

The Ethics of Dharma in the Mahabharata

In the Mahabharata, the concept of dharma determines all of the events that occur in the Kurukshetra war and justifies the seemingly unethical actions of the Pandavas in their victory over the Kauravas. These unethical actions are depicted through both the deaths of the Pandava's and Kaurava's beloved teachers and the death of the main antagonist, Duryodhana. The three main Pandava brothers: Yudhishthira, Arjuna, and Bhima, all seem to have unjustly killed their teachers and common enemy through what would be considered cheating or unethical in the common virtues of war. Yet, as stated by Krishna, an avatara of the supreme God Vishnu, it was their vow to follow their kshatriya dharma as warriors and fulfill the already predestined events of the war. The predestined event of the Kauravas demise is demonstrated to Arjuna in the famous scene of Krishna's revealing as Vishnu and the discourse he delivers to Arjuna to convince him to fight his Kaurava brothers. In each of these deaths, Krishna is there to explain to the brothers why their actions are ethical in the practice of dharma. The modified system of ethics which Krishna offers is a means to provide the reader with a guide of how to live their life morally in a rapidly changing world. Due to the Pandavas following their dharma, they are finally admitted into heaven, demonstrating that their actions were ethical in accordance to the law of dharma.

Dharma is derived from the word dhr, which in Sanskrit means to support or sustain and refers to both caste obligations and an individual's obligation to the betterment of their society. These two types of dharma are called svadharma, obligation to caste, and sadharana-dharma, which is the universal obligation an individual has in relation to the world as a whole; such as using unethical means to ultimately create a better society. Jean Holm, former Principal Lecturer in Religious Studies at Homerton College states, "In Hinduism, [dharma] was traditionally related to the way people fulfilled their moral duties and obligations of caste membership" (Holm, Pg.5). For the Kauravas and Pandavas, their svadharma was one of the warrior class or kshatriya caste and their dharma was to maintain justice and order in their kingdom. This idea of justice in relation to dharma is a complicated matter based upon the task of objectively separating what is considered ethical from subjective opinion, "Human nature tends to be attuned to a sense of justice, even when the specific understanding of an account may not be acceptable to the others" (Holm, Pg. 104). This tension between the subjective and objective has created a continuous debate for scholars over the ethics of the Pandavas actions in the Kurukshetra war.

The predestined event of the Kauravas demise is revealed to Arjuna before the epic battle, when Arjuna drives to the middle of the battlefield with Krishna as his charioteer and laments the genocide which will befall his family. To remind Arjuna of his dharma, Krishna gives Arjuna divine sight and reveals his universal form, the Visvarupa. While seeing Krishna in his divine form as Vishnu, Arjuna exclaims, "I see your mouths with jagged, ghastly tusks...Lo, all these sons of Dhritarashtra accompanied by hosts of kings...those foremost in battle of our party too rush blindly into your gaping mouths" (Zaehner, Pg. 83). This vision demonstrates to Arjuna that the events of the Kurukshetra war have already occurred and that he must fight in the war to fulfill his dharma. In response, Krishna explains to Arjuna, "Drona, Bhishma, Karna, Duryodhana and all the other men of the war are as good as slain by Me" (Zaehner, Pg.83). These lines ultimately demonstrate that Krishna's word is supreme. This is why the Pandavas

seemingly unethical behavior is ethical; it is the will of God. Due to these words, Arjuna is convinced of his dharma and allows the battle to commence. As stated by Sitansu Chakravarti, a contributor to the Encyclopedia Britannica,

Once somebody reaches a spiritual height, he attains an existential state where the concept of moral duty may not apply anymore insofar as he transcends the domain of right and wrong, having been established in all sympathy and respect for others, and a feeling for everything around, without a tinge of selfishness left (Chakravarti, Pg 2).

Chakravarti's statement is crucial in understanding the discourse that Krishna delivers to each of the brothers during the deaths of Bhishma, Drona, and Duryodhana. Since right and wrong are transcended by Krishna's spiritual height, he is exempt from these subjective ideas and acts on behalf of the greater good. This is illustrated by the death of Bhishma, as Krishna urges Arjuna's moral duty to be put aside to defeat his teacher.

