

"The Poetics of Performative Speech Acts:
Literary Expressions of Truth, Power, and Virtue"

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The *Mahābhārata* is a sustained moral reflection on the value of truth and truthfulness.
Ganeri (2011 196)

This paper examines the ideology and practice of truth-telling in South Asia. Evidence is drawn primarily from the *Mahābhārata* (MBh) and, for the sake of comparison, from other literature (Buddhist and nonreligious) with a focus on the "Act of Truth" statement. I compare this type of performative speech with other speech acts that have similar features: the curse, boon, and vow. All these speech acts derive their perceived efficacy from a shared ideology according to which words spoken by a person are empowered by that person's qualities: truthfulness and the fulfillment of one's social and religious obligations enable one to affect the world with one's words.

I also draw upon the philosopher of language, J. L. Austin (1962), for his exploration of the "performative utterance" as a theoretical framework for understanding the use of the Act of Truth in India's literature. His analysis of how certain statements effect change in the speaker's circumstances or surroundings illuminate the ideology at work in ancient India.

I analyze the Act of Truth in the comparative context of a set of religiously significant pronouncements. The patterns for these speech acts, each performed by a person with power, can be described generically as follows:

The Curse: "Because in the past you did X badly, I give you Y as an undesired outcome."

The Boon: "Because in the past you did X well, I give you Y as a desired outcome."

These two statements constitute a pair, and are mirror images of each other, the difference being that the boon is a reward for good conduct in the past, while the curse is punishment for bad conduct in the past. The other two types of statement are also a linked pair.

The Vow: "Because of X (or if X), I vow to do Y in the future for a desired outcome."

The Act of Truth: "Because in the past I did X well, *by that truth* the following desired outcome must happen now (or in the future)."

Both the vow and Act of Truth contain statements about good conduct; the difference between them is that the vow expresses an intention to engage in good conduct in the future to achieve a good outcome, while the Act of Truth asserts the previous performance of good conduct that enables the speaker to achieve a specified outcome.

One further difference between these two pairs of statements is that the curse and boon are pronounced by a person for the detriment or benefit of another person, while the vow and Act of Truth are pronounced by a person for his or her own benefit, and/or the benefit of other persons.

All four of these speech acts are ritual events. The Act of Truth statements that follow the pattern I have described, including the linking phrase “by that truth,” emphasize the ritualized nature of the pronouncement.¹ Indeed, Alex Wayman (1984) uses “rite of truth” as the term for this speech act. Almost all the examples I cite here closely follow this pattern, but I also include several that omit the phrase “by that truth” because the narrative context in which they appear and the function they perform suggest that these statements are patterned on the Act of Truth statement and may depend on its ideology and form. Also, in each of these types of speech act, I have described the statement as being made by “a person with power” because the fact that someone in a work of literature could make such a statement, and make it come true, indicates that the person making the performative statement is understood to have the power to make it so—but more on this later.

Of these four speech acts, perhaps the least well known is the Act of Truth. The term Act of Truth has come into use as a translation of the Pāli *saccakiriyā* (Sanskrit *satyakriyā*). A number of scholars have asserted that there are no examples of the use of this term in Sanskrit,² but that is not true; some Buddhist Sanskrit works do use the term *satyakriyā*. Often, Buddhist works in Sanskrit use related but different terms, such as *satyavacana*, which emphasizes the verbal aspect of the act; but the pattern and function of the speech act are recognizably the same whichever term is used, so I consider them the same act. Also worth noting in this regard is that while Buddhist literary works typically (apparently always) refer to the speech act by name (providing us uses of such terms as *saccakiriyā* and *satyavacana*), Hindu works in Sanskrit seem

never to refer to the act by name: characters in such works simply perform the act without naming it, thus reducing our opportunities to see the term *satyakriyā* used.

