

CONTEXTUAL MORALITY IN THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

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ABSTRACT: ‘Telling truth is good.’ Why is it so? This question not only interrogates the authenticity and validity of this particular principle but moral principles all together. It is said that moral principles should be universal and absolute in nature. Moral principles should be followed even if the world goes into doom. This article explores the justification and grounds of moral principles. However, the article concentrates on the debate evolved in the great epic the Mahābhārata from India and proposes that the epic votaries for a contextual understanding of moral principles.

KEY WORDS: *dharma*, Mahābhārata, moral universalism, contextualism, deontology.

Many people read the Mahābhārata as a text delineating *dharma*, i.e. the universal moral order. Obeying one’s *dharma* or moral duty without considering consequence is its niche. In the form of Bhishma Pitāmaha’s promises or Yudhiṣṭhira’s moral obligation, many people opine, the Mahābhārata champions a crude kind of deontological morality. Moral codes are absolute, universal and irrevocable. This urges for moral action without consideration of consequence. Many people allege that Bhishma, the grand old man’s position is quite illogical and ridiculous since he protected and supported the evil knowingly only because of certain hollow promises without taking account of consequence. Yudhisthira’s actions are also ridiculed in the same ground that he invites immense misfortune for himself, his family and his kingdom only in the name of certain empty idea of *dharma* or universal principles. However, this is only one aspect of the Mahābhārata. In fact the Mahābhārata presents a debate in different moral theories. Krishna presents an alternative to this approach. Disobeying certain principles otherwise considered morally obligatory, Krishna brings in contextuality into the whole debate. Provoking Yudhisthira to tell a piece of lie to

Dronāchārya about his son Aswathāmā's death, or instigating Arjuna to kill Karna when he is in distress, Krishna heralds that morally approved actions are contextual or context specific. This is not only Krishna who brings contextualism in to the Mahābhārata. Besides Krishna, other votaries such as maharshi Vyāsa also championed for contextual morality in the Mahābhārata.

Enumeration of the characteristics of dharma has occupied a central stage in the Mahābhārata. The nature of *dharma* is also debated in the good length. However, in the epic, the two are so intermingled that the multilayered characteristics of *dharma* question the absolute nature of it. Maharshi Vyāsa enlists nine characteristics of *dharma* in one of the chapters of the Śāntiparvan (37.7) as follows:

adattasyānupādānam, dānamadhyayanam, tapah, /
Ahiṃsā satyamakrodhah, ksamejyā dharmalakṣanam, //

Here it is stated that non-taking of anything that has not been given by the owner of that thing (i. e., not stealing or forcibly taking away something that belongs to others), charity, study of scriptures (especially the *Vedas*), practice of austerities, non-violence, truthfulness, absence of anger, forbearance, and performance of sacrifices/worship of deities are the markers of dharma. If these markers are considered to be the characteristics of moral duties, these should be performed by or meant for all and sundry. However, there are some characteristics that cannot be performed by all people. For example, study of scriptures was only permitted to the *trivarnikas* (i.e. *Brāhmaṇas*, *ksatriyas* and *vaiśyas*). Similarly, certain sacrifices are only meant for householders (*grahasthas*). Thus, the possibility of all these various expediencies in the dharma invites a debate about the nature of *dharma*.

Whether *dharma* is absolute and universal or contextual or situational is an apple of discord in the Mahābhārata. In the prima facie reading, one can smell an absolutistic or universal nature of dharma in the Mahābhārata. As mentioned earlier, in the form of Bhis'ma, the doyen's promise or Yudhiṣhira's behaviour, the Mahābhārata presents the worth of universal moral order. Even many a time Krishna also sounds like the harbinger of deontological morality. Thus the sloka:

yadā yadā hi dharmasya glanir bhabati bhārata /
abhythānam dharmasya tadātnamam, srujanyahm, //

