3

Yudhishthira's Duty

'I act because I must'

I act because I must. Whether it bears fruits or not, buxom Draupadi, I do my duty like any householder.

—Yudhishthira in exile, to Draupadi, *Mahabharata*, III.32.2–4

'Dharma, I find, does not protect you'

As though once were not enough, Yudhishthira goes on to play a second game of dice with the Kauravas. He loses again and is banished for thirteen years. In accordance with the terms of the agreement, he must go into exile for twelve years and spend a thirteenth in disguise in society without being discovered. If discovered during that thirteenth year, he must repeat the punishment. After losing, Yudhishthira sets off into the jungles, accompanied by Draupadi and his brothers.

One day, a few years after the game of dice, the Pandavas are feeling particularly low in the Dvaita forest. Draupadi is in tears as she thinks about her royal husband sleeping on the hard earth when he is accustomed to sheets of silk and pillows of down. He eats roots from the forest when he ought to be feasting like a king, served by thousands of retainers. Draupadi laments:

> *I remember your old bed and I pity you, great king, so unworthy of hardship . . . sorrow stifles me . . . I saw you bright as a sun, well oiled with sandal paste, now I see you dirty and muddy . . . I have seen you dressed in bright and expensive silks . . . and now I see you wearing bark!*[1]

She cannot get over the bitter memory of her humiliation in the assembly, especially since the Kauravas snatched their kingdom through a rigged game.

> *That crook with his gang has brought this suffering on a man like you . . . You are upright, gentle, bountiful, modest, truthful—how could the spirit of gambling swoop down on you? My mind has become utterly bewildered and burns with grief as I see this sorrow of yours and this great distress.*[2]

She asks Yudhishthira, what is the point of being good when it only brings grief? What kind of world is it where the bad seem to be rewarded while the good, who uphold dharma, suffer such hardship?

> *Dharma is supposed to protect the good king, but I find that it doesn't protect you. You have never strayed. You have always treated everyone alike. Even after winning all the earth, your head did not grow. After losing the crooked game of dice, you remained faithful to your word.*[3]

Draupadi has raised the classic problem of unmerited suffering: 'Why do bad things happen to good people?' When things were going so well for Yudhishthira, why did tragedy have to strike? She cries out in anger:

> *When I see noble, moral and modest persons harassed in this way, and the evil and ignoble flourishing and happy, I stagger with wonder. I can only condemn the Placer, who allows such outrage.*[4]

'Why be good?'

Isn't it better, Draupadi tells her husband, to give up this forest living, raise an army, and fight the evil Kauravas for what is rightfully theirs?

> *I think, king of men, it is time to use your authority on the greedy Dhartarashtras, who are always offensive. There is no more time to ply the Kurus with forgiveness: and when the time for authority has come, authority must be employed. The meek are despised, but people shrink from the severe: he is a king who knows both.*[5]

Yudhishthira responds by reminding Draupadi that he has given his word. To fight, he says to her, is easy; to forgive is more difficult. To be patient is not to be weak; to seek peace is always the wiser course. Draupadi, however, wonders why her husband does not feel outrage, like a kshatriya warrior, at the injustice of their situation.

> *Why doesn't your anger blaze? . . . Truly, O best of the Bharatas, you have no anger, else why is it that your mind is not moved at the sight of your brothers and me?*[6]

Yudhishthira explains to Draupadi that forbearance is superior to anger.[7] But she feels frustrated, and wonders why her husband has adopted a stubborn pacifism while their enemies exploit his goodness. Power, Draupadi argues, is what really counts in the world. 'Why be good?' she asks her husband. Yudhishthira answers her patiently in a sparkling dialogue in the *Vanaparvan*, which presages much thinking about ethics in the major schools of Western moral philosophy.

Yudhishthira is taken aback by the strength of Draupadi's emotion, and he gently explains to her why he must be good. He says:

> *I do not act for the sake of the fruits of dharma. I act because I must. Whether it bears fruits or not, buxom Draupadi, I do my duty like any householder . . . I obey dharma, full-hipped woman,*

> *not for its rewards . . . but by its nature my mind is beholden to dharma*.[8]

In a typically modest way, Yudhishthira expresses his instinctive sense of duty: 'I act because I must'. He does not follow dharma because of any hope of reward that might come. He acts from a sense of what he has to do. Dharma or 'what he has to do' is a standard of conduct, and a society needs standards. 'He who doubts dharma finds in nothing else a standard,' Yudhishthira says, 'and ends in setting himself as a standard.'[9] He is saying, in effect, that following dharma is its own reward. When one acts thus, it is motives and not consequences that are important. Krishna will elaborate this idea later—of acting without thinking of the 'fruits' of one's action. I will raise the question if it is possible for ordinary human beings to act in this selfless manner.

