



Dharma: An Expression of Universal Order

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I

It is well known that one of the most basic and pervasive concepts in Indian thought is that of *dharma*. It is an extremely complicated concept, embracing many differing, though related, meanings, and extending to a wide range of referents. Its referents range from the entire panorama that makes up Hinduism to the right way of dressing wounds. It refers to the metaphysical entity that stands as the fundamental particle in the Buddhist process philosophy, and also to the effects of Vedic rituals. As a social concept it refers to a moral code, natural and positive law, and also to the various distinct duties of individuals.

What these various uses of “*dharma*” have in common is a normative feature. Though there are many kinds of *dharma*, they all involve the notion of regulation, and are, therefore, basically rules of action. Thus, the normative ordering of anything is said to be its *dharma*. For example, the king’s regulation of his kingdom is his *dharma* (*rājadharmā*), the regulation of natural elements or things is their *dharma* (*padārthadharmā*), and the regulation of communities is community *dharma* (*samājadharma*). The rules of life for a particular class of persons in society constitute *varṇadharmā*, the rules of life for a particular period in one’s life are known as *āśramadharmā*, and the regulation of life according to basic norms that all persons have in common despite differences in age or social class are *dharma-sādhāraṇadharmā* or *sāmānyadharmā*. These different *dharmanas* are clearly norms which provide for the ordering of human actions such that they will facilitate the achievement of certain ends or aims in life. Consequently, it is useful to examine the aims that the various *dharmanas* are intended to facilitate.

Traditionally, all human aims (*puruṣārthas*) can be grouped under four headings. (1) *Dharma* is the aim of living in accord with all the various rules that apply to a person in a particular class, stage in life, and simply as a human being. As an aim in life, rather than as a rule of conduct, *dharma* refers to “being established in *dharma*.” To become established in *dharma* it is necessary to develop the habit of observing the relevant particular *dharmanas* or moral rules. This is analogous to virtue, for if one aims at virtue, in the sense of living a virtuous life, then it is necessary to perform virtuous actions as a matter of character. (2) *Artha* is the aim of securing the various stuffs of life—such as food, shelter, power, etc.—that are requisite for a full human life in society. (3) *Kāma* is the aim of attaining satisfaction of wants and desires. (4) *Mokṣa* is the aim of being completely free from whatever is imperfect and binding. The aim of *mokṣa* is generally recognized as a spiritual aim, and sometimes, when the first three aims are interpreted as material aims in life,

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an incompatibility between the first three aims and the fourth aim is claimed. Hopefully, this article will show that there really is no incompatibility between these aims.

The ordering of life to achieve these four aims to the greatest extent possible for each individual represents the entire range of Hindu *dharma*, with the various distinctions introduced between these aims, and between the various human activities required for the achievement of these aims, resulting in the types of *dharma* recognized traditionally in India, such as *sāmānyadharmā*, *varṇadharmā*, *āśramadharmā*, etc. Since the ordering of life, which *dharma* represents, is a normative matter, it is important to try to appreciate the indigenous understanding of normative ordering that underlies the evolution of the concept of *dharma* in India.

The understanding of *dharma* as a normative concept requires two considerations. First, there is the question of the content of *dharma*. What are the specific rules that constitute each of the particular kinds of *dharma*? Second, there is the question of the justification for these rules. It is primarily with this second question that I am concerned, for although the reference of *dharma* is tied up with the content of the rules, the meaning of the term cannot be understood without considering the justification of the various rules comprising *dharma*.

The term "*dharma*" has been translated as "morality," "duty," "religion," "law," etc. But since *dharma* encompasses all of these different terms in its various uses, no one term from the English vocabulary provides an adequate translation. An important reason for this difficulty in translation is that the thought and practice making up Indian society in which this term has functioned differs considerably from that of Greco-European society. In the West, norms for human behavior have generally been understood to be man-centered and rational. The Protagorean dictum that "man is the measure of all things," and the Aristotelian conviction that man is, above all else, rational, have tended to encourage thinking of norms of action in terms of their rational design to facilitate human aims. Even in the natural law tradition of the West, where human norms are regarded as the expression of the Divine Law, the thinking is man-centered and rationalistic, for the highest natural laws are the laws for man, and the index to these divine laws is human reason (which, significantly, Austin equates with utility).

