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REVIEW ARTICLE

# Ethics and Hermeneutics in the *Mahābhārata*

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Emily T. Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahābhārata*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

In *Disorienting Dharma*, Emily T. Hudson reads the *Mahābhārata* from the perspective of its "aesthetics of suffering." By this she means "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" (6). According to Hudson, the *Mahābhārata* "operates as a literary text…more through what it 'does' than through what it says, that is by 'doing' something to its audience" (5). The specific action undertaken by the text is that it "brings its audiences to the brink of meaninglessness and then, instead of receding from it, it toys with pushing them over the precipice" (26). This, Hudson contends, is where the "real work" (60, 96) of the epic is done, because, through this experience, we come to realize that "a fundamental feature of human life is suffering on a monumental scale and nothing, not even *dharma*, can protect us from this fact" (220, see also 222).

Hudson argues that, by forcing us to confront the "truth of universal suffering" (72, see also 31, 34, 39, 44, 45, 68, 69, 108, 178, 179, 196, 219, 221) and the fact that we, as humans, "have a desperate need to rationalize suffering (in order to avoid confronting it)" (216), the *Mahābhārata*'s "aesthetics of suffering" helps us see through the unsatisfactory nature of every theodicy. We see that "suffering exists… and that is it. Suffering is not a phenomenon that can be understood, or justified, or rationalized away; it simply exists" (215). Further, we see that concepts like *dharma*, far from helping us cope with sorrow, are actually responsible for much of our suffering in that: (*i*) "the path of *dharma*" itself turns out to be implicated in

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"suffering and sorrow" (7); (*ii*) by holding out the prospect of a moral order or of a justification, *dharma* "blind[s] us to the pervasive existence of suffering" (103); and (*iii*) as a consequence, *dharma* actually causes us to suffer more, for "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…" (215). This raises an all-important question: "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?" (103).

This is the central question of Hudson's book, and she tries to answer it by showing how characters who pursue *dharma* in the epic are inevitably frustrated. Her conclusion is expectably pessimistic: concepts such as *dharma* "do not provide us with the conceptual clarity and security that we long for" (103). Although many characters in the epic operate under the "illusion…that *dharma* will protect them from suffering[,] [t]he reality in the world of the text is that nothing protects one from suffering" (32, see also 33, 220, and 222). Indeed, "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" turns out to be "a fundamentally flawed conception of *dharma*" (219). Thus, if we wish in the future "to recover a deeper, truer understanding of *dharma*," we must be "reoriented to an understanding of it that would be divested of all pretenses of security" (103–4). "One would," Hudson concludes, "according to the logic of this understanding of the concept, follow *dharma* for the sake of nothing" (104, see also 32).

This is a radical thesis and Hudson's approach of reading the *Mahābhārata* through the lens of its performative aspect is an interesting idea. In practice, however, both the thesis and the approach are seriously flawed. The *Mahābhārata* explicitly calls itself a *dharma* text (1.1.19c, 47a, 1.56.16a, 21a, 33a), committed to upholding and explaining the normative *dharma*. It does not share Hudson's skepticism regarding the possibility of *dharma*; indeed, it could be asked whether such a rejection is at all possible within Indian thought. As "the cosmically or 'religiously' determined activity of all existing beings to maintain the normal order of the world," *dharma* simply refers, maximally, to the innate propensity of all beings to act in accordance with their natures (Van Buitenen 1957: 36). "It is the *dharma* of the sun to shine, of the pole to be fixed, of the rivers to flow, of the cow to yield milk, of the *brahmin* to officiate, of the *kṣatriya* to rule, of the *vaiśya* to farm" (Van Buitenen 1957: 36). As an *āstika* text, the *Mahābhārata* explicitly locates itself within this long tradition of Indian thought (see 1.1.19a, 191a, 204). It regards *dharma* in this sense as the cosmic background, the *sine qua non* of its specific inquiry into the obligations and duties of the various *varṇa*s, especially as the *dharma* declines in the Kali Yuga (1.58.3–34). Next to the *Manusmṛti* (which it frequently invokes),[1] there is no other work as central for the formulation of *dharma* in the Indian tradition.