For the protection of *dharma* the lord takes birth. For the establishment of *dharma* everything can be sacrificed but not the vice versa. However, many a time Krishna seems to deviate from this. Krishna persuades Arjuna to kill Karna when latter's chariot

got stocked which is against the law of the battle. Similarly, he persuades Yudhishtira to suppress fact so that Dronāchārya can be butchered. How to account these deviations? For Krishna mere laws are not *dharma* and therefore important. For Kṛṣṇa *dharma* refers to welfare of the society (*lokasamgraha*). Kṛṣṇa claims that laws are meant for sustenance of *lokasamgraha*. Laws are not followed for the law's sake. If there is one law, that is the establishment of *lokasamgraha*. Joseph Fletcher in his seminal book *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* also maintains similar stand. For Fletcher, no laws are absolute if at all only *agāpē* or the heavenly love. All laws are directed towards love best attained. Hence, for the betterment of the society, the Mahābhārata pleads that laws should admit contextual exigency.

The inefficiency of laws and expediency of situational morality is beautifully delineated in the Mahābhārata. In the Mahābhārata, terms like *āpaddharma* or *āvasthikadharmā* are used to refer contextual ethics. *Āvasthikadharmā* denotes to *avasthā* or situation in which moral decisions are made. In the words of S. K. Belvalkar, the editor of *Sāntiparvan*, *āpaddharma* literally means 'duties of the king in abnormal time of stress and struggle, which are to be adopted in circumstances wherein a king would be justified in transcending the commonly accepted ethical maxims in the interest of the still higher demands of the welfare of the state and of the whole humanity'.¹ The scripture vehemently recognizes such *āvastikvisayas* (situational factors) which can alter moral decision making.

Maharshi Vyāsa proffers the most compact formulation of the basic principle underlying the adoption of *Āpaddharma* in the *Rājadharmā* section of *Sāntiparvan* (37.8):

ya eva dharmah, so' dharmo' des'e kāle pratisthitah. /
ādānāmanrtam, himsā dharmo vyāvasthikah smrtah. //

Through this verse *Vyāsa* dictates that whether a certain action is an instance of *dharma* or *adharma* depends on the situation or circumstance in which action takes place. What is *adharma* (e.g. stealing, telling lie and violence or killing) in a normal situation may be *dharma* in an abnormal situation (*āpadavasthā*). Similarly, what is *dharma* (e.g. telling the truth) in a normal situation (*svābhābikavasthā*) may be *adharma* in an abnormal situation (wherein telling truth would be harmful to an innocent person). The *Mahābhārata*, through jubilant instances enlists such contextual

¹ Belvalkar, S.K. 'Introduction', in S.K. Belvalkar (ed.), *Mahābhārata (Critical Edition)*, vol.16. Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1966, (clxxi, ccxi).

compulsions where one has to deviate from the law. In the *Dronaparvan* (164.99), for example urging *Yudhisthira* to tell a piece of lie, Śhrīkrṣṇa opines that one does not incur the sin of telling a lie when it is told for saving the life of someone- indeed, in such cases, a lie become superior to a true statement:

*sa bhavāṃstrātu no dronāt satyājyāyo' nrtam bhavet /
anrtam jībitasyārthe vadanna sprṣyate' nrtaih.//*

