

After Dharma: Dialogue and Pluralism in the Mahābhārata

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Introduction

In his book *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre contends that moral philosophy today cannot provide the rational foundations for moral judgements. As a consequence, moral views become mere expressions of personal preference. One of the symptoms of modernity's moral decline, according to MacIntyre, is that without a shared tradition, moral debates become interminable: 'The most striking feature of contemporary moral utterance is that so much of it is used to express disagreement' (1981: 6). MacIntyre attempts to address this impasse in modern moral philosophy by retrieving an Aristotelean-inspired virtue ethics in which moral agents can cultivate a good life within a community shaped by tradition.

I am drawn to MacIntyre's work not only because of the way that he articulates some of the shortcomings of modern Western philosophy, but also because of how he reinvigorates an ancient philosophical tradition, exploring how its approaches to ethics might offer valuable contributions towards addressing modern problems. Although he does not explicitly say it, one of the problems he seems to have with moral philosophy today is that it does not adequately address a cultural condition that has become increasingly pluralistic. If we agree that engaging with plurality is one of the biggest challenges for contemporary moral philosophy, then I think we have much to learn from philosophies that were developed in social contexts that not only were pluralistic, but also ones that theorised plurality and offered ways of making moral choices within a plural philosophical landscape.

In this paper I will argue that the *dharma*-based ethics of the *Mahābhārata* offers innovative ways of confronting and navigating the philosophical challenges of pluralism. Rather than attempting to prescribe a neutral or objective way of evaluating competing moral claims, the *Mahābhārata* – I will argue – promotes ongoing reflection on one's own moral deliberations. As such, it addresses the challenges of pluralism by modelling introspective and social practices for addressing and negotiating a plurality of philosophical views. In order to make this argument, I will focus my attention on three particular dialogues about *dharma*. I will argue that these dialogues, which are representative of countless similar episodes throughout the text, not only genuinely confront plurality, but also gesture towards a pluralistic ethics based on a dialogical understanding of *dharma*.

The longer version of this paper will be a chapter in the edited collection, *Provincializing Pluralism: Theorizing Plurality in South Asian Traditions*, that I am co-editing with James Madaio. In the book, we use the word 'pluralism' because the examples we explore do not just acknowledge plurality, but explicitly articulate strategies for negotiating plurality and/or articulate theories for understanding it. But while using the term, we are aware that 'pluralism' is sometimes associated with a specifically modern, Western understanding of diversity. As Elaine Fisher has warned, pluralism has been characterised as 'a mode of sociality prescriptively modeled after the canons of liberal political theory, the heritage of the European Enlightenment' (2017: 192). Although we continue to use the term 'pluralism', we explicitly reject trying to measure South Asian traditions 'by the rubric of parliamentary democracy, quantified by participation in the political process and the frequency of civil unrest, or the lack thereof' (2017: 192). Rather, like Fisher, we are looking to excavate emic articulations of pluralism from South Asia.

In this paper I look to excavate an emic articulation of pluralism in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. It is well known that the *Mahābhārata* is both multi-centered and poly-vocal. As such, its bringing together of multiple voices, multiple worldviews, and multiple sources of religious and philosophical authority has much to offer our understanding of pre-modern concepts and practices of pluralism. Through its inclusivity, it brings in a wide range of potential readers and listeners, including followers of Vishnu, of Shiva, of the Mother Goddess, as well as, as we will see, potentially heterodox religious groups such as Buddhists and Jains. It's not that there are no hierarchies. There are. But these hierarchies are both challenged and inverted repeatedly throughout the text, while subversive voices are well represented.

Another thing that makes the *Mahābhārata* such a rich resource when it comes to pluralism, in addition to the variety of perspectives that it contains, is its understanding of itself as a text that contains such a plurality. As it famously claims, both at the very beginning and the very end of the text, there is nothing that it does not include: 'Whatever is here may be found elsewhere, but what is absent from here does not exist anywhere' (1.56.33; 18.5.38). As a text that reflects upon its own plurality, the *Mahābhārata* creates an imaginative space where people with a wide range of religious and philosophical commitments can co-habit and where no particular position always wins out. In this way, the *Mahābhārata* is not a relic or artefact to be relegated to India's past, but a living dialogue partner that fosters dialogues among those who engage with it. As Fisher has remarked a text is not

merely as 'a world unto itself' but 'a medium for communication' (2017: 30). As such, we might see the *Mahābhārata* as a sort of shared public space, not only as a text that is inclusive and invites different audiences, but also one that prompts conversation and debate, while modelling verbal interaction that allows for difference.

Matilal and the Philosophical Pluralism of *Dharma*-Ethics

As recognised above, there are many different understandings of the term 'pluralism', not to mention a number of different ways that Indian traditions have theorised plurality. In this paper, I am engaging with an understanding of philosophical pluralism as articulated by B.K. Matilal. According to Matilal, pluralism is 'a theory that refuses to reduce all judgement of (moral) preference to a quantitative form in a single dimension (so that we can calculate), and thus allows for diversity of (moral) goods which are sometimes incommensurable' (2007: 100). In other words, for Matilal, pluralism is opposed to the notion that 'there is (or there should be) some absolute, that is, universal and objective standard for deciding right or wrong morally and what is true or false' (2002: 180).

When providing examples of philosophical pluralism from an Indian context, Matilal often referred to the *Mahābhārata*, particularly the many episodes within the text that present a moral dilemma. What distinguishes such episodes as dilemmas is not merely that a choice is difficult to make, but that it is ultimately impossible to justify one choice as morally superior to others. As Matilal describes it, such moral dilemmas are 'unresolvable' (Matilal 1989: xi).

The Sanskrit word that is most closely associated with these moral dilemmas in the *Mahābhārata* is *dharma*. As is well known, the term *dharma* is notoriously difficult to translate, as it has overlapping connotations with a number of different English words, including justice, responsibility, morality, and religion. Indeed, one of the reasons why *dharma* invites such conflicts is because it is a multivalent term.¹ V. S. Sukthankar explains:

Dharma is not simple and unitary, but manifold and complex. There are thus, for instance, rājadharmā and prajādharmā, jñātidharmā and kuladharmā, varṇāśramadharmā, dānadharmā, āpaddharmā and mokṣadharmā, strīdharmā and so on and so forth. They must all be known accurately, if one is to act rightly, that is, according to the dictates of Dharma in all the various

¹ For discussions on the term *dharma* and its multiple meanings, see Fitzgerald 2009 and Hildebeitel 2011.

situations in life, smooth and rough, pleasant and unpleasant, normal and abnormal [1957] (2016: 82).