[1] See Kane's (1930: 159) listing of the sections where Dharmaśāstric topics occur in the *Mahābhārata*. Hudson lists this work in her bibliography but does not seem to have made use of it. See also Olivelle's Introduction in his *Manu's Code of Law* (2005) on the relationship of the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* to the *Mahābhārata*.

Hudson also misunderstands the way *dharma* operates in the epic. Although she repeatedly asserts that it fails to provide a satisfactory solution to the problem of human suffering, she does not clarify which sense of *dharma* she means. The *Mahābhārata* distinguishes between *pravṛtti dharma*, the *dharma* of activity, and *nivṛtti dharma*, the *dharma* of renunciation (12.322.3a and 12.327.2–4).[2] At the level of *pravṛtti dharma*, there is no final answer to suffering, though certain compensations (for example, the birth of a child, the joy of an encounter, and so on) exist. If all that Hudson means by the statement that *dharma* "fails" is that *pravṛtti dharma* is not a final solution to the problem of human existence, she is quite right. But this is merely stating the obvious. The *Mahābhārata* is aware of the finite nature of *pravṛtti dharma*. It repeatedly emphasizes the temporary nature of worldly success, using the dicing game as a metaphor for this in the text.[3] Repeated statements about the impermanence of wealth, power, or fortune—many of them scattered through the postdicing *Āraṇyakaparvan* (see, for example, Śaunaka's brief sermon; 3.2.15–48)—reinforce the message. The epic uses this finitude as a way to open up the *nivṛtti* axis. Here, there really is an answer to the problem of human suffering, but it is an answer that requires going beyond the kind of "aesthetic" lamentation Hudson's book emphasizes.

Surprisingly for a work that claims to embody a "hermeneutics of respect" that "seeks to listen to rather than disembowel the text" (20), Hudson's book hacks away at most of the text. She never once mentions the concept of *nivṛtti dharma*. She also sets aside *all* the other essential elements of the *Mahābhārata*'s soteriological response to the problem of *pravṛtti*: *prādurbhūti*, *bhārāvataraṇa*, *avataraṇa*, *devarahasya*, *bhakti*, *krīḍa*,[4] *yugānta*, the *devāsura* conflict, and the vision of Becoming as a *raṇa yajña* through which are born both *jñāna* and *mokṣa*. Having snapped the text's spinal cord of ideas, she then laments that "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" (214–15). Moreover, she insists that the *Mahābhārata* is trying to get us to see a "fundamental truth of existence: the truth of universal suffering" (219, see also 72) and claims that—as a consequence—"academic discussion 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*" (49, see also 35 and

[2] Other terms that would have required clarification are *varṇāśramadharma* (the *dharma* of the various castes and stages of life), *ṛṣidharma* (the *dharma* of renunciates), *strīdharma* (the *dharma* of women), *rājadharma* (the *dharma* of kings), and *āpaddharma* (the *dharma* of emergencies). Additionally, there are *dharma*s specific to the family and subcaste or community (*kuladharma* and *jātidharma*). Hudson is using the term *dharma* in an indiscriminate sense that simply does not apply in Indian thought.

[3] See the story of Nala and Damayanti (*Mahābhārata* 3.50–78), recounted to Yudhiṣṭhira in the forest by way of consolation; the dice are the work of Kali, driven by the law of entropy to bring loss and destruction to the king.

[4] I cannot agree with Couture (2001) that the concept of play is, as yet, present only in implicit form in the *Mahābhārata*. The term is mentioned twice in the *Nārāyaṇīya*: Nārāyaṇa is the "Undecaying Puruṣa, the nondoer and the doer, the action and also the cause" who "plays (*krīḍate*) as He pleases" (*akartā caiva kartā ca kāryaṃ kāraṇam eva ca | yathecchati tathā rājan krīḍate puruṣo 'vyayaḥ*; 12.336.56); "divided into four," he, the Puruṣa, "plays as he pleases" (*caturvibhaktaḥ puruṣaḥ sa krīḍati yathecchati*; 12.339.20ab; my translations).

