that "there is in a text something like a counter-text."

73. Alex Ross, "Sound and Vision: Glass's 'Koyaanisqatsi' and the art of film scoring," *The New Yorker*, June 27, 2005, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/06/27/050627crmu_music.?currentPage=all (accessed November 1, 2008).

decision to accept the invitation to the game of dice).[74] Here the character in question, no matter how virtuous, inevitably makes a bad decision or reacts to the situation in a way that makes matters exponentially worse. The second is situations that take place after the bad decisions have been made and the catastrophe has occurred and characters are reeling with sorrow (e.g., Dhṛtarāṣṭra's post-war malaise).

Generally speaking, four character types operate in these two situations: (1) the victim of suffering—characters who experience pain either physically or psychologically and who often express their despair by lamenting; (2) the agent of suffering—those who cause others to suffer, often unwittingly, as a result of bad decisions; (3) the passive witness to suffering—those who observe others in distressful situations and do nothing;[75] and (4) the advisor against grief—those wise counselors who attempt to dispel the despair of others. For the most part, the principal characters in the epic fall into more than one of these categories.[76] Yudhiṣṭhira, for example, is a victim, a passive witness, and potentially an agent of suffering (see chapter 2).

In these two situational contexts (i.e., situations in which characters find themselves involved in dilemmas or catastrophes), the aesthetics of suffering works primarily in two ways. The first is to "disorient" any unilateral understanding of so-called virtuous characters and thereby any "easy," "comfortable" understanding of them as moral guides. The second is to reorient the audience to a new way of seeing the world through the

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74. Shulman ("Toward a Historical Poetics," 24) characterizes the *Mahābhārata* as a "poetics of dilemma." See also Bimal Krishna Matilal, ed., *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989) for scholarship on dilemmas in the *Mahābhārata*. Daniel H. H. Ingalls argues that what makes the *Mahābhārata* a fascinating and enthralling work of literature is not its encyclopedic nature but its representation of a series of moral problems as well as the various human responses to them. Ingalls, "*Dharma* and *Mokṣa*," *Philosophy East and West*, 7 (1957): 41–48.

75. A. K. Ramanujan argues that the cast of characters in the epic can be divided into actors and watchers; see "Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*," 439.

76. For an example of a character typology in Sanskrit literary theory, see *The Nāṭyaśāstra: A Treatise on Hindu Dramaturgy and Histrionics, Ascribed to Bharata Muni*, trans. Manmohan Gosh (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1950), 2: 201–213. Bharata distinguishes between three kinds of male and female characters: the low; middle; and high, from less to more virtuous. More significantly, he defines heroes and heroines as those who experience misfortune, and they are classified according to their responses to distressful situations. Thus, the four classes of heroes are the self-controlled and vehement, the self-controlled and light-hearted, the self-controlled and exalted, and the self-controlled and calm. The four classes of heroines are the self-controlled, the light-hearted, the exalted, and the modest.

lens of the epic's many "arguments against grief," which are delivered when a character is lamenting the sudden, tragic death of a loved one. The advisers against grief urge the lamenters to overcome their personal sorrow through understanding the fact that all creatures that have existed and will exist experience suffering. The implication here is that to move beyond one's personal suffering, one has to "see" and accept the fact of universal suffering. A thorough exploration of the "argument against grief" as a sub-genre in the *Mahābhārata* and the immense ethical work that it does will be explored in chapters 3 and 4.

With respect to the second sphere, the sphere of conceptual categories, the aesthetics of suffering refers to the way the narrative strategies manipulate the sensitive reader/spectator's hopes, desires, and expectations regarding central concepts in the epic largely, but not exclusively, by bringing the issue of suffering to the foreground at key strategic moments. Often what is at stake is the validity and reliability of specific conceptual categories that structure how the reader/spectator understands the world of the text—categories such as time, fate, human exertion, heaven, hell, god, and—most importantly—*dharma*. By using instances of palpable suffering to call into question the efficacy of specific conceptual categories (such as the way *dharma* is called into question in the dicing scene, see chapter 2), the epic's narrative strategies are able to reach out and radically disorient the sensitive reader or spectator by rupturing his or her understanding of these categories. Through this process the epic's strategies are then able to reorient the audience to a new way of seeing and hence understanding the world. The "disorienting/reorienting process" is ethically significant because the categories that these strategies are designed to impact are inextricably linked to the moral life. Indeed, what unites most if not all these categories is that they are frequently called upon to provide a rationale for the existence of suffering. For example, when characters lament the death of a loved one, they often blame their loss on time, fate, the gods, and/or karma (less frequently), or they comfort themselves with the thought that the deceased will now enjoy heaven (see chapters 4 and 5). In this context, then, the categories are summoned to explain, justify, or make suffering palatable. The work of the aesthetics of suffering, however, is to show that these categories—or specific ways of understanding these categories—fail to make suffering comprehensible or palatable. The task is, therefore, to confront the reality of suffering without using these categories as conceptual crutches.

Perhaps the most important category in this regard is *dharma*. The illusion under which many characters in the epic operate is that *dharma* will protect them from suffering. The reality in the world of the text is that nothing protects one from suffering. This is driven home predominantly through the presentation of fate and time in the epic, as well as through the epic's narrative strategies of "rupture" (i.e., those aspects of the text that create holes or gaps in literal meaning).[77] This book suggests that what the text is ultimately "doing" through disorienting this understanding of *dharma* is reorienting its audiences to a deeper understanding of *dharma*, one that is divested of all self-oriented pretenses. One would, according to this understanding of the concept, perform *dharma* for the sake of nothing.

Through its aesthetics of suffering the *Mahābhārata* makes a threefold "argument" about the importance of confronting the fact of suffering, recognizing the forces that cause it and apprehending the appropriate emotional and psychological responses that allow one to move beyond it. The term "argument" is used loosely here because the epic's aesthetics of suffering is not attempting to forcefully persuade so much as to "disorient and reorient" the sensitive reader toward deeper knowledge and insight. The purpose of this disorientation/reorientation process is to refigure the way the audience sees and hence responds to the world.[78] Indeed, the transformative impact of the audience's refiguration has epistemological consequences. The discovery of truth (i.e., the insights generated by the text's aesthetics of suffering) involves an epistemological shift, a radically new orientation to the world.

The project of refiguring the sensitive reader/spectator's understanding of suffering—and by extension refiguring their understanding of the world—is primarily ethical (and in the classical South Asian context religion and ethics are inextricably linked; indeed what we think of as "religion" in this context was largely defined as "a practical way of dealing with suffering").[79] Ethics here is conceived as the threefold task of how to confront,

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77. For a slightly different application of the concept of rupture to the epic, see David Gitomer, "King Duryodhana: The *Mahābhārata* Discourse of Sinning and Virtue in Epic and Drama," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 112/2 (1992): 225, 232. See also Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 5.

78. "Refiguration" here refers to "the healing and transformative potential of narratives." See Charles Hallisey and Anne Hanson, "Narrative, Sub-ethics and the Moral Life: Some Evidence from Theravāda Buddhism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24/2 (1996): 308. Refiguration here refers to "the healing and transformative potential of narratives."

79. Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 64.

respond to, and thus move beyond suffering.[80] "Confronting suffering," refers to the task of seeing suffering as an objective fact. The *Mahābhārata's* aesthetics devotes a tremendous amount of attention to scenes of enormous sorrow and grieving (e.g., Draupadī's abuse in the dicing scene;[81] the cruel slaying of Abhimanyu and its impact on Arjuna, Yudhiṣṭhira, Subhadrā, and others;[82] the grieving of the women in *The Book of the Women*,[83] etc.). In these scenes, the epic's narrative strategies encourage the sensitive reader/spectator to face the vulnerability of all human beings to enormous suffering. The fact that even the most virtuous characters suffer forces the audience to face the fact that nothing, not even *dharma*, offers protection.

"Confronting suffering" also involves cultivating a clear sense of the factors that contribute to human misery. The epic explores a plethora of potential causes of sorrow (e.g., fate, time, God/gods, human exertion), but we learn the most about the causes of sorrow through watching characters as they triumph and fail—particularly as they fail. Often in these contexts the narrative voice focuses on the quality of a character's state of mind and/or ability to see. Indeed, the quality of one's mind (*manas, mati*) or one's intelligence (*buddhi*) receives much attention in the *Mahābhārata*. Characters are often described as losing their wits to grief, to jealousy (Duryodhana is the prime example of this in the episode of the dice game), and anger (primarily during the war, during which relatives and close friends do not "know" one another and thus kill one another[84]). Two very important passages related to this point are Bhīma's speech to Yudhiṣṭhira at 12.16.21–25 and Kṛṣṇa's speech to Yudhiṣṭhira at 14.12.1–14. Both Bhīma and Kṛṣṇa, in an effort to persuade Yudhiṣṭhira to stop grieving and agree to rule, tell him that the battle he now must wage is one with his mind (*manas*). According to Bhīma, Yudhiṣṭhira's "battle" involves accepting "the coming and going of creatures" (*bhūtānām āgatiṃ gatim*), or the transitory nature of life.

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80. Bimal Krishna Matilal notes the absence of moral philosophical thinking in the Indian philosophical tradition and locates it in the Indian epics, the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*. Bimal Krishna Matilal, "Moral Dilemmas: Insights from the Indian Epics," in *Ethics and Epics*: *The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal*, ed. Jonardon Ganeri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 22–23.

81. 2.15–64.

82. 7.32–75.

83. 11.16–26.

84. See, for example, 6.44.2–3.

"Responding to suffering," refers to the task of reacting to catastrophic situations with a calm mind and clear vision. Very few characters in the *Mahābhārata* respond in such a manner. Instead, characters in such situations are often overwhelmed by powerful emotions and, as a result, they lose control of their senses. Consequently, they make reckless decisions that simply lead to more suffering. By showing its audiences the disastrous consequences of these inappropriate responses, the *Mahābhārata* presents a powerful and palpable argument for why it is necessary, even imperative, to respond to suffering with calmness and clarity.

"Moving beyond suffering" refers to the techniques, solutions, and even ways of viewing the world that would help one overcome the tendency to succumb to sorrow. The didactic portions of the text contain many discussions of techniques and virtues that are said to bring an end to psychological sorrow—techniques such as mental restraint and virtues such as contentment and tranquility.[85] The content of these discussions intersect in important ways with the epic's arguments against grief referred to above. The point of many of the epic's arguments against grief is to shift the focus of victims of suffering from the narrow lens of their own particular situation to the level of the experience of suffering of all living creatures. Such an epistemological shift is meant to snap lamenters out of their despair by distancing them from their own personal situation and opening up their eyes to the condition of all living creatures (i.e., universal suffering). Such a shift is also meant to encourage a transformation of their emotional responses from grief and self-pity to emotions that are closely linked to self-mastery and restraint, such as stoic acceptance, contentment, and tranquility.[86]

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85. For statements on the concept of contentment in the *Mahabhārata*, see, for example, Śaunaka's discourse to Yudhiṣṭhira at the beginning of *The Book of the Forest* (3.2.15–3.3.1); the discussion of the hunter in "The Colloquy of the Brahmin and the Hunter," a story told by Mārkaṇḍeya in *The Book of the Forest* (3.198.1–3.207.2); and Vidura's "argument against grief" to Dhṛtarāṣṭra after the Kaurava defeat in *The Book of the Women* (11.3.1–7.20.) Related to the notion of contentment is Saṃjaya's advice to Dhṛtarāṣṭra as he narrates the events of the war to him: to refrain from grief and remain calm and in control of his mind (5.156.13 and 6.16.6). Arti Dhand argues that equanimity is the overarching worldview of the epic. See "The Subversive Nature of Virtue in the *Mahābhārata*: A Tale About Women, Smelly Ascetics, and God," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 72/1 (2004), 47.

86. Ingalls proposes that the highest virtue in the epic is discipline: "The virtue of virtues in the Sanskrit epic is what one might call discipline. The favorite Sanskrit word is *yoga*, putting oneself under the yoke, a personal training . . . One disciples the senses by the mind, the mind by the judgment, judgment by the very self. One must always be on the lookout; one must do nothing carelessly." Ingalls, "*Dharma* and *Mokṣa*," 44.

Just as these advisors encourage, even enjoin, victims of suffering to overcome their grief and despair, this book argues that the *Mahābhārata* through its aesthetics of suffering provides an extended "argument" in narrative form on the perils of grief and other inappropriate responses to catastrophic situations. Its goal is to "teach" its audiences how to meet tragedy and misfortune with a tranquil eye so that they may never lose their minds to grief, despair, and other tumultuous emotions that would blind them from seeing the direct route out of the catastrophe. Just as Saṃjaya provides instructions for how Dhṛtarāṣṭra should listen to his narration of the blow-by-blow progression of the war (that Dhṛtarāṣṭra should listen but not grieve), so too does the epic through the aesthetics of suffering instruct us not to grieve in the face of the colossal theater of human suffering that takes place in the central narrative, a suffering that is largely staged through the drama of the Pāṇḍavas, but moves outward from the battle books to overtake virtually every character in the epic. Indeed, Ugraśravas, one of the principal narrators of the epic, declares that after listening to the *Mahābhārata*, one will never despair, even in dire situations.[87]

By arguing that one of the *Mahābhārata*'s overarching tasks is to refigure the audience's understanding of suffering and thus of the world, this book seeks to de-center discussion of ethics in the *Mahābhārata* from the topic of *dharma* and re-center it on the issue of suffering and its relationship to *dharma*. Ultimately this book argues that this relationship is one of the overarching preoccupations of the epic and, to a large extent, drives the internal momentum of the central narrative.[88]

Two Central Concepts: Dharma *and* Duḥkha

Because this book argues that many of the *Mahābhārata's* darkest and most enigmatic "riddle-questions" concern the troubling points of contact between *dharma* and *duḥkha*, or suffering, and indeed are centered on the question of the nature of the relationship between these two concepts, it is worth briefly introducing the range of definitions of both terms in the epic and their place and points of contact in the history of ideas of premodern India.

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87. 1.1.199.

88. Greg Bailey agrees; he writes, "Where notions of suffering are expressed most clearly in the *Mahābhārata*, questions about *dharma* and fate are usually in the background." "Suffering in the *Mahābhārata,*" 40.

Dharma

Dharma is perhaps the most important and ubiquitous concept in the history of South Asian religions. It is central not only in Brahmanical/Hindu traditions but also in Buddhist and Jain traditions as well. Because the term has been used in a bewildering variety of ways, it has no single semantic equivalent in English. In various contexts the word may mean law, justice, custom, morality, ethics, religion, duty, nature, or virtue. This semantic range seems to underline links between ways of living, ways of seeing, and ways of relating to life's ultimate issues.[89]

Patrick Olivelle has recently argued that while the term *dharma* originated in the Vedic context, it was part of a specialized vocabulary associated with royalty (particularly in the middle and late Vedic context).[90] The term became central to Brahmanical religious vocabulary only after it had been borrowed by the Buddha to locate and articulate his new religion.[91] In the Buddhist context the term *dharma* was ethicized and came to define the good and righteous "Buddhist" life. After its Buddhist appropriation, the term was then reappropriated by the Brahmanical tradition and employed as a central religious and ethical category, in part in an effort to respond to the Buddhist challenge.[92]

According to Olivelle's view, the concept of *dharma* was on the front lines of the intellectual debates of the post-Vedic to early classical period in ancient India. This period was marked not only by the rise of Buddhism (as well as Jainism), but also by the decline of the *śrauta* sacrifice, the transition from "Brahmanism" to what we now refer to as "Hinduism" and the rapid growth of "*dharma* literature," that is, literature in which *dharma* is the central concept under consideration.[93] Within the Brahmanical tradition, the term "*dharma* literature" refers primarily to the *Dharma Sūtras*, the *Dharma Śāstras*, and the epics (the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*).

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89. Bimal Krishna Matilal, "Elusiveness and Ambiguity in Dharma-Ethics" in *Ethics and Epics: The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal*, ed. Jonardon Ganeri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 37.

90. Patrick Olivelle, "The Semantic History of Dharma the Middle and Late Vedic Periods," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32/5–6 (2004): 503.

91. Ibid., 504.

92. Ibid., 506.

93. Alf Hiltebeitel, *Dharma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), 5–6. See also Hiltebeitel's recently published expanded book on this subject, entitled *Dharma: Its Early History in Law, Religion, and Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Alf Hiltebeitel has recently pointed out that once *dharma* became a flourishing literary topic in classical India, a division emerged between texts that treated *dharma* primarily as a legal matter (the *Dharma Sūtras*, *Śāstras*) and ones that explored it predominantly through narrative (the epics). This "legislative/narrative" divide also corresponded to a division between texts that attempted to assert *dharma's* clarity, order, and perfection (the legal texts) and those that emphasized its subtlety, ambiguity, and profundity (the narrative texts), although Hiltebeitel is careful to point out that single texts can be expected to hold these tensions within themselves and cannot be expected to have just one view of *dharma*.[94]

In the *Dharma Sūtras*, *dharma* is an encompassing term for ritual, social, and moral norms.[95] These short treatises written in aphoristic prose are primarily concerned with the rules of conduct that regulated the *varṇas* (social classes) and *āśramas* (life stages). The *Dharma Śāstras*, or extended treatises on the nature of *dharma* written in verse, consolidate and further elaborate upon the rules of conduct as established in the *Dharma Śūtras*. By far the most celebrated of the *Dharma Śāstras* is the *Mānava Dharma Śāstra* (first to second centuries CE), often translated as "The Laws of Manu." One of the most significant innovations in *The Laws of Manu* is the addition of a fourth source of *dharma* beyond the three mentioned in the *Dharma Sūtras*. In the *Dharma Sūtras* the three sources of *dharma* are: revelation, texts composed by the learned who have inferred what is not explicitly stated in revelation, and the practices of learned people. To this list *The Laws of Manu* adds personal conscience or "what is pleasing to oneself" (2.6). This addition introduces the important idea that *dharma* involves not only following a list of obligations but also the development of insight.

What is worth noting about the use of the term *dharma* in the *Dharma Sūtras* and *Śāstras* is that, to a large extent, it is restricted to rules of behavior according to strict Brahmanical norms. Over a period of time, however, there was an expansion in the application of the word, a process most

94. Hiltebeitel, *Dharma*, 10. Hiltebeitel also points out that the idea of the subtle nature of *dharma* appears in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*. In Death's house when Naciketas asks to know whether a man exists after death or not, Death first tells him to ask something else, since "it's a subtle dharma." Hiltebeitel, *Dharma*, 32.

95. For a good overview of the development of the concept of *dharma* in the Hindu traditions, see Barbara A. Holdrege, "Dharma," in *The Hindu World*, ed. Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby (New York: Routledge, 2004), 213–248.

likely catalyzed by the rise of renunciant movements around the fifth century BCE. These movements represented a new set of values that challenged the idea that brahmin ritual provided the only way to religious fulfillment. The old goal of sacrificial and social behavior, heaven, was superseded by a new goal: liberation from the world into which one was continually reborn. Further, the ideal of *ahiṃsā*, noninjury, a central tenet of all renunciant traditions, is noteworthy because it was a virtue considered to be applicable to all human beings and not dependent upon one's class or life stage.[96]

The *Mahābhārata* was composed during this turbulent period, a fact that helps explain why the depiction of *dharma* in the epic is "varied and elusive" and why its definition is often under contestation both "explicitly and implicitly."[97] While the epic does contain passages that describe *dharma* in strikingly legalistic terms, many of the narrative passages seem to call into question the idea that *dharma* is codifiable, suggesting instead that *dharma* is subtle and may be understood only by deep insight.[98] This view of *dharma* is reflected in Yudhiṣṭhira's well-known statement, "The truth of *dharma* lies hidden in a secret cave (*dharmasya tattvaṃ nihitaṃ guhāyāṃ*)."[99]

Recently James Fitzgerald has argued that there are two predominant uses of the term in the *Mahābhārata* that reflect a transition corresponding to the historical shift from the ritual ethics of meritorious deeds as represented predominantly in the *Dharma Sūtras* and *Śāstras* to the newer yoga/renunciant-ethics of refining one's self (i.e., cultivating virtue).[100] *Dharma* in the first sense, according to Fitzgerald, is duty or righteousness, the way of conducting one's life so as to achieve happiness on earth and heaven after death. Here, one acts in accordance with *dharma* (i.e., the *dharma* of one's stage in life and one's class) with the awareness that one's

96. For an excellent discussion of the development of the term *dharma* during the time period of the composition of the *Mahābhārata*, see Bowles, *Dharma, Disorder, and the Political in Ancient India*, 81–132.

97. James L. Fitzgerald, "Dharma and Its Translation in the *Mahābhārata*," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32/5–6 (2004): 671.

98. Sutton, *Religious Doctrines in the Mahābhārata*, 294.

99. 3.313.117 in Ramachandra Kinjawadekar, ed., *Mahābhāratam with the Commentary of Nīlakaṇṭha* (Poona: Chitrashala Press, 1923–33).

100. James Fitzgerald, trans., *The Mahābhārata, Volume 7: Book 11: The Book of the Women; Book 12: The Book of Peace, Part 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 104.

actions will accrue positive or negative results. *Dharma* in the second sense refers to the overcoming of all attitudes that are oriented toward personal goals and merit. In this context, *dharma* focuses on the virtues of mental purity, self-disciple, patience, truthfulness, tranquility, and, significantly, the ability to refrain from succumbing to grief. Chief among all the virtues, according to this second definition of *dharma*, are harmlessness, *ahiṃsā*, causing no pain or suffering to any sensitive creature, and *ānṛśamsya*, lack of cruelty.[101]

As Fitzgerald notes, these two senses of *dharma* essentially contradict one another because one is predicated upon the desire for some great good (in the end heaven—the ultimate "protection" against suffering) and the other seeks to expunge all desire (i.e., to gain liberation or *mokṣa*).[102] And, in Fitzgerald's view, resolving the tension between these contradictory senses of *dharma* constituted the "spiritual force" that drove some brahmins to create the *Mahābhārata*.

Implicit in Fitzgerald's formulation of the tension between these two types of *dharma* is the problem of universal suffering. In many respects, suffering is the engine that drives the logic of Fitzgerald's second sense of *dharma*, since it pivots on the twin aspirations of freeing oneself from suffering (by being able to remain tranquil and not grieve) and refraining from causing suffering to others (*ahiṃsā*).[103] Furthermore, the problem of universal suffering renders the first sense of *dharma*, which is built on the egocentric structure of acting in accordance with one's duty for the sake of good results, untenable. Why? In this transient world (a dominant worldview in this period as will be discussed below), acting in accordance with *dharma* out of desire for any reward (including heaven) will only lead to sorrow since any such reward is by nature transitory, and the loss of it will result in grief and despair. Thus *dharma* in Fitzgerald's first sense becomes implicated in—or more precisely perpetuates—the problem of suffering.

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101. See Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 177–214, and Mukund Lath, "The Concept of *Ānṛśaṃsya* in the *Mahābhārata*," in *The Mahābhārata Revisited*, ed. R. N. Dandekar (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1990), 113–119.

102. Fitzgerald, *The Mahābhārata, Volume* 7, 104.

103. *Dharma* and *duḥkha* are clearly linked in the early Buddhist texts such as the *Dīgha Nīkāya*. Consider, for example, the following quotation: "And when the Lord knew that Pokkharasāti's mind was ready, pliable, free from hindrances, joyful and calm, then he preached a sermon on *dhamma* in brief: on suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path." As cited in Hiltebeitel, *Dharma*, 40.

This book argues that the *Mahābhārata* provides an "aesthetic" argument for the untenability of the first sense of *dharma*. The central narrative foregrounds the issue of suffering to such an extent that it "saturates" most if not all instances of this understanding of *dharma* and makes such a vision of ethics defensible only if radically stripped of all desire. The problem is not only that desire leads to personal suffering, as articulated above, but because—as the *Mahābhārata* argues time and again—grief due to loss stupefies the mind and causes one to make decisions and take actions that unleash further suffering in the world. The suffering of the individual leads to exponential suffering in the world, and *dharma* in Fitzgerald's first sense, as the *Mahābhārata* argues, is implicated and indeed feeds into this problem.[104]

Duḥkha

Many Sanskrit terms are employed in the *Mahābhārata* to refer to suffering. These include *duḥkha* (sorrow, grief, difficulty),[105] *śoka* (grief, distress, lamentation, wailing, deep anguish),[106] *ārti* (distress, affliction, suffering),[107] *durmanas* (troubled in mind, dispirited, sad),[108] *vimanas* (out of one's senses, downcast, disconsolate),[109] and adjectives, nouns, and verbs formed from the roots √*dah* (to burn, scorch, consume, destroy, pain, torment, distress, grieve)[110] and √*tap* (to shine, be hot, suffer pain, hurt, injure, torment, mortify the body).[111] Victims of suffering are often described as being perplexed (*vimohita*), stupefied (*mūrchita*), overwhelmed (*samanvita*), flooded (*samabhi √plu*), tormented (*ardita*), emaciated (*karśita*), burning (*pradīpta*), or out

104. The "argument" that *dharma* is viable as an ethical category if and only if it is stripped of all desire for fruits is very close to Kṛṣṇa's argument for desireless action (*niṣkāmakarma*) in the *Bhagavadgītā*—that is, acting in the world according to *dharma*, but acting without desire for results.

105. Vaman Shivaram Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Kyoto: Rinsen Book Company, 2003), 319.

106. Ibid., 1669.

107. Ibid., 355.

108. Ibid., 322.

109. Arthur Anthony Macdonell, *A Practical Sanskrit Dictionary* (New Delhi: Munishiram Manoharlal, 2003), 287.

110. Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 806.

111. Ibid., 760.

of their minds (*upahatacitta*, *vyākulacetana*) with suffering and sorrow.[112] They often fall to the earth, shake, lose their senses, are barely conscious, cry, hiss, and/or shriek violently.

When characters describe their own suffering, they often emphasize the fact that their minds are overwhelmed and that they are therefore confused or perplexed by the experience. For example, when Dhṛtarāṣṭra learns of the news of the death of Duryodhana and the defeat of his army, he tells Saṃjaya that his mind (*manas*) "seems unsteady" (*vihvalatīva*) and that he cannot recover (*na upa√labh*) his wits (*saṃjñām*).[113] Arjuna, "whose mind is agitated with grief" (*śokasaṃvignamānaḥ*) in the opening chapters of the *Bhagavadgītā* over the prospect of having to kill his kinsmen, tells Kṛṣṇa that his mind (*manas*) seems to whirl (*bhramatīva*).[114] Gāndhārī, reeling from the pain that she feels over the death of her sons, tells Kṛṣṇa that her mind (*manas*) "is almost reeling" (*vihvalatīva*).[115] The fact that

112. For example, when the Pāṇḍavas are forced to renounce their kingdom and enter the forest, Yudhiṣṭhira describes his brothers as "perplexed by the sorrows that spring from their sufferings" (*śokajair duḥkhair . . . vimohitāḥ*) (3.2.9). Arjuna's "mind is anguished with grief" (*śokasaṃvignamānasaḥ*) when he realizes he must kill his family members in battle (6.23.47). Throughout the war and especially in its aftermath countless characters are overwhelmed with sorrow over the deaths of their fathers, brothers, teachers, and sons. Aśvatthāman is described as "completely filled with grief and sorrow" (*duḥkhaśokasamanvitaḥ*) and "burning with grief like a fire that is blazing" (*dahyamānas tu śokena pradīptenāgninā yathā*) over the killing of his father, Droṇa, and the particularly dishonorable way it was carried out. (10.3.1–2). When Draupadī learns of the slaughter of her sons, her countenance (*vadanam*) is "emaciated with sorrow" (*śokakarśitam*) and she is "tormented by grief" (*sokārtā*). Yudhiṣṭhira is "filled with grief for his sons" (*putraśokasamanvitaḥ*) and "barely conscious" (*visaṃjñaḥ*) (10.11.6–7; 10.10.7, 10.10.30). When the Kuru women learn of the defeat of their army, they are described as "out of their minds with grief" (*śokenābhyāhatajñānāḥ*) and when they go to the battlefield seeking the remains of their sons, fathers, and brothers, they are "stricken with pain" (*duḥkhārtāḥ*) (11.9.14 and 11.16.14). Yudhiṣṭhira, falling into a postwar malaise, is described as "withered by grief" (*śokakarśitaḥ*) and "having a mind bewildered with grief" (*śokavyākulacetanaḥ*) (12.7.1–2). Arjuna describes Yudhiṣṭhira at this point as "drowning in an ocean of grief" (*śokārṇave magnaḥ*) (12.29.2). The Pāṇḍavas are "destroyed by sorrow and grief" (*duḥkhaśokasamāhatāḥ*) when their mother, Kuntī, abandons them for the forest, and when they learn of the slaughter of the Vṛṣṇis and the death of Kṛṣṇa, they are "filled with grief and sorrow"(*duḥkhaśokasamanvitāḥ*) and despondent (*viṣaṇṇāḥ*) (15.28.1 and 16.1.11). When Arjuna witnesses his twin brothers and Draupadī fall to their deaths in the epic's penultimate book, he "burns with grief" (*śokasaṃtaptaḥ*) (17.2.18). And Yudhiṣṭhira, realizing that the voices he hears in hell begging him to stay to ease their suffering belong to his brothers and wife, is described as "completely filled with sorrow and grief" (*duḥkhaśokasamāviṣṭaḥ*) and "one whose senses are confused by anxiety" (*cintāvyākulitendriyaḥ*) (18.2.49).

113. 1.1.159.

114. 6.23.30.

115. 11.13.12.

characters often describe their own experience of suffering in this manner underscores the epic's basic point that once one succumbs to sorrow, one loses control of one's mind and is no longer able to "see" a situation clearly and make good decisions.[116] Indeed, many actions that are undertaken by the confused grief-stricken in an effort to quell the "burning" of their grief further their own suffering and the sorrow of all the characters in the epic, a phenomenon clearly demonstrated by Aśvatthāman's desperate actions in *The Book of the Night Massacre*. Aśvatthāman (a Kaurava), in order to extinguish his own grief over the dishonorable way his father Droṇa was killed, sneaks into the Pāṇḍava camp at night and slays all the surviving warriors while they are sleeping, an act that wins him eternal ignominy and leads a devastated Yudhiṣṭhira to declare in perhaps the most despairing statement in the entire epic that the Pāṇḍavas' hard-won victory at such a mind-boggling cost was in truth a crippling defeat.[117]

Victims of sorrow in the *Mahābhārata* are often advised by wise counselors who urge them to let go of their grief. Several recurring ideas are expressed in these "arguments against grief." First is the notion that suffering is a condition to which all living beings are subject because time, or the transitory nature of life, is the root of everything.[118] Sorrow caused by the transitory nature of existence should be avoided because it leads to confusion, madness, inaction, and therefore further sorrow. Thus Vidura says to Dhṛtarāṣṭra:

> Grief destroys beauty, grief destroys strength, grief destroys wisdom, from grief one acquires disease. Nothing is gained from sorrow; the body suffers and one's enemies rejoice. Do not let your mind turn to sorrow.[119]

The means to move beyond suffering, according to many of these wise advisors, is acceptance of the transitory nature of life, an acceptance that entails greeting death and impermanence with a calm and controlled mind, in short with tranquility (*saṃtoṣa*, *praśānti*). Thus, as already mentioned,

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116. For a discussion of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's madness (*unmāda*) in the context of his grief over the loss of his sons and kingdom, see J. P. Sinha, *The Mahābhārata: A Literary Study* (New Delhi: Meharchand Lachhmandas, 1977), 81.

117. 10.10.9–14.

118. See, for example, Saṃjaya's statements to Yudhiṣṭhira at 5.27.3.

119. 5.36.42–43.

when Yudhiṣṭhira is unable to rise above his grief after the war Bhīma tells him that the real battle that faces him is with his mind, a battle that he must face alone and fight singlehandedly.[120] The contented person is described as "that person who greets everything with equanimity, who is not troublesome, who speaks truthfully, and who is indifferent to worldly objects."[121] Such persons not only move beyond sorrow but they conduct themselves in a manner that ensures that they will not bring harm or sorrow to others because they have full mental control.

Two important and related distinctions are embedded in the *Mahābhārata's* didactic discussions as well as its literary representations of suffering. The first is the distinction between physical and mental suffering. While both types of suffering are discussed in the epic,[122] emphasis, as has been suggested, is given to mental suffering, particularly in terms of locating both the source and the remedy for human sorrow.[123] Second is the distinction between "reflexive" (i.e., self-directed) and "transitive" (i.e., other-directed) suffering. The depiction of suffering in the *Mahābhārata* reveals the close alliance between these two phenomena. Once a person succumbs to mental despair (i.e,. self-directed suffering), one literally loses one's mind and makes decisions and takes actions that have disastrous consequences both for oneself and for others, thus unleashing further suffering (i.e., transitive suffering).

The *Mahābhārata* did not develop its ideas about, and its intense preoccupation with, suffering, its causes, and the means to move beyond it, in a vacuum. As B. K. Matilal notes, "Almost all Indian philosophical and religious systems start with apparently a very similar thesis of universal suffering, *sarvaṃ duḥkham*."[124] "All is suffering to the sage" writes Patañjali at the beginning of his *Yoga Sūtra* (a text composed sometime between 100 BCE and 400 CE, but most likely containing ideas that circulated much earlier) echoing what Eliade calls "a leitmotiv of all post-Upanisadic

120. 12.16.21–25.

121. 12.171.2–3.

122. See Śaunaka's discourse to Yudhiṣṭhira at 3.2.15–3.3.1.

123. See, for example, Bhīma's speech to Yudhiṣṭhira at 12.16.1–17.1 and Kṛṣṇa's speech to Yudhiṣṭhira at 14.12.1.

124. Bimal Krishna Matilal, "On the Universality of Suffering," in *Suffering: Indian Perspectives*, ed. Kapil Tiwari (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), 13.

speculation."[125] Patañjali then turns to the task of laying out a practice of mental discipline that enables the practitioner to move beyond suffering. Īśvarakṛṣṇa, author of the earliest Sāṃkhya treatise, declares at the beginning of his work that the purpose and essence of Sāṃkhya is "the elimination of the torment of the threefold suffering (*duḥkha*)"—bodily or physical suffering, environmental suffering, and mental suffering.[126] In a Nikāya passage the Buddha states that he has always made known just two things, namely suffering (*duḥkha*) and the cessation of suffering.[127] This essential teaching of the Buddha is embodied in the Four Noble Truths: the truth of the nature of suffering; the truth of the nature of its cause (which is desire [*tṛṣṇā*]); the truth of the nature of its cessation; and the nature of the path leading to its cessation. As Rupert Gethin points out, few English speakers would define the word "religion" as a "practical way of dealing with the reality of suffering." However, in the premodern Indian cultural context, this is essentially how many of the traditions that we in the academy classify as "religious" conceived of themselves. One of the ancient and recurring images of Indian religious discourse is "crossing the ocean of existence," that is, crossing over from the near shore, which is fraught with dangers and endless miseries, to the further shore, which is free of danger, a crossing that is equivalent to escaping the condition of *duḥkha*, or suffering.[128]

Where and when did the idea of universal suffering emerge in premodern South Asian religious thought? The answer to this question has been the subject of some scholarly debate. While most scholars agree that the Vedas were not centrally concerned with the problem of suffering, at some point during this time period (many scholars point to the rise of the anti-Vedic reform movements, such as Buddhism, Jainism, and the Ājīvikas) we see the emergence of the idea that the world, as it is experienced by all living creatures, is characterized by bondage and suffering. In

125. Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 11–12.

126. Gerald Larson, *Classical Sāṃkhya* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979) 8–9 and Matilal, "On the Universality of Suffering," 13. While the Indian tradition considers Sāṃkhya to be one of the oldest classical schools, no distinct Sāṃkhyan text prior to Iśvarakṛṣṇa's *Sāṃkhyakārikā* (350–450 CE) is extant. Basic Sāṃkhyan models underlie important portions of the epic, especially the *Bhagavadgītā* and *Mokṣadharmaparvan*.

127. *Majjhima Nikāya* i.140 as cited in Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 59.

128. Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 64.

most cases, this idea is accompanied by the practice of renunciation and the call to transcend suffering. Many scholars associate the characterization of the world as a place of bondage and suffering with the emergence of the idea of *saṃsāra*.[129] The term "*saṃsāra*" has two closely linked meanings, both of which are found in the *Mahābhārata*: (1) the transient and cyclical nature of phenomenal existence (or, more simply, transience) and (2) the beginning-less and endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (i.e., transmigration).[130] *Saṃsāra* is a central idea in the Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jain traditions and in general all three traditions concur in characterizing *saṃsāra* in terms of the ideas of suffering and impermanence. Further, for Buddhist, Jain, and nearly all Brahmanical religions[131] the soteriological goal is defined as liberation (*mokṣa*) from *saṃsāra*, that is, release from the cycle of rebirth or the endless cyclical revolutions of time.

By the sixth century BCE, the time of the rise of early Buddhism and Jainism, the theory of *saṃsāra* (keeping in mind both definitions of the term) was widely accepted.[132] However, what seems to have been still a matter of intense debate was the question of the driving force behind the wheel of *saṃsāra*, and hence suffering. For the Buddhists and Jains, the impetus was karma (the result of past actions). However, for the Ājīvikas, ascetics who were contemporaries of the early Buddhists and Jains and who were strict determinists, *niyati* or fate, not karma, was responsible for the endless cycles of birth, death, and rebirth and by extension the force behind suffering.[133]

In the *Mahābhārata*, a Brahmanical text that is both assimilating and responding to Buddhist, Jain, and Ājīvika ideas concerning the origin and existence of universal suffering, the question of the force behind the cycle of *saṃsāra* (again keeping in mind both definitions of the term) is still a matter of intense debate. Time, fate, human exertion, the will of the gods/God, and karma (less frequently) are among the many candidates considered. True to its riddle design, the *Mahābhārata* raises the question of which one of these

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129. For example, see Richard H. Davis, introduction to *Religions of India in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 15 and Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 86.

130. Brian K. Smith, "Samsara," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd edition, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 12: 8097–8.

131. The Mīmāṃsākas are a notable exception.

132. Smith, "Samsara," 8098.

133. A. L. Basham, *History and Doctrines of the Ājīvikas: A Vanished Indian Religion* (London: Luzac, 1951), 224.

forces is most powerful and answers the question simply by raising more questions. Without doubt, the question of the origin of suffering acquires a degree of immediacy and urgency in the epic since it is raised in the context of the story of the Bhārata war and the enormous human toll that it exerts. As the depiction of human suffering mounts, the epic inexorably leads to the palpable and inescapable conclusion that suffering exists on a mind-boggling scale. At the same time, the epic's riddles encourage the audience to wrestle with questions of why: Why did this war happen? Why does suffering exist? What makes the narrative connection between the war and the large-scale human suffering so disturbing is the fact that the war itself is interlinked with the concept of *dharma* in a number of ways. After all, this apocalyptic war was fought in the name of *dharma*, it is referred to by some as a "*dharmayuddha*" or "*dharma*-battle," and it was sanctioned by the son of the god Dharma, Yudhiṣṭhira. Many warriors fight in the name of *kṣatriya dharma* and expect to gain heaven by following their dharmic path. This trope is the source of one of the epic's most baffling as well as one of its concluding riddles: Does Duryodhana, the ostensible villain of the story and the principal agent behind the conflict between the two sets of cousins and hence all the suffering that this conflict causes, really win heaven or not?[134]

Suffering has long been considered an important category in the study of religion. As Jack Bemporad points out, "suffering, more than any other fact of human life, raises the philosophical questions that religion is customarily called to answer."[135] However, "Hinduism(s)" is often omitted in discussions on the topic.[136] Even when suffering is discussed in the context

134. This riddle is addressed at length in chapter 5.

135. Jack Bemporad, "Suffering," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 13: 8804–09.

136. For example, the entry on "suffering" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* focuses on Christianity and Islam (Ibid.); *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* considers only Christian doctrine (T. B. Kilpatrick, "Suffering," in *The Encyclopedia of Religious Ethics*, ed. James Hastings [New York: Scribner, 1961], 12:1–10); in *The Harper Collins Dictionary of Religion*, again only Buddhism is considered ("Suffering" in *The Harper Collins Dictionary of Religion*, ed. Jonathan Z. Smith [San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995], 1028–1029); and the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* includes only Buddhist points of view on the origination of suffering (Marek Mejor, "Buddhist Views of Origination of Suffering" in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig [New York: Routledge, 1998], 9: 215–519). For discussions on suffering in the Hindu context, see John Bowker, *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 193–237; Arthur Herman, *The Problem of Evil and Indian Thought* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1976); Brian K. Smith, "Hinduism," in *Evil and Suffering*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1998), 7–35; and Kapil N. Tiwari, ed., *Suffering: Indian Perspectives* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986).

of Hindu traditions, the *Mahābhārata* is rarely considered.[137] Thus one additional aim of this book is to argue for the addition of the *Mahābhārata* to the list of "sacred texts" (i.e., those texts that are important to scholars in the study of religion) that offer powerful meditations on the philosophical, theological, and ethical issues raised by the phenomenon of human sorrow.

Chapter Overview

Having laid out the basic argument of this book by discussing the aesthetics of suffering in this introduction, in chapter 1 I turn to the task of examining the possibility of whether or not the *Mahābhārata* contains an implicit literary theory that can be "lifted out" of its aesthetics of suffering. This chapter discusses three theoretical resources—namely Sanskrit literary theory, reader-response theory, and narrative ethics—that are used to identify and articulate the broader ideas about how literature works that are embedded in the *Mahābhārata*'s aesthetics of suffering. The discussion is weighted heavily toward Sanskrit literary theory, and the ideas of the ninth-century literary theorist Ānandavardhana in particular. Specifically, this chapter focuses on three aesthetic categories that are borrowed from Ānanda, namely *dhvani* or "meaning-without-saying" or "suggestion"; *sahṛdaya*, or "the sensitive reader/spectator"; and *rasa* or "aestheticized emotion." By showing how these categories help one to locate meaning in the *Mahābhārata*, this chapter points to the enormous interpretive potential that could be opened up by bringing such concepts to bear on other works of religious and literary art, South Asian and beyond.

Chapters 2 through 5 turn to the task of demonstrating how the aesthetics of suffering "works" by showing how the text uses some combination of the five components mentioned above in order to build a threefold ethical "argument" about the existence of suffering, the forces that cause it, and the specific emotional and psychological responses that allow one to move beyond it. Chapters 2 and 3 explore how specific narrative strategies in the *Mahābhārata* use the theme of suffering to "disorient and reorient" the audience's relationship to specific characters. Chapters 4 and 5 examine how the text's narrative strategies use the theme of suffering to "disorient and reorient" the audience's relationship to specific conceptual

137. A notable exception is Greg Bailey's article in Tiwari, ed., *Suffering: Indian Perspectives*, 38–60.

categories. The overarching purpose of each chapter is to examine and explain how the aesthetics of suffering transforms the sensitive reader/spectator's understanding of the world through refiguring his or her understanding of suffering as well as to explore the implications of this refiguration for determining what the *Mahābhārata* is ultimately "saying" about *dharma* and the religious and moral life more broadly.

More specifically, chapter 2 examines how the epic's aesthetics of suffering builds its threefold argument concerning the pervasive presence of suffering through examining the depiction of four characters and one conceptual category in the epic's most pivotal scene, the episode of the dice game. First this chapter examines how the actions of three characters (Duryodhana, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and Yudhiṣṭhira) lead to the game of dice and Draupadī's subsequent abuse. It argues that the strategies of estrangement promote insights into the causes of suffering. Next the chapter explores the detailed description of Draupadī's violation in the assembly hall and how the strategies of proximity encourage the audience to confront the existence of suffering. Finally, this chapter focuses on Draupadī's question to Yudhiṣṭhira concerning the validity of his stake, examining what this question communicates about *dharma* and about suffering.

Chapter 3 investigates the depiction of a single character, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, as both a victim and an agent of suffering. While Dhṛtarāṣṭra has received little attention from *Mahābhārata* scholars, this chapter argues that he is a central character for the text's aesthetics of suffering. The chapter examines the relationship between the characterization of the blind king, the narrative's construction of time, and the problem of grief. It considers four instances in the epic where, with respect to these issues, the depiction of Dhṛtarāṣṭra is important: (1) Dhṛtarāṣṭra's lament in the epic's outermost frame in *The Book of the Beginning*, (2) Dhṛtarāṣṭra's role in the failed peace negotiations in *The Book of the Effort*, (3) Dhṛtarāṣṭra's articulations of grief in the frame of the battle books, and (4) Dhṛtarāṣṭra's despair after the war and the three "arguments against grief" that he receives in *The Book of the Women*. In addition, the chapter considers three types of narrative strategies—estrangement, ambiguity, and temporal manipulation—and their role in the text's "argument" about the causes of despair.

Chapter 4 explores the theme of time. First, two dominant "theories of time," the system of world ages or "*yugas*" and what scholars have called the epic's "doctrine of time" (*kālavāda*) are examined. The chapter focuses on these two conceptions of time because both depict time as an oppressive,

destructive force that is implicated in the presence of suffering. Second, the chapter considers what the text's narrative strategies "do" with time. It examines four different strategies that manipulate time and how they encourage specific insights into the nature of time and its role in the production of suffering as well as the elimination of despair.

Chapter 5 analyzes the epic's treatment of several important themes through considering whether the *Mahābhārata* provides a rationale for the existence of suffering (i.e., a theodicy). First, this chapter considers the epic's treatment of both fate (*daiva*) and human endeavor (*puruṣakāra*) as potential theodicies by examining their role in the dicing scene. Next the chapter investigates whether karma and Kṛṣṇa provide rationales for the existence of suffering. Finally, this chapter examines the epic's enigmatic conclusion (when the Pāṇḍavas journey to heaven). It argues that, due to the strategies of ambiguity, neither fate, human endeavor, karma, nor Kṛṣṇa provide conclusive answers to the theodicy question. Rather, the epic rejects a "straightforward" approach and addresses the issue in a more dramatic fashion. Through the deployment of the strategies of rupture, proximity, and estrangement in the journey-to-heaven episode, the epic prepares its audiences for its stark revelation of the structure of the world, a revelation that is the epic's "answer" to the problem of suffering in the world.

The concluding chapter argues that the *Mahābhārata* provides us with a new template for how to read works of religious and literary art, particularly with respect to the task of locating those moments where such texts are suggesting ideas rather than directly stating them. The conclusion also recommends that academic discussions of ethics in the *Mahābhārata* should be de-centered from the topic of *dharma* and re-centered on the issue of suffering, particularly on the relationship between suffering and *dharma*. Suffering, I argue, is the primary aesthetic ground for ethics in the epic.

I

Meaning-Without-Saying

THE IMPLICIT LITERARY THEORY OF THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*

> *"*Dharma *and* adharma *do not go about saying 'Here we are!' Nor do the Gods, Gandharvas, or Ancestors tell us 'This is* dharma*,' 'This is* adharma*.'"*
>
> —ĀPASTAMBA DHARMASŪTRA[1]

IN "WHERE MIRRORS Are Windows: Toward An Anthology of Reflections" A. K. Ramanujan tells us that works of Indian literature are inherently self-reflexive in that they offer reflections on themselves as stories. For example, the Indian epics, as discussed earlier, come with frame stories, stories that tell the tale of how and why the epics were composed and told. Many Indian stories contain *phalaśruti*-s, passages where a storyteller describes what his or her story "does" by enumerating the many positive effects it bestows on its audience members. For example, in the *Story of Nala*, an embedded story in the *Mahābhārata*, Bṛhadaśva the storyteller tells the recipient of his tale, a grieving Yudhiṣṭhira,

> Misfortune will never be experienced by those who tell or listen continuously to this great story of Nala. Wealth will flow to them and they will have good fortune. After ceaselessly hearing this ancient and supreme story, one will know sons, grandsons, cattle, and also prominence among men, and, without a doubt, one will be healthy and full of love.[2]

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1. *"Adharma"* is the opposite of *dharma*. *Āpastamba Dharma Sūtra* 1.7.20.6. This is the translation of James L. Fitzgerald ("Dharma and Its Translation in the *Mahābhārata*," 671).

2. 3.78.12–13.

This chapter takes Ramanujan's insight one step further by proposing that the *Mahābhārata* not only offers reflections on itself as a narrative, as a work of literature, but also contains implicit ideas about the nature and work of literature itself. If we take this claim seriously—the idea that the *Mahābhārata* contains an implicit literary theory—then how might we locate it? In this chapter we will delve more deeply into the aesthetics of suffering—that is my articulation of the specific way the *Mahābhārata* works as a literary text—to see if it is possible to lift out of it a more general literary theory embedded in it. This chapter uses three theoretical resources—namely, Sanskrit literary theory, Euro-American reader-response theory, and narrative ethics—to help identify and articulate the broader ideas about how literature works that are embedded in the aesthetics of suffering. The discussion is weighted heavily toward Sanskrit literary theory, and the ideas of the ninth-century literary theorist Ānandavardhana in particular. Specifically, it relies on three aesthetic categories taken from Ānandavardhana, namely *dhvani* or "meaning-without-saying" or "suggestion"; *rasa* or "aestheticized emotion"; and *sahṛdaya*, or "the sensitive reader/spectator." This chapter discusses these three theoretical resources and describes their points of convergence and influence with respect to the *Mahābhārata's* aesthetics of suffering in ways that are both specific to the *Mahābhārata* and yet also point to the epic's broader ideas about how literary texts do their aesthetic, religious, and moral work. By showing how these three aesthetic categories help us locate meaning in the *Mahābhārata*, this chapter attempts to point to the enormous interpretive potential that could be opened up by bringing these concepts to bear on other works of religious and literary art, South Asian and beyond.

Sanskrit Literary Theory: Ānandavardhana's Concept of Dhvani *and His Reading of the* Mahābhārata

One of the first recorded readers and literary critics of the *Mahābhārata* was Ānandavardhana (hereafter Ānanda), a ninth-century Kashmiri poet and one of the most influential thinkers in the tradition of Sanskrit literary theory (*alaṅkāraśāstra*). His magnum opus, the *Light on Suggestion* (*Dhvanyāloka*), revolutionized the tradition by introducing a new way of analyzing how great works of literature convey meaning. According to Ānanda, a work of literature expresses meaning through *dhvani* or "meaning-without-saying," most commonly translated as "suggestion." In the *Light on Suggestion* he

set out to prove that *dhvani* exists by demonstrating its presence in the received classics of Prakrit and Sanskrit literature, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* in particular. He also set out to show that it plays a central role in the aesthetic effectiveness of these works, that it is what makes them beautiful.[3] An examination of his work provides an example of how a premodern South Asian literary theorist read the *Mahābhārata*; it also gives us a window into premodern South Asian ideas about the nature of literature itself and what fulfillments were thought to be derived from it.

This section has three goals. The first is to lay out Ānanda's general ideas about how all works of great literary merit convey meaning. In the course of this discussion I will also appeal to the ideas of Abhinavagupta, a tenth-century Śaiva philosopher and theologian who wrote a commentary on the *Light on Suggestion* called the *Locana* or "The Eye." The *Locana* has come to be as famous and influential as the *Light on Suggestion* itself. The second is to discuss Ānanda's ideas about how meaning is conveyed in the *Mahābhārata* specifically.[4] Finally, this section discusses the areas of overlap between Ānanda's (and, in some cases, Abhinavagupta's) ideas and the epic's aesthetics of suffering.

Ānanda's Ideas about How Literature Conveys Meaning

As mentioned above, Ānanda argued that works of great literature convey meaning through *dhvani*, or suggestion. In the *Light on Suggestion*, Ānanda defined suggestion as "that type of poetry in which either a meaning or a word, subordinating itself or its own meaning suggests that [non-expressed] meaning."[5] According to Ānanda, suggested meaning is different from literal meaning. While it depends on the literal meaning, suggested meaning is predominant over the literal and the two remain distinct. Ānanda offered the following humorous verse as an example of a passage where the literal meaning and the suggested meaning are distinct and the suggested meaning is predominant:

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3. Lawrence McCrea, *The Teleology of Poetics in Medieval Kashmir* (Cambridge, MA: Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University, 2008), 24.