I confess that I have not met many individuals who had Yudhishthira's instinctive sense of duty, and who did what they did because they had to. One of the very few was the new and young CEO of a company, whose board I joined in the late 1990s. Seventy per cent of the company's production was sold to a government company that insisted on receiving 2 per cent of the invoice as a kickback in cash. The bribe was shared systematically among a number of employees in the state-owned company. Our new CEO refused to pay the bribe. As a result, our company's bills were unpaid for nine months. He tried everything—cajoling, political influence, cutting off supplies—but nothing worked. As the receivables mounted, we discovered one painful morning that our company was bankrupt and would cease operations in two weeks, and 829 people would lose their jobs.

In an emergency meeting of the board of directors, the CEO wanted the board's advice. It was the first time that the board heard about these improper payments, although they had been going on for decades. My first reaction was to rush for cover. Was I liable as an independent director? Should I resign from the board? Then I thought about the future of our 829 employees. As

we dug deeper into this ugly mess, we discovered that our CEO had explored all possible options. It seemed to come to an either/or—either to pay the bribe and save the company or to refuse and close it.

Most board members were of the view that since this was the way that things had always been done, we should pay the bribe and get on with it. They were upset with the CEO for having rocked the boat. A few of us, including the new CEO and I, were opposed and we prevailed in the end. The board decided to close the company's government business and retain only the 30 per cent business with private sector customers. This meant that the company would limp along for a while. The CEO promised to try vigorously to replace the lost business by gaining new customers in the private sector. Sadly, 390 workers lost their jobs. I felt guilty about that, but I think we did the right thing.

I admired the CEO for standing up like Yudhishthira. He claimed that we were unlucky to do business with the government, where kickbacks were standard practice. 'It is somebody's money in the private sector and they won't allow it to be stolen in kickbacks,' he added. I reflected on the initial reaction of most board members and I realized they had been persuaded to change their minds because of the fear of disclosure by the auditors. I wondered if people are only honest because of the fear of punishment. I later asked the CEO why he had decided to blow the whistle and made his own life difficult. He mumbled something about not having had a choice—it was a sense of duty, not a fear of disclosure in his case.

Yudhishthira does not elaborate on his laconic statement, 'I act because I must', and this is why Draupadi remains confused. Immanuel Kant, the eighteenth century German philosopher, in trying to understand this sense of duty, said: 'When moral worth is at issue, what counts is not actions, which one sees, but those inner principles of action that one does not see.'[10] These 'inner principles' led me to think about human motives. I was reminded of a newspaper report about a young man who jumped into the

Arabian Sea on a crowded beach and saved a child from drowning. He instantly became a hero. But he confessed a few days later to the *Times of India* that he might not have jumped if no one had been watching. He did it, he said, to impress his friends on a college trip, and particularly one girl. Yudhishthira (or even the CEO) might have jumped even if no one had been looking. So, motives do matter when it comes to duty.

'But a child was saved in the end,' the young man might have protested. 'So, who cares about my motives?' He would have a point. Consequences of one's acts do matter, but so do motives in trying to understand why we behave morally. Where does our sense of duty come from? David Hume, the Scottish philosopher, argued that our moral sense originated in human sentiments. 'The sentiments, dependent on humanity, are the origin of morals,' he said.[11] Kant also felt that one's sense of duty originates in one's humanity, but he added that the 'noble descent' of duty lies in the 'autonomy of the rational being'. Kant located the origin of dharma in man's ability to reason, and the ability to reason underpins man's autonomy. 'This condition,' Kant wrote, 'requires that a person never be used as a means when it is an end in itself.'[12]

Whereas Kant justified duty based on man's humanity and reason, earlier Western thinkers had appealed to 'natural law'. They claimed that human beings have inside their nature a law or a guide to what is right and wrong. Christian thinkers like Thomas Aquinas offered a brilliant exposition of natural law theory in the Middle Ages. Later, John Locke provided an influential variant of this idea based on 'natural rights'. He argued that human beings had certain rights when they started out in a state of nature, and these rights continued even when that state of nature was over and they became citizens of a civil society.[13] Locke's notion of human rights, as we know, had a deep influence on the making of the American and other constitutions and continues to hold sway in the moral and political debates of today.

Yudhishthira's answer to Draupadi implies that consequences or ends do not justify the means. Although the Pandavas have a perfectly legitimate end in regaining their stolen kingdom, they must recover it only by honest means, without compromising dharma. He says that he gave his word when he lost the dice game and he must now abide by his promise. Mahatma Gandhi's refrain to Indians in the first half of the twentieth century was similar. Although throwing off the foreign yoke was a just cause, he felt that Indians had to adopt the right means in winning freedom of their country.

Draupadi, however, does not believe that this principle works in politics, especially when one's political opponents are ready to employ 'dirty tricks' to gain power. In contemporary democracies politicians may not 'steal' an election through a dice game and they usually do not tell outright lies, but they always use 'spin' in order to 'package' themselves in a way that maintains their popularity. Draupadi merely wants to use the same tactics as her enemies in order to level the playing field.

'To save the family, abandon the individual'

Yudhishthira senses that Draupadi is dissatisfied with his duty-based answer to her question, 'Why be good?'. Hence, he takes a different tack, shifting his focus to the consequences and away from intentions: he offers heaven as the reward for being good.