224). These claims would be credible if Hudson could account for the fact that, in the concept of *nivṛtti dharma*, the epic has a sophisticated response to the problem of human suffering. By ignoring key components of the epic's project, Hudson lives up neither to her claim to take the *Mahābhārata* seriously as "a work of literature" (4) nor to her claim to have shown that suffering is "the primary aesthetic ground for ethics in the epic" (49, 224). In fact, this claim appears to be true only because Hudson considers suffering only from an "aesthetic" (that is, disinterested) perspective: consequently, it now appears as though the epic's only answer consists in its "stark revelation of the structure of the world" (49).[5]

Even at the level of *pravṛtti dharma*, Hudson's analysis is problematic. She sets aside the theme of *adharma* (unrighteousness, injustice, irreligion, wickedness), even though, within *pravṛtti*, it is impossible to formulate *dharma* without seeing it in its relationship to *adharma*. As V. S. Sukthankar notes, what gives the Mahābhārata War its "real depth and significance is the projection of the story on to a cosmic background, by its own interpretation of the Bhārata War as a mere incident in the ever recurring struggle between the Devas and the Asuras; in other words, as a mere phase in cosmic evolution" (1957: 62). This cosmic background is a key element in the epic's exploration of the dynamics of *dharma*. Not only does it permit the epic to explain the reality of *adharma* (as the result of egotism and the shortsighted seeking of one's advantage), but it also permits it to illustrate the final triumph of *dharma* (with the destruction of the *asura*s and the reestablishment of a just order). Hudson, however, via a reference to Simon Brodbeck's work,[6] removes this ontological dimension from the text.[7] She attributes all the problems in the text

[5] Hudson is probably correct to note that there is a performative aspect to the *Mahābhārata*, but, contrary to her claim that there is a contrast between the epic's content and its form, the text is fully conscious of this aspect. Hudson claims, "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" (29, see also 60, 72, and 207). In her view, this disjunction between form and content gives the reader "access to levels of meaning that lie far beyond its explicit content" (220), but this is to presume that the text's doctrines are in some way the products of a false consciousness—something she has *not* shown. The *Mahābhārata* fashions its performative aspect to reflect its stated contents. Yudhiṣṭhira states in an exchange with the god Dharma that the mind "does not grieve when tamed" (*mano yamya na śocanti sadbhiḥ saṃdhir na jīryate*; *Mahābhārata* 3.297.55; Van Buitenen's translation). This statement vitiates Hudson's thesis because it shows: (*1*) that there is no contrast between the text's content and form, a *sine qua non* of her "aesthetic" approach to the epic of setting aside its doctrines; and (*2*) that she is carrying out even this "aesthetic" approach from the truncated perspective of someone who has not gained control of his mind. Had Hudson read beyond Dhṛtarāṣṭra, she would have seen that, rather than identify with any one character, the reader is supposed to develop a synoptic vision of the text, realize its message, and finally attain happiness. As Nabokov puts it: "The good, the admirable reader identifies himself not with the boy or the girl in the book, but with the mind that conceived and composed that book" (1981: 11).

[6] "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' " (139n132, citing Brodbeck 2009: 50, 52).