Despite its multiple meanings and interpretations, however, moral agents in the *Mahābhārata* tend not to suggest that *dharma* is ultimately unfathomable or nonsensical. Rather, the characters in the text continue to advocate upholding *dharma* and to seek deeper understandings. According to Sukthankar, a deep understanding includes an understanding of various types of *dharma* and how they relate to each other in any given situation. While some aspects of *dharma* are clearly emphasised on some occasions, no aspect eclipses all others in all circumstances. This does not mean that *dharma* becomes completely relative, but rather that an essential aspect of upholding *dharma* is contemplating its range of meanings, including its ambiguities and tensions. Moreover, it means that *dharma* needs to be reflected upon in relation to the specificity of each situation. As such, *dharma* does not impose uniformity and universality, but rather a way of speaking about religious and philosophical commitments through which diverse voices can articulate their differences.

Despite its multiple meanings and interpretations, however, moral agents in the *Mahābhārata* tend not to suggest that *dharma* is ultimately unfathomable or nonsensical. Rather, the characters in the text continue to seek deeper understandings of *dharma* and to advocate upholding *dharma*. According to Sukthankar, a deep understanding of *dharma* is an understanding of the various types of *dharma* and how they relate to each other in any given situation. While some aspects of *dharma* are clearly emphasised on some occasions, no aspect eclipses all others in all circumstances. This does not mean that *dharma* becomes completely relative, but rather that an essential aspect of upholding *dharma* is contemplating its range of meanings, including its ambiguities and tensions. Moreover, it means that *dharma* needs to be reflected upon in relation to the specificity of each situation. As such, *dharma* as a concept is not an attempt to impose uniformity and universality, but rather a way of speaking about religious and philosophical commitments through which diverse voices can articulate their differences.

As I argue, this way of understanding *dharma* is particularly enacted through dialogue. I have explored the complexities and a range of implications of the dialogue form in the *Mahābhārata* elsewhere (Black 2021). Here, I focus specifically on dialogues that discuss *dharma*, examining what the unfolding of the conversation itself tells us about this ever elusive way of understanding. I focus on three dialogues

in particular: 1) between the patriarch Bhīṣma and the queen-regent Satyawatī; 2) the brahmin sage Viśvāmitra and an untouchable (*caṇḍāla*) who eats dog meat ; and 3) the brahmin sage Jājali and the merchant householder Tulādhāra, who might well be a Buddhist or Jain. As I explore, Satyawatī and Bhīṣma articulate different understandings of *dharma* when confronted with the problem of how to continue the dynastic lineage; Viśvāmitra and the *caṇḍāla* put forward different interpretations of *dharma* when faced with the question of whether the brahmin should eat dog meat to save his life; and Jājali and Tulādhāra offer different views when exploring the question of what represents a higher knowledge of *dharma*.

Focusing on these three conversations in which interlocutors debate about the meaning and application of *dharma*, I will argue that through dialogue the *Mahābhārata* invites us to confront the diversity embedded within *dharma* and to reflect on how its different meanings relate to each other in different ways and in different situations. By juxtaposing countless episodes in which interlocutors debate about *dharma*, the *Mahābhārata* reveals intra-textual connections and alternative perspectives, prompting its readers and listeners into an open-ended exploration into the text's moral problems, where there is always another point of view and where every discussion seems to lead to or refer to yet another one. Not only does dialogue include a plurality of viewpoints, but it puts them into a creative tension that provokes us to look for their relationships with each other.

Although deeply pluralistic, I will suggest that the *dharma*-ethics of the *Mahābhārata* avoids the problems of relativism by providing a common language, a set of inclusive practices, and a shared narrative landscape for moral agents to articulate their views to and engage with each other. The *Māhābhārata* does not offer a moral philosophy that can settle disputes by positing a neutral or objective vantage point, but rather it provides an ethical framework for moral agents to reflect continually on their own actions and interactions with others, from as many standpoints as possible.

Bhīṣma and Satyawatī (1.97-99)

Our first dialogue comes from the *Ādi Parvan*, when Satyawatī asks Bhīṣma to give up the infamous promises he had made to his father, Śaṃtanu, to renounce the throne and remain celibate throughout his life. Bhīṣma's promises allow his father to marry Satyawatī, whose own father had insisted that the children to their union would be the heirs to the throne. Subsequently, Śaṃtanu and Satyawatī marry and have two children: Citrāngada and Vicitravīrya. Citrāngada dies in battle, after which Bhīṣma

arranges for Vicitravīrya to marry two princesses from Kāśi. Vicitravīrya, however, dies before fathering any children. Thus, a generation after Bhīṣma takes his vows so his father can marry her, Satyavatī – in an effort to solve the present dynastic crisis – asks him to renounce his solemn promises and marry Vicitravīrya’s widowed queens.

Satyavatī begins her case by speaking of *dharma* pluralistically, mentioning its various traditions and authorities:

You know the *dharmas*, in full and in part, you know the various (*vividha*) traditions (*śrutī*), you know the Veda in every way. I see the disposition by *dharma*, the proper custom of family (*kulācāra*), and the procedure in difficult situations (*kṛcchra*) as securely lodged with you as with Śukra or Bṛhaspati (1.97.5-6).