In Vedic and traditional India, on the other hand, man is regarded as a manifestation and expression of a deeper reality, which is the measure of man, not vice versa. The highest law is the orderly coursing of the highest reality in its central being. Moral and social laws are merely partial and lowly expressions of this highest law. The universe is not thought of as a collection of three kinds of being, divine, human, and natural; the latter two being created by the former. Instead, all reality is one in being and function. The

manifoldness of reality represents merely different expressions of the same central reality which, in its deepest center, is hidden from ordinary experience and reason. Within this vision of reality, since man does not confront nature as its divinely given knower and conqueror, truth is not a matter of the correspondence of propositions of reason with an independent reality. Instead, truth is a matter of realizing the inner connectedness of things, not only to each other but also to their source, which is the very center of reality. In agreement with this conception of reality, the fundamental norm of reality is not taken to be some sort of proposition to which the actual functions of things correspond but is understood to be the actual coursing (*rta*) of the central and ultimate reality from which the manifest reality has issued. The coursing of the highest reality is the fundamental norm, and the norm or rule of function (*dharma*) for individual beings is given by their very being to the extent that they participate in the central reality. It is not something added later to direct existent beings. The *dharma* of a being is given by its very being through its participation in the central and ultimate reality of which it is a manifestation; it is not something added on to the being of the individual in question in order that certain aims might be achieved.

It is this basic conception of reality as *in se* normative that must be understood to appreciate the relationship between extraordinary *dharma* (*mokṣa-dharma*) and ordinary *dharma* (*varṇadharma*, *āśramadharma*, etc.). Within this vision of reality just outlined it is a mistake to look for justification of *dharma*, in terms of the agreement of certain propositions about reality, with the kinds of aims the rules of action are intended to achieve. Instead, one must look to the agreement of life with its source.

Sometimes the matter of justification of *dharma* is considered exclusively in terms of the basic human aims (*puruṣārthas*) that the various rules (*dharma*s) are intended to facilitate. Because these aims have often been thought of as rationally designed goals, this has resulted in a misconception wherein *dharma* is understood exclusively as a rational and man-centered concern, assuming a fundamental similarity to the Greco-European understanding of norms. But in fact, *dharma* is rooted in something much more basic and central to ultimate reality than merely the manifestations of human action and reason. When this is not recognized there appears to be an irreconcilable opposition between *mokṣadharma* and the explicitly moral-social *dharma*s, for it seems that the *dharma* of *mokṣa* requires the repudiation of the moral and social aspects of human existence and is therefore in opposition to *varṇa* and *āśramadharma*. On the other hand, when it is recognized that *dharma* is rooted in the very function of the central reality which is the manifest source and function of the manifest world, then the identity of the individual existence with the being (*sat*) of the center of reality (*kendrasya kendraṁ*) is seen to represent not the repudiation of the functions of the

manifest reality, but the completion and perfection of this reality in its very source.

To show the outlines of this vision of reality and its relation to *dharma* in traditional thought, it is useful to turn to Vedic period, for here the evolution of *dharma* has its beginnings. These beginnings are, for the most part, an indispensable presupposition for the traditional understanding of *dharma* that we find in literature of the epics and *dharmaśāstras*.

II

It may be noted that the word *dharma* is derived from the root *dhṛ* which means "to support, sustain, hold together." In its widest sense it refers to that which sustains and holds together the universe itself. Although the term *dharma* occurs frequently in the Vedas, it usually occurs in connection with *yajña* ("sacrifice") rather than being used in an explicit social sense. This fact has led many modern students of Vedic thought who employ exclusive disjunctive thinking to the mistaken view that if *dharma* is always associated with *yajña* it must belong to the realm of religion and magic, and therefore has no normative significance. The fact is, however, that precisely because *dharma* refers to *yajña* or to the effects of *yajña*, it is a normative concept, for the Vedic view of *yajña* is normative. In the Vedic age *yajña* was regarded as maintaining the various processes of the world. In fact, there are many passages where the coming to be of the world is described as due to *yajña*. The world comes to be through *yajña*, is maintained by *yajña*, and man's well-being in the world is insured by *yajña*. Clearly, though *yajña* is usually translated as "sacrifice," this is no ordinary sense of sacrifice. To say, as Surama Dasgupta does, that "the Vedic people seemed to have a simple code of morals. The performance of sacrifices was regarded as the principal virtue, which was rewarded by the attainment of heaven,"¹ is to fail to appreciate the complexity and subtlety of the Vedic conception of *yajña*.

