**Cosmic Order and Human Action: The Ṣoḍaśarājakīya (Tale of Sixteen Kings) in the Mahābhārata[1]**

**Introduction**

The Mahābhārata features two versions of the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya, The Tale of the Sixteen Kings: one narrated to Yudhiṣṭhira in the aftermath of the war (12.29.16–128); and a second version, related to an appendix in the Mahābhārata critical edition, which is also narrated to Yudhiṣṭhira but after the death of the valiant Abhimanyu (Bk. 7, App. 1, no. 8).[2] Though a seemingly trivial sub-tale that is peripheral to the epic's main plot, much can be thematically drawn from this *upākhyāna*. Furthermore, given that both versions of the tale can be located in different recensions of the MBH—the Śāntiparvan version placed in the critical edition, and the Droṇaparvan version relegated to the appendices—what is also at stake in understanding this story is the status of interpolated sections and what interpretative disposition one ought to adopt towards them.

Given that it is a small *upākhyāna* that is peripheral to the epic's main plotline, the Tale of the Sixteen kings has received scant scholarly attention. It has received its most comprehensive attention thus far from Tamar Reich, who compares and contrasts the Droṇa and Śāntiparvan versions of the tale to trace out two processes of textualization (Reich 1998). She traces not only stylistic differences, but also thematic differences to show how both versions of the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya reveal the "highly dialogical quality of the Mahābhārata" (Reich 1998, 141). The epic, according to Reich, need not convey a single philosophical or ideological principle, nor ought we resort to text-historical criticism in order to demarcate an authentic layer from an inauthentic interpolation. Rather, as the differences between the two versions of the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya show, one need not read the Mahābhārata seeking a single organizing theme, but rather as a compilation or an encyclopedia of competing ideologies.

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Reich's claim is by no means unique and it applies principles already within the tradition of Indological text criticism. Though her analysis abandons the long-standing search for an *ur*-text and its concomitant disposal of what are categorized as "interpolations," it nonetheless follows the tradition of treating the text merely as a congeries of sectarian ideologies. This approach can be directly traced back to Paul Hacker's "text-historical" (*textgeschichtliche*) method, which sought to establish the historical critical method "as the sole scientific means of knowledge for the [Indian] historical process" (Hacker 1961, 489).[3] By tracing "inversions of the text, expansions, interpolations and even individual word variants" one "can at times practically read off intellectual-historical processes." (Hacker 1961, 489; translation by Adluri and Bagchee 2018a, 94n35). In other words, peculiar moments in the text supposedly provide insights into the text's own composition and the various ideological commitments that were at play in that compositional process.

However, a recent work by a group of contemporary Mahābhārata scholars, edited by Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee (2016), has reformulated how to approach the *upākhyānas*. The implications are relevant not only to reading the sub-tales of the Mahābhārata, but it also offers a counter-hermeneutic to Hacker's text-historical method:

> Yet surprisingly enough, almost all of the scholars who contributed to the project arrived at fairly similar conclusions: (1) the upākhyānas *are* meaningful; (2) their inclusion (or addition, if one prefers) in the epic follows a design; (3) together, they yield an *argument*; and (4) this argument shows the Mahābhārata to be a highly self-conscious work of literature, a dharma text from its inception and not a Kuru epic with didactic interpolations, as had long been suspected. (Adluri 2016, 7)

Rather than reading the *upākhyānas* and their peculiarities as a proof for the ideologically fragmented nature of the Mahābhārata, Adluri et al. advocate for reading these portions of the text as contributions, commentaries, or elaborations upon the epic's central philosophical themes; it is on this ground that one could see how the Mahābhārata's compositional process is a "highly

self-conscious one." A closer look at the *upākhyānas*, especially the redacted portions that are relegated to the appended sections of the Critical Edition, will reveal that the Mahābhārata—even in its sections that are ostensibly discordant with one another—conveys a series of cogent philosophical concerns and commitments.

This paper will not directly dwell on the debates between structuralist approaches and historical critical approaches to the Mahābhārata. However, it will use the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya in the Droṇaparvan to show how an 'interpolated' section of the epic can be read as an interpretation of the Mahābhārata as a whole—that this minor *upākhyāna* is a meditation on the *telos* of action in the face of temporality (i.e., mortality as well as the temporal limits of the universe). By contrasting the Droṇaparvan version of the tale with its Śāntiparvan counterpart—namely, by showing how the narrative context of the Droṇaparvan sheds new light on the sub-tale—this paper will show that the appended sections are not to be read as discontinuities with the major themes of the text, but that they are an elaboration thereof. Through this reading, this paper presents the literary-philosophical hermeneutic as a cogent counter to the historicist hermeneutic.

**The Ṣoḍaśarājakīya**

The Tale of the Sixteen Kings is told to Yudhiṣṭhira at two crucial moments: the first time after the death of Abhimanyu (in the Droṇaparvan), and the second in the aftermath of the war (as part of his instruction in the Śāntiparvan). It tells the story of King Sṛñjaya and the birth and death of his son, Suvarṇaṣṭhivin. Granted a boon by Sage Nārada in exchange for his hospitality, King Sṛñjaya requested that he be given a son with good qualities: a son with valor and fame. However, in addition to this, he makes a peculiar request: that "[t]he urine, excreta, the phlegm,

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and the sweat of the child should be gold." (7, App. 1, 8.33; Ganguli trans.). Thus, the child is named Suvarṇaṣṭhivin, or literally, the "excretor of gold."

King Sṛñjaya's joy is curtailed when his son is killed at a young age. According to the appended version, Suvarṇaṣṭhivin is killed by robbers who seek the gold within his body. In the Śāntiparvan's version by contrast, Indra, anxious about his sovereignty, manifests as a tiger and crushes the young boy. Grief-stricken by his son's death, Sṛñjaya is consoled by Sage Nārada through the story of the sixteen kings.

The story of the sixteen kings is a compilation of the lives of sixteen kings, all of whom are praised for their immense sacrificial and martial activities—in other words, all of whom have excelled at fulfilling their *kṣatriyadharma*. Though the kings mentioned in the Droṇaparvan and Śāntiparvan differ, the structure of each king's life story remains similar: each king is lauded for his great feats (whether in performing grand sacrifices, producing children, or obtaining sovereignty). However, the tales are not merely optimistic laudations of heroic kings for each king's life is introduced and concluded with a reference to their mortality. For example, the story of King Maruttta in the Śāntiparvan is introduced accordingly: "O Sṛñjaya, listen to [the tale of] Marutta, son of Avikṣit. He died. The gods, with Indra and Varuṇa, with Bṛhaspati at the fore, attended the sacrifice called Viśvasṛj performed by that great-souled king" (12.29.16).[4] The appended version of the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya in the Droṇaparvan follows a similar motif. King Marutta's story opens with these lines: "Avikshit's son Marutta even, O Srinjaya [*sic*], we hear, had to die. Piqued with Vrihaspati [*sic*], he had caused Samvatta himself to officiate at his great sacrifices!" (7, App. 1, 8.335–36; Ganguli trans.).[5] Every story thereafter is introduced in the same manner. Each is also concluded similarly. In the Śāntiparvan, Nārada sums up each tale of the king by exhorting Sṛñjaya not to grieve for his son: "O Sṛñjaya, if he died who was four

times as prosperous as you and was indeed more meritorious than your son, do not grieve for your son" (12.29.21).[6] Nārada offers a similar refrain in the Droṇaparvan: "When such a king, O Srinjaya [*sic*], died who was superior to thee in respect of the four cardinal virtues (*viz*., ascetic penances, truth, compassion, and liberality), and who, superior to thee, was much superior to thy son, do not grieve saying 'O *Swaitya* [*sic*], for thy son who performed no sacrifice and gave no sacrificial present'" (7, App. 1, 8.357–59; Ganguli trans.).[7]

At face value, it seems as though the message of the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya is straightforward: that everyone dies and one ought not grieve, especially for one who has not lived a full and virtuous life. At the end of Nārada's discourse, however, Sṛñjaya conveys his pacification yet nonetheless requests that the sage revive his son. Nārada agrees and Suvarṇaṣṭhivin lives out the rest of his days living to the ideals of kingship. The question of why the young boy is revived is not clearly answered. As Hiltebeitel notes, the contrast between Suvarṇaṣṭhivin's resurrection and the death of Abhimanyu (in the Droṇaparvan) as well as of the Kauravas (in the Śāntiparvan) brings about a certain tension: why should the young boy who has lived without virtue be revived when the heroes who have lived valiantly remain dead (Hiltebeitel [1976] 1990, 348)? Through this tension, the Mahābhārata is making a larger claim about the value and ends of human life.