The first teacher to meet his demise at the hands of the Pandavas is the wise and beloved Bhishma, the mentor to all of the descendants of Satyawati and grandfather to the Pandava and Kaurava brothers. To find a way to defeat him in battle, the Pandavas turn to Krishna to provide them with advice. Krishna tells the brothers that Bhishma would tell them how to defeat him and that he would do this because it was his dharma to die in the war. Arjuna laments, "Alas, him, our aged grandshire! Oh, fie upon the profession of a Kshatriya" (Rao, Pg. 77). Krishna rebukes Arjuna stating that he must kill Bhishma due to his kshatriya dharma, "Having vowed to kill Bhishma, O Jishnu, how canst thou now refrain from doing so without violating the duties of a Kshatriya...This hath already been settled by the Gods. That which hath been destined must happen. It cannot be otherwise" (Rao, Pg. 78). According to the law of dharma, not only does he have to kill Bhishma to fulfill his caste dharma but also to carry out the predestined outcome of the war. True to Krishna's advice, Bhishma stated that he could not fight a woman and to use the warrior Sikhandin as a means of defeating him. In the heat of battle, Arjuna follows his strategy and defeats Bhishma with his arrows using Sikhandin as a shield.

The use of Sikhandin as a means to defeat Bhishma is disputed by scholars as unethical due to codes of virtue. According to Frank Stewart, a distinguished professor from the University of Hawaii who has been co-editor of the twenty three year old academic journal Manoa: A Pacific Journal of Academic Writing, "Both sides violate *dharma*, the codes of honor, goodness, and right conduct" (Stewart, Pg. 114). The problem with this claim is that Stewart's definition of dharma isn't in conjunction with the ethics of dharma presented by Krishna in the Mahabharata. These are his personal ideals and definitions of dharma. He overlooks the dharma of a kshatriya and bases his argument off of what are seen as traditional values; in this case not using dishonest means to kill another person, especially one of such high esteem. Also, the vow of non attachment or 'vairagya' as stated by Krishna in relation to the doctrine of Jnana yoga isn't considered in the theological context of the Mahabharata. To explain why Arjuna can ethically kill Bhishma, Krishna uses a reference from the ancient Veda's to connect to an already established historical background as to provide the validity of his teaching,

Listen to what Brihaspati once said unto Sakra. 'One should slay even an aged person, gifted with every virtue and worthy of reverence, if he showeth himself as a foe, or, indeed, any other who approacheth for destroying thee.' O Dhananjaya, this is the eternal duty laid down for Kshatriyas, namely, that they should fight, protect their subjects and perform sacrifices – all without malice. (Rao, Pg. 78-79)

The discourse that Brihaspati, the lord of prayer, devotion, and sacred speech according to the RG Veda's (O'Flaherty, Pg. 61) delivers to Indra demonstrates that Arjuna's actions were right according to his duty to protect his armies as long as it wasn't out of malice. As illustrated by Arjuna's detestation and lament, he doesn't hold malice towards Bhishma; he actually feels the exact opposite emotions of love and devotion for his teacher. Krishna's teaching is further supported and explained by Chakravarti, "Deviation from the accepted norms to this end will not deter [Krishna]. He makes adjustments to the ethical priorities according to the ethics of the emergency situation, the situational ethics of apaddharma, for reaching the grand goal of the well-being for each and everyone" (Chakravarti, Pg. 33). Chakravarti brings up the important point that ethics change according to each situation and the killing of Bhishma, to use his words, was an 'emergency situation' to carry out dharma. Apaddharma is a form of dharma which changes based upon the specific situation, but is only appropriate in emergency situations, such as the Pandavas looming defeat that would have occurred without the death of Bhishma. The changing of ethical practices to conform to a specific situation is further demonstrated by the death of the Pandava's and Kaurava's martial teacher, Drona.