> *He who resolutely follows dharma, O beautiful woman, attains to infinitude hereafter.*[14]

But Draupadi remains unmoved. Yudhishthira then tries another approach. He appeals to her based on the law of karma, which teaches that human deeds will inevitably have consequences. 'Knowing that acts bear [karmic] fruit, the wise man is content even with a little,' he says.[15] The law of karma is rooted deeply in the innate human belief in the efficacy of action. Human beings act on the assumption that their desires, intentions and

actions will lead to an intended goal. As Manu, the Indian lawgiver, explains:

> *. . . it is impossible to be free from desire . . . Intention is the root of desire . . . Nowhere in this world do we see any activity done by a man free from desire; for whatever that a man may do, it is the work of someone who desired it.*[16]

Human desire and intentions work on our innate belief in cause and effect, and this assumption led ancient Indians to postulate a dharma based on the consequences of human action—and, accordingly, a harmonious, cosmic law of karma. This is why Draupadi is outraged when she sees the virtuous Pandavas suffering in the forest. It creates a dilemma in her mind. What keeps the Pandavas going is their belief that virtue will be rewarded eventually. In fact, the sage Markandeya reassures Yudhishthira that actions always bear fruit. Those fruits, according to the law of karma, might emerge in this world, but they might also emerge in another world.[17]

There are others in the epic who also judge the rightness of an action from its results. The respected counsellor Vidura, who is half-brother of King Dhritarashtra, appeals repeatedly to the king to stop his wicked son from proceeding with the dice game. Vidura believes that an act is good only if it promotes good consequences. And an act that promotes the good of many persons is better than one which promotes the good of a few. He is against the dice game not only because of the deception involved, but because it will eventually create strife and harm the interests of the country and the people. As a true 'consequentialist', he says:

> *To save the family, [one must] abandon an individual. To save the village, abandon a family; to save the country, abandon the village.*[18]

Vidura's position is that if an action produces good consequences, then it is good. Yudhishthira might not have abandoned an

individual for the sake of the family. His sense of duty to *ahimsa*, non-violence, might not have allowed him to sacrifice even a single human life. He goes further than Kant: he looks upon all sentient beings (not just human beings) as ends in themselves. When one sacrifices an individual for a village then one treats that individual as a means rather than an end.

It is dilemmas such as these—between intentions and consequences, and ends and means—that make dharma subtle, as Bhishma pointed out to Draupadi in the assembly. Perhaps because he feels guilty for not 'saving' Draupadi on that day, Bhishma will return to the difficulty of being good in Book Twelve when it comes to a trade-off between telling the truth and saving a life. He tells Yudhishthira about Kaushika, an ascetic without much learning, who is accosted one day by a group of thieving cut-throats who are seeking the man who had witnessed their crime. Kaushika had seen the witness run into the forest and he knows that if he reveals it, he is issuing a death sentence. He must choose between the dharma of *satya*, telling the truth, or of *ahimsa*, saving a life.

Kaushika chooses the duty of *satya* over *ahimsa*. The robbers catch and kill their prey, and the ascetic ends in a gruesome hell because he failed to understand that dharma in this instance required him to tell a 'white lie' to the villains. Bhishma explains that while 'there is nothing higher than the truth',

> *the thing most difficult to understand in the whole world . . . is that truth should not be spoken and that falsehood should be spoken, where falsehood would be truth, or truth falsehood. Someone simple is dumbfounded in that circumstance where truth is not fixed . . . If escape is possible by not singing your song, then you should not let out the smallest note. But if your not singing would arouse suspicion, then you absolutely have to sing away.*[19]

In Western literature, the most dramatic example of this trade-off came in a question posed by Fyodor Dostoevsky in *The*

Brothers Karamazov. Ivan asks whether it is justified to torture a child in order to bring incalculable happiness to the rest of humanity?

> Tell me honestly, I challenge you—answer me: imagine that you are charged with building the edifice of human destiny, the ultimate aim of which is to bring people happiness, to give them peace and contentment at last, but that in order to achieve this it is essential and unavoidable to torture just one little speck of creation, that same little child beating her chest with her little fists, and imagine that this edifice has to be erected on her unexpiated tears. Would you agree to be the architect under those conditions? Tell me honestly![20]

Alyosha, his brother, does not have an answer, and Dostoevsky seems to feel that such questions are unsolvable. This is perhaps why dharma is 'subtle'. But Yudhishthira, with his commitment to the absolute principle of *ahimsa*, 'non-violence', would probably have refused to torture the child no matter how benign the consequences. Bhishma and Krishna—like most political leaders who have to run a state—would have chosen the more practical approach of looking at the consequences of an action.[21] The sensible Vidura, who is also close to power, would have argued that by sacrificing one child, he would have been able to save millions of children from suffering in the future—saving them from disease, hunger, violence and other forms of pain. The ethic of absolute standards and perfection appeals more to those who are far removed from public office like Yudhishthira when he is in the forest.