The Vedic *yajñas* are rituals, often extremely elaborate, requiring the precise intonations of various formulas by a number of priests and careful ceremonial activities spread over many days, sometimes even years. Unless we free ourselves to some extent from our quite different world view, these ritualistic activities directed toward one of the gods, or when engaged in by the gods, directed toward a higher reality, tend to appear as the superstitious beliefs of a primitive, magic-mongering people. It simply does not seem possible to us that these rituals could affect the order and function of the universe and procure for man the requested boons.

According to the conception of the effects of *yajña* (*yajñadharmā*) in the

¹ *Development of Moral Philosophy in India* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1961), p. 54.

Rgveda, the *yajña* directed to the gods moves them to respond by effecting various changes in the universe. Frequently, however, it appears that the gods do not *choose* to effect these changes but are compelled to do so by the *yajña* itself. Though the *yajña* is directed to a god, it is the activity of the *yajña*, not the god, which effects the desired change. The power of ordering the functions of this world is found in *yajña*, not in the gods. The reason for this is that the *yajña* ritual establishes the connection between this reality and the higher reality beyond. The source of this power is to be found in the identification of *yajña*, as sacrificial rite, with the “world rite,” which represents the underlying function of the universe. Thus, the gods are usually pictured as themselves engaging in *yajña* to produce their intended effects. Consequently, though *yajñadharma* refers directly to the effects of *yajña*, it indirectly refers to a higher principle of order in the universe, for the effect of *yajña* is the maintenance of the structure and order of the universe. According to this view, whatever referred to the effects of *yajña* also referred to order in the universe. It is clear, therefore, that the concept of *dharma* embodied much more than merely the effects of sacrifice as is usually understood.

The full significance of the normative aspect of Vedic *dharma* can be seen in the relation between *dharma* and *ṛta*. In the Vedas *ṛta* is one of the profoundest concepts. Literally, it means “the course of things.” Related to this, the word was used to refer to the unalterable law of producing effects and also, as A. A. Macdonell points out, “order in the moral world as truth and ‘right’ and in the religious world as sacrifice or ‘rite.’”²

The concept of *ṛta* is most often used in the *Rgveda* to signify the unchanging order of the highest reality which is the source of all order in the universe. Even such powerful *devas* as Mitra and Varuṇa are said to have obtained their power and might from *ṛta*. The Maruts, heavenly powers, are said to come from the seat of *ṛta*. The whole universe is described as being founded upon *ṛta*, and moving according to it. “The dawn follows the path of *ṛta*, the right path; as if she knew them before. She never oversteps the regions. The sun follows the path of *ṛta*.”³ *Ṛta* is the right way for all aspects of reality, human and nonhuman. As the way of right human action, it leads from evil to good as evidenced in this prayer to Indra, “O Indra, lead us on the path of *ṛta*, on the right path over all evils.”⁴

The closeness of the concept of *dharma* to this concept of *ṛta* is seen in the fact that in this world the chief duty of man is to engage in *yajña* because the very manifestation of the world, as well as its maintenance, is the effect of *yajña*. Engaging in *yajña* is the means for securing the order and function (*ṛta*) of the highest reality in *this world* (which is a manifestation of that

² *Vedic Mythology* (Strassburg, Austria: K. J. Trübner, 1897), p. 11.

³ *Rgveda* I.24.8.

⁴ *Rgveda* X.133.6.

highest reality). Since the effect of *yajña* is maintenance of order, and *ṛta* is the highest order of reality, these concepts are closely related and are clearly normative. But it would be a mistake to infer that since *dharma* and *ṛta* are normative they are not ontological, for they are both. There is no difference between the being (*sat*) of reality and its function (*ṛta*). Just as in the Upaniṣads, truth is identified with *dharma*,⁵ so in the Vedas, truth (*satya*) is identified with *ṛta*.