Much is thus at stake in interpreting the Tale of the Sixteen Kings. The tale itself is ambiguous and it appears to be an unsatisfying response to grief and mortality. The key to understanding it, however, lies in reading it in its narrative context. The story makes an appearance in two separate *parvans* of the Mahābhārata: while it coheres with narrative structure of the Śāntiparvan, I argue that its gist can be best drawn from the second, Droṇaparvan version. A literary-philosophical analysis would allow us to draw out this essence effectively.

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Nonetheless, there have also been attempts to draw out the meaning of this tale through text-historical explanations.

**Text-Historical Scholarship on the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya**

Text-historical scholarship on the Tale of the Sixteen Kings has mostly focused on the minute textual differences between the Droṇa and Śāntiparvan versions of the tale. Though such differences are noticeable, they are not significant for interpreting the tale's meaning. One key difference between the Droṇa and Śānti versions is the length of the former. Each tale is significantly more elaborate in terms of the feats performed—whether sacrificial, militaristic, or familial. The Droṇaparvan version of Marutta's tale, for example, extends to twelve verses, whereas the Śāntiparvan is only six. Suhotra's tale in the former is eleven lines, whereas in the latter it is only six. Śibi's is thirteen in the former, and five in the latter. In addition to the differences in terms of length and detail, there are also minor differences in the order of the kings' tales. They are as follows:

| Dronaparvan | Śāntiparvan |
|---|---|
| 1) Marutta | 1) Marutta |
| 2) Suhotra | 2) Suhotra |
| 3) Paurava (king of Anga) | 3) Bṛhadratha (king of Anga) |
| 4) Śibi | 4) Śibi |
| 5) Rāma (son of Daśaratha) | 5) Bharata* |
| 6) Bhaghīratha | 6) Rāma (son of Daśaratha) |
| 7) Dilipa | 7) Bhaghīratha |
| 8) Māndhatṛ | 8) Dilipa |
| 9) Yayāti | 9) Māndhatṛ |
| 10) Ambariśa | 10) Yayāti |
| 11) Śaśabindu | 11) Ambariśa |
| 12) Gaya | 12) Śaśabindu |
| 13) Rantideva | 13) Gaya |

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|---|---|
| 14) Bharata* | 14) Rantideva |
| 15) Pṛthu | 15) Sagara** |
| 16) Rāma Jāmdagnya** | 16) Pṛthu |

There are two noticeable differences here: (1) Bharata's tale is delayed in the Droṇaparvan; and (2) Paraśurāma is introduced in the Droṇaparvan as one of the sixteen kings (replacing Sagara). This latter point is particularly noteworthy given that Paraśurāma is not a king, but a Brahmin. In his earlier works, Sukthankar deems this as "one of the most interesting of Bhārgava references in the Mahābhārata" (Sukthankar 1936, 39), and attributes the inclusion of Paraśurāma to "an unscrupulous Brahmin redactor—with strong Bhārgava leanings—to perpetuate such a tendentious perversion and father it upon Vyāsa" (Sukthankar 1936, 42).[8] Tamar Reich dismisses this position, however, arguing that the inclusion of Bhārgava material need not be seen as extraneous to the epic (Reich 1998, 118). In fact, Paraśurāma's inclusion in the close of the Droṇaparvan version could be anomalous because it sought to draw attention to themes that are central to the Mahābhārata as a whole: the annihilation of the Kṣatriyas, and the necessity of violence to reestablish *dharma* (Reich 1998, 122). Though she diverges from Sukthankar by deeming the Droṇaparvan version central to interpreting the Mahābhārata, she nonetheless agrees with his historical-critical claims: the Droṇaparvan version conveys an ideology distinct from the Śāntiparvan. Whereas the Śāntiparvan version of the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya conveys a commitment to "a non-violent utopian ideal of material and social order, of civilization," the Droṇaparvan is more jaded and militaristic in its view in that it sees the necessity of violence for maintaining the ideal social order (Reich 1998, 124, 139–40). She bases this also on the fact that the account of Rāma Dāśarathī in the Śāntiparvan does not mention his violent conflict with Rāvaṇa, whereas the Droṇaparvan version does (Reich 1998, 141–44). Thus, whereas Rāma is able to realize a utopia without violence in the Śāntiparvan, the Droṇaparvan version of Rāma's life places

greater emphasis on the necessity of violence and conflict for social and ethical stability. By drawing out these differences between the two versions of the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya, both Sukthankar and Reich trace two conflicting ideological commitments and thus present the Mahābhārata as an encyclopedic composite of different sectarian or communal commitments.

However, these arguments are based upon a *petitio principii* and furthermore exaggerate the significance of what are otherwise minor details. Though Paraśurāma's appearance in the Tale of the Sixteen Kings is a peculiarity, it is too minor a detail to attribute it to political motivations.[2] Even presuming that a group of Brahmins sought to emphasize their ideological positions, why would they insert it in such a minor *upākhyāna*, one that is peripheral to the major plotline? And why convey this theme through such an insignificant and coded detail as the inclusion of Paraśurāma? As Hiltebeitel notes, "[t]here is no reason why the *Mrtyu* story should be part of a *Bhargava* insert; if the *Bhargava* redactors have tampered with the text, it can only be on the matter of making *Bhargava Rama* the sixteenth 'king.'" (Hiltebeitel [1976] 1990, 346n28). The mere inclusion of Paraśurāma would not suffice to explain the entire appended section of the Droṇaparvan. If there are any socio-ideological commitments to be traced throughout the Mahābhārata, it is unlikely to be found in such minor details, let alone in such a minor plotline. The Tale of the Sixteen Kings is a minor *upākhyāna* and thus can by no means change the tenor of the epic as a whole. Rather than reading the Droṇaparvan version of the tale as an ideological insertion it would be more effective to read the passage as a commentary on the epic. At no point does the epic deny the necessity of violence (Adluri 2018), and thus Reich's claim that the Śāntiparvan version of the tale conveys a commitment to a non-violent utopia reads the tale outside of its context—that is, as a moment in which Yudhiṣṭhira is being consoled

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in the aftermath of the war and is being educated on the necessity of kingship with its concomitant violence.

It should further be noted that Reich's claim that the Śāntiparvan conveys a different ideology due to a lack of violence—notably the absence of Paraśurāma, and also the lack of mention of Rāma Dāśarathī's conquest of Rāvaṇa—is an argument *ex negativo*. What can be affirmed, however, is that the Droṇaparvan version of the sub-tale is more elaborate than its Śāntiparvan counterpart. It is also juxtaposed to the Mṛtyukathā and is placed in a different context—namely in response to Abhimanyu's death. It is only by reading the Tale of the Sixteen Kings in its narrative contexts that one can trace the significant differences between the two versions of the tale.


**Reading the Appended Ṣoḍaśarājakīya in Its Narrative Context**

Whereas the Tale of the Sixteen Kings in the Śāntiparvan is separated from its juxtaposed stories, the Droṇaparvan version is placed within a larger narrative context and is juxtaposed to another tale that also emerges in the Śāntiparvan, the Mṛtyukathā, or the Story of Death. This is not to say that the Śāntiparvan version of the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya lacks a proper context—for it is narrated to Yudhiṣṭhira in the aftermath of the war and is meant to address his lamentations of having killed his kinsmen. Nonetheless, the Droṇaparvan version of the tale provides significant context with regard to its location in the main plot of the Droṇaparvan itself as well as with regard to its location within the appended section. Thus, though the Droṇaparvan version has been relegated to an appendix as an interpolation, it nonetheless contains key elements for interpreting the Tale of the Sixteen Kings as well as the Mahabhārata as a whole.

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The Droṇaparvan version of the tale occurs immediately after Abhimanyu is ambushed and slaughtered by the Kaurava warriors. Upon hearing this news, Yudhiṣṭhira grieves at having sent his young nephew to his death (7.49.21). This lamentation is followed by the interpolated section (7 App. 1, 8.1–920) which begins with the entrance of Vyāsa. The entire appended section is told in this narrative setting in which Vyāsa narrates and interprets two tales meant for placating and educating the Dharmarāja: in addition to the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya being one of them, he also narrates to him the Mṛtyukathā, or the Story of Death.