Examples of the performance of the Act of Truth in India's literature occur frequently in Buddhist literature and the *Mahābhārata*, and they typically occur as decisive events at crucial moments in the narrative. In an otherwise useful study of the word *satya*, Renate Söhnen-Thieme wrongly states the following:

If we look at occurrences of the 'act of truth' in both epics, Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa, we shall see that they only occur in incidental stories or in parts that are presumably later. ... there are no real attestations of an 'act of truth' in the original main stories of both epics ... Indian epics, it appears, aim rather at representing real life in that respect than at solving problems by 'acts of truth' which belong to the realm of Indian fairy tales.³

Scholars might disagree regarding whether a passage is later than another, but the MBh's Critical Edition helps us with this and, as a result of careful comparison of many manuscripts, shows Act of Truth statements in the text we have. Söhnen-Thieme does not indicate what she regarded as the "original main stories of both epics" (whatever she may mean by using the term "original" in this context). With regard to the MBh, perhaps this is intended to refer to the narrative about the Pāṇḍavas, in which case her statement is wrong, as will be documented below. She goes on to state "Apparently this motif belonged to legends and tales, but not to the genuine epics which are considered to tell ancient history." Her assertion that some unspecified portion of the MBh text is

“genuine” (and therefore some other portion is not genuine) cannot be supported by the evidence we have in the Critical Edition. For example, the stories about Damayantī and Sāvitrī are found throughout the textual tradition and are undeniably part of the text; they are part of the “genuine” epic. In a later publication, Söhnen-Thieme (2010 859) slightly modifies her earlier pronouncement about the Act of Truth:

In the Mahābhārata it mainly occurs in substories (Nala, Sāvitrī), but also at one decisive point in the main story: it is only by means of a “truth spell” that Kṛṣṇa is able to bring back to life Arjuna’s grandson, Parikṣit, in his mother’s womb.

The main point to be emphasized here, though, is that Söhnen-Thieme is incorrect in these observations about the Act of Truth: the fact is that the most important figures in the MBh do articulate Act of Truth statements, as will be shown below.

In the *Mahābhārata*, the best-known examples of the Act of Truth may well be those of Damayantī and Sāvitrī, whose narratives are clearly intended to shed light on situations faced by its main characters (who also hear the stories being told). As observed by Madeleine Biarreau (1984 247), such a narrative is an *upākhyāna* (“sub-story”), which she also calls a *récit-miroir* (“mirror-story”), a narrative within the narrative that reflects features of the main story, illuminating what is not obvious. Her brilliant analysis of the mirroring effects of Damayantī’s story leads Biarreau to emphasize the role of Draupadī in relation to not only kingship but the *avatāra* Kṛṣṇa in the MBh.⁴ The story of Nala and Damayantī (3.50-78) is told to the Pāṇḍavas in response to Yudhiṣṭhira’s question whether any man on earth was more unlucky and

unhappy than himself, having been cheated at dice, lost the family's wealth and kingdom, and then been forced to watch his wife dragged into the hall. Br̥hadaśva the seer offered to tell him a story about a king even more unhappy than himself, Nala. Princess Damayantī was so attractive that four deities attended her Bridegroom Choice ceremony (*svayamvara*), appearing to be indistinguishable from her intended husband, Nala. In the large assembly, Damayantī pronounced an Act of Truth to compel the four Gods to reveal to her which of the apparently identical figures standing before her was indeed Nala (MBh 3.54.15-21). Her Act of Truth consists of three linked proclamations, as follows: (1) as it is so that I had chosen Nala to be my husband; (2) as it is so that I have never gone astray in speech or thought; and (3) as it is so that the Gods themselves had ordained Nala to be my husband. Each of these three statements is followed by this phrase stated as an imperative: "by this truth, the Gods must point him out to me!"⁵ Since each of her assertions is true, her desired outcome occurs: the text shows the Gods complying with her demand, which is based on her articulating and manifesting truth.

Sāvitṛī is another fascinating case of a woman employing an Act of Truth to protect herself and her family (3.277-83). She married a man, Satyavat, who had been predicted to die in one year. As the appointed day neared, she performed a three-day ascetic vow of standing day and night. Then the two of them went out to gather wood for the family and he fell unconscious; Yama, the deity presiding over the realm of the dead, came to convey her husband there, so Sāvitṛī followed Yama. She engaged him in conversation, and so impressed Yama with her knowledge of *dharma* that he gave her

one boon after another benefitting her family, and finally restored the life of Satyavat. With night having fallen, worried about the wellbeing of his parents, and with Satyavat too weak to return quickly to their home, Sāvitrī performed an Act of Truth for the protection of her family: “If I have developed *tapas* (ascetic power), if I have donated, if I have offered sacrifice, then tonight must be safe for my parents-in-law and my husband! I do not recall ever speaking a lie, even in jest; by that truth, my parents-in-law must live today!”⁶ The family is reunited, and all live happily thereafter. Worth noting is the position in the narrative of Sāvitrī’s heroic effort to protect her family, which immediately follows the account of the abduction of Draupadī by Jayadratha (3.248-56) and the long mirror story on Rāma’s recovery of the abducted Sītā (3.257-75). Yudhiṣṭhira observes that Draupadī had saved her husbands from disaster at the dice match, and posed to Mārkaṇḍeya this question: “Has there ever been a woman, or has one even been heard about, who was so loyal to her husband and as great as the daughter of Drupada?” The story of Sāvitrī follows as an answer for Yudhiṣṭhira’s question, emphasizing how two such mirror-stories contribute to the audience’s appreciation of the plight of the Pāṇḍavas. But women in subtales or mirror stories are not alone in performing Act of Truth statements.