This identity of being and function (*sat* and *ṛta*) is one of the profoundest aspects of the Vedic vision. In *Rgveda* 10.190, it is said that “from *tapas* (heat; maybe the heat of the *yajña* fire) were born *ṛta* and *satya*. And from that (referring to *ṛta* and *satya* together as though they were one and the same), was born night, and from that the billowy sea.” *Satya* here refers to the inner being or truth of reality, and *ṛta* to the functioning of that reality. *Ṛta* here is regarded as belonging to the center of reality—to what in the *Brāhmaṇas* is referred to as the *kendrasya kendram* (center of centers), which is also identified with the *satyasa satyam* (truth of truths). This “truth of truths” (*sat*), which is also *ṛta* or the function of ultimate reality, is not the correspondence of a proposition to a reality but is the very *being* of reality. It refers to the inner or higher being of reality as opposed to the outer or merely apparent being of reality; it is the central as opposed to the peripheral; it is the higher as opposed to the lower. Expressed as *ṛta*, it is the course of central reality which is the source of direction for the peripheral, apparent, and manifest gross reality of ordinary experience.

Although the vision of reality presented in the preceding paragraph may appear to smack of later Vedāntism, it is very much Vedic. The contrast between *ayam* and *asau* (“this” and “that,” respectively) on the one hand, and *iha* and *amutra* (“here” and “there,” respectively) on the other, is found throughout the Vedic literature and is crucial for understanding the Vedic vision. The “this” and the “here” refer to what belongs to ordinary experience, or as the combination of *ayam* and *iha* in the expression “*aihika*” indicates, “this world.” The “that” and the “there” refer to the world beyond, as indicated by the expression “*āmuṣmika*.” The world of ordinary experience is not regarded as self-sufficient or self-explanatory. Something else which is “beyond” is presupposed as the source and inner reality of this ordinary world. *Asau* and *amutra* refer to the inner reality, the subtle source which is beyond, whereas *iha* and *ayam* refer to the gross and ordinary world of common experience. What is of “that world” (*āmuṣmika*) possesses *sat* and *ṛta* in their fullness. What is of “this world” only partially possesses *sat* and *ṛta* in their incomplete manifestation. Therefore, the function and being of this world requires the “support” of the being and function of a higher reality.

⁵ *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.14.

Turning to the relation between “this world” and “that world,” we find that the Vedas contain a vision of reality according to which the world of ordinary experience has evolved out of a higher and more subtle world. Not only does ordinary experience yield only a small fraction of the universe to our consciousness, but this small portion is the grossest and lowest part of reality (though it most definitely is part of reality, for the Vedic seers did not assume that being manifest and lower also meant unreal). In the worlds beyond the ordinary are to be found the sources and functions of the ordinary. The manifest is but an expression of the unmanifest. *Ṛta* and *satya*, in their fullness, belong to the unmanifest reality, and only in their lower expressions are they found in the manifest world of ordinary experience.

This fundamental assumption of the Vedic vision is responsible for the worshipful respect accorded the *ṛṣis* or seers who enunciated the wisdom of the Vedas, for they were assumed to have seen beyond the ordinary world to the hidden and unmanifest higher reality. In their vision of what lies beyond the ordinary world, they saw the relation between the manifest and the unmanifest and therein discovered the means for ensuring the orderly functioning of the higher within the lower reality of this manifest world. These means, which are like the microcosmic correlates of the macrocosmic being and function (*sat* and *ṛta*) of the unmanifest source, are the *yajñas* of the Vedas, established by the seers and gods.

Granted the importance of the Vedic distinction between what is of this ordinary world experienced here, and that higher world envisioned there through a higher consciousness, it is not surprising that almost the entire *Rgveda*, in its speculative passages, seems to be a quest for the deeper structure of reality. What appears to ordinary experience as the structure is not accepted as the ultimate structure. Although the Vedas are full of references to the functions of the *devas* (gods) and their wonderful activity, their functions are usually regarded as being lower or less than the source and center of reality. Typically, the functions of the *devas* represent cosmic functions, and therefore they are regarded as cosmic draftsmen and upholders of cosmic order. This is evident in the concern with questions such as “With what stuff was this made by them (*devas*)?” and “How did they put all this together?”

In many Vedic passages, it is clearly recognized that the *devas* are not the primary reality, and they are regarded as belonging more to “this world,” than to “that world.” Consequently, the questions of how the *devas* came to be and of what stuff and what form was there prior to the *devas* are raised in various passages.