[7] The ontological dimensions of the text are those aspects that are crucial for a clarification of what "Being" means, specifically in the form of most immediate concern to us as humans: what it means to be as beings in time.

to *dharma*'s failure to function as a theodicy, not realizing that within *pravṛtti*, *dharma* exists in an essential tension with *adharma*. Thus, at the *ādhibhautika* level, there will always be a violation of *dharma*; at the *ādhidaivika* level, a protection of *dharma*; but it is only at the *ādhyātmika* level that there can be a full vindication of *dharma* through achieving emancipation.[8]

The epic is aware of these aspects. It sets up the conflict over *dharma* (*dharmayuddha*; 7.164.1c, 10.9.23a) in order to clarify, within the context of a confusion *over the meaning of dharma* (*dharmasaṃmūḍha*; 6.24.7a), the utmost importance of holding on to *dharma*. Further, through an apocalyptic war, it clarifies that the unjust are destroyed and that the just triumph even on a temporal plane. Indeed, there is no principle the epic could be said to be more committed to than the idea that where there is *dharma*, there is victory.[9] Hudson, however, sets aside *adharma* as the counterconcept to *dharma* and generates a perverse thesis. Rather than seeing that suffering is the result of a *violation* of *dharma*, she attributes the presence of suffering to *dharma* itself. In the *Mahābhārata*, Draupadī's dishonoring in the Kuru assembly hall is the paradigmatic example of how individuals, drunk with lust or power, perpetrate injustice. Yet, rather than condemn the Kauravas for their cruelty, Hudson scapegoats *dharma* instead. Thus, she declares that Draupadī's "virtue fail[s] her; *dharma* fails her" (99). Hudson has not understood the basic distinction between *dharma* and *adharma*. She does not see that *dharma* protects by saving the soul's virtue and not by making one immune to aggression.[10] She also does not understand that there is such a thing as innocent suffering, caused by the injustice of others or that those who perpetrate *adharma* are ultimately punished for their transgression. In issuing a blanket condemnation of the principle of *dharma* itself, she creates a false dichotomy ('either there should be no *adharma* whatsoever in the world, or *dharma* has failed'). *Dharma* exists in a constant struggle with *adharma*, but, even under pain of death, one ought not abandon the right path.[11] In contrast to the epic's project of using the conflict between *dharma* and *adharma* as a way to demonstrate the basically moral character of the universe (evil does not go unpunished; *dharma* functions as a principle of retribution [see *Bhagavadgītā* 4.7–8;

[8] Although most frequently associated with the *Sāṃkhyakārika* of Īśvara Kṛṣṇa, the terms *ādhibhautika*, *ādhidaivika*, and *ādhyātma* are not foreign to the epic. There is a well-developed doctrine of the distinctions between the "elemental," "divine," and "individual" levels (Van Buitenen's translations) in the *Bhagavadgītā* (see 7.30, 8.1–4); in the chapter known in some manuscripts as the *Ādhyātmādhibhūtikaṃ* or the *Ādhyātmādhibhautikaṃ* (*Mahābhārata* 12.301.1–13, see also 12.300.17) of the *Yājñavalkyajanakasaṃvāda* (12.298–306); in the encomimum of the Puruṣa in the *Dānadharmaparvan* (13.16.18); and in the *Guruśiṣyasaṃvāda* section of the *Anugītā* (14.42.27–40).

[9] See *Mahābhārata* 5.39.7c, 5.141.33c, 5.146.16c, 6.20.14c, 6.21.11c, 6.61.16c, 6.62.34c, 6.117.33c, 7.158.62a, 9.62.58c, 11.13.9c, 11.17.6c, 13.153.9c; see also 1.197.25c, 5.66.9c, 6.21.12c, 6.21.14c, 6.41.55a, 9.61.30c ("where there is Kṛṣṇa, there is victory"—highlighting the role of the *avatāra* in ensuring *dharma's* triumph).

[10] See *Mahābhārata* 3.298.8a: nonviolence, equanimity, tranquility, austerity, purity, and unenviousness (*ahiṃsā samatā śāntis tapaḥ śaucam amatsaraḥ*) are the doors to Dharma; the god Dharma himself states "No mishap befalls those men who are devoted to me!" (*ye hi me puruṣā bhaktā na teṣām asti durgatiḥ*; 3.298.11c; Van Buitenen's translation).