In our present ethical mood, we intensely admire an individual like Yudhishthira. The nineteenth-century public, however, was influenced by Jeremy Bentham, whose Utilitarian philosophy focused on consequences. He judged an act to be 'good' or moral by the net amount of pleasure or happiness it produced. Bentham would answer Draupadi's question like Vidura: what is good is that which promotes the greatest happiness of the greatest

number. Bentham too may have sacrificed a family for the sake of a village or tortured one child in order to save all children from suffering. The great divide in ethical thinking is between those who judge an act based on its consequences versus those who judge it based on duty or some rule.

The attraction of Consequentialism is its simplicity. I can quickly tell if I am being good by examining the consequences of my act. Everyone is equal in the equation, whether a servant or a master.[22] My criticism of it is that it ignores the justice or fairness in the distribution of goods. It is indifferent to the needs of the weak and the poor as long as society's overall satisfaction is maximized.[23] Indeed, it is all too easy to ignore the circumstances and the freedom of a minority in maximizing the welfare of society as a whole.[24]

'Dharma is a ship that guides one to the farthest shore'

We return to husband and wife in the Dvaita forest. Yudhishthira can see that his 'beautiful' Draupadi is still not satisfied, and he gropes for another answer to her question, 'Why be good?' He turns to the social benefits of moral action. He compares dharma to a ship that allows human beings to journey through life, just as it allows a merchant to travel to the farthest shores. 'Were dharma to be fruitless,' he says, 'the whole world would sink into a bottomless darkness . . . and [people] would live like cattle.'[25] His assumption is that human beings can live together only if they cooperate. If people do not trust each other, the social order will collapse. Our moral rules, such as *ahimsa,* 'not hurting others', or s*atya,* 'telling the truth', are, in fact, rules for cooperation, without which we would 'sink into a bottomless darkness', he says.

David Hume also felt that the rules of a society were a social creation. While at the individual's level moral rules may well be inviolate injunctions that a person must follow unquestioningly, at society's level they are justified by social utility. This justification

of morality is sometimes called Indirect Utilitarianism. Its attraction lies in its ability to combine both the approaches—one that judges the goodness of an act by looking at its consequences and the other of looking to the intentions behind the act. In the case of Yudhishthira—he can still act based on principle and observe dharma because he regards it a duty. Moral rules, such as *ahimsa,* 'not hurting others', or s*atya,* 'telling the truth', are imperative duties for him. The duties themselves, however, are justified separately by their ability to produce positive consequences—i.e. keeping society going or keeping 'the ship afloat', as he puts it. This argument combines, somewhat opportunistically, the best in both the 'consequences' and 'duty' or 'intention'-based moral positions.

Draupadi does not immediately respond to her husband, but I suspect she would have accepted this argument. This is one of the fundamental themes of the epic and it repeats it often in the form of an abstract axiom: 'Where there is dharma, there is victory'.[26] By this, the epic means that dharma yields good fruits not only for the individual but for society as a whole. Indeed, Draupadi's frustration in this case is not with the principle. She is disappointed with her husband for ignoring the social consequences of his actions. In her view, he neglects the dharma of the king and of the ruling kshatriya caste. Because of his bull-headed insistence on remaining in the forest, she feels he lets his people down, and fails to uphold dharma. The king's dharma is to ensure that society functions harmoniously. How can he observe this dharma if he is unwilling to fight, regain his kingdom, and be a dharmic king?

'Why cover yourself in tatters of dharma and throw away *artha* and *kama*?'

Having overheard Draupadi make a heroic but unsuccessful effort to get his older brother Yudhishthira to get up and fight, Bhima joins them now. He confesses that he cannot get over the

theft of their kingdom and he exhorts Yudhishthira to get up and fight to recover what is rightfully theirs. He uses a different argument, however, and without realizing it, offers another answer to Draupadi's question, 'Why be good?' By remaining in the forest, he says, the Pandavas are neglecting the three aims of a good and flourishing life. The classical Indian texts enjoin an individual to pursue *kama,* 'pleasure', *artha,* 'material well-being', and dharma, 'righteousness', in order to fulfil life's purpose.

> *Why should we dwell in this austere wilderness and miss out on dharma, artha and kama? . . . Why cover yourself in some tatters of dharma, king, and throw away artha, which is the [material] basis for [the pursuit of] dharma and kama?*[27]

Bhima does not mention the fourth aim, suggesting that, perhaps, the last aim of *moksha,* 'spiritual liberation', may have been added later. He makes the sensible point that it is difficult to be virtuous in conditions of extreme deprivation when one is constantly thinking of the next meal. 'But one who is destitute of wealth cannot practise dharma.'[28] A person needs a minimal level of material security even to practise dharma properly.

Bhima concedes that when the three aims of life come into conflict, dharma trumps the other two. It disciplines the pursuit of pleasure and wealth, and thus provides balance to a good human life. But by remaining in the forest, Yudhishthira neglects the other two aims of life, and thereby fails to fulfil life's purpose. The ancient Greeks reached a similar conclusion. They also believed that human life had a *telos,* 'purpose', and Aristotle felt that the human life had multiple ends, and virtue was one of them.