By citing a variety of authorities, Satyavatī implies that when Bhīṣma’s vows are considered from a wider range of perspectives, there are legitimate grounds for him to give them up. By referring to ‘the proper custom of family’ (*kulācāra*) she indicates that there is traditional support for marrying the wives of one’s step-brother – a practice we find in other places in the *Mahābhārata*. And by mentioning ‘difficult situations’ (*kṛcchra*), she is perhaps pointing in the direction of *āpad-dharma*, which she will mention explicitly a bit further on in this dialogue. Finally, by referring to Bṛhaspati and Śukra, she names the divine teachers of both the *devas* (gods) and *asuras* (demons), thus including both their perspectives.²

After presenting her case, Satyavatī then specifically asks Bhīṣma to father children with Ambikā and Ambālikā for the sake of continuing the family lineage, again characterising her request in terms of *dharma* (1.97.11). By framing her argument in terms of the continuation of the lineage, Satyavatī’s request parallels Śaṃtanu’s explanation for his sorrow a generation earlier (1.94.63). But whereas Bhīṣma’s father used the future of the lineage to disguise the real reasons for his suffering, Satyavatī genuinely has the future of the lineage in mind.

Despite Satyavatī’s appeal to a multiplicity of *dharmas* and Vedic authorities, Bhīṣma refuses to marry the princesses, citing the ‘highest promise’ (*parā pratijñā*) he had taken to renounce offspring. He acknowledges that Satyavatī is quoting the ‘highest (*para*) *dharma*’, but nevertheless uses this occasion to reinforce his previous promises with another promise. In making this contrast between ‘highest *dharma*’

² Moreover, Bṛhaspati is named as one of Bhīṣma’s teachers in heaven (1.94.34). For a discussion of Bhīṣma’s sources, see Hildebeitel (2001).

and 'highest truth', Bhīṣma seems to make a distinction between *dharma* and truth, rather than arguing that maintaining the truth of his vows would be a different way of upholding *dharma*. Indeed, he even says that the king of the Dharma would renounce *dharma*, before he would forsake his commitment to truth (*satya*) (1.97.18). Later in their discussion, however, Bhīṣma makes it clear that he sees keeping his vows as an enactment of his *varṇa-dharma*, when he says that breaking one's word is not the *dharma* of *kṣatriyas* (1.97.24).

When Bhīṣma refuses to break his vows, Satyavatī responds by repeating her plea to save the lineage and then suggests Bhīṣma could break them by following *āpad-dharma*, for the higher purposes of continuing the lineage and supporting his family (1.97.21-22). Throughout the *Mahābhārata*, *āpad-dharma* is repeatedly invoked as a justification for acting against *dharma* in exceptional circumstances. As Adam Bowles defines it, *āpad-dharma*

fundamentally means 'right conduct in times of distress', and refers to the relaxing of normative rules of behaviour when extraordinary social, environmental or other difficulties, have made these normative rules difficult to follow. In short, *āpaddharma* refers to exceptional rules for exceptional circumstances (2007: 2).

Satyavatī's reference to *āpad-dharma* is the first time in the main narrative when a character mentions the term.³ Despite the fact that later in the story he will offer the text's most detailed teachings on *āpad-dharma*, here Bhīṣma accuses her of not following *dharma* and, thus, potentially bringing about the destruction of the family (1.97.24-25).

Moreover, Vaiśampāyana, the narrator of this scene, responds to her invocation of *āpad-dharma* as if she is making too extreme an argument. Vaiśampāyana recounts that Satyavatī is 'straying from *dharma*' and describes her as 'babbling' and desirous for grandsons (1.97.23). These belittling remarks contrast sharply with his own narration, in which Satyavatī cites traditional authorities and invokes widely recognised teachings on *dharma*. Moreover, she never says anything specifically about grandsons, but rather argues for what is best for the sake of the lineage, which is legitimately under threat in these circumstances.

Bhīṣma, declaring that he is reciting the 'eternal *dharma* of royalty' (1.97.25), then

³ The only previous occasions of this term in the *Mahābhārata* are when Ugrasravas names the *Āpad-dharma* section of the *Śānti Parvan* in his two summaries at the very beginning of the text (1.2.64; 1.2.198).

recounts the tale of the seer Utathya, in which the blind brahmin Dīrghatamas fathers eleven sons and then acts as surrogate father for the heir to King Balin. Bhīṣma utilises this story to suggest implementing the practice of *niyoga*. As Arti Dhand explains: '*Niyoga* is the custom of levirate marriage ... It allowed for a woman to obtain children through the instrument of another man, if her husband were diseased, infertile, or otherwise incapacitated' (2004: 38). Here, Bhīṣma suggests that *niyoga* can be practised according to *āpad-dharma*, telling Satyavatī to invite a brahmin to father children with the wives of Vicitravīrya. We should recall that it was Satyavatī's idea to appeal to *āpad-dharma*, but here Bhīṣma reinterprets how they should do so. Rather than to justify abandoning his promises, Bhīṣma argues that they should invoke *āpad-dharma* to justify the practice of *niyoga*. Satyavatī replies, telling Bhīṣma that he has spoken the truth and represents the *dharma* of the family. She then informs him about her pre-marital son Vyāsa, suggesting that he could perform *niyoga* with Ambīka and Ambālikā.

In this exchange between Satyavatī and Bhīṣma, we see that one of the ways that the dialogue form explores a pluralistic understanding of *dharma* is by setting up a dialectic between the arguments of different characters. Although both Satyavatī's case for abandoning the vows and Bhīṣma's defences of them are articulated in terms of *dharma*, their arguments emphasise different aspects of *dharma*. Satyavatī – whose two children have died without a male heir – portrays Bhīṣma's promises as violating his *kula-dharma*, while Bhīṣma justifies them in terms of *kṣatriya-dharma*.

This dialectic between the different views on Bhīṣma's vows also plays out over time, as arguments for and against them change as circumstances change. In Vaiśampāyana's narration of the circumstances under which Bhīṣma initially takes his vows, they are explained in terms of his loyalty to his father. Satyavatī's emphasis on *kula-dharma*, then, has particular relevance because it offers a counter argument to Bhīṣma's initial justification. Moreover, Satyavatī brings attention to the new context, indicating that the original reasons for his vows no longer apply. But rather than continue to argue from the position of family loyalty, Bhīṣma takes an additional vow, effectively giving himself a new justification for keeping his old ones. In taking his additional vow, Bhīṣma reinterprets his initial promises in terms of his adherence to the vows themselves, rather than in terms of loyalty to his father. The evolving justifications for his vows bring attention to the temporal dimension of a pluralistic understanding of *dharma*. In other words, a central aspect of characterising *dharma* as plural is the consideration of the same moral question within different contexts.