That the Vedic *devas* are not creators of the world in the sense that the God of Judaic-Christian-Islāmic tradition is a creator is clear from the accounts of the roles of some of the important gods, such as *Tvaṣṭṛ*, *Viśvakarman*,

Hiraṇyagarbha, Prajāpati, Puruṣa, and Brahmanaspati. Tvaṣṭṛ appears to be one of the oldest *devas* of the Vedic period, prior to the mighty Indra and powerful Agni—in fact, the father or maker of the gods. Literally, Tvaṣṭṛ means “builder,” and this describes his function, because he is not regarded for creating the world but for giving it form, and giving the gods their form and function. Viśvakarman, which means “all-maker” is credited with designing the world, but not with its creation. He like Brahmanaspati (lit., “lord of the holy power or word”), is described as a smith, welding or smelting together features of a prior reality to give shape to this world. Hiraṇyagarbha (lit., “golden germ” or “fetus”), is described as evolving and then establishing this earth and heaven. He is not described as an eternal existent and is not given credit for creating reality. Prajāpati, lord of what is born, is lord, not creator.

In addition to the accounts assigning important roles in the coming into being of this world to various *devas*, none of which suggest the creation (*ex nihilo fit*) of the world by an eternally self-existent being, there are accounts such as that given in *Ṛgveda* 10.129, where prior to being and nonbeing was “That One” (*tad ekam*). “Prior to being and nonbeing” refers to reality prior to distinctions, as is made clear by the remark that “there was darkness, hidden by darkness, in the beginning. This All was an undistinguished ocean. From the potentiality enveloped by emptiness That One was born by its own *tapas* (heat; maybe sacrificial heat).” The account in these verses seems to be that of the manifestation and differentiation of a reality which was previously unmanifest and distinctionless. “That One” appears as the first manifestation, and then through desire, volition, and thinking, the processes of manifestation and differentiation proceeded to produce this world.

Man and *devas* belong to this world, the world produced through the manifestation and differentiation of that which was there prior to being and nonbeing. Consequently, though man has access to the structure and truth of this world, and though the *devas*, as super-persons have greater access and control to this world, their understanding is ordinarily limited to the manifest and differentiated reality, so that the poet in *Ṛgveda* 10.129.6 says, “Who truly knows? Who shall here proclaim it—whence they were produced, whence this creation? The gods (arose) on this side (later) by the creation of this (empiric world, to which the gods belong) ; then who knows whence it came into being?”

According to the account in *Ṛgveda* 10.90, Puruṣa, the cosmic Man, is the function and being of all this world. In the words of the seer, “The Puruṣa alone is all this universe, what has been, and what is to be.” Here, though Puruṣa is identified with all reality, that higher reality “there” (the unmanifest and central reality) and the empirical reality “here,” the distinction between “this world” and “that world” is clearly maintained, for

it is said that “in his three-quarters the Puruṣa arose to the upper regions; a quarter of him, on the other hand, came to be here below. From this (quarter) he expanded manifoldly into the things that eat and those that do not eat (animate and inanimate beings).” The three-fourths that went up represents the higher unmanifest reality, and all this manifested and differentiated reality represents only a small fraction of the total reality. Despite this distinction, however, the account is not an attempt to deny the reality of this world, for Puruṣa is not merely the source but is both source and being of this reality. It is clear that whatever of the higher becomes manifest in the lower does not cease to be higher, but exists as the higher in the lower, maintaining the lower in existence, being its support as well as its source.

The distinction between the highest unmanifest reality and the lower manifest reality and the manifestation of the latter out of the former is found also in the *Atharvaveda*. In 2.1 it is said that “Vena (perhaps a *ṛṣi*) saw that highest which was in secret, in which this All becomes of one form.” In the next stanza we find, “Let the Gandharva, who knows the immortal, declare this highest station, which is in secret. Three quarters of it are set down in secret. He who knows this shall be the Father’s Father.”

In all of the accounts of world evolution above, excepting the “*Tad Ekam*” account (though if *tapas* is interpreted to mean sacrificial heat, there is no exception here either), the world-giving or world-making function are associated with *yajña*. The rituals performed by the *devas* in making this world are the first processes of order and law in the empirical world. In “That World” it is assumed that order (*ṛta*) and being (*sat* or *satya*) have been eternally there. What the *yajña* of the *devas* accomplishes is the manifestation of that order and being in the form of the existence and orderly functioning of the differentiated reality of this world.