In this dialogue, the *Mahabharata* has offered a number of answers to Draupadi's question, 'Why be virtuous?' Yudhishthira's first answer is instinctive—he 'acts because he must'. He follows

dharma because it is there and he feels it his duty to follow it. Yudhishthira feels an inclination, a *svabhava*, a 'predisposition to act in a certain way'.[29] He upholds the truth and he sticks to his promise because he has an inner disposition to do so. This is an important distinction, one similar to the ancient Greek idea of 'character', and it is a dimension absent from the approaches based on 'duty' and 'consequences'. Whatever the temptations or the advantages of raising an army in order to recover his kingdom, Yudhishthira will not break his vow to King Dhritarashtra.

. . . the promise I made is a true one, remember
I choose over life and eternity, dharma
Neither kingdom, nor sons, neither glory nor wealth,
Can even come up to a fraction of the Truth![30]

Since this answer does not appeal to Draupadi, the epic offers several other arguments based on the consequences of one's behaviour. The first is the standard religious one: a person will go to heaven if she is good. The second is the law of karma. The third is the more general benefit of virtuous behaviour to society. Finally, the epic offers, via Bhima, an answer that students of ethics know as 'virtue ethics'. It connects 'being good' with character and fulfilling the purpose of human life. A good and flourishing life demands that a human being observe dharma.

Yudhishthira did not succeed in convincing Draupadi on that day. The question 'Why be good?' is left hanging in the air and it will hang over the epic till the end, when the Pandavas will still be searching for an answer. Yudhishthira, however, is sad and contrite. He feels that he has let his family down. 'I do not blame you for your bitterness. For my wrong course brought this misery upon you,' he says.[31] Both Draupadi and Bhima try to cheer him up, saying that victory will ultimately follow if they pursue the kshatriya's dharma. But Yudhishthira is unconvinced for dharma to him is a deeply personal matter. Being truthful and non-violent has little to do with being a kshatriya warrior.

To her dismay, Draupadi can sense his real and bull-headed commitment to his sense of duty.[32]

'That is the way it is!'

'It is not the Indian style to send heroes off to the forest and then continue, "After twelve years they came back". The romance of the forest was too gripping and the theme of the prince exiled too popular.'[33] During their wanderings the Pandavas face many hardships, encounter sages and enchanted spirits, and have many adventures. In the thirteenth year, they move to the capital city of the king of Virata. To avoid being discovered, they assume disguises: Yudhishthira becomes a dice master at the royal court; Draupadi, the queen's handmaiden; Bhima, a cook in the royal kitchen; Arjuna dresses like a woman and gets the job of a eunuch to guard the ladies' chambers and to teach the royal women dancing; Nakula becomes a groom in the stables; and Sahadeva looks after the royal cattle. Duryodhana sends spies to find them, but they remain undetected during their year of masquerade.

After thirteen years of exile and adventure, including several attempts on their lives by the Kauravas, the Pandavas return to reclaim their inheritance. They have fulfilled the terms of the agreement and now expect their rightful share of the kingdom. But Duryodhana refuses. Elaborate peace negotiations follow between the two sides. Duryodhana, however, remains adamant. So, war becomes inevitable.

The decision to declare war is an awkward moment for Yudhishthira who is dedicated to preserving dharma. Lamenting the failure of the peace negotiations, Yudhishthira says that 'war is evil in any form'.[34] He goes on to say:

> *The ultimate disaster for which I dwelled in the forest and suffered is upon us in spite of all our striving . . . For how can war be waged with men who we must not kill? How can we win if we must kill our gurus and elders?*[35]

Yudhishthira's brothers try to reassure their elder brother. They remind him of his duty to his family, to his kshatriya heritage and to his people—he is a king, after all. There is much discussion among the mighty warriors about the rightness of war. To stop the endless debate Krishna exclaims impatiently and bluntly, 'That is the way it is!'[36]

The Pandavas' decision to go to war marks a turning point in Yudhishthira's thinking about dharma. Yudhishthira has evolved from a guileless idealist who stands for absolute moral standards into a pragmatist who understands the limitations of those who have to rule a state.[37] Sanjaya, the emissary of the Kauravas in the second peace negotiations, does not realize this change. He suggests to Yudhishthira: 'Do not destroy yourself! If the Kurus will not grant you your share . . . without resorting to war, then in my opinion, a life of begging . . . would be better than winning your kingdom through war.'[38] The earlier Yudhishthira in the forest might have accepted this suggestion to turn the other cheek; now, he finds it preposterous. Sanjaya chides him:

> *. . . if you must commit an evil act of such hostility, Parthas, after all this time, why then, Pandavas, did you have to live in the forest for those successive years, in miserable exile, just because it was right? . . . And why have you spent these successive years in the forests if you want to fight now, Pandava, when you have lost so much time? It is a foolish man who fights . . .*[39]

Yudhishthira's answer comes as a surprise:

> *. . . in times of trouble one's duty alters. When one's livelihood is disrupted and one is totally poverty-stricken, one should wish for other means to carry out one's prescribed duties . . . which means that in dire situations one may perform normally improper acts.*[40]

Chastened by thirteen harsh years in exile, Yudhishthira has become pragmatic. As he takes charge of the war effort, and assumes 'complete control of his brothers and his allies',[41] he also

recognizes the limits of absolute goodness. He agrees with his ally, Satyaki: 'No law can be found against killing enemies who are plotting to kill us.'[42] He tells Sanjaya, 'I am just as capable of peace as I am of war . . . as I am of gentleness and severity.'[43] His new, down-to-earth view of dharma is grounded in self-interest but without being amoral. His new position avoids both ideological extremes—the Hobbesian amorality of Duryodhana as well as the idealistic super-morality of the earlier Yudhishthira in exile.