4. It is important to note that Ānanda lived several centuries after the composition of the *Mahābhārata*.

5. McCrea, *The Teleology of Poetics*, 133.

> Mother-in-law sleeps here, I there:
> look, traveler, while it is light
> For at night when you cannot see
> you must not fall in my bed.[6]

According to Ānanda, the literal meaning in this verse is a prohibition. However, the suggested meaning is an invitation: a young woman is inviting a traveler to sleep with her. Thus, the actual intent of her statement is the opposite of what it literally means, and the literal and the suggested meaning of the verse are clearly distinct. Further, the suggested meaning is predominant because it communicates the intent of the speaker.

How does suggestion become manifest? According to Ānanda, it flashes forth in an instant "in the minds of intelligent auditors who are averse to the literal meaning and in quest of the real meaning."[7] Ānanda likened the appearance of suggestion to the resonance of a bell after it is struck. First comes the stroke by which the primary, or literal, meaning of the word enters the mind. Then the mind is suddenly aware of something related but distinct from this—an overtone or suggestion.[8] For Ānanda, the most important messages of a work of literature are delivered through suggestion. According to him, an essential matter carries far greater luster by not being stated literally. For example, if we say, "A young man and his bride were very much in love," we give the hearer no flavor at all of what the love was like. This can be conveyed only through suggestion. And precisely what makes most if not all instances of suggestion so powerful are that they enlist the emotions and sympathies of the audience, a subject to which I will return to momentarily.

According to Ānanda, there are three types of suggestion: narrative element (*vastu*, of which the above verse is an example), figure of speech

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6. *Dhv*. 1.4c A, in Daniel H. H. Ingalls, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, and M. V. Patwardhan, trans., *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, Harvard Oriental Series, no. 49 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 98.

7. Ibid., 130.

8. Daniel Ingalls, *Sanskrit Poetry: From Vidyākara's Treasury*, 2nd Ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 9. Ravi Shankar Nagar offers the following analogy to characterize how the suggested meaning is predominant over the literal: "As the beauty of a star lies not so much in what we catch at the first glance but the twinkle that follows." Nagar, "Suggestiveness (Dhvani) in the Mahābhārata," in *Modern Evaluation of the Mahābhārata: Prof. R. K. Sharma Felicitation Volume*, ed. Satya Pal Narang (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1995), 245.

(*alaṅkāra*), and aestheticized emotion (*rasa*). The most important of the three types is *rasa*, or aestheticized emotion, because it is *rasa* that makes a work of literature beautiful. Further, according to Ānanda, it is the essential characteristic of great poetry. Any coherent literary work, in Ānanda's view, communicates a single dominant *rasa*, to which all the component elements of the work are directly or indirectly subordinated.

The word *rasa* in its most literal sense means "juice," "taste," "flavor." It is an aestheticized emotion that is suggested by the "underlying emotion" of a character. Originally, the theory of *rasa* had been applied to the theater. According to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* there are eight possible *rasas* or aestheticized emotions that a play can exhibit: the erotic, the comic, the tragic, the furious or cruel, the heroic, the fearsome or terrible, the gruesome, and the wondrous. To this list of eight, the tradition later added a ninth, *śāntarasa*, the aestheticized emotion of tranquility.[9]

Each *rasa* is based on the aesthetic transformation of an underlying basic human emotion termed a "*sthāyībhāva*" (literally, a "permanent feeling"). For example, the erotic is based on sexual desire, the comic on laughter, and the tragic on grief (*śoka*). Precisely how does the aestheticized emotion (*rasa*) differ from the underlying emotion? While Ānanda was silent on this issue, Abhinavagupta (hereafter Abhinava) provided an answer. Abhinava reasoned that the aestheticized emotion cannot be the original underlying emotion itself or we would not enjoy hearing sad poetry like the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. *Rasa*, then, according to Abhinava, is not a "worldly" state, but rather it is a depersonalized condition of the self. *Rasa* is other-worldly, for in the world, pity, disgust, and horror are not enjoyed as they are in poetry. While the underlying emotion is personal, the aestheticized emotion is universal. Thus, according to Abhinava, for poetry to be properly appreciated, a distancing should ideally occur between what is represented by a text

9. For scholarship on the theoretical problems connected specifically with *śāntarasa*, see Shashthi Prasad Bhattacharya, *Śānta Rasa and Its Scope in Literature* (Calcutta: Sanskrit College, 1976); Sushil Kumar De, "The Śānta Rasa in the Nāṭya-Śāstra and the Daśa-Rūpaka," in *Some Problems of Sanskrit Poetics* (Calcutta: Firma K. L Mukhopadhyay, 1959), 139–143; Edwin Gerow and Ashok Aklujar, "On Śānta Rasa in Sanskrit Poetics," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 92 (1972): 80–87); J. L Masson and M. V.Patwardhan, *Śāntarasa and Abhinavagupta's Philosophy of Aesthetics*, Bhandarkar Oriental Series 9 (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1969); V. Raghavan, *The Number of Rasas* (Madras: Adyar Library, 1940); and Gary A. Tubb "*Śāntarasa* in the *Mahābhārata*" in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 177.

and its appreciator. With *rasa*, we are at one remove from our personal emotions; we are feeling about emotions rather than directly experiencing them.[10]

Both Ānanda and Abhinava were aware of the fact that the aestheticized emotion conveyed by a verse is not apparent to everyone. According to them, this is due to the fact that *rasa* is not a property of literal meaning but of suggestion. Therefore, both thinkers held that the appreciation of a literary work requires aesthetic competence, an aesthetic sensitivity (*sahṛdayatva*) not common to all people. Thus in the *Light on Suggestion* emphasis was placed for the first time in the tradition on how readers understand a literary text.[11] Ānanda's term for the aesthetically competent audience member is the *sahṛdaya*, or the sensitive reader or spectator (literally "having the same heart"—i.e., capable of sharing the aesthetic experience crafted by the poet). Abhinava defined the *sahṛdaya* as:

> [t]hose people who are capable of identifying with the subject matter, since the mirror of their hearts have been polished through constant recitation and study of poetry, and who sympathetically respond in their own hearts, are known as sensitive readers (*sahṛdaya*).[12]

The sensitive reader/spectator is, in effect, defined as the person who is capable of apprehending the *rasa* conveyed by a work. This concept was so important to Ānanda and so central to his ideas that the *Light on Suggestion* (*Dhvanyāloka*) was originally entitled the *Light on the Sensitive Reader* (*Sahṛdayāloka*).[13]

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10. See J. L. Masson and M.V. Patwardhan, *Aesthetic Rapture: The Rasādhyāya of the Nāṭyaśāstra* (Poona: Deccan College, 1970), 35. For a thoughtful meditation on how *rasa* relates to religious experience, see J. N. Mohanty, "Feeling, Poetics, and Religion," in *Explorations in Philosophy: Essays by J. N. Mohanty*, ed. Bina Gupta (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 189–194.

11. Sheldon Pollock, "Bhoja's *Śṛṅgāraprakāśa* and the Problem of *Rasa*: A Historical Introduction and Annotated Translation," Asiatische Studien/ Etudes Asiatiques 52/11 (1998), 124–125.

12. Translated by Masson and Patwardhan (*Aesthetic Rapture*, 6).

13. Daniel Ingalls, "Introduction" in *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, 12.

Ānanda's Reading of the *Mahābhārata*

In the context of proving the existence of suggestion in the *Light on Suggestion*, Ānanda turned to his analysis of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. "How do we know that suggestion exists?" Ānanda asked. His answer: Because it can be found in works of literature that are endowed with special imaginative genius, such as the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Some of Ānanda's most powerful examples of suggestion are taken from the *Mahābhārata*.

Ānanda had two startling things to say about the *Mahābhārata* in particular. First, he argued that the *Mahābhārata* is a supreme example of a work of literary unity because all the disparate parts of the poem are working toward a single goal.[14] Second, he contended that the *Mahābhārata* contains a single predominant aesthetic tone or *rasa*, *śāntarasa*, or the aestheticized emotion of tranquility. Before we interrogate these two ideas, particularly the second, it is important to consider how innovative, even radical, these ideas most likely were in Ānanda's day. Before Ānanda no known critic had considered the possibility of looking at a work of literature as a unified whole with a single predominant *rasa*, particularly something as gigantic and sprawling as the *Mahābhārata*.[15]

What precisely is the aestheticized emotion of tranquility (*śāntarasa*), and why did Ānanda believe that it is the predominant *rasa* of the *Mahābhārata*? According to Ānanda, the aestheticized emotion of tranquility is characterized by "the full development of the happiness that comes from the dying off of desire."[16] To explain the nature of *śāntarasa*, Ānanda quoted a verse from the *Mahābhārata* (12.168.36):

> The joy of pleasure in this world and the greater joy of pleasures found in heaven are not worth a sixteenth of the joy that comes from the dying of desire.[17]

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14. McCrea, *The Teleology of Poetics*, 123.

15. Tubb "*Śāntarasa* in the *Mahābhārata*," 171.

16. *Dhv*. 3.26a A, in Ingalls, Masson, and Patwardhan, *The Dhvanyāloka*, 520. As Deutsch notes, *śāntarasa* has to do with spiritual insight and aesthetic understanding. Eliot Deutsch, Review of *Śāntarasa and Abhinavagupta's Philosophy of Aesthetics*. By J. L. Masson and M. V. Patwardhan, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 30/1 (1970): 215–216.

17. *Dhv*. 3.26a A, in Ingalls, Masson, and Patwardhan, *The Dhvanyāloka*, 520.

The underlying emotion of *śāntarasa*, according to Ānanda, is *vairāgya*, which generally means "disgust," "aversion," or "indifference to worldly objects and life."[18] Lest we be tempted to rush to label Ānanda's reading of the *Mahābhārata* as "pessimistic" or "world-negating," however, we should be very clear about what the disillusionment denoted by the term *vairāgya* is targeting. *Śāntarasa* and its related underlying emotion (*sthāyibhāva*) of *vairāgya* are deeply connected with the issue of time and transitoriness in the *Mahābhārata* according to Ānanda.[19] As Gerow and Aklujkar argue, Ānanda used the term *śāntarasa* to refer to "an intense experience of detachment that comes from reading or witnessing a work of art depicting ruin, impermanence, the transitory character of worldly existence, and the futility of ambition."[20] From the eight or so passages that Ānanda quotes from the *Mahābhārata*, it is clear that he was interested in those passages that conveyed a sense of the transience, futility, and the insubstantiality of all worldly affairs.[21] This suggests that what the sensitive reader/spectator is being encouraged to feel aversion toward, according to Ānanda, is not the empirical/natural world *per se*, but a particular psychological state or attitude with regard to the empirical world—namely egoism—that renders human beings emotionally vulnerable to feelings of suffering and grief over the losses that are brought about by the inevitable ravages of time.[22]

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18. *Dhv*. 4.5 A, in Ingalls, Masson, and Patwardhan, *The Dhvanyāloka*, 690. I am disagreeing with Gary Tubb here who argues that, for Ānanda, *śama*, not *vairāgya*, is the underlying emotion of *śāntarasa*. However, Ānanda states that *vairāgya* is the *sthāyibhāva* of *śāntarasa*. Tubb himself admits that he is interpreting Ānanda through Abhinava. This seems to be the source of the disagreement. See Tubb, "*Śāntarasa* in the *Mahābhārata*," 180.

19. Peter Gaeffke argues that *śāntarasa* has to be understood in the context of "Buddhistic dramas and kāvyas." See Gaeffke, Review of *Studies in Comparative Aesthetics* by Eliot Deutsch, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 99/1 (1979): 16768.

20. Gerow and Aklujkar, "On Śānta Rasa in Sanskrit Poetics," 8.

21. See, for example, Ānanda's interest in Vyāsa's haunting statement about time (*Dhv*. 3.16a) and his focus on the moving lament of Bhuriśravas's wife as she stands amidst the dead warriors on the Kuru Field (*Dhv*. 320e).

22. For an illuminating discussion of how the experience of *śāntarasa* is transformative and whether this transformative experience is transitory or permanent, see Deutsch, *Review of Śāntarasa*, 216.

On what grounds did Ānanda argue that *śāntarasa* or the aestheticized emotion of tranquility is the predominant *rasa* of the *Mahābhārata*? To make his case, Ānanda turned to the epic's conclusion. In perhaps his most famous statement about the *Mahābhārata*, Ānanda declared:

> Likewise in the *Mahābhārata*, which has the beauty of a *kāvya* while being in the form of a *śāstra*, the great sage [Vyāsa] has demonstrated that the creation of dispassion is the principal purport of his work, by composing a conclusion that produces a despondent feeling [*vairāgya*] in response to the sorry end of the Vṛṣṇis and the Pāṇḍavas, and in doing so he has suggested that what he intended as the principal subject of his poem is the peaceful flavor [*śāntarasa*] and the human aim characterized by liberation [*mokṣa*].[23]

Why did Ānanda turn to the epic's conclusion to locate the epic's predominant *rasa*? While Ānanda never explicitly explained why the predominant *rasa* of the *Mahābhārata* could be located in its conclusion, it is clear from his comments that it is because it is here that one can assess the success or failure of the actions of the epic's principal characters.[24] In the case of the *Mahābhārata*, the conclusion shows that the activities and strivings of the epic's principal characters lead only to misery (the Vṛṣṇis kill one another in a drunken brawl, and the Pāṇḍavas, still mired in grief at the end of the epic, renounce the kingdom, retire to the mountains, and commit ascetic suicide). Because the *Mahābhārata* concludes by depicting the miserable end of the principal characters, according to Ānanda, Vyāsa's intention is to show the emptiness of human effort and to generate in the sensitive reader/spectator a dispassion for worldly affairs and human ambition. When heightened through suggestion, this dispassion is transmuted into *śāntarasa*, or the aestheticized emotion of tranquility.

Ānanda's aim was not to argue that the aestheticized emotion of tranquility is the *only rasa* that is suggested in the *Mahābhārata*. Rather, his aim was to argue that it is the predominant *rasa*. Certainly Ānanda would have agreed with the assertion that the *Mahābhārata* contains most if not

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23. *Dhv*. 4.5 A, in Tubb, "*Śāntarasa* in the *Mahābhārata*," 176. Also translated in Ingalls, Masson, and Patwardhan, *Dhvanyāloka*, 690.

24. Ānanda also focuses on the conclusion of the *Rāmāyaṇa* to locate the predominant rasa of that work, ostensibly for the same reason. I am thankful to Guy Leavitt for this insight.

all the nine *rasa*s. It is a narrative after all that seeks to contain everything. However, Ānanda would have also argued that while most, if not all, the *rasa*-s are found in the *Mahābhārata*, each is not given equal aesthetic weight. While other *rasa*-s may be regarded as paramount at particular moments in the text, they are all subordinated to *śāntarasa* in the work as a whole.

TURNING NOW TO the task of pointing out the connections between Ānanda's ideas and the epic's aesthetics of suffering, let us focus on three key ideas that Ānanda relies on to discuss how literature conveys meaning in general: (1) suggestion or meaning-without-saying (*dhvani*), (2) the sensitive reader/spectator (*sahṛdaya*), and (3) the role of identification (or proximity) and distance in the evocation of the aestheticized emotion, or *rasa*. Ānanda, as we have discovered, argued that great works of literature convey meaning through suggestion. According to Ānanda, it is only through suggestion that the meaning of a text is allowed to blossom in the minds of the audience, a phenomenon characterized by Ingalls as the "sudden rushing of the mind into a delightful, calm expansion."[25] Similarly, the aesthetics of suffering conveys meaning primarily through what I have called "narrative strategies," which refer to the complex dynamic between content (what the text says or literal meaning) and form (how what the text says is actually presented) and audience. What this concept captures is the dynamic activity that arises in those moments in which "form" and "content" are at cross purposes (i.e., the text literally says one thing but the *way* it presents what it says "suggests" something very different) and how the audience experiences meaning from the dynamic interaction, or tension, between the two. Thus, a narrative-strategy approach, which argues that meaning comes from what a text "does," as opposed to simply what it literally says, is an approach that utilizes a similar literary mode to that of suggestion. To put it more succinctly, both narrative strategies and *dhvani* convey meaning "more through doing and less through saying."

Perhaps the most significant difference between these two concepts—*dhvani* and the narrative strategy—is that Ānanda's concept of suggestion is concerned primarily with isolated features of a work of literature (for example, a figure of speech, a narrative element, or the emotion of a character in a particular scene), while the concept of the narrative strategy

25. Ingalls, *Sanskrit Poetry*, 31.

deals with broader portions of the text, such as the way a theme or a character is developed over time.[26] This difference is due to the fact that the text's narrative strategies work, to a large degree, through setting the audience up to expect certain outcomes (with respect to the behavior of a character such as Yudhṣṭhira, for example, see below), and then delivering a very different outcome than the one the audience was set up to expect.

The second category is the *sahṛdaya*, or sensitive reader/spectator. As we have seen, the notion of the *sahṛdaya* is built into the concept of suggestion, for there is no birth of such meaning, if there is no sensitive reader/spectator to detect it. Similarly, the notion of the sensitive reader/spectator is built into the concept of the narrative strategy, because the dynamic interaction of form and content is activated only in the presence of a reader or spectator who is sensitive to the tension created by the two.

The third point of connection entails ideas about the fundamental features of aesthetic experience. According to Abhinava, the sensitive reader/spectator is the one who identifies, who literally "feels with," the subject matter of the literary work. However, Abhinava also suggests that the pinnacle of aesthetic experience, *rasa*, requires distance. When one is experiencing *rasa*, one is no longer simply feeling with characters, one is feeling about feelings, one is "meta-feeling," one is at one remove from the world of the text. So, according to Abhinava, the aesthetic experience depends upon both proximity—or closeness—with elements of the text and a subsequent distancing or separation from them. Similarly, as the following chapters will demonstrate, the *Mahābhārata's* narrative strategies work largely through the manipulation of the experience of proximity and distance. Through the work of the narrative strategies, the audience is set up to feel close to or comfortable with certain conceptual categories and/or characters, and then, further down the road, the strategies manipulate them to feel suddenly "disoriented" or distanced from them. Through this distance, one is encouraged to stand back and reflect on the feelings and beliefs that one was manipulated by the text to have. This distance allows for the space of meta-feeling, or more precisely "meta-reflecting," that is, reflecting on the emotions that the text manipulated one to have and why it did so. The chapters that follow seek to show that this is where the "real work" of the text takes place.

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26. I am thankful to Guy Leavitt for this insight.

Additionally, there are significant areas of overlap between Ānanda's specific reading of the *Mahābhārata*—his contention that it contains a single predominant *rasa*, *śāntarasa*—and the aesthetics of suffering. For example, both readings locate the central aesthetic experience of the text in the epic's preoccupation with death, destruction, and ruin. While Ānanda focused predominantly on the epic's depiction of transitoriness, the aesthetics of suffering centers on the epic's depiction of suffering, which is often portrayed as a direct result of transitoriness, as chapter 4 demonstrates. A second point of convergence concerns the kinds of claims both readings are making, specifically since both readings could be misconstrued as being reductive. However, as mentioned earlier, Ānanda did not argue that the only *rasa* evoked by the *Mahābhārata* is *śāntarasa*. Neither does the aesthetics of suffering suggest that the *Mahābhārata* is only about suffering. Both readings acknowledge that the *Mahābhārata* carries many emotional valences and is about many things. However, both would argue that in terms of "aesthetic weight," these concerns are given predominant emphasis. A final point of partial convergence concerns the teleology of both readings. In his reading of the *Mahābhārata*, Ānanda argues that the point or goal of the *Mahābhārata* is to evoke in the reader/spectator the aesthetic experience of *śāntarasa* or the aestheticized emotion of tranquility. According to the aesthetics of suffering, the goal of the *Mahābhārata* is ethical, and "ethics" in this context is defined in terms of confronting, appropriately responding to, and moving beyond suffering. Significantly, moving beyond suffering, as discussed in this chapter, involves cultivating the habits of mental restraint or tranquility (*saṃtoṣa*, *praśānti*). To be sure, Ānanda himself believed that literature (*kāvya*) has an ethical dimension. He also argued that the goal of *kāvya* is delight, and it seems clear that for him, as well as for other Sanskrit literary theorists such as Abhinava, ethics and delight were intricately linked.[27] Unfortunately, however, Ānanda never elaborated on the subject.

Reader-Response Theory

A second theoretical resource that we will consider in this chapter is reader-response theory. Because a number of Ānanda and Abhinava's ideas about how literature "works" resonate with reader-response theory

27. Masson and Patwardhan, *Śāntarasa*, 55.

(particularly with respect to the works of Wolfgang Iser and Umberto Eco), it provides a set of conceptual tools in English that helps one better understand and articulate the ideas of the Indian literary theorists. Therefore, in formulating the aesthetics of suffering, this project has drawn from some of the concepts and vocabulary of reader-response discourse.

While reader-response criticism is not a conceptually unified position, all reader-response theorists argue—as do Ānanda and Abhinava—that a work of literature can best be understood in terms of its results, and that its effects on a reader are inextricably linked to its meaning.[28] Reader-response theory and Indian aesthetics share additional intellectual commitments as well. Both foreground the role of the emotions in the transmission of literary meaning, and both highlight the importance of implication in signification ("*dhvani*," or suggestion, in Ānanda and Abhinava's terminology, and "gaps" in Eco and Iser's).[29]

For example, Wolfgang Iser argues that the reader actively participates in the production of textual meaning because he or she supplies the portion of the text, or gaps, that are not written but only implied. According to him it is only through this encounter with the inevitable omissions and unexpected moments in a work of literature that the reader's imagination is rendered active—and the text indeed comes to life for him or her—because the reader is given the opportunity to bring his or her own emotional and cognitive faculties into play in the process of discovering the meaning of the text. Just as Ingalls characterizes the discovery of a text's suggested meaning (*dhvani*) as a pleasurable experience, as a "sudden rushing of the mind into a delightful calm expansion," so too does Iser characterize the discovery of meaning through the gaps in a text as a form of aesthetic pleasure.[30]

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28. Jane P. Tompkins, "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism," in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1980), ix.

29. For scholarship on the areas of overlap between these two discourses, see William Haney, *Literary Theory and Sanskrit Poetics: Language, Consciousness, and Meaning* (Lewiston, ME: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993); Anne E. Monius, *Imagining a Place for Buddhism: Literary Culture and Religious Community in Tamil-Speaking South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Pollock,"Bhoja's *Śṛṅgāraprakāśa*," 117–193; Krishna Rayan, *The Lamp and the Jar: Explorations of a New Horizon in Literary Criticism* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2002); K. M. Tharakan, *Western and Eastern Poetics: A Comparative Study of Reader Response in I. A. Richards and Abhinavagupta* (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1998).

30. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), xiii.

Iser does not, however, grant the reader autonomy or even partial independence from textual constraints in the process of meaning production. The reader's activity in this regard is only a fulfillment of what is already implicit in the structure of the work. By reading, according to Iser, we uncover the unformulated part of a literary work and what we uncover represents the text's intention.[31] Ānanda and Abhinava would have argued (though they never explicitly did so) that the sensitive reader/spectator's role in the production of meaning is similarly constrained by the structure of the text. Indeed, they have been criticized for constraining the sensitive reader's freedom to such a degree that they do not allow even for the possibility of differences in responses, something Iser does allow as a possibility.[32]

Just as Iser delimits the reader's relative freedom in interpreting the gaps of a literary work through the concept of the "implied reader,"[33] so too does Umberto Eco through his concepts of the "model author" and the "model reader." The model author, according to Eco, is "manifested as a narrative strategy, as a set of instructions which is given to us step by step and which we have to follow when we decide to act as the model reader."[34] The model reader is "a sort of ideal type whom the text not only foresees as a collaborator but also tries to create."[35] He or she is the reader who is guided by the model author's rules, which Eco calls its "narrative strategies." While the model reader's task is to follow the text's set of instructions, the reader's role is not passive since, according to Eco, every text "is a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work."[36] Unable to say everything about the world, the text has gaps; the reader's task is to fill in these gaps. The model reader is the person who fills in the gaps responsibly by allowing himself or herself to be guided by the text's instructions, or in Ānanda's terminology, "suggestions."

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31. Tompkins, "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism," xv.

32. Pollock, "Bhoja's *Śṛṅgāraprakāśa*," 139.

33. The implied reader is defined as both a textual condition and a process of meaning production. Iser, *The Implied Reader*, xii.

34. Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Wood*, Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 1993 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 15.

35. Ibid., 9.

36. Ibid., 3.

Eco raises a crucial issue here, one that Ānanda left relatively untouched: the issue of interpretive access. After all, Ānanda had very little to say about how one cultivates the skills to become a *sahṛdaya*, a sensitive reader/spectator. According to Eco, however, a literary text contains instructions for how it is to be read and the person who allows himself or herself to be guided by these instructions—or, to put it another way, who is open and responsive to the "doing" or the "suggesting" of the text—becomes the model reader, or in the language of Ānanda the sensitive reader/spectator. Eco discusses the metaphor of the common woods through which all readers of a particular text travel. The world of the narrative, he says, brackets the larger "real world." In the narrative world, the model author tells the model reader/spectator what he or she needs to know to walk through that world.[37]

The *Mahābhārata* shares ideas that are remarkably similar to Eco's, particularly through the implications that can be drawn from the inclusion of the epic's two outer frame stories, which contextualize the *Mahābhārata*'s telling and reception. It is important to note that these outer frame stories are *part* of the *Mahābhārata*. If we take this insight and extend it logically, the *Mahābhārata* seems to be suggesting that the circumstances under which it is told or received become part of the *Mahābhārata* itself.[38] In other words, all readers/spectators of the text are invited into its common woods. By inviting us into its woods in this way, it is reasonable to assume that the *Mahābhārata* also provides the tools with which we may navigate its many landscapes.[39] Chapters 2 through 5, which execute an aesthetics-of-suffering reading of the epic, discuss the effects of the epic's narrative strategies on its audiences. These chapters at times make use of personal pronouns such as "we" and "us" to refer to the epic's model audiences/*sahṛdaya*-s (the readers and/or spectators that the *Mahābhārata's* strategies encourage "us" to become). This language is adopted for the purpose of inclusivity. The intention in these chapters is to invite the reader into the *Mahābhārata's* literary landscape—as this book argues that the *Mahābhārata* itself

37. Ibid., 6.

38. For slightly different interpretations, see Minkowski, "Janamejaya's *Sattra*," 406, and Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 95.

39. Black argues that the epic's "textualized audiences" created by its framing device provide an indication of the ideal receivers who were in the imagination of the composers or compilers of the poem. See Black, "Eavesdropping," 57.

does—rather than to exclude him or her by suggesting these woods are accessible only to some "model" or historical other.[40]

Narrative Ethics

The idea that there is a relationship between the way in which literature conveys meaning and the ethical transformation of the reader/spectator is implicit in both Sanskrit literary theory and reader-response theory (especially in Iser's formulation). However, neither school develops this connection in a systematic and sustained fashion. Therefore, in order to flesh out this link in terms of how the *Mahābhārata* functions as an aesthetic text, we turn to the Euro-American school of discourse called "narrative ethics." This school developed in the past few decades out of a growing dissatisfaction within moral philosophy with rule-oriented moral theory. The objection was that rule-driven moral theory, in its attempt to universalize ethics, neglected to take into account individual experience as well as contexts such as space and time in the formation and expression of moral understanding.[41] The recognition that narrative takes into account these dimensions of human experience has informed the ideas of various scholars working in a variety of disciplines (primarily moral philosophy, but also literary criticism) who share the view that it is predominantly through narrative—more so than through propositions or rules—that moral being and knowing are formed and shaped.[42]

Precisely how narrative informs moral being and knowing, however, has been conceptualized in diverse ways within narrative ethics. In this regard, narrative ethics can be subdivided in terms of two broad trajectories: (1) those narrative ethicists, such as Wayne Booth[43] and Martha

40. Several scholars have argued that the *Mahābhārata* was designed to be accessible to a wide, indeed universal audience. See Brian Black, "Eavesdropping," 54–55 and James L. Fitzgerald, "India's Fifth Veda: The *Mahābhārata*'s Presentation of Itself," in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 150–170.

41. Leela Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct: Oral Narrative and Moral Being in a South Indian Town* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 17.

42. Ibid., 17.

43. See, for example, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

Nussbaum[44], who locate and articulate the ethical value of reading literature and (2) those, such as Paul Ricoeur[45] and Alasdair MacIntyre,[46] who explore the relationship between narrativity (as a human endeavor, not necessarily limited to literature) and the construction of identity. In what follows we will focus on the first group, particularly the narrative ethicists who examine the link between ethics and tragic literature, such as Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, and Martha Nussbaum. Tragic literature with its focus on suffering, grief, and loss shares many of the same themes and concerns of the *Mahābhārata*. Specifically, the work of Nussbaum focuses on the theme of tragic blindness; the work of Weil and Murdoch centers on the theme of tragic suffering and death. The *Mahābhārata* explores both these themes of tragic literature and both are pertinent to the way it transmits its ethical messages through its aesthetics of suffering.

In *The Fragility of Goodness*, Martha Nussbaum argues that the works of the tragic poets (particularly Sophocles) are morally edifying because they combat the human tendency to oversimplify the world and thus render oneself blind to the richness and complexity of life. For Nussbaum, tragedy offers insights into the rich texture of the matters of choice and deliberation. In tragedy, causes and events are presented in such a complex manner that they expose the truth of indeterminacy and the sheer difficulty of human deliberation. Because of this richness and specificity of circumstantial detail, tragedy forces us as interpreters to be active. Further, tragedy elucidates what is lost when one endeavors to oversimplify life. Oftentimes, the tragic hero's downfall is caused by a kind of blindness, a tendency to oversimplify the world of values. With the tragic hero or heroine's downfall, tragedy reveals the cost that is involved in closing oneself off from the multiplicity of the world of values.

Building on the insights of Nussbaum, the chapters that follow will be concerned with articulating the ways in which the *Mahābhārata*'s narrative strategies serve to sharpen our moral perceptions—our ability to discern acutely and responsively the salient features of a particular situation.

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44. See, for example, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

45. See *Time and Narrative* and *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

46. See *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

In this regard, there are two recurring situations in which "watching" the behavior of characters is particularly important: (1) situations that involve dilemmas in which the character in question—no matter how virtuous—inevitably makes a bad decision due to an inability to see the situation with mental clarity, and (2) situations that take place after the bad decisions have been made and the catastrophe occurs wherein characters are either incapacitated by their sorrow and thus unable to take positive action or they are stupefied by their despair, which in turn causes them to make additional bad decisions that trigger further suffering. The *Mahābhārata*'s recurring interest in these situations suggests that it is fascinated by how human beings are rendered blind, incapacitated, and/or stupefied by their responses to what one may call "situations of extreme urgency."[47] The text's aesthetics of suffering seems to pinpoint the crucial ethical moment here, in moments where one more link is created in the chain of despair that runs through the course of the epic due to a character's inability to see or "foresee" the inextricable link between his or her action and its consequences.

Turning now to the theme of tragic suffering and death, Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch argue that reading tragic literature is morally useful because it teaches us to see the truth of the human condition, which is our vulnerability to radical suffering and death. In her classic essay "The Iliad, Poem of Might" Simone Weil marvels at the fact that the great tragic poets have found the words to capture and communicate this truth because, according to her, confronting suffering is a nearly impossible task for human beings. Because the tragic poets are able to depict this reality in a way that can be apprehended by the human mind as true and beautiful, and because, according to Weil, it is only through the radiance of beauty that human thought has access to this truth, the tragic poets are able to effect what she calls a miracle. For Weil, the ability to "see" the prevalence of suffering is the ultimate moral stance to the world.

Building on Weil's ideas, Murdoch argues that what prevents human beings from seeing the truth of the human condition is what she calls "the fat relentless ego," which is prone to daydream and fantasy.[48] Tragedy, according to her, is morally beneficial because it helps to disillusion the

47. As David Gitomer notes, the *Mahābhārata* depicts a world "in permanent crisis." "King Duryodhana," 222.

48. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1971), 52.

egoistic self. Since tragedy contains some dreadful realization of the reality and significance of suffering and death, tragedy threatens the ego's dream of eternal life, happiness, and power. Murdoch insists that to break the ego, tragedies must really distress us—they must show us the reality of our situation, which is that "life is chancy and incomplete," there is no goal or *telos*, and every single thing including one's mind is subject to the vagaries of chance. This way of seeing the world is what she calls "realism,"[49] and for her virtue starts with it.

Both Weil and Murdoch place the ability to recognize the truth of human vulnerability to suffering and death at the center of ethics, as does the *Mahābhārata's* aesthetics of suffering. For Weil and Murdoch, it is the ability to confront suffering—to have the courage to face the truth about the human condition—that opens one up to ethical transformation. This transformation is characterized by the silencing of the ego and the purification of one's consciousness; it results in the ability to see the world as it is, what both Weil and Murdoch refer to as the virtue of "attention." Attention is ethically crucial for both thinkers because it determines behavior in matters of choice. As Murdoch notes, at crucial moments of choice, most of the business of choosing is already over. Why? Because we can choose only based on what we see and therefore only on what we desire and are controlled by.[50] Thus it is the quality of our seeing rather than the quality of our thinking and deliberating that determines our choices and consequently our actions. For Weil and Murdoch, seeing and evaluation go hand in hand; they are simultaneous. Thus moral thinking is closer to aesthetics than to reasoning.

Similarly, through training our attention on the fact of the existence of universal suffering, the *Mahābhārata*'s aesthetics, this book argues, is attempting to refigure less what we think and more what we see and desire and thus how we respond to the world. This "refiguration" entails a repatterning of desires away from the self and toward a larger truth that takes into consideration the condition of all living creatures. For example, as mentioned several times, the point of the argument against grief is to shift the lamenter from the narrow lens of his or her particular viewpoint to the level of the experience of all living creatures. Such a shift is meant to snap lamenters out of their despair by distancing them

49. Ibid., 87.

50. Ibid., 39–40.

from their own situation and opening up their eyes to the condition of all living creatures—universal suffering and ultimately death. This shift also involves a transformation of their emotional responses from grief and self-pity to stoic acceptance and fortitude, emotions that are akin to Murdoch and Weil's concept of attention. Through the depiction of certain characters, particularly Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the blind king (perhaps the most human of all the characters, see chapter 3), the epic's aesthetics of suffering shows time and again that a person can "know" the right thing to do, but still not do it. It is right vision, not right reason, that determines moral behavior in matters of choice.

THUS FAR THIS chapter has discussed three categories of theoretical resources and their points of convergence with the *Mahābhārata's* aesthetics of suffering. However, one should also note what a study of the *Mahābhārata* has to "offer back" to these resources, particularly narrative ethics. Narrative ethics has rarely ventured beyond the genres of the novel and tragic drama into the world of epic. However, for all the reasons for which the novel is considered an ideal genre for the exploration of ethical matters—the complexity of its form, its focus on particulars, the fact that it offers a reflection on human action and character, and so forth—the epic genre too is ideal, often providing even more complexity and detail. In addition, narrative ethics has, for the most part, limited its purview to the Anglo-Christian world.[51] This book offers an examination of the connections between ethics, religion, and narrative in a work of South Asian literature, contextualized in South Asian literary theory.[52]

The Implicit Literary Theory of the Mahābhārata

Having developed a relatively detailed understanding of the epic's aesthetics of suffering through a description of its constitutive elements in the introduction of this book and its points of contact with Sanskrit literary theory, reader-response theory, and narrative ethics in the first part of this chapter, we are now in a good position to "look through" it in order to abstract out the more general but implicit literary theory contained in it.

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51. Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct*, 187.

52. For the intimate connection between ethics (here defined as confronting, responding to, and moving beyond suffering) and religion, see Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 64.

In what follows four basic features of this implicit theory are sketched out. However, this sketch is preliminary because we have not yet turned to the task of closely reading the *Mahābhārata* and showing how the aesthetics of suffering works, which we will do in the following four chapters.

The first feature is the idea that a work of literature conveys meaning less through what it says and more through what it does, and by "what it does" is meant the responses it evokes from its audiences. Just as Ānanda argued that works of literature convey meaning less through directly "saying" and more through "doing" or suggesting—through initiating a process by which meaning blossoms in the mind of the sensitive audience member—so too do Eco and Iser argue that literary texts do much of their work through their gaps—that is, those moments in which a text "does" something precisely by not saying it. The *Mahābhārata's* aesthetics of suffering makes an implicit argument in this regard. It does so in those instances where the text directly states one thing and then down the road contradicts what it has said with no literal, explicit acknowledgment that it is doing so. In these instances meaning is created by the emotional experience of the disjuncture between the explicit saying and the implicit contradicting or "doing." To explain further, let me briefly provide an example from the text. Yudhiṣṭhira is a paragon of virtue and the audience is explicitly encouraged by the text to view him as such. He is the son of the god Dharma and he is frequently referred to as "the Dharma king" (*dharmarāja*). However, early on in the text, in the dicing scene of Book 2, Yudhiṣṭhira displays morally troubling behavior. He gambles irresponsibly and as a result loses his kingdom and his wealth, as well as himself, his four brothers, and their common wife Draupadī. Moreover, he passively watches as the Kauravas violate Draupadī in the assembly hall, refusing all appeals to help her. Given this disturbing behavior, what precisely are we, the audience, supposed to make of Yudhiṣṭhira? Is he really meant to serve as our eyes and ears for determining the dharmic path? Or is the message the opposite of this, namely that Yudhiṣṭhira, in truth, is not virtuous? The answer is neither. Instead, the messages that the text ultimately conveys through its depiction of Yudhiṣṭhira have to do with the audience's emotional experience derived from the disjuncture between these two ideas (i.e., the idea that Yudhiṣṭhira is a paradigm of virtue on the one hand and his morally troubling behavior in the dicing scene on the other) and the audience's intense bewilderment—or disorientation—of not receiving the easy answer that the text itself on the surface appears to give (i.e., to know dharma, look to Yudhiṣṭhira). These

ideas will be expanded upon in chapter 2 which links these kinds of disjunctures to the narrative strategies of rupture and explores what the text is ultimately "suggesting" through them about both the character Yudhiṣṭhira and the concept of *dharma*.

Other scholars of Indian religions have made strikingly similar arguments concerning how premodern Indian texts convey meaning. For example, Joel Brereton offers a remarkably similar argument concerning the aesthetic function of riddle hymns in the *Ṛg Veda*. In his article "Edifying Puzzlement: *Ṛgveda* 10.129 and the uses of Enigma" Brereton focuses on a notoriously puzzling Vedic hymn concerning the origins of the world. The hymn concludes with a riddle-question asking whether anyone truly knows how the world arose, a question that seems to undermine the first part of the poem, which describes the world's origins. By concentrating on the hymn's rhetorical structure and other formal features, Brereton argues that the solution to the riddles posed by the hymn rests both in what the poem says and "even more in the response it evokes in its audience" (i.e., what it does).[53]

The second feature is the idea that a work of literature assumes a sensitive reader/spectator (*sahṛdaya*). This feature is inextricably linked to the first, since what a literary text "does" it does to an audience, and in particular to those audience members who are open to the strategies of the text. Such openness requires sensitivity, literally "feeling with" or "having the same heart," as theorized by the Sanskrit literary theorists; it also requires courage. Why courage? Because the *Mahābhārata's* aesthetics of suffering assumes a reader who is sensitive and open to the discomforting experience of being handed comforting truths and then having those truths wrenched away by the type of disjunctures discussed above. Such an experience, while powerful and potentially transformative, is also intensely bewildering and disorienting. Therefore, it requires a willingness to be and remain open to the experience—what is meant by "courage." In the following pages, references to the epic's "audience," will be referring specifically to the sensitive reader/spectator.

A third feature involves the kind of work that a text can "do" through the provocation of the aesthetic experiences of proximity and estrangement. According to Abhinava, the sensitive reader/spectator—the one who is capable of apprehending *rasa*—is the one who identifies, who literally

53. Brereton, "Edifying Puzzlement," 249.

"feels with" the subject matter of the literary text. However, for *rasa*, or aestheticized emotion, to be successfully suggested, a distancing should occur between the text and its appreciator. Thus the aesthetic experience depends both on proximity—or closeness—with elements of the text as well as on a subsequent distancing from them. Similarly, according to the aesthetics of suffering, one important way in which a literary text does its work is through setting up its audience members to feel close to or comfortable with certain conceptual categories and/or characters, and then subsequently manipulating audience members to feel suddenly "disoriented" or estranged from them. Through this distance, the sensitive reader/spectator is encouraged to stand back and reflect on the feelings and beliefs that he or she was manipulated by the text to have and why. Thus the text creates a space for meta-reflecting, which is precisely where meaning "blossoms" in the mind of the sensitive audience member.

The fourth feature is the inextricable link that the epic's aesthetics of suffering makes between the aesthetic goals of literature and the themes of suffering, loss, separation, death, and impermanence, which, as mentioned earlier, constitutes, to a large degree, the dominant worldview of the three major religious traditions of premodern India. Implicit in the *Mahābhārata's* aesthetics is an argument for why narrative is a distinctively successful genre for exposing this truth. Just as Weil and Murdoch point out that human thought is unable to accept our vulnerability to radical suffering and death, so too does *Mahābhārata's* aesthetics of suffering imply that human beings have an enormous conceptual resistance to facing the fact of universal suffering. It also implies that neither telling them in a straightforward or literal fashion nor showing them through depictions of instances of suffering will break through this resistance. Why? Because most of the conceptual categories that human beings "see through" to order and understand the world are constructed in such a way that they protect them from seeing the truth of universal suffering. Narrative, however, through the work of its aesthetic features, is able to target and "disorient" the sensitive reader/spectator's assumptions, beliefs, and expectations concerning these very conceptual categories, and, in so doing, create a space where one can begin to see beyond them.

Further, according to the *Mahābhārata's* aesthetics, how a human being sees is inherently a matter of ethics, because it inevitably affects one's decisions in matters of choice, a point the *Mahābhārata* demonstrates time and again through its interest in conflict-ridden situations and the weight that it gives to the moment of moral deliberation. However, it is

important to note that the *Mahābhārata* rarely if ever provides a positive role model in these situations.[54] Instead, in the majority of cases, characters make bad decisions and suffer terrible consequences. In this, the *Mahābhārata's* aesthetics of suffering seems to suggest that readers or spectators of narrative literature do not learn from characters through witnessing positive role models in action. Rather, they learn from characters by watching them fail, and by assessing the reasons for the failure as well as witnessing and experiencing the inevitable disastrous consequences of the bad decisions. In chapter 3 we will consider the depiction of the character Dhṛtarāṣṭra as a negative role model and the extensive moral work that this characterization does in the text.

Having sketched four basic features of the implicit literary theory of the *Mahābhārata*, let us now turn to the task of reading the epic with its aesthetics of suffering in mind. In chapter 2 we begin by close-reading perhaps the most famous episode in the epic: the game of dice. Our task will be to examine the depiction of three character types—the victim, the agent, and the passive witness to suffering—in the context of one of the predominant narrative situations of the aesthetics of suffering: situations that involve dilemmas. Indeed, the dicing scene is the quintessential example of this type of situation in the epic, for it is here that characters make decisions and take actions that make the inevitable march toward whole-scale destruction irreversible.

54. John Smith also makes the point that the heroes and heroines of Indian epics are not meant to be taken as moral paragons. See "Scapegoats of the Gods: The Ideology of the Indian Epics," in *Oral Epics in India*, ed. Stuart Blackburn et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 194.

2

Dharma *and Rupture in the Game of Dice*

What is more wretched than this, that I, a woman of virtue and beauty, was forced to enter the assembly hall of men. Where is the dharma *of kings?*
—DRAUPADĪ *To The Assembled Kings*[1]

If anything, grief is the one quality or sign which marks women in epic Mahābhārata, *and Draupadī is exceptional in this respect.*
—KEVIN MCGRATH[2]

AS DAVID SHULMAN notes, in the unfolding of the central narrative line of the *Mahābhārata*, "all roads lead to and from the pivotal moment of the dice game (*dyūta*)."[3] In this episode, the Kauravas (led by Duryodhana) challenge the Pāṇḍavas to a crooked dice match, rob them of their kingdom, violate their queen Draupadī, and exile them for thirteen years. Because of these egregious acts, war between the two sets of cousins is inevitable. Furthermore, this episode contains one of the most disturbing instances of cruelty and suffering in the text: Draupadī's violation at the hands of the Kauravas in the presence of the Bhārata elders who do nothing to save her.[4] What is particularly disturbing about the fact that the elders act as "passive witnesses" to Draupadī's abuse is that they claim they

1. 2.62.8.

2. Kevin McGrath, *Strī: Women in Epic Mahābhārata* (Boston, MA: Ilex Foundation, 2009), 192.

3. Shulman, "Devana and Daiva," 351.

4. The dicing scene takes place in *The Book of the Assembly Hall* (*Sabhāparvan*), 2.43.–72.37.

are paralyzed by the "subtle" (*sūkṣma*) nature of *dharma*, a claim that implicates *dharma* in this instance of violence and sorrow.

In this chapter we will explore how the epic's aesthetics of suffering makes its threefold argument about the existence of suffering, the forces that cause it, and the appropriate emotional and psychological responses that allow one to move beyond it through examining the depiction of four characters—Duryodhana, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Yudhiṣṭhira, and Draupadī—and one conceptual category—*dharma*. Following a brief summary of this episode, we will first explore how the actions of three potential agents of suffering—Duryodhana, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and Yudhiṣṭhira—lead to the game of dice and Draupadī's subsequent abuse. Next we will focus on how the depiction of Draupadī encourages us to critically confront disturbing truths about the prevalence of suffering in the world.[5] Finally, we will examine Draupadī's question to Yudhiṣṭhira concerning the validity of his stake and the silence of the elders and Yudhiṣṭhira in response to this question. What does the Pāñcalī princess's question, which leads to a tangled discussion about the nature of *dharma* among the elders in the assembly hall, and the absence of an answer, tell us about the disconcerting relationship between *dharma* and suffering?

Summary of the Episode of the Dice Game

Duryodhana, the Kaurava prince, has just witnessed his cousin Yudhiṣṭhira's spectacular rise to universal sovereign at the royal consecration and is "burning"(*dahyamāna*)[6] with envy. Due to this impassioned state, he falls prey to the "tricks"(*pralambha*)[7] of Yudhiṣṭhira's grand hall, stumbling into ponds that he mistakes for land and lifting his skirts to keep them dry on crystal pavements that he "sees" (√*dṛś*) and "thinks" (√*man*) are ponds. (The use of these two verbs suggests that Duryodhana's mistake has to do with how he cognitively responds to what he sees.) Arjuna, Bhīma, and their servants witness these "mistakes" and ridicule him, adding to Duryodhana's humiliation. Note that the themes of illusion, mockery, and public humiliation that are present here will resurface

5. My use of personal pronouns such as "we" and "us" in this context refers to the sensitive reader/*sahṛdaya*. See chapter 1.

6. Literally, "being tormented." 2.43.21.

7. 2.43.11.

later when Draupadī, upon Duryodhana's orders, is brought into the Kauravas' assembly hall.

Now Duryodhana wants revenge; specifically, he wants to wrest Yudhiṣṭhira's glory and power from him, but he knows he cannot do so through force; the Pāṇḍavas are too powerful. Śakuni, his uncle, comes up with another idea: a game of dice. Yudhiṣṭhira, according to Śakuni, is fond of dice (*dyūtapriya*) but does not know how to play; Śakuni, on the other hand, is an expert at dice, and he assures Duryodhana that he will be able to wrest Yudhiṣṭhira's kingdom from him.[8]

Duryodhana approaches his father, King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, in order to obtain his approval for Śakuni's plan. Dhṛtarāṣṭra refuses; gambling, he says, will lead to a division in the family. Duryodhana heatedly persists; Dhṛtarāṣṭra wavers, ultimately gives in, and sends his brother and wise councilor Vidura to summon Yudhiṣṭhira to the Kaurava assembly hall. Yudhiṣṭhira submits to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's summons unwillingly (he feels that he has no choice but to accept, appealing to both fate [*daiva*] and *dharma* as forces that bind him) and upon his arrival in Hāstinapura, the game begins.

Yudhiṣṭhira's first stake is a modest string of pearls. Śakuni wins. Yudhiṣṭhira accuses him of defeating him with a "trick" (*kaitavaka*)[9] and begins to stake wildly. In the course of the next seventeen throws, he gambles away his entire kingdom, his four brothers, and himself. His nineteenth stake is his wife and queen, Draupadī. He loses and Duryodhana orders Draupadī to be brought into the hall as his slave:

> Come, steward, bring Draupadī, the beloved, honored wife of the Pāṇḍavas. Let her sweep the house! Make her move quickly! What a joy for us—let her be with the female slaves![10]

Draupadī, at her most magnificent, responds to her summons with a question for Yudhiṣṭhira: "Bhārata, whom did you lose first—yourself or me?"[11] This question, posed several times to Yudhiṣṭhira and to the elders in the hall, is met with stupefied silence.

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8. 2.44.18.

9. 2.54.1.

10. 2.59.1.

11. 2.60.7.

Draupadī is dragged into the hall and sexually violated by Duryodhana and his cronies in the presence of the kings and elders in the assembly hall who watch but do nothing to help her. Finally, the howls of jackals and other inauspicious omens prompt Dhṛtarāṣṭra to put an end to the madness. He gives the Pāṇḍava queen three boons, and she requests Yudhiṣṭhira's freedom first followed by the freedom of her other four husbands. The Pāṇḍavas, free again, leave for their kingdom, Indraprastha, but are then summoned back by Dhṛtarāṣṭra (at Duryodhana's prompting) for one last throw. After losing yet again, they are exiled for twelve years in the forest and for one year in the city, where they are to live in disguise; if they are recognized during this year, they are to spend another twelve years in the forest.

At the conclusion of the dice game, there is a sense of impending doom. Almost every character knows that war between the two sets of cousins is inevitable; it is only a matter of time. Further, a sensibility that I call the "weight of affliction" enters the text in this episode and is sustained throughout the remaining sixteen books. Before the game of dice, suffering, particularly the Pāṇḍavas' suffering, is punctuated by resolution; misfortune is followed by periods of happiness and fruition. However, beginning with the game of dice, the Pāṇḍavas (and most of the characters who are sympathetic to them) experience unyielding suffering. From here on out there is no end to the Pāṇḍavas' misfortune, just as there is no end to their despair. This is borne out in the narrative by the continuous line of travails that they undergo during and after the game: loss of kingdom, exile, failed peace negotiations, war, victory at unthinkable cost, a joyless return to power as rulers of an empty kingdom, and death. From the point of the "fated" dice game onward, suffering for the Pāṇḍava family is followed by more suffering, and then finally death.

Proximity and Estrangement in the Episode of the Dice Game

In the opening passages of the episode of the dice game, the text forewarns the audience about two narrative outcomes: it tells us that the dice game will take place and it tells us that it will have disastrous consequences. For example, early on in the episode Janamejaya interrupts the narrator Vaiśaṃpāyana and asks him,

> How did that very unfortunate dice game between brothers come about that brought that calamity to the Pāṇḍavas, my paternal grandfathers? . . . I want you to tell me this in great detail, noble brahmin, for this was the root of the destruction of the world.[12]

Here Janamejaya, whose perspective is informed by the future, tells us that the game will indeed take place and that it will have tragic and violent consequences. Why does the text forewarn us about the outcomes of both the episode (the game will take place) and the game (familial division and war) and rob us of the opportunity for suspense about these matters? One plausible reason is in order to arouse curiosity about issues that extend beyond the question of "what happens next?" Of course, one must assume that most audiences would already know the outcome of this episode, since, as A. K. Ramanujan has famously said, no one ever "reads" the *Mahābhārata* for the first time.[13] Still, by beginning in this way, the text sets us up to pay attention to certain things, namely to the question of precisely what *caused* the game. How did it come about? Why did it lead to such division and strife? Thus, suspense is transferred from the "what happens next" question to questions about how and why certain events happened—that is, questions about the details.

The epic's strategies provide answers to the "how" and the "why" of the game through a carefully crafted presentation of the decision-making processes of the three principal characters whose combined decisions lead to the game: Duryodhana, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and Yudhiṣṭhira. Here, the closely related motifs of vision and blindness on the one hand and mental clarity and confusion on the other are particularly important. The manner in which the epic's narrative strategies present these three characters in this scene encourages proximity (i.e., sympathy) and/or estrangement (i.e., emotional and critical distance) from them. Further, our emotional ties to these characters, or the lack thereof, have a great deal to do with what we ultimately learn from them about suffering, both their own and the sorrow that their decisions and actions cause others.