The Puruṣa account shows more clearly what is present in many of the other accounts also, for here undivided and unmanifest being are pictured as taking form as agency (*puruṣa*), making of itself many. This world comes from a prior reality, not from nonbeing. As the philosophical poet of *Rgveda* 10.129 realized, a reality prior to any distinctions could not be spoken of as either being or nonbeing, for all being comes neither from being nor from nonbeing. Yet he too refers to what is prior to being and nonbeing, which he calls a “distinctionless all,” just as Vena is said to have “Seen” the highest which as source of all is prior to distinctions or unmanifest, and therefore secret.

It seems clear enough that, even though the *Rgveda* surely is not a document susceptible to any monolithic interpretation, there was a widespread world view in the Vedic age which assumed that the universe had evolved from within. Further, this evolution is a change within the real, rather than the real evolving out of the unreal. There is no genuine Creator of the uni-

verse and no outside Lawgiver. The order of the processes of reality in the universe's evolution is not something distinct from that reality, and therefore being and order (*sat* and *ṛta*) are interchangeable.

The great emphasis on *yajña* in these Vedic accounts of world making and manifestation should be seen as a recognition by the seers (*ṛṣis*) of the applicability of order or law in the universe, for *yajña* represents the functioning of the inner structure or order of the universe, something called *ṛta*. The *yajña* of world-making *devas* are the analogues of human *yajña*. Human *yajña* effects *devayajña*, and since the *yajña* of the *devas* reflects the orderly rhythm and power of the cosmos, it turns out that human *yajña* is the means par excellence for connecting the functions of individual life with the orderly functions and power of the universe itself. Thus *yajña* is really *dharma* in the sense of support or sustenance, for it is what must be done to support or sustain the central coursing (*ṛta*) of reality in this world.

This explains why *ṛta*, the coursing of reality, is generally regarded as higher than the *devas*, and the *yajñas* of the *devas* and man the source of power for man and the *devas*, for the *yajña* represents the microcosmic reality of the macrocosmic *ṛta*, as is evidenced by the insistence on the strictest possible observation in performance of *yajña*. The power of *yajña* is evident also in the respect shown Agni. Agni is Fire, and most importantly fire was the essence of the early *yajña*. Although sometimes Agni is recognized as an individual *deva*, alongside Varuṇa, Indra, etc., at other times Agni is identified with the source of his power (sacrificial Fire) and then is viewed as the power of all the *devas*. Thus, in *Rgveda* 2.1.3ff., the great *devas* Indra, Viṣṇu, Brahmanaspati, Varuṇa, Mitra, Aryaman, Amśa, Tvaṣṭṛ, Rudra, Pūṣan, Savitr, and Bhaga are praised for their power and accomplishments, but they are all said to be Agni. Although these passages are usually taken to show that the Vedic period saw a development from crude polytheism to refined monotheism through henotheism, this seems rather farfetched. Since the gods are never ultimate, it may be a mistake to describe Vedic thought as any kind of theism at all. It is much more plausible to interpret these passages as a recognition that the power of the various *devas* is essentially the power of Agni, where Agni is taken not as an individual *deva* but as the power of Fire, since it is clear that the various *devas* are regarded as dependent upon *yajña* for their power, and fire is indispensable to *yajña*. Since the *yajña* is consummated by fire it is, indirectly, the effect (*dharma*) of Agni that effects the functioning of the cosmos, the *devas* merely being agents of this power.

III

The preceding paragraphs show that *dharma*, as the effect of *yajña*, represents the order and function of this world, for *yajña* establishes the connection with