I approve of this prudent Yudhishthira. One should be realistic and pursue only what is attainable. Unnecessarily demanding ideals are easily discredited. Although 'prudence' does not have a high moral purchase these days—it suggests a person who is self-interested and expedient—I believe one can be 'prudent' when one's own interest is not involved. A 'prudent' mother is concerned for her child's welfare. A 'prudent' person looks at the future consequences of actions. These do not make them selfish actions. They are compatible with acting considerately and bearing in mind the interest of others. Accordingly, this new Yudhishthira, however different he may appear on the surface, is the Yudhishthira who at the epic's end will hold up the virtues of *ahimsa,* 'non-violence', and *anrishamsya,* 'compassion', as the highest dharma.[44]

Yudhishthira's moral journey from Book Three (*Vanaparvan*) to Book Five (*Udyogaparvan)* of the epic has brought him to a rational and sensible position. Indeed, Machiavelli might have been addressing the earlier Yudhishthira when he wrote, 'a man who wishes to profess goodness at all times will come to ruin among so many who are not so good'.[45] Yudhishthira's new position is more akin to the evolutionary principle of reciprocal altruism: adopt a friendly face to the world but do not allow yourself to be exploited. Recent insights of evolutionary scientists throw some light on this pragmatic middle ground, in terms of both how we live and how we ought to.[46] There is always a risk

in deriving moral values from nature's workings; an unwarranted inference from what 'is' to what 'ought to be'—this is what philosophers call the 'naturalistic fallacy'. There is also a risk in over-reading the data of the young discipline of evolutionary biology. Still, I believe that it can illuminate the moral temper of the *Mahabharata*.

To be sure, human beings have evolved through a long struggle in which only the fittest have passed on their genes. But to conclude that life is a tooth-and-claw struggle—or that morality is merely in the interest of the strong, as Duryodhana claims—is a mistake. Nature is full of examples of dharma-like goodness. Dolphins will help lift an injured companion for hours to help it survive. Blackbirds and thrushes give warning calls when they spot a hawk even if it means risking their own lives.

Evolutionary biology assumes that societies have developed moral principles in order to get people to cooperate. Moral rules are grounded in human self-interest but are tempered by our need to live with others—a pragmatic assumption that also runs through the *Mahabharata*. So, where might our dharma-like behaviour originate? In *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin speculated that in the course of evolution, if a person helped another, he would also receive help in return. 'From this low motive,' Darwin wrote, 'he might acquire the habit of aiding his fellows; and the habit of performing benevolent actions.'[47] This thought of Darwin's led biologists to hypothesize that 'an individual who maximizes his friendships and minimizes his antagonisms will have an evolutionary advantage, and selection should favour those characters that promote the optimization of personal relationships'.[48] One observes that human beings do tend to behave altruistically towards their relatives and this suggests a link of reciprocity with kin selection in evolution: 'A gene that repaid kindness with kindness could thus have spread through the extended family and by interbreeding to other families.'[49]

To see how such a 'reciprocal altruism' might work in practice, let us look at the famous Prisoner's Dilemma.[50] It might help explain why Yudhishthira changes his moral position in the *Mahabharata*. In this game, the police are trying to get two prisoners to confess to a jointly committed crime. If one of them confesses, he will be let off and the other will spend his life in jail. If neither confesses, both will spend minimal time in jail. If both confess, then both will have to spend seven years in jail. The logical selfish strategy is to confess, betray your partner, and hope that he won't betray you. The 'altruistic' strategy is not to confess, but then you run the risk of spending your life in jail if your partner betrays you. The best strategy is collaborative—neither should confess. In that case, both would be free after spending a minimal time in jail.

The Prisoner's Dilemma teaches us something about how strangers cooperate in society. A round-robin tournament of the Prisoner's Dilemma was held in which contestants played two hundred games with one player and then moved to the next, the objective being to minimize the time in jail. The reason for repeating the games was to simulate real life, in which people meet each other repeatedly in large, anonymous cities. The winner of the game was neither altruistic nor egoistic—but the person who used a strategy called 'tit-for-tat', or what Indians call '*nehle pe dehla*'.[51] 'Tit-for-tat' is in effect 'reciprocal altruism': do not confess on the first move; this sends a signal to your opponent that you are a nice person; from the second move onwards, however, mimic what your opponent does; if he is nice to you, reciprocate by being nice; if he is selfish, punish him in kind. This sends a message to the Duryodhanas of the world that you will retaliate if necessary.