The *Mahābhārata* also enlists the criteria of conditionality where dharma should be envisioned as *Āpaddharma*. In the *Āpaddharma* section of *Sāntiparvan*, such criteria are instructed through various concrete cases. The criteria manifested through such cases don't suggest making of certain universal laws out of them but to suggest them the situation sensitivity in applying or deviating certain laws. The story of *Caṇḍālavivāmitrasamyāda* in the *Āpaddharma* section described how taboos regarding food can be ignored during the time of stress. It also states the condition under which even theft is permitted. At the juncture of *tretā* and *dvāpara* aeons (*Yugas*), the normal life of people was totally disrupted by a drought lasted for twelve years and the resultant famine. Even the sages let their hermitage and normal chores of penance in order to search livelihood. During this trying times, sage *Viśvāmitra* who had come to a village inhabited by *Caṇḍālas* (who were considered to be untouchable, since against the stipulation of scriptures they ate the meat of dogs and hence were called *s'vapaca* or *s'vapāka*) and failed to get any food by way of alms. Weakened by the enforced fasting for a longtime, he fainted near the door of a *Caṇḍāla* household. At night, on regaining consciousness, he found that in the house some portions of dog carcass that even the *Caṇḍālas* had considered to be inedible. *Viśvāmitra* decided to steal the dog meat. He also remembered the scriptural rule that in such cases of stealing for the sake of survival one should first choose the household of someone who is inferior in caste and that in such cases, taking something without the consent of its owner did not amount to theft.²

Discovering *Viśvāmitra* stealing the dog's meat *Caṇḍāla* requests the sage not to commit the act. Because, for the *Caṇḍāla*, by doing this *Viśvāmitra* commits at least four sins which fetch him *adharmā*. First, it was an act of stealing which was *adharmā*. Second, what was being stolen was the flesh of dog, which was a strict taboo for *Viśvāmitra*.

² Belvalkar, S.K. "Sāntiparvan", in S.K. Belvalkar (ed.), *Mahābhārata* (Critical Edition), vol.16. Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1966, 139.37-39.

Third, the flesh was from so despicable a limb of the dog that even the *Candāla* refrained from eating it. Fourth, the flesh was taken from the house of an untouchable *Candāla* which was also supposed to be out of bounds for a sage like Vis'vāmitra. Vis'vāmitra however convinced the *Candāla* the appropriateness of such action since the act is done in an abnormal situation (*āpadavasthā*). Vis'vāmitra saved his life by eating this flesh after consecrating it and offering it to the deities.³

A similar anecdote is also found at the *Mārjāramūsīkasamvāda* in the *āpaddharma* section of *Sāntiparvan*, where two mortal antagonistic creatures could enter into temporary truce for mutual benefit in an abnormal condition. A mouse used to live in a burrow under a huge banyan tree on the branch of which a cat used to stay. One day the cat was trapped in a snare put up by a hunter. Delighted by this sight the mouse came out of the burrow to eat some flesh used by the hunter as bait. All of the sudden the mouse discovered two other mortal enemies: a mongoose on the ground and an owl on the branch. The mouse could realize that the only way to save its life was to ask the entrapped cat for shelter because like the mouse, the cat was also in great danger and, since the mouse could also help the cat by gnawing through the ropes of the snare, it ought not to harm the mouse if it valued its own life. The cat agreed and requested the mouse to cut the rope fast. But the mouse cut it slowly and ensured the cat that it would be freed before the hunter reached. Towards the morning, the disappointed mongoose and the owl went away and as soon as the hunter arrived there, the mouse cut the last string in the snare so that it could enter its burrow and the cat could climb the tree at the same time. After the departure of the disappointed hunter, the cat repeatedly requested the mouse to come out from its burrow since they are now friends. But the mouse declined to come out in spite of such entreaties. It told the cat that friendship and enmity are not permanent- they are formed according to one's self interest. Hence there are times when a friend can become an enemy and an enemy can turn into friend. It all depends on situations.⁴ The friendship between the cat and the mouse was formed earlier since both of them were endangered, and with the cessation of that danger, the resultant friendship also comes to an end.⁵ Some might ridicule this story by equating it with sheer matter of prudence or at the best matters of diplomacy; it does not deal

³ Ibid 139.24-88

⁴ Belvalkar, S.K. "Sāntiparvan," in S.K. Belvalkar (ed.), *Mahābhārata (Critical Edition)*, vol.16. Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1966, 136.134-35.

