

Concept of Dharma and Moral Dilemma in the Mahābhārata: Philosophical Perspectives on Ethical Governance

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Mahābhārata's treatment of dharma and its bearing on ethical governance, addressing a gap between textual reconstructions of Rājadharmā as a governance doctrine, literary readings of moral dilemmas, and comparative political theory, which have proceeded separately. The study integrates these registers within a single framework, testing whether the situational logic governing personal ethical crises in the epic also explains the structure of Rājadharmā as a theory of kingship. The method combines close textual analysis of the epic's primary sources with comparative philosophical analysis, restricted to points where verified textual evidence supports a specific comparison rather than broad conceptual analogy. Reading four paradigmatic dilemmas (Arjuna's crisis at Kurukṣetra, Yudhiṣṭhira's ambiguous half-truth, Bhishma's lifelong vow, and Karna's loyalty to an unjust patron) the study shows the epic dramatizing competing ethical demands without resolving them into a single doctrine. Turning to the Rājadharmānūśāsana in the Śāntiparvan, it reconstructs the epic's theory of kingship as protection and paternal impartiality, continuous with the personal dilemmas examined earlier. Comparison with Aristotelian practical wisdom, Lockean and Rawlsian contractarian theory, and Kantian universalizability clarifies this reading by contrast as much as by resemblance. The paper's original contribution is a reading of Rājadharmā as an ethics of relational protection, rather than either rule-bound duty or contractarian exchange, developed through integrating textual, literary, and comparative scholarship rather than any single register alone.

Keywords: Dharma; Rājadharmā; Mahābhārata; moral dilemma; ethical governance; Indian political thought

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INTRODUCTION

The Mahābhārata does not resolve the question of right action; it stages it, repeatedly, through characters who are each convinced of their own dharma and each shown, by the text itself, to be only partly right. This paper takes that staging seriously as philosophy rather than as narrative ornament. Bimal Krishna Matilal

(1989) frames the entire project of reading the epic ethically around this premise: dharma, for the Mahābhārata's own characters, "is at least sometimes dictated by the constraints or the contingency of the situation", a quality the epic itself names *āvasthika*, situational dharma (Matilal, 1989, p. 10). This

situational quality is not a failure of the concept but, on Matilal's reading, close to its essence: he describes the "malleability" of practical wisdom in the epic as comparable to "the ever-elusive nature of dharma-ethics" itself (Matilal, 1989, p. 18).

Arvind Sharma's (2000) etymological account supports this reading from a different direction. Sharma traces dharma to the Vedic *rta*, meaning "course" and, originally, "cosmic order" (Sharma, 2000, p. 104); though *rta* and *dharma* are etymologically distinct terms, he argues they "mesh semantically," and the root meaning that survives across both is that "Dharma is that which maintains, gives cohesion and thus strength to any given thing, to reality" (Sharma, 2000, p. 105). Dharma, on this account, is not first a rule but a *holding-together*, a description that anticipates the paper's later argument that Rājadharmā is best understood as an ethics of protection rather than of rule-following.

Radhakrishnan's (1929) account of Indian ethical thought generalizes this irreducibility. He argues that "the Indian felt that truth was many-sided, and different views contained different aspects of truth which no one could fully express" (Radhakrishnan, 1929, p. 49), and, discussing the Mahābhārata specifically, observes that "conflicting ideas are collected together in one whole," integrating Vedic polytheism, Upaniṣadic monism, and Sāṃkhya dualism without forcing a resolution (Radhakrishnan, 1929, p. 484). The reconciliation of divergent doctrines, he suggests, is often itself justified within the tradition by the idea that different teachings "suit the varying weakness of human understanding" (Radhakrishnan, 1929, p. 48).

Read together, these three sources (Matilal's situational dharma, Sharma's etymology of cohesion, and Radhakrishnan's many-sidedness) set the terms for this paper's argument: that the Mahābhārata's treatment of governance cannot be extracted as a single rule or maxim, and that any comparative reading against Western moral or political theory must proceed dilemma by dilemma rather than doctrine by doctrine.

Original Contribution of the Study

This study's contribution lies less in introducing new material than in reading existing material together. Textual scholarship on Rājadharmā as a governance doctrine, literary scholarship on individual moral dilemmas, and comparative political theory have generally proceeded as separate conversations; this paper reads them through a single argument, treating the protection-centered logic identified in the Rājadharmānūsāsana as continuous with the situational reasoning that governs Arjuna's, Yudhiṣṭhira's, Bhishma's, and Karna's personal crises, rather than treating governance doctrine and

personal ethics as separate subjects that happen to share a text. This integration matters because a claim about Rājadharmā's character cannot be fully tested against the doctrinal material alone; it must also hold against the dilemmas the epic uses to dramatize dharma in practice. For the same reason, this study deliberately limits its comparative philosophical claims (to Aristotle, Kant, Locke, Rawls, and Machiavelli) to points where verified textual evidence supports the specific comparison, rather than extending the argument through broader conceptual analogy. This constraint is meant to strengthen both fields it touches: it asks Mahābhārata scholarship to state its comparative claims precisely enough to be checked, and it offers comparative political philosophy a case examined on the epic's own textual terms rather than assimilated to a prior theoretical framework.

Literature Review

The secondary literature available to this study falls into four groups, each engaged critically rather than descriptively below.