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12. 2.46.1–3. This break occurs after Vaiśaṃpāyana has narrated the events of the dicing scene up to the point where Dhṛtarāṣṭra submits to Duryodhana's request. Janamejaya's question causes Vaiśaṃpāyana to retell the conversation between Duryodhana and Dhṛtarāṣṭra in more detail.

13. Ramanujan, "Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*," 419.

In this section we will explore how the epic's strategies depict the mental states and decision-making processes of Duryodhana, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and Yudhiṣṭhira, focusing on four issues: (1) how the narrative strategies depict the characters and how these characters make their decisions, (2) how the narrative strategies present the behavior of these characters *after* they make their decisions, particularly with respect to their treatment of Draupadī, (3) how the narrative strategies encourage either proximity and/or estrangement from each character, and (4) the "work" of the estrangement. Our journey with each one of the characters begins with sympathetic proximity and ends with emotional distance. This distance is inevitable because each one of these characters makes decisions that lead to the dice game. In addition, since the epic has forewarned us that the consequences of the game will lead to a great disaster and large-scale suffering, we are encouraged to feel distanced from whoever in the narrative promotes the game.[14]

Duryodhana

Prince Duryodhana is the driving force of the dice game. While the game is originally his uncle Śakunī's idea, Duryodhana seizes upon it and mobilizes those around him to effect its implementation. Therefore, an analysis of his emotions and mental states is crucial for understanding why and how the game came to be, as well as why it had such disastrous consequences. Such

14. For the symbolic import of dicing in ancient India, see Don Handelman and David Shulman, *God Inside Out: Śiva's Game of Dice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Their work suggests that the dicing motif is, in some sense, the antithesis of order. It represents the destructive aspects of the cosmos. Similarly, I believe that the *Mahābhārata* is interested in the dicing motif because it, like war (to which it is compared often), brings out extreme emotions in people. It provides a context where people lose control of their senses and become violent and destructive. The text is very interested in examining how people respond psychologically to extreme situations. The gambler's lament in the *Ṛg Veda* (10.34) also explores the dicing motif vis-à-vis the destructive emotions that gambling can elicit. See Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, tr., *The Rig Veda: An Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), 239–241. For scholarship on the particulars of the dice game in ancient India, see C. Panduranga Bhatta, *Dice-play in Sanskrit Literature: A Study* (Delhi: Amar Prakashan, 1985); N. N. Bhattacharya, "The King and the Dice: A Study in Rituals of the Rājasūya," *Journal of the Oriental Institute of Baroda* 23/4 (1974), 288–307; K. de Vreese, "The Dice Game in Ancient India," in *Orientalia Neerlandica: A Volume of Oriental Studies* (Leiden: A. W. Sitjhoff, 1948), 349–362; A. B. Keith, "The Game of Dice," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1908): 824–828; J. C. Heesterman, *The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1957), 143–157; David Shulman, "Devana and Daiva," 351–353; and David Gordon White, "Dogs Die," *History of Religions* 23/4 (1989): 283–303.

an analysis also provides clues as to how the narrative strategies of proximity and estrangement make a point about the psychological forces that contribute to the pervasive presence of suffering in the world.

At the opening of the episode, Duryodhana surveys the Pāṇḍavas' grand assembly hall along with Śakuni and falls prey to the "tricks"(*pralambhān*)[15] of the hall. He "thinks" he sees a pond where only a crystal slab exists, and he pulls up his robe to avoid getting wet. Next, he falls into a pond that he mistakes for crystalline water. Witnessing this, Bhīma, Arjuna, and the twins laugh mockingly. Ashamed, Duryodhana roams the hall dejected (*durmanas*).[16] Again, he mistakes dry land for water, pulling up his robes; again, his cousins mock him.

Why does Duryodhana fall prey to the "deceptions" or tricks in the Pāṇḍavas' hall? The epic does not provide an explicit answer to this question, so we are left in the dark as to whether "the divine designs"[17] are intentionally planted there by the Pāṇḍavas (or by Maya, the divine architect, for that matter)[18] to shame Duryodhana or whether there is something about Duryodhana that makes him susceptible to the power of these objects.[19] In any event, Duryodhana is humiliated; the Pāṇḍavas and their servants mock him cruelly, and their actions contribute to his misery.[20]

As Duryodhana returns to his kingdom with Śakuni, he is preoccupied and deep in thought; his uncle asks him the source of his distraction. Duryodhana's long response to Śakuni together with his extensive speeches to his father about the powerful emotions he experiences as a result of witnessing Yudhiṣṭhira's royal consecration provides one of the largest windows into the inner workings of Duryodhana's mind in the

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15. 2.43.11.

16. 2.43.4.

17. 2.43.2.

18. Maya is saved from the fire of the Khāṇḍava Forest by Arjuna. To return the favor, Maya builds the Pāṇḍavas a great assembly hall. For more on Maya as the architect of the Pāṇḍavas' assembly hall, see van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata, Vol.* 2, 6–9.

19. See 2.3.30. There is something "fishy" about this hall; some kings are fooled by its ponds for mysterious reasons.

20. 2.43.2–43.13. For examples of other literary texts that encourage us to sympathize with "villains," see Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 243–264. This scene is undoubtedly meant to be funny, but it is the human dimension of Duryodhana that is being brought out here, not the villainous side. For an overview of humor in Sanskrit literature, see Lee Siegel, *Laughing Matters: Comic Traditions in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

entire epic. By opening up Duryodhana's internal world to us, the text encourages us to understand his situation from his point of view. These speeches contain three basic themes: (1) that Duryodhana suffers bitterly; (2) that the cause of Duryodhana's suffering is the Pāṇḍavas' spectacular rise to power and glory; and (3) that he intends to ease his suffering by seeking revenge. In these speeches, Duryodhana moves from the persona of victim to that of would-be aggressor; at the same time, he moves from a figure of tentative sympathy to an object of suspicion.

In his speeches to his father and his uncle, Duryodhana emphasizes his misery. Duryodhana tells Śakuni that he "suffers bitterly" (*suduḥkhita*),[21] that he is "suffering" (*dahyamāna*)[22] night and day. To Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Duryodhana communicates that he is "pale" (*vivarṇa*), "miserable" (*dīna*), "yellowish" (*hariṇa*), and "feeble" (kṛśa).[23] He tells his father that he can find no peace "in his mind which is suffering" (*dahyamānena cetasā*)[24] and that he no longer finds himself firm (*na vinde dṛḍham ātmānaṃ*).[25] For Duryodhana this is a matter of life or death, because he cannot bear to go on suffering like this. He tells Śakuni that he will enter the fire or drink poison or drown himself, for he will not be able to go on living.[26]

What is the source of Duryodhana's despair? Duryodhana tells Śakuni that since he saw Yudhiṣṭhira's grand sacrifice, during which he witnessed the entire earth under Yudhiṣṭhira's sway, he has fallen prey to "resentment" (*amarṣa*), which he is tormented by.[27] Likewise, Duryodhana tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra that it is because he saw *śrī*, or royal splendor, in Yudhiṣṭhira and not in himself, he has become pale and wasted.[28] While jealousy in a character is not an emotion that encourages proximity, the things that keep us from feeling alienated from Duryodhana, and indeed encourage us to sympathize with him to some extent here are the fact that

21. 2.43.36.

22. 2.43.23.

23. 2.45.16.

24. 2.45.35.

25. 2.47.2.

26. 2.43.27

27. 2.43.21.

28. 2.45.15–16. For scholarship on the royal value of *śri* in both Vedic and post-Vedic texts, see Jan Gonda, *Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1969), 176–231 and Minoru Hara, "Śrī: Mistress of a King," *Orientalia Suecana* 45–46 (1996): 45–46.

he is suffering and that we have just witnessed the Pāṇḍavas (with the exception of Yudhiṣṭhira) treat him cruelly.[29] In this momentary reversal of roles (the Pāṇḍavas as "bad guys" and Duryodhana, briefly, as their prey) the text encourages us to question our assumptions about who is the victim and who is the aggressor, toying with our sympathies in the process. To see the Pāṇḍavas briefly from this less than flattering perspective gives us the opportunity to see them from Duryodhana's point of view, and while Duryodhana is not a figure to be admired here, he is still, in both his anguish and his envy, granted the full measure of his humanity.

However, as Duryodhana seizes upon the idea of revenge and tries to convince his father to sanction the game, he begins to spin out of control and loses his grip on his reason and on reality. At the same time, he begins to arouse our suspicion. Duryodhana's growing anger and hatred toward Yudhiṣṭhira contribute to a steady yet illogical progression of thought that leads him to the dangerous conclusion that he must take the Pāṇḍavas' wealth away from them at any cost, and this leads him ultimately to the decision to implement the dice game.[30] The steps in his thinking, all extracted from his speeches to his father and his uncle, run something like this: (1) I suffer,[31] (2) I suffer because I "saw" Yudhiṣṭhira's immense wealth,[32] (3) in order to stop my suffering I must win even greater glory or kill myself,[33](4) I must take the Pāṇḍavas' wealth away from them or die, because a man who watches the prosperity of his enemies without acting (a) is not human,[34](b) is evil (*pāpa*),[35]and finally because (c) if I do act not my enemies are sure to destroy me.[36] This progression of thought is not

29. Yudhiṣṭhira does not laugh at Duryodhana in this scene; neither does Draupadī. See 2.43.7.

30. For a slightly different interpretation of Duryodhana's reasons for inciting war with the Pāṇḍavas, see B. K. Matilal, "The Throne: Was Duryodhana Wrong?" in *Ethics and Epics: The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal*, ed.Jonardon Ganeri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 109–122.

31. 2.43.21, 2.45.16, 2.45.35, 2.47.2.

32. 2.43.19–21.

33. 2.43.7.

34. He says, "If I were to tolerate such wealth that has come (to them) now, I would be neither a woman nor not a woman, neither a man nor not a man." 2.43.29.

35. 2.48.18.

36. 2.50.23–24.

only illogical but delusional. There is absolutely no indication in the text that Yudhiṣṭhira has had any intention of destroying the Kauravas. Indeed, it seems that his intentions are quite the opposite, for there is textual evidence that Yudhiṣṭhira is attempting to bring the families closer together.[37]

As Duryodhana spins more and more out of control, he moves from victim to villain, further encouraging distance. He becomes increasingly childish and spoiled as he tries to convince Dhṛtarāṣṭra to sanction the game, using his suicidal impulses, which seemed genuine in his speeches to Śakuni, as a tool to manipulate his father. He says to his father,

> If Vidura were to come, he would turn you back. If you were stopped, I would die, let there be no doubt, best of kings. When I am dead, be happy with your Vidura, king! You will enjoy the entire earth, why bother about me?[38]

During the actual dice game, he commits the defining act of cruelty (*nṛśamsya*) in the epic: he causes Draupadī, half-naked and in her menses, to be brought into the assembly hall before the gaze of men, opening the floodgates to her violation. The inconceivability of this act forecloses any possibility of lingering sympathetic proximity to Duryodhana; our estrangement from him at this point is total and complete.[39]

Proximity and estrangement in the *Mahābhārata* are almost always connected to characters and their relation to two thematic elements: suffering and comprehensibility. We sympathize with those characters who are either victims of or prevent suffering, and we are distanced from those who cause suffering. Similarly, we feel close to characters whose motives and modes of behavior make sense to us, and we feel estranged from those characters whose motives and modes of behavior do not. It is in part due to moments of great distance from and great proximity toward characters in the epic that the text is able to refigure our understanding of suffering.

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37. During the Royal Consecration, Yudhiṣṭhira invited the Kauravas to participate as members of his family. However, he was most likely "sticking it" to Duryodhana by assigning him the duty of receiving the gifts of homage. Surely Yudhiṣṭhira knew this would incite Duryodhana's greed and envy. 2.32.1–10.

38. 2.45.43–44.

39. Matilal, "The Throne," 112.

What is the purpose of our estrangement from Duryodhana? By creating distance between the audience and the character, the text's strategies encourage us to stand back and question Duryodhana's almost inconceivable behavior. Here the question is obvious: What caused Duryodhana to go so horribly astray? The text provides us with clues that help to answer this question through its careful depiction of Duryodhana in the opening passages of the episode, particularly in the way they focus on (1) what Duryodhana sees, (2) what he thinks, and (3) the condition of his mind (*manas*, *mati*). So what precisely does Duryodhana see and how does this contribute to his moral decline? In his speeches to his father and his uncle, Duryodhana refers self-reflexively to the act of seeing at least ten times.[40] While the objects of his vision range from treasures that he saw at Yudhiṣṭhira's royal consecration to the "tricks" of the lotus pond built by Maya, what he focuses on as the source of his suffering and resentment is the fact that he "saw" *śrī* in Yudhiṣṭhira and not in himself.[41] Similarly, the object of his thoughts centers on Yudhiṣṭhira's magnificent wealth and power, symbols of his *śrī*, which he thinks about continuously.[42] What the narrative strategies provide through their depiction of Duryodhana is a meditation on the psychological effects of greed and envy (closely related emotions in the *Mahābhārata*). The text notes that once Duryodhana "saw" the magnificent wealth of the Pāṇḍavas, his mind became evil (*pāpā matir ajāyata*).[43] Duryodhana himself speaks of becoming mentally unsteady and confused. This confusion causes him to settle upon a lose-lose solution to his troubles: suicide or victory at any cost through the game of dice, which he pursues with monomaniacal blindness to the point of madness, and which culminates in the cruel abuse of Draupadī.

To return to our question, what caused Duryodhana to go astray? A close analysis of the text suggests that the turbulent quality of Duryodhana's mind, caused by his responses to what he witnesses in the world, leads to his despicable behavior.[44] At the same time, it suggests that virtue and vice have less to do with conduct and more to do with quality of mind.

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40. √*dṛś*. 2.47.1–2.49.1.

41. 2.45.15–16. Van Buitenen translates the use of the locative here as "at Yudhiṣṭhira's place" instead of "in Yudhiṣṭhira."

42. For example, 2.43.35.

43. 2.43.13.

44. Dhṛtarāṣṭra provides a similar analysis of Duryodhana's behavior at 1.1.98.

This point may be articulated differently in light of our concern with the *Mahābhārata*'s depiction of human sorrow: those who generate suffering (both for themselves and others) do so as a result of confusion caused by an unbalanced mind.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra

Dhṛtarāṣṭra's role in the dice game is crucial for two reasons. First, Duryodhana would not be able to move forward with his plan without his father's approval. Second, Yudhiṣṭhira would not accept the invitation to play dice if it were extended by anyone other than his uncle. Therefore, an analysis of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's emotions and mental states in this episode is also critical for understanding why the disastrous game took place. With Dhṛtarāṣṭra, we take a journey that begins with clear vision, lapses into blindness, and then returns to clear vision again.[45]

When Śakuni and Duryodhana first approach Dhṛtarāṣṭra and present their plan to him, Dhṛtarāṣṭra exhibits remarkable farsightedness. He immediately recognizes the dangers of the game, which he believes will cause a quarrel in the family. He also recognizes that his son is not of sound mind, but operates out of delusion (*moha*).[46] Based on these correct assessments, he refuses to grant his approval of the game. He even offers Duryodhana sound advice by telling him that longing for another's property is "fruitless behavior."[47] Thus, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's preliminary response to his son's request that he sanction the dice game displays wisdom and insight, and insofar as he seems genuinely interested in obviating a family quarrel, we are encouraged to stand by him and to even feel a sense of relief that he is going to check Duryodhana, who, at this point, is spinning out of control.

However, Dhṛtarāṣṭra suddenly changes his mind and submits to Duryodhana's request saying,

> Your speech does not please me, but do what you want, king of men. You will suffer afterwards.[48]

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45. While the discussion centers on Dhṛtarāṣṭra's moral blindness here, remember that the king is also physically blind. On the importance of seeing and observation in the epic, see Angelika Malinar, "Blindheit und Sehen in der Erzählung des Mahābhārata," in *Odysee-Rezeptionen*, ed. A. Luther (Frankfurt: Verlag Antike), 97–114.

46. 2.50.3.

47. 2.50.6.

48. 2.51.14.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra's reversal here is abrupt; there is no narrative event that explains his sudden change of heart. Attention to the narrative sequence does not seem to help us here because directly before Dhṛtarāṣṭra speaks these words, Duryodhana has told him that if they gamble with the Pāṇḍavas, then they can stand on equal footing with them.[49] Duryodhana has made similar points before, so it is difficult to see why this statement in particular persuades Dhṛtarāṣṭra. What makes Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sudden change of heart so puzzling is that he gives in at the precise moment when he sees clearly that the game will have disastrous consequences.[50] So why does Dhṛtarāṣṭra give in? The text suggests several causes without privileging one. Was he beaten down by Duryodhana's relentless harangue?[51] Did Duryodhana's threats of suicide tug at his heart?[52] Did wisdom finally give way to desire for power? Was he impelled by fate (*daiva*, *dhātṛ*)[53] or by his affection for his son (*sutapriya*)?[54] Whatever the cause of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's change of heart, the text's strategies, by flooding the text with possible causes without privileging one, transform this question into a riddle-question. In so doing, it deliberately keeps Dhṛtarāṣṭra's reasons and emotions hidden from us.

Once Dhṛtarāṣṭra acquiesces to his son's wishes, he descends into confusion. His perturbed state of mind and the unfortunate decisions that he makes as a result further encourage alienation from him. His conversation with Vidura right after he agrees to allow the game illustrates his befuddlement most clearly. Here Vidura, who has just learned that Dhṛtarāṣṭra has given in to his son, tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra that he (Vidura) does not approve of the game because dicing will lead to a quarrel (*kalaha*).[55]

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49. 2.51.13.

50. Immediately after Dhṛtarāṣṭra submits to his son he says, "For all this was previously seen in just this way by Vidura who is wise and intelligent. It is just this that leads to the great calamity of the one who is powerless, destroying the seeds of the *kṣatriyas*." 2.51.15.

51. Duryodhana expends considerable verbal and emotional energy in an effort to convince his father to sanction the game. Almost one hundred *ślokas* are devoted to his report to his father concerning the treasures that he received on Yudhiṣṭhira's behalf at the royal consecration.

52. See 2.45.45.

53. 2.45.55, 2.45.57, and 2.51.25. See chapter 5 for a discussion of the various Sanskrit terms used for fate in the *Mahābhārata* and their semantic nuances. Also see chapter 5 for a more extensive discussion of the role of fate in the dicing scene.

54. The narrative voice suggests this at line 2.66.27 and Dhṛtarāṣṭra suggests this at line 2.72.36.

55. 2.51.24.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra refuses to listen to Vidura's advice, even though he himself had expressed similar concerns earlier.[56] Mysteriously, he says to his brother:

> Steward, there will be no quarrel between my sons and my other sons.[57] The gods in heaven will favor us, there is no doubt.[58]

What is curious about Dhṛtarāṣṭra's response to Vidura here is that where he saw danger moments before, he now sees the favor of the gods. In a very short period of time, it seems, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's vision of the world has been upended, prompting the question, again, of the source of his sudden reversal.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra's silence during the dice game encourages estrangement from him. The fact that Dhṛtarāṣṭra says nothing as the unthinkable events unfold, as Draupadī is summoned into the hall by Duryodhana, dragged by her hair, stripped, and abused, is astounding. Other characters note his silence and take him to task for it (Draupadī does so at 2.60.34 and Vikarṇa does so at 2.61.13). In spite of their admonishment, Dhṛtarāṣṭra continues to say and do nothing. Since he is perhaps the only character who has the power to stop Duryodhana, his silence is a tacit approval of his son's actions. And while Dhṛtarāṣṭra is the one who finally offers Draupadī the boons that save her and her husbands, the text is careful to note that he does so only at Vidura and Gāndhārī's bidding.[59] It is not at all clear that he would have done so on his own.

At the end of the game of dice, after the Pāṇḍavas have left for the forest and after the enmity between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas seems irreversible, clarity of vision returns to Dhṛtarāṣṭra just as suddenly and inexplicably as blindness struck earlier. His lucidity here is staggering. He sees that a war between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas is inevitable,[60] he understands that Vidura's advice was correct and that he was unable to heed it because of his attachment to his son (literally, "his desire for that

56. 2.46.12.

57. Literally, "by my sons on my other sons" (*putreṣu putrair me*).

58. 2.45.53.

59. 2.63.24.

60. 2.72.1.

which is advantageous for his son" [*putrahitepsā*]).[61] What is so heartbreaking about Dhṛtarāṣṭra's clarity here is that it comes too late. If only he had been able to maintain a balanced mind as the events unfolded and restrained his son as a result, the outcome of this episode could have been so different, and untold suffering—not only Draupadī's, but that of virtually every other character in the epic (suffering caused by the war and its devastation)—could have been avoided. Because the text deliberately emphasizes the abruptness of the return of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's mental clarity and provides no real account of its sources, it encourages us to remain distanced from him.

What kind of work does this estrangement from Dhṛtarāṣṭra do? From this distanced viewpoint, we are encouraged to reflect on the question of what motivated Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sudden reversals from clear vision to blindness and then from blindness to clear vision again. Dhṛtarāṣṭra himself provides a partial answer to this question at the very end of the episode. Listen as he speaks to Saṃjaya:

> When the gods wish to bring disaster to a person, they remove that person's intelligence so that one sees matters backwards. When destruction is imminent and one's intelligence is perverted the wrong course appears as the right one and does not leave one's heart. When destruction is near that which is fruitless appears fruitful and that which is fruitful appears fruitless and one is pleased. Time does not raise a club and clobber a person's head. The power of time is just this inverted vision of matters.[62]

While Dhṛtarāṣṭra makes several important points here, I want to highlight two of them: first, Dhṛtarāṣṭra focuses on the mind as the root of misfortune; second, Dhṛtarāṣṭra provides an account of the confused or "perverted" mind, which he says causes the right course to appear wrong (or more precisely, fruitless, *anartha*) and the wrong course to appear right (fruitful, *artha*).

What we learn about the role of mental confusion in human suffering from Dhṛtarāṣṭra's speech here conjoined with what we learned about the

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61. 2.72.36.

62. 2.72.8–11. Interestingly, in the Vulgate, this speech is put in the mouth of Saṃjaya. Vidura repeats the speech almost word for word to Dhṛtarāṣṭra when he offers words of comfort and advice to the blind king in *The Book of the Effort* (5.34.78–79).

significance of the quality of a person's mental attitude in our analysis of Duryodhana provide specific insights into the forces that impel human beings to commit acts of cruelty and thus produce suffering. How? In our analysis of the depiction of both Duryodhana and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, we noticed that both characters were overcome by powerful emotions;[63] subsequently they succumbed to mental confusion which, as in Dhṛtarāṣṭra's words, caused them to see "the wrong course" as "the right one" and vice versa. As a direct result of this inverted vision, both characters committed acts and/or made decisions that resulted in cruelty, acts and decisions that caused the suffering of others (Draupadī in particular). Neither of the two characters saw their actions as cruel; instead they saw them as somehow proper. We must understand, however, that while both Duryodhana and Dhṛtarāṣṭra are agents of suffering,[64] they are also victims of despair. Their own inner turmoil impels them to make the decisions they make. Suffering, it seems, only begets more suffering. More precisely, once one succumbs to sorrow (caused by one's emotional responses to what one sees in the world), one becomes confused, one's vision becomes inverted, and the wrong course appears as the right one and vice versa. Consequently, one commits acts of cruelty (acts that cause others to suffer), without seeing these acts as wrong, but, on the contrary, seeing them as somehow proper.[65]

Yudhiṣṭhira

The presentation of Yudhiṣṭhira in this episode constitutes a somewhat special case. While we have witnessed Duryodhana and Dhṛtarāṣṭra commit morally questionable acts before the dicing scene,[66] Yudhiṣṭhira

63. Duryodhana is overcome by jealousy and despair due to the grand success of his cousins. Dhṛtarāṣṭra is overcome by sorrow caused by witnessing Duryodhana's anguish and possibly his own desire for power.

64. To be more precise, one might say that Duryodhana is an active agent, while Dhṛtarāṣṭra is a passive one because he "gives into" his weakness for his son, his greed, and so on. See B. K. Matilal, "Dharma and Rationality," in *Ethics and Epics: The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal*, ed. Jonardon Ganeri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 61–62.

65. See 2.62–63 of the *Bhagavadgītā* where Kṛṣṇa discusses a similar chain of events that lead to a person's downfall. Irawati Karve comments on this passage in *Yugānta: The End of an Epoch* (New Delhi: Sangam Press, 1974), 136.

66. Most notably, Duryodhana attempted to kill Bhīma and both Duryodhana and Dhṛtarāṣṭra exiled the Pāṇḍavas to Vāraṇāvata in order to gain control of the throne.

up to this point has been, for the most part, a paragon of virtue. Significantly, he is the son of Dharma and is frequently referred to as "the Dharma king" (*dharmarāja*). Therefore, at the outset, we have a tremendous amount of trust in him and his abilities to perceive *dharma*. Further, we have been encouraged by the epic's strategies to travel with him. Up to this point he has served, for the most part, as our eyes and ears for discerning right and wrong in the epic. However, in this episode Yudhiṣṭhira, for perhaps the first time in the text, explicitly displays morally troubling behavior: he accepts the invitation to dice for mysterious reasons, he gambles irresponsibly, and he is a passive witness to Draupadī's violation in the assembly hall.[67] In what follows I explore how the text encourages estrangement from Yudhiṣṭhira. As in the case of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Yudhiṣṭhira's journey begins with clear vision and then degenerates rapidly into confusion. However, unlike Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Yudhiṣṭhira never regains clear vision in the dicing episode; we do not witness him return to balance and control until we meet him again in the next book, in *The Forest Book*, when the Pāṇḍavas begin their thirteen years in exile.

When Vidura approaches Yudhiṣṭhira to summon him to Hāstinapura, Yudhiṣṭhira sees the dangers of the game immediately and is reluctant to acquiesce. He tells Vidura:

> Dicing will bring destruction upon us, steward. Who, knowing this, would consent to a game?[68]

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67. Van Buitenen argues that the motivating factors of Yudhiṣṭhira's remarkable behavior can be found in the structure of the Vedic *rājasūya* ritual and thus Yudhiṣṭhira's morality was not affected by engaging in the gaming. See J. A. B. van Buitenen, "On the Structure of the *Sabhāparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*" in *India Maior: Congratulatory Volume Presented to J. Gonda*, ed. J. Ensink and P. Gaeffke (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), 68–84 and van Buitenen, introduction to *The Mahābhārata, Vol.* 2, 5. For a rebuttal of this view, see Renate Söhnen-Thieme, "On the Composition of the *Dyūtaparvan* in the *Mahābhārata*" in *Composing a Tradition: Concepts, Techniques and Relationships: Proceedings of the First Dubrovnik International Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas, August 1997*, ed. Mary Brockington and Peter Schreiner (Zagrab: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1999), 139–154. Shulman too is somewhat skeptical of van Buitenen's thesis, noting that "[if] the epic dice-match is a reflection of, or even a commentary upon the Vedic model, then it clearly stands in a somewhat ironic relation to the prototype." Shulman, "Devana and Daiva," 353. Shulman justifies his position by noting that in the Vedic royal consecration (which leads up to a game of dice played by the king) the king never loses the match, whereas Yudhiṣṭhira "fails spectacularly to win." For additional scholarship on the position of the Vedic dice game in the life of the king see Paul Bowlby, "Kings without Authority: The Obligation of the Ruler to Gamble in the *Mahābhārata*," *Studies in Religion /Sciences Religieuses* 20 (1991): 3–17.

68. 2.52.10.

Next, he asks Vidura to name the specific gamblers whom he will play. After Vidura tells him, Yudhiṣṭhira remarks that they are all very dangerous and play with tricks (*māyā*).[69] At the very outset, then, Yudhiṣṭhira seems to assess the situation correctly, just as we might expect him to. He even seeks Vidura's advice, and Vidura tells him that although the game will bring disaster, Yudhiṣṭhira is "wise" (*vidvāṃs*),[70] and he should do as he sees fit.[71] Therefore, there is every indication that Yudhiṣṭhira has the means and the opportunity to act wisely in this situation.

However, instead of refusing the game, Yudhiṣṭhira informs Vidura that he will accept the challenge because he feels obligated to do so. Why? Again, the epic provides several answers without privileging any one. Yudhiṣṭhira himself gives three reasons: (1) because he must obey his "father" (presumably in accordance with *kula*, or family, *dharma*);[72] (2) because he has vowed to accept all challenges (in accordance with *kṣatriya dharma*);[73] and (3) because of fate (*dhātṛ*).[74] Taken together, these reasons generate more questions than answers.[75] Was Yudhiṣṭhira motivated by only *one* of them, or by all three? If the answer is the latter, then what does it mean to be impelled by *dharma* and by fate at the same time? What is the relationship between the two? Is Yudhiṣṭhira simply confused here? If so, why? By flooding the text with several possible motivating forces without privileging one, the epic's strategies transform the question of what caused Yudhiṣṭhira to accept the challenge to dice into another riddle-question. By rendering Yudhiṣṭhira's reasons and motives a mystery to us, the text encourages us to feel estranged from Yudhiṣṭhira, King Dharma, for what may be one of the first times in the epic.

Once Yudhiṣṭhira agrees to play dice, he, like Duryodhana and Dhṛtarāṣṭra before him, begins to spin out of control; his erratic behavior

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69. 2.52.14.

70. Literally, Vidura says that the dice game is the root of meaninglessness (*anarthamūla*). 2.52.11.

71. 2.52.11.

72. 2.52.15.

73. 2.52.16 and 2.53.13.

74. 2.52.18. For an analysis of the different terms for fate, see chapter 5.

75. Later, in the forest in an astonishing moment, Yudhiṣṭhira tells Bhīma that he accepted the dice game because he wanted to take the Kauravas' kingdom away from Duryodhana. 3.35.2.

further encourages distance from him. When Yudhiṣṭhira first sits down to play with Śakuni, he is wary, telling Śakuni that gambling is evil (*pāpā*).[76] He begins the game cautiously: his first stake is a string of pearls. But after he loses the first throw, he seems to become unhinged for mysterious reasons. Accusing Śakuni of confusing him with a "trick",[77] he stakes a thousand jars full of gold pieces. In the following seventeen throws, Yudhiṣṭhira loses all his wealth, his kingdom, his brothers, himself, and his beloved wife, Draupadī. Such reckless behavior is utterly disconsonant with the calm, judicious character that we have come to know up to this point in the text.

After staking and losing Draupadī, Yudhiṣṭhira's behavior takes another surprising turn. His confused and reckless behavior gives way to stupefied silence. When the usher poses Draupadī's famous question to Yudhiṣṭhira (Whom did you lose first—yourself or me?), Yudhiṣṭhira is "motionless" (*niśceṣṭa*), "lifeless" (*gatasattva*), and fails to reply.[78] His failure to respond mobilizes Duryodhana, who orders Draupadī to be brought into the hall a third and final time. Duḥśāsana complies, and Draupadī is molested and humiliated before all the kings including Yudhiṣṭhira. When Bhīṣma finally calls on Yudhiṣṭhira to decide the matter according to his interpretation of *dharma*, that is whether Draupadī has really been won or not, Yudhiṣṭhira does not utter a single word. Indeed, the text does not even register a reaction from the Dharma King. What is so troubling about Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to act as a silent/passive witness to Draupadī's abuse is that it paves the way for further abuses that his wife must endure, which makes his behavior seem not only puzzling, but cruel.[79] The obvious question is, why is he silent? Is he too dejected to speak? Does he know that he will entrap himself if he answers Draupadī's question?[80] Is he simply unfeeling? This question is another of the dicing episode's many riddle-questions, and because the epic's strategies do not provide an explicit reason for why Yudhiṣṭhira acts as a passive witness, his failure to

76. 2.53.2.

77. 2.54.1.

78. 2.60.9.

79. Yudhiṣṭhira makes this point himself at 3.35.17; it haunts him.

80. See van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata, Vol.* 2, 817, and Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahabhārata*, 262.

speak up and attempt to stop the molestation of his wife renders our alienation from Yudhiṣṭhira complete.[81]

Disengaged from Yudhiṣṭhira, we are encouraged to reflect on the sources of his erratic and mysterious behavior. Much is at stake in this question, for Yudhiṣṭhira is, after all, King Dharma. With respect to the depiction of Yudhiṣṭhira in this episode, the epic's narrative strategies make two things clear: that Yudhiṣṭhira felt obligated to accept the game of dice because of *dharma* and because of fate and that once he began to play dice, he became maddened (or confused) by the dice game.[82] The rub is this: like Duryodhana and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Yudhiṣṭhira makes a decision that leads to the dice game, but unlike his cousin and his uncle he makes this decision, at least in part, in the name of *dharma*—that is, because of his commitment to upholding virtue. (Note that while Duryodhana is concerned with the "conduct" (*vṛtta*) of kings, he is not concerned with the "dharma" of kings and explicitly states this at 2.50.16.)[83] Several uncomfortable implications follow. First, the path of *dharma* potentially leads to suffering, and/or second, Yudhiṣṭhira's ability to perceive *dharma* is somehow flawed, for how could Yudhiṣṭhira feel morally obligated to accept the

81. For different interpretations of Yudhiṣṭhira's silence, see Mary Brockington, "Husband or King? Yudhiṣṭhira's Dilemma in the *Mahābhārata*," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 44/3 (2001): 253–263 and Mary Brockington, "Husband or Slave? Interpreting the Hero of the *Mahābhārata*," in *Epic Undertakings*, ed. Robert P. Goldman and Muneo Tokunaga (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2009), 23–32. In the latter article Brockington justifies Yudhiṣṭhira's behavior by arguing that as a slave, his *dharma* is to say and do nothing. However, this interpretation does not explain his reckless behavior during the actual game, before he becomes a slave. In *Dharma, Adharma, and Morality in the Mahābhārata*, A. N. Bhattacharya justifies Yudhiṣṭhira's disturbing behavior here in terms of a narrative requirement to bring about the war, an unsatisfactory solution from a literary standpoint because it shortchanges the literary genius of the epic. See A. N. Bhattacarya, *Dharma, Adharma, and Morality in the Mahābhārata* (Delhi: S.S. Publishers, 1992), 8. These various attempts to justify Yudhiṣṭhira's behavior point to just how disturbing this scene is. It is also important to note that characters themselves are critical of Yudhiṣṭhira's behavior, most notably, Draupadī (see 3.31.1–6 where she suggests that Yudhiṣṭhira is overly attached to *dharma* and 4.17.1–29 for her speech verbalizing the sorrows of having a husband like Yudhiṣṭhira). On this issue, see also Nancy Falk, "Draupadī and the Dharma," in *Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and Religion*, ed. Rita M. Gross (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977), 97, and Bailey, "Suffering in the *Mahābhārata*," 41–51.

82. He himself says he was confused (*matta*) by Śakunī's trick (at 2.54.1) as does the usher (at 2.60.4). Draupadī says that he was bewildered (*mūḍha*) and maddened (*matta*) by his passion (*mada*). She says this, however, when she first learns of his stake and before she sees him. 2.60.5.

83. For a discussion of Duryodhana and his version of *kṣatriya dharma*, see David Gitomer, "King Duryodhana," 222–232.

invitation to dice at the same time that he knew that it would lead to a division in the family and to disaster?[84] By encouraging us to contemplate both these possibilities, the text directs us to question our assumptions and our expectations with respect to Yudhiṣṭhira as a moral guide and with respect to *dharma* as a category that helps us navigate the world. Perhaps we have too much confidence in either the character or the category, or both. An important question that we should keep in mind is "What is the reason for eroding our confidence in both characters (particularly "virtuous" characters) and conceptual categories (particularly moral ones) in this manner?" One thing, however, is clear from the depiction of Yudhiṣṭhira in this episode: from the dice game forward, we are encouraged to abandon our trust in King Dharma as a moral guide. What, if anything, is offered as a replacement?

What sort of "clues" do the narrative strategies provide to help us decipher Yudhiṣṭhira's mysterious behavior? Do they suggest that he became confused and succumbed to inverted vision as Duryodhana and Dhṛtarāṣṭra before him? While the text does not explicitly state that he became confused *before* he entered the game, his behavior seems to indicate that this is the case. When Yudhiṣṭhira accepts the invitation to the dice game, he repeats Dhṛtarāṣṭra's fatalistic statements almost word for word. At 2.51.25 when Dhṛtarāṣṭra tells Vidura that he must sanction the game, he says mysteriously, "It is well known that this [world] is under the control of destiny through the Ordainer." At 2.52.14 Yudhiṣṭhira tells Vidura exactly the same thing. This parallel suggests that whatever motivated Dhṛtarāṣṭra to sanction the game (confusion, as noted above), most likely motivated Yudhiṣṭhira to agree to participate in it.[85]

The Work of Estrangement

In light of our analysis of the depiction of Duryodhana, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and Yudhiṣṭhira in the episode of the dice game, we can now stand back and ask: What is the purpose of the distancing effect that the epic's narrative strategies encourage? As discussed above, this estrangement promotes "a

84. Perhaps Yudhiṣṭhira is overly attached to *dharma* and his desire obstructs his vision. As previously mentioned, Draupadī suggests this at 3.31.1–10.

85. Whether or not these parallel statements mean that these characters actually were impelled by fate or by other forces is a question that is left unanswered by the text.

moment of reflection." By creating distance between the audience and the characters, the epic's strategies direct us to stand back and question why each one of these characters made the disastrous decisions that he did. While the narrative strategies do not provide an explicit answer to this question (instead they mystify the issue by flooding the text with several possible causes in order to effect the distance), they do provide "clues" that enable us to reflect critically on the mystery through their strategic deployment of the motifs of clear vision and blindness on the one hand, and mental clarity and confusion on the other. These clues, aggregative in their effect, encourage specific insights into the forces that produce despair. If we piece together these clues, we see the following dynamic at work. Each character who agreed to either implement, sanction, or participate in the game of dice was overtaken by powerful emotions. Duryodhana was overtaken by jealousy and greed, Dhṛtarāṣṭra by anxiousness over the well-being of his son and possibly a desire for power, and Yudhiṣṭhira by anger and possibly greed (see his statement at 3.52.2). Subsequently, each character succumbed to mental confusion and inverted vision.[86] As a result of this inverted vision, each character made decisions and took actions (that is, to move forward with the game) that had disastrous consequences, decisions and actions that caused great suffering both to the character and to those around him, and each did so without seeing these decisions and actions as "wrong," or fruitless (*anartha*). Instead, each saw his decisions and actions as somehow "good," or fruitful (*artha*), or necessary. In sum, what the narrative strategies of estrangement encourage is the following insight into the forces that produce suffering, which can be articulated in the form of a chain of events: improper responses (like greed, envy, or anger) to what one "sees" in the external world generate mental turbulence. Mental turbulence, in turn, causes inverted vision (where the wrong course appears as the right one and vice versa). Inverted vision then leads to bad decisions which have disastrous consequences and can lead to great suffering. In this case, the misguided decisions of the three characters under review lead not only to Draupadī's despair, but to the suffering of virtually every character in the epic, since the dice game provides a direct route to war.

The text, then, through its strategies of estrangement provides a certain kind of argument about the existence of suffering and the forces that

86. For each character the "right course" appears as the wrong one, etc.

cause it through its strategies of estrangement. To probe into the work of estrangement even further, let us consider its implications for psychologically overcoming suffering: If one were to gain the abovementioned insights into the roots of suffering, one would both be *motivated to change* in way "*x*" by the content of the argument and *changed* in way "*y*" by the form of the argument.

First, let us look at how one would be motivated to change by the content of the argument. The assumption here is that if one "saw" into the nature of the roots of suffering, then one would at the same time be encouraged to transform oneself in such a way that one would no longer be subject to despair. In what specific way would one be encouraged to change? The abovementioned argument not only provides an account of the forces that produce suffering (i.e., strong emotions and a turbulent mind), but also, at the same time, contains implicit recommendations for how to free oneself from suffering (i.e., by cultivating a balanced mind that is not subject to being overwhelmed). Here the concept of contentment (*saṃtoṣa, śama*) that is praised by Saṃjaya, Vidura, and other advisors (i.e., those characters in the text who work to, among other things, eliminate suffering, "the advisors against grief") seems particularly relevant.

Further, one is changed in way "y" by the form of the argument. Just as important as the content of this argument (articulated above) is the form in which it is delivered. To determine this argument's form, it is helpful to think about the way in which the "clues" discussed above were presented to us. They were not "spoon-fed" to us; no explicit answers were provided by the text with respect to the motivational forces that led each of the three characters to make their disastrous decisions. Instead, we noted that the text directed us to work for our insights into why the characters behaved the way they did. This "work" took place at the moment of estrangement where, as argued above, the narrative strategies disengaged us from the characters and directed us to reflect for ourselves on the forces that caused Duryodhana, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and Yudhiṣṭhira to make the decisions that they did, decisions that caused suffering both for themselves and for those around them. This moment of reflection is where the "real work" of the narrative takes place because it is precisely at such moments that the text directs us to search inside ourselves for understanding. Further, it is precisely this reflexive activity that is encouraged by the text's strategies that attempts to make us not only active and open participants in the drama of the characters, but encourages us to develop the faculties that will

transform the act of "seeing" itself. (Abhinavagupta uses the image of the heart being polished like a mirror to describe what happens to the *sahṛdaya*, or the sensitive reader/listener, when he or she becomes able to sympathetically respond to the poem or drama.)[87]

The Depiction of Draupadī in the Dice Game

As mentioned earlier, the depiction of Draupadī's abuse in the dicing episode is one of the most disturbing scenes of human cruelty and affliction in Indian literature.[88] In this section we will consider the "work" of the depiction of Draupadī as a victim of cruelty and suffering. Immediately after Yudhiṣṭhira stakes and loses Draupadī, Duryodhana orders her to be brought into the hall as his slave. Draupadī refuses, sending the usher back with a question. Duryodhana sends Duḥśāsana after her. He seizes her by the hair and drags her half-naked and in her menses into the assembly hall of men, a place where virtuous women are not supposed to be seen. In this wretched state, Draupadī stands before her husbands and elders, humiliated and shamed, pleading the injustice of her treatment, and urging the members of the hall to save her from Duryodhana's villainous designs (designs that result in what Nancy Falk has called "a sequence of the most intense insults to be found anywhere in the literature of the world").[89] She asks how it is possible that she, surrounded by her family, has no protectors:

> The Pāṇḍavas who did not allow me to be touched by the wind in my house, they now allow me to be touched by this villain. The Kauravas allow their undeserving daughter-in-law to be tormented. I think of the changes brought about by time. What is more

87. See Masson and Patwardhan, *Aesthetic Rapture*, 5–6.

88. See Falk, "Draupadī and the Dharma," 89–114 and Sally J. Sutherland, "Sītā and Draupadī: Aggressive Behavior and Female Role Models in the Sanskrit Epics," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109/1 (1989): 63–79.

89. Falk, "Draupadī and the Dharma," 99–101. These insults, according to Falk, include Duryodhana's comments about sweeping (the occupation of low-caste groups and a polluting act); being subjected to the public gaze (wives of kings were not to be subjected to the view of others), doubly offensive because she is menstruating and thus a source of pollution; being dragged by her hair (the head was considered sacred; to touch it violently was considered to be an act of defilement); and being exposed to Duryodhana's left thigh (a seat reserved for wives and lovers).

> wretched than this, that I, a virtuous woman, was forced to enter the assembly hall of men? Where is the *dharma* of kings?[90]

Shockingly, her entreaties are met with stupefied silence. This silence provides Duryodhana and his cronies with the freedom to proceed with their cruelty. Karṇa deems her a whore and orders her to be stripped.[91] The final insult comes when Duryodhana exposes his left thigh to her, an explicit sexual invitation and attempt at utter humiliation.

Draupadī is dragged, seized, held down, shaken, ridiculed, called "a slave" (*dāsī*), and almost fully stripped.[92] Further, the text notes "her pallid (*vivarṇa*) face," "her bleak spirits" (*durmanas*), and "her shamefulness" (*hrīmant*).[93] By emphasizing the fact that she is violated precisely where she should be most safe (literally, that she is "unprotected amongst her protectors" [*nāthavatīm anāthavat*]), the *Mahābhārata* points to a dark truth: if Draupadī can be treated in this way, among precisely these people, then absolutely no human being is protected from a reversal of fortune so extreme that a queen may be reduced to a slave (here defined as someone who is divested of everything, even his/her self) in the matter of moments.

However, more should be said here about the kind of sensitivities and intuitions that the strategies promote here, for it could be maintained that this one episode transforms the sensibility of the entire epic by introducing an aesthetic of despair that permeates the remaining sixteen books of the text. Why does Draupadī's violation cut so deep? What is it about this episode that is so unsettling for almost every character in the text?[94] I suggest that it is the presence of those elders, kings,

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90. 2.62.6–8.

91. 2.61.40. Draupadī is never fully stripped, however, because of her miraculous, inexhaustible *sarīs*. For a good discussion of this scene and its variants, see Hiltebeitel, "Rethinking the *Mahābhārata*," 250–257. Both the Northern and Southern recensions include Draupadī's appeal to Kṛṣṇa during the time of her stripping, implying that Kṛṣṇa was the source of the miracle. This plea to Kṛṣṇa, however, is not included in the Critical Edition.

92. 2.60.24–41.

93. 2.60.21, 2.60.28, 2.60.35.

94. Examples of characters who refer to Draupadī's violation and how it haunts them are Kuntī (in a very moving speech at 5.8. 84–87), Kṛṣṇa (3.13.5–6), and Yudhiṣṭhira (5.26.15 and 18.1.7–7).

and family members in the assembly hall who act as passive witnesses to Draupadī's abuse. The elders, who have studied the *śāstras* and performed the rituals are speechless in the face of what appears to be a gross transgression of *dharma*.[95] Draupadī's husbands and protectors, perhaps the most powerful men in the world, are mute and powerless before this unthinkable violation of their wife. They fail her in one of their most important dharmic duties as kings: protection.[96] Not only do Draupadī's husbands and her elders fail her, but, by extension, *śāstric* learning fails her; ritual sacrifices fail her; familial ties fail her; her standing in society fails her. So too does her virtue fail her; *dharma* fails her. By calling into question these categories that serve to maintain and uphold societal structures, the depiction of Draupadī in this episode encourages us to question their effectiveness. For example, what is the purpose of class (i.e., *varṇa*) if a queen can be treated as a slave? What becomes of the categories "wife," "husband," "daughter," when Draupadī is treated thus before her husbands and her father-in-law? Draupadī later in the forest will say that she has no husbands, no father, no friends precisely because these familial ties failed her during the dice game.[97]If such categories are shown to be ineffective, as they are for Draupadī here, then the question becomes: "Precisely what protects human beings from cruelty and suffering?" Nothing? At the most basic level—stripped of all protective categories—what is a human being?[98]

One of the overarching questions that the text encourages us to ask in light of Draupadī's gross violation is "How does one conduct oneself in a world that holds out the possibility of sudden misfortune?" None of the epic's characters forget what happened to Draupadī in the assembly hall.[99]Nor does the text ever allow its audiences to forget. The trope of the

95. Draupadī says: "In the hall are men who have studied the books. All follow the rites and are like Indras." 2.60.29.

96. Nancy Falk, "Draupadī and the Dharma," 102. For more on the significance of *rakṣaṇa*, or protection, in the *Mahābhārata*, see Fitzgerald, *The Mahābhārata*, Vol. 7, 10–13.

97. 3.13.59–110.

98. Or, as Hiltebeitel formulates it, "What is the self?" See *Rethinking the Mahabhārata*, 260–261.

99. For more on the theme of Draupadī's suffering in the epic, see Bailey, "Suffering in the *Mahābhārata*," 41–51.

abandoned, unprotected wife is reenacted over and over, but never as dramatically and poignantly as in this scene.[100]

Dharma *and Rupture in the Game of Dice*

Now let us leave the sphere of character (the first sphere in the aesthetics of suffering) and move to that of the conceptual category (the second sphere) as we turn our attention to the presentation of *dharma* in the episode of the dice game. This discussion will center on Draupadī's question to Yudhiṣṭhira (Whom did you lose first—yourself or me?), its impact on the hall (i.e., how it renders the elders in the hall silent and passive), and its impact on us, the audience. What does this question, which leads to a tangled discussion about the nature of *dharma*, and more significantly its answer, or lack thereof, reveal to us about the relationship between *dharma* and human sorrow?

Before we embark on a discussion of *dharma* in this episode, let us first revisit the details of Draupadī's question to Yudhiṣṭhira and to the assembly hall and the response that it receives. After Yudhiṣṭhira stakes and loses Draupadī to the Kauravas, Duryodhana orders an usher to bring Draupadī into the hall as slave to the Kauravas. When the usher approaches her, Draupadī, not missing a beat, quizzes him about the details of Yudhiṣṭhira's stake. Upon learning the relevant information, she sends the usher back with a question for Yudhiṣṭhira and for the hall: "Bhārata, whom did you lose first—yourself or me?"[101] Upon returning to the hall, the usher tells Yudhiṣṭhira: "Draupadī asks: 'Whose master were you

100. Draupadī is "abandoned" and violated twice more. Once in *The Book of the Forest* (3.248–257) and once in *The Book of Virāṭa* (5.13–24). For scholarship on Draupadī's "other indignities," see Simon Brodbeck, "Gendered Soteriology: Marriage and the *Karmayoga,"* in *Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata*, ed. Simon Bodbeck and Brian Black (New York: Routledge: 2009), 158. See also "The Story of Nala" where Damayantī is abandoned by her husband, Nala (3.50–80) and "Śakuntalā" in *The Book of the Beginning*. (1.62–70). According to Bailey, the "account of Draupadī's suffering is in essence the story of the epic as a whole," ("Suffering in the *Mahābhārata*," 43).

101. 2.60.7. Van Buitenen calls Draupadī's question "the ultimate riddle." For scholarship on Draupadī's question, see S. M. Kulkarni, "An Unresolved Dilemma in '*Dyūta-Parvan*': A Question Raised by Draupadī," in *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata*, ed. B. K. Matilal (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), 150–156; Alf Hiltebeitel, "Draupadī's Question," in *Is God a Feminist? The Politics of South Asian Goddesses*, ed. Alf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen M. Erndl (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 113–122; Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 240–277; and M. A. Mehendale, "Draupadī's Question," *Journal of the Oriental Institute, Baroda* 35/3–4 (1985): 179–194.

when you lost us? Whom did you lose first—yourself or me?'"[102] Notice the subtle shift in emphasis in the way the usher poses the question and the way Draupadī did. Draupadī's question focused on the issue of sequence, and the usher's question focuses on the issue of ownership.[103]

Once the usher brings Draupadī's question to the hall, a tangled discussion about *dharma* takes place between the kings and elders in the assembly. This discussion centers on two intimately connected questions. The first is whether Draupadī's forced entrance into the hall is a violation of *dharma*. The second is the validity of Yudhiṣṭhira's stake. Vidura, the first to raise the issue of the legality of Yudhiṣṭhira's stake, urges the kings and the elders to answer Draupadī's question. Bhīṣma tries and fails, deeming *dharma* too subtle (*sūkṣma*) to be interpreted.[104] Vikarṇa, one of Duryodhana's ninety-nine brothers, declares Draupadī free because Yudhiṣṭhira was under the influence of the dice when he staked her, but Vikarṇa is summarily dismissed by the others in the hall.[105] Desperate to provide Draupadī with an answer to her question, Bhīṣma appeals to Yudhiṣṭhira as "the authority" (*pramāṇa*)[106] in these matters, but Yudhiṣṭhira, mysteriously, refuses to say a word. Despite Vidura, Vikarṇa, and Draupadī's pleas, Droṇa, Kṛpa, and the other elders in the hall, like Yudhiṣṭhira, fail to respond; they either refuse or are not able to speak to Draupadī's question.

Why is practically no one in the hall willing or able to provide an answer to Draupadī's question? The epic's strategies, once again, do not supply us with an explicit answer to this question. Indeed, by rendering the reasons for the elders' silence mysterious to us, the text encourages our estrangement from them just as it encouraged our distance from Duryodhana, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and Yudhiṣṭhira.