[11] See *Mahābhārata* 1.143.2: "Preserve the Law, Pāṇḍava, before you preserve your life" (*śarīra-guptyābhya-dhi-kaṃ dharmaṃ gopaya pāṇḍava*; Van Buitenen's translation).

see also *Mahābhārata* 3.187.26]), she uses the *dharmasaṃśaya* (uncertainty or doubt about *dharma*) to undermine the very notion of *dharma*. Adopting the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the king who enables much of the *adharma* in the epic as her spokesperson,[12] she argues for a similar moral relativism.[13] Like the king, she invokes the universality of suffering as a way to frustrate the epic's moral argument. Her argument, which sets aside the role of personal responsibility in one's misfortunes, is a perfect restatement of the king's views in the *Mahābhārata*.[14] Blind and blinded by his lust for power and his attachment to a wicked son, Dhṛtarāṣṭra is not a tragic figure, as Hudson claims (69, 106). Rather, he is a Vṛtra-like[15] figure who uses pretended doubts about *dharma* as a way to avoid doing the right thing.[16] As readers of the *Mahābhārata*, are we really supposed to read the epic from the perspective of this king whose very name suggests a lust for the kingdom (*dhṛtam rāṣṭram yena saḥ*), a lust that triumphs over even his professed love for his son?

Many of these problems could have been avoided had Hudson read the text more attentively. Yet, her view of the *Mahābhārata* appears to have been shaped by only a handful of episodes: Dhṛtarāṣṭra's lament in the *Ādiparvan*, the dicing match in the *Sabhāparvan*, Vidura's discourse in the *Udyogaparvan*, Saṃjaya's narration of the battle and its aftermath in the *Bhīṣmaparvan* and the *Strīparvan*, and the Pāṇḍavas' final journey in the *Svargārohaṇaparvan*. Utterly crucial *dharma* tracts such as the *Bhagavadgītā*, the *Mārkaṇḍeyasamāsyāparvan*, the *Śāntiparvan* (including the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* and especially the *Nārāyaṇīya*), and the *Anuśāsanaparvan* are

[12] Contrary to Hudson, Dhṛtarāṣṭra does not merely suffer from commonplace human failings: indecisiveness, incontinence, and excessive love and partiality towards his own sons. As a king, he fails to counter *adharma* and so fails in his own duty, or *svadharma*, as well, which is to protect the people through wielding the *daṇḍa*, or staff (see 1.11.15c). This is why, mediated via Saṃjaya, he becomes the proximate recipient of Kṛṣṇa's sermon in the *Bhagavadgītā*: like the effect of *adharma*, the destruction of the Dhārtarāṣṭras, which is narrated to him by Saṃjaya in the war books, the "ultimates" of *dharma* and *adharma* are also narrated to him by Saṃjaya in the *Gītā*. On the relation of relationship of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's lament in the *Ādiparvan* to the *Bhagavadgītā*, see Adluri (2011).

[13] Dhṛtarāṣṭra's postdicing match rationalizations are "specific insights into the forces that impel human beings to commit acts of cruelty and thus produce suffering"; it was "mental confusion which…caused them [that is, Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Duryodhana] to see 'the wrong course' as 'the right one' "; "neither of the two…saw their actions as cruel; instead they saw them as somehow proper"; they are not just "agents of suffering," but "victims of despair" as well (89).

[14] The epic would not accept Hudson's rationalizations for Dhṛtarāṣṭra's actions any more than it accepts his. It is explicit about the principle that when the law is hurt, it hurts back (*dharmo hi hato hanti*; 1.37.22c) and, similarly, that those who protect the law are protected by it (*dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ*; 3.31.7b; compare *Manusmṛti* 8.15: *dharmo eva hato hanti dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ*). Hudson's argument overlooks the key element of personal responsibility, so brilliantly reinstated by Arendt (2003) after the Holocaust.