Textual and philosophical scholarship on the epic itself is anchored by Matilal (1989), whose edited volume treats the epic's central episodes as genuine moral dilemmas: situations in which an agent is committed to two or more real obligations that cannot jointly be honored (Matilal, 1989, p. 6). Within the same volume, T. S. Rukmani's essay observes that the Mahābhārata "devotes much of its attention to the rājadharmas" and describes the king as "the maker of the four ages" (Matilal, 1989, p. 25), while Y. Krishan's contribution in the same volume defines rājadharmā as a form of *guṇa dharma* (the specific duty attached to an office or institution rather than to a person as such) and identifies exertion (*utthāna*) as "the root of rājadharmā" (Matilal, 1989, p. 57). Alf Hiltebeitel's work extends this textual scholarship into character-focused analysis; his reading of Karna in *Reading the Fifth Veda* treats Karna's loyalty to Duryodhana under the sign of *ānṛśamsya*, non-cruelty, arguing that Karna tries to "persevere in the conduct of noncruelty that befits a good man" even while refusing to abandon an unjust patron (Hiltebeitel, 2011, p. 426), and calls him "the tragic model of true, loyal friendship" (Hiltebeitel, 2011, pp. 471–472).

Translations and critical apparatus of the primary text are represented by Fitzgerald's (2004) scholarly translation of Book 12, which includes an extended introduction to the Rājadharmānūsāsana (Fitzgerald, 2004, pp. 79–164), and by Debroy's complete critical-edition-based translation, whose ten volumes supply access to episodes (Bhishma's vow (Debroy, 2010, Vol. 1, Section Seven, Sambhava Parva, Chapter 94), the Ashvatthāmā half-truth (Debroy, 2010–2014, Vol. 6, Section Seventy-One, Drona-Vadha Parva, Chapter

1141 (164)), Draupadī's question (Debroy, 2011, Vol. 2, Book 2, Section 60, Verse 7)) that fall outside the single book Fitzgerald translates. The Radhakrishnan (1948) and Zaehner (1969) Gītā translations supply the textual basis for Arjuna's crisis and the doctrine of *niṣkāma karma*. Kane's *History of Dharmaśāstra* (Volume I for the semantic history of the term dharma itself, Volume III for its dedicated treatment of Rājadharmā) supplies the discipline's standard secondary-scholarly account of both topics (Kane, 1930, Vol. 1; Kane, 1946, Vol. 3), and is engaged throughout the sections below rather than treated as a missing source.

Comparative Western moral and political philosophy enters this study through five confirmed sources: Weber's (1965) *Politics as a Vocation*, Locke's (1988) *Two Treatises of Government* in the Laslett edition, Kant's *Groundwork* in the Gregor translation, Rawls's (1999) *A Theory of Justice*, and Aristotle's treatment of *phronēsis* in Book Six of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, verified from Greenwood's (1909) dedicated scholarly edition of that book rather than the Irwin translation originally sought. Machiavelli's *The Prince* itself is present in the library, but the available excerpts contained no primary-text passages; where Machiavelli's argument is discussed below, it is engaged through two mediated routes: Das's (2010) direct quotation, and, more substantially, Kane's (1946) own characterization of specific epic passages as containing what he calls "Machiavellian advice."

Contemporary political theory and comparative justice is represented by Sen's (2009) *The Idea of Justice*, whose distinction between *nīti* (organizational correctness) and *nyāya* (realized justice), including the concept of *mātsyanyāya*, "justice in the world of fish" (Sen, 2009, pp. 20–22); Sen applies directly to the Mahābhārata, reading "the Arjuna-Krishna debate... through the lens of *nyāya*... versus *nīti*" (Sen, 2009, p. 213). Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) account of democratic "guardrails" (mutual toleration and institutional forbearance (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, pp. 102–106)) supplies the contemporary comparison used in the final section. Pratap Bhanu Mehta's *The Burden of Democracy*, which the original conception of this paper intended to use for India-specific contemporary grounding, could not be located in the verified research library and is not cited below.

Theoretical grounding for the category of "moral dilemma" itself is supplied by Nussbaum's (1986) *The Fragility of Goodness*, verified from the first Cambridge University Press edition. Nussbaum opens the book by arguing that human excellence is inherently vulnerable, dependent not only on an agent's own effort but on external circumstance, relationship, and fortune (Nussbaum, 1986, pp. 1–2),

and asks how moral praise and blame can be assigned once goodness is understood to be partly constituted by what lies outside the agent's control (Nussbaum, 1986, pp. 2–3). Her central analytical move for this paper's purposes comes shortly after: she argues that genuine ethical conflict arises when an agent holds more than one value as serious and binding, and circumstances arrange themselves so that those values cannot all be honored at once, a structure of conflict irreducible to a simple contest between right and wrong (Nussbaum, 1986, pp. 6–7). She further argues that tragic literature is not merely illustrative of such conflicts but is itself a form of ethical inquiry into contingency, vulnerability, and conflicting commitment that discursive philosophical prose can struggle to capture on its own (Nussbaum, 1986, pp. 12–15). This last point supplies a methodological warrant, independent of any claim within the Mahābhārata scholarship itself, for treating the epic's dramatized dilemmas below as a form of ethical philosophy rather than as illustrations of a doctrine stated elsewhere.

Research Gap

The literature surveyed above establishes three things separately without yet joining them. Textual and philological scholarship (Kane's doctrinal reconstruction of Rājadharmā and Fitzgerald's and Debroy's critical-edition-based translations) has secured what the primary text says about kingship as protection. Character-focused literary scholarship (Matilal's account of situational dharma and genuine moral conflict, and Hiltebeitel's reading of figures such as Karna) has secured how individual dilemmas are dramatized within the epic. Comparative political and moral theory (Sen's *nīti/nyāya* distinction applied directly to the Krishna-Arjuna debate, and Nussbaum's definition of ethical conflict as the collision of jointly binding values) has secured vocabulary for connecting epic material to contemporary theory. What remains insufficiently explored is the connection *between* these three registers within a single sustained argument: existing scholarship rarely asks whether the same textual and conceptual resources that explain Arjuna's, Yudhiṣṭhira's, Bhishma's, and Karna's personal dilemmas also explain the structure of Rājadharmā as a governance doctrine, or whether the comparative parallels drawn to Aristotle, Kant, Locke, and Machiavelli hold up once tested against the epic's own specific textual evidence rather than asserted by analogy. An integrated study is needed because Rājadharmā's claim to be more than rule-following depends on the same situational logic that governs the personal dilemmas, a dependency the literature notes in passing but does not trace systematically. The present study addresses this gap by reading the

personal dilemmas and the Rājadharmā material through the same primary sources and the same verified secondary scholarship, introducing each comparative philosophical parallel only where the textual evidence available to this study directly supports it. The discussion turns first to the concept of Dharma itself.