There are crucial structural similarities between these two tales: the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya is narrated by Ṛṣi Nārada to King Sṛñjaya, and the Mṛtyukathā is also narrated by Nārada but to King Akampana. Both kings have lost their sons, though in different contexts: whereas King Sṛñjaya's son lost his life unheroically—being murdered by a band of thieves—King Akampana's son was ambushed in battle after fighting heroically. There are key connections being made through these two stories to their outer narrative. Yudhiṣṭhira is being instructed by Vyāsa through these stories to come to terms with the untimely death of his nephew, just as Akampana and Sṛñjaya are instructed by Nārada through mythic tales in order to come to terms with their sons' deaths. Akampana's son faces a similar fate to Abhimanyu, whereas Sṛñajaya's is the antithesis to Arjuna's son. Akampana's son and Abhimanyu live and die valiantly, but they remain dead, whereas Sṛñjaya's son is revived. Though these two tales, the Tale of the Sixteen Kings and the Story of Death, are found in different portions of the Śāntiparvan (12.29–31 and 12.248–50, respectively), they are brought together in this appended section in order to draw out key themes from each other and also from the nesting plotline itself.[10]

There are four key components to this appended section that I will artificially separate and analyze individually: (1) The opening, in which Yudhiṣṭhira mourns Abhimanyu's death and

asks Vyāsa for his instruction; (2) The Mṛtyukathā; (3) The Ṣoḍaśarājakīya; and (4) Vyāsa's

analysis of the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya and how it sheds light on Abhimanyu's untimely death. By

drawing out the underlying theme that motivates these four sections, I hope to show how this

appended section is concerned with themes that are central to the epic as a whole; that is, that

this inserted portion is really a brief yet pregnant commentary on the Mahābharata.


1) <u>The Opening</u>

The appended section begins with Vyāsa's entrance. What is noteworthy is that this emerges

immediately after Yudhiṣṭhira conveys his dispassion for the kingdom and the demands of

*kṣatriyadharma*. In the previous section (part of the critical edition), Yudhiṣṭhira lamented:

"Beholding this son of Indra's son, of unrivalled energy and prowess, on the field of battle,

neither victory, nor sovereignty, nor immortality, nor abode with the very celestials, causeth me

the least delight" (7.49.21; Ganguli trans.)."[11] What is significant about this statement is that it

emerges at a moment when the Mahābhārata shifts to philosophical contemplation. Yudhiṣṭhira

announces his desire to renounce the kingdom repeatedly throughout the epic, but most notably

in the Śāntiparvan in the aftermath of the war: a moment which is evocative of death, the futility

of action in the face of death, and also the violence and concomitant moral demerit that is

inherent to action.[12] Such themes are the philosophical pivots of the epic and thus Yudhiṣṭhira's

meditation provides an opportune moment for Vyāsa to enter the scene and interpret the

narrative. As the author of the Mahābhārata, Vyāsa's serves not only as a character, but also as a

cipher for the text's own self-interpretation. He appears not only to interpret the death of a

character, but also to show how the epic is mobilizing the themes of grief, death, and violence in

order to convey an overarching philosophical idea.


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On being reminded of the inevitability of death, the Dharmarāja asks a pertinent yet ironic question:

> Alas, they who used daily to come to battle with this hope firmly implanted in their hearts, *viz.*, that they would conquer, alas even they, possessed of great wisdom, are lying on a field, struck (with weapons) and deprived of life. The significance of the word *Death* hath today been made intelligible, for these lords of earth, of terrible prowess, have almost all been dead. Those heroes are lying motionless; reft of vanity, having succumbed to foes. Many princes filled with wrath, have been victimised before the fire (of their enemies' wrath). A great doubt possesses me, *viz.*, whence is Death? Whose (offspring) is Death? What is Death? Why does Death take away creatures? O grandsire, O thou that resemblest a god, tell me this. (7 App. 1, 8.28–34; Ganguli trans.)[13]

The irony here is that Yudhiṣṭhira himself is an *aṃśa* of Yama, yet he inquires into the nature of death. The irony is further amplified when Vyāsa narrates to Yuddhiṣṭhira the Story of Death, in which a female version of Death refuses to partake in her duties out of a concern for the demerit that her actions would entail. These ironies draw to mind the cosmological backdrop of the Mahābhārata in which the gods descended to earth in order to engage in battle with the Asuras. Yudhiṣṭhira's question about the nature of death is thus concerned with both the microcosm and macrocosm, in the sense that he is concerned about the fate of individuals and yet is also inquiring into the nature of a phenomena that is inherent to the cosmos. His inquiry about death emerges out of a contemplation of the loss of individual lives, yet it also leads him to inquire about the nature of death on a general, macrocosmic level. Accordingly Vyāsa will instruct Yudhiṣṭhira through two tales that take the standpoint of these two distinctive positions.

2) The Mṛtyukathā

Whereas the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya gives an intimate or singularized vision of death—namely the story of a father who loses his son, and then is told the story of individual kings who have died—the Mṛtyukathā emphasizes the cosmological aspect of death. It tells the story of a female version of Death, who refuses to partake in her violent task. It begins with Brahmā who creates the world,

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but seeing that there are no signs of decay, resolves to incinerate it out of anger. Śiva then appears and propitiates Brahmā, asking him to forego his destructive actions. Brahmā heeds his request, establishes *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti dharmas*,[14] and from his channeled wrath, creates Death. When Brahmā requests Death to slay all creatures according to their time, she weeps at having to perform such a vicious task and attempts to propitiate her progenitor with piteous lamentations and severe austerities. Brahmā eventually yields to her requests, though proposing a compromise: Death must undertake her duty, but the beings that she kills will be guilty of vices: "Let covetousness, wrath, malice, jealousy, quarrel, folly, and shamelessness, and other stern passions tear the bodies of all embodied creatures." (7, App. 1, 8.206–207; Ganguli trans.).[15] With this compromise, Death avoids the guilt and demerit of having to kill innocent beings, and thus the cosmic order of justice emerges. She does not serve as the sole cause of death, but as one of its instrumental causes by bringing about each being's allotted end. In addition to this, Brahmā declares that her tears "will become *diseases*, springing from living creatures themselves" (7, App. 1, 8.211; Ganguli trans.).[16] Through both these compromises, Death avoids the ethical implications of having to kill creatures herself.

When juxtaposed to the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya—another story that centers on the theme of death—the Mṛtyukathā is distinctive insofar that it examines death from a cosmological perspective. The tale tells the origin story, not only of Death, but also of time itself (instead of instantaneously dissolving the universe, Brahmā allows beings to exist for an allotted time). Death emerges as a restraint and prolongation of Brahmā's incinerative anger. What is also noteworthy is how Brahmā resorts to destruction out of a desire to unburden the earth:

> I had no desire of destroying the universe, I desired the good of the earth, and it was for this that wrath possessed me. The goddess Earth affiliated with the heavy weight of creatures, always urged me for destroying the creatures on her. Urged by her, I could not

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however, find any means for the destruction of infinite creation. At this wrath possessed me. (7 App. 1, 8.89–94; Ganguli trans.)[17]

This reference to *bhārāvataraṇa* evokes the cosmological backdrop of the Mahābhārata—namely, how the gods descended onto the earth in order to unburden her of the demonic kings—and more specifically, Yudhiṣṭhira's identity as an *aṃśa* of Yama and his function within the cosmological process. Just as Death is reluctant to partake in her duties which are necessary for the sustenance of the cosmos and of the earth, Yudhiṣṭhira also laments at having to perform his duties as king. The Mṛtyukathā is a reminder of his place within the social and cosmological order and how he ought to partake in his duties in order to keep the political and cosmic order functioning.

What is also worth noting about the Story of Death is how Death's (and thereby also Yudhiṣṭhira's) responsibility is relegated. Death does not kill beings herself, but simply kills beings based on their allotted time. She is merely an instrumental cause to bring about their fate. Similarly, by performing his duties as the king, Yudhiṣṭhira acts as an instrumental cause for certain ends—whether doling out justice to the Kauravas, or bringing about the next stage in the cosmic cycle, or *bhārāvataraṇa*. The Story of Death highlights the necessity of action (whether violent or non-violent) in facilitating the social, ecological, and cosmic processes. In other words, it emphasizes the need for individual action in perpetuating a larger order. Action is situated and necessitated with reference to the order that it sustains.