the *ṛta* of the higher unmanifest reality from which this world has evolved. It is not surprising, therefore, that the later concepts of *dharma* and *karman* should replace the concept of *ṛta*, with *karman* referring to the connectedness of events, and *dharma* referring to the normative dimension of this connectedness. The law of *karman* guarantees the relatedness of all events in the world but does not provide for the regulation of events. The ordering or regulation of relations between events is accomplished by *dharma*. Just as in the Vedic view *yaज्ञa* regulated the various functions of the cosmos, so later, when attention was concentrated on social activities, *dharma* was viewed as the regulator of human relations. The term *dharma* does not come to mean something radically different; it merely is extended to refer to additional and detailed aspects of the world in a specifically social sense. The vision of a deeper reality providing for the being and regulation of this ordinary world continues to dominate Indian thought, at least through the period during which the *Dharmaśāstras* and other works on social *dharma* were compiled. The fact that attention is focused more sharply on the individual and his relation to other individuals in this later period should not be allowed to obscure this fact, for when attention shifts to the individual he comes to be seen as a microcosmos of all reality. *Dharma* is the expression of cosmic *ṛta* in human life, providing the identity of the individual reality with the higher reality. This is why the highest authority on *dharma* is generally recognized to be the person who knows the Veda and is established in *dharma*. This is, of course, a continuation of the Vedic recognition that the *ṛṣis* were able to see into the deeper reality that is the source of this world and discern there a truth or law governing all existence and sustaining the various levels of beings, providing for the deepest connections between things. This universal aspect of *dharma* is not lost when the concept takes on greater social significance, for all ordinary human *dharma* is only an aspect of the universal *dharma*, and is justified not in itself, but only in the function of the universal *dharma*, the *ṛta* of the *Ṛgveda*.

As just discussed, *dharma* means functioning in accord with reality, and just as in the Vedic vision a distinction is made between the reality of this world and the reality of that world beyond, so a distinction must be made between levels of *dharma*. The higher *dharma* means being in accord with the higher reality out of which the lower evolved. The lower *dharma* means being in accord with the lower manifested reality of ordinary experience. *Mokṣa-dharma*, as the higher *dharma*, represents harmony with the higher distinctionless reality, which is not only the source but also the inner being of the individual. The lower *dharma*s represent a harmony of the various aspects of manifested reality (especially social aspects) with each other. But since all beings have their source and inner being in a higher distinctionless reality, there is no conflict between the social *dharma*s of *varṇa* and *āśrama* and the extra—social *dharma* of *mokṣa*.

The various social *dharma*s are essentially rules for the ordering of human activity directed toward *artha* and *kāma*. Since accumulating the various goods required for life and the satisfaction of wants and desires made possible through these goods are the consuming objects of attention for most people throughout most of their lives, a majority of human activity is tied up with these aims. Consequently, this is a major area for regulation of human conduct. Since the pursuits of these aims are affected by one's social position, age, marital status, profession, etc., the *dharma*s or rules pertaining to these pursuits are distinguished in various ways. For example, the particular age of the world in which one lives is a factor, and there is, thus, in this age a particular *dharma* or set of rules that would not be appropriate to an age other than *kaliyuga*, and there is a *yuddhadharma* which represents the particular rules for fighting a war. But the major factors relevant to the conduct of human life have traditionally been sorted out into the *dharma*s of class (*varṇadharmā*), stage in life (*āśrama*), and human life in general (*sāmānyā* or *sādhāraṇadharmā*).

Both sources of *dharma*, such as the tradition and practices of *dharma*-knowing persons, the Veda, reason, the conduct of virtuous persons, applicability, wholesome custom, etc., and the subject matter of the texts on *dharma*, such as rules for interpretation of texts, taxation, sexual intercourse, treatment of elders and guests, payments on debts, ruling a kingdom, commerce, marriage, etc., reveal that the primary meaning of *dharma* is that of a rule of action. The recognized sources of *dharma* provide likely answers to the question: "How can I know what is the right or correct thing to do with respect to this matter?" And the answers, given in the texts on *dharma*, consist of rules which are to be applied to specific cases. Taken all together, the various *dharma*s provide a complete set of rules for right living, providing for the ordering of life in such a way that one's life will fulfill its highest function or purpose.

Granted that *dharma* means ordering of actions in such a way that life is lived correctly or right, it is important to ask for the criterion for determining rightness. The sources of *dharma* given in the various texts represent an answer to this question, but a quick glance at the sources given reveals the circularity of the answer. It is of little help to say that *dharma* is what "those who know" say it is, for the question is about the criteria for *knowing* what is *dharma*. If, however, we pay attention to the identification of the persons who know *dharma* with the *ṛṣi*s and those who know the Veda, we can see that the assumption of the Vedic view that the seers had penetrated the forms of this lower reality and seen the connections between this and the higher reality, which is its source, and therefore knew the eternal rhythms of that higher reality coursing through this manifest reality, is still alive in India at this time. The ultimate justification of *dharma* as the ordering of life is not given

by any human criterion ; it is given by the resulting harmony with the higher reality which is the source and inner being of this lower reality.