Despite emphasising different understandings of *dharma*, Satyavatī and Bhīṣma come to an agreement and work together to ensure the continuation of the lineage. As we have seen, when proposing *niyoga*, Bhīṣma uses the same terminology introduced by Satyavatī, but to make a different point. Rather than completely rejecting Satyavatī's argument, he redeploys her invocation of *āpad-dharma* to reach what could be considered a synthesis of their positions.⁴ Satyavatī and Bhīṣma, then, come to a resolution through *āpad-dharma*.

Nevertheless, the encounter between Satyavatī and Bhīṣma also leaves behind a number of unresolved tensions, particularly within different understandings of *dharma*. Within *kula-dharma*, by acting out of duty to his father in the short term, Bhīṣma puts his family in danger in the long term; within *kṣatriya-dharma*, by living up to his word, he is unable to fulfil other *varṇa* duties such as having male children and protecting women. In addition to the ongoing tensions within both types of *dharma* at a conceptual level, there is also the ongoing problem of the future of the lineage at a narrative level. Their dialogue might be resolved in the short term as Bhīṣma and Satyavatī work together to continue the dynastic line, but their plan ultimately leads to the breach within the family which results in full-scale war.

Viśvāmitra and the caṇḍāla

Our second dialogue features the ṛṣi Viśvāmitra and a *caṇḍāla*. The word *caṇḍāla* is usually translated as an outcaste or as someone of mixed class. In this scene, the *caṇḍāla* is described as 'violent, a killer of animals, and an eater of dogs' (12.139.27). The encounter between Viśvāmitra and the *caṇḍāla*, which takes place in the *Āpad-dharma* section of the *Mahābhārata*, is told to Yudhiṣṭhira by Bhīṣma, when the king asks him how one should live when in times of *adharmā*. Bhīṣma relates the story of a time of a terrible twelve year drought when the sage Viśvāmitra was so hungry he had to wander around searching for food. He finally finds some dog meat in a *caṇḍāla*'s house and resolves to take it, after justifying to himself that in times of distress it is acceptable to take something from someone who is 'at the bottom of society' (12.139.39).

Whereas our previous dialogue ended with *āpad-dharma*, here we see that *āpad-dharma* sets the context for the discussion. Viśvāmitra's resolve to break dharmic conventions and eat the dog meat is presented as a moral problem that his debate

⁴ For a discussion of other dialogues that reach agreement in similar ways, see Black (2015).

with the *caṇḍāla* addresses. Just as Viśvāmitra is about to take a bite, the *caṇḍāla* wakes up and asks him why he is there. Viśvāmitra then announces that he is there to steal the dog meat. Rather than let the *ṛṣi* take the food, however, the *caṇḍāla* instructs him on *dharma*, warning: ‘do as I say and you will not lose merit’ (12.139.52).

The *caṇḍāla* points out that dog is the lowest of animals and that the sage was about to steal meat from the lowest part of the dog’s body, the thigh and rump (*ūrujāghānī*). He then warns Viśvāmitra not to mix *dharmas*: ‘You ought not cause a mixing of different *dharmas*. Do not abandon *dharma*; you are the final knower of *dharma*’ (12.139.56). Here we see another description of *dharma* as plural. But whereas Satyavatī invoked *dharma*’s plurality to argue that there are different ways of looking at the same situation, the *caṇḍāla* is referring to the distinct sets of rules and responsibilities for each social group within a caste hierarchy. Nevertheless, he is also demonstrating the importance of knowing the rules and responsibilities for others, as well as for oneself.

Viśvāmitra responds by defending his decision in terms of *āpad-dharma*. He explains that one should follow one’s own *dharma* when possible, but that this is a life or death situation: ‘One who is perishing should stay alive by whatever extraordinary deed he can do’ (12.139.61). Then Viśvāmitra explains that he can make up for his wrongdoing through asceticism and learning (139.63). In addition to invoking *āpad-dharma*, Viśvāmitra also argues that ‘well-educated men are the basis of *dharma*’, using the justification that if he does something, it must be dharmic. Upon hearing this line, the *caṇḍāla* warns: ‘Do not do wrong on the basis of a fallacious argument’ (12.139.70).

Viśvāmitra later takes a different approach, saying that eating the dog meat is really not that bad, compared to other potential wrongdoings: after all, he is not injuring anyone and he has not been untruthful. He concludes: ‘It is not so grievous then’ (12.139.84). The *caṇḍāla* again observes a flaw in Viśvāmitra’s argumentation, but in the process makes an interesting concession. As he explains, these might be acceptable grounds for eating the dog mean, but if these are Bhīṣma’s reasons then they are not based on the Vedas and are not based on any *dharma* (12.139.85).

During their exchange, both Viśvāmitra and the *caṇḍāla* appeal to the authority of traditional sources to back their arguments. The *caṇḍāla* – referring to the Dharmaśāstras – cites the types of food that brahmins and *kṣatriyas* are permitted to

eat, warning: 'If the learned handbooks have any authority for you, then decide against eating forbidden food' (12.139.66). In contrast, Viśvāmitra goes beyond traditional sources in making his arguments by relativising his actions in comparison with other wrongdoings. More importantly, however, he grounds *dharma* not in the texts, but in one's actions, presenting asceticism and learning as foundations for *dharma*.

Bhīṣma concludes the story, reporting that Viśvāmitra finally ate the dog meat, before returning to his wife in the forest. At that very moment, it began to rain 'reviving all creatures and producing plants' (12.139.90). Bowles takes this as a divine endorsement of Viśvāmitra's views, referring to the rain as the 'ultimate sanction' (2007: 279) from Indra. Bhīṣma extracts from the story that *āpad-dharma* can be invoked when one's life is in danger: 'Someone in the midst of a crisis who is desperate to stay alive may save his overstressed body by any means possible if his mind is not afflicted and he understands things in this way. One must resort to this understanding and survive; so it should always be' (12.139.92-3).

Yudhiṣṭhira, however, is not impressed: 'That horrible thing you have described seems like an unacceptable violation. This is barbarian *dharma*, which I shun. I am dumfounded, I am stunned, my sense of *dharma* is completely undone' (12.140.1-2). Bhīṣma's reply is fascinating: 'The instruction I give you in *dharma* does not come simply from pure tradition ... It is honey collected from different sources by wise seers' (12.140.3). Here we see another way that *dharma* is characterised as plural, with Bhīṣma suggesting that that it can be drawn from a combination of different sources.