The "work" of this estrangement, however, is somewhat different in nature. Here the text is not just targeting our confidence in specific

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102. 2.60.8.

103. Arjuna also reformulates it at 2.63.21.

104. 2.60.40. Draupadī also suggests this at 2.60.31. For scholarly assessments of Bhīṣma's behavior in this scene, see Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 247; Karve, *Yugānta*, 14; Mehendale, "Draupadī's Question," 194; and M. M. Thakur, *Thus Spake Bhīṣma* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992), 141–147.

105. 2.61.23–25.

106. 2.62.21.

characters, but is disorienting our beliefs about the category of *dharma* itself.[107] The elders in the assembly hall, ostensibly among the wisest men in the land, are, we presume, specialists in interpreting *dharma*.[108] The implication is that if anyone in the world of the text should be able to determine the *dharma* of a situation, aside from Yudhiṣṭhira, it would be they. However, they are either unable or unwilling to do so, and the point in the story where they respond to Draupadī's question with utter silence is one of the most hauntingly disturbing passages in the epic. There are few other places in the text where the presence of absence is more felt and undoes so much.

What is so disorienting about the silence of the elders? First, it calls into question their ability to perceive *dharma*. This raises the question of whether *dharma* can be perceived at all, an implicit anxiety that runs through the text.[109] Second, this silence creates a rupture, and by "rupture" is meant a gap in meaning, in both the assembly hall and in the text.[110] In the assembly hall, the silence of the elders leads to the suspension of judgment, which provides Duryodhana with the freedom to move forward with his villainous designs. In the text, the silence of the elders creates a rupture, or gap in meaning, with respect to the category of *dharma*.[111] The text's strategies disorient us by pulling the rug out from underneath our assumptions and expectations about *dharma* (specifically, that the wisest men in the kingdom should be able to interpret the right course of action, and, by extension, that *dharma* is an interpretable force). In so doing, they distance us from the world of the text in the same way that they distanced us from characters above. Here the disengagement invites us to reflect on the fact that the most eminent brahmins in the hall, the Vedic scholars, the gurus, the ritual performers are unable to determine the right course of action.

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107. Hiltebeitel also argues that this scene calls *dharma* into question. *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 240.

108. They have after all studied the *śāstras*.

109. See, for example, Yudhiṣṭhira's famous statement that "the truth of *dharma* lies hidden in a secret cave" at 3.313.117 in the Vulgate. Kinjawadekar, *Mahābhāratam with the Commentary of Nīlakaṇṭha*.

110. It is important to note that while postmodern theorists argue that a text ruptures itself beyond meaning, I am arguing that the *Mahābhārata* uses ruptures to produce meaning.

111. For a similar interpretation, see Bhattacharya, *Dharma-Adharma and Morality*, 27.

The larger issues here are "What is *dharma*?" and "What is its relationship to suffering?" The rub is this: no one in the hall with the exception of Duryodhana and his companions believed that Draupadī should be dragged to the hall, stripped, and abused. It is because they are trapped by their inability to speak to her question, possibly because of their inability to interpret *dharma*, that they fail to act. This would suggest that *dharma*'s inscrutability paves the way for what would seem to be one of *dharma*'s greatest transgressions, the abuse of Draupadī in the assembly hall of kings. If this is the case, then the category of *dharma* itself is implicated in Draupadī's molestation and affliction.[112] Draupadī herself seems to have assumed that her virtue would have protected her from such treatment.[113] Did we assume this as well? Now we are forced to ask ourselves: If the path of *dharma* not only does not protect one from misfortune and sorrow, but, on the contrary, potentially is implicated in the problem of suffering, is the dharmic path even a noble or worthy pursuit?[114]

What does this unsettling link between *dharma* and suffering have to do with the *Mahābhārata*'s ethical project? Through targeting and disorienting our expectations and assumptions about key conceptual categories, here *dharma*, the text suggests that there is some problem with these categories, particularly in light of the issue of suffering. *Dharma* is a category that, supposedly, offers conceptual clarity about the way the world is ordered and to be navigated. It also, ostensibly, provides some degree of security against suffering. Hence, the text, in targeting *dharma*, suggests that *dharma* and categories like it (that is, categories that provide conceptual clarity and security) are, in part, what blind us to the pervasive existence of suffering. The fact that the text also contains ruptures, or gaps in meaning, that target these very categories, *dharma* especially and most pervasively, implies that these categories must undergo a radical re-evaluation. Why? Because they do not provide us with the conceptual clarity and security that we long for. This implies that to recover a deeper, truer understanding of *dharma* one would need to be reoriented to an

112. See Bailey, "Suffering in the *Mahābhārata*," 41–51; Bhattacharya, *Dharma-Adharma and Morality*, 27; and Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 259

113. 2.62.5–10.

114. As he is dying, slain by Arjuna's arrow, Karṇa voices precisely this criticism of *dharma*, namely that it does not protect those who follow it. See 8.66.40–44.

understanding of it that would be divested of all pretenses of security. One would, according to the logic of this understanding of the concept, follow *dharma* for the sake of nothing.

The work of the rupture, then, directs us to recognize not only the failure of these conceptual categories in this regard, but exposes, at the same time, our longing for them not to fail, that is, our longing for them to provide us with the comfort, security, and conceptual clarity that we require in order to believe that we are protected from suffering. Through the process of rupture, the text orients us to a new way of seeing, a way of seeing that is free from the confines of this longing. The transformation of our relationship to these categories is crucial to the task of confronting the problem of suffering, for it is precisely our sense of security and our belief (which is false) that we possess some degree of conceptual clarity about the world and the way it is ordered that protects us, to some extent, from sorrow and that keeps us from recognizing, by extension, the extreme urgency of the task of moving beyond it.

Conclusion

Let us stand back and reflect for a moment on how the aesthetics of suffering "worked" in the episode of the dice game. Through encouraging our proximity and then estrangement from specific characters (namely Duryodhana, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and Yudhiṣṭhira) the text's strategies directed us to stand back and reflect upon why the characters made the disastrous decisions that they did. For example, in the case of Duryodhana we determined that a close analysis of the text's strategies suggested, but did not state explicitly, that the turbulent quality of his mind led to his disastrous decisions and despicable behavior, which, as stated earlier, entails the defining moment of cruelty (*nṛśamsya*) in the text. Thus the strategies suggest that cruelty and by extension the suffering that it generates are caused by mental confusion (a kind of mental confusion which, as characterized by Dhṛtarāṣṭra, causes the right course to appear as the wrong one and vice versa). At the same time, by encouraging us to be active participants in the determination of the source of these characters' disastrous decisions, the text's strategies also motivate us to safeguard ourselves from the very forces to which these three characters succumbed (i.e., strong emotions and a turbulent mind). Thus, embedded in this formulation is a powerful, yet silent or "suggested," argument for the significance and urgency of

cultivating mental tranquility or contentment (*saṃtoṣa*, *śama*), virtues that are often praised by the text's advisors against grief.[115]

With respect to the work of the strategies of rupture, it is important to note that when the elders in the assembly hall, the *dharma* specialists, respond to Draupadī's question with silence, a crisis in *dharma* is introduced that pervades the remainder of the text. This crisis is created not by what the elders say but what *they do not say* and the suggestions that arise from the absence of an answer. This episode perhaps more than any other in the epic demonstrates Ānandavardhana's point that the most important messages of a work of literature are delivered through *dhvani*, or suggestion, through not being stated directly, precisely because this "silent" moment in the text creates so many powerful and hauntingly disorienting reverberations throughout the text.

The next chapter, chapter 3, builds on the discussions of estrangement in this chapter by focusing on the depiction of a character now familiar to us, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and his role as both an agent and victim of suffering. This will be explored primarily through a discussion of his three characteristic activities: vacillating, blaming, and lamenting. It should be noted that very few scholars have focused on Dhṛtarāṣṭra and his significance in the epic.[116] This is surprising, especially given the fact that he is a central character for the text's aesthetics of suffering.[117]

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115. Virtues that are equivalent to Fitzgerald's second sense of *dharma* in the *Mahābhārata* are the *dharma* of self-discipline, mental purity, and contentment. See the introduction to this book.

116. Two notable exceptions are Krishna Chaitanya, *The Mahābhārata: A Literary Study* (New Delhi: Clarion Books, 1985), 45–64, and Sinha, *The Mahābhārata*, 78–81. Chaitanya devotes half of a chapter to Dhṛtarāṣṭra and his role in causing the war. Sinha focuses on Dhṛtarāṣṭra's grief.

117. Sinha, *The Mahābhārata*, 78.

3

The Eyesight of Insight: Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Moral Blindness

Angry Duryodhana is the great tree, Karṇa its trunk, Śakuni the branches, Duḥśāsana the plentiful blossoms and fruits, and foolish King Dhṛtarāṣṭra the root.[1]

Indeed no Sanskrit poet presents any character whose grief could match the grief of Dhṛtarāṣṭra as presented by the poet of the Mahābhārata.

—J. P. SINHA[2]

IN THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*, the blind king Dhṛtarāṣṭra is at the center of the catastrophe that befalls the Bhāratas. His journey from passed-over primogeniture to ruler, to the loss of his kingdom and one hundred sons in the Bhārata war has the pure arc of a tragic life. Whereas the source of his downfall belongs to the domain of the *Mahābhārata's* many riddles, the text explores Dhṛtarāṣṭra's moral failure through the contrasting motifs of vision/wisdom and blindness/ignorance. This contrast pivots on "the paradox of Dhṛtarāṣṭra": while the blind king often "sees" with insight, he seldom makes decisions in accordance with it. Nowhere is this paradox more apparent than in the way that Dhṛtarāṣṭra perceives the virtues and the merits of the Pāṇḍavas on the one hand and the way he chooses to treat them on the other. His failure to connect his insights with his actions when making decisions concerning the fate of his nephews has tragic consequences, since it fuels the enmity between the two sets of cousins and contributes significantly to the forces that lead to the war.

1. 1.1.65.

2. *The Mahābhārata*: *A Literary Study*, 78.

The characterization of Dhṛtarāṣṭra is a central component of the text's aesthetics of suffering for several reasons. First, Dhṛtarāṣṭra is depicted as *both* the quintessential agent and the victim of suffering. On the one hand, he is blamed for the war and its consequent devastation (more so than any other character I would argue),[3] and, on the other, he is utterly broken by the holocaust.[4] After the battle, having lost all of his sons save one,[5] Dhṛtarāṣṭra falls victim to an intense and protracted grief, a state from which he never truly recovers. Since he is an extreme example of both agent and victim of suffering, Dhṛtarāṣṭra plays a significant part in the audience's moral refiguration.

Second, Dhṛtarāṣṭra rarely appears in the text without an "advisor-against-grief" by his side (most often Vidura or Saṃjaya). These advisors encourage him to avoid making decisions that will lead to despair (both his own and others') and urge him to overcome his grief. Indeed, Dhṛtarāṣṭra is the recipient of several of the epic's major arguments against grief. The extent to which the blind king heeds the advice contained in these "arguments" influences our relationship to him; it also determines what we learn from him about the problem of suffering, its causes, and the means to overcome it.

Third, the characterization of Dhṛtarāṣṭra is interwoven with the issue of time.[6] This chapter will discuss three kinds of time—cosmological

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3. See Chaitanya, *The Mahābhārata*, 45–64; Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, 292. Kṛṣṇa blames him at 9.62.37–55; Saṃjaya blames him throughout the battle books; and Vyāsa implies that he is to blame at 6.4.6. He is not the only character who is blamed.

4. Only Yudhiṣṭhira's grief after the war rivals Dhṛtarāṣṭra's postwar malaise.

5. Dhṛtarāṣṭra does have one son who survives the war: Yuyutsu, a bastard son.

6. For scholarship on the subject of time in the *Mahābhārata*, see V. M. Bedekar, "The Doctrines of *Svabhāva* and *Kāla* in the *Mahābhārata* and Other Old Sanskrit Works," in *Time in Indian Philosophy: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Hari Shankar Prasad (Delhi: Sri Satguru, 1992), 187–202; Luis González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas: India's Great Epic Poem and the Hindu System of World Ages* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 20–50; Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, 196–223; Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 38–39, 89, 95, 166, 97; Sutton, *Religious Doctrines in the Mahābhārata*, 247–267; Yaraslov Vassilkov, "*Kālavāda* (the Doctrine of Cyclical Time) in the *Mahābhārata* and the Concept of Heroic Didactics," in *Composing a Tradition: Concepts, Techniques and Relationships*, ed. Mary Brockington and Peter Schreiner (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1999), 17–34. For scholarship on time in the Indian tradition, see Anindita Niyogi Balslev, *A Study of Time in Indian Philosophy* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983); Anindita Niyogi Balslev, "Time and the Hindu Experience" in *Religion and Time*, ed. Anindita Niyogi Balslev and J. N. Mohanty (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), 163–181; Ariel Glucklick, *The Sense of Adharma* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 38–66; Alf Hiltebeitel and Randy Kloetzli, "*Kāla*," in *The Hindu World*, ed. Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby, 553–586; Angelika Malinar, ed., *Time in India: Concepts and Practices* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2007); and Romila Thapar, "Linear Time in Historical Texts of Early India," in *India and Beyond: Aspects of Literature, Meaning, Ritual and Thought: Essays in Honour of Frits Stall*, ed. Dick van der Meij (London: Kegan Paul International, 1997), 562–574.

time (time as the creator and destroyer of all beings in the world),[7] sequential time (past, present, and future time relative to the sequence of the events of the narrative), and consequential time (the inextricable link between past, present, and future time and between act and consequence). At two important points in the story, Dhṛtarāṣṭra appears in the epic's frame in the role of both listener and lamenter, in *The Book of the Beginning* and in the four battle books.[8] In both cases Dhṛtarāṣṭra expresses his sorrow in the context of a dialogue with Saṃjaya. Time is a central theme in these discussions. It is targeted as the cause of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's suffering (as a destructive force, the agent of the death of his sons) and it is identified by Saṃjaya as the key to the elimination of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's grief. How does Dhṛtarāṣṭra's ignorance, particularly about the nature of time, factor into his disastrous decisions? How does Saṃjaya attempt to help Dhṛtarāṣṭra move beyond his despair by encouraging him to develop insight into the nature of time and its role in universal suffering? Precisely what is the significance of the fact that Dhṛtarāṣṭra appears at several important junctures in the epic's frame in the role of lamenter *par excellence*?

To explore how the characterization of Dhṛtarāṣṭra is a key element in the epic's aesthetics of suffering, we will examine his depiction in terms of its two predominant situational contexts: dilemmas and catastrophes. Specifically, we will explore four narrative episodes in which Dhṛtarāṣṭra functions as the quintessential lamenter, blamer, and /or vacillator: (1) Dhṛtarāṣṭra's "When I heard . . ." lament in the epic's outermost frame in *The Book of the Beginning (Ādiparvan)*, (2) Dhṛtarāṣṭra's role in the failed peace negotiations in *The Book of the Effort (Udyogaparvan)*, (3) Dhṛtarāṣṭra as war spectator and lamenter in the frame of the battle books, and (4) Dhṛtarāṣṭra's despairing reactions to the news of the Kauravas' defeat in *The Book of the Women (Strīparvan)*. Along the way, we will also examine the text's deployment of two types of narrative strategies: estrangement and temporal manipulation, and their role in the text's presentation of suffering.

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7. With cosmological time there is an emphasis on time's destructive and oppressive capabilities. In chapter 4, I refer to this type of time as the epic's "*kālavāda*" or doctrine of time.

8. Brian Black notes that Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Yudhiṣṭhira are paradigmatic receivers, since they are the characters who are most often presented as listeners in the epic. "Eavesdropping," 57.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra's "When I heard . . ." Dirge: The Lament as Summary

The central role that Dhṛtarāṣṭra plays in the epic story—particularly in the guise of the survivor of the cataclysmic Bhārata war who is forced to face the consequences of his bad decisions—is underscored by the fact that Dhṛtarāṣṭra appears at the opening of the text, in the text's outer frame, to provide a summary of the central story in the form of a lament. This is an important moment in the epic's aesthetics of suffering because the entire central story is encapsulated in Dhṛtarāṣṭra's lament—that is, in the idiom of sorrow and regret. To explore the implications of the epic's choice of introducing the central story in this way, we will consider three aspects of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's lament/summary: (1) the lament itself and what Dhṛtarāṣṭra reveals about himself in the course of it, (2) Saṃjaya's response to the lament (i.e., his argument against grief), and (3) the location of the lament in the epic's introductory passages.

The Lament

As mentioned in the introduction to this book the *Mahābhārata* begins when Ugraśravas, an expert in telling stories about kings and gods, encounters a group of brahmins performing a ritual and agrees to narrate the story of the *Mahābhārata* to them. However, Ugraśravas does not begin by telling the story of the lineage of the Bhāratas. Instead, he first makes introductory comments about the glories of the story, its origin, its author, and its contents. In the context of these introductory comments, Ugraśravas provides a brief summary of the *Mahābhārata*.[9] Directly after Ugraśravas's summary, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, a character whom Ugraśravas has not yet introduced into the narrative, abruptly breaks into the narrative and speaks, providing a second summary of the epic. Dhṛtarāṣṭra's summary is presented in the form of a lament articulated by an aged father who has learned that his favored son, Duryodhana, is dead and his entire army vanquished.[10]

Dhṛtarāṣṭra responds to the devastating news by attempting to absolve himself of blame. He assures Saṃjaya that he did not favor his sons over

9. 1.1.67–95. This summary begins with Pāṇḍu's decision to renounce his kingdom and ends with the decimation of the *kṣatriyas* in the war.

10. The exact timing of this lament is not made explicit by the text.

his nephews, the Pāṇḍavas.[11] Instead, Dhṛtarāṣṭra blames Duryodhana for the war, arguing that a "bewildered" (√*muh*) Duryodhana caused him to "become bewildered" and, therefore, to make the bad decisions that led to the conflict. Further, because Duryodhana "lost his mind" (*acetana*), he (Duryodhana) instigated the crooked dice game, which caused the conflict.[12]

Attempting to distance himself further from culpability, Dhṛtarāṣṭra claims to have special wisdom, namely the eyesight of insight (*prajñācakṣus*).[13] All along, he claims, he foresaw the approaching war and the defeat of his sons. He says:

> Saṃjaya, listen to what I know just as I know it. For after hearing my words which are truly informed with wisdom, you will know that I possess the eyesight of insight, O son of a suta.[14]

Here Dhṛtarāṣṭra defines "the eyesight of insight" as "seeing" the outcome of an event from the moment of the event's inception, a virtue to which I will refer as "far-sighted vision."

To prove his point, Dhṛtarāṣṭra lists some fifty-five events that according to him, presaged the inevitable war and the defeat of the Kauravas. Because Dhṛtarāṣṭra "foresaw" a Kaurava defeat when each event occurred, his point is that in spite of being blind, he has the special ability to see with insight. As mentioned, this list also functions as an introductory summary of the central events of the epic.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra's list begins with Draupadī's *svayaṃvara* and ends with Aśvatthāman's curse of Parikṣit in the womb,[15] suggesting that he sees

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11. 1.1.97. This statement, we will come to discover, is false. Is Dhṛtarāṣṭra a victim of self-deception or is he consciously lying here? We do not know.

12. 1.1.98.

13. This term is a polite epithet for a blind person. However, it takes on a broader (even ironic) meaning in the *Mahābhārata*, particularly with respect to its application to Dhṛtarāṣṭra. The narrative voice applies this term to Dhṛtarāṣṭra frequently (for example at 2.45.2, 3.5.1, 3.8.23, 9.1.21, 11.10.2.) The term is also linked to knowledge of karma (in Mārkaṇḍeya's discourse to Yudhiṣṭhira) at 3.181.26 and knowledge of impermanence at 3.200.48 (in the hunter's discourse to the brahmin).

14. 1.1.101.

15. In the story, Aśvatthāman hurls his weapon not just at Uttarā's womb, but at the wombs of all the Pāṇḍava women. Kṛṣṇa assures everyone that Parikṣit will be revived in Uttarā's womb. See 10.15.28–31 and 10.16.1–15.

these two events as the "book-ends" of the Kaurava-Pāṇḍava conflict and the defeat of his sons. His list focuses predominantly on the Pāṇḍavas' feats of strength and virtue and the losses suffered by the Kauravas.[16] He packages each event in the formula, "When I heard 'x', I lost hope of victory."[17] His repetition of this formula over fifty times fashions the lament into a despairing, mournful meditation on the seeds of the Bhārata conflict and the defeat of his sons.[18] Thus, his lament encourages us to see each of the epic's major events from his point of view, that is, from the perspective of a father grappling with the deaths of his sons, the end of his royal line, and the loss of his kingdom. However, it also encourages us to stand back from him and ask certain questions of him. One obvious question is, if he "saw" each event as portending a Kaurava defeat, why did he not attempt to stop the building animosity between his sons and the Pāṇḍavas? What is the use of insight if it is not united with action?

In the last part of his lament, Dhṛtarāṣṭra succumbs to utter despair, telling Saṃjaya that darkness pervades him and his mind is unsteady. He laments:

> Alas! I hear ten have survived the war, three of ours and seven of the Pāṇḍavas'. Eighteen armies were destroyed in the battle, that war of *kṣatriyas*. Now dark confusion seems to overpower me. I have no clarity. Sūta, my mind seems unsteady.[19]

Tormented, he falls to the ground in a faint.[20]

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16. Examples are: Yudhiṣṭhira's defeat by Śakuni in the game of dice (and yet, still, his brothers remained united in their support for him), Arjuna's acquisition of the Paśupati missile and his sojourn in heaven with Indra, the Pāṇḍavas' alliance with Virāṭa, and the various slayings of the Kaurava generals during the war.

17. See, for example, 1.1.102.

18. It should be noted that Dhṛtarāṣṭra's main preoccupation here is with whether the Kauravas' final defeat could have been avoided, not with whether the war could have been avoided.

19. 1.1.158–159.

20. 1.1.98. The grammar and style of this lament are entirely different from those of other *Mahābhārata* laments, which are characterized for the most part by a string of questions concerning the circumstances of the loved one's death, the tendency to juxtapose the condition of the deceased now with how the loved one appeared in life, and a meditation on the causes of the victim's misfortune (which Dhṛtarāṣṭra does do here). No other lament in the epic, to my knowledge, employs this strange use of the present tense that refers to the loved one as though he or she is still living. For some "characteristic" *Mahābhārata* laments, see Yudhiṣṭhira's lament at 7.49.1–21; Aśvatthāman's lament at 9.64.12–38; and Gāndhārī's lament at 11.16.1–26.1.

Saṃjaya's Argument Against Grief

Saṃjaya responds to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's words of despair by urging him not to grieve. Saṃjaya makes his "argument against grief" by also discussing the war's cause. However, while Dhṛtarāṣṭra blamed Duryodhana, Saṃjaya lays the blame on several other candidates. First, Saṃjaya points a finger at the destructive power of time, particularly as it affects even the most mighty:

> You have heard about many kings, kings of great energy and strength. You have heard talk of them from Vyāsa and wise Nārada. They were born in great lineages that were prosperous with virtues. They knew divine weapons and possessed splendor that rivalled Indra's. They who conquered the earth with *dharma*, offered up sacrifices with many gifts, and acquired fame in this world all succumbed to the power of time.[21]

Saṃjaya recites the names of twenty-four kings, and a second list of sixty-five kings, making the point that despite their strength, wisdom, and virtue, these mighty kings all succumbed to death. Second, Saṃjaya targets Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons whom he calls "wicked" and "consumed by anger," and therefore, he concludes, should not be mourned.[22] Third, Saṃjaya more quietly and indirectly implicates Dhṛtarāṣṭra himself in the events, since the blind king "knows [how to implement] both restraint and favor,"[23] implying that he went too far in protecting his son Duryodhana.[24] Fourth, Saṃjaya turns to the topic of fate: "It was to be thus and therefore you must not grieve. With [even] superior wisdom who can divert fate?"[25] Finally, Saṃjaya returns to the theme of the destructive nature of time, emphasizing the fact that all creatures are fashioned and destroyed by temporality.

Saṃjaya devotes the most attention and art to his first and last points, both of which have to do with the destructive power of time. He also targets

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21. 1.1.163–65.

22. 1.1.183.

23. 1.1. 185.

24. 1.1.185.

25. 1.1.186.

fate (which he seems to assume is closely related to time), Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra himself. Specifically, Samjaya implies that Dhṛtarāṣṭra did not do enough to prevent the conflict. In spite of the fact that he "knew better," he did not restrain his wicked sons.

Why would Samjaya's statements about the destructive nature of time help Dhṛtarāṣṭra move beyond his grief? In locating the cause of the war predominantly in the ruinous power of time, Saṃjaya is attempting to help Dhṛtarāṣṭra see that he should not grieve over the death of his sons and the destruction of the Bhārata line because time does not just bring death and destruction selectively. Time brings death to every living creature, since all life is fundamentally characterized by time. Here, Saṃjaya is attempting to shift Dhṛtarāṣṭra's focus from the narrow lens of his own particular situation, the loss of his sons, to the level of the experience of all living creatures. From this vantage point, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's view of things would look radically different. He would see that the sorrow he feels now has been experienced by every creature on earth, since all creatures are creatures of time. Thus, he would see that his grief is just a tiny drop in the ocean of sorrow caused by the ravages of all-destroying time. Such a shift would, presumably, snap Dhṛtarāṣṭra out of his despair by distancing him from his own situation and opening his eyes to the condition of all living creatures. It would also, presumably, encourage a transformation in Dhṛtarāṣṭra's emotional responses from grief and self-pity to emotions like stoic acceptance and fortitude.

The Location of the Lament and the Response

Let us now consider the significance of the location of this lament and response in *The Book of the Beginning* (Book 1). To do so, it is helpful to make a distinction between where the lament and response take place in the text and where they take place in the story. The lament is located in the beginning of the text, but in the story, the lament takes place after the death of Duryodhana, which occurs in Book 10 at the conclusion of the war in the latter half of the story. Therefore, an event that takes place well into the story is placed in the opening passages of the text.[26] To determine what

26. This particular lament is not repeated in the battle books. However, Dhṛtarāṣṭra does lament Duryodhana's death and the defeat of his army at the beginning of *The Book of Śalya* (when he first hears the news of it from Saṃjaya) and at the beginning of the *Strīparvan* (when the news has sunk in). See 9.2.3–9.2.47 and 11.1.10–20 respectively.

kind of "work" this placement is doing, and how it is doing it, it is necessary to turn briefly, once again, to the function of the text's framing device.

As mentioned several times, the *Mahābhārata* does not begin with the central story of the great Bhāratas. Instead, it begins with two outer frames that introduce the circumstances of the epic's first two tellings—who told it to whom, where, and under what circumstances. Further, these frames provide the opportunity for the epic's two main storytellers, Ugraśravas and Vaiśaṃpāyana, to reflect on the *Mahābhārata*'s genre, its central messages, its contents, and so on. Thus, these framing devices function as narrative strategies that allow the text to present itself in specific ways and thus gain control, to some extent, of the way the audience views it.[27] They also grant the text the power to manipulate time by giving it the ability to move backwards and forwards in time (i.e., sequential time).[28] In the case of the location of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's lament, these strategies manipulate time by altering the sequence of events in the story. To put it differently, an event that has yet to come (the lament), and that is a response to other events that have yet to come (e.g., Duryodhana's death), is placed at the beginning of the text. Thus it affects the way that the audience understands the text as a whole as well as events as they come.[29] It does so in several ways.

First, the location of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's lament at the opening of the epic is a strategy that encourages us to see each of the major events that the blind king mentions through the lens of his despair—that is, through the sorrow of a father broken by the defeat and deaths of his sons in the war and the utter futility of the Kaurava effort. (See chapter 1 for a discussion of Ānandavardhana's *śāntarasa* reading of the *Mahābhārata*; here Dhṛtarāṣṭra could be understood to be conveying an emotion very close to *vairāgya* or world-weariness, the underlying emotion of *śāntarasa*, the aestheticized emotion of tranquility.) The form of the lament, as a summary of the epic, serves a similar function, since Dhṛtarāṣṭra's expression of despair encapsulates the epic in miniature.

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27. For slightly different interpretations, see Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 92–130, Minkowski, "Janamejaya's *Sattra*"; and Reich, "A Battlefield of a Text," 4–6, 56–64.

28. For my definition of sequential time see the introduction to this chapter. For more on frames in the *Mahābhārata* and their relation to time, see Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 38.

29. For a good discussion on the significance of the introduction and its impact on interpretation in works of literature, see Christina Swanson, "Narrative Temporality and the Aspect of Time in Franz Kafka's Short Fiction" (PhD diss., University of California Irvine, 1999), 107–116.

Second, Saṃjaya's speech on the destructive nature of time also provides a critical lens, since his argument for why Dhṛtarāṣṭra should not grieve for the loss of his sons prepares us, the epic's audience, to properly deal with *our* grief. Just as Saṃjaya tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra that he should not grieve because death comes even to the most mighty, so too the text is suggesting that the audience should not despair at the deaths of the mighty warriors encountered in this tale, because death is inevitable for all living beings. Indeed, the *Mahābhārata* could be viewed as providing an extended argument for why one should not grieve over the losses that are inevitably brought about by time.[30]

Finally, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's lament and Saṃjaya's response both focus on the cause of the disaster, but they do not supply a consistent account.[31] Thus, the text raises at the outset the question "Who or what caused the deaths of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons and the end of the great Bhāratas?" No final answer is given, but several possibilities are suggested. One possibility is of course Dhṛtarāṣṭra himself, which renders Dhṛtarāṣṭra's expressions of despair multidimensional, even ironic. Because the *Mahābhārata* war not only brings death to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons, but also wreaks devastation on a universal scale (universal in terms of the world of the text, because no one is untouched by it), the broader question here is "Who or what is responsible for death?" or, even more to the point, "Who or what is responsible for grief and sorrow?"[32]

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30. For discussions on the perils of grief in the epic see, for example, 3.206.20–25 and 5.36.42–43.

31. The source of the *Mahābhārata* war is undoubtedly overdetermined. The possible candidates in the text are almost endless. Various characters are blamed (e.g., Duryodhana, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and less frequently Kṛṣṇa [see 18.1.7–9; 6.62.38–54; 1.1.92; 2.33.19; 15.5.7]). Impersonal forces like time, fate, and karma are also blamed. For a good discussion of fate, time, and karma as causal forces of the war in the epic, see Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, 193–230. There is even a cosmic explanation for why the war had to take place. According to this story, Earth personified goes to Brahmā after the demons, defeated in heaven, are born on earth as kṣatriyas. Earth, tormented by these demons/kṣatriyas asks Brahmā to relieve her burden. Brahmā directs the gods, *gandharvas*, and *apsarās* to be born on earth for their suppression. 1.61 provides the list of "partial incarnations," which identifies the major participants on both sides in the war with their divine and demonic prototypes. (1.58–61). For scholarly debate concerning the significance of this story in the epic, see note 133 of this chapter.

32. Upon the death of Abhimanyu, Yudhiṣṭhira, heartbroken, asks Vyāsa, "What is the cause of death?" Vyāsa responds by making a reference to a famous dirge, "The Passing of the Sixteen Kings," recited by the seer Nārada to King Sṛñjaya, who mourned the death of his young son. This speech, similar to Saṃjaya's in Book 1 in many ways, appears at 12.29 and Appendix I (no.7) in the Critical Edition. For a discussion of the two epic contexts for this passage and their significance, see Reich, "A Battlefield of a Text," 110–152.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra's Role in the Failed Peace Negotiations

Now we will put Dhṛtarāṣṭra on trial as a potential agent of suffering by examining his role in the failed peace negotiations in *The Book of the Effort*. Significantly, the text devotes much attention to Dhṛtarāṣṭra in this book, especially as he agonizes when making decisions concerning whether to take measures to avert war.[33] Therefore, the context of the peace negotiations provides us with the opportunity to watch Dhṛtarāṣṭra as he deliberates, doubts, refuses to heed good advice, and squanders his last chance to treat his nephews as sons, not enemies, and thereby avert war. With this aim in mind, we will explore the depiction of Dhṛtarāṣṭra in three different instances: as he reveals his inner thoughts to Saṃjaya (here his envoy) about the merits of the two parties involved;[34] as he receives advice from his wise brother Vidura about how to treat the Pāṇḍavas;[35] and as he makes his final decision about whether to give back to the Pāṇḍavas their kingdom.[36]

Our goal here is quite specific. Several characters blame Dhṛtarāṣṭra for the conflict between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas and the consequent destruction of the Bhāratas.[37] They cite his failure to listen to good advice during the dice game and during the negotiations for peace as evidence.[38] Therefore, an examination of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's actions and decisions here will help us assess these accusations.[39]

At this point in the text, we have traveled far from *The Book of the Beginning*. Briefly, Yudhiṣṭhira has gained and lost a kingdom; the crooked gambling match has taken place; and the Pāṇḍavas, having honored the conditions of losing this match (thirteen years in exile), now demand their kingdom back. The Kauravas, however, are stalling. Thus, the two sets of

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33. Van Buitenen suggests that the decision to make peace with the Pāṇḍavas is up to Duryodhana (see van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata, Vol. 3*, 133.) However, the narrative focuses on Dhṛtarāṣṭra's decision-making process during the peace negotiations, not on Duryodhana's. Yudhiṣṭhira also assumes that the decision is up to Dhṛtarāṣṭra (see 5.23–32).

34. 5.22.1–23.1.

35. 5.33.1–42.1

36. 5.46.1–60.1.

37. Most notably, Saṃjaya (5.156.9 and 6.14.13) and Kṛṣṇa (at the end of *The Book of Śalya*, 9.62.37–55).

38. See, for example, 6.16.4 and 9.62.37–55.

39. See chapter 2 for an analysis of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's behavior in the dicing scene.

cousins stand on the brink of battle. Armies have been amassed on both sides and only decisive action will avert war.

At the opening of *The Book of the Effort*, the Pāṇḍavas send an envoy demanding that the Kauravas honor the terms of their agreement and return to the Pāṇḍavas their kingdom.[40] The envoy of the Pāṇḍavas assures the Kauravas that if they do not act now, it will be too late and the Pāṇḍavas will declare war. After the envoy leaves, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, worried, decides to send his own envoy, Saṃjaya, to assess the Pāṇḍavas' position. Dhṛtarāṣṭra's words of instruction to Saṃjaya concerning how to negotiate with the Pāṇḍavas expose a critical moral flaw in the blind king: the wide gap between how Dhṛtarāṣṭra "sees" on the one hand (in this scene he sees the situation with stunning clarity) and the course of action that he decides to take on the other.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra begins by informing Saṃjaya how the Pāṇḍavas should be greeted. Rather quickly, however, he veers off track into an extended meditation on the virtues of the Pāṇḍavas, which he contrasts with the "villainy" of Duryodhana whom Dhṛtarāṣṭra calls "wicked" (*pāpā*), "uneven" (*viṣama*), and "foolish"(*mandabuddhi*).[41] Dhṛtarāṣṭra further reflects on the unparalleled might of the Pāṇḍavas, particularly Yudhiṣṭhira's, whose "anger" he fears most.[42] He says,

> I am not as afraid of Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa
> Not even of Bhīma and the twins,
> As I am always more afraid, O sūta, of the
> Anger of that king burning with anger.
>
> He possesses austerity, self-control—
> His plans are sure to succeed,
> Knowing his anger about the ongoing conflict,
> I am utterly fearful now, Saṃjaya.[43]

Finally, Dhṛtarāṣṭra briefly tells Saṃjaya what he should say to the Pāṇḍavas: he should kindly salute them, calling them blessed for "having

40. On the conduct of diplomacy in ancient India, see van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata, Vol. 3*, 134–138.

41. 5.22.7.

42. 5.22.33.

43. 5.22.33–34.

completed the miserable sojourn that they did not deserve."[44] After asking about the Pāṇḍavas' health and speaking with affection about whatever is opportune for them,[45] he should assure them that Dhṛtarāṣṭra wants peace[46] and say nothing that will rouse them toward war.[47]

Given what Dhṛtarāṣṭra says to Saṃjaya here about his nephews, one would assume that Dhṛtarāṣṭra would decide to give the Pāṇḍavas their kingdom back, since he believes that they have not deserved the treatment that they have received from the Kauravas. Instead, however, Dhṛtarāṣṭra tells Saṃjaya to ask about their health! Dhṛtarāṣṭra does not say one word about what he is willing to give the Pāṇḍavas because he is willing to give them nothing. In spite of his correct assessments of the moral qualities of the Pāṇḍavas and the vices of his son, he refuses to take the obvious proper course of action and give the Pāṇḍavas back what he understands as rightfully theirs. Dhṛtarāṣṭra is unable, or unwilling, to connect his insight with his actions, even when he understands the enormity of what is at stake. We know from his speech that he sees clearly how powerful the Pāṇḍavas are and that they will most likely destroy the Kauravas if war breaks out.[48] Specifically, he tells Saṃjaya that no one is more powerful than Arjuna and Bhīma and that the twins, Nakula and Sahadeva, will leave no Kuru alive.[49] Dhṛtarāṣṭra's unwillingness to connect his actions with his insights, even in the face of enormous and disastrous consequences, makes him a perplexing character. This bewildering aspect of his characterization encourages the audience's critical distance from him. Indeed, we are encouraged to stand back and reflect on an obvious question: "Why does Dhṛtarāṣṭra refuse to make the effort to prevent a war that he knows will devastate his family and his kingdom?"

As Dhṛtarāṣṭra awaits Saṃjaya's report about his mission, he has premonitions that Saṃjaya will return with bad news. Upset, tormented with doubt, fearful of the future, Dhṛtarāṣṭra calls upon his wise brother, Vidura, to discourse upon *dharma* in order to ease his mind.[50] Vidura's

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44. 5.22.2.

45. 5.22.39.

46. 5.22.2.

47. 5.22.39.

48. See 5.22.10–34.

49. 5.22.10–16.

50. 5.33.12 and 5.33.15.

discourse to his blind brother is remarkable in its sheer length and scope. In this "vigil" (van Buitenen calls it "one of the longest longeurs of the *Mahābhārata* so far")[51] Vidura discusses what seems to be every topic under the sun. Each lecture, however, ends with a peroration on the justice of the Pāṇḍavas' cause and specific advice about how they should be treated: Dhṛtarāṣṭra should consider them as his sons and return to them what is rightfully theirs.[52]

When Dhṛtarāṣṭra asks Vidura specifically what he should do about the Pāṇḍavas, Vidura says,

> As actions have consequences, one should look to the consequences and, having deliberated, act. One should not act in haste.[53]

Then, applying this general principle to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's particular situation, Vidura tells his brother that he should make peace with the Pāṇḍavas because he will rue the consequences of his bad decisions. Failure to give the Pāṇḍavas what they want will lead to war.[54] Vidura assures Dhṛtarāṣṭra that if there is war, either the Pāṇḍavas or Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons will perish, and either result will cause Dhṛtarāṣṭra despair. Vidura tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra:

> You should see the bad consequences of quarreling with the Pāṇḍavas
> with regard to whom even Indra and the gods would tremble:
> enmity with sons, perpetual anxiety, the loss of fame, and the joy of
> your enemies.[55]

In his speech to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Vidura highlights the connection between act and consequence. Let us mark this point; it will return to haunt the blind king, especially through the mouth of Saṃjaya in the battle books. According to Saṃjaya, understanding this intimate link between act and consequence will be crucial for Dhṛtarāṣṭra for two reasons: it will help him to see how and why the destruction of the Bhāratas was his fault (Saṃjaya, however, does not blame only Dhṛtarāṣṭra for the

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51. Van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata, Vol. 3*, 180.

52. 5.33.103–105.

53. 5.34.8.

54. 5.39.20–30.

55. 5.37.38.

war; he also blames time and fate),[56] and it will help him move beyond his grief.

Not surprisingly, Dhṛtarāṣṭra does not heed Vidura's advice. In the assembly hall the next morning, when Saṃjaya reports that the Pāṇḍavas will declare war unless the Kauravas return their kingdom to them, Dhṛtarāṣṭra still refuses to give in. Instead, he questions Saṃjaya about Yudhiṣṭhira's battle-plans. When Dhṛtarāṣṭra poses these questions, all the characters in the Kauravas' assembly hall "lose hope of their lives."[57] They realize that the blind king has no intention of taking the necessary actions to avert war, and that war is now inevitable. Even the perennially composed Saṃjaya faints.[58]

What makes Dhṛtarāṣṭra's intransigence in the face of the imminent prospect of war so perplexing is the fact that he himself sees (and has seen) very clearly that the Pāṇḍavas will slaughter the Kauravas. In spite of these premonitions, he refuses to take measures to avert war—that is, until it is too late.

Shortly after, in a remarkable about-face reminiscent of his return to clarity in the dicing scene,[59] Dhṛtarāṣṭra decides that peace should be made with the Pāṇḍavas. Otherwise, he realizes, the destruction of the Kauravas is imminent. He says,

> I think that no war with them is best—hear this, Kauravas! If there is war, there will certainly be the destruction of our entire family. This is my ultimate attempt at avoiding calamity by means of which my mind will be at peace. If war is not desired, let us strive for peace![60]

Saṃjaya, however, tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra that his change of heart has come too late; the Pāṇḍavas at this point have suffered too many wrongs.

> Great King Bhārata, it is just as you say: it is foreseeable that Arjuna's bow will destroy the *kṣatriyas* in battle. But this I fail to understand about you who are always firm: in spite of knowing the power

56. See my discussion in the following section of this chapter.

57. 5.48.47.

58. 5.49.10–13.

59. See chapter 2.

60. 5.52.14–16.

> of Arjuna, you submit to the will of your son. This is not the time, great king![61]

This seems an odd thing for Saṃjaya to say. Only moments earlier, Bhīṣma and Droṇa tried to convince Dhṛtarāṣṭra to make peace, which suggests that there was still time then to avert war. So, at what point did it become too late for Dhṛtarāṣṭra to change his mind? While the text does not give us an explicit answer to this question, it does make "a narrative point" through presenting this sudden and inexplicable point of no return. The point is this: Dhṛtarāṣṭra always decides to do the right thing when it is too late to reverse his course of action. Not only is it too late to reverse his negotiations with the Pāṇḍavas, it is also too late to reverse Duryodhana's course. Now Duryodhana—who has been for the most part silent in *The Book of the Effort*—declares that he too is determined to go to war and that nothing will stop him.[62]

Therefore, despite his change of heart, Dhṛtarāṣṭra is now powerless to make peace. By focusing on the brooding, doubting, hesitating Dhṛtarāṣṭra as the events escalate to this point, the text shows us that the momentum that Dhṛtarāṣṭra is now unable to reverse has much to do with his own actions and decisions. Specifically, he is unable to "see" the consequences of his actions and thus act accordingly, even when the disastrous consequences of his actions are directly upon him. At the same time, the text's strategies present us with the paradox of Dhṛtarāṣṭra: that he sees with insight but does not act with it. This paradox, which lies at the core of the blind king, will have grave consequences. Just how horrific they will be, we, at this point in the story, can hardly fathom.

BEFORE WE MOVE on to a discussion of the depiction of the blind king in the frame of the battle books, let us return briefly to Vidura's discourse on *dharma* discussed above. There it was noted that Vidura's *dharma*-talk touches upon a vast array of topics. The fact that it does so raises a disorienting question about *dharma*. If a discourse on *dharma* given by a master/specialist

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61. 5.53.1–3. Note that van Buitenen translates this last line as "It is now too late, Mahārāja!" while Ganguli translates it as: "Now is not the time [to grieve]." What I interpret Saṃjaya to be saying here is that there was a time when peace negotiations were possible, but this time has passed Dhṛtarāṣṭra by.

62. 5.57.10–20.

of *dharma* (the incarnation of Dharma, no less)[63] includes such a wide range of topics, then what is *dharma*? To put this question another way, if *dharma* is everything, then is it anything? Thus, one possible reading of Vidura's discourse is that, through the strategies of excess,[64] the text attempts once again to undermine our confidence in the category *dharma*.

Another possibility, which does not necessarily negate the first, is that these strategies provide a clue about the way *dharma* functions in the epic. This possibility rests on the supposition that there is a method to Vidura's discourse, namely, to overwhelm the blind king with what van Buitenen calls Vidura's "rainy-season pitter-patter of peanuts of wisdom."[65] The ostensible point in so doing would be to open him up and make him receptive to what Vidura has to say, for Vidura every now and then interrupts his rambling discourse to give Dhṛtarāṣṭra very specific advice—namely, to consider the consequences of his actions and to return the Pāṇḍavas' kingdom to them. If this is the case, then Vidura's "strategies" suggest that *dharma* is less a straightforward set of strictures and more an orientation to the world, a way of seeing, if you will, that is characterized by insight and receptiveness.[66] Vidura's "method" would also suggest that what words "do" is as important as what they signify, since here Vidura would be using words to "do work" by attempting to make Dhṛtarāṣṭra receptive through sheer volume, just as the strategies "do work" by attempting to transform us in a variety of ways.

Saṃjaya Narrates the Battle Events to the Blind King

The motif of the lamenting blind old king—the quintessential image of the foolish, doting father reaping the consequences of his bad decisions—is foregrounded both in the outer frame of the epic (as discussed above) and in the frame of the battle books.[67] As we now turn to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's

63. The god Dharma is cursed by an angry seer to be born in the womb of a *śūdra*. The result is Vidura. 1.57.77–81.

64. Maria Heim, "The Aesthetics of Excess," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71/3 (2003): 531–554.

65. Van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata, Vol.* 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 180.

66. See Matilal's discussion of *dharma* and insight in "Moral Dilemmas,"19–35. David Shulman talks about the epic as a "vehicle for realistic insight." Shulman, "Toward a Historical Poetics," 26.

67. The five battle books are, in order: *The Book of Bhīṣma (Bhīṣmaparvan)*, *The Book of Droṇa (Droṇaparvan)*, *The Book of Karṇa (Karṇaparvan)*, *The Book of Śalya (Śalyaparvan)*, and *The Book of the Night Massacre (Sauptikaparvan)*.

depiction as the quintessential victim of suffering in the frame of these battle books, we will be interested in the fact that we "hear" the events of the war as we are sitting next to him while he listens to Saṃjaya's narration. As Dhṛtarāṣṭra's fellow listeners, we are privy to his reactions.[68] Since most of the events that Saṃjaya narrates concern the deaths of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons, friends, family members, and allies, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's responses are responses of despair. What do we learn from Dhṛtarāṣṭra about his grief, and about sorrow in general, by sitting next to him as we listen to Saṃjaya narrate the events of the war?

As discussed in the introduction to this book, the *Mahābhārata* has not one but several principal narrators who exist at different levels of embeddedness in the text. Ugraśravas narrates the story of the Bhāratas to the brahmins of the Naimiṣa Forest in the epic's outermost frame. Vaiśaṃpāyana tells the story to Janamejaya in the text's inner frame (Vaiśaṃpāyana is the most present of all the narrators), and Saṃjaya narrates the events of the war to Dhṛtarāṣṭra in the epic's five battle books.[69] What is the significance of the fact that Saṃjaya, not Vaiśaṃpāyana, is the principal narrator of the battle books and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, not Janamejaya, is our fellow audience member?

Since both Saṃjaya and Dhṛtarāṣṭra are characters in the central story, they are familiar to us in ways that Vaiśaṃpāyana and Janamejaya are not. While we know very little about Vaiśaṃpāyana, we know Saṃjaya as Dhṛtarāṣṭra's aide and critic. Further, we know that he criticized the king several times for his role in the conflict;[70] now Saṃjaya will narrate the events that he predicted and tried to prevent.[71] Similarly, while we know very little about Janamejaya, we have traveled far with Dhṛtarāṣṭra. We have watched the blind king agonize, waver, fail to make good decisions, and thus fail to avert the events that he will now hear Saṃjaya narrate. Therefore, as audience members of the battle books, we not only

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68. Dhṛtarāṣṭra's immediate fellow listeners are the women of the court. We know this because in the beginning of the *Śalyaparvan*, Dhṛtarāṣṭra dismisses them when he hears the news of Duryodhana's death at 9.2.1. Also, the text notes their response to Karṇa's death at 8.3.1–8. See Black, "Eavesdropping," 60–72.

69. Saṃjaya loses his divine eye at 10.9.58. He associates his loss of vision with the fact that he was "afflicted by grief" (*sokārta*) when he saw Duryodhana ascend to heaven. See chapter 5 for a discussion of "the hell trick," the *Mahābhārata's* "answer" to whether or not Duryodhana really did ascend to heaven.

70. 5.32.10–30.

71. Chaitanya, *The Mahābhārata*, 29.

know more about our narrator, Saṃjaya, and fellow audience member, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, but we also know something about their relationship to the events being narrated.[72]

To further explore the significance of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's depiction in the frame of the battle books, I offer a brief analysis of two narrative episodes: Dhṛtarāṣṭra's request that Saṃjaya narrate the events of the war to him in *The Book of the Effort* and Dhṛtarāṣṭra's lament at the news that Bhīṣma has fallen in the frame of the battle books in *The Book of Bhīṣma*.[73] Next, I turn to an examination of two types of narrative strategies, backshadowing and frame-switching, that involve the framing device and the narrative construction of time. The point of our analysis is to assess how specific narrative strategies associated with the text's frame structure make an argument concerning the source of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's downfall and his grief.

Dhṛtrarāṣṭra's Request

At the end of *The Book of the Effort*, when it is clear that the peace negotiations have failed and war is inevitable, the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra asks Saṃjaya to tell him everything that happens in the battle.[74] (It is worth noting that Vyāsa offers to bestow upon Dhṛtarāṣṭra a divine eye so that he can see the battle events, but the blind king refuses. He tells Vyāsa that he does not want to behold the deaths of his kinsmen.)[75] In the course of posing this request, Dhṛtarāṣṭra also makes several revealing comments. He tells Saṃjaya that he thinks "fate is supreme and human effort is useless"[76] because, despite the fact that he knows the evils of war, he cannot restrain "his deceitful son" (i.e., Duryodhana).[77] Upon further reflection he offers,

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72. Brian Black points out that the epic's inclusion of characters as audience members who emotionally respond to the events being narrated makes their emotional response "part of the story itself, thus connecting the audience in the text to the audience outside the text." "Eavesdropping," 63.

73. Bhīṣma lies mortally wounded on a bed of arrows throughout the rest of the battle. He does not die until the end of Book 13, *The Book of the Instruction*.

74. Saṃjaya is given a divine eye by Vyāsa so that he can report the details of the battle to Dhṛtarāṣṭra. For discussion about Saṃjaya and the powers of the divine eye, see S. K Belvakar, "Saṃjaya's 'Eye Divine,'" *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 27 (1946): 323–326.

75. 6.2.4–7.

76. 5.156.4.

77. 5.156.4–5.

"I do have the wisdom to foresee evil, but when I am with Duryodhana it gets turned around again."[78]

Saṃjaya chastises Dhṛtarāṣṭra, telling him that he should not put all the blame (*doṣa*) on Duryodhana. Further, "the person who obtains that which is inauspicious because of his own misdeeds" should not blame time or fate.[79] After reprimanding the king, Saṃjaya agrees to report the details of the war. Significantly, he provides instructions for how Dhṛtarāṣṭra should listen: he should remain calm and not despair. (Saṃjaya is the only narrator in the epic who instructs his audience in this manner, with the exception of Nārada, who, interestingly, is reporting to Yudhiṣṭhira the news of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's death in the forest fire.) Saṃjaya says:

> So, then, hear from me in full the news of the slaughter of the horses, elephants, and kings of immeasurable splendor in the battle. And while you are listening to what happened in the great war that gave rise to the destruction of all the world, remain calm and do not despair, O king.[80]

Why should Dhṛtarāṣṭra remain calm? Because, according to Saṃjaya,

> A person is not the agent of his good and evil karma; s/he is not free and is manipulated like a wooden puppet. Some are assigned by God, some by chance, and still others by previous karma.[81]

Thus, at the very outset of the war, we see that Dhṛtarāṣṭra is preoccupied with his role in the conflict. On one level, he accepts some degree of responsibility. However, by presenting himself as a passive agent who is directed to act by fate and by Duryodhana (it is not clear whether or not Dhṛtarāṣṭra connects these two forces in his mind), he accepts responsibility only minimally. Saṃjaya focuses on the cause of the conflict as well, but his statements are ambiguous. On the one hand, Saṃjaya implies that the roots of the war have nothing to do with human influence and he does

78. 5.156. 6.