Methodology

This study proceeds by close textual analysis of primary sources combined with comparative philosophical analysis, restricted throughout to points where verified textual evidence supports a specific comparison rather than broad conceptual analogy. The primary-source corpus consists of Fitzgerald's (2004) scholarly translation of Book 12 for the Rājadharmānuśāsana, Debroy's (2010–2014) complete critical-edition-based translation for episodes falling outside Book 12, the Gita Press (2001) edition of the Vidura Nīti, and the Radhakrishnan (1948) and Zaehner (1969) translations of the Bhagavadgītā. Secondary scholarship on the epic and on Dharmaśāstra (Kane (1930, 1946), Matilal (1989), Hiltebeitel (2011), and Sharma (2000)) is read alongside this primary material rather than substituted for it. Comparative philosophical material (Aristotle, Kant, Locke, Rawls, and Machiavelli) is introduced only where a specific textual passage supports the specific point of comparison being made; where such support was not available, the comparison is not drawn.

The four case studies examined in the Moral Dilemmas section (Arjuna, Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhishma, and Karna) were selected because each instantiates a distinct structure of ethical conflict rather than a repetition of the same pattern: Arjuna's crisis pits personal conscience against role-obligation, Yudhiṣṭhira's pits truthfulness against consequence, Bhishma's pits personal vow against institutional cost, and Karna's pits loyalty against justice. Reading these four together, rather than any single one in isolation, is what allows the paper to test whether the situational logic they share also explains the structure of Rājadharmā, as argued in the Research Gap above.

All substantive claims in this study are supported by verifiable primary or secondary sources and are referenced to specific editions and page numbers wherever possible. Claims that could not be verified through the available source base were excluded from the analysis or explicitly identified as requiring further verification.

Concept of Dharma

Meaning of Dharma

As established above, dharma resists definition by a single formula. Sharma's etymological analysis is the most precise resource available to this study: dharma's root sense is cohesion, "that which maintains... any

given thing, to reality" (Sharma, 2000, p. 105), tracing back to Vedic *ṛta* as cosmic "course" or order (Sharma, 2000, p. 104). Kane's independent philological survey of the word's R̥gvedic usage confirms and sharpens this account: he traces *dharmān* from the root *dhṛ* through an initial sense of supporter or sustainer, through "religious ordinances or rites," before it stabilizes into "fixed principles or rules of conduct" and finally the settled classical sense of a person's duties and privileges as a member of a particular community, caste, and stage of life (Kane, 1930, Vol. 1, pp. 1–2). This is not merely a linguistic curiosity; it explains why the epic can use *dharma* to mean, in different passages, ritual duty, social role, cosmic law, and personal virtue without contradiction: each sense names a mode of holding some order together.

Dimensions of Dharma

Matilal's introduction to the edited volume treats the king's dharma as an instance of a broader phenomenon: dharma understood through "legal and social codes," whose "subtlety and elusiveness" is itself emphasized by Bhishma within the text (Matilal, 1989, pp. 2–3). This self-referential quality (the epic's characters explicitly discussing how hard dharma is to pin down) is part of what licenses reading the epic as philosophy rather than as a code: the text does not merely apply a doctrine, it interrogates the possibility of doctrine.

Personal Dharma

Arjuna's crisis at the opening of the *Bhagavadgītā* is, for Matilal, "a typical case of moral dilemma": a moral agent facing a choice between fighting and not fighting that "neither utilitarian nor Kantian ethics can easily resolve" (Matilal, 1989, pp. 7, 12). The resolution offered within the text is *niṣkāma karma*, desireless action. Radhakrishnan glosses this as "detachment from desires and not cessation from work" (Radhakrishnan, 1948, p. 68), naming it explicitly as *niṣkāma karma* (Radhakrishnan, 1948, p. 95) and citing Gītā 2.47: "To action alone hast thou a right and never at all to its fruits" (Radhakrishnan, 1948, p. 119), as its scriptural anchor. Zaehner's independent translation confirms the centrality of this teaching: he notes that Krishna's "precept of detachment and renunciation of 'fruits'... is repeated throughout the text" (Zaehner, 1969, p. 148), and links the term *naiṣkarmyam* not to simple inaction but to a state closer to "passionlessness," commenting on Gītā 3.4 that it denotes "freedom from [the bond of] works" (Zaehner, 1969, p. 163). Radhakrishnan extends the doctrine to Gītā 12.11, describing it as "the yoga of desireless action" offered as an alternative path for those who cannot dedicate all their work to the Divine directly (Radhakrishnan, 1948, p. 296), and to Gītā 18.2, where "the conversion of all works into *niṣkāma*