3) The Ṣoḍaśarājakīya

If the Mṛtyukathā argues for the necessity of action by appealing to its place within a macrocosm, the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya considers the necessity of action from the perspective of the singular individual. Both tales wrestle with the inevitability of death and raise the question of the

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value of action in the face of mortality. In the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya, this theme is evident when considering the contrast between Suvarṇaṣṭhivin (Sṛñjaya's son) and the sixteen kings. Whereas Suvarṇaṣṭhivin fails to achieve great deeds yet provides his father with extravagant forms of wealth merely through his bodily secretions, the sixteen kings perform great deeds yet they must nonetheless die. Accordingly, the Tale of the Sixteen Kings prioritizes action itself over its results.

This is more evident when considering that Sṛñjaya uses his son to satisfy his desires. The dynamic between Sṛñjaya and Suvarṇaṣṭhivin conveys more than a decadent father-son relationship, but instead a certain disposition towards desires. The lucrative relationship between the father and son is a cipher for the three forms desire as is articulated in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad:

> He is the one who is beyond hunger and thirst, sorrow and delusion, old age and death. It is when they come to know this self that Brahmins give up the desire for sons [*putraiṣaṇā*], the desire for wealth [*vittaiṣaṇā*], and the desire for worlds [*lokaiṣaṇā*], and undertake the mendicant life. The desire for sons, after all, is the same as the desire for wealth, and the desire for wealth is the same as the desire for worlds—both are simply worlds. (Bṛ.U. 3.5.1; Olivelle trans.)[18]

Suvarṇaṣṭhivin satisfies at least two forms of desire (*putraiṣaṇā* and *vittaiṣaṇa*), which are conflated with the third form of desire (*lokaiṣaṇa*). His satisfying the criteria of *lokaiṣaṇa* is made more explicit in the Śāntiparvan version of the tale, where Indra is concerned that the duo's possessing such extravagant wealth will enable them to supersede him as the king of the gods. Nonetheless, on Suvarṇaṣṭhivin's death in the Droṇaparvan version, Nārada warns Sṛñjaya of his impending mortality and the possibility of living an unfulfilled life: "Sṛñjaya, with thy desires unfulfilled, thou shalt have to die, although we utterrers of *Brahma*, live in thy house" (7 App. 1, 8.333–34; Ganguli trans.).[19] This statement immediately precedes the story of the first of the sixteen kings (the tale of Marutta) (7 App. 1, 8.335–59). Thus, each king's tale points to the

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limits and futility of a life dedicated to fulfilling desires. After losing the means of satisfying the three forms of desires, Sṛñjaya is instructed through these tales to not depend upon contingent circumstances in order to live a proper life.

4) Vyāsa's Interpretation of the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya

One of the major distinctive characteristics of the Droṇaparvan version of the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya—a distinction that is significant for its interpretation—is that it is followed by a brief conclusion where Vyāsa interprets the significance of the tales. After he recounts Suvarṇaṣṭhivin's revival, Vyāsa instructs Yudhiṣṭhira in the significance of this story:

> Srinjaya's son had not fulfilled the purposes of his being [*akṛtāstraḥ*]. He had performed no sacrifice and had no children. Destitute of bravery, he had perished miserably and not in battle. It was for this reason that he could be brought back to life. As regards Abhimanyu, he was brave and heroic. He hath fulfilled the purposes of life [*kṛtāstraḥ*], for the brave son of Subhadrā, having blasted his foes by thousands, hath left the world, falling in the field of battle. (7 App. 1, 8.893–96; Ganguli trans.)[20]

Whereas Sṛñjaya's son "had not fulfilled the purposes of his being," Abhimanyu has. And accordingly, the former is revived. The peculiarity of this moment—that the slothful Suvarṇaṣṭhivin is revived while the valiant Abhimanyu remains dead—has led to perplexity amongst readers. For example, Belvalkar (1950, 650) attributed this paradox to the cruelty of the redactor. Hiltebeitel, by contrast, interprets this tension as addressing trifunctional elements: whereas Abhimanyu fulfilled the three royal virtues of having performed sacrificial actions, of excelling in heroism, and having continued his lineage[21], Suvarṇaṣṭhivin failed to achieve these three virtues. Thus the latter had to be revived in order to fulfill these virtues that were promised to his father (Hiltebeitel [1976] 1990, 348).[22] Hiltebeitel makes a legitimate point here. Suvarṇaṣṭhivin failed to "fulfill the purposes of his being" insofar that he failed to conduct his *svadharma*—more specifically, living according to the demands of kingship incumbent on him.

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He is revived on the grounds that he lives out the rest of his days as a virtuous king, fulfilling the purposes of his being.

What should be elaborated on, however, is the soteriological value of his action. Vyāsa's statement about Abhimanyu having fulfilled the purposes of his being should be read as a philosophical meditation on the *telos* of action. Whereas Suvarṇaṣṭhivin's life (prior to his revival) were based in *kāma* and *artha*, the sixteen kings and Abhimanyu acted in accordance with *dharma*. This is manifest when considering the contrast between Suvarṇaṣṭhivin and the sixteen kings: whereas each of the sixteen kings have accomplished great deeds, Suvarṇaṣṭhivin acquired great wealth but without any great actions. Therefore, the closing refrain of each king's tale referred to their great deeds, not simply their acquisitions. The emphasis is laid on action and the value of action, albeit in the face of mortality which nullifies the significance of the fruits of action. In respect of this theme, Vyāsa lauds Abhimanyu's untimely death as yielding soteriological value: "Those inaccessible regions that are attainable by *Brahmacharya*, by knowledge, by acquaintance with the scriptures, by foremost of sacrifices, even, these have been obtained by thy son" (7 App. 1, 8.897–98; Ganguli trans.).[23] Though Abhhimanyu attained heaven (not *mokṣa*), he is said to have attained noetic knowledge through his actions: the realms that are attained through self-discipline, by knowledge, and scriptural studies have been attained by him through his actions. Thus, Vyāsa highlights the pursuit of noetic knowledge as the *telos* of ethical action. Suvarṇaṣṭhivin shared in common with the sixteen kings their prosperity, but he did not live up to his royal duties through his actions. The latter is what Abhimanyu shared with the sixteen kings.

This emphasis on the soteriological value of action over its material results is manifest in the repetitive format of the Tale of the Sixteen Kings. By juxtaposing the material achievements

of each king, those achievements are rendered superfluous and replaceable irrespective of how hyperbolic those achievements are—from Gaya's excessively large sacrificial altar, to Yayāti's repeated attainment of heaven, to Śaśabindu's one hundred thousand wives and one hundred million sons. Though none of the tales of the kings explicitly refers to soteriological knowledge, the virtue of the respective king's soul is brought to the fore in the closing refrain of each tale: "When he died, O Srinjaya, who was superior to thee as regards the four cardinal virtues [*caturbhadrataras*] and who, superior to thee, was, therefore, much superior to thy son thou shouldst not, saying '*Oh, Swaitya, Oh, Swaitya,*' grieve for the latter who performed no sacrifice and made no sacrificial present" (7 App. 1, 8.357–59, 381–383, 406–408, 434–36, 480–82, 507–509, 525–27, 563–65, 585–87, 620–22, 645–47, 688–90, 727–729, 760–62, 825–27; Ganguli trans.).[24] Though the kings are lauded for their actions, their actions are ultimately laudatory insofar as they achieved a just soul, a soul consisting of "the four cardinal virtues."[25] The repetitiveness of each tale of the sixteen kings renders their hyperbolic acquisitions peripheral to the condition of the individual soul.[26]

This transition of focus in the value of action is more manifest considering that each tale in the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya is introduced by and concludes with a reference to the mortality of each individual king. Vishwa Adluri highlights the close connection between mortality and singularity—that is the radical individuation of the the *jīvā*: "[the warrior's] awareness of himself as *this* mortal being bound for death, *forces* the encounter with being by initiating a rapid divestment of political identities and metaphysical and theoretical justifications for becoming" (Adluri 2012, 135). Mortality reveals the individual soul divested of its political and social identities, and thus denies recourse to an other (e.g., a family's rights, the universal social order) to justify one's actions. The realization of singularity, evoked by mortality, strips the individual

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of his social and political functions. In the case of the sixteen kings, the reference to their

mortality calls into question the value of their actions. The kings are not lauded for simply

contributing to the transactional cosmic order—whether through charity, sacrifice, progeny, or

just rulership. By evoking the mortality of each individual king at the introduction and

conclusion of their tale, the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya invokes a justification for action that is based in the

singularity of the king himself. The transactional merits of sacrificial actions, rulership, or

progeny are rendered transitory in the face of mortality, and thus the kings' magnanimous deeds

are grounded in that which is immortal and not external to the individual king himself (i.e., the

individual soul and its fate).