79. 5.156.9.

80. 5.156.12–13.

81. 5. 156. 14–15.

so in a manner that suggests that human power is severely if not completely limited. On the other, he blames Duryodhana for the conflict, suggesting that human beings have the power to act.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra Laments Bhīṣma's Fall

Samjaya's narration of the war events commences in the *Book of Bhīṣma* when he, "grief stricken" (*duḥkhita*),[82] rushing from the battlefield to Hāstinapura, approaches the "brooding" (*dhyāyant*)[83] Dhṛtarāṣṭra and tells him that Bhīṣma, the grandfather of the Pandavas and Kauravas, has fallen. To drive the magnitude of this point home, Saṃjaya juxtaposes many of Bhīṣma's great feats of strength with the fact that he now lies helpless on a bed of arrows:

> That great warrior who on a single chariot conquered all the assembled kings in a great battle in the city of the Kāśi, the offspring of the Vasus, who fought Rāma Jāmadagnya and was not killed by him, now has been felled by Śikhaṇḍin in battle.[84]

Significantly, Saṃjaya concludes his opening speech by blaming Dhṛtarāṣṭra for what has come to pass:

> [Bhīṣma] lies on the ground like a tree felled by the wind, groaning, undeserving of his fate, because of your ill-conceived plan, *Bhārata*![85]

Dhṛtarāṣṭra first responds to the disastrous news with a string of questions. How did Bhīṣma fall from the chariot? Who was protecting him? Dhṛtarāṣṭra also expresses how he feels. He says, "Profound grief enters me"[86] and "I know no peace, only sorrow."[87] Finally, he questions how this could have possibly happened to someone as mighty and powerful as Bhīṣma. First he blames himself,[88] but later places the blame on time,

82. 6.14.2.
83. 6.14.2.
84. 6.14.6–7.
85. 6.14.13.
86. 6.15.4.
87. 6.15.69.
88. 6.15.15.

coming to the conclusion that "time certainly is very powerful, inevitable for the whole world," since mighty Bhīṣma has been defeated.[89] At the end of his lament he exhorts Saṃjaya to tell him everything that happened, once again pinning the blame on Duryodhana:

> Tell me everything that happened in battle to the kings of the earth, whether lacking in virtue or not, all the result of the bad ideas of that fool [Duryodhana].[90]

Saṃjaya agrees to report the details of Bhīṣma's fall, but before he does so, he berates Dhṛtarāṣṭra for not accepting responsibility for his role in the war. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Saṃjaya says, should not place all the blame on Duryodhana, for "a man who is faced with misfortune because of his own evil actions must not blame someone else for it."[91] The Pāṇḍavas suffered the injustice of the dice game because of their loyalty to Dhṛtarāṣṭra.[92] Exhorting Dhṛtarāṣṭra to listen to what he, Saṃjaya, has seen with his own eyes, he instructs him "not to indulge his mind in sorrow" (*mā ca śoke manaḥ kṛthāḥ*)[93] because "surely all this was destined long ago."[94]

The exchanges between Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Saṃjaya in the frame of the four battle books follow the format of this exchange closely: Saṃjaya reports the details of the war to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Dhṛtarāṣṭra responds with a lament in which he mourns the loss of the particular character who has died, reflects on the implications of the event for the security of his sons, and then turns to the broader issue of the cause of the war and blames variously himself, fate, time, and, most frequently, Duryodhana. Saṃjaya chastises him for not accepting responsibility, telling him that he is reaping the results of his bad acts since he did not listen to good advice[95] and since he allowed the Pāṇḍavas to be treated so cruelly by Duryodhana.[96] Saṃjaya then exhorts Dhṛtarāṣṭra to listen to what he has to tell him and

89. 6.15.56.

90. 6.15.73.

91. 6.16.2.

92. 6.16.4. A reference to the dice game.

93. 6.16.6.

94. 6.16.6.

95. 6.61.20–21.

96. 5.156.11 and 6.16.4.

to remain calm and not to grieve because the war and the destruction of the Bhāratas was foreordained and/or because man is not the agent of his acts.[97]

The exchanges between Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Saṃjaya in the frame of the battle books are noteworthy because both characters focus on the issue of the war's cause and both provide inconsistent accounts, but their speeches are inconsistent for different reasons. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, it is clear, refuses to come to terms with his responsibility for the war. It is simply too much for him. Therefore, he blames whatever person or force is convenient for him. (Note that while Dhṛtarāṣṭra sometimes points the finger at himself, he never ends a speech on this note. He always settles upon some other force.) Saṃjaya's inconsistencies, on the other hand, are due to a distinction that he makes between how Dhṛtarāṣṭra should think about the causes of the war (i.e., Dhṛtarāṣṭra should blame himself) and how Dhṛtarāṣṭra should listen to his narration of the battle events (i.e., the king should view the unfortunate events as the work of destiny). While the event remains the same (the war), the king's responsive acts are different (blaming versus listening). According to Lawrence McCrea, there is a rationale behind Saṃjaya's ambiguous statements: Saṃjaya employs two different rhetorical strategies for two different purposes. When Dhṛtarāṣṭra attempts to play "the blame game," Saṃjaya stops him short by pointing to the blind king's own culpability; but when Dhṛtarāṣṭra begins to wallow in despair, Saṃjaya points to the inexorability of fate and the universality of death and loss. In both cases, "his aim is essentially therapeutic—to lead him away from self-destructive emotions and towards stoic acceptance and fortitude."[98]

Backshadowing and Frame-switching in the Frames of the Battle Books

Moving now to an examination of the battle books' structure, let us explore how certain narrative strategies related to the text's framing structure—backshadowing and frame-switching—make an argument about Dhṛtarāṣṭra's role in the production of the war. Each battle book begins with a flash-forward in which Saṃjaya rushes back from the battlefield to announce to Dhṛtarāṣṭra the death of the Kuru general of the book (each

97. 5.156.14 and 6.16.6.

98. Personal communication.

book is named after a Kaurava general who is killed). The rest of the book contains Saṃjaya's narration of the days of the battle that conclude with the general's killing.[99] What is notable about this structure is that each book begins with a declaration of its own outcome (i.e., the news of the death of a Kaurava general) and the rest of the book involves the narrative's effort to "catch up" with this outcome. This device will be referred to as "backshadowing," since Saṃjaya's reports are after-accounts, not running commentaries.[100] While this narrative device is similar to the placement of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's lament in *The Book of the Beginning* discussed above, it does not function in quite the same manner. The difference has to do with the fact that Duryodhana's fall—the source of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's grief in *The Book of the Beginning*—is not the outcome of the epic story (the events that the lament frames). Bhīṣma's fall—the source of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's grief in the *Śalyaparvan*—on the other hand, is the outcome of the book. Thus, while the technique is similar in both instances, it is saying something fundamentally different about time in each case. It is making a point about cosmological time in the first instance and about consequential time in the second.

The second aspect of the battle books' structure that we will focus on is the strategy of frame-switching. While frame-switching is used throughout the *Mahābhārata*, the use of this strategy is particularly effective in the battle books because, as mentioned earlier, the audience is so well-acquainted with Saṃjaya and Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Further, the conversations between Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Saṃjaya provide a framing meta-commentary on the events of the war. Significantly, these conversations are between the character who is, ostensibly, an agent of the war (Dhṛtarāṣṭra), and the character who forces Dhṛtarāṣṭra to see himself as such (Saṃjaya).

Backshadowing and frame-switching are narrative strategies that manipulate time and therefore make specific points about it. These points have to do with the implicit connection in the text between causation (seed and fruit)—a theme that has been surfacing throughout this chapter—and

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99. For a slightly different interpretation of the chronological arrangements of Saṃjaya's reports, see Belavalkar, "Saṃjaya's 'Eye Divine,'" 323–326.

100. See M. A. Mehendale, *Reflections on the Mahābhārata War* (Shimla: India Institute of Advanced Study, 1995), 3. At the start of this chapter, I discussed the use of this device in *The Book of the Beginning*. Here I am focusing on slightly different dimension of its use in the battle books. For the term "backshadowing," see Hiltebeitel and Kloetzli, "Time," 582.

consequential time (i.e., the inextricable link between past, present, and future, and between act and consequence).[101]

Backshadowing is a strategy that encourages us to view the events that occur in a particular battle book as informed by the outcome of the book (i.e., the death of a Kaurava general). The outcome, in this way, becomes the defining hermeneutic of the book. All the events that occur in that book are seen as an inevitable progression leading to the death of the Kuru general. Accordingly, backshadowing is a narrative strategy that "treats the past as though it inevitably led to the present"; it suggests that "the present, as the future of the past, was already immanent in the past in a more or less straight line."[102] The use of backshadowing in the battle books involves "backwards causality" because it makes a past catastrophe (the death of the general) visible in narrative advance. By treating the present as already immanent in the past, backshadowing makes the point that the fruit of an act is contained in the act, as seed (i.e., in the seed's inception).

This strategy, then, provides us with—or suggests—a clue concerning Dhṛtarāṣṭra's role in the war, a recurring topic of Saṃjaya and Dhṛtarāṣṭra's framing conversations. Following the logic of this strategy, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's fatal error was that he did not have a proper understanding of time and therefore of causation. When he made his decisions to give into his sons and allow the Pāṇḍavas to be treated unfairly, Dhṛtarāṣṭra did not properly understand the intimate connection between past and present (as the future of the past), and therefore between seed and fruit.[103] Or, if he did understand it, he failed to act on this knowledge. Either way, his failure contributed significantly to the great tragedy, for the decision to cheat the Pāṇḍavas contained the fruit of the war and the death of his sons. It was not a question of whether or not the war would come to pass (and Dhṛtarāṣṭra held out hope against hope that it would not, as we know from his "When I heard . . ." dirge), it was just a matter of time.

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101. For examples of two discussions of karma in the epic that incorporate the seed-fruit metaphor, see 3.225.22–27 (where, interestingly, Dhṛtarāṣṭra himself is speaking about the likelihood that the Pāṇḍavas will defeat the Kauravas in battle) and 5.34.1–25 (where Vidura is attempting to convince Dhṛtarāṣṭra to make peace).

102. Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 3, 234.

103. Vidura and Saṃjaya make this same point to Dhṛtarāṣṭra at 5.34.1–25 and 11.1.30–35 respectively.

The second narrative strategy, the strategy of frame-switching, plays with time by placing two different narrative moments, the time of the war and the time of the war's telling and Dhṛtarāṣṭra's grieving, in close proximity to one another. What this strategy provides, then, is the juxtaposition of the moment where a character (Dhṛtarāṣṭra) is forced to see that he is the agent of an event (the war) and the moment of the event (the war) itself. This switching back and forth between agent and event, or seed-sower and fruit, suggests that the present (as the future of the past) and the future are inextricably linked, that the effect and its cause are inseparable. As in the case above, the suggestion here is that Dhṛtarāṣṭra did not have a proper understanding of this intimate connection. Because of this fundamental misunderstanding, he now finds himself facing inconceivable consequences for his misguided actions and his over-indulgent affection for his sons.

As noted above, Dhṛtarāṣṭra claims to have the eyesight of insight, which he defines as the ability to see the consequences of an action at an event's inception. However, if this is the case, then we encounter, once again, the paradox of the blind king: that he sees with insight but does not act with it. The reason why he fails to make the connection between insight and action, following the suggestions of the narrative strategies of back-shadowing and frame-switching, is because he is blind to the intimate link between act and consequence. He fundamentally misjudged this connection by clinging to the small hopes he harbored that he would not reap the bad consequences of the seeds that he sowed, even though he was able to "see" these consequences in temporal advance.[104] It was this error, this moral blindness, that cost him and virtually every other character in the epic so much because it contributed significantly to the war and its devastation. Experienced in this way, the text through its narrative strategies provides an argument for why we should see in the way that Dhṛtarāṣṭra does not see. Blindness to this fundamental characteristic of time and causality, the text argues, is at the heart of the source of suffering.

The End of the War and the Moment of Advice: Three Arguments Against Grief

The end of the war constitutes the moment of reckoning for Dhṛtarāṣṭra. At this point in the story he is no longer able to turn a blind eye to the inevitable consequences of his bad decisions, since these consequences

104. For a discourse in the epic on the evils of hope, see 12.126.

have now come to pass. Devastated by the defeat of his army, the deaths of his sons, and the loss of his kingdom, Dhṛtarāṣṭra is a broken man who utterly succumbs to grief; it is doubtful whether he will ever be able to move beyond it. To help him begin to do so, three advisors against grief (Saṃjaya, Vidura, and Vyāsa) arrive and deliver three very different arguments to him.

The end of the war represents a crossroads for the audience as well. Like Dhṛtarāṣṭra, we have just emerged from the battle books and have experienced "the massive shock that the account of the war produces."[105] Just as Dhṛtarāṣṭra's advisors present him with three different arguments for why he should not grieve, the text also provides us with three arguments for why we should not grieve. Do the text's narrative strategies encourage us to be persuaded by the same arguments that Dhṛtarāṣṭra is persuaded by? Why or why not?

As this book has argued in its introduction, the *Mahābhārata* contains an extended argument for why its audiences should not succumb to grief. One way the text makes its case is through the characterization of the grieving king Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who is the recipient of many arguments against grief. It is during these crucial "moments of advice" that the text presents us with some of its most powerful cases against despair. Why does the text present many of its arguments through the depiction of a character who ultimately fails to overcome his grief?

Three Arguments against Grief

At the conclusion of the war, Saṃjaya approaches Dhṛtarāṣṭra to tell him that it is time to perform the funeral rites for the warriors who have perished in battle. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, "pained because of the killing of his sons and grandsons" (*putrapautravadhārdita*), falls to the earth and laments:

> My sons have been killed! My ministers have been killed! All my allies have been killed! Obviously I will be miserable as long as I move upon this earth! What is the use of living now that I am deprived of my relatives? I am like a decrepit old bird whose wings have been clipped.[106]

105. Fitzgerald, *The Mahābhārata, Vol. 7*, xvi.

106. 11.1.10–11. This image of extreme vulnerability to the implacable forces of the world is a quintessential image in the *Mahābhārata*. See my discussion of Draupadī's depiction in the dicing scene in chapter 2.

After he expresses his grief, Dhṛtarāṣṭra turns to the task of apportioning blame, just as he did in the frame of the battle books. First Dhṛtarāṣṭra blames himself for not heeding the advice of his friends[107] and for giving into his bad judgment.[108] Next he blames his misfortune on the machinations of karma and fate (this appears to be the one instance in which Dhṛtarāṣṭra blames karma for his misfortune):[109]

> Saṃjaya, I do not remember committing bad acts in the past the fruit of which I am experiencing here and now, fool that I am. But certainly I did something wicked in previous births as a result of which the Ordainer has made me act in ways that lead to suffering. Growing old, the destruction of all my relatives and allies, all this has happened because of the operation of fate. Is there a person in the world more miserable than I?[110]

In response Saṃjaya attempts once again to help Dhṛtarāṣṭra move beyond his grief. He argues that Dhṛtarāṣṭra should not grieve since the source of his grief, the death of his sons, was his own fault. Because Dhṛtarāṣṭra did not follow his friends' advice, because he was too greedy and "eager for results," and because he did not do enough to restrain Duryodhana, Dhṛtarāṣṭra now finds himself in this miserable position.[111] Summing up Dhṛtarāṣṭra's moral failure with an aphorism "A person must act properly in the very beginning so that when the matter has long passed, s/he does not suffer later,"[112] Saṃjaya concludes his sermon with a warning about the dangers of grief:

> One cannot obtain wealth while grieving, nor can one find happiness while grieving. One cannot obtain royal splendor when grieving, nor can one who is grieving find the Ultimate.[113]

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107. 11.1.13–14.

108. 11.1.15.

109. Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, 33.

110. 11.1.17–19. Yudhiṣṭhira asks this same question ("Is there anyone more miserable than I?") several times in *The Book of the Forest*.

111. 11.1–27.

112. 11.1.28.

113. 11.1.31.

To understand Saṃjaya's point, we should consider why accepting responsibility for his hand in the war would dispel Dhṛtarāṣṭra's grief. First, what is grief for Saṃjaya? From Saṃjaya's perspective, grief is not simply sadness over the death of a loved one. Grief, like other negative responses (such as greed or anger) to external events, is a potentially paralyzing emotion that overwhelms the senses and skews one's vision of reality. Thus it prevents one from taking the proper course of action. Further, grief is an emotion to which one succumbs; it is an indulgence that entails a fundamental rejection of the way things are. From this perspective, we can see why Saṃjaya might assume that telling Dhṛtarāṣṭra that the war was his fault might persuade Dhṛtarāṣṭra to overcome his despair. Saṃjaya's point is that Dhṛtarāṣṭra, of all people, should not grieve, since he was not a victim but an architect of his own misery.[114] By forcing Dhṛtarāṣṭra to see his role in the war, Saṃjaya is attempting to snap the blind king out of his brooding and to motivate him to act.

Before Dhṛtarāṣṭra has a chance to respond, Vidura jumps in and provides a second argument against grief. Because Dhṛtarāṣṭra does not respond to Saṃjaya's speech and because a second argument is necessary, we may assume Saṃjaya's speech did not accomplish its goal. (This would not be surprising since we know that Dhṛtarāṣṭra has heard many of Saṃjaya's "arguments" before, and they were met with deaf ears.) Vidura's speech, the longest of the three, focuses on two related themes: the destructive quality of time and the misery of the cycle of rebirth.

Vidura exhorts Dhṛtarāṣṭra to take hold of himself since death is the final conclusion for all mortal beings. All accumulations end in dissolution, all unions end in separation, all life ends in death.[115] The warriors who died in the battle did not belong to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, nor he to them, so why does he grieve?[116] Suffering and death are simply fundamental aspects of existence.[117] Time drags everyone and everything off,[118] making all things in life temporary; knowing this, Dhṛtarāṣṭra should slay his mental misery with wisdom.

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114. Karve, *Yugānta*, 70.

115. 11.2.3.

116. 11.2.8.

117. 11.2.16.

118. 11.2.14.

Next, Vidura discusses the forces of karma and *saṃsāra*, painting the picture of *saṃsāra* in the most unpleasant terms through the following story.[119] Once upon a time, a brahmin enters an impenetrable wood that is filled with gigantic beasts of prey who hunt him. Running for his life, the brahmin discovers that he is trapped by a large net that covers the forest. To his horror, he also notices a gigantic, hideous-looking woman who embraces the forest with her arms and five-headed snakes whose heads touch the sky. The brahmin falls into a well and becomes tangled up in vines. In this unfortunate predicament, he discovers several additional dangers that threaten him: a six-headed elephant, a cluster of bees gathering honey (which the brahmin licks greedily), black and white rats that gnaw at the vines that hold him; and a snake at the bottom of the well, coiled in anticipation.

Moved by the plight of the brahmin, Dhṛtarāṣṭra asks Vidura how he can escape. Vidura explains that the story is an allegory for *saṃsāra*.[120] The forest, according to Vidura, is the vast cycle of rebirth, the wild beasts are diseases, and the giant woman is old age that destroys beauty. The well is the physical body and the vines from which the brahmin hangs in the well are the desire to stay alive, a desire that all human beings have. At the bottom of the well lies the snake, which is time, the destroyer of all beings, that which takes everything away.

Capitalizing on Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sympathy for the brahmin, Vidura urges Dhṛtarāṣṭra to save himself from the misery of rebirth, as represented in the story, by resorting to "misery medicine" (*duḥkhabhaiṣajya*),[121] or mental restraint. Through mental control a person is able to move beyond the suffering caused by the endless cycle of rebirth: "not courage, not riches, not friends can free one from misery the way that the self that is firmly restrained can."[122]

Unfortunately, Vidura's lecture is too intense for the old king, and at its conclusion, Dhṛtarāṣṭra faints away. When he is revived, he declares that he wants to commit suicide and Vyāsa, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's father, now steps in. Vyāsa begins his speech by reinforcing Vidura's basic point concerning the transitory nature of life. He says:

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119. 11.5.3–11.6.1.

120. 11.6.1–6.5.

121. 11.7.17.

122. 11.7.18 Notice the similarity between this statement and Ānanda's definition of *śāntarasa* (see chapter 1).

> No doubt you know that mortals are transient. Since the world of the living is not eternal, existence is transient, and life has death for its end, why do you grieve?[123]

Then, suddenly switching gears, he tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra that he should not grieve because the slaughter was "destined" (*bhavitavya*, *daiva*).[124] To explain, Vyāsa tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra that he visited Indra's assembly hall in heaven.[125] There he overheard a conversation between the gods and the goddess Earth. During this conversation, Earth requested that the gods fulfill the promise they made to her and help to relieve her burden. Viṣṇu replied that Duryodhana would soon make his appearance in order to take care of that job. According to Vyāsa, Viṣṇu told Earth,

> The kings have gathered on the battlefield of the Kauravas for his (i.e., Duryodhana's) sake. Attacking, they will kill each other with mighty weapons. Thus, goddess, it is in war that your burden will be removed.[126]

Vyāsa then lectures Dhṛtarāṣṭra on his sons' wickedness and urges him to recognize the fact that his sons were born on earth in order to destroy it.[127] Knowing that the destruction of the Bhāratas was fated, Dhṛtarāṣṭra should abandon his grief, keep his life, and reconcile with the Pāṇḍavas.[128] Finally, Vyāsa ends his argument by returning to his first point concerning the transitory nature of life, reminding Dhṛtarāṣṭra that he who is "supreme in *dharma*" must accept what he already knows—that "creatures go and come back again".[129]

Dhṛtarāṣṭra, moved by his father's speech, agrees to try to abandon his despair. He tells Vyāsa:

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123. 11. 8.13–14.

124. 11.8.16, 11.8.28, 11.8.35.

125. 11.8.20–26.

126. 11.8.25–26.

127. 11.8.27.

128. 11.8.34–35.

129. 11.8.39. Here knowledge of *dharma* seems to be equated with knowledge of the transient nature of life. See also 15.40.11 where *dharma* and acceptance of transitoriness seem to be closely linked if not equated.

> O best of brahmins, driven by a huge net of grief and perplexed incessantly, I do not know myself. But listening to your statement about what was ordained by fate, I will hold onto life and try not to grieve.[130]

Vyāsa, satisfied, disappears on the spot, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra summons Gāndhārī and prepares to visit the battlefield.

WHY, AMONG ALL three speeches, is Vyāsa's speech successful (or at least partially successful, since Dhṛtarāṣṭra never truly overcomes his grief)?[131] Let us consider these three arguments together. Saṃjaya, Vidura, and Vyāsa all provide Dhṛtarāṣṭra with a framework for understanding the destruction of the Bhāratas and its cause; they do so with the intention of dispelling Dhṛtarāṣṭra's despair. Simply put, these three arguments are, in chronological order: (1) Dhṛtarāṣṭra should not grieve because the source of his grief, the death of his sons and kinsmen, was his fault (Saṃjaya's argument); (2) Dhṛtarāṣṭra should not grieve because the source of his grief, the death of his sons and death more generally, is a fact of life to which all living creatures are subject (Vidura's argument); and (3) Dhṛtarāṣṭra should not grieve because the source of his grief, the death of his sons and kinsmen, was brought about by a divine design in order to relieve Earth of her suffering (Vyāsa's argument). It is important to keep in mind, however, that Vyāsa's account of the divine plan is bookended by a restatement of Vidura's earlier point about the transitory nature of life, an argument that catapulted Dhṛtarāṣṭra into suicidal despair.

Saṃjaya provides Dhṛtarāṣṭra with a framework for understanding the war's cause that is based on Dhṛtarāṣṭra's particular situation and that encourages self-understanding. Through directing Dhṛtarāṣṭra to see his role in bringing about the war, Saṃjaya encourages Dhṛtarāṣṭra to face reality and move on. Saṃjaya's strategy fails, however, because Dhṛatrāṣṭra has neither the strength of mind nor the courage to accept his role in the events that led to the war.

Vidura encourages Dhṛtarāṣṭra to understand the devastation through the dual lenses of time and *saṃsāra*. Since destruction comes to all creatures,

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130. 11.8.46–47.

131. See 15.36.26–33 where Dhṛtarāṣṭra at the end of his life still speaks of being tormented by the memory of the destruction of the Bhāratas and where he still blames Duryodhana for the catastrophe. See also Chaitanya, *The Mahābhārata*, 62.

why does Dhṛtarāṣṭra grieve? He is by no means the only person who has experienced sorrow because of loss and death. Since all life is characterized by loss and hence suffering, because all creatures are endlessly born into a world where they face the ravages and sorrows of time, then why would one be shocked and overwhelmed when it comes one's way? This argument, like Saṃjaya's, fails to persuade Dhṛtarāṣṭra to abandon his grief. Dhṛtaraṣṭra is not ready to face this vision of "the way things are." In fact, it almost breaks the blind king completely.

Vyāsa's principal argument encourages Dhṛtarāṣṭra to understand the war and devastation through the framework of fate. What is worth noting about Vyāsa's account is that it "explains" the destruction of his kinsmen in terms of a higher good: relieving Earth of her burden. Vyāsa's account also frees Dhṛtarāṣṭra from the burden of responsibility, since Vyāsa's main point is that there was simply nothing that Dhṛtarāṣṭra could have done to stop the war. It was the product of a divine design; this is why he should not grieve. Vyāsa's principal account—as Dhṛtarāṣṭra interprets it—does not, therefore, require him to take a hard look at his own life. Neither does it require him to reflect deeply upon the human situation (though Vyāsa's framing point concerning the transitory nature of life certainly does).[132]

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132. Does Vyāsa really think that the story of the burden of Earth provides a sound explanation for the war? I have been careful to note that in this passage he frames the story with a very different account of the war's cause—one that emphasizes the transitory nature of life, a point that echoes Vidura's previous speech. For other places in the epic where Vyāsa emphasizes the transitory nature of life in the context of urging the grief-stricken not to succumb to despair, see 6.2.5, 6.4.2–3, and 12.26.5–8. I emphasize the presence of Vyāsa's framing point, which stands in an ambiguous relationship to his "burden of Earth explanation" because a number of scholars have read the epic's burden of Earth account as its definitive answer to why the war took place. According to these scholars, the war is not actually a war between human beings, but is in reality a war between the gods and the demons, and hence good against evil, transposed in this human context. For this reading, see, for example, Georges Dumézil, *Mythe et Épopée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 168–169; Fitzgerald, "The *Mahābhārata*," 57–59, 74; Alf Hiltebeitel, "India's Epics: Writing, Orality, Divinity" in *The Study of Hinduism*, Studies in Comparative Religion, ed. Arvind Sharma (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 134; W. J. Johnson, *The Sauptikaparvan of the Mahābhārata: The Massacre at Night* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xxxvi; Ruth Cecily Katz, *Arjuna in the Mahābhārata: Where Krishna is, There is Victory* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 239–240; Jacques Scheuer, *Śiva dans le Mahābhārata* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982), 156; John D. Smith, *The Mahābhārata* (London: Penguin

Vyāsa's principal account, therefore, stands out because it is the only argument among the three that could be construed as providing Dhṛtarāṣṭra with some level of comfort. As the blind king interprets his father's speech, it places a positive spin on the tragic war by contextualizing it in terms of the greater good of relieving Earth of her burden and by absolving Dhṛtarāṣṭra of blame. Vidura and Saṃjaya's arguments, by contrast, are bitter pills for the blind king to swallow. Given the fact that

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Books, 2009), xxvi. This reading of the text is often based on the following passages: 1.58–61, 6.62.8–11, 11.8.20, 12.337.29–31, 13.143.12, 16.9.29. However, as Simon Brodbeck notes (and I agree with him), this cosmic explanation for the war is used sparingly in the text and remains "firmly in the background." See "Husbands of Earth: *Kṣatriyas*, Females, and Female *Kṣatriyas* in the *Strīparvan*," in *Epic Undertakings*, ed. Robert P. Goldman and Muneo Tokunaga (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2009), 50 and 52. My position on this question is that this cosmic explanation is only one answer among many with respect to the question of the war's cause, and the epic in the end defers privileging any one of these answers. (Tamar Reich's recent article "Ends and Closures in the *Mahābhārata*" supports this position [see p. 25]). I also believe that the cosmic "answer" is not one to which the epic gives a great deal of "aesthetic weight." (See chapter 1 for how this idea of aesthetic weight is central to Ānandavardhana's reading of the epic as well as my own.) Many scholars have cautioned students of the epic on this point as well, arguing against the trend in *Mahābhārata* studies to overemphasize the mythological/divine dimensions of the story. For example B. K. Matilal warns us against viewing the *Mahābhārata* war as a simple struggle between good and evil, between gods and demons (a lens that the story of the burden of Earth supplies). Matilal writes, "But I believe when we interpret the *Mahābhārata* battle in this way, we take a simplistic and easy way out. Every episode of the epic has a rich variety of significance, it is full of ambiguities, *replete with suggestivity*" (italics mine). See Matilal, "The Throne," 109. Greg Bailey too notes that the epic genre emphasizes the human level, particularly in light of the physical and mental suffering that characters in the epic undergo. See "Suffering in the *Mahābhārata*," 48 and 51. See also A. K. Ramanujan, "Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*," 434 n4 where he critiques Biardeau and Hiltebeitel for their tendency to emphasize the mythological over the human. Additionally, K. A. Paniker notes that the difference between the *purāṇa* genre and the *itihāsa* genre (by which he means "epic") is that the *purāṇas* glorify divinity (i.e., the mythological stories), while the *itihāsa* focuses on the human element. See *Indian Narratology*, 41–42. Many scholars who emphasize the mythological lens when interpreting the epic have been influenced by either Georges Dumezil, who reads the epic through a Vedic/Indo-European prism, or Madeleine Biardeau, who reads it through a Purāṇic one. Both scholars have been criticized for their symbolic interpretations of the epic. See Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, 69; González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 157; Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, xxii; James Laine, *Visions of God: Narratives of Theophany in the Mahābhārata* (Vienna: Gerold & Co., 1989), 32; van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata. Vol. 3*, 163; and John D. Smith, "The Hero as Gifted Man: Nala in the *Mahābhārata*," in *The Indian Narrative: Perspectives and Patterns*, ed. Christopher Shackle and Rupert Snell (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), 13–22.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra, at least in part, is presumably moved by Vyāsa's account because it makes him feel better, how are we encouraged to respond to it? Or to put this question another way, are Dhṛtarāṣṭra's responses meant to serve as a model for ours? The answer is clearly "no." The text's strategies have encouraged us to view him increasingly as morally wanting, particularly in three contexts: as he makes decisions,[133] listens to advice, and refuses to come to terms with the real sources of his sorrow. Therefore, rather than being moved by arguments that persuade Dhṛtarāṣṭra, we are encouraged by the text to be moved by those arguments that fail to persuade him.

Further, the fact that Dhṛtarāṣṭra fails to be moved by Saṃjaya and Vidura's arguments provides a window into the innerworkings, particularly the potential blind spots, of the human mind. The fact that Saṃjaya's speech fails to persuade Dhṛtarāṣṭra to abandon his despair exposes the fact that Dhṛtarāṣṭra is simply unable to see and accept his role in the war. Similarly, the fact that Vidura's speech fails shows us that Dhṛtarāṣṭra is unable to face fundamental truths about the nature of existence. In Dhṛtarāṣṭra's failure to be persuaded by Saṃjaya's and Vidura's arguments lies a hidden truth now exposed for us to see: how loath the human mind is to accept agency in suffering (both one's own suffering and the suffering of others) and to accept the fact that life is characterized by implacable temporality and hence inevitable loss and despair.[134] By exposing this resistance, the text provides us with the opportunity to reflect upon whether we harbor the same kind of resistances that Dhṛtarāṣṭra does. What would be the purpose of encouraging this reflexive move? Ostensibly, such self-reflection would initiate the process of the dissolution of the resistances that prevent us from seeing and coming to terms with the world as it is.

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133. Once the Pāṇḍavas come of age and the question of kingship becomes pressing, Dhṛtarāṣṭra makes three fateful decisions: (1) he exiles the Pāṇḍavas to Vāraṇāvata, (2) he challenges them to a game of dice, and (3) he fails to return the kingdom to them after their thirteen-year exile.

134. As mentioned in chapter 1, Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch both write passionately about the fact that humans are unable to face the prevalence of suffering and death in the world. Weil and Murdoch consider the ability and courage to do so is the highest ethical achievement. See Simone Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," in *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George Panchinas (London: Moyer Bell, 1977), 439–468 and Iris Murdoch, "Comic and Tragic," in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin Press, 1993), 90–146.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, Dhṛtarāṣṭra never truly rises above his grief. Although he spends his last days in the forest performing austerities, he still speaks of being tormented by the memory of the destruction of the Bhāratas and still blames Duryodhana for the catastrophe.[135] Thus he remains "blind" to the very end save for one brief and joyous night when Vyāsa, his father, grants him the power to see his sons (along with the other warriors) rise up from the river and embrace one another.

To return to a question raised earlier, why then does the text make an argument against despair chiefly through the depiction of a perennially grieving character who himself ultimately fails to overcome his sorrow? An argument running throughout this chapter is that the text's narrative strategies encourage our increasing estrangement from Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Our suspicions are first raised at the very opening of the story in his "When I heard . . ." speech, since his attempts to prove that he possesses the eyesight of insight raise troubling questions about him. Namely, if he was able to "foresee" the defeat of the Kauravas and the deaths of his sons, why didn't he do something to stop the building animosity between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas? In *The Book of the Effort*, we watch him waver; doubt; "see" and, at the same time, refuse to see; squander precious time; and lose the opportunity to make peace. During and after the war, we watch him refuse to own up to his role in the conflict and rush to pin the blame on other forces.

Thus we "learn" from Dhṛtarāṣṭra not because he is a moral paragon, but because he is a flawed human being.[136] Accordingly, we are not encouraged to identify and emulate him, but to stand back and critically reflect on his moral—and very human—failings (for filial weakness and losing one's mind to grief are very human pitfalls). From this distance, we are directed to see parts of ourselves mirrored and greatly magnified. This amplification "does work" because the extremity of what Dhṛtarāṣṭra has to face—moral responsibility for whole-scale slaughter—renders bearable what we ourselves have to face and are loath to face, which will almost certainly not be as extreme as what the blind king must face. Thus, the characterization

135. 15.36.26–33.

136. See Matilal's assessment of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's moral failings, "Dharma and Rationality," 60–61.

of Dhṛtarāṣṭra creates "a moral space" for us to face and bear our own places of contact with sorrow, either as agents or victims of despair or as both. The fact that this characterization does significant moral and aesthetic work in the epic is underscored by the fact that Dhṛtarāṣṭra's role as lamenter *par excellence* is highlighted in the epic's outer frame and in the frame of the four battle books.

Further, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's failure to rise above his grief creates a context for wise characters in the epic to make arguments about the pitfalls of despair. While it is clear that these arguments fall on Dhṛtarāṣṭra's deaf ears, they are not meant to fall on *our* deaf ears. Thus Dhṛtarāṣṭra's character creates an opportunity in the epic for advice, particularly arguments against grief. In asking us to watch Dhṛtarāṣṭra (whom we increasingly see as morally wanting) fail to listen to good advice and reap bad consequences due to this failure, the text's aesthetics of suffering makes a powerful case for why we should adopt the ways of seeing and of understanding the world recommended by Dhṛtarāṣṭra's wise advisers that would enable us to move beyond despair.

For all these reasons, the epic's depiction of Dhṛtarāṣṭra provides a powerful case for why readers or spectators of narrative literature do not learn from watching positive role models in action. Rather, they learn from negative exemplars by watching them fail and assessing the reasons for the failure as well as witnessing and experiencing the inevitable disastrous consequences of their bad decisions. Dhṛtarāṣṭra is not the only character in the epic who "instructs" through his flaws. Indeed, the principal characters in the epic, for the most part, serve as negative examples, especially in terms of their responses to suffering.[137] Almost all the principal actors are moral failures in this respect (Gāndhārī, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's wife, is one possible exception; see postscript). They either refuse to see their role in contributing to sorrow (Dhṛtarāṣṭra), are crazed by the experience of it (Draupadī and Aśvatthāman, who both descend into a psychology of revenge),[138] or are paralyzed by being implicated in it (Yudhiṣṭhira, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgītā*). The point of supplying numerous examples of inappropriate responses is to persuade us to understand why it is imperative not to respond in these ways. Fortitude, courage,

137. Bharata, author of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, provides a typology of heroes and heroines that is based on characters' responses to events. See *The Nāṭyaśāstra, Vol.2*, 201—213.

138. Sutherland, "Sītā and Draupadī," 67.

realistic vision, stoic acceptance, and tranquility—these are the mental attitudes that will enable us to steer clear of the fog of despair and the furthering of suffering.[139]

Postscript

As a postscript to chapter 3 I want to briefly note that Gāndhārī's postwar laments provide an interesting counterpoint to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's. I also want to entertain the idea that they provide a model in the epic for an appropriate way to respond to despair. Gāndhārī is Dhṛtarāṣṭra's wife who blindfolded herself on the day of her marriage so that she would not be superior to her husband in any way. After the war, both she and her husband find themselves in analogous situations; both respond to these situations similarly. Since each is a parent of Duryodhana, both must face the fact that the war and its devastation were due, in part, to their inability to restrain their son. Both characters have a difficult time coming to terms with their culpability, and this, in part, accounts for the reason why they blame a variety of causal forces for the catastrophe: Gāndhārī, like Dhṛtarāṣṭra, blames variously time,[140] karma,[141] Duryodhana,[142] herself[143] (as Dhṛtarāṣṭra blames himself),[144] and Kṛṣṇa (whom Dhṛtarāṣṭra never blames).[145] Further, both Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gāndhārī respond to their overwhelming grief with anger (Dhṛtarāṣṭra attempts to crush Bhīma in a violent embrace;[146] Gāndhārī contemplates cursing Yudhiṣṭhira[147] and actually does curse Kṛṣṇa[148]). Finally,

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139. Dhand, "The Subversive Nature of Virtue," 34.

140. 11.15.17.

141. 11.16.58–59.

142. 11.17.16.

143. 11.15.20.

144. Yudhiṣṭhira also blames himself in his postwar laments. In this regard, he presents an interesting contrast to Dhṛtarāṣṭra. While Dhṛtarāṣṭra has a tendency to blame others and avoid coming to terms with his own role in the war, Yudhiṣṭhira goes too far in the opposite direction: he blames himself entirely for the war and the deaths of his kinsmen and consequently loses his will to live and desire to rule. (12.7.1–8.1; 12.27.1–25)

145. 11.25.36–42.

146. 11.11.13–21.

147. 11.13.2. While she does not curse him, she does scorch the nails of his fingertips as he bows before her in a gesture of filial piety at 11.15.7–8.

148. 11.25.36–42.

both receive the gift of vision in the context of filial loss. In *The Book of the Women*, Vyāsa grants Gāndhārī a divine eye so that she may witness the carnage of the battlefield (thus she never sees her sons while they are alive, but only as corpses).[149] In *The Book of the Stay in the Forest Hermitage*, as already mentioned, Vyāsa bestows the gift of vision on Dhṛtarāṣṭra so that he may see his dead sons rise up from the river Gangā for one brief night.[150]

Yet it is in Gāndhārī's ability to respond to and express her grief from the perspective of a mother that sets her apart from her husband. In the teeth of her own despair, Gāndhārī never ceases to be moved by the grief of those around her, even her "enemies." When she first encounters the Pāṇḍavas after the war, we are told that she comforts them "like a mother".[151] It is like a mother too that she "who suffers acutely" (*ārta*)[152] comforts the grieving Draupadī, "who suffers even more" (*ārtatara*),[153] telling her in words that echo Saṃjaya's speech to Dhṛtarāṣṭra in *The Book of the Beginning*,

> Daughter, do not be tormented with grief! See how I am also suffering. I think that this devastation of the world was brought on by the turning of Time . . . Do not grieve for something that cannot be avoided and especially not for what has passed away.[154]

Directly after she comforts Draupadī (and perhaps because of it?), she sees the field of battle with the divine eye bestowed upon her by Vyāsa. Movingly, she describes to Kṛṣṇa the details of the carnage as well as her own mixture of emotions—sorrow and resignation—upon seeing Duryodhana's body:

> Look at my son, Mādhava, as he lies on a hero's bed—impetuous, the best of warriors, an expert shot, intoxicated by war. The scorcher of enemies who went at the head of the consecrated kings now lies in the dust. See how Time turns![155]

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149. 11.16.1–3.

150. 15.43.1.

151. 11.15.8.

152. 11.15.15.

153. 11.15.15.

154. 11.15.16–19.

155. 11.17.9–10.

She also mourns the loss of other sons, Duḥśāsana, Vikarṇa, and Durmukha in particular. These laments concerning her personal loss, however, are interspersed with her detailed descriptions of the shock, horror, and suffering of the other women on the battlefield. Even more painful than the sight of the mangled bodies of her own sons, Gāndhārī says, is the vision of the grieving women on the battlefield; these women who gasp, shriek, wail, and drop to the earth as they happen upon the severed limbs and heads of their husbands, fathers, and sons. She says,

> And look, what is even more distressing to me than the slaying of my son is these women who surround these heroes killed in battle.[156]

Thus, encapsulated in her lament to Kṛṣṇa in *The Book of the Women* are the laments of countless others, the voices of wives, mothers, sisters, and lovers.[157] In this scene, Gāndhārī is more than just a mother who laments the loss of her sons; she is a mother to all grievers lamenting the loss of their loved ones. In her concern for the sorrow of others while grappling with her own loss, she becomes a model for how one should respond to despair—that is, one should never lose sight of the fact that human sorrow is a universal experience, not an isolated personal one, a truth that the "short-sighted" Dhṛtarāṣṭra never seems to glean in spite of Saṃjaya's (and others') exhortations that he do so.[158]

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156. 11.17.22.

157. Black argues that it is precisely this quality of her narration that makes it so poignant and unique. "Eavesdropping," 65.

158. See Vidura's argument against grief, which he delivers to Dhṛtarāṣṭra at 11.2.1–8.1. Note that at 15.40.11 Gāndhārī is described as a "*kālaparyāyavedinī*"; in the same verse she is also described as a "*sarvadharmajñā*." The suggestion here is that to know *dharma* is to understand the "revolution of time," i.e., the transitory nature of life.

4

Time That Ripens and Rots All Creatures

*We might, in fact, regard the [*Mahābhārata*] as an extended essay, carried along on a complex narrative frame, on time and its terrors.*

—DAVID SHULMAN[1]

AT THE OPENING of the *Mahābhārāta*, Ugraśravas, the bard of the brahmins in the Naimiṣa forest, makes an astute observation about the *Mahābhārata* and how it is meant to affect its audiences. He says, "The great-spirited author has composed this story of the Bhāratas to produce tears and terror in the minds of good people."[2] There is perhaps no more terrifying "character" in the epic than the specter of time (*kāla*). Throughout the text, time appears in the guise of several horrifying forms and incarnations: a rat gnawing on a rope;[3] a snake coiled at the bottom of a pit;[4] an old woman smeared with crimson ointments, chanting dismal tunes;[5]

1. "Toward a Historical Poetics," 26–27.

2. 1.2.195. Ugraśravas here is speaking specifically about how *The Book of the Women* is meant to affect its audiences, but the statement certainly pertains to the epic as a whole.

3. This image appears twice in the context of a story about Jaratkaru, an ascetic and the father of Āstika. The story line runs as follows: One day Jaratkaru wanders into a cave. There he discovers his ancestors hanging upside down and suspended by a blade of grass, which is being devoured by a rat. When Jaratkaru asks them why they are in this horrible predicament, they reply that because he, the last of their descendants, has chosen the life of asceticism and refused to procreate, their line will be destroyed. The rat, they inform him, is time. Soon it will gnaw through the rope, they will die, and the line will become extinct (1.13 and 1.41).

4. See Vidura's argument against grief in *The Book of the Women* (11.2.1–11.8.1).

5. 10.8.64–5.

a bald man with a black and tawny complexion who peers into the houses of his imminent victims.[6]

Time is also terrifying because of the adverse ways in which it impacts the lives of individuals. Characters often attribute their misfortunes to the forces of time.[7] Further, when characters walk open-eyed into certain doom, the narrative voice declares that they were impelled by time. For example, when Yudhiṣṭhira makes the fateful decision to journey to Hāstinapura and play dice with the Kauravas, Vaiśaṃpāyana notes that he "was summoned by Dhṛtarāṣṭra and the covenant of time."[8] At the end of the epic, when the still-dejected Dharma King decides to renounce his kingdom and perform yogic austerities, he tells Arjuna that he thinks everything that happened, the war and the deaths of their kinsmen, was due to time.[9] Arjuna replies simply, "Time, time."[10]

Paul Ricoeur in his seminal work *Time and Narrative* writes,

> All fictional narratives are *tales of time* inasmuch as the structural transformations that affect situations and characters take time. How ever only a few are "*tales about time*" inasmuch as in them it is the very experience of time that is at stake in these structural transformations.[11]

The *Mahābhārata*, in addition to being a "tale of time" since it is a work of literary art, is also "a tale about time" since, as this chapter argues, the experience of time that it produces is central to the moral and aesthetic messages of the text. Indeed, transforming our understanding of time is at the heart of its ethical project of refiguring our understanding of suffering.

Without doubt, time is one of the most complex, multifaceted themes in the epic. Not only does the text contain a variety of conceptions of time

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6. 16.3.2.

7. Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, 225. For example, Dhṛtarāṣṭra blames time frequently as discussed in chapter 4.

8. 2.52.21.

9. 17.1.3.

10. 17.1.4.

11. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*. trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 2:101 (italics mine).

(e.g., time is closely associated or equated with astrology,[12] cosmology,[13] causality,[14] historical chronology[15]), it also expresses its views on time in a variety of ways (e.g., as a theme,[16] as a narrative construct, and as a poetic motif[17]). Because of the diversity and range of the conceptions of time in the text, our focus in this chapter will be narrowed to three concerns. First, this chapter will explore two dominant theories of time, the system of world ages or "*yugas*" and the epic's "doctrine of time," (*kālavāda*).[18] Second, it will examine what the epic's narrative strategies "do" with time, that is, how the text through its narrative strategies manipulates our experience of time. Third, it will consider what insights these two avenues of inquiry yield in terms of understanding the relationship between time and human sorrow in the text and how these insights relate to the epic's threefold ethical task.

Two Theories of Time: Yugas *and* Kālavāda

As previously mentioned, one unique dimension of the *Mahābhārata* as a work of religious and literary art is its "riddle design," which van Buitenen captures so aptly in the following statement that it bears repeating:

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12. Bhīṣma, for example, is said to be able to calculate time because he can read the heavens; See his calculations in *The Book of Virāṭa*, 4.47. For more on the astrological aspects of time in the *Mahābhārata*, see Paula Lerner, *Astrological Key in Mahābhārata: The New Era*, trans. David White (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988).

13. Time is said to be the creator and destroyer of the universe. I discuss this dimension of time and its depiction further in this chapter.

14. See chapter 3.

15. The *Mahābhārata* is after all a chronicle of the lineage of kings of the great Bhāratas.

16. One way the text explores time thematically is through characters and their relationship to time. Bhīṣma, as noted above, is able to calculate time. Kṛṣṇa is time (6.33.32), and Vyāsa is able to see past, present, and future simultaneously—as is Saṃjaya when he possesses his divine eye bestowed upon him by Vyāsa. (6.2.2 and 6.14.1) Further, Vyāsa is called the "*kālavādin*," or the speaker of time (at 6.4.2), and he provides some of the most moving sermons on time in the text. See Bruce Sullivan, *Seer of the Fifth Veda: Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa in the Mahābhārata* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999), 31–36.

17. Beyond the "terrifying" images mentioned above, time is also depicted as a wheel (suggesting time's cyclical nature), a rope; an ocean (in which the whole world sinks), and a mighty wind or river (which carries all things away). See Vassilkov, "Kālavāda," 17–24.

18. Ibid., 17–33.

> The epic is a series of precisely stated problems imprecisely and therefore inconclusively resolved, with every resolution raising a new problem until the very end, when the question remains: whose is heaven and whose is hell?[19]

One of the most pressing riddle-questions raised throughout the central narrative is precisely why in spite of many characters' good intentions did events turn out in the disastrous way that they did? Or, more to the point, who or what is responsible for the *Mahābhārata* war, the tragic devastation of the great Bhāratas, and the near destruction of the world?

One among several answers that the text provides is time (*kāla*).[20] So, precisely how and why is time responsible? By examining two major "theories" of time in the *Mahābhārata*, the system of four world ages or "*yugas*" and the epic's "doctrine of time" (*kālavāda*), this chapter seeks to suggest an answer. It focuses on these two ideas because both emphasize the destructive and oppressive powers of time, thus targeting time as a principal cause of suffering in the world. In this chapter we will be interested in the extent to which these two ideas about time overlap, the context in which each is discussed, and the extent to which characters in the epic explicitly link each to the Bhārata war. This chapter argues that the latter theory (the epic's doctrine of time) is more central to the text's aesthetics of suffering.

The *Yugas* in the *Mahābhārata*

The term "*yuga*" refers to a mythical-historical system of four world ages, beginning with the Kṛta *yuga* and ending with the Kali *yuga*. Each *yuga* is preceded and followed by a "dawn" and a "twilight" that connect the ages together. According to one formulation, the Kṛta *yuga* lasts four thousand years plus four hundred years of dawn and as many of twilight; then comes the Tretā of three thousand years, the Dvāpara of two thousand, and finally the Kali of one thousand years (plus their corresponding dawns and twilights). Thus, the ages are of unequal duration, the longest appearing at the beginning of the cycle and the shortest at the end. At the conclusion of this four-*yuga* cycle, that is at the end of the

19. Van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata, Vol. 2*, 29.

20. The text, of course, raises other possible sources for the war and for suffering in general. See chapter 5.

Kali *yuga*, the world is destroyed and then recreated and the whole cycle begins anew.[21]

The four *yugas* are named after the throws of the Vedic dice game and their names indicate the gradual moral and physical degeneration of humankind. While *dharma* is said to stand on four legs in the Kṛta *yuga*, it stands on three in the Tretā, two in the Dvāpara, and finally on only one leg in the Kali *yuga*.[22]

Much has been made of the relationship between the *Mahābhārata* and the theory of the *yugas*. According to the tradition, the *Mahābhārata* war occurred just before the commencement of the Kali *yuga*, which began on the day of Kṛṣṇa's death on February 18, 3102 BC.[23] Perhaps because of this dating, which is not supported by the text, both Euro-American scholars and traditional scholars have tended to "blame" the influence of the approaching Kali *yuga* for the *Mahābhārata* war and the degeneration of *dharma* that takes place both before and during the battle.[24]

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21. For scholarship on the *yuga*s in the *Mahābhārata*, see Madeleine Biardeau, "Etudes de Mythologie Hindoue (IV): *Bhakti et Avatāra*," *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extreme-Orient* 63 (1976): 111–263; Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 113–115; González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas;* Sutton, *Religious Doctrines*, 255–261; Lynn Thomas, "Paraśurāma and Time," in *Myth and Mythmaking: Continuous Evolution in Indian Tradition*, ed. Julia Leslie (Richmond: Curzon, 1996), 63–86 and "Does the Age Make the King or the King Make the Age? Exploring the Relationship Between the King and the *Yugas* in the *Mahābhārata*," *Religions of South Asia* 1/2 (2007): 183–201; Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972). For a good synthesis of the theory of the *yugas* as it is presented in the Purāṇas, see Cornelia Dimmit and J. A. B van Buitenen, trs. and eds., *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Purāṇas* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 38–44. The subject of the *yuga*s and its centrality to the epic story is a loaded subject in *Mahābhārata* scholarship because it is at the center of Madeleine Biardeau's reading of the epic. Biardeau places the epic action at a crucial change of *yuga* (from the Kali to the Kṛta *yuga*, that is the end of a cosmic cycle and the beginning of a new one) and she explains many of the epic's narrative events, particularly the tragic conflict and the war, in terms of this transition. She does this despite the fact that the *Mahābhārata* itself does not explicitly makes this link. For a critique of her *pralaya* theory of the epic, see González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 157; Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, xvii–xviii; Hiltebeitel, "The *Mahābhārata* and Hindu Eschatology," *History of Religions* 12/2 (1972) 95–135; and John Smith, "The Hero as Gifted Man,"14.