Although a resolution to the debate between Viśvāmitra and the *caṇḍāla* seems to come from Indra's divine endorsement, it is important to observe some of the lingering tensions of their discussion. As we have seen, the *caṇḍāla* is not completely convinced. Not only does he bring attention to some of the logical leaps of Viśvāmitra's arguments, but he also remains sceptical, only grudgingly going along with Viśvāmitra, seemingly out of respect of social hierarchy more than anything else. As he says to Viśvāmitra: 'As you will ... delight yourself as you wish' (139.74). While Viśvāmitra does do as he wishes, his arguments are roundly challenged, and doubts linger about whether, despite the invocation of *āpad-dharma*, he goes too far.

It is also interesting to keep in mind that Bhīṣma, the narrator of the episode, never retracted his vow, even in the potentially 'āpaddharmic' situation of his family not

having a male heir to the throne. We might reflect on whether this dialogue offers a commentary on Bhīṣma's earlier choices. Or whether, despite his endorsement of Viśvāmitra's teaching, Bhīṣma – whose essential character trait is upholding *dharma* by steadfastly carrying out his own 'awesome' vow – has any doubts himself about the sage's flagrant breach of dharmic norms.

Jājali and Tulādhāra (12.252-256)

Our third dialogue is also from the *Śānti Parvan*, again with Bhīṣma narrating to Yudhiṣṭhira. Bhīṣma tells this story in response to Yudhiṣṭhira's extended questions about the nature of *dharma*. Yudhiṣṭhira reflects that Bhīṣma has already indicated the 'subtle mark of *dharma*' (*sūkṣmaṃ dharmalakṣaṇam*; 12.252.1), but he still wants to know whether it is 'possible to know *dharma* completely' (12.252.3).⁵

As Yudhiṣṭhira explains, his confusion arises from that fact that there are different *dharmas* for different people (12.252.4) and that sometimes *adharma* comes in the guise of *dharma*. He points out that *dharma* cannot be known by studying texts, since it varies according to circumstance and different eras, and because the sacred texts contradict one another (12.252.9-10). Using Upaniṣadic imagery, Yudhiṣṭhira describes *dharma* as 'finer than the edge of a razor'⁶ and 'more massive than a mountain' (12.252.11-12). He then laments that the constant (*śāśvata*) *dharma* has disappeared (12.254.14), before returning to the multiplicity of *dharmas*, saying that there is no mode of behaviour that is universally beneficial (12.252.20). He concludes his question by indicating that *dharma* needs a firmer foundation than the 'custom of earlier times' (12.252.20).

Unlike our previous dialogues, where interlocutors invoke the plurality of *dharma* to frame or justify their arguments, here Yudhiṣṭhira presents *dharma*'s plurality as morally problematic. Although Yudhiṣṭhira himself understands *dharma* as plural on some occasions,⁷ he is nevertheless one of the characters in the *Mahābhārata* who most yearns for a more consistent and universal understanding. In this case, not only is Yudhiṣṭhira perplexed that *dharma* can be so ambiguous and unpredictable, but he also wants some sort of grounding.

⁵ Translations of the Tulādhāra episode loosely follow Proudfoot (1987).

⁶ See the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (1.3.14).

⁷ See, for example, the arguments he makes in the *Ādi Parvan* in defence of the polyandrous marriage (1.189.1-40). For extended discussion of his arguments in this episode, see Black (2021: 67-73).

In response to Yudhiṣṭhira's questions, Bhīṣma recites the ancient story of Tulādhāra and Jājali, a story that shared details with an episode from the Buddhist Haribhaṭṭa's *Jātakamāla*. According to Bhīṣma, Jājali lives in the forest for many years, practising severe asceticism: he wears only rags and skin, fasts for long periods of time, and practises long silences. While Jājali remained motionless practising asceticism, a pair of sparrows set up a nest in his matted hair. The couple then had baby birds, who grew up and learned how to fly during the time they lived in Jājali's hair. Finally, when the young birds leave the nest for the last time, Jājali begins to think highly of himself, declaring that he has 'achieved *dharma*' (253.41). In the *Jātakamāla*, the ascetic Jājalin also has a bird nest in his hair and remains still in meditation for the sake of helping the mother bird tend to her chicks.

But whereas Jājalin is depicted as a bodhisattva whose demonstrates the ideal of attending to the good of all beings, Jājali is characterised as boastful, letting his compassion go to his head. Upon hearing his boast of achieving *dharma*, an invisible voice from the sky warns him that 'in *dharma*', he is not the equal of Tulādhāra (12.253.42). According to the voice, even the wise Tulādhāra, a merchant who lives in Vārāṇasī, 'would not be worthy to say such words' (12.253.43). Hearing this, Jājali becomes angry and decides he must go and see this man.⁸ Bhīṣma's narration continues with Jājali arriving in Vārāṇasī and Tulādhāra receiving him as an honoured guest. Tulādhāra then reveals that he knows all about Jājali: his austerities, the birds that lived in his hair, his boastful claim to have won the greatest merit of all living creatures, and the voice from the sky that spoke to him. When Tulādhāra asks him what he can do for him, Jājali replies by asking how he has become knowledgeable when his daily routine is buying and selling bark, leaves, herbs, fruit, and roots (12.254.2).

Tulādhāra responds with a long instruction. But before recounting it, Bhīṣma describes Tulādhāra as 'aware of the essential meaning of *dharma*' and as speaking of 'the subtleties of *dharma*' (*dharma-sūkṣmāṇi*) (12.254.4). By describing Tulādhāra and his instruction in this way, Bhīṣma not only portrays him as knowledgeable, but also indicates that his teaching itself is a demonstration of 'the subtleties of *dharma*'.

One of the interesting aspects of Tulādhāra's teaching is that he associates *dharma* more with the values of a renouncer than with more traditional householder ideals.

⁸ Proudfoot argues that the two different accounts of Jājali's ascetic exploits are the result of bringing together two different versions of this story. Although this is possible, here I am taking a synchronic reading.