The Ṣoḍaśarājakīya thus establishes the fate of the individual soul as the *telos* of action.

Vyāsa lauds Abhimanyu for this reason: though he had an untimely death, he died heroically and

as per his *kṣatriyadharma*, and it is through this excellence that he attained noetic knowledge.

His polar opposite was Suvarṇaṣṭhivin whose life was primarily about the acquisition of material

comforts and the satisfaction of his father's desires (namely the three *eṣaṇas*). Through this

contrast with Suvarṇaṣṭhivin, as well as the comparison with the sixteen kings, Vyāsa answers

Yudhiṣṭhira's bewilderment regarding mortality and the purpose of action.


   5) <u>Reflections: the Appended Sodaśarājakīya in Context</u>

It may seem as though the Tale of the Sixteen Kings is antithetical to the Mṛtyukathā: the former

highlights the singular soul, whereas the latter highlights the microcosm. This ostensible tension

between the perspective of the singular individual and that of the cosmic order—a distinction

that is rife throughout the epic—has led some to distinguish at least two ideological strains

within the Indian philosophical tradition: one which is psychological and stresses the inner-life of

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the individual, and another which is religiously oriented and emphasizes the cosmic structure (Frauwallner [1942] 1944).[27] Given that both positions offer opposing metaphysics, it would seem that they would lead to opposing grounds for ethics. Thus, whereas the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya grounds ethical action in its implications for the individual soul, the Mṛtyukathā necessitates that one acts for the sake of a cosmic order. Both principles seem irreconcilable.

However, this is not necessarily the case. Acting for the betterment of a larger unit (whether a familial, political, or cosmic order) is not mutually exclusive to the development of the individual soul. Both tales in the appended section critique a certain disposition towards action: one which reifies the individual ego against the cosmic order. The Mṛtyukathā tells the tale of Death who refuses to play her instrumental role in the cosmic order out of concerns for her individual moral degeneration: in doing so, she accordingly asserts her own moral purity, and ultimately her own ego, against and above the order of which she is a part. The Ṣoḍaśarājakīya is a warning to a self-indulgent king and his son: rather than contributing to the cosmic and political orders through sacrifice and proper rulership, they eschew such ethical actions for the sake of self-gratification. Though both stories present antithetical character types—one who renounces her position out of compassion for other beings, and another who thoughtlessly indulges in the satisfaction of his desires—the appended section presents both dispositions as fundamentally similar insofar that they are fundamentally egoistic. Yudhiṣṭhira's lament over the futility of action (7 App. 1,8.28–34) depends upon falsely distinguishing these two positions. Whereas he identifies with Death—namely, in her refusal to perform her violent but necessary duties—he sees his opposite in the self-indulgent father and son duo. The extreme renunciate and the extreme hedonist are ostensibly polar opposites. However, through these two tales, Vyāsa instructs Yudhiṣṭhira that unwarranted renunciation and self-indulgent hedonism are two sides of

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the same coin and neither lead to the ultimate good. Just as Death eventually accepts her role as an instrument for the cosmos's self-regulation, and just as Suvarṇaṣṭhivin later lives in accordance to the paradigm of the sixteen kings, Yudhiṣṭhira must perform his prescribed duties as the Dharmarāja despite the violence these duties entail.

Therefore, the appeal to the microcosm in the Tale of the Sixteen Kings need not stand in contrast to the Mṛtyukathā's emphasis on the macrocosm. By juxtaposing both tales in the appended section, the appended section conveys a certain philosophy of action that is neither merely individualistic nor merely subsumptive (i.e., appealing to a greater good). By properly and thoughtfully playing one's role within the familial, political, and/or cosmic order, one attenuates one's ego and develops the soul, preparing it for noetic realization. This is, according to the redacted section, the ultimate *telos* of action.

**Action in the Bhagavadgītā**

Although a seemingly minor interjection in the major plotline of the epic, the appended section is a commentary on the Mahābhārata as a whole. It draws out themes that are central to the epic. These concerns about the *telos* of action in the face of mortality are also tackled in the philosophical core of the Mahābhārata, the Bhagavadgītā. The Gītā is a meditation on the violence of *pravṛtti* and the prospect of attaining *mokṣa* while participating in the *pravṛtti* order. In this section, I show that the Gītā and the appended portion of the Droṇaparvan share common themes: namely, that both problematize egoistic action, and instead situate action with reference to the microcosm (i.e., the purification of the soul) and macrocosm (i.e., integration into the cosmic order) ultimately for soteriological ends. The purpose of this comparison is to show that the appended Droṇaparvan section, though seemingly peripheral to the Mahābhārata, actually

conveys themes central to the epic. Fundamentally, the purpose of this brief comparison is not only to interpret the Mahābhārata, but also to exhibit a fruitful interpretative disposition towards the appended portions of the text.

1)  The *Telos* of Action

The Bhagavadgītā is told to Arjuna in the moments immediately prior to the commencement of the battle. The very first *śloka* uttered by Dhṛtarāṣṭra sets the philosophical tenor for the rest of the text: "On the field of *dharma*, on the field of the Kurus [*kurukṣetre*], eager for battle, what did my sons [*māmakāḥ*] and the sons of Pāṇḍu do, O Sañjaya?"[28] (BG 1.1). The first half of the verse situates the battle in the context of *dharma*. The second half of the opening verse transitions from the philosophical plane to the mundane plane, in which Dṛtarāṣṭra egoistically distinguishes between "my sons" and "the sons of Pāṇḍu." The theme of egoism and its contrast is developed in the remainder of the opening chapter. Duryodhana is characteristic of the former: "And there are many other heroes, who possess various weapons and are all skilled in the art of warfare, who are willing to give up their lives for my sake" (1.9).[29] Duryodhana places himself at the locus of the battle, seeing the warriors' lives transactionally—as means to acquire his ends. In contrast, Arjuna asks Kṛṣṇa to drive his chariot to the center of the battlefield (*senayorubhayormadhe*; 1.21), allowing him to examine both armies from a non-egoistic perspective. Symbolically, this movement towards the center is a movement towards philosophical contemplation (Adluri 2012, 153–57): whereas Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Duryodhana see the individual warriors in parochial, political terms, Arjuna sees the battle as indicative of the human condition—that the warriors in both armies are moving towards their destruction. Through this contrast, the Gītā establishes a dichotomy between transactional thinking and

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philosophical contemplation. The contrast between Dhṛtarāṣtra's and Duryodhana's disposition and Arjuna's is meant to demonstrate that both logics are mutually exclusive.

On seeing the two armies, Arjuna despairs over the futility of the battle and its outcome (BG 1.31–35). Arjuna's despair is not over the outcome of the battle, but over the senselessness of individuals ready to give up their lives for the sake of wealth and sovereignty. The contrast between Duryodhana's transactional view of the warriors and Arjuna's compassionate disposition is philosophically significant, because whereas the former acts for the satisfaction of desires (namely, his desire for sovereignty), the latter is divested of any ultimate principle from which he can act. The motives that led to and impel the war are rendered absurd. Thus what is at stake in Arjuna's grief is a philosophical question about the value of action. His refusal to fight and desire to live on alms (2.5)—an impulse that is frequently entertained by Yudhiṣṭhira—is more than a mere act of compassion. It is an explicit desire to withdraw from the path of *pravṛtti*, characterized by desire, action, and necessary violence, and the path of *nivṛtti*, characterized by renunciation. The tension between these two paths is the core concern of the Gītā.[30] Arjuna's despair over the futility of the battle is ultimately a critique of the transactional nature of action and the violence that necessarily accompanies such action.