22. For a brief study of this idea, see André Couture, "Dharma as a Four-Legged Bull: A Note on an Epic and Purāṇic Theme" in Voice of the Orient: A Tribute to Prof. Upendranath Dhal, ed. Raghunath Panda (Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers, 2006), 69–76.

23. M. Krishnamachariar, *History of Classical Sanskrit Literature* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970), lxvii. There is some discrepancy on this point. According to some traditional scholars, the Kali *yuga* began during the *Mahābhārata* war.

24. González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 2.

Given the tendency of both modern scholarship and received tradition to explain various narrative events, particularly the tragic conflict and the war, in terms of the influence of the Kali *yuga*, it is surprising that there are only two extensive discussions of the *yugas* in the *Mahābhārata*.[25] Neither is located "in the thick of things," that is, in the midst of the heat of the action of the central narrative; rather, both are located in the third book, *The Book of the Forest*, where the exiled Pāṇḍavas wander for twelve years in the forest, traveling to hermitages and pilgrimage sites, listening to the stories and teachings of the various sages whom they visit. Further, as this chapter will demonstrate, neither of the two passages mentioned above explicitly link the war or any other key narrative event explicitly to the approaching Kali *yuga*.

The Hanumān Episode

The first major discussion of the *yugas* in the epic occurs in *The Book of the Forest* when Bhīma encounters Hanumān in a banana grove. Hanumān, the chief of monkeys who aided Rāma in the conquest of Laṅkā, is a major figure in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. His most famous feat was jumping over the ocean to Laṅkā in order to locate Sītā, Rāma's kidnapped wife. When Bhīma recognizes Hanumān, he asks about the specifics of the four world ages, and Hanumān's discourse on the *yugas* follows.

In this discourse, Hanumān focuses primarily on the quality of life, virtue, and religious devotion in each *yuga*, which, he points out, decrease as the *yugas* progress. In the Kṛta *yuga*, according to Hanumān, *dharma* does not decay and creatures do not die. There is no illness, no aging, no discontent, no sorrow, no pride, no hatred, no hostility, and no fear. The four classes are well defined and there is one single Veda. In the Tretā *yuga*, however, *dharma* decreases by one quarter and sacrifices appear, along with different religious systems, and people perform their duties according to *svadharma*. In the Dvāpara *yuga*, *dharma* survives by half. The Vedas are now fourfold; some people know all four, some three, some two or one, while some know none at all. Passion arises and dishonesty and diseases follow. In the Kali *yuga*, only one quarter of *dharma* survives. The Vedic life-rules, law, sacrifice, and ritual come to an end. Crops fail and diseases and vices take over.[26]

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25. My discussion here is limited to Critical Edition and the Vulgate.

26. 3.148.10–37.

Hanumān concludes his teaching by warning Bhīma that the Kali *yuga* will arrive soon. Then he assumes his divine form and he delivers a second teaching, this time on *dharma*. In this speech he emphasizes the virtues of nonviolence.[27]

Mārkaṇḍeya on the Yugas

The second extensive discussion of the *yugas* in the epic also occurs in *The Book of the Forest* when Yudhiṣṭhira is visited by the sage Mārkaṇḍeya. Mārkaṇḍeya, gifted with a long life, has had the unique experience of living through and witnessing the dissolution of the universe at the end of the Kali *yuga*. Yudhiṣṭhira questions him, therefore, about his apocalyptic experience as well as about ultimate causation.[28] This question prompts Mārkaṇḍeya's discourse on Kṛṣṇa's role as creator and destroyer of the universe as well as his reflections on the *yugas*, particularly on what happens at the end of the Kali *yuga*.[29]

Mārkaṇḍeya begins his discourse by briefly outlining the time-span of each *yuga* as well as that of the whole *yuga* cycle. Next, he describes in great detail what happens at the end of the *yuga* cycle, that is, at the end of the Kali *yuga*. According to Mārkaṇḍeya, people degenerate both morally and physically. They become liars and thieves. Members of one caste perform the duties of another. Barbarian kings rule the earth. Young girls become pregnant at the age of seven or eight. People have shortened life spans, become weak-bodied and diseased. The population increases, cows yield little milk, and trees produce few fruits.[30] Many natural disasters occur at the end of the eon as well. First, there is a drought, and then a fire devastates the earth. Finally, "wondrous-looking" clouds gather and flood the earth with rain for twelve years until there is nothing but one desolate ocean.[31]

Mārkaṇḍeya describes his own experience of wandering about the desolate ocean. He journeys with great fear and dread until he comes upon a

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27. Directly before his meeting with Hanūmān, Bhīma behaved in a particularly aggressive manner, trampling and killing whatever was in his path as he searched for flowers for Draupadī.

28. Literally, "the causes of everything" (*sarvahetu*). 3.186.11.

29. This episode of the *Mahābhārata* has been translated by James Laine. See *Visions of God*, 177ff.

30. 3.186.25–55.

31. 3.186.56–77.

child sitting on the branch of a banyan tree, who offers him refuge inside his mouth. There in the child's mouth Mārkaṇḍeya discovers the world, just as it was before the deluge; he explores the world for more than a hundred years. After being emitted from the child's mouth, he learns that the child is Nārāyaṇa/Kṛṣṇa, creator and destroyer of the universe, who creates himself whenever *dharma* languishes in the world.

After Mārkaṇḍeya praises the merits and powers of Kṛṣṇa extensively, Yudhiṣṭhira presses him for more details about life at the end of the Kali *yuga*. Mārkaṇḍeya expands upon the moral and physical depravity of human beings as the universe comes to an end. After the termination of the Kali *yuga*, the world is regenerated. Kalki, a brahmin who brings tranquility back to the world, is born. Mārkaṇḍeya concludes his speech by warning Yudhiṣṭhira that he should heed *dharma*:

> You have joined yourself eternally to *dharma*, O best among those who uphold *dharma*. A dharma-spirited king enjoys happiness here and in the next world.[32]

Significantly, both the Hanumān and the Mārkaṇḍeya episodes are immediately followed by a discourse (however brief) on *dharma*. This suggests that both teachings were not delivered to inspire a kind of hopelessness about the possibilities of the life of virtue in the Kali *yuga*. Rather, it suggests that these *yuga* talks were delivered, at least in part, to inspire a sense of urgency with respect to the task of cultivating virtue. Further, as noted above, neither speech explicitly links the epic events, particularly the approaching war, to the Kali *yuga*.

Other Discussions and References to the Yugas

In addition to these two passages, briefer discussions and references to the *yugas* are scattered throughout the text. They are most frequent in *The Book of the Forest* and *The Book of Peace*. These passages can be categorized in terms of the following themes:

1. *References to the end of the yuga*. These references are the most numerous and they are most prevalent in "the massacre narratives," that is, those passages in the text that describe death and destruction on a large scale.

32. 3.189.17.

Most, if not all, compare a specific warrior, weapon, or scene of battle to some aspect of the destruction of the world at the end of the *yuga*. However, these references do not indicate that it *is* the end of the *yuga*. Rather, they are metaphors expressing the idea that the particular phenomenon being described is "like" (*iva*) some aspect of the end of the *yuga*. For example, in *The Book of Bhīṣma*, the first of the four battle books, the encounter between the two armies is described as being "like" (*iva*) the encounter between two oceans at the end of the *yuga*.[33]

2. *References to Kṛṣṇa/Nārāyaṇa*. Like the Mārkaṇḍeya passage discussed above, these passages focus particularly on Kṛṣṇa's role as creator and destroyer of the universe at the beginning of the Kṛta *yuga* and the end of the Kali *yuga*. Kṛṣṇa's role as *avatāra* is also mentioned, but less frequently. These passages discuss how Kṛṣṇa assumes different forms in different *yugas* in order to uphold *dharma*.[34]
3. *References to the time of the Mahābhārata war*. There are approximately two passages in the text that state explicitly that the war took place at the juncture of the Dvāpara and Kali *yugas*. These passages suggest that the Dvāpara *yuga* has come to an end and that the age of Kali is close at hand. The first is in *The Book of the Beginning* when Ugraśravas tells the brahmins in the Naimiṣa forest that the war between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas was fought at the juncture of the Dvāpara *yuga* and the Kali *yuga*.[35] However, no specific causal relationship between the two is indicated. The second occurs in *The Book of the Effort* when Kṛṣṇa tells Karṇa that when the battle begins, there will be no more Kṛta *yuga*, no more Tretā *yuga*, and no more Dvāpara *yuga*, implying that what will be left is the Kali *yuga*.[36] However, the causal relationship between the war and the Kali *yuga* in Kṛṣṇa's statement is not exactly clear.
4. *References to the decline in dharma in the Kali yuga*. While these passages are fairly numerous, relatively few suggest that the Kali *yuga* is explicitly linked to the moral decline that takes place in the epic. However, there is at least one passage that does so. It occurs in *The Book of Śalya* when Bhīma defeats Duryodhana in a mace battle by resorting to unfair

33. 6.1.24.

34. See, for example, Kṛṣṇa's conversation with Uttaṅka in *The Book of the Horse Sacrifice* at 14.53. and *Bhagavadgītā* 4.7–8.

35. 1.2.9.

36. 5.140.6–15.

means: he strikes him in the thigh, an action that violates the rules of proper warfare. Balarāma, Kṛṣṇa's brother, furious with Bhīma for fighting dirty, berates both Bhīma and Kṛṣṇa. In an effort to explain Bhīma's actions, Kṛṣṇa tells his brother that what Bhīma did was justified since the Kali *yuga* has arrived.[37] This brief statement, however, is only one among five reasons that Kṛṣṇa provides to plead Bhīma's case.[38] Also, Saṃjaya, our narrator here, refers to Kṛṣṇa's statements as "deceptive" (literally "a deception of *dharma*," *dharmacchala*).[39]

5. *References to Śiva*. These passages concern Śiva's role as destroyer and creator of the universe.[40]
6. *References to the relationship between kingship and the yugas*. These passages make the point that the quality of the age depends upon the quality of the king.[41]

The *yuga* theory is without a doubt prevalent throughout the *Mahābhārata*. Further, it does provide an account for the existence of suffering. Most simply put, as time progresses (and remember, we are talking about very long periods of time here), human beings degenerate morally and physically and hence their condition deteriorates. However, only a few passages explicitly link major narrative events to the *yugas*, particularly the Kali *yuga*. Further, characters rarely appeal to the concept of the *yugas* in order to attempt to understand and explain the unfolding disaster of the Bhārata war. Therefore, while the *yuga* theory does implicate time in the problem of human moral and physical depravity, in most cases, it is not one

37. Literally, Kṛṣṇa tells Balarāma, "Know that the Kali *yuga* has arrived." *prāptaṃ kaliyugaṃ viddhi*. 9.59.21.

38. 9.59–60. See Robert P. Goldman, "*Eṣa Dharmaḥ Sanātanah*: Shifting Moral Values and the Indian Epics," in *Relativism, Suffering, and Beyond: Essays in Memory of Bimal K. Matilal*, ed. P. Bilimoria and J. N. Mohanty (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 91–108 and Bimal Krishna Matilal, "Kṛṣṇa: In Defence of a Devious Deity," in *Ethics and Epics*: *The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal*, ed, Jonardon Ganeri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 91–108. Kṛṣṇa is notorious for flooding his case with a plethora of reasons even though these reasons are often contradictory. This suggests that Kṛṣṇa's goal is to get the result that he wants and he cares little for which reason in particular is actually convincing. Lawrence McCrea, personal communication.

39. 9.59.22.

40. These are most prevalent in 13.14, particularly in the Vulgate.

41. See Kuntī's comments to Kṛṣṇa at 5.130.14–18. For scholarship on this topic, see Thomas, "Does the Age Make the King or the King Make the Age? Exploring the Relationship between the King and the Yugas in the Mahābhārata,"183–201.

of the primary suspects in the epic's who-dunnit quest, posed in the form of riddle-questions, of why things went so horribly wrong.[42] This is reserved for another theory of time found in the *Mahābhārata*.

Kālavāda: The Doctrine of Time in the *Mahābhārata*

In addition to the *yuga* system, the epic provides another theory for why time is terrifying: the epic's "doctrine of time" (*kālavāda*).[43] The *Mahābhārata*'s *kālavāda* expresses the idea that time revolves or turns (*kālaparyāya*) inevitably bringing about decay, destruction, and death. As Luis González-Reimann writes, "The *Mahābhārata* views time as an oppressive, overpowering force that relentlessly pushes all beings towards their eventual death. So intense is the concern with its destructive nature that time virtually becomes a synonym of death and destruction."[44]

Alf Hiltebeitel captures the range of the images and ideas associated with the concept of *kālavāda* in the *Mahābhārata*:

> The epic's *kālavāda* includes frequent references to the "wheel of time," to time's "revolving" (*paryāya*). The idea that those about to die are "already slain" and the theme that time "swallows" beings with its "gaping mouth" are not only combined in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, but found elsewhere in the text (22–28). Not only does the *Mahābhārata* make the phrase "time cooks" one of its signatures: there is an "ocean of time" (*kālasāgara*; 12.28.43). The whole world is *kālātmaka* or "has time as its self" (13.1.45). Time is "the Supreme Lord" (*parameśvara*). Caught in "time's noose," always "bewildered" and "impelled by the law of time" (*coditaḥ kāladharmaṇā*), heroes and heroines should act knowing that although one cannot counter time, fortune does have its favorable moments . . .[45]

Building on the work of Vassilkov, González-Reimann, and Hiltebeitel, this section focuses on the context and import of the *Mahābhārata's*

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42. This "who-dunnit quest" will be approached head-on in chapter 5.

43. Vāda has a range of meanings: "discourse," "statement," "argument," "doctrine." In translating it as "doctrine," I am following Vassilkov's translation in his article "*Kālavāda*."

44. González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 20.

45. Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 39.

kālavāda. It hopes to show that expressions of this idea surface at pivotal moments, particularly moments of crisis when characters are reeling from sudden reversals in their fortune.[46] In the context of these moments, two sub-genres of discourse express the *kālavāda* idea: the lament and the argument against grief. In the lament, characters who are victims of misfortune often blame the disasters that they encounter on time (i.e., *kālavāda*) and express shock in response to what they understand to be the power of all-destroying, impartial time. In the argument against grief, characters, most often "advisors," focus on the omnipotence and destructive capability of time as well.[47] However, they argue that it is simply a fact of life to which all living creatures are subject, a dimension of existence that needs to be faced and accepted. Implicit in the argument against grief articulation of the *kālavāda* is the idea that if one truly understands and accepts the fact that "time revolves" and therefore everything in the world is transitory, then one will no longer be a victim of the pain that this dimension of life brings; one will no longer be "terrorized by time."

Kālavāda and the Lament

Because the *Mahābhārata* presents a series of catastrophic events that impact characters in a variety of adverse ways, the text also contains many accompanying passages where characters give expression to their grief. I refer to such an expression as "the lament" (*vilāpa*). While laments most often occur when characters mourn the death of a loved one, they arise in other contexts as well, such as when a character is aware of some impending doom. In many if not most cases, the lamenter offers a reflection on the transitory nature of life due to the reverses brought about by time.

Several recurring ideas are expressed in these laments. First and foremost, the lamenting character expresses an understanding of a fundamental truth about existence in terms of time and how it functions, that time turns or revolves (*kālaparyāya*), bringing about change.[48] No matter how dear, powerful, virtuous, or precious, nothing is permanent. The attitude toward this realization is a mixture of incredulousness, shock, disbelief, awe, and immense sorrow. Further, in the throes of this

46. Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, 199.

47. These characters generally fall into the wide-ranging rubric of friend, wise counselor, and/or family member.

48. Vassilkov, "*Kālavāda*," 24.

realization, the lamenter often juxtaposes past circumstances with present ones. For example, when a character laments the death of a loved one, he or she juxtaposes the way that the loved one appeared in the full bloom of life with how the deceased appears now. These juxtapositions lead to further remarks about time's immense power, which the grieving character finds almost incomprehensible, and the fact that he or she now finally sees the vulnerability of all things—even the most powerful and mighty—to time.

For example, in *The Book of the Effort* when Dhṛtarāṣṭra has a premonition of the war and the deaths of his sons, events that he knows he cannot stop, he blames the revolution of time for what will inevitably take place:

> Turning I think is the *dharma* of time, which is eternal. There is no escape for those who are fixed to its wheel like a rim.[49]

In one of the epic's most heartbreaking scenes, Subhadrā, Arjuna's wife and Kṛṣṇa's sister, laments the death of her son, Abhimanyu. Expressing shock and disbelief at the news that her son has been tricked and defeated by some of the Kauravas' most honorable warriors, she reflects upon past moments when her son enjoyed youth, beauty, and the finest comforts. Now he lies on the battleground, fodder for beasts of prey, and she can barely comprehend the immense divide between these two moments in time:

> O son, how does your face, which is dark like a blue lotus and with beautiful white teeth and lovely eyes, appear to me now that it is covered with the dust of battle? . . . Alas, your bed used to be covered with expensive quilts. How do you, who was accustomed to a life of ease, sleep on the bare earth now, [your body] pierced [with arrows]? This mighty-armed hero used to be surrounded by the most beautiful women. How can he who has fallen in battle now be surrounded by jackals?[50]

After denouncing the might of Bhīma, Arjuna, and the rest of the Pāṇḍava warriors who failed to protect her young son, she articulates the shock of

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49. 5.50.58.

50. 7.55.3, 7.55.6–7.

the realization of the transitory nature of life and how this truth is very hard for human beings to conceptually grasp:

> O, hero, to me you are like a treasure in a dream that was seen but now lost. Alas, the human condition is transitory, as unstable as a bubble in water . . . Without a doubt the course [of time] . . . is very difficult to understand, even for the wise![51]

When Ghāndhārī, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's queen, sees her son Duryodhana's body on the battlefield, she, "withered with grief," (*śokakarśita*)[52] drops to the ground and faints. After regaining consciousness, she gives voice to her sorrow by marveling at the power and impartiality of time because it can strike down all human beings, even the most powerful:

> Look at my son, Mādhava, . . . the scorcher of the enemy who would be at the head of the specially consecrated warriors now lies in the dust. See how time turns![53]

The power of these laments lies in the fact that they capture moments when characters are forced to come to terms with precisely that which is almost impossible for the human mind to accept: the finality of death and the transitory nature of life.[54] The fact that many of the *Mahābhārata*'s laments share common motifs and ideas, particularly ideas about temporality, reveals that grief has an idiom in the *Mahābhārata* and this idiom, to a large extent, centers on the language that captures the awe, shock, and sorrow that one feels when confronted by the irrevocable ravages of all-destroying time.[55]

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51. 7.55.16 and 7.55.19.

52. 11.17.1.

53. 11.17.10.

54. Examples of other laments in the epic are Draupadī's lament in the dicing scene (2.62.4–14); Yudhiṣṭhira's lament upon the news of Abhimanyu's slaying (7.49.1–21); Aśvatthāman's lament after Duryodhana has been defeated (9.64.12–38); and Gāndhārī's lament in *The Book of the Women* (11.16–26).

55. Studies on the psychological effects of grief are too numerous to mention, but recent work on the subject is worth noting: Jill Bialosky, *History of a Suicide: My Sister's Unfinished Life* (New York: Atria Books, 2011); Jean-Yves Le Naour, *The Living Unknown Soldier: A Story of Grief and the Great War*, trans. Penny Allen (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002); Joan

Kālavāda *and Arguments against Grief*

A closely related sub-genre of discourse that employs this same idiom of grief is the argument against grief.[56] The argument against grief is a sermon delivered by a wise advisor at moments of great crisis in order to "comfort" a grieving character. I use the term "comfort" loosely, because what the advisor provides is not solace but a bitter pill for the griever to swallow. The advisor transforms the idea of the transitory nature of life, the essence of the epic's *kālavāda*, from being a realization that is inextricably linked with the emotion of grief, as it is in the lament, to being a fact of life that must be recognized and accepted so that despair and grief may be overcome. There are approximately nine major "arguments" in the epic that incorporate the *kālavāda* worldview.[57]

These speeches express the following cluster of ideas. First, time is the root of everything that exists; it brings living things into being and destroys them in turn. No one, regardless of how virtuous, powerful, or wealthy, is protected from time's oppressive decree. Second, time is also cyclical; whatever or whoever dies will return to life again, only to be subject to the same miseries as before. Third, time is closely associated with fate (*daiva*, *diṣṭa*); it is so in at least two different ways. Some passages indicate that fate just *is* the inevitability that time will bring about adverse reversals. Others indicate that time brings about ("cooks" or "ripens"[58]) that which

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Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss* (New York: Scribner, 2005); Sandra M. Gilbert, *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Way We Grieve: A Cultural Study* (New York: Norton, 2006); Joyce Carol Oates, *A Widow's Story: A Memoir* (New York: Ecco, 2011); Julian Barnes, "For Sorrow There is No Remedy," *The New York Review of Books*, April 7, 2011, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/apr/07/sorrow-there-no-remedy/ (accessed May 15, 2011).

56. Arguments against grief are numerous in the *Mahābhārata*. Other examples that espouse a view of time that is consistent with Saṃjaya's view here are delivered by Vyāsa (6.2–4; 12.26; 16.9) and Vidura (11.2) Kṛṣṇa's statements to Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgītā* could be considered an argument against grief as well since Kṛṣṇa argues that Arjuna should not grieve for those "he" is going to kill because Kṛṣṇa, as time, has already killed them. More broadly construed, the entire *Śāntiparvan* (Book 11, *The Book of Peace*) could be understood as a kind of argument against grief since Bhīṣma delivers his teaching at Kṛṣṇa's prompting in order to help Yudhiṣṭhira overcome his despair over the slaughter of his kinsmen.

57. 1.1.188–190, 3.245.12–17, 5.36.42–46, 11.1.21–11.2.1, 11.2.1–11.8.1, 11.8.10–11.9.1, 12.26 ff, 12.34.1–17, 16.9.25–38.

58. For scholarship on "the cooking time" image in the epic, see Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 39 and González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 34–35. For scholarship on the cooking motif in the Vedic context, see Jan Heesterman, *The Broken*

has been fated.[59] Fourth, grief and despair caused by the ravages of time should be overcome because they destroy one's ability to see a situation clearly and make good decisions accordingly; in short, they obscure one's intelligence. Fifth, one should conquer grief with wisdom (*buddhi*), which entails acceptance of "the coming and going of creatures" (*bhūtānām āgatiṃ gatim*) or the transitory nature of life.[60]

In *The Book of the Beginning*, for example, when Dhṛtarāṣṭra mourns the death of his eldest son Duryodhana in the lament/summary that we examined closely in chapter 3, Saṃjaya responds to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's lament with a speech that attempts to dispel Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sorrow. In this speech, Saṃjaya points out that time is the root of everything. It both brings creatures into being and then destroys them. If Dhṛtarāṣṭra fully grasped this truth, he would, according to Saṃjaya, not allow his mind to succumb to grief. This particular speech of Saṃjaya's is one of the epic's signature statements on time:

> Time ripens the creatures and time rots them. Time again extinguishes the time that burns the creatures. Time alters all beings in the world, virtuous or not. Time destroys them and creates them again. Time moves in all creatures, unchecked and impartial. Those beings who were in the past and those beings yet to come and those that exist now, they are all fashioned by time. Know this and do not abandon your intelligence.[61]

A second example comes from *The Book of Bhīṣma*, when the two armies stand on the battlefield readied for war and Vyāsa approaches

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World of Sacrifice: An Essay in Ancient Indian Ritual (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 175 and Charles Malamoud, *Cooking the World: Ritual and Thought in Ancient India*, trans. David White (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

59. Fate is a multivalent category in the *Mahābhārata* that is sometimes closely linked with the concept of time and sometimes is not (see chapter 5 for a more extensive discussion of the range of Sanskrit terms for fate and their meanings). González-Reimann (*The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*) views fate and time as synonymous, but even when they are linked, I think that there are subtle important differences between them. See also Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, 196–210.

60. 12.16.24.

61. 1.1.188–190.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra and informs him that all the warriors will kill one another. Vyāsa argues, however, that this news should not cause Dhṛtarāṣṭra grief. Why? Because the impending massacre is not simply a personal tragedy for Dhṛtarāṣṭra, but is just the way the world dictated by time works. Vyāsa says,

> Knowing the changes brought about by time, do not allow your mind to grieve . . . Without a doubt, O best of kings, time destroys the world; time creates the world again. In this world nothing exists forever.[62]

In *The Book of Peace*, Yudhiṣṭhira, overwhelmed by grief at the slaughter of his kinsmen, becomes "radically disaffected from everything,"[63] and expresses the desire to renounce the kingdom and go to the forest. Vyāsa, his grandfather, approaches him and delivers a sermon on time in order to dispel his grief. First, Vyāsa points out that time is the cause of all things, both the actions of men and natural processes:

> A person acquires all that is ordained for him or her through time by means of the Ordainer from the operation of its turning.
>
> Through time swift winds blow, through time rain reaches the clouds, through time bodies of water possess blue lotus blossoms, through time trees flourish in the forests.[64]

Next, Vyāsa recites a song sung by King Senajit when he was overcome with sorrow. This song expresses the idea that all living creatures are subject to time's turnings.[65] Therefore a person should see his or her own misery and fear as the miseries and fears of all living creatures. Such a transformation in vision would reveal the self-centered foolishness of grief.[66] When Yudhiṣṭhira's sorrow persists, Vyāsa reinforces the idea of the transitory nature of existence:

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62. 6.2.5 and 6.4.2–3.

63. Fitzgerald, *The Mahābhārata, Vol. 7*, 168.

64. 12.26.5 and 12.26.8.

65. 12. 26.14.

66. 12.26.18.

> The unions and separations of living creatures are certainly like bubbles in water: they are there and then they are not. All accumulation ends in dissolution, every ascent ends in a fall, all unions end in separation, all life ends in death.[67]

The goal of the argument against grief is essentially therapeutic, that is, to dispel the lamenters' sorrow. As we discovered in chapter 3 in the context of our discussion of Saṃjaya's speeches to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, one key point of the argument against grief is that time is impartial because it brings death and decay to every living creature regardless of virtue or stature. Thus the argument against grief seeks to point out that sorrow caused by the ravages of time is a universal experience, not an isolated personal one. By making this point, the argument against grief is forcing the lamenter to confront the fact that his or her grief is just a tiny drop in the ocean of sorrow caused by the ravages of all-destroying time. Such a perspective, if adopted, would, as we discussed in chapter 3, presumably snap the lamenter out of his or her despair by recontextualizing her situation and opening her eyes to the condition of all living creatures.[68] It would also encourage an emotional transformation in the grief-stricken toward the normative emotion of tranquility (perhaps the most lauded virtue in the epic and the goal of the *Mahābhārata* according to Ānanda).[69]

BOTH THE THEORY of the *yugas* and the *Mahābhārata's kālavāda* view time as an oppressive, destructive force. Both provide accounts for why time is implicated in the problem of human suffering. However, these two theories of time diverge in two important ways. First, they address fundamentally different levels of human experience. While the *Mahābhārata*'s *kālavāda* is concerned with time as it appears in an individual's immediate awareness (one moment something exists and the next it is gone), the *yuga* theory addresses large periods of time or "times." Another way to put this is that while the epic's *kālavāda* is concerned with time at the microcosmic level, the theory of the *yugas*

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67. 12.27.28–29.

68. Chaitanya, *The Mahābhārata*, 58–59.

69. See chapter 1.

has to do with time at the macrocosmic level since it is concerned with large cycles of social transformation.[70]

The second way these two "theories" differ concerns how they are explored in the epic. As the discussion so far has attempted to show, the passages that discuss the idea of the *yugas* do not frequently explicitly link them to the Bhārata war, nor do characters often turn to the idea of the *yugas* in order to understand the catastrophes they endure. The passages that discuss the epic's doctrine of time, however, are located at pivotal moments in the epic and are integral to how the narrative voice and how the characters themselves understand the catastrophes that lead to the war and to whole-scale destruction.[71]

Narrative Strategies of Temporal Manipulation: Consuming, Dismissing, Collapsing, and Stretching Time

Now that we have established some of the predominant statements that characters make about time, let us consider what the text's strategies "do" with time. How does the text through the skillful deployment of its narrative devices impact our experience of time? In what follows this chapter hopes to show that while the text emphasizes the theme of the destructive, oppressive nature of time as discussed above, it also makes a quite different point, that time may be manipulated and therefore in some sense overcome. Through its strategies of temporal manipulation, the text collapses, overturns, engulfs, reverses, eradicates, and stretches time, thus seemingly undermining or "rupturing" our confidence in the *kālavāda* understanding of time. To what end?

This section discusses three ways in which the text manipulates time through strategies that are closely associated with its framing device: consuming, dismissing, and collapsing it. Next, it discusses a fourth way in which the *Mahābhārata* through the art of narration manipulates time: stretching it.[72] Finally it considers the "arguments" that these narrative strategies are making about time, particularly in light of the issues discussed above, the epic's doctrine of time and its connection to human

70. González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 3.

71. Ibid., 45, and Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, 199.

72. The distinction that I am making here is between the art of telling and the art of structuring the story, two narrative impulses that are closely related.

sorrow. The discussion will refer to four interrelated kinds of time: (1) the epic's doctrine of time, (2) sequential time—or past, present, and future time relative to the sequence of the events in the narrative, (3) the characters' experience of time, and (4) the audience's experience of time.

Consuming Time

In order to discuss what the *Mahābhārata* "does" with time, it is necessary to return, once again, to the issue of the framing device. As Hiltebeitel and Kloetzli write, "The frame story is probably the leading device through which the text supports its vast and complex meditations on time."[73] Through the use of the framing device, the text moves back and forth in time as well as into "simultaneous meanwhiles."[74]

As mentioned several times, the *Mahābhārata* contains two outer frames, both of which contextualize the epic's telling: the Ugraśravas-Śaunaka frame (the outermost frame where Ugraśravas narrates the story of the *Mahābhārata* to a group of brahmins in the Naimiṣa forest) and the Vaiśaṃpāyana-Janamejaya frame (the epic's inner frame, where Vaiśaṃpāyana narrates the story of the *Mahābhārata* at Janamejaya's snake sacrifice). The fact that these two outer frames contextualize the epic's narration tells us something about the *Mahābhārata*'s relation to time. Since these stories that tell the circumstances (the where, when, why, and by whom) of the epic's first two tellings are contained in the *Mahābhārata*, they are also, as I have mentioned before, *part* of the *Mahābhārata*. If we take this insight and extend it logically, the design of the epic suggests that whenever, wherever, or whoever tells or receives the story of the great Bhāratas becomes part of the *Mahābhārata*. In other words, through the art of its design, the text explodes the boundary between interiority and exteriority. As David Shulman writes,

> So the *Mahābhārata* is coterminous with the world—not a modest claim perhaps but one that does help to clarify the aims of the text. There is no escape built into it from its relentless, bleak vision. It

73. Hiltebeitel and Kloetzli, "*Kāla*," 578.

74. Ibid. According to Hiltebeitel and Kloetzli, the *Mahābhārata* is one of the first texts to explore framing and its narrative possibilities in relation to the theme of temporality.

> represents itself not as a work of art but as reality itself. No boundary marks off this text from the world.[75]

The eradication of these boundaries gives the text the ability to consume time, for if the *Mahābhārata* is reality itself, then it has the potential to contain all of time.[76] Thus, through the art of its design, the text has the capacity to draw into itself and take control of a central theme in its own story: time. This suggests that the all-powerful destructive nature of time, the central point of the *kālavāda* doctrine, is not the epic's last "word" on this issue.

Dismissing Time

The framing device allows the narrative to move backward and forward in time; stories merge into other stories with deliberate disregard for temporal boundaries. For example, in the *Pulomanparvan* of *The Book of the Beginning*, Śaunaka asks Ugraśravas to recite the origins of his lineage, the Bhṛgu lineage.[77] Ugraśravas agrees and narrates the story of Ruru, Bhṛgu's grandson.

Ruru falls madly in love with a young woman named Pramadvarā. A wedding is arranged, and several days before the wedding Pramadvarā, who is playing with her friends, fails to notice a sleeping snake and steps on it. Significantly, the narrative voice notes, "she was prompted by time."[78] The snake "pressed by the decree of time" sinks its fangs into the body of the "careless" girl, and Pramadvarā dies immediately.[79]

Ruru, grief-stricken, laments the death of his bride. Calling upon the gods and summoning his ascetic power, he begs them to revive his wife. The gods suggest a deal: he will give up half of his life in order to restore the life of his wife. Ruru agrees and the deal is struck. Ruru, however, angry at the high price that he had to pay to be reunited with his wife, vows to seek revenge on all snakes. Indeed, whenever he sees a snake, fury overtakes him and he beats it to death with a club.

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75. Shulman, "Toward a Historical Poetics," 26.

76. Certainly the size and the scope of the *Mahābhārata* underscore this point as well.

77. For scholarship on the Bhṛgus, see Robert Goldman, *Gods, Priests, and Warriors: The Bhṛgus of the Mahābhārata* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

78. 1.8.15.

79. 1.8.16.

One day, he happens upon a lizard. Mistaking the lizard for a snake, Ruru smashes it on the head with a stick. The lizard, understandably startled, questions Ruru about his motives since he, the lizard, has never done Ruru any harm. Ruru informs the lizard about his vendetta against all snakes, and the lizard, in response, delivers a sermon lauding the virtues of nonviolence and telling Ruru that he has been conducting himself like a *kṣatriya*, not a brahmin. To make his point he refers to King Janamejaya and his great sacrifice, an example of a king (i.e., a *kṣatriya*), who has a similar vendetta against snakes and for similar reasons.[80] Quite unexpectedly, the lizard (now a brahmin released from a curse) disappears, and Ruru runs to his father and begs him to tell him the story of Janamejaya's sacrifice; his father agrees.[81]

Thus Ruru's story ends, but this ending is no simple ending in truth, since here the text completely dismisses the rules of temporal boundaries. Ugraśravas, the bard who is situated in the outer frame of the *Mahābhārata*, tells the brahmins of the Naimiṣa forest that he recently attended Janamejaya's snake sacrifice. Ruru's father, Pramati, is Śaunaka's great-great grandfather. He tells Ruru that he is going to tell him about this *same* sacrifice. Since obviously Śaunaka and Ugraśravas are contemporaries (and by "contemporary" I mean that they are situated at the same point in time in the text) and Ugraśravas witnesses the sacrifice, which has just happened, this means that Pramati is going to tell Ruru a story about a sacrifice that will occur approximately *three generations in the future*.

Collapsing Time

Another strategy that the text employs to manipulate time is the direct address formula. The direct address formula is the device that the text employs to signal a change in narrators, "X *uvāca*" or "X said," "X" being the speaker. It is also a strategy that the text uses at specific junctures to collapse time.[82] One such instance occurs in the *Mahābhārata's* pivotal scene: the dicing scene. It is in this scene that Yudhiṣṭhira gambles away himself, his four brothers, and his wife, Draupadī, in a crooked dice game.

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80. The snake Takṣaka killed Janamejaya's father, Parikṣit (Arjuna's grandson).

81. 1.12.4–5.

82. This happens approximately twice in the epic: once in the dicing scene, as discussed here, and once in *The Book of the Stay in the Forest Hermitage* at 15.42.1.

Duryodhana and his followers subsequently violate Draupadī and the seeds are sown for the bitter enmity between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, seeds that ultimately culminate in the war.[83]

A quarter of the way into Vaiśaṃpāyana's narration of the dicing scene, Janamejaya interrupts Vaiśaṃpāyana and asks him a question, which Vaiśaṃpāyana answers. Interestingly, for the second time in the text, Vaiśaṃpāyana's comments are introduced by an outer narrator called "the Bard" (*sūta*).[84] Therefore, here the direct address formula introduces back-to-back four different speakers who are situated in varying points in the story.[85] The sequence of these direct speakers runs as follows: (1) Janamejaya, (2) the Bard, (3) Vaiśaṃpāyana, and (4) Duryodhana. Directly before this passage, Vaiśaṃpāyana has outlined the events that have led up to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's decision to sanction the fateful dice game.[86] Now Janamejaya requests to be told in more detail how the dice game came about; his request is followed by a statement by "the Bard" who says,

> Thus addressed by the king, Vyāsa's glorious student, who knew everything, narrated it all as it happened.[87]

The Bard's statement is followed by Vaiśaṃpāyana's voice; Vaiśaṃpāyana, in response to Janamejaya's request, begins to tell the story of the events that led up to the dice game all over again, only this time in more detail. Vaiśaṃpāyana's voice is followed by Duryodhana's, who is now speaking to Dhṛtarāṣṭra in an attempt to convince him to sanction the game.

The insertion of the Bard's very brief comments is significant because it is not clear at all who "the Bard" is.[88] The text does not give us the name

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83. See chapter 3 for an extensive discussion of this scene.

84. For scholarship on the status of *sūtas* in Indian society as discussed in the classical texts, see Shubha Pathak, "Why Do Displaced Kings Become Poets in the Sanskrit Epics?" *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 10/2 (2006): 133–36.

85. 2.46.1–7.

86. See chapter 2

87. 2.46.4.

88. van Buitenen also finds this insertion strange; he writes, "this bard can only be Ugraśravas, who is recounting to the hermits of the Naimiṣa Forest Vaiśaṃpāyana's account to Janamejaya. His unexpected appearance here is interesting." van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata, Vol. 2*, 815.

of a specific person; the word "*sūta*" simply appears. "*Sūta*" here means storyteller. So, the question is who is "the Bard"? The narrative provides one clue about who the Bard is: the Bard informs his audience that Vaiśaṃpāyana is the narrator. Because Vaiśaṃpāyana is the narrator in the inner frame, only someone in the outer frame is in a position to refer to Vaiśaṃpāyana as a narrator. This clue leads us to our answer: the Bard is Ugraśravas, who is narrating the story of the *Mahābhārata* to the group of brahmins in the epic's outer frame.[89] (My logic here runs as follows: For the Bard to be able to refer to Vaiśaṃpāyana as the narrator, the Bard has to know who Vaiśaṃpāyana is and the circumstances under which he acted as the narrator of the *Mahābhārata*; that is, he must also know about the snake sacrifice. For the Bard to know about the snake sacrifice, the Bard must be speaking at a point in time that either overlaps with the snake sacrifice, or the Bard must exist in "future time" with respect to the snake sacrifice. Because no other person other than Janamejaya and Vaiśaṃpāyana acts as a direct speaker at the snake sacrifice, the Bard must be speaking from the perspective of a future time. The only context in the *Mahābhārata* where this is possible is the epic's outer frame. Hence the Bard must be Ugraśravas.)

Remember that Ugraśravas, at this point in the story, has not appeared since Vaiśaṃpāyana took over as narrator approximately 217 chapters ago.[90] At this point in the story, he is, to say the least, distant from our thoughts. Thus the realization that the Bard is Ugraśravas brings with it a potential moment of disorientation, which is intentional. It is as though the text is prompting us to ask ourselves: Where are we in the narrative really? Are we inside the story witnessing Duryodhana as he speaks passionately and despairingly to his father in an effort to convince him to sanction the game (*t1*)? Are we at the level of the inner frame where Vaiśaṃpāyana narrates the story of the *Mahābhārata* to King Janamejaya at the snake sacrifice (*t2*)? Or are we at the level of the outer frame where Ugraśravas narrates the story of the great Bhāratas to the group of brahmins (*t3*)? Each one of these narrative levels exists at different points in time: the time that the story takes place (*t1*), the time that the story is publicly told (*t2*), and the time that

89. Beyond the opening passages of the *Mahābhārata*, Ugraśravas rarely appears as a direct speaker. At this point in the story, the audience's memory of Ugraśravas, the outer-frame narrator, is rather faint; I believe this is intentional.

90. 1.55.1.

the story is retold (*t3*).[91] However, through the close proximity of these different levels of time, the *Mahābhārata* creates the effect of their occurring simultaneously, that is, it creates the effect of the collapsing of time.[92]

More specifically, what the sequence of speakers in lines 2.46.1–2.47.1 presents us with is the insertion of the future (*t3*) into the present (which is *either t2* or *t1*; the text makes the present here ambiguous). In so doing, the present moment (which, as mentioned above, is either *t2* or *t1*) is made into the past due to the future's (*t3*'s) insertion, which then frames it. This is further complicated by the presence of the dyadic present, which itself contains a future (*t2*) and a present (*t1*), and here again the future (*t2*) inserts itself into the present (*t1*), making the present moment the past by displacing it.[93]

What point is the text making by creating this disorienting experience of time? Let us take a look briefly at how time (*kāla*) is working in the dicing scene. The word "*kāla*" comes up on a number of occasions. Most relevant to our concerns, it appears in places where the text seems to explicitly suggest that the characters make the disastrous decisions that they do, decisions that lead to the game and ultimately to war, because they are being impelled to do so by time. For example, when Yudhiṣṭhira begins his journey to Hāstinapura, the text says, "[Yudhiṣṭhira] was summoned by Dhṛtarāṣṭra and the decree of time."[94] In doing this, the text encourages us to ask specific questions about the nature of time. Does it determine human action? Worse, is it a force that impels human beings to their doom? By effecting the experience of the collapsing of time through the insertion of the future into the present moment, the *Mahābhārata's* narrative strategies provide a dramatic response to these fundamental concerns. After all, how can we have complete confidence in the notion of the all-consuming power of time

91. *T3* is "future time" from the perspective of *t2* because Ugraśravas is narrating the story of the *Mahābhārata* after having heard Vaiśaṃpāyana narrate the story at the snake sacrifice; *t3* and *t2* are "future time" from the perspective of *t1* because they both contain narrators who are telling the events that happened in *t1*.

92. The temporal representation of the sequence of narrators in this particular passage is *t2*, *t3*, *t2*, and *t1*.

93. Consider Ricoeur's statement about the remarkable property of the narrative voice: "Indeed we can consider anticipations about the future as anticipated retrospections, thanks to the remarkable property of narrative voice that it can place itself at any point of time which for it becomes the quasi-present, and from this observation point, it can comprehend as a quasi-past the future of our present." Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3:260.

94. 2.52.21.

after the *Mahābhārata*'s narrative strategies have produced the experience of the collapsing of time?

Stretching Time

Aside from the framing device, the *Mahābhārata* has other means at its disposal for manipulating time. One such means is narrative delivery, particularly when the delivery slows down, takes its time, delays time, and essentially stops time. This strategy appears most often in the "massacre narratives," that is, those passages in the epic that depict death and destruction on a massive scale.[95] In these episodes the narrative voice employs two strategies that stretch time: intricate description and repetition.

Considering the size, shape, and scope of the *Mahābhārata*, whose story begins with creation and "ends" with the reign of Janamejaya, the fact that the eighteen days of battle consume five books (including *The Book of the Night Massacre*) or more than one quarter of the epic gives us a sense of what happens to time in these books. Indeed, the battle scenes contain some of the most intricately detailed and carefully crafted passages in the entire epic; these same passages describe horrifying scenes of savage slaughter and wholesale devastation.[96] Consider, for example, the following passage:

> A river was seen on the battlefield that flowed to the other world. Its waters were blood, its whirlpools were chariots, its trees were banners, its pebbles were bones. Its crocodiles were arms, its streams were bows, its rocks were elephants and its stones were horses. Its marshes were fat and marrow, its swans were umbrellas, and its rafts were clubs. Covered with armor and turbans, its beautiful trees were flags. Filled with a multitude of wheels and three-bannered poles, the horrifying river rose up full of Kauravas and Sṛñjayas, inspiring delight in the heroes and increasing the dread of the fearful.[97]

95. Examples of massacre narratives include the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest (1.214–220); the cattle expedition (3.225–244); the cattle raid (4.25–63); and the five battle books, including *The Book of the Night Massacre* (*Sauptikaparvan*) where Aśvatthāman viciously butchers the sleeping Drupadas.

96. Chaitanya, *The Mahābhārata*, 38–39, 58–59.

97. 9.8.29–32.

Because the description is so thick in these books, the progression of the plot slows down, and we are encouraged to pause and take in, with eyes wide open, the various horrifying ways in which the soldiers' lives are cut short and how the body, which is vulnerable to so many abuses, can be torn apart. Saṃjaya tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra (as quoted before in the introduction to this book):

> Some were pierced by spears and some by battle-axes, and some were crushed by elephants and others were trampled by horses. Some were cut by car-wheels and some by sharp arrows, and they cried out everywhere for their relatives, king. Others cried out for their sons, and others for their fathers and for their brothers. . . . And their many entrails were scattered and their thighs were broken, Bhārata. And others, with arms torn off and their sides split open were seen wailing. Thirsty, they desired to live, and others overwhelmed with thirst, with little strength, fell on the battlefield on the bare ground and begged for water.[98]

Through slowing down the tempo of the narrative at these points in the story, the narrative voice encourages us to pause and take in the ravaging effects of violence, decay, and destruction—the effects, in essence, of time:

> Hundreds and thousands of severed heads and adorned arms fell upon the ground and twitched. And some accomplished warriors, those best of men, who were headless continued to stand ready with weapons grasped and bows raised.[99]

Another strategy that the text employs to delay time is the repetition of various motifs throughout the war books. The most prevalent ones are:

1. *The loss of recognition motif*. In the battle books, Saṃjaya frequently describes how, as the war progresses, the warriors lose the ability to recognize one another. Again and again we are told that fathers no longer recognize their sons, brothers no longer recognize brothers,

98. 6.44.34–38.

99. 6.55.9–10.

nephews no longer recognize uncles. Consequently, they kill one another.[100]

2. *The river of blood motif*. Another recurring motif is the description of the river of blood that forms as a result of the extensive carnage. Filled with the flesh and blood and entrails of the corpses of the soldiers, horses and elephants, the river carries the bodies to the realm of Yama, the God of death.
3. *The "battlefield looked beautiful" trope*. Saṃjaya repeatedly comments on the aesthetic dimensions of the battlefield strewn with corpses. For example, he compares the battlefield littered with bodies to a field of flowers,[101] an autumnal sky,[102] a beautiful young woman adorned with various ornaments,[103] a field of gold-colored lotuses, and a painted figure on a canvas.[104] The irony here lies in the fact that Saṃjaya is narrating the events of the war to Dhṛtarāṣṭra and is, therefore, essentially asking him (as well as us) to see the destruction of his own army as beautiful. Indeed, Saṃjaya describes a wounded Duryodhana to Dhṛtarāṣṭra in the following somewhat shocking manner: "Deeply pierced your son looked beautiful like a *kiṃśuka* flower in the spring season."[105]
4. *The omens motif*. Scattered throughout these books are passages that describe in great detail the dreadful omens that appear for all the warriors to behold.[106] Examples of such omens are meteor showers, dust storms, flashes of lightning in a cloudless sky, howling jackals, moving headless trunks, showers of blood or pieces of bone and flesh, the tears

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100. See for example 6.44.2–3.

101. 6.50.55.

102. 6.55.15.

103. 6.92.65.

104. 6.42.25.

105. 8.40.29. For Danielle Feller Jatavallabhula's interpretation of these descriptions, see "Raṇayajña: The *Mahābhārata* War as a Sacrifice," in *Violence Denied: Violence, Non-Violence, and the Rationalization of Violence in South Asian Cultural History*, ed. E. M. Houben and K. R. van Kooij (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 1999), 86. She surmises that the fact that the Earth is enjoying these "offerings" explains these poetic descriptions. However, I could find no evidence for this interpretation. For a more convincing discussion of the epic's battle similes from the perspective of Sanskrit literary theory, see Sinha, *The Mahābhārata: A Literary Study* 33–34, 36.

106. See, for example, Vyāsa's extended description of the omens at the beginning of the war at 6.2–6.3.

of the Kauravas' animals, lakes and wells that vomit blood. These omens create a kind of recurring dread, not only in the characters but also in us, since they indicate that events are only going to get worse as the war progresses.[107]

5. *The scattered weapons motif*. The narrative voice repeatedly pauses to catalogue the battle weapons that are strewn upon the field. The expense, size, shape, and design of the weapons are described, highlighting the futility of such mighty and costly weapons to their now-deceased owners.[108]
6. *The hungry jackals motif*. Most of the battle episodes conclude with a brief description of all the hungry beasts of prey (jackals, dogs, *rākṣasas*, and ghouls) howling in anticipation of their nightly feast and gorging upon the fat and blood of the victims of the battle, dancing about in glee.

The point that the repetition of such motifs makes is that in war there is no progress toward a brighter future, there is only a steady decline in the humanity of the characters. This decline is marked by the slow, unbearable march toward inevitable whole-scale destruction. According to Ānandavardhana, the repetition of these motifs throughout the battle books has an important aggregative effect: the more battles that are described, the more distasteful the war becomes and the "more firmly grounded becomes our feeling of detachment, of world weariness (*vairāgya*)."[109]

LET US NOW stand back and consider in more detail why the text would want to manipulate our experience of time in these varying ways. On the surface at least, the strategies that manipulate time appear to undermine the central thesis of the *kālavāda* doctrine, which is that time is an overpowering, oppressive force that leads all creatures to their doom. For, if time really possesses these qualities, then how could the text give us the experience of consumed/dismissed/collapsed time? But is this really the

107. For a discussion of the relationship between omens and time, see Hiltebeitel and Kloetzli, "*Kāla*," 578.

108. See for example 6.92.47–9.

109. *Dhv*. 4.5 A. This is Masson's interpretation of Ānandavardhana; see Ingalls, Masson, and Patwardhan, *The Dhvanyāloka*, 694.

case? Do the strategies of temporal manipulation truly unravel the epic's doctrine of time? To answer this question, we should turn to and reflect upon the central point of the advisors' perspective on the *kālavāda* doctrine, which they articulate in their arguments against grief. According to Saṃjaya, Vyāsa, and Vidura, the person who faces and accepts the fact that time "revolves" and that therefore everything in the world is subject to radical transitoriness will no longer be subject to the sorrow that time brings. Thus the person who is no longer swayed by the strong emotional responses that time's ravages cause would in essence move beyond time in the sense that he or she would no longer be psychologically terrorized by time. Viewed from this perspective, the text's temporal manipulations do not undermine the epic's doctrine of time—what they actually undermine, or "rupture," is only the lamenters' version of the doctrine. They support, however, the implicit recommendation for overcoming sorrow articulated by the advisors in their arguments against grief: psychologically moving beyond time. They support this implicit recommendation by producing in us the very experience that the advisors attempt (and fail) to produce in their own audience members, that is, the experience of overcoming temporal boundaries and hence psychologically moving beyond time.

If the strategies of consuming, dismissing, and collapsing time do not unravel but indeed support the epic's doctrine of time (specifically the understanding of the doctrine expressed by the advisors), what about the strategies that stretch time? Earlier I mentioned that these strategies appear most often in the massacre narratives. By delaying our experience of time at these points in the story, the strategies force us to become intimately familiar with death and its many dimensions: the susceptibility of the body to violence, the look of terror in the eyes of a mortally wounded victim, the gory details of the decaying corpse, the grief that loss causes others and how this emotion can so easily lead a person to slip into madness. By presenting us with these violent scenes and by doing so again and again, the text encourages us to face and accept the vulnerability of the human condition to time and decay. It does more than make us face these truths. It guides us through these scenes so that the aggregative effect of the delaying devices is that they provide instruction in how to respond to a world that is characterized by all-powerful, all-consuming time. Guided by the text, shock, horror, and despair give way to contemplative distance, stoic acceptance, even peaceful contentment, emotions that would enable us to face such a

world with courage and forbearance rather than losing control of our senses, as do so many characters in the text.[110]

Conclusion

What our analysis in this chapter reveals is a slight variation on Ānandavardhana's *dhvani* theory in chapter 1. While we saw that many of the text's literal statements about time focused on the idea of time as an all-powerful destructive force impelling all creatures to their doom, we also saw that many of the text's "suggested" messages about time included the idea that time can be manipulated and temporal boundaries can be surmounted. While on the face of it these two ideas about time seem distinct and even contradictory, we discovered that, at least in the case of the strategies of temporal manipulation, it was the areas of overlap between these two ideas (particularly taking into account the grief counselors' articulation of the epic's *kālavāda* urging acceptance of the transitory nature of life) that gave force to the text's messages concerning the task of psychologically moving beyond time. What this variation points to, therefore, is a slight modification of our articulation in chapter 1 of the way the literal meaning and the suggested meaning work together to produce signification (i.e., that the suggested meaning is always distinct and predominant over the literal). There are also cases, our analysis has revealed, where the text works to create meaning through the reverberations (i.e., areas of consonance as well as dissonance) between the two types of signification (and not simply through the predominance of one over the other).