The second teacher to meet his demise at the hands of the Pandava army is Drona, the master of weapons and father of the mighty Aswatthaman. To defeat Drona, the Pandavas again turn to the knowledge of Krishna for guidance. In this instance, Krishna urges Yudhishtira to make a lie of omission and confirm to Drona that Aswatthaman has died when in actuality it is the elephant who shares the same name that has been slain. Yudhishtira, like Arjuna, is reluctant to kill the teacher who has trained him in the art of warfare. Yudhishtira is the son of dharma and is called 'King Dharma' many times in the Mahabharata. This provides the epic a unique situation to address the question of ethics in relation to dharma as Yudhishtira literally represents it. This is why when Drona hears of his son's death he asks Yudhishtira specifically. The text states, "Drona was sure that Yudhishtira would never speak an untruth even for the sake of the sovereignty of the three worlds" (Rao, Pg. 157). Yudhishtira again argues with Krishna on account of the mistruth and his duty of upholding dharma to which Krishna responds, "If Drona fighteth in fury for even half-a-day, I tell thee truly thy army will be annihilated...in such circumstances falsehood is better than truth. By telling an untruth with a view to save a life one committeth not sin" (Rao, 157). In this discourse on dharma, Krishna explains that falsehood is separate from truth and that telling an 'untruth,' which isn't considered a lie, doesn't violate dharma. This distinction between truth and falsehood is a crucial aspect in understanding the ethics surrounding Drona's death.

In the Karna Parva, Krishna explains the difference between these two seemingly similar terms: "Truth may not sometimes be spoken, and even falsehood may be uttered where falsehood would really serve the purpose of truth and mere mechanical lipping of truth would in effect become falsehood" (Rao, Pg 179). While Yudhishtira may not have told the truth to Drona, in the discourse that Krishna

gives to Arjuna, he states that his falsehood towards Drona is his *svadharma* due to his role as a *kshatriya* and the predestined outcome of the war. His lie of omission then becomes a falsehood and not a lie since it serves the greater good of the Pandava army and God's will; which is ultimately his will. As stated by the great and timeless sage Narada, "Although truth in words is preferable, the knowledge of real truth is rare" (Rao, Pg. 207). Yet, not all scholars agree with Krishna's separation of truth and falsehood, "Yudhishtira, the virtuous Pandava brother and the epitome of *dharma*, commits unethical acts. For example, on the twelfth day of battle, Krishna urges Yudhishtira to tell Drona that his son, Ashwatthama, has been killed. The statement is a 'crooked stratagem'" (Stewart, Pgs. 111-112). Stewart clearly believes that there is no difference between a lie and falsehood and that Yudhishtira is morally wrong in his actions. The issue is that Stewart fails to put aside his own morals to understand what Krishna explains about *svadharma* and its relation to the ethics of Drona's death. The death of Duryodhana provides the best explanation of the values that Krishna is trying to explain to the Pandavas through the dialogue between him and his brother Balarama.

After defeating the Kaurava army, the Pandavas turned their attention to the main antagonist of the epic, Duryodhana. Bhima had made a vow to kill Duryodhana and to follow his word, which is binding in the Mahabharata, he challenges Duryodhana to a bludgeon duel. In the ensuing battle, Bhima proves to be weaker than Duryodhana and Krishna urges him to strike Duryodhana in the thigh. This tactic of hitting Duryodhana beneath the belt can be seen as unethical due to its underhanded principals and Krishna's brother Balarama becomes furious at Bhima for using these tactics. Krishna explains to his brother, "Were not the Asuras vanquished by the Gods through stratagem...Therefore, well putting forth his prowess, let Bhimasena also employ guile" (Rao, Pg. 219). Krishna in this quote directly states that it is ethical to use devious means as demonstrated by the Gods in their continuous battle against the asuras or demons. Since Krishna is a God, he is referring to both himself and the Gods of the ancient Veda's, demonstrating that morality is something that transcends the world and functions on a higher plane of understanding. This is why it is difficult for the characters in the epic to understand why Krishna is prompting them to act in seemingly unethical and immoral ways. Even Krishna's brother Balarama, who is said to be an avatara of the cosmic snake Shesha, cannot understand the purpose of his brother's advice. In response Balarama says to Krishna,

The son of Pandu stands branded forever as a crooked warrior, while Duryodhana will obtain eternal bliss...having made all preparations for the sacrifice of battle, having undergone the initiatory ceremonies on the field and, lastly, having poured his life itself as a libation upon the fire represented by his foes, Duryodhana has fairly completed his sacrifice by the final ablutions represented by the obtainment of glory. (Rao, Pgs. 220-1)

Balarama's response is crucial in the understanding of the modified system that Krishna is trying to establish in contrast to the previous system that the Veda's provided.