Each time that the tournament was replayed, 'tit-for-tat' or reciprocity won. Those who followed the selfish strategy always lost. Those who tried to be good like the earlier Yudhishthira in the forest also lost. Neither pure meanness nor pure goodness

paid off.[52] I learned from this game that the principle of reciprocity keeps cheats like Duryodhana in check. In contrast Mahatma Gandhi's and Jesus's teaching about turning the other cheek sends them a wrong signal that cheating pays. So, Draupadi does have a point when she tells Yudhishthira to get up and raise an army. What she is saying, in effect, is 'do not be a sucker'—counter meanness with meanness.

However, 'tit-for-tat' should not be confused with an aggressive strategy. It calls for presenting a friendly face to the world—the first move in the game is always to be nice. Yudhishthira presents an affable face during the interminable peace negotiations. And he will make an exceptionally generous offer to Duryodhana, as we shall soon see. The difference is that Yudhishthira is no longer willing to be exploited. It has taken him thirteen long years to realize that Draupadi may have been right.

It does seem extraordinary that evolutionary biology and the Prisoner's Dilemma should be able to shed light on the pragmatic temper of the *Mahabharata*. When Yudhishthira gave the order to start the war—albeit reluctantly—he acted like a reciprocal altruist and became a prudent ruler of the middle path. It is a path somewhere between the 'amoral realism' of Duryodhana and the 'ethical idealism' of the earlier Yudhishthira in the forest. Having said that, we still admire this earlier Yudhishthira who instinctively told Draupadi, 'I act because I must.' Although we cannot be like him, he does appeal to our ideals, and every society needs ideals. As always, Oscar Wilde says it best, 'We are all in the gutter. But some of us are looking at the stars.'

Can dharma be taught?

In goading Yudhishthira to fight for his kingdom, Draupadi showed an admirable bias for action that would make any CEO proud. She elaborated her managerial principle thus: 'One first decides [keeping] one's mind on one's goal, then achieves it with acts . . . an act capably done, well planned by the doer, is clearly

distinguished from an incompetent one.'[53] In saying this, Draupadi is gently rebuking her husband. While his *sva-dharma* is clearly that of a kshatriya, a man of action, he behaves too often like a brahmin, a man of contemplation. Draupadi is using the word 'dharma' here in the sense of a 'calling', which is also the connotation that my father had in mind when he would proclaim that 'engineering' was his dharma.

In the same dialogue, Draupadi suggests that those who have a sense of 'dharma as a calling' are fortunate. She says, 'For who knows what his task is, [he] is one in a thousand!'[54] I expect she feels this way because such fortunate persons have an intrinsic motivation for their work. She would have been proud of the primary schoolteacher in Dharmapuri district in Tamil Nadu who I read about in the *Times of India* in May 2005—a man who has bicycled 32 kilometres each day for the past twenty years without missing a single day of school. Because of his commitment, as well his ability to inspire students, a surprising number of his former students went on to become hugely famous. When asked about the roots of his motivation, he answered, 'Teaching is my dharma,' the sort of answer that a professional like Drona, the teacher of the Kauravas and Pandavas, would also have given.

Contrast this with the findings of a study on government primary school teachers in India by Michael Kremer of Harvard University and others (including members of the World Bank) that shocked the Indian nation in 2003. From it we learned that one in four teachers in our government primary schools is absent and one in four, although present, is not teaching. Thus, one in two teachers out of roughly 1.5 million primary school teachers is not doing his/her job. Aside from the institutional aspects of the failure, a teacher who is chronically absent wounds dharma and demeans the teaching profession.

Dharma is not only a matter of personal well being. It is also a matter of social and political health, and the epic is deeply

concerned with 'the dharma of the king' and his officials and it will elaborate this further in Book Twelve. Among the officials of the state are schoolteachers in government primary schools in India, who fail dharma when they are absent. The *Mahabharata* has offered a number of reasons to these schoolteachers to be good. First, because it is one's duty; second, good acts produce good consequences; third, the social order would collapse if people did not keep to their commitments; finally, virtue or dharma is necessary for leading a good and flourishing life. The absentee schoolteacher wounds dharma on all counts—he/she fails her duty; he/she fails the consequentialist test, destroying the futures of her students; and he/she neglects his/her own capabilities, failing to achieve life's purpose.

Plato wrote more than two thousand years ago that the reform of schools is everyone's work—the work of every man, woman and child. While school reform—say punishing a teacher for absence—would certainly bring errant teachers back to school, how does one address the moral failure? How does one get a teacher not only to be present but also teach with a sense of calling? Can dharma be taught so that there are more inspiring teachers like the one in Dharmapuri? Both Plato and Aristotle believed that virtue could be taught. A person's character is not something that one is born with. It is constantly evolving through repeated actions, and one can be educated to become more moral. Aristotle gives the example of a musician in the *Nicomachean Ethics.* To become a musician, Aristotle says, requires skill and repetitive practice. In the same way, to become virtuous requires repeating virtuous actions.[55]

I tend to view the old concept of karma in this light. When I repeat certain actions, I accumulate karma of a certain kind, which builds a certain kind of character and predisposes me to act in a certain way. Karma for me is not something supernatural but *svabhava,* 'an inclination to act in a certain way' as a result of my habits, which have been formed as a result of my past

actions. So when Yudhishthira tells Draupadi that eventually human acts do bear fruit, even though the fruit is invisible,[56] one might interpret 'fruit' to mean the building of character through repeated actions. Yudhishthira was certainly aware that repeated actions had a way of changing one's inclinations to act in a certain way. That inclination is character.