There are key similarities between the Arjuna's grief in the Gītā and Yudhiṣṭhira's lament in the Abhimanyuvadhaparvan. Both are fundamentally a reflection on the connection between desire and death and the absurdity of the former in the face of the latter. Just as Yudhiṣṭhira is dumbstruck at the stark contrast between the ambition of the warriors and them lying dead on the battlefield, Arjuna is also bewildered at the willingness of the warriors to die for the sake of a kingdom. Both expressions of grief are a meditation on the futility of action in the face of death. The context of the battlefield makes this inherent connection between desire and death more

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glaring and it presents the violence of *pravṛtti* vividly. In other words, the war and the concomitant despondency that it invokes in its participants are literary ciphers for *pravṛtti* and its ethical limitations, and thus of the impulse to withdraw from action in the face of those limitations.[31] The Gītā is an answer to this dilemma.

2) <u>Desire, Action, and the Purification of the Soul</u>

Arjuna misunderstood his dilemma as being between acting on his desires (akin to Duryodhana) and refraining from action altogether (akin to Yudhiṣṭhira). Given that the apocalyptic war is a cipher for *pravṛtti* itself—namely, insofar as the path of desire-based action culminates in destruction—Arjuna's dilemma is fundamentally between whether he should participate in the path of action or whether he should refrain from it altogether. Whereas *pravṛtti* is characterized by transitoriness (whether of the fruits of action, or of life, or of the universe), it would seem that the path of renunciation is a viable alternative. The Gītā, however, circumvents this ostensible dichotomy altogether. Though Kṛṣṇa exhorts Arjuna to participate in the battle, these exhortations are far and few in between and they do not constitute the substance of the Gītā's message.[32] The Gītā's response instead is to shift the locus of debate away from action and inaction, and instead towards desire. It presents an alternative dichotomy: one either acts with a view to satisfy one's desires or one acts without desire altogether.[33] In other words, rather than offering normative prescriptions (whether one should act or not act in certain situations), Kṛṣṇa instead offers a cognitively or philosophically transformative path.

By circumventing this dichotomy, the Gītā thus undermines two philosophical positions: one which sees the satisfaction of desire as the ultimate *telos* of action and another which presents the renunciation of actions as leading to the highest good. On the one hand, the Gītā

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denounces those who perform actions (namely, sacrifice, though the logic can be extended to any transactional action) solely for the gratification of desire, seeing no higher purpose in action (BG 2.42–43). On the other hand, it also warns against undue renunciation in which one has not undertaken the intellectual-philosophical preparation for renunciation. Ostensibly these two are antithetical in that they prescribe opposite ends and methods: one presenting the satisfaction of desires as the ultimate good, and the other presenting their denouncement as the highest good. However, both share a lack of attention to the cognitive or philosophical development of the aspirant. This is especially manifest in the Gītā's criticism of the undue renunciate: "He who remains controlling the organs of action while remembering the objects of the senses with the mind, that deluded one is called a hypocrite [*mithyācāraḥ*]" (3.6).[34] The Gītā thus presents the hedonist and the undue renunciate as both sharing an uncritical disposition towards desire: one unabashedly so and the latter hypocritically so.

The Gītā thus prescribes *karmayoga* (the *yoga* of action) as an alternative path to these two extremes. It is the means by which one engages in action, yet it serves the purification of the soul. It therefore circumvents the shortcomings of the other two paths: unlike the hedonist position, *karmayoga* presupposes a *telos* to action that transcends desire; unlike the renunciate position, *karmayoga* necessitates that one engages in action.

However, *karmayoga* is more than an uncritical corrective and synthesis of these two extreme positions. It consciously presupposes a philosophical deconstruction of the commonplace notion of the distinction between action and inaction: "He who sees inaction in action and action in inaction, that intelligent one amongst men is established in yoga; he has fulfilled all actions" (BG 4.18).[35] Contra the unwarranted renunciate, action is inescapable because one must act minimally for the maintenance of the body (3.8) and also in performing

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vital functions (breathing, sleeping, etc.) (5.8–9). Thus the wise see "action in inaction" since

even the most idle, mundane, and basic tasks are a kind of action. Seeing "inaction in action," by

contrast, is the philosophical praxis of intellectually transcending the transactional causal order.

The mundane conception of action views action transactionally: an agent acts in order to attain a

certain desired result. Desire fuels the symbiotic relationship between the agent and the fruits of

action; it reifies both the agent and the fruits of action, and thereby also the transactional schema.

For this reason, knowledge and desire are presented as two countervailing forces, since the latter

reifies the causal order and the former nullifies or transcends it altogether (3.37–41).[36] Therefore

the cognitive-philosophical practice of seeing "inaction in action" fosters insight into that which

transcends the transactional causal schema. Though one may engage in action, such action is not

done for transactional purposes, but for the purification of the soul and ultimately for liberation

from the causal order. Thus, the Gītā's espousal of detached action is more than an alternative

sectarian or doctrinal praxis. It is a cognitive-philosophical prescription for transcending *pravṛtti*

based on a philosophically nuanced conception of action and agentship—a conception which

goes beyond the mundane understanding of action that the hedonist and renunciate position

jointly presuppose. Due to these philosophical considerations, the Gītā does not offer

transcendence through merely normative prescriptions. Instead, it offers transcendence through a

philosophical deconstruction of *pravṛtti*. In other words, transcendence can be attained only

through such philosophical-intellectual cultivation, and not through an unreflexive adoption of

certain practices.


   3) <u>Participation in the Sacrificial Order</u>

This is not to say that the Gītā solely focuses on the subjective or psychological conditions of the individual soul as the sole foundation for ethical action. Like the appended section in the Droṇaparvan, the Gītā offers a microcosmic as well as a macrocosmic ground for action. To be clear, however, the Gītā is by no means utopian: as the *viśvarūpadarśana* demonstrates, the war ends apocalyptically with the decimation of both armies; Arjuna's predictions about the degeneration of the socio-political order come true in the aftermath of the war; the war itself facilitates the turn of the cosmic cycle, initiating its most degenerate and entropic stage, Kaliyuga. Kṛṣṇa does not address Arjuna's concerns about the apocalyptic outcome of the battle nor does he appeal to a greater good, whether by normatively prioritizing *kṣatriyadharma* over *kuladharma* or by promising the stability of the cosmological and social orders. Therefore, when the Gītā offers a macrocosmic grounds for action, it eschews acting self-righteously in the name of a greater good. As in the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya and the Mṛtyukathā, one integrates oneself into the cosmic or socio-political order as a means attenuating one's ego and thereby purifying the soul.

This point is manifest in the third chapter of the Gītā, which provides the account of Prajāpati's creation of the universe as well as of the cosmic order (BG 3.10–15). The primary purpose of this account is to situate action within a cosmic order thereby decentering the individual and his desires. Prajāpati establishes a symbiotic system in which humans sustain the gods through sacrifices and the gods support human endeavors by providing them with sustenance as well as their coveted objects. Given that the individual is dependent upon the gods (as well as other beings) for his sustenance and for fulfilling his desires, the prospect of acting for self-gratification is ethically reprehensible (BG 3.12–13, 16). By refusing to partake in the sacrificial order, one undermines the very foundations that constitute one.

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This criticism is equally applicable to the hedonist and to the renunciate, for both reify their ego as a central principle: whereas the first establishes his egoistic desires as the organizing principle of the cosmos, the renunciate similarly reifies himself as standing outside of the sacrificial order. The latter is distinct insofar as he refuses to compromise his claims to moral integrity by participating in the violence that is part and parcel of this order. But this difference is ostensible since it affirms the individual as distinct from the nexus in which he is located. By fleeing from the battlefield, Arjuna seeks salvation by an extreme act of hubris, namely by denying his place in the cosmos and placing himself above it. His (and Yudhiṣṭhira's) claim to salvation thus rests on egoism: the individual ego will be saved insofar as it renders itself distinct from the cosmological order. However, as mentioned above, the Gītā exhorts that transcendence is achieved only through cognitively transformative means—namely, the attenuation of the ego—not through action alone. Thus, it eschews the pretense of preserving one's moral integrity through resignation and instead exhorts that one must participate in the cosmic order for purificatory purposes. The central purpose of the cosmology is to decenter the individual and locate him within a sacrificial economy that he is beholden to. The cosmology thus fundamentally serves an ethical—in the sense of placing the individual in relation to others—and ultimately a soteriological function.