More specifically my argument in this chapter has suggested that the epic's aesthetics of suffering presents time as both a cause and a "solution" to the problem of suffering. First, ontologically time is the problem since it is a destructive and overpowering force that leads all living beings toward their doom. However, psychologically and epistemologically time is a "solution" to the problem of suffering in the sense that if one undergoes a radical reorientation to the world based on an enlightened acceptance and acknowledgement of time's power, then one can psychologically move beyond time (i.e., the *kālavāda* doctrine of time) and hence beyond suffering.

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110. Weil makes a similar point about the benefits of tragic literature in her essay "Morality and Literature" in *The Simone Weil Reader*, 290–295. As Ugraśravas says, the *Mahābhārata* will cause one to never despair, even in dire situations (*na kṛcchreṣv avasīdati*). 1.1.199.

How might one characterize the psychological state of moving beyond time? As Yaroslav Vassilkov tells us in his study of the *kālavāda* doctrine, it would involve equanimity, that is, both seeing the world and acting in the world with complete disinterest so that one would not grieve over loss nor rejoice over success (a common refrain in the epic's arguments against grief).[111] To appreciate this "solution," one must remember that the epic's aesthetics, unlike its characters, is less concerned with preventing catastrophic situations because, according to the epic's *kālavāda*, these situations are sure to come.[112] Instead, the epic's aesthetics is chiefly concerned with how human beings respond to these situations once they occur. The recommendation is to respond with a calm, disinterested mind, so that one can see one's way out of the fray and act accordingly. Why does the epic's aesthetics of suffering locate the solution to suffering here, in moments that characters perceive to be instances of extreme urgency? What the *Mahābhārata*'s aesthetics shows us time and again is that strong emotional responses (such as grief and anger) to the injustices wrought by time only lead to actions that increase the number and intensity of such situations. Indeed, as we saw in chapters 2 and 3, the degree to which events can spiral out of control is so extreme in the epic's worldview that the simple matter of a son's "grief" over the fortunes of his prosperous "enemy"/cousin coupled with the leniency of a doting father can lead to actions that initiate a chain of despair that is so wide and so deep that it is capable of bringing about the destruction of the entire world.

111. Vassilkov "*Kālavāda*," 25.

112. As Gitomer ("King Duryodhana," 222) puts it, "the text depicts a world in permanent crisis." I do not mean to suggest, however, that the epic recommends that one *not* attempt to prevent disaster. Rather, I am suggesting that, according to the epic, this attempt will not necessarily be successful.

5

Heaven's Riddles or the Hell Trick

THEODICY AND NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

> *The full significance of suffering in the epic derives its meaning only within the total ensemble of speculations about fate,* dharma, karma, *human effort (*puruṣakāra*) and* adharma*; these constitute part of the thematic web of the epic. Where notions of suffering are expressed most clearly in the* Mbh.*, questions about* dharma *and fate are usually in the background.*
>
> —GREG BAILEY[1]

OUR ANALYSIS SO far has suggested that the epic's aesthetics of suffering encourages its audiences to be centrally engaged with the question "Who or what is responsible for the great Bhārata war and, by extension, who or what is responsible for large-scale or universal suffering?" In the last three chapters we have seen that the epic's narrative strategies have directed us to consider several possible "answers" to this question: Did the Bhārata war begin with the game of dice (chapter 2) or was it Dhṛtarāṣṭra's fault (chapter 3)? If so, what does this say about the role of human psychology—and by extension human agency—in creating the disaster? Is time a culprit and/or a solution to universal suffering? (chapter 4).

In addition to the concept of time, the epic's aesthetics of suffering points a finger at a number of other conceptual categories, suggesting that they are responsible for the production of the war and by extension the problem of universal suffering. Indeed, time's role with respect to this problem is placed in tension with approximately four other conceptual categories: fate (*daiva*), human exertion (*puruṣakāra*), karma, and God

1. "Suffering in the *Mahābhārata*," 39.

(Kṛṣṇa). In this chapter we will examine the presentation of these other possible "suspects" in order to assess whether the epic's aesthetics of suffering ever provides a definitive answer to one of its central preoccupations (Who or what was responsible for the Bhārata war, and by extension, universal suffering?). In short, we will be exploring the question of whether or not the epic's aesthetics delivers a theodicy.

According to Ronald Green, the problem of theodicy arises when the reality of human suffering is juxtaposed with two sets of beliefs traditionally associated with ethical monotheism: (1) God is absolutely good and compassionate and (2) God is omnipotent and omniscient.[2] However, as Green asserts, some writers have expanded the term beyond its classical Western philosophical usage. Max Weber redefined it in order to make it applicable to religious traditions that do not believe in just one omnipotent deity. According to Weber, "the theodicy problem" refers to any situation of inexplicable suffering and "theodicy" itself refers to any rationale for explaining suffering.[3]

For the purposes of this chapter, we will adopt Weber's use of the term. First we will consider fate (*daiva*) and human endeavor (*puruṣakāra*) as potential theodicies by returning to the dicing scene and examining their role in the infamous game of dice. Next we will explore whether or not karma and Kṛṣṇa provide rationales for the existence of suffering. Finally, we will examine the epic's enigmatic conclusion when the Pāṇḍavas journey to heaven.[4] This chapter argues that, due to the narrative strategies of ambiguity and deferral, fate, human endeavor, karma, and Kṛṣṇa do not provide conclusive answers to the theodicy question.[5] Rather, the epic's aesthetics of suffering rejects a "straightforward" literal approach to the problem and addresses it in a more dramatic, "suggestive" fashion.

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2. Ronald Green, "Theodicy," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2d ed, vol. 12, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 9112.

3. This is Green's formulation of Weber's ideas. See Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. E. Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 138–150.

4. This takes place in *The Book of the Great Departure* and *The Book of the Journey to Heaven*, Books 17 and 18, respectively.

5. One additional theodicy that the *Mahābhārata* considers is time. See chapter 4 for a discussion of time in the *Mahābhārata*, particularly vis-à-vis the issue of suffering. There I mentioned but did not emphasize the fact that the power of time is placed in tension with (or exists in an ambiguous relationship with) other potentially more powerful forces like fate and human exertion. Thus, in the context of the concerns of this chapter, I would argue that it is handled with the same strategies of ambiguity with which fate, human exertion, and Kṛṣṇa are.

Through the deployment of the strategies of estrangement and rupture in the journey-to-heaven episode, the text presents its stark revelation of the structure of the world, a revelation that this chapter argues is the epic's "answer" to its central question concerning the causes of despair.

Fate and Human Exertion in the Game of Dice

As mentioned in chapter 2, the dicing scene is one of the pivotal scenes in the *Mahābhārata*. In this scene, Duryodhana invites Yudhiṣṭhira to a "rigged" dice game,[6] takes his kingdom from him, physically abuses his wife, and exiles him for thirteen years. These horrible actions make the war between the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas inevitable.[7] Throughout the epic, characters locate the root of the war and the immense suffering that it generates in the dice game (see, for example, Janameya's comments at 2.46.1–3 where he calls the game of dice "the root of the destruction of the entire world" [*mūlaṃ . . . vināśya pṛthivyā*] and 18.1.16–17 where Nārada urges Yudhiṣṭhira not to dwell on the hardships he has endured that were "caused by the dice game" [*dyūtakārita*].)[8] So precisely why did this "very unfortunate"[9] game take place? Both characters and the narrative voice (here Vaiśaṃpāyana) point fingers at destiny (*daiva*). However, close scrutiny of the scene reveals that the principal characters' desires and volitions are also operative (*puruṣakāra*). To what extent, then, are fate, human endeavor, and/or some combination of the two depicted as the primary cause of the dice game and the resultant suffering that it causes? To answer this question, we will examine, once again, the depiction of the three characters whose decisions led to the "fateful" game and who themselves claim that these decisions were determined by fate: Duryodhana, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and Yudhiṣṭhira. While in chapter 2 we investigated the psychological states of these three characters vis-à-vis the strategies of proximity and estrangement, we are now concerned with a slightly different set of issues: the tension between their desires and the role of fate in their decisions and

6. "Rigged" in the sense that Śakuni, an expert at dicing, plays for Duryodhana. Whether Śakuni cheats or not is an open question in the text. However, he is a decidedly shady character.

7. For a brief summary of the dicing scene, see chapter 2.

8. See Luis González-Reimann, "Ending the *Mahābhārata*: Making a Lasting Impression," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 15/1 (2011): 101–110.

9. Janemjaya calls the game "*mahātyayam*" at 2.46.1.

actions. Because the question of the power of fate versus human endeavor is explicitly under investigation in the dicing scene (more so than in any other dramatic scene in the epic), the epic's treatment of the dynamic between these two forces is considered to be representative.

Fate Terminology

Before we turn to our analysis of the role of fate and human effort in the dicing scene, let us first briefly get clarity on the terms under investigation.[10] In the *Mahābhārata* there are several Sanskrit terms that are employed to designate the notion of fate. The most common terms are *daiva* ("divine power or will," "destiny," "fate," "chance")[11] and *diṣṭa* ("allotment," "fate," "destiny").[12] Other terms that frequently appear are *kāla* ("time," "death," "fate"),[13] *vidhi* ("rule," "fate," "time"),[14] *dhātṛ/vidhātṛ* ("maker," "arranger," "fate"),[15] *bhāgya* ("fate," "fortune," "luck," "happiness"),[16] and *bhāgadeya* ("share," "portion," "lot," "fate").[17] While these terms have slightly different semantic nuances, most of them are used interchangeably; all consistently indicate external forces over which the individual exercises no control.[18] Precisely who or what is the agent of fate? This is yet another question raised by the *Mahābhārata* and, characteristically, answered ambiguously. In some passages, the epic suggests that there is a divine intelligence at

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10. For scholarship on the role of fate in the *Mahābhārata*, see E. Washburn Hopkins, *Epic Mythology* (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1969), 73–77; Bruce Long, "The Concepts of Human Action and Rebirth in the *Mahābhārata*," in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 38–60; Saroj Bharadwaj, *The Concept of "Daiva" in the Mahābhārata* (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1992); Shulman, "Devana and Daiva," 350–365; Sutton, *Religious Doctrines*, 367–384; Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, 85–230; and Julian F. Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative in the Mahābhārata* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001).

11. See, for example, 2.43.32, 3.33.15, 5.26.15, 6.19.2, 7.23.4, 8.5.29, 10.2.6, 11.10.19, 12.7.18, 13.6.3, 14.5.16, 16.2.5.

12. See, for example, 1.84.6, 2.45.54 ff, 3.33.11 ff, 5.29.18, 6.49.02, 16.9.26.

13. See chapter 4.

14. See, for example, 2.19.43 ff, 5.41.9, 6.1.6, 9.1.8, 11.8.35, 14.3.9, 15.10.8, 17.1.11, 18.50.32.

15. See, for example, 3.31.36, 5.23.17, 5.28.5, 6.72.26, 9.44.4, 11.1.18, 14.42.61.

16. See, for example, 2.16.26, 2.17.3, 2.70.15, 3.49.35, 5.174.13, 7.52.29, 9.20.41, 11.8.9.

17. See, for example, 2.16.26, 3.49.35, 5.14.13, 7.52.29, 9.20.41, 11.8.9.

18. Long, "The Concepts of Human Action and Rebirth in the *Mahābhārata*," 45, and Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, 198. See, for example, 3.257.4.

work (here the primary candidates are Brahmā,[19] Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa,[20] and the *dhātṛ*/*vidhātṛ*).[21] In others, the epic suggests that fate is caused by an impersonal mechanistic power that drives all people to their doom.[22] In still others, the line between these two options is not always clear.[23] Thus, the concept of fate is presented multidimensionally; sometimes fate is presented as an impersonal, mechanistic force, sometimes as the will of the gods or God, and oftentimes the exact nature of the agency behind what is deemed "fated" is left open to question.[24]

Puruṣakāra means literally "that which is done by human beings."[25] In the epic's endless quest for causation (i.e., why things happened the way they did), fate and human exertion are forces that are often pitted against one another. Most scholars agree that the question of their relationship is one of the central concerns of the epic.[26] However, they disagree about which side, if any, the epic ultimately comes down on. For example, according to R. C. Zaehner, "the *Mahābhārata* stresses time and time again the primacy of fate over human endeavor."[27] Conversely, while Peter Hill acknowledges the wide variety of views that exist in the *Mahābhārata*

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19. For other references to the divine burden of Earth story, see 6.62.8–11, 11.8.20 ff, 12.337.29–31, 13.143.12, and 16.9.29.

20. In some versions of the burden of Earth story, Brahmā commands Viṣṇu, in others Viṣṇu himself decides to descend. See 11.8.20–25.

21. As Hill (*Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, 166) points out, *dhātṛ* and *vidhātṛ* are sometimes employed as epithets of one of the great Gods (Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva). For example, see: 3.13.19, 3.18.22, 6.62.32, 13.15.31, 13.16.22, 16.17.47, 17.145.39. For instances where characters employ these terms to refer to an inscrutable, capricious, arbitrary force, see 2.51.25, 2.52.14, and 3.31.1–42.

22. See, for example, 2.43.32, 6.58.01, 8.24.3. This understanding of fate is often articulated by characters who are struggling to come to terms with circumstances of death, destruction, and/or extreme reversals of fortune. Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, 199.

23. Peter Hill makes the point that this ambiguity is embedded in the terminology itself. Ibid., 197.

24. Here I am disagreeing with scholars who argue that the fate terminology in the epic refers in all cases to the story of the burden of Earth and/or the will of Kṛṣṇa. See, for example, Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative*, 146.

25. Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative*, 4.

26. For scholarly discussion of the constant tension between these opposed "poles" in the epic, see Bharadwaj, *The Concept of "Daiva,"* 78–96; Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, 232–234; and Sutton, *Religious Doctrines*, 367–384. For statements in the epic that reflect this tension, see Bharadwaj, *The Concept of "Daiva,"* 28–96.

27. R. C. Zaehner, *Hinduism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 106.

concerning the tension between fate and human exertion, he argues that it is the importance "and meaningfulness of human effort and freedom that most stands out."[28] Perhaps more wisely, Nicholas Sutton argues that there is no clear solution to the question of which force is supreme; rather the epic presents different possible "accounts" of their dynamic in order to engender in the reader a clear sense of the stakes involved in the issues raised by the power (or lack thereof) of each.[29]

Duryodhana and Fate

As mentioned in chapter 2, Prince Duryodhana is the driving force of the dice game. But precisely what motivates him to rush toward certain disaster? The text suggests that fate is implicated. At the opening of the dicing scene, Duryodhana is smarting. Having just witnessed Yudhiṣṭhira's royal consecration and his glorious rise to the position of universal sovereign, he is publicly humiliated by the illusions of Yudhiṣṭhira's assembly hall. He burns because of his humiliation. Duryodhana cannot understand why, in spite of his repeated efforts to defeat them, the Pāṇḍavas continue to rise in glory while his situation remains stagnant. His only explanation is that it is due to fate. He says:

> I think that fate (*daiva*) alone is supreme and human action is pointless when I see such radiant fortune given like that to Yudhiṣṭhira.[30]

Along with Śakuni, his crafty uncle, Duryodhana plots to defeat the Pāṇḍavas and win their kingdom; he shall do it through a game of dice. Śakuni claims that Yudhiṣṭhira, who loves to gamble, does not really know how to play.[31] He, on the other hand, is so skilled at gambling that there is

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28. Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, 371.

29. Sutton, *Religious Doctrines*, 384.

30. 2.43.32.

31. 2.44.19. Many scholars have attributed Yudhiṣṭhira's astonishing behavior in the dicing scene to a weakness for gambling, based on Śakuni's statement here. However, there is very little evidence in the text that Yudhiṣṭhira is a compulsive gambler. (Arjuna does accuse Yudhiṣṭhira of having a weakness for gambling in *The Book of Karṇa*, but he does so out of anger, and it is not clear whether we are meant to take his words at face value). Further, Śakuni is a very shifty character who the text suggests should not be trusted. Indeed, there is textual evidence to refute Śakuni's claim. Draupadī says that Yudhiṣṭhira rarely played: "*nātikṛtaprayatnaḥ*." 2.60.43.

no one like him on earth (indeed, in all the three worlds). Therefore, Śakuni assures Duryodhana, if Yudhiṣṭhira can be persuaded to enter into the game, Duryodhana will be able to take Yudhiṣṭhira's kingdom from him.

The fact that Duryodhana tries to act against that which he believes is ordained by fate puts him in an antagonistic relation to it. In trying to defeat the Pāṇḍavas, whose triumph he believes is fated, he is attempting to defy fate. Paradoxically, the way in which he intends to defy fate, through the game of dice, is exactly what other characters (namely Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Yudhiṣṭhira) think is ordained by fate, as we shall see.[32] So, precisely what is Duryodhana's relation to fate here? Is he acting against it (and thus exercising his freedom) or in accordance with it (indicating that his freedom is limited)? Since the answer to this question depends on character-perspective (i.e., Yudhiṣṭhira and Dhṛtarāṣṭra suggest that he is acting in accordance with fate; however, according to Duryodhana, he is not), the issue is handled ambiguously by the text.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Fate

When Duryodhana and Śakuni approach Dhṛtarāṣṭra and urge him to sanction their plan, Dhṛtarāṣṭra first wavers and then acquiesces. Dhṛtarāṣṭra himself provides three reasons why he feels that he cannot allow the dice game to take place: (1) Vidura is against it,[33] (2) it will lead to a division (*bheda*) in the family,[34]and (3) he does not want to fight with people who are stronger than them.[35]

However, Duryodhana is wasting away with envy and Dhṛtarāṣṭra cannot bear to see him suffer. Because there are two versions of the conversation between Duryodhana and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the text provides two different contexts in which Dhṛtarāṣṭra gives in to Duryodhana. In the first version, he acquiesces when Duryodhana threatens suicide.[36] This version suggests that Dhṛtarāṣṭra yields to his son because he is both weak and overly fond of his spoiled son. (Duryodhana is certainly hamming it up a

32. See 2.45.57 and 2.52.14.

33. 2.46.7.

34. 2.46.12.

35. 2.51.10.

36. Specifically, Duryodhana tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra that Vidura will urge him to turn away from this idea, and if Dhṛtarāṣṭra follows this advice, Duryodhana will kill himself. 2.45.43.

bit and manipulating his father when he says, "When I am dead, be happy with your Vidura, king.")[37]

According to the second version (which includes an extended version of Duryodhana's detailed account of the extravagant gifts that Yudhiṣṭhira received at the royal consecration), Dhṛtarāṣṭra relents when Duryodhana points out that if they win the game the Kauravas will stand on equal footing with the Pāṇḍavas.[38] This version suggests that Dhṛtarāṣṭra gives in for reasons beyond his concern for Duryodhana's happiness or well-being. It suggests that he does not like watching the Pāṇḍavas outshine his own sons, and, further, that listening to his son's account of the magnitude of the Pāṇḍavas' wealth has perhaps incited his greed.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra, however, claims that he submits to his son's request for a reason that is altogether different from the ones suggested above. He says that he agrees to the game because it is fated. He tells Vidura, "I think it is supreme fate alone by which this occurs."[39] But what exactly does he mean? Is he saying that he agrees to Duryodhana's request because the game is fated? If so, how does he know this? Does it suddenly occur to him or is he being tricked by fate so that he suddenly "sees" the game in this light? Or, is he justifying his own weakness (his failure to stand up to his son) by stating that the game is fated and therefore something that cannot be avoided anyway? More to the point, does he agree to the game because he wants to or because he is compelled or even forced to by fate?

The text's strategies suggest that Dhṛtarāṣṭra is motivated by a complicated, even contradictory, dialectic between these two factors (i.e., his agency and fate). The narrative voice (here Vaiśaṃpāyana) states explicitly that Dhṛtarāṣṭra submits because of his attachment to Duryodhana:

> Dhṛtarāṣṭra, knowing the evils of dicing, was drawn to it out of love for his son.[40]

However, it also suggests that Dhṛtarāṣṭra's mind is "bewildered by fate" (*daivasaṃmūḍhacetas*).[41] Dhṛtarāṣṭra himself claims that he has been blinded

37. 2.45.44.

38. 2.51.13.

39. 2.45.57.

40. 2.45.49.

41. 2.51.16.

and confused by an inexorable force beyond his ken that causes him to "see" things incorrectly[42] and impels him to act against his will.[43] Because the text's strategies support both readings (i.e., he did as he desired and was impelled by fate), they deliberately render ambiguous the relative extent to which Dhṛtarāṣṭra's will on the one hand and fate on the other play a role in his decision to agree to the game.

Yudhiṣṭhira and Fate

Yudhiṣṭhira is the most baffling character of all. Why does he accept Dhṛtarāṣṭra's invitation when he knows that the game will divide the family and most likely cause a war? And why does he, King Dharma, the paragon of virtue who has faced every one of the Pāṇḍavas' trials with complete equanimity suddenly lose his wits once he enters the game and gamble away his entire kingdom, his brothers, himself, and his wife? These questions bring us to the heart of what is at stake in determining the precise nature of the role of fate in driving events toward the game.

When Dhṛtarāṣṭra sends Vidura to Indraprastha to invite Yudhiṣṭhira to the dice game, Yudhiṣṭhira immediately senses danger. As previously mentioned in chapter 2, he tells Vidura,

> Dicing will bring destruction upon us, steward. Who, knowing this, would consent to the game?[44]

Instead of refusing the challenge, however, as one might expect, he accepts it. Why? Yudhiṣṭhira himself provides three reasons: (1) because as

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42. 2.72.8–11. In this speech, Dhṛtarāṣṭra uses the term "time" (*kāla*) and seems to use it interchangeably with fate. In his commentary to verse 2.52.21, Devabodha glosses "*kālasya*" as "*daiva*sya" (*Devabodha's Commentary on the Sabhāparvan from the Mahābhārata*, ed. R. D. Karmarkar [Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Institute, 1949], 35). For scholarship on time and fate as closely linked (if not synonymous) terms in the epic, see Long, "The Concepts of Human Action and Rebirth," 295; Bharadwaj, *The Concept of "Daiva,"* 19; Sutton, *Religious Doctrines*, 369; Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, 196–200; and González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 26–39. Time, like fate, has a range of meanings in the *Mahābhārata* (see chapter 4 for a discussion of this range).

43. 2.51.25.

44. 2.52.10.

the "son" of Dhṛtarāṣṭra he must obey his father's command,[45] (2) because he has vowed to accept all challenges,[46] and (3) because he believes that the game is fated and that he must obey that which has been decreed. (In *The Book of the Forest* Yudhiṣṭhira gives one additional reason why he agrees to play. He tells Bhīma that he wanted to take Duryodhana's kingdom from him.)[47]

Yudhiṣṭhira's first two reasons involve moral obligations by which he feels bound. His third reason involves an outside force beyond his control: fate (*dhātṛ*). Yudhiṣṭhira tells Vidura,

> It is well known that this [world] is under the control of destiny through the Ordainer. I will not refuse to gamble with those rogues today.[48]

And as he leaves for Hastināpura to take part in the game, Yudhiṣṭhira says, to no one in particular:

> Fate (*daiva*) robs wisdom like light blinds the eye. A person is under the control of the Ordainer as though bound with fetters.[49]

Once he enters the dice game with Śakuni, Yudhiṣṭhira does act like a man who has been robbed of his reason, overtaken by some exterior force such as fate. He begins with a sober stake: a set of pearls. But when Śakuni cries "Won!" Yudhiṣṭhira loses his composure. Nineteen throws later he has staked and lost his entire kingdom, his four brothers, himself, and Draupadī, thus paving the way for his wife's humiliation and abuse.[50]

So precisely why does Yudhiṣṭhira accept the challenge? One way of interpreting Yudhiṣṭhira's statements is that he considers fate to be that which he believes he is obligated to do but does not want to do. If this is

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45. 2.52.10. This is highly ironic because it is precisely because Dhṛtarāṣṭra chooses to treat Yudhiṣṭhira as an enemy rather than as his son that Yudhiṣṭhira has been placed in this situation in the first place.

46. 2.52.14.

47. 3.35.2. For additional scholarship on Yudhiṣṭhira's motivations to play dice, see Brodbeck, "Gendered Soteriology: Marriage and the *Karmayoga*," 154.

48. 2.52.14.

49. 2.52.18.

50. See chapter 2 for a discussion of the ramifications of Yudhiṣṭhira's stake of Draupadī.

the case, then while he might feel forced to act, he is still to some extent in control of his situation and thus a free agent. However, Yudhiṣṭhira believes that he is being confused and impelled toward the game by fate. The narrative voice (again Vaiśaṃpāyana) supports Yudhiṣṭhira's view by suggesting that he is being impelled towards the game against his will.[51] So, did Yudhiṣṭhira accept the challenge to play the game of dice because of his sense of moral obligation—in which case, while constrained, he still has agency—or because he was impelled by fate—in which case his agency is called into question? Again the text's strategies support two readings whose conjunction places fate in an unresolved tension with human agency.

A CLOSE EXAMINATION of the characters' decisions and actions in this scene reveals that characters express the conviction that fate is a force that clouds their mind and drives them.[52] The narrative voice supports this view by suggesting that fate both strikes out at individuals and makes decrees to which characters are subject.[53] However, characters also express intentions and give reasons why they willfully agree to the game (e.g., Dhṛtarāṣṭra indicates that he submits to Duryodhana's wishes because of his devotion to his son[54] and Yudhiṣṭhira indicates that he agrees to participate in the game, in part, out of moral obligation), and the narrative voice indicates that these intentions are motivating factors as well.[55] To return to the original question concerning the extent to which either fate or human endeavor provide answers to the theodicy issue, the answer is an ambiguous "both do, in part." The above analysis reveals that the dice game took place because of a complicated dialectic between both forces. What is the nature of this dialectic? Which force is more powerful and which is responsible for the suffering that takes place in this scene and in the epic at large? Since these questions are not answered conclusively, they join the ranks of the epic's multiple riddle-questions (that is, questions that are raised but never conclusively answered). And, because the power of fate is placed in an ambiguous relation with human

51. 2.52.21.

52. 2.51.25, 2.52.14, 2.52.18, and 2.72.8–11.

53. 2.51.16 and 2.52.21.

54. He says this explicitly at 2.72.36.

55. 2.45.49.

endeavor, the text through its strategies of ambiguity defers answering whether either force on its own (or a definitive combination of the two) is a sufficient explanation for the problem of suffering.[56]

Karma and Suffering

Unlike the powers of fate and human endeavor, the impact of karma on the lives of individual characters is not explicitly examined in one dramatic scene. Instead, karma is explored predominantly in two epic contexts: (1) in didactic passages where the details of the machinations of karma are discussed; and (2) through characterization, particularly in terms of how characters are depicted as acting and reaping the consequences of their actions.[57]

Before I turn to an examination of karma's role in the prevalence of suffering in the epic, let me first clarify what karma is and how it pertains to the theodicy issue. According to Peter Hill there is no single theory of karma in the tradition.[58] However, a distinctive feature in most, if not all, definitions is the strict connection between act and consequence. Further, according to Hill, most theories of karma contain the idea that every individual in the course of successive existences (i.e., *saṃsāra*, or cycle of rebirth) reaps the fruit of his or her own actions performed in previous existences. As Hill writes, "as a person desires, so does he [or she] act and as he acts so does he incur or store up consequences that must come to fruition in future existences."[59]

Some Euro-American scholars, the great sociologist Max Weber in particular, have argued that the concept of karma provides a logical solution

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56. Sutton writes, "There can be no simple solution to the problem of destiny and free will and the stature of the epic is surely raised by the fact that when viewed as a work in its entirety, it makes no such attempt. Rather, it offers different perspectives . . . each of which contributes to the development of the reader's comprehension." Sutton, *Religious Doctrines*, 384. For a catalogue of references to *daiva* in the *Mahābhārata*, many of which point to the pervasive tension between the power of fate and human endeavor in the epic, see Bharadwaj, *The Concept of "Daiva,"* 28–96.

57. Hill associates karma's presentation in the epic also with the themes of boons/curses and sin/merit. See Hill, *Fate, Predestination and Human Action*, 39–40 and 42–72. There are also several characters in the epic whose past lives determine their present ones in specific ways. For example, see the story of Ambā who is reborn as Śikhaṇḍin to exact revenge on Bhīṣma. (5.170–190).

58. Hill, *Fate, Predestination and Human Action*, 2.

59. Ibid., 3.

to the conundrums of the theodicy question.[60] Weber considered karma to be "the most complete formal solution to the problem of theodicy."[61] For him, the doctrine "solves" the problem of the prevalence of suffering by blaming evil on itself: one's present experience is the direct result of the action (karma), good and bad, accumulated in past lives and affixed to the transmigrating soul.[62] In Weber's own words: "What may appear from the viewpoint of a theory of compensation as unjust suffering in the terrestrial life of a person should be regarded as atonement for sins in a previous existence."[63]

In the *Mahābhārata* karma is linked to suffering in two distinct but related ways. First, karma along with the closely associated notion of *saṃsāra*, is invoked by characters (predominantly sages or advisors, often advisors against grief) as a concept that provides descriptive content to the idea that the world, and more specifically the human condition, is characterized by suffering.[64] In this context, the concept is invoked predominantly to provide an account for, indeed to describe, "the way things are," as opposed to providing a rationale or reason for the prevalence of human sorrow. The purpose of providing such an account is to make a compelling case for why either the path of *dharma* and/or the techniques for escaping rebirth should be adopted, *not* to provide a theodicy.

The second manner in which karma is linked to suffering occurs when, in accordance with Weber's ideas, characters invoke the concept in order to explain why they (or others) suffer sudden and unexpected misfortune (i.e., it is invoked as a theodicy). The reason is that the character must have performed some sinful act either in a previous life or in the past of his or her current lifetime and is now reaping the consequences of those bad

60. However, the law of karma has never been unanimously accepted as a satisfying answer to the theodicy problem. See Magaret Chatterjee, "Some Strands of Thought Relating to the Problem of Evil" in *Relativism, Suffering, and Beyond: Essays in Memory of Bimal K. Matilal*, ed. P. Bilimoria and J. N. Mohanty (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 329.

61. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 145.

62. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 14.

63. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 143.

64. The distinction that I am making here is between invoking the concept of karma to provide a reason for why characters suffer and invoking the concept in order to describe an ontological fact. The difference is between the urge to solve the problem as opposed to the urge to describe the problem. Another way of saying this is that the issue shifts from being about causality to being about ontology.

actions. However, this use of the concept occurs surprisingly infrequently in the text. Saṃjaya's comments to the lamenting Dhṛtarāṣṭra in the battle books are a notable exception.[65]

Significantly, when karma is linked to suffering specifically for the purposes of providing a theodicy, its power is often placed in an ambiguous relation with other potential theodicies (such as fate, time, etc.). In what follows, we will examine the depiction of karma in the two types of epic contexts mentioned above (didactic passages and characterization) in order to assess karma's precise role in the problem of suffering.

Three Teachings on Karma

There are only a handful of major teachings on karma in the *Mahābhārata*.[66] The three that we will briefly examine are Markaṇḍeya's discussion of karma in *The Book of the Forest*, the hunter's discussion of karma in "The Colloquy of the Brahmin and the Hunter" (also in *The Book of the Forest*), and Vidura's teaching on karma in *The Book of the Women*. Our main concern is determining precisely if, how, and why karma is linked to suffering.

Yudhiṣṭhira prompts Markaṇḍeya's teaching on karma in *The Book of the Forest* by posing the following question to the great sage:

> Seeing myself unhappy and noticing that the evil sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra are prospering in every way, the thought occurs to me that a person is the agent of action, both good and evil, and that one enjoys one's own fruit; but if this is so, how is God the agent? Best of those who know Brahman, do the acts of human beings, in happiness and suffering, follow them in this life, or again in another body?[67]

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65. Two other notable exceptions are Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gāndhārī's laments in *The Book of the Women*. Both attribute their miserable circumstances to their previous actions. See 11.1.17, 11.16.59, and 11.18.11–12.

66. According to Peter Hill, there are five major discussions of karma in the *Mahābhārata*: the *Uttarayāyāta* section of *The Book of the Beginning* (1.81.1–89.1); Markaṇḍeya's teaching to Yudhiṣṭhira in *The Book of the Forest* (3.181.1–185.1); "The Colloquy of the Brahmin and the Hunter," also in *The Book of the Forest* (3.198.1–207.1); Bṛhaspatī's teaching to Yudhiṣṭhira in *The Book of the Instruction* (13.112.1–113.1); and Kṛṣṇa's teaching to Arjuna in the *Anugītā* (14.13.1–17.1). See *Hill, Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, 5–29. I would add a sixth discussion to Hill's list: Vidura's argument against grief to Dhṛtarāṣṭra in *The Book of the Women* (11.2.1–8.1).

67. 3.181.4–6.

The heart of Yudhiṣṭhira's question is whether previous acts determine future fortunes, whether bad or good. In short, his question is whether karma provides a theodicy, and if it does, how it does so.

In response, Markaṇḍeya turns to a discussion of the beginning of creation, providing a kind of history of the origins of human suffering. In the beginning, according to Markaṇḍeya, Prajāpati, Lord of the Creatures, created pure beings who were devoted to *dharma* and thus free from suffering. Living with the gods in heaven, they went back and forth to earth as they pleased. However, as time progressed, human beings became vulnerable to lust and greed and committed sinful acts. Consequently, they became victims of suffering, reaping the fruits of their evil deeds.

Next Markaṇḍeya responds more directly to Yudhiṣṭhira's question, asserting that human beings, and not God, are responsible for their happiness and/or misery because they reap the consequences of what they sow in previous existences:

> A person in his or her original, God-created body accumulates a lot of good and bad deeds. At the end of life one abandons one's mostly exhausted body and is instantly reborn in a womb; there is no gap. There, one's own acts, which always follow one like a shadow, fructify, and now one is born deserving happiness or suffering.[68]

Finally, Markaṇḍeya discusses the course of action followed by the wise. Markaṇḍeya defines "the wise" (*jñānavat)* as those who understand that what will happen to them in the future is determined by their current behavior. Thus wise people live according to virtuous actions in order to be born into better wombs in the next life. According to Markaṇḍeya, the superior course of the wise involves practicing austerities, devotion to learning, speaking the truth, subduing one's passion, forgiveness, and self-control.[69]

After Markaṇḍeya establishes the fact that karma is the sole operative force in determining the lot of human beings—specifically with respect to their happiness and/or sorrow—he seemingly pulls the rug right out from under his teaching by asserting quite out of the blue:

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68. 3.181.23–25.

69. 3.181.28–32.

> O king, some things come to people from fate, some from chance, and some from previous actions. Do not think about this anymore.[70]

Thus he calls into question (or as Hill writes "demolishes")[71] his teaching on karma by placing its so-called predominant power in an ambiguous relation with other forces that he claims also control the lives of individuals.

The second teaching on karma involves a story that Markaṇḍeya tells Yudhiṣṭhira about a brahmin who visits an unusually wise hunter in order to receive the hunter's teachings on *dharma*. Upon meeting the hunter, the brahmin asks the hunter why he pursues his vile occupation. The hunter explains that he does so because of his past deeds:

> There is no doubt that my actions are terrible, brahmin, but what is ordained is powerful for our previous deeds are difficult to overcome. This is the bad consequence of the evil that I did before. I have tried, brahmin, to destroy this bad consequence. What was previously ordained by fate is the cause that is really the killer. But we are the cause of this karma, brahmin.[72]

The hunter then proceeds to instruct the brahmin in, among other things, the nature of karma.

In his teaching on karma the hunter makes four basic points. First, the hunter emphasizes karma's power to determine human fortune. Karma, according to the hunter, governs and is responsible for everything (including suffering); human beings are but the instrument of previous karma. According to him,

> no one is the master of one's own lot, supreme brahmin; [what] is seen here is the consequence of one's previous actions.[73]

Second, the hunter discusses the details of birth, death, and transmigration in order to explain the mechanics of how acts follow the soul from one life to another. He tells the brahmin that when the body perishes, the

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70. 3.181.32.

71. Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, 13.

72. 3.199.1–3.

73. 3.200.22.

soul migrates to another body, bound by the fetters of his deeds.[74] Further, he explains how karma determines the quality of one's birth: As a result of virtuous acts, one becomes a god; due to mixed acts, one becomes a human; due to deluded acts, one becomes an animal; and due to criminal acts, one goes below, to hell.[75]

Next, the hunter describes the misery that the cycle of transmigration, generated by karma, entails. He labors on this point extensively:

> A person continually attacked by the miseries of birth, old age, and death is cooked in *saṃsāra* by the bad consequences which one brings upon oneself. After going to hell and being reborn in a thousand animal wombs, souls, bound by the fetters of their actions, wander. But a creature, having died and suffered due to this or that karma which they brought upon themselves is reborn in an inauspicious womb in order to get rid of that suffering. Then one gets a great deal of new karma and again is cooked by it like a sick person who has eaten something that does not agree with them. Being in a state of constant suffering yet unsuffering, one is called happy. Therefore, in great agony one goes around in saṃsāra like a wheel because the fetters have not been cut and karma has come again.[76]

Finally, the hunter discusses the means to escape the world of suffering generated by the forces of karma and *saṃsāra* through controlling the senses and cultivating tranquility, which is in accordance of the behavior of the followers of *dharma*. According to the hunter, the path of *dharma* leads one to realize that the world is by nature transient and therefore it is expedient to renounce everything and strive for release.[77]

In this discourse the hunter clearly implies that karma is responsible for human fortune and misfortune (since according to him karma governs everything), but this is not his principal point. His main point is to describe the misery of human existence due to the forces of karma and *saṃsāra* in order to convince the brahmin to follow the path of *dharma* and to escape the cycle of rebirth and thereby suffering. Such a path, according

74. 3.200.24.

75. 3.200.32.

76. 3.200.33–37.

77. 3.200.40–52.

to him, entails disciplined mental control and practicing austerities. Because this path ultimately leads to union with Brahman, the paths of *dharma* and *mokṣa* are thus united, or at least brought closely together, in the hunter's discourse.

The third teaching on karma is one that we have already examined in chapter 3, Vidura's argument against grief to Dhṛtarāṣṭra in *The Book of the Women*. In a speech that Julian Woods calls "perhaps the purest enunciation of karma in the *Mahābhārata*," Vidura focuses on the universal nature of suffering, which he attributes to several forces, karma and *saṃsāra* among them.[78]

Vidura begins his argument by emphasizing the vulnerability of all living beings to the ravages of all-destroying time, which he discusses as the root of suffering.[79] Seamlessly, Vidura shifts his focus from time as the cause of suffering to karma and *saṃsāra*, providing one of the clearest articulations of karma in the epic:

> Deeds that were done in the past lie next to a person who is lying down, they stand next to a person who is standing, and run after a person who is running. A person who performs good or bad acts in a certain stage of life will experience their results in that same stage of life.[80]

And, like Markaṇḍeya and the hunter before him, Vidura points out that misery as well as happiness are products of one's past deeds:

> Son of Vicitravīrya, beings obtain their lot in life whether it is suffering or happiness through their own deeds in fact. Heaven is reached through one's own deeds, as are happiness and suffering, Bhārata. So one bears one's burden, whether one is free or not.[81]

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78. Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative*, 120.

79. See chapter 4 for a full discussion of time conceived in this way.

80. 11.2.22–23. Note that, according to Vidura, one reaps the consequences of one's actions performed in the past of a current life, not in a previous life. It is not clear how much the concepts of time and karma overlap in Vidura's argument. Sometimes Vidura seems to be talking about them synonymously and sometimes they seem to refer to different things. However, they do appear to be very closely linked here.

81. 11.3.7–8.

Further elaborating on this point, Vidura discusses the impact of karma and *saṃsāra* on the lives of the individual, describing human existence, which he argues is determined by them, in very unpleasant terms. He begins with the topic of conception in the womb, then moves to life in human form which, according to him, is characterized by disease, sin, vices (due to karma) all of which make one susceptible to the clutches of Yama (i.e., death). Thus one lives, acts, suffers the consequences of one's actions, and dies, and then is reborn again only to live, act, suffer, and die again. In making this strong connection between karma, *saṃsāra*, and human suffering, Vidura's purpose is not to further depress Dhṛtarāṣṭra but to encourage him to see the truth and thus travel "the farthest course."

Out of these three teachings, only one, Markaṇḍeya's speech, focuses on karma primarily for the purposes of discussing it as a theodicy. However, as already mentioned, while Markaṇḍeya points a finger at karma, he also points other fingers at fate and chance, thus rendering his comments concerning karma's role in universal suffering inconclusive. By contrast, although both the hunter's teaching and Vidura's teachings imply that karma is responsible for suffering, this point only serves as a stepping stone to a larger ontological point about the fact that rebirth and karma simply constitute (rather than cause) universal suffering. Indeed, the idea of providing a rationale for suffering is in some sense antithetical to the hunter's and Vidura's messages, since both stress that suffering is something that must be accepted, not rationalized and "explained away."

Characterization and Karma

Detailed teachings are not the only way in which karma is explored in the epic. The nature of the relationship between act and consequence, particularly with respect to the issue of human suffering, is explored through the depiction of characters as well. Perhaps the most persistent and dramatic way karma is explored through characterization is through the depiction of a character now all too familiar to us: Dhṛtarāṣṭra.[82] Dhṛtarāṣṭra is a compelling character study in this regard because he is one of the few characters, if not the only one, who is consistently told that he is reaping or will reap the consequences of his actions. As discussed at some length in chapter 3, Saṃjaya

82. See chapter 3 for a more extensive discussion of Dhṛtarāṣṭra vis-à-vis the topic of act and consequence, particularly as it intersects with issues of narrative structure.

tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra throughout the battle books that the war and the deaths of his sons are his fault, a direct result of his past actions, namely his weakness for his son and/or his refusal to listen to good advice.[83] And, as we also discovered in chapter 3, Saṃjaya's message to Dhṛtarāṣṭra in most of these passages is anything but straightforward. In many cases, Saṃjaya's statements are ambiguous, since he complicates his point by telling Dhṛtarāṣṭra, in the same breath, that the war and the death of Dhṛtrarāṣṭra's sons was fated and that there was nothing that Dhṛtarāṣṭra could have done about it!

The most stunning example of Saṃjaya's ambiguity occurs in *The Book of the Effort* in a passage that we examined in chapter 3. When Dhṛtarāṣṭra asks Saṃjaya to be his war correspondent, Saṃjaya accepts the job, but tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra that the blind king finds himself in the present situation because of his own misdeeds. Immediately after Samjaya says this, however, he tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra to listen to his narration of the war and as he does so, not to grieve. Why? Because, according to Saṃjaya, man is not the agent of his good and evil acts; he is helplessly manipulated like a wooden puppet. Further, some acts are caused by chance (*yadṛcchā*), some by God (*īśvara*), and some by previous action (karma).[84]

What are we to make of Saṃjaya's baffling statements to Dhṛtarāṣṭra? Like Markaṇḍeya, Saṃjaya seems to deliberately employ the strategies of ambiguity when speaking about the power of karma. We might wonder whether or not Saṃjaya understands fate and karma to be somehow linked or in collusion with one another. However, this seems to decidedly not be the case since Saṃjaya tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra explicitly not to blame fate, only himself and his past actions, for what has come to pass.[85]

WHILE THIS BRIEF survey of the epic's examination of karma is not exhaustive, my intention has been to bring to light two points about karma's treatment in the epic. First, the text does not frequently invoke karma as a means to provide a rationale for the existence of suffering and misfortune. There are approximately five major teachings on karma in the epic; only a few of these focus on the concept specifically as a theodicy. And while the relationship between act and consequence is examined implicitly in

83. See passages discussed in chapter 3, for example, 5.156.9, 6.16.2, and 6.73.1–3. Other characters—most notably Kṛṣṇa at 9.62.37–55—also tell Dhṛtarāṣṭra that the war was his fault.

84. 5.156.12–15.

85. 5.156.9.

the case of many characters (as it is in any good work of literature),[86] it is examined explicitly (and by "explicit" is meant the presence of terminology like "*karman*," "fruit" [*phala*] and "fault" [*doṣa*]) in relatively few cases. Second, when the concept of karma is invoked for the purpose of providing a rationale for suffering, it is often placed in an inconclusive relationship with other forces that either vie for power or possibly work in tandem with it in ways that are deliberately rendered ambiguous by the text's strategies.

To return to the larger question of whether *karma* provides a theodicy in the *Mahābhārata*, the answer is, once again, "not conclusively." Why not? First, it is not a major "theodicy-suspect" in the *Mahābhārata*, and second, in the relatively few cases where karma is treated as such, it is often handled ambiguously; thus any definitive answer of karma's precise role in the prevalence of suffering is deferred. We must, therefore, look elsewhere for more conclusive answers in our theodicy quest. This search leads us now to perhaps our most perplexing suspect of all: God in the form of the trickster Kṛṣṇa.

Kṛṣṇa the Enigmatic Deity

Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, cousin to the Pāṇḍavas and Lord of the Universe, is an enigmatic deity. Why, for example, does he stand back and allow the injustices of the dice game and the resultant slaughter that follows to take place? If he is God, couldn't he have stopped these events? And why does he urge the Pāṇḍavas to commit deceitful acts during the war? More disconcerting is the fact that the narrative leaves open the question of whether or not Kṛṣṇa is actually on the side of human beings or if he is plotting against them, driving everyone toward an apocalyptic doom. While the subject of Kṛṣṇa's enigmatic depiction in the *Mahābhārata* is worthy of a monograph itself, my focus in this section will be quite limited and specific.[87] I want to consider what role Kṛṣṇa plays in the existence of suffering, focusing in

86. See E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1956), 59.

87. For scholarship on the depiction of Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata*, see Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, 256–267; Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, 143–153; Alf Hiltebeitel, *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahābhārata* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976); idem, "Kṛṣṇa and the *Mahābhārata* (A Bibliographical Essay)," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Institute* 60 (1979): 65–107; Karve, *Yugānta*, 159–182; Matilal, "Kṛṣṇa: In Defence of a Devious Divinity," 91–108; Smith, *The Mahābhārata*, xxxiv–xli; Sutton, *Religious Doctrines*, 143–180; and S. N. Tadpatrikar, "The Kṛṣṇa Problem," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 10 (1929): 269–343.

particular on the questions that the text raises about the nature and scope of his divinity and about his role in bringing about the war.

Kṛṣṇa's Power

Several passages in the epic portray Kṛṣṇa as an omnipotent deity who creates and controls the cosmos. Depicted as such, he is, by implication, responsible for the presence of suffering, since he is considered to be the cause of everything. For example, in the *Bhagavadgītā*, Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that he is the "great lord of the world" and that "happiness and unhappiness" (*sukham duḥkham*) along with everything else spring from him alone.[88] In *The Book of the Assembly Hall*, when Yudhiṣṭhira consults Kṛṣṇa about whether or not he should perform the royal consecration, Yudhiṣṭhira turns to him precisely because he is God and thus "superior to all the world".[89] In the same book Bhīṣma, defending his decision to give Kṛṣṇa the guest gift, tells the assembly of kings that Kṛṣṇa alone is the origin of the worlds.[90] Further, in *The Book of the Effort*, Saṃjaya (who has special knowledge of Kṛṣṇa)[91] tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra that Kṛṣṇa makes the wheel of the world go around and governs all things, including time, death, and all creatures.[92] Finally, in the battle books, as the war progresses and the Kauravas suffer heavy losses, Bhīṣma, Droṇa, and others in the Kuru camp tell Duryodhana that victory for the Pāṇḍavas is certain because they have Kṛṣṇa, who is the all-powerful divinity, on their side. Indeed, Kṛṣṇa even uses his divine powers to intervene on the Pāṇḍavas' side (although this occurs rarely). For example, after the war when Kṛṣṇa alights from Arjuna's chariot, it is immediately consumed by fire. To the awed Pāṇḍavas Kṛṣṇa explains that the chariot had already been burned several times over by the various weapons by which it had been struck. Because Kṛṣṇa had stood upon it in battle, it had not broken apart.

While Kṛṣṇa is portrayed as the omnipotent creator of the universe in some passages, in others he is depicted as possessing limited power.[93]

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88. 6.32.4.

89. 2.12.25.

90. 2.35.22.

91. See 5.67.2.

92. 5.66.14.

93. Note that there is certainly a distinction between how Kṛṣṇa talks about himself when he is revealing his divine form and when he is not.

When Kṛṣṇa is portrayed as limited, he is sometimes depicted as the *avatāra* (i.e., incarnation) of Lord Viṣṇu.[94] Perhaps the clearest articulation of Kṛṣṇa portrayed in this light occurs in *The Book of the Horse Sacrifice* when Kṛṣṇa is journeying home to Dvārakā after the war. In the deserts of Rajasthan, he encounters the great hermit Uttaṅka. Regarding Kṛṣṇa as the all-powerful deity, Uttaṅka asks him if he was able to resolve the differences between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas and establish peace. Kṛṣṇa replies that although he tried, he was not able to because "it is impossible to overcome destiny through either intelligence or might."[95] When he hears this, Uttaṅka becomes furious and accuses Kṛṣṇa of being responsible for the suffering and carnage caused by the war. Because Kṛṣṇa could have stopped the war (since he is God), Uttaṅka argues, he is to be held accountable for allowing it to happen. Uttaṅka, therefore, threatens to curse Kṛṣṇa:

> O Kṛṣṇa, since your dear relatives the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas were not protected by you even though you were capable of it, therefore I will curse you, without a doubt. And it is not the case that

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94. The term "*avatāra*" itself never appears in the Critical Edition and Sutton calls it, with respect to the epic, "a peripheral concept" (see Sutton, *Religious Doctrines*, 156, 167). Sutton also notes that there are two distinct "doctrines" of *avatāra* in the text. The first centers on the notion that the descent of an *avatāra* is related to a particular *yuga* and the second stresses the manifestation of the *avatāra* when it is required to assist the purposes of the gods (i.e., to relieve the burden of Earth) and/or to preserve *dharma*; (it is important to note that these two ideas are not necessarily linked). For "the restoration of dharma idea," see *Bhagavadgītā* 4.7–8. Despite the fact that the concept of *avatāra* is underdeveloped in the text and the fact that the term never appears in the Critical Edition, many scholars have read the epic largely through the lens of the doctrine of the *avatāra*. See, for example, Biardeau, "*Études de Mythologie Hindoue* (IV)," 111–262 and "*Études de Mythologie Hindoue* (V)," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 65/1 (1978): 87–237; Fitzgerald, "*Mahābhārata*," 55, and *The Mahābhārata*, Vol. 7, 4; Johnson, *The Sauptikaparvan*, xxxiv. Through this lens many scholars have argued that the *Mahābhārata* concludes with the restoration of *dharma* (stemming from Kṛṣṇa's statement in the *Bhagavadgītā* at 4.7–8 and a conflation of the two "doctrines" noted above) despite the fact that this reading of the text is hard to reconcile with what actually happens at the epic's conclusion. In actuality, the *Mahābhārata* concludes, as Pollock aptly puts it, "in anomie, ascetic suicide, and apocalypse." Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India*, Vol. 2: *Ayodhākāṇḍa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 71. In a similar vein, Fitzgerald writes, "a pall hangs over the epic narrative from the conclusion of Bhīṣma's instructions all the way to the end of the tale" (*The Mahābhārata*, Vol. 7, 139). James Laine takes Biardeau to task on precisely this issue (i.e., imposing comforting ideas onto the epic story). See Laine, *Visions of God*, 32.

95. 14.52.16.