[15] Vṛtra, meaning "Obstructor" (see Macdonnell 2002: 58, 159) and sometimes associated with the serpent Ahi (58, 152–53) is best known in the *Ṛg Veda* for damming up the primeval waters in his coils; Indra has to strike him with his thunderbolt to release the waters (58–59 for citations). Dhṛtarāṣṭra is also the name of a snake in the *Mahābhārata* (see 1.31.13c): the text is aware of these resonances.

[16] Dhṛtarāṣṭra—not Duryodhana—is the recipient of most of the *dharma* sermons in the *Udyogaparvan*. But instead of heeding his advisors' warnings, the king exploits the complexity of *dharma* to generate aporias. He repeatedly leads the *dharma* discourse astray (see 5.39.1, 5.39.7, and 5.40.28–30 for examples).

conspicuous by their absence. The *Ādiparvan*, the first book of the *Mahābhārata* and the book that contains essential hermeneutic instructions on reading the *Mahābhārata* (see Adluri 2011, 2013), such as the motif of the descent of the *dharma*-minded Śeṣa to uphold the earth (*dhārayat*, 1.32.21c; the word is etymologically related to *dharma* through the root *dḥr*) and of the cursing of Dharma to be born from a Śūdra's womb (1.57.77–81 and 1.101.1–28), is barely mentioned. This would be worrying in an introduction to the *Mahābhārata*; in a text that claims to be "one of the first book-length studies to view the subject [that is, *dharma* in the *Mahābhārata* and its relation to "South Asian religious, social, and political thought"] through the lens of Indian aesthetics" (back cover),[17] it is an unforgivable omission.

These criticisms of *Disorienting Dharma* should not detract from the strengths of Hudson's work. She wisely avoids the pitfall of seeking the Āryan "Ur-epic," which led nearly two generations of scholars astray (see Adluri and Bagchee 2014, especially chapters 1–2). Hudson rightly eschews discussion of the work of an earlier generation of German scholars on the epic, above all, their theories of "oral transmission," which gave them license to neglect the text as it exists for a fantasy epic of their own devising.[18] Likewise, she places no trust in their fabricated histories of the text (for example, its "heroic" origins, its "corruption" by the Brāhmaṇas, the fusion of "epic" with "didactic" elements, and so on). In fact, where I found problems with her work they were primarily due to her recurrence to nineteenth-century attitudes to Indian texts: reading them selectively, reading them without the guidance of an authoritative tradition, and reading them in order to find meanings at variance with the received interpretation.[19]

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[17] Space does not permit an engagement with Hudson's reading of Ānandavardhana here, but there are several problems with this part of her analysis. Ānanda would not countenance the suggestion that "there are significant areas of overlap between [his]…specific reading of the *Mahābhārata*—his contention that it contains a single predominant *rasa*, *śāntarasa*" and "the aesthetics of suffering" (61), because, as a philosopher and critic, he is concerned with the problem of the *Mahābhārata*'s unity and he is well aware that the *rasa* of *karuṇa* or *bhayānaka* would never suffice to account for the epic's literary unity. Further, he would not countenance the assertion that "both readings locate the central aesthetic experience of the text in the epic's preoccupation with death, destruction, and ruin" (61), because for him, the central aesthetic experience of the text is *explicitly* in the creation of "the bliss (which arises) in the hearts of sensitive readers on their noticing it in (the poems that form) the object of their attention" and his central aim in his *Dhvanyāloka* commentary is to "reveal" this *dhvani* "so that…[it] may take firm hold in their [that is, the readers'] hearts" (1.1e; Ingalls, Masson, and Patwardhan 1990: 68). There could not be a reading more opposed to Hudson's than Ānanda's.

[18] For a discussion of the difficulties theories of "oral transmission" encounter (above all, circularity and the absence of objective criteria), see Adluri and Bagchee (2016).

[19] A longer version of this review is scheduled to appear in the *International Journal of Dharma Studies*, with an invited response by Emily T. Hudson.

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