In summation, the Gītā is an exhortation to partake in action in spite of the temporal limits of life and also of the universe. As mentioned above, the Gītā mobilizes the motif of war as a meditation on *pravṛtti* and temporality—more specifically, on the futility of the path of action in the face of the transitoriness of all things; in this sense, Yudhiṣṭhira's meditation on the tension between the ambition of the warriors and their mortality is also addressed here. Given that the battle leads to the degeneration of the socio-political structure and the cosmos, the

cosmology developed in the third chapter of the Gītā is by no means utopian. Just as Death in the

Mṛtyukathā must partake in a cosmos characterized by temporality and death, and just as

Suvarṇaṣṭhivin in the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya must traverse the mortal path undertaken by the sixteen

kings, Arjuna must participate in the war, albeit ritualistically. Action is not undertaken for

material or political ends (ends that are subject to degeneration) but for cultivating

discernment—a discernment that arises through the attenuation of the ego and ultimately

culminates in seeing "inaction in action, and action in inaction."


**Conclusion**

The basic task of this paper was to demonstrate how the Droṇaparvan version of the

Ṣoḍaśarājakīya, when read in the context of its appended section (as juxtaposed to the Mṛtukathā

and within the Abhimanyuvadhaparvan), offers a philosophical meditation on action, ethics, and

mortality. By divesting it of this narrative context, we miss these larger themes. This

philosophical hermeneutic is thus the antithesis to the text-historical method, which frustrates

any possibility of finding philosophical coherence or integrity to the epic.

What is also at stake is a philological point about sections that are relegated to the

appendices of the critical edition—sections which are also often dismissed under the category of

"interpolation." Rather than reading such passages as interruptions in the narrative of the text and

thereby as proof of the incoherence of the text, the argument here sought to demonstrate that

such appended sections should be read as commentaries upon the text. While they may not be

part of the archetype, they represent the ongoing exegesis of the text alive within the scribal

tradition, and hence they can shed invaluable light on how the text was received within its

interpretive communities. The aim was twofold in tracing common themes to the appended

Droṇaparvan section and the Bhagavadgītā: (1) to illustrate that the inserted portions of the Mahābhārata are not extraneous to the epic, but are rather commentaries on themes that are central to the epic; and (2) to show that the Mahābhārata, despite its textual and (ostensible) thematic variations, is a philosophically coherent text—that is, it is fundamentally a meditation on the limits of *pravṛtti* and also on the means by which one can transcend it.

It may seem as though the reading espoused in this paper and that taken up by text-historical criticism are merely alternative hermeneutic positions that rest upon different presuppositions about the epic: the philosophical reading here presupposing the integrity of the text and the text-historical method presuming its multifariousness and, at worst, its incoherence. The shortcomings of the text-historical method is an issue that could not be adequately addressed here.[37] However, I have shown above (in the analysis of Reich's and Sukthankar's claims) that such a method relies on *petitio principii* and *ad hoc* speculations. The text-historical method conveniently brushes over the peculiar moments of the text, barring the need for interpretative effort. While the manuscript evidence shows that the texts have had minor emendations and augmentations over the centuries (Adluri and Bagchee 2018a, 11–12), the motives driving the redactors cannot be ascertained without resorting to speculation—a criterion that does not suffice as historical evidence. At best, we can interpret the texts that we have before us.

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# Endnotes

1.  This paper has been developed out of a seminar conducted by Vishwa Adluri on the Mahābhārata "War Books" (Books 6–11) at the Hindu University of America. I would also like to thank Joydeep Bagchee for his feedback and guidance on this paper, as well as Haridas Radhakrishnan for providing me feedback and in-depth information on certain Sanskrit passages.

2.  All citations of the Mahābhārata refer to its critical edition: Sukthankar, et al., 1933–1966. The Sanskrit text is from John D. Smith's electronic text of the edition available at http://bombay.indology.info/mahabharata/statement.html (accessed April–May 2022).

3.  "From such changes (I mean: inversions of the text, expansions, interpolations and even individual word variants) we can at times practically read off intellectual-historical processes. And since for the most part we lack direct historical evidence, textual history or, speaking more generally, the *method of comparing multiple transmissions* is often the sole scientific means of knowledge for the historical process. The history of religion of Hinduism in its different branches—history of myths, of cult, of religious ethics and laws, of piety—but also the history of philosophy in some of its branches can no longer be carried out scientifically without the use of this method." (Hacker 1961, 489; translation by Adluri and Bagchee 2018a, 94n35)

4.  āvikṣitaṃ maruttaṃ me mṛtaṃ sṛñjaya śuśruhi | yasya sendrāḥ savaruṇā bṛhaspatipurogamāḥ | devā viśvasṛjo rājño yajñam īyur mahātmanaḥ ||

5.  āvikṣitaṃ maruttaṃ ca mṛtaṃ sṛñjaya śuśruma || saṃvarto yājayāmāsa spardhayā yaṃ bṛhaspateḥ ||

6.  sa cen mamāra sṛñjaya caturbhadratara tvayā | putrāt puṇyataraś caiva mā putram anutapyathāḥ ||

7.  sa cen mamāra sṛñjaya caturbhadrataras tvayā | putrāt puṇyataras tubhyaṃ mā putram anutapyathāḥ|ayajvānam adākṣiṇyam adhi śvaityety udāharat ||

8.  It should be clarified, however, that "The Bhṛgus and the Bhārata" is an anomaly amongst Sukthankar's works and it is his only major attempt at text-historical criticism. Sukthankar ([1942] 1957) later rejects this method altogether and presents a devastating critique against it.

9.  Instead of reading Paraśurāma inclusion in the Tale of the Sixteen Kings as a politically motivated insertion, one could however see his position as a cipher for the temporal limits of, not only human life (as is signified by the mortality of the other fifteen kings), but also of the political and cosmic order. The section opens by referring to his cosmological function: "Rooting out all evils from earth, he caused the primeval Yuga to set in" (*yasābhramanuparyeti bhūmiṃ kurvanvipāmsulām*) (7 App. 1, 8. 830; Ganguli trans.). By closing the Tale of the Sixteen Kings with this cosmological figure, the redacted section draws attention to the limits of the political and cosmological order. Nonetheless, like with the other fifteen kings, Paraśurāma's mortality and thus his singularity is also brought to the fore: "that son of Jamadagni, of great fame, will die, without being contented (with the period of his life)." (rāmo mahātapāḥ śūro vīralokanamaskṛtaḥ | jāmadagnyo 'pyatiyaśā avitṛpto mariṣyati) (7 App. 1, 8, 828–29; Ganguli trans). This substantiates the point that the Ṣoḍaśarājakīya is more emphatic on the microcosm—the fate of the individual soul—rather than (as the Mṛtyukathā does) on the cosmological structure that necessitates dissolution. Even as a force of the cosmos, Paraśurāma will have to die without the satisfaction of his desires.

10. The Ṣoḍaśarājakīya (as well as the Mṛtyukathā) neatly fits in with the overarching motif of the Droṇaparvan, namely the loss of sons—a motif which ultimately points to the limits of *putraiṣaṇā* as well as the aspiration to attain immortality through one's progeny.

11. Na me jayaḥ prītikaro na rājyaṃ|na cāmarataṃ na suraiḥ salokatā | imaṃ samīkṣyāprativīryapauruṣaṃ|nipātitaṃ devavarātmajātmajam ||

12. Adluri (2018) examines the Mahābhārata's ethical injunction to non-injury (*ahiṃsā*). Though this injunction necessitates that one minimizes violence, it fundamentally has philosophical implications, for even basic actions required for sustenance are tainted with violence (e.g., slaughtering animals for food, tilling the fields). The Mahābhārata's injunction of *ahiṃsā* is thus also a philosophical injunction: to see the violence that is inherent to *pravṛtti* and, as a result, transcend *pravṛtti* via detachment.