> because you were unable to, you did not stop them because the best of the Kauravas were assisted by you who behaved deceitfully. You neglected them, Mādhva, though you were capable. Therefore, filled with anger, I will curse you, slayer of Madhu.[96]

Calmly, Kṛṣṇa explains to Uttaṅka that although he is "the soul" of "all that exists"[97] and that everything emanates from him, he takes birth in diverse wombs in order to uphold *dharma*.[98] When he is born among the Gandharvas, then he acts like a Gandharva, and when he is born among the gods, then he acts like the gods.[99] Likewise, when he is born as a human, he acts and is limited to the actions of human beings.[100] Thus even though he took measures to avert the war, he acted as a human being, not as a god. As a human, all that he could do was counsel the Kauravas and encourage them to avoid war, but because they were "unrighteous" (*adharma*)[101] and "assailed by the law of time" (*parītāḥ kāladharmena*)[102] they all perished in battle.

The Uttaṅka episode explicitly raises the question of Kṛṣṇa's omnipotence and responds negatively. According to this passage, Kṛṣṇa did not stop the war because he lacked the power to do so. Limited by his human form, all that he could do was attempt to counsel the Kauravas, but because they were "assailed by the law of time" they did not listen to him.[103] Thus we see that the passages that depict Kṛṣṇa as the all-powerful godhead, such as those found in the *Bhagavadgītā*, are placed in an ambiguous relation with those that suggest that his power is limited, such as the Uttaṅka episode.[104] While in some cases the text resorts to the nascent idea of the *avatāra* to resolve these kinds of paradoxical statements, in most cases the ambiguity is left unresolved (i.e., sometimes Kṛṣṇa is

96. 14.52.20–22.

97. 14.53.5.

98. 14.53.12.

99. 14.53.16–17.

100. 14.53.19.

101. 14.53.21.

102. 14.53.21.

103. Matilal, "Kṛṣṇa: In Defence of a Devious Divinity," 101.

104. See also Sutton, *Religious Doctrines*, 175; Hill, *Fate, Predestination, and Human Action*, 144–145; and González-Reimann, *The Mahābhārata and the Yugas*, 29.

depicted as all-powerful and sometimes he is not) and the question of the extent of Kṛṣṇa's power is rendered by the text's strategies as one more issue or "knot" that joins the ranks of the epic's many riddle-questions.[105]

Kṛṣṇa's Role in the Slaughter

Equally perplexing is the issue of Kṛṣṇa's role in bringing about the war. Certainly there are passages in the epic that suggest that Kṛṣṇa actively endeavors to cause the war and its concomitant suffering. For example, in his summary of the epic in *The Book of the Beginning*, Ugraśravas, the narrator in the outer frame of the epic, explicitly states that Kṛṣṇa encouraged the quarrel between the cousins. He says,

> Then Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who was fond of his son, permitted the dice game. Hearing this, the son of Vasudeva [i.e., Kṛṣṇa] became very angry. And the wise one who was not terribly pleased encouraged the dice game and he also disregarded the other developments.[106]

In *The Book of the Assembly Hall*, Nārada tells to the assembled kings that Kṛṣṇa will eradicate the *kṣatriya*s:

> Alas! This Great Being who has created himself will once again in this way seize the *kṣatriya*s who are strong.[107]

In *The Book of the Stay in the Forest Hermitage*, Dhṛtarāṣṭra tells Yudhiṣṭhira that Kṛṣṇa saw the destruction of the *kṣatriya*s as a favorable outcome:

> For Kṛṣṇa saw all the kings destroyed. Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme One, took this to be the greatest good.[108]

Kṛṣṇa's role in the events leading up to the war also suggests that he played an active part in bringing about the conflict, since he is the one

105. For scholarship on the paradoxes surrounding Kṛṣṇa, see Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, 24, 26 and Sutton, *Religious Doctrines*, 176–177.

106. 1.1.92–93.

107. 2.33.19.

108. 15.5.7

who encourages Yudhiṣṭhira to build his grand assembly hall and to perform the royal consecration, both events that incite Duryodhana's jealousy and desire for revenge.

However, in at least two epic passages Kṛṣṇa is cursed (or almost cursed in one case) not because he actively caused the war but because he stood back and allowed it to happen (i.e., he as god was a passive witness to suffering). For example, Gāndhārī blames Kṛṣṇa for being indifferent to the slaughter. She therefore curses him:

> Because you, Govinda, ignored the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas, who are relatives, as they killed each other, you shall kill your own relatives.[109]

Above we saw that Uttaṅka also threatens to curse Kṛṣṇa for standing back and allowing the war to happen. We also saw that Kṛṣṇa denied that charge, explaining that as a human being his power was limited and suggesting that he himself is subject to fate. However, when he is cursed by Gāndhārī, Kṛṣṇa does not attempt to defend himself; he simply confirms that her curse is fated to happen.[110]

In addition to passages suggesting that Kṛṣṇa either actively endeavors to bring about the war or stands back and allows it to happen, there are episodes where we see Kṛṣṇa actively trying to bring about peace. In Book 5, the *Udyogaparvan*, Kṛṣṇa acts as an envoy on behalf of the Pāṇḍavas and journeys to the kingdom of the Kauravas in order to deter them from war. When Duryodhana indicates that he is not going to heed Kṛṣṇa's advice, Kṛṣṇa urges the Kauravas to restrain him.[111] If the Kauravas had listened to Kṛṣṇa at this moment, there would have been no war. However, it is worth noting that before Kṛṣṇa sets out on his mission for peace, he tells Yudhiṣṭhira that he does not think it will be successful.[112]

The real irony here is that Kṛṣṇa himself claims that his main objective in walking among human beings is to uphold *dharma* (see the above discussion of the Uttaṅka episode). For example, in the *Bhagavadgītā*, Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna:

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109. 11.25.40.

110. 11.25.44. Vasudeva also asserts that Kṛṣṇa stood back and passively allowed his own kinsmen to slay each other (16.8.).

111. 5.126.33.

112. 5.70.88.

> Whenever there is a decline in *dharma*, O descendant of Bhārata, and an increase of *adharma*, then I manifest myself. In order to protect the virtuous, destroy the sinful and sustain *dharma*, I am born *yuga* after *yuga*.[113]

But if Kṛṣṇa's main goal is to uphold *dharma*, then why would he allow and/or bring about the war? And why would he encourage the Pāṇḍavas to act dishonorably during the war? Kṛṣṇa has a hand in the killing of the following Kuru heroes: Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa, Bhūriśravas, and Duryodhana. In each case, Kṛṣṇa violates—or, more precisely, encourages others to violate—the moral code of warriors: Kṛṣṇa tells Yudhiṣṭhira to lie to Droṇa; he encourages Arjuna to kill Karṇa while Karṇa is fixing the wheel of his chariot; he urges Sātyaki to butcher Bhūriśravas when the latter is incapacitated, and he prods Bhīma, through Arjuna, to break Duryodhana's thigh in the mace battle.

The epic provides several answers to each of these two questions. With respect to the first (why would Kṛṣṇa allow and/or bring about the war?) the text provides the following answers: in order to relieve the Earth of her burden,[114] in order to issue in the next *yuga*,[115] in order to restore *dharma*, and/or because he was helpless to stop the war (as Kṛṣṇa argued in the Uttaṅka episode). With respect to the second question (why would Kṛṣṇa encourage the Pāṇḍavas to act immorally?), in *The Book of Śalya* Kṛṣṇa himself provides several reasons why he was justified to encourage Bhīma to break Duryodhana's thigh; (we can presume that Kṛṣṇa would give similar reasons for encouraging the other adharmic acts mentioned above.)[116] To Balarāma, his brother and Bhīma and Duryodhana's teacher, he argues that Bhīma had made a vow to do so when Draupadī was violated.[117] To the Pāṇḍavas he argues that Duryodhana would have defeated Bhīma and the Kauravas would have won the war.[118] To Duryodhana he argues that, having violated *dharma*, he (Duryodhana) lost his moral right to be treated according to it.[119]

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113. 6.26. 7–8.

114. 11.8.20–26. However, note my discussion of this passage in chapter 3.

115. See, for example, 8.70.

116. Goldman, "*Eṣa Dharmaḥ Sanātanaḥ*," 208–210.

117. 9.59.14–15.

118. 9.60.57–62.

119. 9.60.39–46.

Each one of these answers, particularly the last two, raises confounding moral questions. If, as Kṛṣṇa argues, in the fight for justice unjust acts may be perpetrated, then how much *adharma* is acceptable, and when does it become just plain evil? Similarly, if in order to combat injustice unjust acts may be employed, then how does one decipher the line between right and wrong? More pressingly, how much human suffering is morally acceptable to ensure that *dharma* triumphs in the end?[120] Not surprisingly, the text's strategies raise but defer answering such questions.[121]

What role then does Kṛṣṇa actually play in the existence of suffering? Characteristically, the narrative provides several possible contradictory answers that exist in tension with one another. In some passages Kṛṣṇa is depicted as all-powerful and in some of these passages the text suggests that he actively endeavors to produce the *Mahābhārata* war and the great suffering it causes, and he does so for various reasons (to relieve Earth of her burden, to ensure that *dharma* triumphs in the end, and/or to usher in the new *yuga*).[122] In other passages, as in the Uttaṅka episode, Kṛṣṇa is depicted as having limited power. Many of these passages suggest that while Kṛṣṇa was powerless to stop the carnage, he did everything in his power to try to resolve the conflict, and when that proved impossible, he ensured that the Pāṇḍavas won the war and justice (however compromised) prevailed.

Heaven's Riddles or the Hell Trick: The Two Conclusions of the Mahābhārata

So far we have considered four possible theodicy candidates (fate, human exertion, *karma*, and Kṛṣṇa) and have discovered that each candidate is, in some sense, a "non-answer" since each fails to provide a definitive solution

120. This is the subject of Yudhiṣṭhira and Saṃjaya's heated debate in *The Book of the Effort*. 5.23.1–32.1.

121. For more on the enigmatic portrayal of Kṛṣṇa vis-à-vis *dharma*, see Matilal, "Kṛṣṇā: In Defence of a Devious Deity," 91–108; Hiltebeietel, *The Ritual of Battle*, 248; and Reich, "Ends and Closures in the *Mahābhārata*," 35–36. Matilal aptly notes, "If the *Mahābhārata* imparts a moral lesson, it emphasizes again and again the ever-elusive character, the unresolved ambiguity of the concept of *dharma*. Kṛṣṇa's role was not to resolve the ambiguity but to heighten the mystery . . ." Matilal, "Kṛṣṇa: In Defence of a Devious Divinity," 94.

122. Scholars have tended to conflate the first two reasons and to see them as spelling out one consistent story, but there is little, if any, textual support for this. See Sutton, *Religious Doctrines*, 169–171.

to the question of the cause of suffering. At this point, one might wonder if the quest for any answer in the epic is doomed to fail. If the text's strategies raise questions only to resolve them with more questions, then do they ever provide any answers? This chapter argues that they do provide answers, but they are not the kind of answers that are resolved by the straightforward appeal to philosophical concepts. Rather, they are resolved "narratively"; they are "suggested" through the dynamic interaction between form, content, and sensitive reader/spectator, that is, through the epic's narrative strategies.

Now let us consider how certain narrative strategies in the conclusion of the central story create patterns that both draw us in and disengage us from the text's narrative world.[123] Through the deployment of these narrative strategies, the epic sets up its audience so that it is prepared for the revelatory disclosure that takes place in the epic's last two books, *The Book of the Great Departure* and *The Book of the Ascent to Heaven*. This disclosure is the epic's answer to the problem of suffering. It is not the direct or literal kind of answer that conceptual categories such as karma or fate would provide. Instead, the text's strategies of rupture create a cognitive space in the sensitive reader/spectator where a revelation of the tragic structure of existence may take place. Through this disclosure, the text's strategies reveal their "answer" to the theodicy question.[124]

To facilitate a discussion of the epic's conclusion, this section will be divided into five parts. Each part will include a brief summary followed by an analysis. These analyses will attempt to show how each part builds toward the final resolution (which takes place in part five) where the epic's theodicy is revealed.

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123. It is important to make a distinction between the conclusion of the central story of the war between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas (with the deaths of the Pāṇḍavas in Book 18) and the conclusion of the *Mahābhārata*, which is no conclusion in truth but a return to the beginning, the Janamejaya/Vaiśaṃpāyana frame.

124. Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology* defines "end" as follows: "Students of narrative have pointed out that the end occupies a determinative position because of the light it sheds (or might shed) on the meaning of events leading up to it. The end functions as the (partial) condition, the magnetizing force, the organizing principle of narrative: reading (processing) a narrative is, amongst other things, waiting for the end, and the nature of the waiting is related to the nature of the narrative" (Gerald Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press], 26. For scholarship on the significance of narrative endings to the interpretation of a literary work, see Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 1: 60; and Swanson, "Narrative Temporality and the Aspect of Time in Franz Kafka's Short Fiction."

Summary of Part One: After ruling for many years, the Pāṇḍavas decide to retire from the world, and the five brothers with Draupadī as the sixth character and a dog[125] as the seventh character set out to perform the *mahāprasthānika* or "great journey."[126] When they reach Mount Meru, Draupadī loses her yogic concentration, falls to the earth, and dies.[127] Bhīma asks why, and Yudhiṣṭhira tells him that Draupadī fell because she was partial to Arjuna.[128] Leaving Draupadī where she lies, the Pāṇḍavas continue on. Next, Sahadeva, Nakula, Arjuna, and Bhīma fall and die successively. Each time, Bhīma asks the cause (even when he falls), and each time Yudhiṣṭhira points to a moral flaw involving pride (Sahadeva falls because he was proud of his wisdom, Nakula of his beauty, Arjuna of his heroism, and Bhīma of his strength).[129] After his wife and his brothers have fallen, Yudhiṣṭhira, then, proceeds alone, not looking down or back (*anavalokayan*),[130] accompanied by the dog.

Analysis: Draupadī's death is jarring for several reasons. First, it is exceedingly strange that the Pāṇḍavas leave her where she falls and do not mourn her. Neither does the narrative voice (here Vaiśaṃpāyana) mourn her; it notes her death and then falls silent. This silence, both on the part of the characters and the narrative voice, is a narrative strategy that directs us to feel distanced, not only from the characters, but from the world of the text, since we are encouraged to feel a sense of grief and loss that is neither shared nor satisfied by it. (After all, we have traveled a long and arduous journey with Draupadī, and while the epic gives us two entire books to prepare for Bhīṣma's death, Draupadī falls without any warning at all.)

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125. This dog is very interesting because it appears out of nowhere. Nor have dogs played a significant role in the epic up to this point.

126. According to Fitzgerald, "the great journey" or *mahāprasthāna* is a "journey of suicide on which one walks until he or she drops of exhaustion or lack of nourishment." Fitzgerald, *The Mahābhārata,* Vol. 7, 661, n1.20. However, note that Bhīma seems surprised when each of his loved ones drops to the earth. For the ritual dimensions of this particular journey, see Christopher R. Austin, "The *Sārasvata Yātsattra* in *Mahābhārata* 17 and 18," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 12/3 (2008): 283–308.

127. For an instance of epic mirroring with respect to this passage and its implications, see Christopher Austin, "Draupadī's Fall: Snowballs, Cathedrals, and Synchronous Readings of the *Mahābhārata*," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 15/1 (2011): 111–137.

128. 17.2.6.

129. 17.2.10, 2.16, 2.21, and 2.25.

130. 17.2.26.

The narrative voice not only does not share the emotions of loss and grief, but also presents these emotions as a sign of human weakness, noting that when both Nakula and Arjuna fall, each does so because he is overwhelmed with sorrow:

> When the warrior Nakula saw that Draupadī and Sahadeva the Pāṇḍava had fallen, he was distressed (*ārta*), for he loved his family, and he himself fell.[131]

And:

> Having seen [Nakula, Sahadeva, and Draupadī] fall there, Arjuna, the Pāṇḍava who rode a white horse and killed his enemies, fell tormented by grief (*śokasaṃtapta*).[132]

At the same time, the text ensures that the audience's grief will be intensified, since we are encouraged to feel grief with each abrupt (and unmourned) loss of the five characters. Further, the narrative voice highlights Yudhiṣṭhira's detachment from the deaths of Draupadī, Nakula, Sahadeva, Arjuna, and Bhīma by noting several times that he does not look down or back, a detail that serves to separate the audience emotionally from him (after all, during and after the war Yudhiṣṭhira mourned the loss of his kinsmen excessively; the fact that he does not respond to the deaths of his wife and brothers is jarring, to say the least).[133] In these ways, the narrative strategies in part one of the conclusion create a kind of distance or separation between the audience and the world of the text. (One additional narrative strategy that encourages our estrangement from the world of the text is the abrupt insertion of the narrator [here Vaiśaṃpāyana] at this moment in the text. Vaiśaṃpāyana says, "When he said this, the great-armed Yudhiṣṭhira went on, not looking down. Only the dog followed him, *the dog that I have already told you about quite a lot*."

131. 17.2.12.

132. 17.2.18.

133. Since the dice game, we have, of course, been emotionally drawn in by other strategies. Note that Yudhiṣṭhira cries when he sees his brothers lying dead on the ground in "The Drilling Woods" in *The Book of the Forest* (3.295.1–299.1). The drilling-woods scene mirrors the ascent-to-heaven scene in many ways (Shulman calls them "narrative twins"). For a discussion of the resonances between these two scenes, see Shulman, "The *Yakṣa's* Questions," 50–62.

It is as though Vaiśaṃpāyana is saying, "Remember I am the narrator, this is only a story, you are the audience, and you are about to return to your lives.").[134]

Summary of Part Two: As Yudhiṣṭhira proceeds with the dog, Indra appears, inviting him to enter heaven in his human form. "Burning with grief" (*śokasaṃtapta*)[135] because of the deaths of his family members, Yudhiṣṭhira replies that he will not go to heaven without his brothers and Draupadī. Informing Yudhiṣṭhira that they are already in heaven (Indra is careful to note that the others have shed their bodies),[136] Indra urges Yudhiṣṭhira "not to be sad" and to proceed to heaven.[137] Yudhiṣṭhira requests that the dog be allowed to accompany him, but Indra refuses. Yudhiṣṭhira insists. Then, as if by magic, the dog is transformed into the god Dharma, who tells Yudhiṣṭhira that he disguised himself in order to test Yudhiṣṭhira. Yudhiṣṭhira has passed this test and may proceed to heaven in his human form. Dharma says:

> You abandoned the celestial chariot saying, "This dog is devoted to me." Therefore, great king, there is no one equal to you in heaven. Hence the imperishable worlds are yours. You have obtained the supreme path of heaven with your own body, best of Bhāratas.[138]

Analysis: In part two we are drawn back into the narrative world through our proximity toward Yudhiṣṭhira. Yudhiṣṭhira's behavior is less disturbing now that he reacts to the loss of his brothers and his wife and wants to be reunited with them in heaven. However, there are still things about him that are troubling. Should he have insisted on staying with the dog or not? Because the dog is really Dharma, the text seems to indicate that Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to remain with it is the right one. Dharma praises his loyalty and tells him that he may now enter heaven in his human body. The fact that Yudhiṣṭhira is to enter heaven in his body is presented by Indra, Dharma, and Nārada as a rare feat.[139] However, it is not clear

134. 17.2.26.

135. 17.3.2.

136. 17.3.6.

137. 17.3.5.

138. 17.3.20–21.

139. 17.3.6, 17.3.21, and 17.3.27.

whether we should take their word at face value. Indra told Yudhiṣṭhira that he was to enter heaven in his human body even before he "passed" Dharma's test, indicating that this "feat" is not necessarily a product of Yudhiṣṭhira's virtue. Further, we know from previous examples in the epic (i.e.,Yayāti and Arjuna) that going to heaven in one's human body, at least in some cases, means imminent return to the world of human beings.[140] Considered in this light, this episode is a strategy that sets us up for the literary terrain that we are now entering. This is a world where there are tests (i.e., the dog was a test) and tricks (i.e., the dog was really Dharma).

Summary of Part Three: In heaven Yudhiṣṭhira does not see his brothers or Draupadī, but he encounters Duryodhana! Enraged, Yudhiṣṭhira states that he does not want to share heaven with Duryodhana because of the death and suffering that he caused:

> In the company of greedy, short-sighted Duryodhana I do not want these worlds. It was for his sake that the entire world and all my friends and family members were killed while he [i.e., Duryodhana] was being conquered on the battlefield by us who had suffered previously in the great forest.[141]

Instead Yudhiṣṭhira wants to see his brothers and Draupadī. Indra demurs but Yudhiṣṭhira insists, so Indra orders a celestial messenger to take Yudhiṣṭhira to his immediate family.

Analysis: In part three the text's strategies further encourage our proximity toward Yudhiṣṭhira, since his reaction to finding Duryodhana in heaven understandably mirrors and guides our own. Yudhiṣṭhira tells Indra in no uncertain terms that if Duryodhana is in heaven he wants no part of it because Duryodhana caused great suffering to him and the people he loved. Yudhiṣṭhira repeats the word "suffering" (*kliṣṭa*) several times and brings up the dice game and the war as examples of the disastrous events caused by Duryodhana's egregious behavior, statements that encourage our own outrage that Duryodhana is in heaven. Further, Yudhiṣṭhira's concern for the whereabouts of Draupadī, Arjuna, Bhīma, and the twins intensify our own concerns for their whereabouts. Here the

140. 1.70–1.89 and 2.161–162.173. I am grateful to Lawrence McCrea for this insight.

141. 18.1.7–9.

strategies of proximity are setting us up for the realization that we, along with Yudhiṣṭhira, have a lot at stake concerning where they are.

Summary of Part Four: Yudhiṣṭhira follows the celestial messenger on a path that gradually becomes dark. Presently, Yudhiṣṭhira notices that it is covered with hair, flesh, and blood for its mud and that it is permeated by the smell of rotting corpses. Growing concerned, Yudhiṣṭhira begins to turn around. As he does so, he hears voices:

> Stay near, great-armed one, even for a moment, Bhārata. When you are here, Kauravya, the tortures do not torment us![142]

Not recognizing the voices of "those wasted suffering people" (*glānānām duḥkhitānām*),[143] Yudhiṣṭhira asks, "Who are you?" He hears: "I am Bhīma!" "I am Draupadī!" "I am Arjuna!" First disbelieving (Yudhiṣṭhira asks, "Am I asleep or am I awake? Although I am thinking, I do not think. Alas, this may be an agitation of my mind or a disorientation of my mind"[144]) and then angry, Yudhiṣṭhira "reproaches" the gods and even *dharma*.[145] He tells the messenger to return to heaven without him; he will remain here, since his presence comforts his brothers and his wife.

Analysis: The text does not state outright that Yudhiṣṭhira is being taken to hell. Instead, it appeals to our senses of sight, smell, and sound in order to gradually bring us to this realization. The sights of hell are horrible and given in great detail. The path, we are told, is "[strewn] with severed arms, thighs, and hands, which are covered in fat and blood and with severed stomachs and feet scattered about here and there."[146] The horrible smells that emanate from this inauspicious place are referred to repeatedly. However, it is the sounds of hell that are the most horrifying of all: they are the sounds of Arjuna, Bhīma, and Draupadī suffering torments. When Yudhiṣṭhira first hears the voices that cry out in pain, he

142. 18.2.35.

143. 18.2.38.

144. 18.2.48.

145. 18.2.50. David Shulman makes much of Yudhiṣṭhira's curse here, particularly in terms of what it says about *dharma* and suffering. He sees it as a "rejection at the end of the day of the whole world of *dharma*." Shulman, "The *Yakṣas* Questions," 58. Shulman also notes that since Yudhiṣṭhira is the Dharmarāja, this curse must include himself. Ibid., 57.

146. 18.2.21.

does not recognize them. He cannot accept that his loved ones, virtuous as they were on earth, are now in this horrid place. He asks:

> What filthy deed was done by these great-souled ones, by Karṇa or by the sons of Draupadī or by slim-waisted Draupadī? There are those who are in this terrible evil-smelling place. I do not know what evil was done by those whose deeds are virtuous.[147]

By the time Yudhiṣṭhira realizes to whom these voices belong, the narrative has taken him—and us—to a very dark place. The presence of these characters in hell creates a rupture, or gap in meaning, since it forces Yudhiṣṭhira—as well as us—to come face to face with the unimaginable possibility that the "good" are doomed to suffer torments in hell and the "bad" are rewarded with glorious lives in heaven. Just as we are encouraged to identify with Yudhiṣṭhira as he grapples with the fact that many of the conceptual categories that he has held dear have been upended, so too are we encouraged to sympathize with his condemnation of these categories that have now failed him. For, if the virtuous go to hell and the sinners to heaven, then these categories, *dharma* in particular, are rendered meaningless. Thus, the strategies are now doing their "work" by encouraging the audience to experience Yudhiṣṭhira's questions, doubts, and fears as our own.

Summary of Part Five: Instantaneously Indra appears, and the darkness disappears. Urging Yudhiṣṭhira not to be angry, Indra gives him three reasons why he had to go to hell: because all kings must see hell,[148] because of the lie he told Droṇa,[149] and because sinners enjoy heaven first and then are taken to hell, while those who are virtuous endure hell for a moment and then are taken to heaven.[150]

Next Dharma appears and tells Yudhiṣṭhira that this was another test that he passed brilliantly since he was determined to stay in hell for the sake of his brothers and Draupadī. Because Yudhiṣṭhira has now been "purified" and all his stains have been removed, Dharma urges him to

147. 18.2.43–44.

148. 18.3.11.

149. 18.3.14. For scholarship on this lie and its relevance to the conclusion of the epic, see González-Reimann, "Ending the *Mahābhārata*," 101–110.

150. 18.3.12–13.

bathe in the river and shed his body. After doing so, Yudhiṣṭhira encounters his family and his friends in heaven. I will call this heaven "heaven #2," in contrast to the earlier heaven where he encountered Duryodhana, which I will call "heaven #1."[151]

Analysis: In what follows, I will argue that there are two distinct interpretations of the conclusion of the epic's central story. The interpretation that an audience member receives depends upon the extent to which s/he has allowed herself to be guided by the epic's strategies. The first interpretation I will call "the literal interpretation." Here the audience takes the text and Indra at face value. According to this interpretation, Yudhiṣṭhira goes to heaven #1 and finds Duryodhana, then to hell where he encounters his brothers and Draupadī, and then to heaven #2 where he is reunited with his family and loved ones.

However, according to "the suggested interpretation," each one of these steps has been problematized by the text.[152] To begin with, is heaven #1 really heaven? Indra justifies Yudhiṣṭhira's journey to hell by telling him that the good have to go to hell first before they journey to heaven. But the text tells us that Yudhiṣṭhira went to heaven #1 first, not to hell. So who is right? Indra or the text? And if Indra is right, then heaven #1 was not really heaven, but part of Yudhiṣṭhira's experience of hell.

And why do Indra and Dharma make such a fuss about the fact that Yudhiṣṭhira goes to heaven #1 in his body, especially in light of the fact that when Yudhiṣṭhira goes to heaven #2, he has to shed his body? Does this indicate that because Yudhiṣṭhira remained in his body when he went to heaven #1 it was not really heaven? Dharma does say, after all, that it is only after Yudhiṣṭhira passes his third test (i.e., the hell trick) that he is purified and all his stains removed. These ambiguities lead us to question whether or not Yudhiṣṭhira's body was really so pure that he achieved the rare feat of winning heaven in it.

Furthermore, was Yudhiṣṭhira's experience of hell really hell? Dharma tells Yudhiṣṭhira that his experience was not real, but an illusion (*māyā*).[153] Further, immediately after Yudhiṣṭhira decides to stay with his brothers

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151. For a description of both the merits and faults of heaven in the epic, see "The Measure of Rice" in *The Book of the Forest* (3.247.1–35). For an overview of the concept of heaven in Indian thought, see Frederick M. Smith, "Heaven, Indian Conceptions of," in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (New York: Routledge, 1998), 4:253–257.

152. See chapter 1 for a full explication of suggested meaning or *dhvani*.

153. 18.3.34.

and Draupadī, hell is instantaneously transformed into heaven #2, which not only begs the question of whether hell was really hell, but also whether heaven #2 is really heaven. According to the "suggested interpretation," once we are taken to heaven #2, our confidence in the distinction between heaven and hell has been seriously undermined, for how can we believe that heaven #2 is really heaven after we have just witnessed heaven and hell blur into one another? Given the fact that each of these steps is undermined by the text, we are not able to accept what I have called "the literal interpretation." In fact, what the epic shows us is that the distinction between heaven and hell is a *ruse*. And because we are not confident that Yudhiṣṭhira is really taken to heaven #2, we are suddenly distanced from the narrative world of the text as we were in part one above.

Our estrangement from the text is potentially jarring since the beliefs that the text set us up to have are now undermined, or "ruptured," by it. When the text took us to heaven #1 and then to hell, it showed us that we, along with Yudhiṣṭhira, had certain expectations, specifically that we would find the Pāṇḍavas in heaven and Duryodhana in hell. However, these expectations were not met by the text. Instead it presented us with a heaven that contained Duryodhana and a hell that contained the Pāṇḍavas. Thus, we were encouraged to feel disappointment, even outrage, just like Yudhiṣṭhira.

Furthermore, by promoting our distance from the narrative world when Yudhiṣṭhira goes to heaven #2, the text encourages us to reflect upon what we have at stake in finding Duryodhana in hell and the Pāṇḍavas in heaven. Isn't it because then we, like Yudhiṣṭhira, could make some sense of the awful suffering that Duryodhana caused the Pāṇḍavas, and thus could be comforted by the fact that there is some justice in the world?

The text, therefore, shows us that heaven and hell are conceptual categories that we are greatly invested in emotionally because, on some level, they soften the blow caused by the fact that the world contains a tremendous amount of suffering. After the text reveals to us that heaven and hell are illusions, however, we are encouraged to grapple with the possibility of existing in a world without such conceptual categories to provide us with this comfort. This opens us up to the disclosure effected by what I have called "the suggested interpretation" of the conclusion of the *Mahābhārata*: that all the suffering in the epic simply took place and that is it. In the end, the text does not grant us the solace of divine retribution, or justice, or even an explanation for the tremendous suffering that many

of the characters endured. Rather, through setting us up to have certain expectations about who would be in heaven and who in hell, and then rupturing these expectations, the text reveals to us the extent to which we yearn for such comforts. It does so ostensibly for the purposes of dissolving such yearning, and thereby opening us up to the following radical insight, that a fundamental feature of human existence is that suffering exists on a monumental scale and that is it. Suffering is not a phenomenon that can be understood, or justified, or rationalized away; it simply exists. Further, the text encourages us to respond to this insight not with grief—for grief was shown to be literally the downfall of virtually all the characters in this scene—but with profound acceptance. Thus, the epic's conclusion constitutes one more argument against grief, but here the "argument" targets *our* grief, rather than a character's grief, and encourages *our* acceptance. The simplicity of this disclosure and its acceptance is deceptive because, in truth, it is a vision of the world that is very hard, if not impossible, to confront.[154] This disclosure is the tragic theodicy, and by "tragic" I mean the starkly realistic vision that is revealed to us by the text. (I am using the term "realistic" in the sense that Irawati Karve, David Shulman, and B. K. Matilal apply the term to the *Mahābhārata*, as a "harsh, bare, stark, and demanding philosophy of life.")[155]

But how, one might ask, does the *Mahābhārata's* theodicy provide a rationale for the existence of suffering? The epic's response undermines the very formulation of the theodicy question itself, for why else would one seek a rationale for suffering other than to attempt to understand why suffering exists? But according to the *Mahābhārata* the person who seeks this kind of a rationale for suffering is the person who refuses to face the harsh reality of life, that suffering exists simply and totally and that there are no conceptual categories that one can rely upon to make sense of this suffering.[156]

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154. In her essay "The Love of God and Affliction" Weil argues that it is almost impossible for humans to psychologically and cognitively face the presence of radical suffering. To do so is the highest ethical achievement. Simone Weil, *The Simone Weil Reader*, 439–468.

155. Karve, *Yugānta*, 197. See also Matilal, "Elusiveness and Ambiguity in Dharma-Ethics," 94 and Shulman, "Toward a Historical Poetics," 26.

156. Levinas calls theodicy—that is, the impulse to find meaning in suffering—a temptation. He calls for the end of theodicy, arguing that the disproportion between suffering and every framework that has tried to make sense of it was shown in Auschwitz "with an obvious clarity." Emanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 91–104.

Therefore, the *Mahābhārata* addresses the theodicy issue by criticizing the question "is there a rationale for suffering?"—which the text's narrative strategies encouraged us to ask—and instead of providing a straightforward answer, it presents a starkly realistic vision of the structure of existence. (It may be worth noting here that these ideas overlap considerably with Ānandavardhana's reading of the epic. For Ānandavardhana, the "work" of the conclusion of the *Mahābhārata* is to generate in the sensitive reader a dispassion for worldly affairs, a dispassion that when heightened through suggestion, is transmuted into *śāntarasa*, or the heightened emotion of tranquility.)

Conclusion

Now let us stand back and ask what is distinctive about how the *Mahābhārata* handles the theodicy question. We have discovered that the narrative does not provide a straightforward, literal answer to the question. Instead it throws it back at us. What is distinctive here, however, is the *way* that the text does this—through its narrative strategies—and what it accomplishes in so doing. Through its strategies of rupture, the text sets us up to have certain beliefs and expectations. It then pulls the rug out from under us by delivering an outcome that is in fact the opposite of the one that we were encouraged to expect. This disjuncture between what the text's strategies set us up to expect and what the text delivers creates a rupture, that is a space, where immense emotional, ethical, and theological work is carried out because it forces us to face what otherwise would be impossible to see. By being confronted with an outcome opposite to the one the text set us up to expect, we are suspended in a moment of intense disorientation, even shock, where we are forced to face why we had so much at stake in the expected outcome in the first place. We are forced to face, in essence, ourselves with our hopes, fears, and thoughts exposed. Precisely what the text is exposing through its strategies of rupture is the fact that human beings have a desperate need to rationalize suffering (in order to avoid confronting it) and strong preconceived notions of what would count as a rationale. Thus the theodicy question is a place of immense ethical and theological potential in the eyes of the composers of the *Mahābhārata*, presumably because it is a question that carries hopes, fears, and thoughts that can be manipulated and then exposed in such a way that it "reorients" us toward the text's ultimate goal, which, in the words of Abhinavagupta is "knowledge

of reality."[157] It is no coincidence that the "answer"—or more precisely the nonanswer, or suggested answer—comes at the conclusion of the central narrative of the *Mahābhārata*, as if it were the last and final "message" delivered by a text that is notoriously reluctant to provide any clear-cut answers.[158]

157. Tubb, "*Śāntarasa* in the *Mahābhārata*," 178.

158. Reich agrees that the *Mahābhārata* does not end with closure. She argues that a truly satisfying resolution is not achieved within the text. This is not, she insists, a failure. Rather, she reads the text as a work of literature that does not force a monolithic solution. Reich, "Ends and Closures in the *Mahābhārata*," 10.

Conclusion

DHARMA AND SUFFERING

One might see [Yudhiṣṭhira's] curse as still more extreme as a rejection at the end of the day of the whole world of dharma *with its contradictions and cruelties, its subtle meaning now exposed as little more than a veil for unbearable suffering.*

—DAVID SHULMAN[1]

In the end the sole question remains—is dharma worth upholding if it can be maintained only at the cost of great suffering?

—GREG BAILEY[2]

Those who know dharma *have always said that* dharma *protects those who put* dharma *first. . . . I believe that* dharma *never protects!*

—KARṆA *in his death scene. 8.66.43.*

AS WE SAW in chapter 5 Yudhiṣṭhira's condemnation of *dharma* in Book 18 precipitates the quintessential instance of rupture in the text. It is a shocking moment: Yudhiṣṭhira, King Dharma rejects *dharma*, turning his back on precisely the principle that he has ceaselessly endeavored to uphold throughout the story. In deciding that it is preferable to stay with his brothers and his wife in hell, rather than return to heaven, Yudhiṣṭhira is indicating that for him *dharma*—or, more precisely, his

1. "The Yakṣa's Questions," 163.

2. "Suffering in the *Mahābhārata*,"123.

specific understanding of *dharma*—is meaningless.[3] Indeed, Yudhiṣṭhira's logic for condemning *dharma* is as follows: "Since my brothers and wife were virtuous and committed no evil, they, according to my understanding of *dharma*, deserved to win heaven, not hell. Since they did not achieve heaven, but were placed in hell, I will condemn *dharma*." By unpacking Yudhiṣṭhira's logic in this manner we see that Yudhiṣṭhira's condemnation is also a moment where the *Mahābhārata's* aesthetics of suffering raises, once again, the specter of the problematic relationship between *dharma* and suffering. For precisely why does Yudhiṣṭhira condemn *dharma*? Isn't it because he assumed that his brothers and wife would be protected from the possibility of experiencing the miseries of hell because they acted in accordance with *dharma*? In short, Yudhiṣṭhira's understanding of *dharma* entails a *dharma* that one performs for the sake of something, some good or positive result that one will acquire either in this life or in the afterlife (see my discussion of Fitzgerald's first sense of *dharma* in the introduction of this book which has to do with conducting one's life so as to achieve happiness on earth and heaven after death). It is this understanding of *dharma* that is called into question by the presence of Yudhiṣṭhira's brothers and wife in hell, and that he angrily rebukes now.

As we also discovered in chapter 5 when Yudhiṣṭhira censures *dharma* (or more specifically, his particular understanding of *dharma*) and decides to remain with his brothers and wife, heaven and hell instantaneously dissolve into one another. What is the text's aesthetics of suffering "doing" in this quintessential moment of rupture? It is suggesting that the notion of *dharma* performed for the sake of something, particularly for the sake of acquiring merit to safeguard one from misfortune—either in this life or beyond—is a fundamentally flawed conception of *dharma*. Why? Because it blinds human beings to the fundamental truth of existence: the truth of universal suffering. At the same time, the epic's aesthetics of suffering is attempting to reorient the sensitive reader/receiver toward a notion of *dharma* that is divested of the idea of rewards (heaven is the ultimate reward according to the logic of *dharma* in the first sense) as well as stripped of the notion that *dharma* would, or could, provide protection from suffering (for the absence of suffering is inherent

3. Shulman, "The Yakṣa's Questions," 163.

in the idea of heaven). The epic's aesthetics of suffering suggests that only such a conception of *dharma* (i.e., *dharma* in Fitzgerald's second sense, which is predicated on the goal of expunging all desire) would be an accurate and realistic reflection of and response to the true structure of the world.

Equally important as *what* the *Mahābhārata*'s aesthetics of suffering communicates about *dharma* in this final scene is *how* it is doing so: meaning is conveyed through "doing," or to use Ānandavardhana's terminology, "suggesting." What specifically does the text do? As demonstrated in chapter 5, it sets us up to have certain expectations—namely that those who adhere to *dharma* will win heaven and those who transgress it will be relegated to hell, and then it pulls the rug out from underneath these expectations. By not providing us with the outcome that we were set up to expect, the text disengages us; this distance/separation "does work" because it provides a space for meta-reflection, a space where we are directed to see that a fundamental feature of human life is suffering on a monumental scale and nothing, not even *dharma*, can protect us from this fact. Thus we see that through close attention to the work or "doing" of the text we have access to levels of meaning that lie far beyond its explicit content. Through close attention to the work of the text, we also see that the *Mahābhārata* contains an implicit literary theory; it provides us with a template for how to read works of literature, particularly with respect to the task of locating those moments where texts are "doing" or suggesting ideas rather than directly stating them. As Ānandavardhana and the *Mahābhārata* both would argue, an essential matter carries far greater "luster" by not being stated literally. Moreover, the *Mahābhārata* shows us how much ethical and theological "work" a literary text can do by expressing meaning in this way. Chapters 2 through 5 all demonstrated how the *Mahābhārata* conveys its messages about the existence of suffering and the means to move beyond it predominantly through "doing" rather than "saying." These chapters have also demonstrated that expressing meaning in this way is especially powerful when the messages conveyed contain truths that the human mind is almost incapable of confronting, truths such as those related to the existence of suffering, evil, human frailty, and so on.

The title of this book, "Disorienting *Dharma*," is inspired by the journey to heaven episode mentioned above: When Yudhiṣṭhira discovers that his virtuous brothers and wife are suffering the torments of

hell, he indicates that his mind is disoriented.[4] Why? Because, as discussed above, in this moment his understanding of *dharma*, the principle that he has struggled relentlessly to uphold throughout the story, is upended. Indeed, Yudhiṣṭhira's experience in this climactic scene points to a larger phenomenon in the text. As characters struggle to determine the path of *dharma*, they are frequently "disoriented" by *dharma's* "subtle" nature and they become confused and often lose their way. As a result, *dharma* is often transgressed with disastrous consequences that repeatedly entail enormous suffering. The bewilderment of the elders in the dicing scene and their inability to "solve" Draupadī's riddle-question—a failure that leads directly to Draupadī's violation—is one example among many.

On another level, this title points to an essential aspect of the "work" of the aesthetics of suffering. As I have discussed in this conclusion and throughout the book, one function of the epic's aesthetics of suffering is to disorient the sensitive reader, moving him or her away from a conception of *dharma* that assumes that it offers any sort of protection from suffering (i.e., *dharma* in Fitzgerald's first sense). Such an understanding of *dharma* is flawed, the epic's aesthetics of suffering suggests, because it obscures a fundamental feature of reality, that of universal suffering. While the assumption that *dharma* offers protection is undermined throughout the epic, one place where it happens quite dramatically—in addition to the epic's conclusion—is the dicing scene. Draupadī's violation in this scene haunts virtually every character in the epic precisely because she, a virtuous woman, was not protected by her protectors. Thus, in effect, she was not protected by *dharma*.[5] In some sense, the scene of Draupadī's violation is the moment to which all other subsequent moments in the epic are a response.[6] From this event onward, characters struggle to regain a world of meaning, that is, a world in which *dharma* still makes sense in spite of the presence of unjust suffering.[7] As I argued in chapter 2, our confidence

4. *aho cittavikāro 'yaṃ syād vā me cittavibhramaḥ*//18.2.48. Literally, "Alas! This may be an agitation of my mind or a disorientation of my mind."

5. See Karṇa's statement at the opening of this chapter.

6. Gitomer writes, "[i]n the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and in a number of other tellings the violation of Draupadī and its consequences become the primary dynamism of the narrative." "King Duryodhana," 224.

7. Shulman, "The Yakṣa's Questions," 41.

is "disoriented" as well, but to what end? More precisely, what sort of understanding of *dharma* are we being reoriented towards?

To come at these questions from a different angle, why is *dharma* veiled in the epic? As mentioned in the introduction to this book, Yudhiṣṭhira says in the Vulgate, "the truth of *dharma* lies hidden in a secret cave."[8] The text presents the concept to us through the strategies of riddle-question, paradox, and rupture. It would seem that the work of the aesthetics of suffering then lies not in revealing to us what *dharma* is, but in showing us what it is not. (Thus two of the most lauded virtues in the epic—*ahiṃsa* and *ānṛśamsya*, noninjury and noncruelty—are negative categories).[9] The implication here is that all our old notions about *dharma* must be renounced and transcended for a wider experience of *dharma* to be accessed.[10] Why? Perhaps there is some problem with these beliefs, particularly with respect to the issue of suffering. The fact that the epic forces us to face time and time again the uncomfortable truth that *dharma* offers no protection from misfortune suggests that a wider experience of *dharma* entails active participation in (not just the perception of) the presence of radical unmerited suffering and the understanding that no conceptual category—*dharma* above all—protects us from this truth. Accordingly, a wider experience of *dharma* would be available to the person who did not act in the name of *dharma* for the sake of anything, above all in the name of protection from anguish, grief, and misfortune. Once again, we see that the aesthetics of suffering strongly supports Fitzgerald's second sense of *dharma*, which refers to the overcoming of all attitudes that are oriented toward personal goals and merit. It also strongly supports Ānandavardhana's reading of the epic which, as discussed in chapter 1, argues that the *Mahābhārata* is a literary work that inspires the religious sentiment of peace or detachment (*śānti*), thus pointing the reader toward liberation from the world of suffering (*mokṣa*.)

Several scholars have focused on the two concepts noted above, *ahiṃsa* (noninjury) and *ānṛśamsya* (noncruelty), arguing that they constitute the

8. 3.313.17 in the Vulgate. Kinjawadekar, ed. *Mahābhāratam*.

9. See Lath, "The Concept of *Ānṛśamsya*." According to Shulman and others, *ānṛśamsya* is Yudhiṣṭhira's proclaimed ideal. Yudhiṣṭhira calls it the highest *dharma* at 3.297.55.

10. Shulman, *"The Yakṣa's Questions,"* 57–58. Shulman speaks about this process with respect to Yudhiṣṭhira, whose view of *dharma* by the end is "badly battered." Shulman suggests that as a result Yudhiṣṭhira undergoes a "shift in consciousness" which opens him up to a wider experience of *dharma*.

supreme moral principles in the epic.[11] However, it is important not to omit a crucial link in the chain of ethical transformation in the epic. The *Mahābhārata's* aesthetics of suffering first and foremost is not trying to change how we act, but is attempting to reorient our minds and thus refigure how we see (i.e., with a calm mind that is indifferent to the changes wrought by time).[12] As previously mentioned, after the war both Bhīma and Kṛṣṇa, in an effort to persuade Yudhiṣṭhira to stop grieving and agree to rule, tell him that the real battle he must confront is one with his mind (*manas*). According to Bhīma, Yudhiṣṭhira's "battle" involves accepting "the coming and going of creatures" or the transitory nature of life.[13]

However, the idea that the text's aesthetics of suffering might encourage a transformation in behavior follows logically from this epistemological shift.[14] Being highly attuned to the sorrow of other creatures (caused by transitoriness) would presumably lead to, at least in most cases, the avoidance of all actions that would contribute to the ocean of sorrow that the *Mahābhārata's* aesthetics directs us to recognize.[15] However, there might be extreme cases where violence must be committed for the sake of some greater good, such as protecting the world from being overtaken by power-hungry aggressors—even if these aggressors are one's own kin; Arjuna's situation in the *Bhagavadgītā* is an example of such an extreme case.

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11. Arti Dhand, "The *Dharma* of Ethics, The Ethics of *Dharma*: Quizzing the Ideals of Hinduism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 30/3 (2002): 354–355; Fitzgerald, *The Mahābhārata*, Vol.7, 111–112; Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 202–214; and Lath, "The Concept of *Ānṛśamsya*,"114.

12. Shulman argues that Yudhiṣṭhira's ideal of *ānṛśamsya* crumbles in the journey-to-heaven episode, suggesting that there is more to *dharma* than simply the ideal of noncruelty. Shulman, "The *Yakṣa's* Questions, 50–59. As Gary Tubb notes, Ānandavardhana considers the primary end of the *Mahābhārata* to be the state of mind in the reader. Tubb, "*Śāntarasa*," 198. Woods writes, "The purpose and function of the text is clearly designed to be more than exemplary or even didactic; the intent is therapeutic in seeking to prompt the mind to a great awareness of spiritual truths. . . ." Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative*, viii. Hiltebeitel in his recent monograph on *dharma* argues that "*dharma* is never just about 'action.'" Hiltebeitel, *Dharma*, 20.

13. 12.16.21–25 and 14.12.1–14.

14. Dhand agrees, see "The *Dharma* of Ethics, The Ethics of *Dharma*," 356.

15. A recent set of articles on the *Mahābhārata's* ending comes to this conclusion as well. See Bruce Sullivan, "The *Mahābhārata*: Perspectives on its Ends and Endings," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 15 (2011):6.

On a third level, the title of this project pertains to academic discussions of *dharma* in the *Mahābhārata* and entails a suggestion. In this book I have proposed that it might be fruitful to "disorient" such discussions from the isolated topic of *dharma* and reorient them on the issue of suffering, particularly *dharma*'s relationship to suffering. What is at stake in many, if not most, discussions of *dharma* in the *Mahābhārata*, either explicitly or on the level of suggestion, is the issue of human despair. Suffering, we could say, is the primary aesthetic ground for ethics in the epic.

APPENDIX

Glossary of Characters

Abhimanyu—son of Arjuna and Subhadrā
Arjuna—Pāṇḍu's third and last son by Kuntī, fathered by the god Indra
Aśvatthāman—son of Droṇa and ally of Duryodhana
Balarāma—Kṛṣṇa's brother
Bhagavadgītā—sermon preached by Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna at 6.23–40
Bharata—founder of the Bhārata lineage
Bhāratas—descendants of Bharata (includes both the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas)
Bhīma—Pāṇḍu's second son by Kuntī, fathered by the wind god Vāyu
Bhīṣma—Śaṃtanu's son by Gaṅgā; great uncle of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas
Brahmā—the creator god
brahmins—members of the highest of the four primary social classes, serving as priests and scholars
Dhṛtarāṣṭra—father of the Kauravas; elder brother of Pāṇḍu; husband of Gāndhārī; born blind
Draupadī—joint wife of all five Pāṇḍava brothers
Droṇa—teacher of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas; father of Aśvatthāman
Duḥśāsana—second son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra
Duryodhana—first and favorite son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra; enemy of the Pāṇḍavas
Gāndhārī—wife of Dhṛtarāṣṭra; mother of the Kauravas
Hāstinapura—capital of the kingdom of the Kauravas
Indraprastha—Yudhiṣṭhira's capital after the division of the kingdom
Janamejaya—descendant of the Bhāratas (great-grandson of Arjuna) at whose sacrifice the *Mahābhārata* is narrated by Vaiśaṃpāyana
Karṇa—Kuntī's son by the god Sūrya; brought up by a charioteer and his wife; a great ally of Duryodhana and fierce enemy of Arjuna

Kauravas—literally "descendants of Kuru," so applicable to both the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu; in practice reserved for the former

Kṛṣṇa—a Vṛṣṇi prince, son of Vasudeva, cousin of the Pāṇḍavas, and as brother of Subhadā, Arjuna's brother-in-law; supreme lord Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa

kṣatriyas—members of the second-highest of the four primary social classes, serving as warriors and rulers

Kuntī—first wife of Pāṇḍu and mother of the three eldest Pāṇḍavas (Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, and Arjuna)

Kuru—descendant of Bharata and ancestor of the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas

Kurus—descendants of Kuru

Mādrī—second wife of Pāṇḍu and mother of the Pāṇḍava twins Nakula and Sahadeva (youngest of the five Pāṇḍavas)

Mārkaṇḍeya—a great seer

Nakula—one of Pāṇḍu's twin sons by Mādrī, fathered by the twin Aśvin gods

Nārada—a great seer

Nārāyaṇa—Viṣṇu as supreme god; a divine seer associated with Nara

Pāṇḍavas—the sons of Pāṇḍu (and their allies)

Pāṇḍu—father of the Pāṇḍavas; elder brother of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Vidura; husband of Kuntī.

Parikṣit—posthumous son of Abhimanyu; Arjuna's grandson and father of Janamejaya

Sahadeva—one of Pāṇḍu's twin sons by Madrī, fathered by the twin Aśvin gods

Śakuni—brother of Gāndhārī and ally of Duryodhana

Saṃjaya—aide to Dhṛtarāṣṭra; narrates events of the great battle to the blind king

Śaunaka—chief of the seers in the Naimiṣa forest to whom Ugraśravas recites the *Mahābhārata*

Subhadrā—sister of Kṛṣṇa and wife of Arjuna

sūta—a member of a mixed social class, serving as bards and charioteers; said to spring from the union of a kṣatriya man and a brahmin woman

Ugraśravas—the sūta bard who recites the *Mahābhārata* to the seers in the Naimiṣa forest

Uttaṅka—an ascetic sage

Vaiśaṃpāyana—pupil of Vyāsa who recites the *Mahābhārata* at Janamejaya's snake sacrifice

Vasudeva—brother of Kuntī; father of Kṛṣṇa

Vidura—younger brother of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu; uncle of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas

Viṣṇu—with Śiva, one of the two great gods of the *Mahābhārata*

Vyāsa—composer of the *Mahābhārata*; biological father of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pāṇḍu, and Vidura

Yudhiṣṭhira—Pāṇḍu's eldest son by Kuntī, fathered by Dharma

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