⁵ Ibid- 136.156

directly with any moral issue. To rebuff such a view, Prabal Kumar Sen writes, “It, however, illustrates the maxim that in abnormal situations, one may have to adopt some policy which one may not even dream of in a normal situation. But it is easy to see how this principle of expediency can also be extended to decisions that involve moral choice.”⁶

In occasions *Bhisma* also deviates from the so called moral laws. He believes that a *Ksytriya* king could forcibly take other’s property in order to build his treasury in time of distress. *Bhisma* also said in the *S’antiparvan* that there are cases wherein telling a truth amounts to telling a lie, and vice versa:

*bhabet satyam, na vaktavyam, vaktavyamanrtam, bhavet/
yatranrtam, bhavet satyam, satyam, vāpyanrtam, bhabet // (S’antiparvan 110.5)*

Bhisma enlists five such cases where one can be allowed to utter false statements. Those are made either (a) in jest, or (b) to women, or (c) during marriage, or (d) in the interest of one’s teacher, or (e) for saving one’s own life:

*na narmayuktam, vacanam, hinasti na strisu rājan na vivāhakāle /
na gurvarthe nātmano jivitārthe pancānrtānyāhurapātakāni // (S’antiparvan 159.28)*

Today some of these cases seem to be unjustified such as lying. However, *Bhisma* himself states that the list is not exhaustive and should be decided by the application of reason:

*tadrs’o’yamanupras’no yatra dharmah, sudurvacah, /
duskarah, pratisankhyātum, tarkenātra vyavasyanti // (S’antiparvan 110.9)*

In a similar view, *Maharsi Vyasa* also pleads that if *dharma* varies due to variation in the situation, then the collective decision about it taken by 10 scholars of *Vedas* or three scholars of *Dharmas’hāstras* should be taken as final. So it can be said that even though the *Mahābhārata* banks on authority i.e. the scriptures particularly the *Vedas*, it always keeps the door open for reasoning to resolve moral dilemmas. The *Mahābhārata* through the propagation of *S’rikrishna* presents an alternative value system to deontological moral reasoning. There are varieties of accounts presented for *S’rikrishna*’s enigmatic persona. *Jonardon Ganery* writes:

Appearances notwithstanding, there is indeed a consistency in *krishna*’s characterization. His role in the great epic, it seems, is to oversee the unfolding

⁶ Sen, Prabal Kumar, “Moral Doubts, Moral Dilemmas and Situation Ethics in the *Mahābhārata*” in *Mahābhārata Now: Narration, Aesthetics, Ethics*, Arindam Chakrabarti, and Sibaji Bandyopadhyay (eds.) Routledge Publications, New Delhi, 2014, p. 164.

of a chain of events that is destined to be; and he intervenes whenever human beings threaten to throw things off courses, whether it be because of their moral weakness or indeed because of their moral strength.”⁷

One line of explanation is as Das suggests that being super human; he is not bound by the norm of consistency or the moral rules that govern human conduct.⁸ Yet another line of defence is to suggest that Śrīkrishna was setting a new paradigm, whereby moral laws became flexible, unlike the rigid moral codes that one encounters in the Rāmāyana.⁹ The Mahābhārata specifically suggests that while truth (*satya*) reigns supreme in the realm of *devas* and falsehood (*anrta*) in that of *asuras*, there is an intermixture of truth and falsity in the human sphere (Śāntiparvan 183.1-4). Hence, a perfectly satisfactory solution to our moral problems cannot always be found in this imperfect world inhibited by imperfect human beings. That stands for contextualism in morality.

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⁷ Ganeri, Jonardan. 2007. *The Concealed Art of the Soul: Theories of Self and Practice of Truth in Indian Ethics and Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 69-70.

⁸ Das, Gurucharan, 2009, *The Difficulty of being good: On the subtle art of Dharma*, New Delhi: Allan Lane, p. 201.

⁹ Matilal, Bimal K. 2002, *Ethics and Epics*, ed. Jonardan Ganeri. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 34.

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