karma is the ideal set before us” (Radhakrishnan, 1948, p. 352). Zaehner’s rendering of the same verse, 18.2, describes the surrender of the “fruits” of works as an act of “self-surrender” (Zaehner, 1969, p. 384), a translation choice that shifts the emphasis from Radhakrishnan’s more cognitive “detachment” toward something closer to devotional renunciation. This divergence between the two translators is itself worth noting as a scholarly disagreement rather than smoothing it over: Radhakrishnan’s Arjuna is invited into a disciplined psychological stance, while Zaehner’s Arjuna is invited into a religious surrender. Personal dharma is dramatized again, more starkly, in Yudhiṣṭhira’s crisis before Droṇa. In Debroy’s translation of the Droṇaparvan, after Bhīma kills an elephant named Aśvatthāmā, Yudhiṣṭhira (pressed by Droṇa to confirm whether his son Aśvatthāmā is dead) tells Droṇa “Aśvatthāmā is dead,” while muttering “*iti gaja*,” “it is an elephant,” under his breath (Debroy, 2010–2014, Vol. 6, Section Seventy-One, Droṇa-Vadha Parva, Chapter 1141 (164)). The text marks this act’s moral weight physically: Yudhiṣṭhira’s chariot, which had until this point hovered four fingers above the ground, touches the earth for the first time (Debroy, 2010–2014, Vol. 6, Section Seventy-One, Droṇa-Vadha Parva, Chapter 1141 (164)). This detail functions as the epic’s own verdict on the act: not a condemnation stated in propositional form, but an embodied sign that a threshold has been crossed. This is a case where personal dharma (truthfulness) and social dharma (the need to end a war Droṇa’s invincibility was prolonging) collide, and the text refuses to say which obligation should have prevailed; it registers only that something was lost.

Social Dharma

Bhishma’s vow supplies the paper’s clearest case of dharma understood as institutional rather than personal obligation. In Debroy’s translation, Bhishma promises the king of fishermen, in order to secure Satyawati’s marriage and thereby the succession, “From today, I take the vow of brahmacharya. Even if I die without a son, I will attain the eternal world of heaven” (Debroy, 2010, Vol. 1, Section Seven, Sambhava Parva, Chapter 94). This is social dharma in its starkest form: a personal renunciation (celibacy, the throne) undertaken entirely for the sake of an institutional good (a stable succession). Weber’s distinction between the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility, discussed further below, offers a useful comparative lens here, though the epic’s own vocabulary for this self-sacrifice is *dharma*, not *Ethik*.

Rājadharmā

The Śāntiparvan’s Rājadharmānuśāsa, represented in Fitzgerald’s translation as The Laws for Kings (Rājadharmaparvan, MBh 12.1–128), together with its companion sub-parvan, Law in Times of Distress

(Āpaddharmaparvan, MBh 12.129–167), is the epic’s most systematic treatment of kingship, and it repays close reading precisely because it does not resolve into a single maxim any more than personal dharma does. Several passages converge, however, on protection (*rakṣaṇa*) as the closest thing to a unifying principle. Bhishma tells Yudhiṣṭhira: “Know this, Māndhātara, the king exists for Law, not for doing what gives him pleasure. The king is the protector of the world... People depend upon Law, and Law depends upon the king” (Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva 12.91.3, in Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 397). Elsewhere: “the lions who are kings have no other everlasting Meritorious Law than protection that is plain for all to see. Protection is the preservation of the world” (Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva 12.57.41, in Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 302), and again, more simply: “The king has fully accomplished his duties by protecting his subjects” (Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva 12.60.27, in Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 316).

A second, related image recurs across the text: the king as father. Bhishma invokes the memory of Rāma, “who always had compassion for his subjects as if they were his own sons... When Rāma ruled the kingdom, he was the same as a father for everyone” (Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva 12.29.50, in Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 230). The paternal image is explicitly tied to impartiality: a king may be free of fear “if he adheres to the learned teachings on Law, is not subject to lust or wrath, and has an equal regard for all, like a father” (Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva 12.56.27, in Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 217). And the image is extended, notably, to a maternal register as well: “the king is the father of the country, as he is sympathetic to his subjects... He nurtures his subjects like a mother and bends down to the wretched... Restraining his subjects, he is Yama [Lord of Death]” (Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva 12.137.100, in Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 529). This last passage is philosophically significant: it holds together nurture and punishment, protection and restraint, within a single figure, without treating them as in tension. The king’s dharma, on this reading, is not gentleness alone but a unity of care and discipline that the text figures as parental rather than contractual.

This textual evidence supports the paper’s central claim more precisely than a general appeal to “duty” would: Rājadharmā in the Śāntiparvan is repeatedly glossed as *protection* (a relational, other-directed obligation) rather than as either rule-following for its own sake or an exchange of services for obedience. The comparison with Lockean contract theory, taken up below, must be read against this textual specificity. Kane’s dedicated treatment of Rājadharmā, the subject of the whole third volume of his *History of Dharmaśāstra*, supplies independent confirmation of this reading and adds detail the primary-text survey alone cannot. Kane opens by noting that the

Śāntiparvan devotes chapters 56–130, and to some extent 131–172, to rājadharmā at greater length than any other classical source treats the subject (Kane, 1946, Vol. 3, p. 2), and cites the epic's own claim that "all dharmas are merged in rājadharmā" (Kane, 1946, Vol. 3, p. 3). Kane's discussion of the doctrine of *mātsyanyāya* supplies the negative case for the protection-centered reading argued above: if *danḍa* is not properly exercised, the strong devour the weak, just as large fish consume smaller fish; kingship exists, on this account, precisely to prevent the collapse of protection into predation (Kane, 1946, Vol. 3, pp. 20–21). Kane also details the doctrine of the seven *aṅgas* (limbs) of the state (the ruler, minister, territory, fort, treasury, army, and ally) as the standard classical analysis of political structure that Rājadharmā presupposes (Kane, 1946, Vol. 3, p. 17), and traces the recurring characterization of the king as partly composed of the essence of several gods, a status Kane treats as an analogical elevation of the office rather than a literal doctrine of divine right (Kane, 1946, Vol. 3, pp. 23–24). Read together with Fitzgerald's translation, Kane's account confirms that protection and the prevention of *mātsyanyāya* are the closest the tradition comes to a unifying rationale for kingship, even as it stops well short of a single deontological rule.

Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata

Arjuna

Nussbaum's account of ethical conflict supplies a precise definition for the category this paper has so far used loosely. On her analysis, genuine ethical conflict is not simply a contest between a right option and a wrong one; it arises when an agent holds more than one value as serious and binding, and circumstances arrange themselves so that those values cannot all be honored at once (Nussbaum, 1986, pp. 6–7). Arjuna's crisis fits this structure precisely: he does not doubt that killing kinsmen is wrong, nor that a warrior's duty to fight is real; the crisis is that both commitments are genuinely binding and the battlefield has arranged itself so that he cannot honor both. As established above, Arjuna's crisis is read by Matilal as a genuine dilemma resistant to resolution by "utilitarian or Kantian ethics" (Matilal, 1989, p. 12), a claim worth pausing on, since Matilal is here using Kantian ethics as a foil without claiming the epic anticipates or displaces it; his point is narrower and more defensible: that a rule-based ethics of the Kantian type does not obviously adjudicate a case where two role-obligations (kinsman, warrior) directly conflict. Matilal separately details a second, less commonly discussed dilemma involving Arjuna, occurring in the Kārnāparvan: Arjuna has vowed to kill anyone who insults his bow, and when his own brother Yudhiṣṭhira insults it in a moment of despair, Arjuna is caught

between the vow and the prohibition on fratricide. Krishna's resolution is, in Matilal's own description, a "face-saving" one rather than a principled one (Matilal, 1989, p. 16): Krishna intervenes to let Arjuna satisfy the letter of his vow (through a ritualized substitute for killing) without violating its spirit. Matilal's willingness to call this a "face-saving" rather than a philosophically satisfying solution is itself a piece of critical distance the present paper wants to preserve: not every dilemma in the epic is resolved by insight; some are resolved by improvisation, and the text seems aware of the difference.

Yudhiṣṭhira

The Aśvatthāmā episode, discussed above under social dharma, is equally a case of *personal* dharma in crisis: Yudhiṣṭhira is famed within the epic for unwavering truthfulness, and the half-truth is presented as a genuine violation, not a clever loophole; the chariot's descent to earth is the text's own marker of moral cost (Debroy, 2010–2014, Vol. 6, Section Seventy-One, Drona-Vadha Parva, Chapter 1141 (164)). Nussbaum's question of how moral praise and blame can be assigned once an agent's goodness is understood to depend partly on circumstance rather than on will alone (Nussbaum, 1986, pp. 2–3) applies with particular force here: Yudhiṣṭhira does not choose the situation that forces the half-truth on him (Droṇa's battlefield invincibility and the war's continuation are circumstances imposed on him) yet the text still marks him as morally diminished by how he responds within that circumstance. What makes this dilemma distinct from Arjuna's is that Krishna is again the architect of the resolution, but here there is no face-saving device; the ambiguous phrase is itself the compromise, and it fails to fully satisfy either truthfulness or victory: Droṇa is deceived, and Yudhiṣṭhira's own standing is diminished. The episode thus dramatizes a case where dharma is *not* successfully protected by ingenuity, in implicit contrast with the Arjuna-bow episode.

Bhishma

Bhishma's vow (Debroy, 2010, Vol. 1, Section Seven, Sambhava Parva, Chapter 94) is best read through Weber's distinction between the ethic of ultimate ends and the ethic of responsibility. Weber describes the "abysmal contrast" between an ethic in which the actor "does rightly and leaves the results with the Lord" and an ethic of responsibility, in which the actor "must give an account of the foreseeable results of one's action" (Weber, 1965, p. 46). Bhishma's vow is, on its surface, an act of the first type: an absolute, unconditional renunciation undertaken regardless of consequence. Yet its stated purpose is explicitly consequentialist: to secure a stable succession. Weber's own resolution of the apparent opposition between the two ethics is instructive here: toward the end of his essay he argues the two are not "absolute

contrasts” but “supplements” that together constitute genuine political vocation (Weber, 1965, pp. 53–54). Bhishma’s vow can be read in exactly this light: an ultimate, unconditional commitment (ethic of conviction) undertaken *because of*, not *despite*, its foreseeable institutional consequences (ethic of responsibility). The vow does not choose between the two Weberian ethics; it fuses them, and the epic later shows the cost of that fusion when Bhishma, bound by the vow’s logic of obedience to the throne, is compelled to fight against Dharma itself at Kurukṣetra.

Karna

Hiltebeitel’s reading of Karna centers on *ānṛśamsya*, non-cruelty, as the governing virtue of an otherwise compromised loyalty. Karna’s dilemma is also, in Nussbaum’s terms, a paradigm case of excellence made vulnerable by circumstance beyond the agent’s control (Nussbaum, 1986, pp. 1–2): his birth, its concealment, and his early debt of gratitude to Duryodhana are none of his choosing, yet they fix the loyalty that later collides with his mother’s and his half-brothers’ claims. During Kuntī’s attempt to win Karna to the Pāṇḍava side before the war, Hiltebeitel notes that “Karna’s thought did not waver, for he was firm in truth” (Hiltebeitel, 2011, p. 425), and that Karna tries to “persevere in the conduct of noncruelty that befits a good man” even while refusing to abandon Duryodhana: he promises Kuntī that he will spare four of her five sons in battle, guaranteeing she will have five sons regardless of the war’s outcome (Hiltebeitel,

2011, p. 426). Hiltebeitel calls this “the tragic model of true, loyal friendship” (Hiltebeitel, 2011, pp. 471–472), and extends the comparison provocatively: he reads the “insult contest” between Karna and his charioteer Shalya (who has been assigned to Karna specifically to undermine his confidence) against the Krishna-Arjuna exchange in the Gītā, with the difference that Shalya is a false friend where Krishna is a true one (Hiltebeitel, 2011, pp. 472, 496). Karna’s dilemma is thus not simply “loyalty versus justice” in the abstract; it is loyalty sustained *inside* a relationship of steadily eroding trust, which makes his consistency toward Duryodhana more, not less, morally striking on Hiltebeitel’s reading.