Indeed, Christopher Chapple has interpreted Tulādhāra's teachings as 'theologically inspired by Jainism' (2006: 107). Yet Tulādhāra's emphasis on values, such as non-harm, universal compassion, and ascetic practice could equally be inspired by Jainism, Buddhism, or other renouncer traditions. During his long instruction, Tulādhāra uses the term *ahiṃsā* several times (12.254.20; 29; 12.255.24; 12.256.6), on one occasion equating *ahiṃsā* with the highest *dharma* (12.254.29). As he extends his understanding of *ahiṃsā* beyond not killing to non-harm and compassion for others, he associates *dharma* with 'compassion for the welfare of all creatures' (12.254.5). He also announces that he lives by 'that conduct which is the highest *dharma*, without harm to creatures, or failing that with a minimum of harm' (12.254.6) and he equates knowing *dharma* with always being a friend of all creatures and always acting for the good of all creatures (12.254.9).

Another theme that Tulādhāra's instruction explores is the equation of *dharma* with selflessness and acting dispassionately. Tulādhāra explains: 'I am never in accord or discord; I neither hate nor love; I am neutral with regard to all creation' (12.254.11). He explains that he is 'devoid of the desire for the enjoyments of wealth and pleasure' (254.15) and that he follows 'the hereditary practice' of his 'right-acting, noble-minded, and gentle ancestors' (12.254.20). Here, Tulādhāra emphasises control over emotions and sees his vocation as his hereditary duty. Then, echoing Yudhṣṭhira's words in his initial question to Bhīṣma, Tulādhāra describes the constant (*śāśvata*) *dharma* as lost (12.254.21). Although it is not clear whether Tulādhāra is meant to be seen as a Jain or Buddhist, there is a clear distinction along the lines of religious practice between Tulādhāra and Jājali.

Tulādhāra then returns to *sūkṣma dharma*: 'O Jājali, there is indeed nothing without cause, *dharma* is subtle (*dharmah sūkṣmo*) ... because of its subtlety (*sūkṣmatvān*), it cannot be fully understood (12.254.35-6). Here, Tulādhāra seems to present *dharma* as an embodied practice that acknowledges the limitations of a purely conceptual understanding. Although this mode of conduct resembles *karma-yoga* in the sense that it is rooted in actively performing duties and obligations towards others, it is neither formulaic nor mechanical. As he puts it: to follow *dharma*, one should 'not follow the ways of the world' (12.254.50). Rather, Tulādhāra's understanding of *dharma* is grounded in traditional practices of loyalty and responsibility, as well as enacted in response to ever-varying concrete situations. In this sense, Tulādhāra characterises *dharma* as both intuitive and spontaneous.

Jājali replies, saying that the *dharma* Tulādhāra expounds will close the door to heaven and stop the livelihood of all creatures (12.255.1), accusing him of being a heretic (12.255.3) because the world would stop any productive activity if his teachings were followed. Tulādhāra responds with a discourse on reinterpreting Vedic ritual to avoid harming animals. According to Tulādhāra, the gods can be pleased without animals being killed. Tulādhāra then returns to the topic of *dharma*, saying that those who ‘delight in *dharma*’ and ‘rejoice in *dharma*’ achieve the state of *brahman* in this world’ (12.255.21-23). After explaining his teaching further, Tulādhāra then points to the sky and says that among the birds flying above are the very ones that had hatched in the nest in Jājali’s hair (12.256.2). He asks Jājali to call them and when they come, they affirm that Tulādhāra has a superior understanding of *dharma* (12.256.16). Bhīṣma concludes the story, saying that Tulādhāra and Jājali both ‘ascended to heaven ... having reached their respective places earned by their respective acts’ (12.256.16).

Interestingly, Ian Proudfoot has argued that Tulādhāra’s teaching is specifically representative of the outlook of a tradesman, particularly in how he discusses his ethical approach to ‘balancing’: ‘Tulādhāra’s merchandise consists of spices which much be weighed out, juices which must be measured out. The balances (*tulā*) have connotations of equanimity or indifference’ (1987: 106). Indeed, Tulādhāra’s name means ‘bearing a balance’. Tulādhāra’s teaching emphasises his ability to achieve the highest understanding of *dharma* by means of his everyday practices as a householder. In this light, Tulādhāra’s balancing – his careful weighing up of every situation – indicates that he upholds *dharma* through his sustained reflection on his daily responsibilities, a reflexivity that all householders can have towards their everyday practices.

We might also wonder if the characterisation of Jājali has implications on how we should see Viśvāmitra in the previous dialogue. As we have seen, Viśvāmitra grounds his invocation of *āpad-dharma* in his education and asceticism. In this dialogue, however, Jājali is depicted as having an inferior understanding of *dharma*, despite his education and asceticism. Whereas Viśvāmitra connects *dharma* with practices that are specifically associated with brahmins, Tulādhāra depicts *sūkṣma dharma* as grounded in the everyday practices of householders, regardless of *varṇa* affiliation.

Discussion

Now that we have looked closely at three dialogues in which *dharma* is the central topic of discussion, I would now like to explore three ways that the dialogue form

characterises *dharma* as pluralistic: 1) its inclusion of different understandings of *dharma*; 2) its inclusion of different socially situated perspectives on *dharma*; and 3) its tendency to leave debates about *dharma* unresolved..

Regarding the first way, we have seen that each of the three dialogues includes different, often contrasting, understandings of *dharma*. Satyavatī, for example, focuses her argument on *kula-dharma* (family *dharma*), but Bhīṣma responds by equating *dharma* with his own adherence to a solemn vow. In the second dialogue, Viśvāmitra understands *dharma* as upheld by authoritative individuals, such as brahmins, while the *caṇḍāla* argues for abiding by traditional roles of *varṇa dharma* without exception. In our third dialogue, Jājali sees *dharma* in terms of his ascetic accomplishments as a renouncer, while Tulādhāra offers a teaching on *dharma* that encourages meditative reflection on one’s daily activities.