This is expressed quite clearly in the *Gītā*, where the *dharma* of man is not regarded as something imposed from the outside but is the inner law of his being. According to this view, every person has his own *dharma* (*svadharma*) which is the innermost law of his being, which serves to regulate his conduct, his righteousness, and his very sense of right and wrong. In the *Gītā*, one's *svadharma*, as his essential principle of being and function is inseparably linked up with his position in society. Thus when Arjuna, not knowing whether to fight or run, says to Kṛṣṇa, "I am confused about *dharma*, I beseech you, tell me the better thing to do," he is advised to do whatever is in accord with his nature. Kṛṣṇa answers Arjuna by saying, "considering your own *dharma*, you should not flee. For a *kṣatriya* (warrior) nothing is better than a just war. . . . But if you renounce your own *dharma* and refuse to fight this righteous war, then certainly you will incur sin."⁶ This is followed by the advice, "better is one's own *dharma*, though imperfectly performed, than the *dharma* of another well performed. Better is death in the doing of one's own *dharma*: the *dharma* of another is fraught with peril."⁷

Clearly the concept of *dharma* in the *Gītā* includes the notion of a rule of action, as Arjuna is asking for a rule to apply in this particular case, and Kṛṣṇa supplies the rule by reminding Arjuna that among the duties accruing to the office of the warrior is the duty of fighting the just war. But more is at stake than just the duties attending a particular job. If it were only that Arjuna must fight because he has the job of being a warrior, then he could give up that job and take up another, say, teaching the Veda. But this seems to be ruled out by the warning that it is better to die doing one's own job than to take up the job of another. The justification for the conclusion that Arjuna ought to die at his job rather than take up another, is that Arjuna is peculiarly well suited for his present job ; it is his nature to be a warrior. His very being is to be a warrior. His being might have been different, in which case it would be contrary to his nature to fight. But, his nature being what it is, he would be going contrary to his nature if he did not fight this war, thus doing something that would tend to destroy his entire being. Therefore, he must do his duty and fight. It is his *dharma* because he is a *kṣatriya*, and he is a *kṣatriya* because this is his nature. To maintain one's own being and the order of the universe, one must act in accord with one's own peculiar nature. In fact, acting according to one's own nature, and thereby contributing to the order and maintenance of society and the entire universe, is regarded as a form of worship of God: "By worshipping Him from whom all beings proceed and by whom the

⁶ *Bhagavad Gītā* II.33.

⁷ *Ibid.*, III.35.

whole universe is pervaded—by worshipping Him through the performance of *dharma* does a man obtain perfection.”⁸ The very next verse after the one just quoted repeats the advice given earlier: “Better is one’s own *dharma*, though imperfect, than the *dharma* of another well performed. He who does the *dharma* ordained by his own nature incurs no sin.”

Thus it would appear that in the *Gītā* *dharma* has much in common with *dharma* in the Veda, for in both places *dharma* is what is to be done and in both places *dharma* is what is to be done because doing so maintains and supports the entire universe. Of course, in the *Ṛgveda*, the reason *dharma*, as including *ṛta*, is held to maintain and support the universe is that everything is thought to be regulated by *yajña*, whereas in the *Gītā*, the reason *dharma* is thought to maintain and regulate the activities of the universe is that the very nature of beings constitutes their *dharma*. Therefore, to realize their natures, all beings must act in accord with *dharma*.

It follows from the preceding analysis, that if *dharma* is determined by the inner being of the individual, regulating his various activities so as to provide a harmony of outward empirical manifestations and the inner reality which is the source and deeper reality of these manifestations, then there is no conflict between the social *dharma*s and the extra-social *dharma* of *mokṣa*. There would be a conflict only if there were two basically different kinds of beings, human being and spiritual being. But the world view underlying *dharma* provides for only one reality, although it recognizes a variety of manifestations of that one reality. The higher is not a different reality; it is merely less manifest and differentiated than the lower reality. The individual who has achieved *mokṣa* is not a different being from the social individual doing his social *dharma*. But he has realized the identity of his being with that of the higher unmanifest reality.

⁸ *Ibid.*, XVIII.46.