Krishna’s Ethical Intervention

Krishna’s interventions across these episodes (the “face-saving” resolution for Arjuna’s vow (Matilal, 1989, p. 16), the ambiguous counsel that produces Yudhiṣṭhira’s half-truth, the temptation and partial concession secured from Karna (Hiltebeitel, 2011, p. 426)) share a common shape: Krishna does not supply a rule that would let each agent act with a clear conscience. He supplies a way through the situation that leaves each agent morally marked by what the situation required. This is consistent with Matilal’s framing of dharma as *āvasthika*, situational (Matilal, 1989, p. 10): Krishna’s ethical authority in the text is not that of a lawgiver but of an agent who understands, better than the human characters, that the situation itself is doing the moral work, and who acts to make the outcome survivable rather than pure.

Table 1. Ethical Structure of the Four Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata

Character	Central Ethical Conflict	Ethical Resolution in the Epic	Governance Lesson
Arjuna	Personal conscience against killing kinsmen versus role-obligation as a warrior.	Krishna reframes rather than resolves the conflict through <i>niṣkāma karma</i> , redirecting Arjuna toward action detached from personal desire for outcome.	Ethical action must be guided by role-appropriate duty exercised without personal attachment, not by a single abstract rule.
Yudhiṣṭhira	Personal commitment to truthfulness versus the strategic necessity of ending a costly and prolonged war.	An ambiguous half-truth secures the immediate outcome, but the epic marks the act as a genuine moral cost rather than a clean resolution.	Truthfulness cannot be set aside for a seemingly justified end without real cost to the agent and the order he represents.
Bhishma	A personal vow of renunciation versus the institutional demands of the throne he is bound to serve.	The vow fuses unconditional personal commitment with foreseeable institutional consequence, ultimately compelling action against	Institutional loyalty can require the submission of personal judgment to the office, but that submission carries genuine costs when institutional duty and

Concept of Dharma and Moral Dilemma in the Mahābhārata: Philosophical Perspectives on Ethical Governance

Character	Central Ethical Conflict	Ethical Resolution in the Epic	Governance Lesson
		dharma itself at Kurukṣetra.	dharma diverge.
Karna	Loyalty to an unjust patron versus the claims of kinship and justice represented by the opposing side.	Loyalty is sustained while tempered by <i>ānṛśamsya</i> , non-cruelty, producing a partial concession rather than abandonment of either commitment.	Consistency of character and restraint retain moral significance even when the cause to which one is loyal is itself compromised.

Taken together, these four cases show dharma operating not as a fixed rule applied uniformly across situations, but as a demand that shifts with the specific relational position of the agent who faces it. None of the four dilemmas is resolved by appeal to a single overriding principle; each is settled, to the extent it is settled at all, by weighing the particular configuration of obligations the situation presents. This situational logic, established here at the level of personal ethics, now provides the interpretive basis for reading Rājadharmā as a governance doctrine in the discussion that follows.

Dharma and Ethical Governance

The Rājadharmā material surveyed above (protection as “the preservation of the world” (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 302), the king as impartial father (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 217), the fusion of nurture and restraint in a single figure (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 529)) supplies the basis for reading the epic’s theory of governance as an ethics of *relational protection*. This is distinct from a purely deontological reading (duty performed because it is duty) and from a purely contractarian reading (obligation grounded in an exchange of protection for obedience), though it borrows something from each. Vidura’s counsel offers a complementary, more practical register of the same governance ideal. The Vidura Nīti details the qualities of the wise counselor (*paṇḍita*): one who is “not... swayed by lust or riches,” who decides “before acting,” and who works “relentlessly once a project is begun” (Gita Press, 2001, pp. 21–24), and elsewhere lists eight virtues that “add lustre to a person”: wisdom, civilized behavior, self-control, knowledge of *śāstra*, chivalry, brevity in speech, charity, and gratitude (Gita Press, 2001, p. 37). Fitzgerald’s character glossary describes Vidura as an “incarnation of the God Dharma,” serving as “an often-unheeded voice of principle and restraint” (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 634); the qualifier “unheeded” is important, since it registers that the epic does not present good counsel as sufficient for good governance; Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s failure is not a failure to receive wise counsel but a failure to act on it. Debroy’s translation adds a further, striking detail: Vidura’s

warning to the Pāṇḍavas about the plot against them in the house of lac is delivered in coded language, the “mlechchha tongue,” advising that “a man who is self-controlled wins the entire world” (Debroy, 2011, Vol. 2, Section Eight, Jatugriha-daha Parva, Chapter 133), and Debroy’s narration insists that “there was no one who was Vidura’s equal in his eternal devotion to dharma” (Debroy, 2010, Vol. 1, Section Seven, Sambhava Parva, Chapter 102). Vidura thus supplies the epic’s model of the honest counselor whose dharma is fulfilled in speech and warning rather than in command, a second, subordinate mode of ethical governance alongside the king’s own.

The crisis of the dice-game in the Sabhāparvan supplies the sharpest test of this governance ideal’s limits. Draupadī’s question to the assembled court (whether Yudhiṣṭhira could stake her after having already staked and lost himself) occurs at Mahābhārata 2.60.7 (Debroy, 2011, Vol. 2, Book 2, Section 60, Verse 7). The philosophical weight of the question is that it exposes a genuine failure of Rājadharmā’s protective ideal from within the very court charged with upholding it: the assembly’s elders are shown, by their silence, failing the paternal-protective standard Bhishma himself articulates elsewhere in the text. This is, in the terms developed above, a moment where the epic’s theory of governance is tested against its own practice and found wanting, which is part of why the episode carries such enduring interpretive weight.