13. atha ceme hathāḥ prājñāḥ śerate vigatāyuṣaḥ || mṛtā iti ca śabdo 'yam vartate ca vigatāsuṣaḥ | mṛtā mahīpālāḥ prāyaśo bhīmavikramāḥ || rājaputrāś ca saṃrabdhā vaiśvānaramukhaṃ gatāḥ | atra me saṣśayaḥ prāptaḥ kutaḥ saṃjñā mṛtā iti || kasya mṛtyuḥ kuto mṛtyuḥ kena mṛtyur imāḥ prajāḥ | haraty amarasaṃkāśa tan me brūhi pitāmaha ||

14. "[T]he great master, declared the duties of Production and Emancipation" (7, App. 1, 8.116; Ganguli trans.). pravṛttiṃ ca nivṛttiṃ ca kalpayām āsa vai prabhuḥ ||

15. lobhaḥ krodho 'bhyasūyerṣyā droho mohaś ca dehinām | ahrīś cānyonyaparuṣā dehaṃ bhindyuḥ pṛthagvidhāḥ ||

16. te vyādhayaḥ prāṇināmātmajātāḥ ||

33

17. na krudhye na ca me kāma etad evaṃ bhaved iti | pṛthivyā hitakāmāt tu tato māṃ manyur āviśat || iyaṃ hi māṃ sadā devī bhārārtā samcūcudat | saṃhārthaṃ mahādeva bhāreṇābhihatā satī || tato 'ham nādhigacchāmi tapye bahuvidhaṃ tadā | saṃhāram aprameyasya tato māṃ manyur āviśat ||

18. etaṃ vai tamātmānaṃ viditvā brāhmaṇāḥ putraiṣaṇāyāśca vittaiṣaṇāyāśca lokaiṣaṇāyāśca vyutthāyātha bhikṣācaryaṃ caranti; yā hyeva putraṣaṇā sā vittaiṣaṇā, ya vittaiṣaṇā sā lokaiṣaṇā, ubhe hyete eṣaṇe eva bhavataḥ ||

19. kāmānām avitṛptas tvaṃ sṛñjayeha mariṣyasi | yaya caite vayaṃ gehe uṣitā brahmavādinaḥ ||

20. akrtāstraśca bhītaśca na ca sāṃnahiko hataḥ | ayajvā cānapatyaśca tato 'sau jīvitaḥ punaḥ || śūro vīraḥ kṛtāstraśca pramthyārīnsahasraśaḥ | abhimanyurgataḥ svargaṃ pṛtanābhimukho hataḥ ||

21. Though this is compromised, as Hiltebeitel notes, with the death and eventual revival of Parikṣit in the Sauptikaparvan.

22. Hiltebeitel ([1976] 1990, 215–24) explains the trifunctional virtues accordingly: the first virtue, most broadly put, is associated with *satyam*, and *dharma*. Sacrifice falls under this banner, since it is a pious action that is done in service of the gods. The second-level virtues pertain to heroism and namely fulfilling one's *kṣatriyadharma*. The third, being the broadest, pertains to *śri* (in the context of wealth, sovereignty, and beauty). Maintaining the continuity of one's lineage falls under this banner.

23. brahmacaryeṇa yānkāṃścitprajñayā ca śrutena ca | iṣṭaśca kratubhiryānti tāṃste putro 'kṣayāṅgataḥ ||

24. sa cenmamāra sṛnjaya caturbhadratarastvayā | putrātpuṇyatarastubhyam mā putramanutapyathāḥ | ayajvānamadākṣiṇyamadhi svāityetyudāharat ||

25. According to Ganguli, the four virtues are "ascetic penances, truth, compassion, and liberality" (7.53.357).

26. Cf. Plato's *Republic IV* 443c–444a, where Socrates establishes that the ultimate telos of action is the harmony of the soul and not external acquisitions. The just person performs actions that are conducive to this harmony and avoids actions that are detrimental to it.

27. It's worth noting that Frauwallner's distinction between these two methods ultimately rests upon a racial distinction: the former psychological disposition is attributed to the Aryans whereas the latter cosmological disposition is attributed to the aboriginal Indians. Frauwallner's racial interests are by no means an anomaly to Indology. The search for an Aryan or proto-Germanic race via the text-historical method was one of the primary motives for the inauguration (Adluri and Bagchee 2018b) and perpetuation (Adluri and Bagchee 2014) of Indology.

28. dharmakṣetre kurukṣetre samavetā yuyutsavaḥ | māmakāḥ pāṇḍavāśaiva kimakurvata sañjaya ||

29. anye ca bahavaḥ śūrā madarthe tyaktajīvitāḥ | nānāśastrapraharaṇāḥ sarve yudhaviśāradāḥ ||

30. Ādi Śaṅkarācarya establishes that *dharma* is twofold, consisting of *pravṛttidharma* and *nivṛttidharma*, and that this twofold *dharma* is the content of the Gītā: "He imparted that twofold Vedic dharma to Arjuna, who was submerged in the ocean of sorrow and delusion. For dharma would excel if grasped and put into practice by the virtuous" (Śaṅkarabhāṣya introduction to the Gītā). Though Ādi Śaṅkarācarya does not explicitly mention the ostensible tension between these two paths, Arjuna's consideration to flee the battle and live off alms is an attempt to follow the path of *nivṛtti* by the external renunciation of actions (i.e., avoiding actions altogether). In response to this position, Gītā establishes how one may attain the ends of *nivṛttidharma* while engaging in action.

31. We could extend this analogy to the kingdom, Hastināpura, itself. Rather than interpreting the struggle for sovereignty as recounting a historical event or as a political theory, the battle over Hastināpura mimics the cosmogenic battle between the *devas* and the *asuras*. The gods and demons themselves have descended for *bhārāvataraṇa*, and thus the battle does hold cosmological implications: namely the structure of the cosmos depends upon a proper hierarchy in which the gods, with the help of Nārāyaṇa, rule over the heavens (Biardeau 1981, 87–88). The reverse of this, where the asuras rule over the heavens, would bring about cosmological disorder—akin to how Duryodhana's and Śakuni's (as *avatāras* of the Kali and Dvāpara yugas respectively) seizure of Indraprastha (lit. "the dwelling place of Indra") facilitates the entropic turn to the Kaliyuga. Thus the kingdom and the battle over its sovereignty is not merely a historical account of a political event, but are instead ciphers for cosmological themes.

32. This is contra Simon Brodbeck (2004), who argues that the central purpose of the Gītā is to goad Arjuna into battle. However, if this were the case, a lengthy philosophical discourse on the nature of action, the self, and the universe would not be as efficient as evoking the Pāṇḍavas' or Draupadī's treatment at the hands of the Kauravas (to give one possible example). Brodeck's argument is by no means original. It dates back to the work of Jacobi, Oldenberg, Garbe and Hauer, who unanimously declared two points: (1) that the Gītā was centered around the issue of how to get Arjuna to fight (regardless of the reasons); and (2) that Kṛṣṇa's actions were politically motivated. Joydeep Bagchee (2011, 709) provides these criticisms and the history of the "kitchen-sink hypothesis" (that Kṛṣṇa uses any argument that can to goad Arjuna to fight).

33. The question of the possibility of detached action—that is, action done without an attachment to its results—is a theme that deserves more attention than can be given here. It is given a lucid exposition by Christopher Framarin

(2006). Framarin provides the edifying example (one of many) of a student who attends class, yet is not disappointed to find out that the class is canceled (Framarin 2006, 610): the student had a desire not to attend class, yet acted on a normative prescription contrary to his desires. Whereas desire predisposes one to joy or disappointment, acting according to normative prescriptions without any desires for a specific outcome is possible.

34. karmendriyāṇi saṃyamya ya āste manasā smaran | indriyarthānvimūḍātmā mithyācāraḥ sa ucyate ||

35. karmyaṇyakarma yaḥ paśyedakarmaṇi ca karma yaḥ | sa budhimānmanuṣyeṣu sa yuktaḥ kṛtsnakarmakṛt ||

36. The co-constitutive relation between desire, ignorance, and the phenomenal universe is succinctly and beautifully captured by Ādi Śaṅkarācarya in the Vivekacūḍāmaṇi: "The mental sheath is the (sacrificial) fire which, fed with the fuel of numerous desires by the five sense-organs which serve as priests, and set ablaze by the sense-objects which act as the stream of oblations, brings about this phenomenal universe. There is no ignorance (*avidyā*) outside the mind. The mind alone is *avidyā*, the cause of the bondage of transmigration. When that is destroyed, all else is destroyed, and when it is manifested, everything else is manifested" (168–69; Mādhavānanda trans.).

37. In addition to Sukthankar's final lecture ([1942] 1957), see also the works of Adluri and Bagchee (2014, 2018a) and Jon D. Levenson (1993).

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