Not only does each dialogue explore *dharma* through the dialectical juxtaposition of different understandings, but in each dialogue one of the characters describes *dharma* as pluralistic. Satyavatī describes a plurality of *dharmas* when initially framing her argument for Bhīṣma to renounce his vows. Similarly, in the second dialogue, Bhīṣma – who narrates the exchange between Viśvāmitra and the *caṇḍāla* – characterises *dharma* as pluralistic when he explains to Yudhiṣṭhira that it is collected from different sources. In our third dialogue, Yudhiṣṭhira sees *dharma*’s plurality as what makes it particularly difficult to understand. In comparison to Satyavatī and Bhīṣma who invoke *dharma*’s plurality to justify their own arguments, Yudhiṣṭhira sees *dharma*’s plurality as sliding towards relativity, questioning its foundations and intelligibility when it appears to be so random and inconsistent.

In addition to characterising *dharma* as pluralistic, each of our dialogues explores the limits or margins of *dharma*, by examining how to act in exceptional or unpredictable situations. As we have seen, the first two dialogues invoke the notion of *āpad-dharma* – a type of *dharma* for extenuating circumstances. Satyavatī – the first character in the *Mahābhārata* to introduce the notion of *āpad-dharma* – suggests that it can be invoked for Bhīṣma to abandon his vows. Although Bhīṣma rejects this proposal, it is Satyavatī’s appeal to *āpad-dharma* that allows them to work together towards a solution to the dynastic crisis. In this case, we might see *āpad-dharma* as allowing for moral agents with contrasting views to work together despite their differences.

Our second dialogue also explores *āpad-dharma*, but in this case its invocation causes further tensions, rather than leading interlocutors towards agreement. Not only does the *caṇḍāla* remain unconvinced by Viśvāmitra’s argument, but when hearing about this episode from Bhīṣma, Yudhiṣṭhira raises very strong objections. Nevertheless, Bhīṣma uses this case as an occasion to teach that one need not be constricted to the normal duties and obligations when one’s life is in danger. The fact that it is Viśvāmitra, the famous *ṛṣi*, who articulates this view, might make us wonder if this type of *dharma* is available to everyone, or only to authoritative individuals, such as brahmins and royalty. The ambiguity of Viśvāmitra’s own *varṇa* status – as a brahmin with *kṣatriya* heritage – might cast doubt on whether he is meant to represent an example of the highest social identity. In any case, both this and the previous dialogue contribute towards discussions of *āpad-dharma* by characterising *dharma* as pluralistic. In the process, they add to additional understandings of *dharma*, as well as explore its adaptability to the demands of different circumstances.

Our third dialogue explores another way of understanding *dharma*, one that is also regularly invoked in exceptional or unpredictable circumstances: *sūkṣma dharma*, or subtle *dharma*. Bhīṣma’s entire narration of the dialogue between Tulādhāra and Jājali is in response to Yudhiṣṭhira’s questions about *dharma*’s subtlety, or apparent contradictory nature. Within Bhīṣma’s story, Tulādhāra teaches that *sūkṣma dharma* is beyond social expectations and social conventions, demonstrating this understanding through his sustained control over his thoughts and emotions. Although Tulādhāra characterises *sūkṣma dharma* as difficult to fathom, he is able to articulate his understanding to his brahmin audience, thus presenting his teaching as both communicable to others and able to be practised through engaged reflection on one’s daily responsibilities. In other contexts of the *Mahābhārata*, *sūkṣma dharma* is sometimes invoked to explain a rather unusual or unexpected action that seems to contravene the normal expectations of *dharma*.⁹ In this way, understanding *dharma* as subtle seems to include aspects of *āpad-dharma*, particularly as *sūkṣma dharma* can give license to acting in ways that contradict more conventional dharmic norms.

But more than *āpad-dharma*, *sūkṣma dharma* is an understandings of *dharma* that is not defined by or confined within one’s social identity, such as *varṇa*, gender, or stage in life. Thus, while *sūkṣma dharma* is presented as a higher or more nuanced

⁹ See, for example, Kṛṣṇa’s invocation of *sūkṣma dharma* in the *Karṇa Parvan* (8.49). For a discussion of this scene, as well as other subtables that include teachings of *sūkṣma dharma*, see Black (forthcoming)

understanding of *dharma*, it is an understanding that is often articulated from the margins, both by marginal characters and from the margins of the text itself when included within an embedded narrative. As an understanding of *dharma* that is beyond social hierarchies, we might see dialogues about *sūkṣma dharma* as liminal spaces where moral agents who might otherwise would be defined by their differences can engage in mutual reflection upon shared concerns.

This leads us to consider a second way that the dialogue form characterises *dharma* as pluralistic: its inclusion of different personal perspectives on *dharma*. Each of our dialogues depict an engagement between interlocutors who have different social identities which, in way or another, shape their perspectives. Our first dialogue features a woman arguing against a man; our second, an outcaste debating against a semi-divine brahmin *ṛṣi*; and our third, a brahmin renouncer learning from a merchant householder, who might be a Jain or a Buddhist.

Although the first dialogue does not explicitly bring attention to the gender dynamics between Satyavatī and Bhīṣma, their argument is gendered in the way that the scene is narrated. As noted above, Vaiśampāyana describes Satyavatī in some rather misogynist ways, despite the fact that she is clearly knowledgeable about *dharma*. Moreover, she presents her argument clearly and she cites traditional sources. It seems strange that she is castigated for introducing *āpad-dharma*, when ultimately it is *āpad-dharma* that allows her and Bhīṣma to reach a compromise.

In comparison, the social distinction between the two interlocutors in our second dialogue is much more explicit, as each embody an extreme end of the *varṇa* hierarchy. Indeed, the dialogue between Viśvāmitra and the *caṇḍāla* is one of the very few instances in the entire *Mahābhārata* where a dialogue includes the voice of an outcaste. Ironically, it is the *caṇḍāla* who makes the arguments that are more in accordance with śāstric sources, showing his familiarity with the tradition by citing specific rules and passages. Nevertheless, the *caṇḍāla* loses out to the authority of the powerful Vedic *ṛṣi*, despite the fact that his arguments are dharmically sound and that even Yudhiṣṭhira, a personification of *dharma* itself, is shocked by Viśvāmitra's views. While the *caṇḍāla*'s arguments serve to highlight the extreme and perhaps surprising allowances of *āpad-dharma*, they also portray him as abiding by *dharma* and conversant in the language of *dharma*.