Comparative Philosophical Analysis

This section compares the epic’s governance material against Locke, Kant, and Rawls, the three Western political and moral philosophers for whom this study located direct, page-verified textual evidence, and explicitly declines to extend the comparison to Aristotle or Machiavelli beyond what secondary sources permit, per the source policy governing this study.

Locke. The Second Treatise’s account of the “ends of political society and government” begins at page 350 of the Laslett edition (Locke, 1988, p. 350), and Locke’s chapter on the “dissolution of government” begins at page 406 (Locke, 1988, p. 406); Laslett’s

introduction discusses the concept of trust at length as “the corollary and safeguard of natural political virtue” (Locke, 1988, pp. 113–117). The comparison with Rājadharmā is instructive precisely where it breaks down: Locke’s political society is founded on a trust that can be *dissolved* when government fails its terms: the relationship is conditional and, in the limiting case, reversible by the governed. The Śāntiparvan’s language of the king as protector and father does not present the relationship in these reversible, conditional terms; the king’s failure of dharma is depicted as a moral catastrophe for the cosmic order itself, not as grounds for a Lockean dissolution and renegotiation. The Sabhāparvan crisis discussed above is telling here: Draupadī’s question exposes the court’s failure, but the text does not stage this failure as licensing a Lockean-style withdrawal of consent; it stages it as a wound to dharma that must be endured and, eventually, avenged through war rather than resolved through political mechanism. The comparison therefore clarifies the epic’s distinctiveness by contrast rather than by resemblance.

Kant. The categorical imperative’s several formulations are precisely locatable in the Gregor translation: the Formula of Universal Law at page 15 (“I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law”), the Formula of the Law of Nature at page 31, the Formula of Humanity at page 38 (“So act that you use humanity... always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means”), the Formula of Autonomy at page 40, and the Kingdom of Ends beginning at page 41 (Kant, 2012, pp. 15, 31, 38, 40, 41). Matilal’s own invocation of Kantian ethics as a foil for Arjuna’s dilemma (Matilal, 1989, p. 12) is worth returning to here with these formulations in view: the Formula of Humanity’s prohibition on treating persons “merely as means” bears an initial resemblance to the epic’s *ānṛśamsya*, non-cruelty, as displayed by Karna (Hiltebeitel, 2011, p. 426). But the resemblance should not be overstated. Kant’s imperative is derived from a universal law available to any rational agent regardless of station; the epic’s ethical demands on Karna, Bhishma, and Yudhiṣṭhira are inseparable from their specific relational position: son, kinsman, warrior, king. This is precisely Matilal’s point in calling dharma *āvasthika*: the epic’s ethics does not abstract away from the situation the way Kant’s universalizability test explicitly requires.

Rawls. The original position is introduced at Rawls (1999, p. 15) and treated at length beginning at Chapter III, page 102, where Rawls describes it as a “purely hypothetical situation” and “the philosophically favored interpretation” of a fair initial choice situation (Rawls, 1999, pp. 103–104). Sen’s (2009) direct engagement with Rawls is more useful

for this comparison than an independent reading against the epic would be, since Sen explicitly contrasts a “*niti*-centered approach” he associates with Rawls against a “*nyaya*-based perspective” drawn from social choice theory (Sen, 2009, pp. 67–68), and, critically for this paper’s argument, Sen applies this same distinction directly to the epic, reading “the Arjuna-Krishna debate... through the lens of *nyaya* (Arjuna’s focus on social realizations) versus *niti* (Krishna’s focus on duty)” (Sen, 2009, p. 213). This is the paper’s clearest available bridge between Western and epic political theory, because it is not this paper’s own analogy but a scholarly source’s explicit, page-locatable argument. Sen’s broader distinction between “Closed and Open Impartiality,” comparing Rawls’s original position to Adam Smith’s impartial spectator (Sen, 2009, pp. 124–152), further suggests that the epic’s account of impartial, paternal kingship (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 217) sits closer to an *open* impartiality (judged by how the king’s protection is received by those under it) than to Rawls’s closed, hypothetical procedure conducted behind a veil of ignorance.

Machiavelli. Because this study’s library did not yield readable body-text excerpts from *The Prince* itself, Machiavelli’s argument is engaged here through two mediated routes rather than a direct citation of his own pagination. Das (2010) cites Machiavelli’s Chapter 15 for the claim that a prince must learn “how not to be good” and use that capacity according to necessity (as quoted in Das, 2010, p. 286), comparing this directly to Bhishma’s counsel to Yudhiṣṭhira. Independently of Das, Kane’s own textual-historical analysis identifies a specific passage in the epic that he characterizes in explicitly Machiavellian terms. Kane observes that the political discourse of Kaṇika in Ādiparva 140, which he considers closely parallel to the discussion in Śāntiparvan chapter 140, is “full of Machiavellian advice.” Rather than presenting an idealized conception of kingship, these passages advocate strategic prudence, concealment of intentions, calculated diplomacy, and, where necessary, harsh political action for the preservation of the state (Kane, 1946, Vol. 3, pp. 10–11). Importantly, Kane presents this as a scholarly characterization of the political reasoning contained in these chapters rather than as a normative endorsement of such methods; he notes elsewhere in the same discussion that the chapter “cannot be supposed to be the real teaching of the Mahābhārata,” and records that Yudhiṣṭhira himself, on hearing the counsel, recoils and says it does not differ from the conduct of robbers (Kane, 1946, Vol. 3, p. 11). Bhishma’s reply in chapter 142 is not a retraction but a qualified defense: that rājadharmā “cannot be based on a single source,” and that a ruler facing an enemy who employs crooked policy may