Ancient Indians shared Aristotle's belief that character could be built. They regarded the *Mahabharata* as a 'dharma text' which could teach dharma. It is plausible to expect that when one hears repeatedly of the unfair suffering of Draupadi or Yudhishthira one becomes gradually more empathetic. Moral experiments show that 'subjects who were urged to relax and use their imaginations when hearing a story of distress reported both greater emotion and a greater willingness to help the victim than did subjects who were urged to remain detached and "objective". It would seem, then, that people who attend to the distress of another in a manner sufficient for compassion have motives to help that person.'[57]

The epic forces us to reflect on our beliefs and our behaviour. It makes us aware about how we deceive ourselves. Even Yudhishthira confesses to Draupadi and Bhima at the end of this scene, saying that he is not the good man that they think him to be. He had accepted the dice game because of a secret hope that he would win and thereby expand his kingdom. Even when he was losing, he knew that the game was crooked, but he could not stop because he was caught in the gambler's frenetic whirl. Thus, Yudhishthira's mask falls off, and with this devastating discovery Draupadi becomes silent. Secretly, perhaps, she may have been pleased to see that her husband is human and vulnerable, like any other person. It could not have been easy to live with such a principled man. Yudhishthira's confession shakes the listeners of the epic as well, making us aware how difficult it is to be good in a world where right and wrong are intricately mixed in a bewildering manner.

The *Mahabharata* could never be a 'how to' book given its ambivalence towards moral truth. Yudhishthira is unable to convince Draupadi about 'why we should be good'. It does suggest, however, that 'being good' is not a one-off event but a continuing attitude to life and other human beings. Although dharma can be learned, it is an inner 'journey of self-discovery, overcoming self-deception'.[58] Mahatma Gandhi tried to cultivate the moral instinct in an unusual way through his famous 'experiments with truth'. He employed fasts as an instrument of moral growth and was courageous in making a 180-degree turn when it was warranted. He said, 'It may entail continuous suffering and the cultivating of endless patience, [but] step by step one makes friends with the entire world.'[59] The pitfall on this journey, he reminds us, is the human tendency for self-deception. No one 'ever understands quite his own artful dodges to escape from the shadow of self-knowledge'.[60]

Being good may come naturally to Yudhishthira and to the CEO who refused to bribe in order to get government business, but to Draupadi and to most of us, it needs effort. Even when one is able to recognize moral behaviour, one is not able to practise it. One tries to project one's good side and hide one's weaknesses. One admires individuals who are ethical, believing that their lives are somehow more integrated. Why is it then so difficult to behave morally? Is it because goodness is not rewarded more tangibly and generously in the world? The virtuous Pandavas endure banishment, deprivation and hardship, while the wicked Kauravas flourish in their palaces. This is why Draupadi is tempted to accept Duryodhana's view that dharma is merely a disguised form of the interest of the stronger—that people are basically selfish and they invoke dharma in order to further their own interests. Hence, she concludes that it is better to be powerful than virtuous.

One has come across people who are less than virtuous but who are successful, wealthy and powerful. They are even admired

and sometimes loved. At the same time one also knows 'good' people who end up poor, helpless, and even pitiable. One sympathizes with them for it seems reasonable to want and achieve some degree of success. Is a 'good' person likely to have as much chance of succeeding as a 'bad' person? Draupadi seems inclined to believe that the world is so structured that only the selfish, the powerful and the dishonest will have an edge in life. Yudhishthira, however, shows by his own example that there is another way to live. One need not assume that a competitive, self-centred life dedicated solely to self-advancement is the only way.

The *Mahabharata* reminds us that it is natural and desirable for human beings to want happiness and pleasure as they seek to be good. *Kama* is one of the legitimate goals of human life. The Christian denial of physical pleasure, especially sexual pleasure, is happily absent from the epic and most ancient Indian texts. So is the 'thou shalt not' approach, which makes one feel guilty, and turns one off the moral project. The notion of dharma as it emerges from the *Mahabharata* is a plural one. Being plural makes greater demands on one's reason, for human objectives sometimes conflict with each other, and this forces one to choose. The attraction of a clean ethical theory like Utilitarianism is that it attempts to resolve moral issues on the basis of a single criterion. Pluralism is more complex but no less rational. One needs to order different virtues in a hierarchy in order to help one to choose in the case of a conflict.

Dharma is supposed to uphold a certain cosmic balance and it is expected to help us to balance the plural ends of life—desire, material well being, and righteousness—when they come into conflict. Dharma sets limits on the pursuit of pleasure and wealth. In practice this implies, for example, that one maximizes one's pleasure as long as it does not diminish another's. What we have learnt so far, however, is that dharma does not do a very good job of it.