The dialogue between Tulādhāra and Jājali also addresses the social distinctions between the two characters who follow contrasting spiritual paths, and whose

distinction might be based on differences of religious affiliation. Although it is not conclusive that Tulādhāra is meant to be a Buddhist or Jain, the contrasting doctrines and practices associated with the two characters emphasise a religious difference between them. Whereas our first dialogue resulted in a sort of compromise and our second in the arguments of the interlocutor with higher social position prevailing, our third dialogue unfolds into an explicit role reversal between the two characters, with the more heterodox character teaching the brahmin. When we consider that teachings on *sūkṣma dharma* are often delivered by subaltern characters, we might see this particular way of understanding *dharma* as one that is based on conduct rather than birth and one that, despite its difficulty, can potentially be achieved by anyone, regardless of *varṇa*, gender, or religious affiliation. Returning to Tulādhāra and Jājali, we see that despite the heterodox character emerging as more knowledgeable than the brahmin about *dharma*, there is a certain compromise between their two positions, as both reach heaven, but through different ways.

Crucially, then, each of our dialogues includes a subaltern or marginal voice who contributes towards articulating what *dharma* is and how to uphold it. Another way that *dharma* is characterised as pluralistic, then, is through the plurality of voices who articulate ways of understanding it. The plurality of perspectives on *dharma* means that it is not defined by a single narratorial or authoritative voice, nor does it assume that one point of view is more foundational than all the others. Rather, the *dharma*-ethics of the *Mahābhārata* can be seen as an example of an emic pluralism that includes the voices and perspectives of a range of moral agents, including ones at the margins of society. Although these marginal perspectives might not achieve a 'stance pluralism' that aims to subvert 'injustices in the locations that it encounters' – as Dalmiya explores in her chapter (p. *) – they do nevertheless offer a critical lens onto more conventional or mainstream understandings of *dharma*, while also offering ways of understanding and enacting *dharma* that are available to a wide range of people.

A third way that the dialogue form characterises *dharma* as pluralistic is in its tendency to leave debates about *dharma* open-ended, with questions unanswered. Even though Satyavatī and Bhīṣma reach an agreement, the unresolved tensions in their arguments continue to resurface throughout the main story as the family they tried to save spirals towards a destructive civil war. Similarly, although Viśvāmitra ends up eating the dog-meat, the *caṇḍāla* remains unconvinced. And, despite Tulādhāra displaying his superior understanding of *dharma*, Jājali seems to achieve

the same soteriological destination. Meanwhile, the interlocutors whose conversations frame our dialogues often bring attention to or comment on the unresolved tensions within the dialogues, with their reflections indicating that the arguments they hear need ongoing consideration.

Through both the dialogue form's representation of multiple sides to every argument and its ability to leave tensions unresolved, the dialogical structure of the text provokes a sustained reflection on each discussion about *dharma* and the implications of reading different discussions alongside each other. In other words, through the dialogue form the *Mahābhārata* invites us to reflect on *dharma*, its multiple understandings and the tensions within those understandings. Along these lines, Vrinda Dalmiya and Gangeya Mukherji have characterised the *Mahābhārata* as an 'agent of dhārmic instruction' that offers 'moral training' that can transform its audiences (2018: 16, italics original).¹⁰ By immersing us in seemingly countless conflicts of *dharma*, the *Mahābhārata* provokes us to consider a wide range of options when making decisions in our own lives.

In her chapter in this book, Vrinda Dalmiya notes that any pluralistic framework 'raises spectres of an inconsistent relativism'. One way of grounding the pluralistic '*dharma*-ethics' of the *Mahābhārata* is through positing types of knowledge or insight that make sense of the ambiguities of *dharma*. Dalmiya discusses both *prājñā* and *dvaidha* – and here I have suggested *dharma*, especially *sūkṣma dharma* – as offering a type of understanding that can navigate a diversity of moral choices. We might also see the narrative qualities of the *Mahābhārata* itself as offering a response to the spectre of relativism. Through widely shared stories about moral agents who make context-specific moral decisions, the *Mahābhārata* explores ethics as embedded within the life experiences of a range of well-known characters. The *Mahābhārata* avoids the traps of relativism, then, by providing a shared narrative landscape to think through moral problems – a shared imaginative space for thinking through one's own moral decisions and for entering into dialogues about moral choices with others.

Conclusion

Returning to *After Virtue*, what is particularly problematic for MacIntyre is that in today's Western societies moral arguments are delivered from a vast array of

¹⁰ Sukthankar was one of the first modern scholars to claim that the *Mahābhārata* offered a moral teaching about *dharma*: 'the epic aims at impressing upon the reader or rather the listener the paramouncy of moral values' [1957] (2016: 90).

traditions and contexts. This catalogue of ethical standpoints is illustrative, he claims, of 'how wide and heterogeneous the variety of moral sources is from which we have inherited' (1981: 10). But rather than fully accepting the reality of plurality, MacIntyre dismisses 'the notion of moral pluralism' as 'complacent ... surface rhetoric' and 'imprecise' (1981: 10). In other words, he avoids confronting what could be considered the most crucial and challenging aspect of moral philosophy today: how do we engage with one another in multicultural societies where people have vastly different world-views, different claims to truth, and different appeals to authority?

In this paper, I have argued that the *Mahābhārata* puts forth a pluralistic *dharma*-ethics that confronts the challenges of pluralism head-on. As we have seen, it not only includes a wide range of views, but also offers the perspectives of people from different genders, classes, and religious affiliations. *Dharma*-ethics is not about settling disputes, but rather providing a shared language for moral agents to articulate their views to themselves and to others. It provides an ethical framework that encourages moral agents to reflect constantly on their own actions and decisions from as many standpoints as possible. By addressing each moral case differently, the *Mahābhārata* does not offer a specific formula for making moral choices, but rather indicates that every decision needs to be explored in its own unique complexity. Through its profusion of inter-linking stories, many of which feature characters debating moral issues, the *Mahābhārata* provides a network of case studies to inspire readers and listeners to be more reflective about their own moral decision making processes and difficult conversations with others.

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