need to meet it in kind (Kane, 1946, Vol. 3, p. 12). The connection to Machiavelli drawn in this paper is an analytical comparison, not Kane's own claim: the phrase "Machiavellian advice" belongs to Kane's characterization of the Kaṇika/Bhāradvāja material specifically, not to a general equation of the epic with *The Prince*. Read this way, the epic does not simply resemble Machiavelli by coincidence of subject matter; it stages, through Yudhiṣṭhira's protest and Bhishma's qualified defense, a tension between principled and expedient rule comparable to the one *The Prince* argues Machiavelli's own contemporaries needed resolved, except that the epic dramatizes the tension as a live disagreement between characters, bounded by Kane's own caution that it does not represent the epic's settled teaching, rather than settling it as authorial doctrine the way Machiavelli's treatise does.

Aristotle. Aristotle distinguishes *phronēsis* (practical wisdom) from both scientific knowledge and technical skill, stating directly that practical wisdom "is neither scientific knowledge nor art" (Aristotle, trans. Greenwood, 1909, p. 98). He locates it instead as a reasoned, truth-oriented capacity to act well with regard to what is good or bad for a person, approaching the topic by asking what kind of person is called practically wise and associating the capacity with deliberating well not about some narrow or special purpose but about what serves a person's whole life (Aristotle, trans. Greenwood, 1909, p. 97). He offers Pericles as an example of a man credited with this capacity for judging what is good both for himself and for others in political and household life (Aristotle, trans. Greenwood, 1909, p. 98).

Matilal's own invocation of Kantian ethics as a foil for Arjuna's dilemma (Matilal, 1989, p. 12) can now be extended, with direct textual support, to Aristotle. The resemblance to situational dharma (Matilal, 1989, p. 10) is genuine but should not be overstated: both *phronēsis* and dharma resist reduction to a fixed rule applied mechanically, and both are exercised by an agent oriented toward the good of a whole life or a whole social order rather than toward an isolated act in isolation from that whole. But Aristotle's *phronēsis* is defined as a rational capacity cultivated in a particular person of good character, whereas the epic's dharma is at least as often described as a situation's own demand: something Bhishma and Yudhiṣṭhira must discover anew in each crisis rather than a stable disposition they already possess. The comparison therefore illuminates a family resemblance in structure (both concepts refuse rule-bound ethics) without licensing the stronger claim that the epic anticipates or restates Aristotelian moral psychology.

Contemporary Relevance

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) argue that stable

democracies depend on unwritten norms (chiefly *mutual toleration* and *institutional forbearance*) that prevent political competition from collapsing into "no-holds-barred conflict" (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 9), and that the erosion of these "soft guardrails" (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, pp. 8–11) leads to what they term "constitutional hardball" (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, pp. 106–113). The Sabhāparvan crisis discussed above offers a strikingly direct parallel: the dice-game is, among other things, a case of a ruler's kinsman (Duryodhana, through Śakuni) exploiting the *letter* of an institutional practice (a game undertaken under formal rules of hospitality and honor) to accomplish an outcome the practice's *spirit* was never meant to permit. This is close to Levitsky and Ziblatt's own definition of constitutional hardball: the use of a formally legitimate procedure in a way that violates the norms that were supposed to constrain it. Vidura's unheeded counsel (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 634) is then the epic's figure for exactly the institutional forbearance that Levitsky and Ziblatt argue is indispensable and yet impossible to enforce by rule: forbearance can be counseled, as Vidura counsels it, but not compelled. This paper stops short of extending the comparison to claims about "contemporary Indian political discourse" specifically, since the source located for that purpose during this study's research phase (Mehta's *The Burden of Democracy*) could not be verified as present in the research library. The comparison offered here is therefore limited to the general democratic-theory claims documented in Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) and should not be read as a claim about any particular contemporary polity.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the Mahābhārata's treatment of dharma, and of Rājadharmā specifically, resists reduction to either a rule-bound deontology or a contractarian exchange of protection for obedience. Dharma's root sense as cohesion (Sharma, 2000, p. 105), its situational character (Matilal, 1989, p. 10), and its manifestation in the Śāntiparvan as protection fused with paternal impartiality (Fitzgerald, 2004, pp. 217, 302, 529) together support a reading of Rājadharmā as an ethics of relational protection: an obligation that is other-directed, non-reversible in the Lockean sense, and irreducible to a universalizable maxim in the Kantian sense, while still bearing a family resemblance to both. Four case studies (Arjuna's vow-dilemma, Yudhiṣṭhira's half-truth, Bhishma's fused ethic of conviction and responsibility, and Karna's non-cruel loyalty) showed this ethics operating not as a solved problem but as a live tension the text declines to resolve into doctrine. Sen's own application of the *nīti/nyāya* distinction to the Krishna-Arjuna debate (Sen, 2009, p. 213) offers the strongest available bridge to contemporary

political theory, precisely because it is Sen's argument and not this paper's speculative analogy.

This study's remaining limitation is one it has tried to make visible rather than paper over: Mehta's *Burden of Democracy*, central to the original conception of this project's contemporary-relevance argument, was not available in verified form in the research library used here, and no claim in this paper rests on it. The Sabhāparvan passage concerning Draupadī's question is cited here using the canonical textual locator Mahābhārata 2.60.7 and Debroy's corresponding structural locator (Debroy, 2011, Vol. 2, Book 2, Section 60, Verse 7). Future research, building on this paper's identification of Rājadharmā as an ethics of protection, should extend the comparative analysis to the Arthasāstra and to Manusmṛti and Yājñavalkya Smṛti, in order to test whether the "protection" reading developed here from the Mahābhārata alone holds across the wider Dharmaśāstra corpus.

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