In the Veda's, life was focused around the sacrificial ceremony which was performed to appease the Gods. Since the Gods controlled different aspects of life such as the rain, wind, fire and even the sunrise, these ceremonies had to be performed to bring about desired circumstances. For example, if there were a drought that plagued the valley, the people would pray to Indra to bring them rain. These

ceremonies would be performed by the Brahman class who were educated in the four Veda's, which are referred to by Krishna as the 'scriptures.' The rituals that occurred during the ceremony included animal sacrifice and the pouring of the psychedelic substance soma into the sacrificial fire. Both the drink and the fire were Gods in their own respect, Agni and Soma. Duryodhana has offered these oblations not literally like in the Vedic culture, but in the context of war and they are the rituals that Balarama attributes to Duryodhana's honor. While Balarama's point is correct in the historical context, he fails to understand that these old rituals cannot sustain the changing Hindu culture and that a modified system of values needs to be set up to conform to the times. This view on the changing culture is elaborated on by K.R. Paramahansa, an Assistant Professor at the Hindu University of America, "As time passes by, the moral conscience of a society brings about changes in the concepts of svadharma and sadharanadharma, bringing them under the purview of law consistent with the said moral conscience of the society" (Paramahansa, Pg. 84).

Chakravarti views the event similarly, putting the ultimate goals of Krishna's discourse in context of the imminent Kali yuga, the universe's final cycle, and the genocide of the lineage. "Krishna knows that the Kauravas must be finished in order to build a just system for the people, not only of Hastinapura, but also the whole of India" (Chakravarti, Pg. 36). Chakravarti considers the larger ramifications of Krishna's teachings in context of sustaining the Hindu culture in an age where it is said that morality and devotion to dharma will continue to deteriorate until the end of the final yuga. The old values of the Vedic culture then must be changed in order to conform to the evolution of society. With the introduction of new situations, new solutions are required. As stated by Krishna, "People say that the scriptures define morality. But the scriptures do not provide for every case. Precepts of morality have been declared generally for the good of the world" (Rao, Pg. 179). The system that Krishna offers through his advice to the Pandavas is a means to provide the reader with a guide of how to live their life morally in a rapidly changing India. According to Chakravarti, "The goals of the Mahabharata are to bring about a holistic well-being for all, through the establishment of a sound political and social structure based on spiritual ideas" (Chakravarti, Pg. 24). Krishna creates this new social structure in the Mahabharata through his teachings that are based on the spiritual ideas of the yoga's and the different facets of dharma.

In the final book of the epic, after the characters, including Krishna, have left the earthly world, Yudhishtira is the last to ascend to heaven. After having his dharma tested by a dog companion whom the Gods sent, he maintains his dharma and is admitted into heaven. Upon arriving, he first sees Duryodhana but not his brothers and exclaims, "Know, ye Gods, that without those brothers and kinsmen of mine I shall not live here" (Rao, Pg. 411). Yudhishtira is then led into hell where he sees his brothers, Karna, his wife Draupadi and others from the Kaurava army. Immediately he is filled with woe and anger to which he exclaims, "Go thou back to those whose messenger thou art. Tell them that I shall stay even here, since my presence giveth relief to these brothers of mine" (Rao, Pg. 413). Again, Yudhishtira lives up to his dharma and his brothers and him are admitted into heaven. This demonstrates that they followed their dharma as advised by Krishna and were ethical in their actions or else they wouldn't have been admitted into heaven.

The concept of dharma justifies the seemingly unethical actions of the Pandavas in their victory over the Kauravas. These unethical actions are depicted through both the deaths of the Pandava's and Kaurava's beloved teachers and the death of the main antagonist, Duryodhana. Yet, Krishna is always there to explain to the brothers why their actions are ethical in the practice of dharma and give them advice on how to follow their dharma. Krishna creates this new social structure in the Mahabharata through his teachings that are based on the spiritual ideas of the yoga's and the different facets of dharma. As stated by vaisnava Saint Chaitanya Charitamrita, "There are limits to the extent an individual can be moral in an immoral society" (Charitamrita, Pg. 110). This is what Krishna addresses through his discourse on dharma and provides this modified system of ethics as a means to provide the reader with a guide of how to live their life morally in a rapidly changing world.

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