Draupadī had the misfortune of attracting unwanted attention from men in the MBh. One who was especially threatening to her was Jayadratha, while she and her husbands were in exile. With her husbands all away hunting, Jayadratha appeared and Draupadī thought to welcome him as a guest, but he tried to convince her to abandon her husbands since they had lost their wealth and kingdom. She denounced him for his

insulting words, and compared unfavorably his capabilities with the ferocity of her husbands in combat. Jayadratha insisted that he would not be deterred by words alone, while Draupadī replied that even Indra would be incapable of carrying her off from her husbands, so he would certainly not succeed. In an effort to fend him off she performed an Act of Truth (MBh 3.252.20) before Jayadratha and his followers, saying: "And as it is so that I have never at all done wrong to my honorable husbands even in my thoughts, today by that truth I shall watch you be taken captive and dragged about by the sons of Pṛthā."⁷ Despite her threatening pronouncement, Jayadratha dragged her onto his chariot and absconded with her. Her performative statement for self-protection reached fulfillment as her five Pāṇḍava husbands routed his accompanying soldiers, rescued Draupadī, and captured the fleeing Jayadratha. Bhīma was keen to kill Jayadratha but was persuaded to humble him by shaving the hair off his head except for five tufts so that he would look ridiculous. Yudhiṣṭhira pronounced Jayadratha to be wicked, encouraged him to develop his aptitude for *dharma*, and set him free.

In the next *parvan*, while in disguise for a year to complete their exile, Draupadī became fearful over the advances toward her of Kīcaka. The powerful commander of the kingdom's army, Kīcaka, had seen Draupadī and proposed marriage to her. She indicated to him that she was married, so marrying him was not an option, and that he should remember *dharma*. Kīcaka planned to seduce her by having a meal prepared and a supply of liquor on hand, then having his sister send Draupadī to his house, ostensibly to bring liquor back to his sister. Walking to his house by herself, for the sake of her own safety Draupadī said, "As I know no man at all other than the Pāṇḍavas, by

this truth, when he sees me Kīcaka must not overpower me!”⁸ She also prayed to the Sun, who sent an invisible *rākṣasa* to protect Draupadī; when Kīcaka pulled Draupadī by the hair and kicked her for resisting him, the *rākṣasa* threw him across the room. Draupadī fled to Bhīma, reminding him how she had been manhandled in the assembly hall by the Kauravas, in the forest by Jayadratha, and now by Kīcaka, for which she largely blamed Yudhiṣṭhira (MBh 4.16-20). Draupadī and Bhīma decided to entice Kīcaka to meet her in the dancing hall at midnight, and there Bhīma killed him. Thanks to her Act of Truth, the Sun’s *rākṣasa*, and her intrepid husband Bhīma, Draupadī was protected. In both these crises, thanks to her protective Act of Truth based on fidelity to her five husbands, her demand expressed in the imperative was fulfilled.

Kuntī is another example of a royal woman pronouncing an Act of Truth. The mother of the Pāṇḍavas, speaking to Kṛṣṇa, said: “Never have I made any distinction between Pāṇḍavas and Dhārtarāṣṭras; by this truth, Kṛṣṇa, I must see you and the Pāṇḍavas survive this war, your enemies slain and fortune around you.”⁹ Kṛṣṇa replied reassuringly; using many of the very same words of her Act of Truth, he told her that she would see her sons healthy and successful, masters of the world, with their enemies slain and fortune around them (MBh 5.88.98). Kuntī’s Act of Truth, and the confirmation of it by Kṛṣṇa, function as foreshadowing of the eventual outcome.

In the *Droṇa Parvan*, Arjuna vowed to kill Jayadratha for his role in the death of Arjuna’s son Abhimanyu. In the aftermath of Jayadratha’s failed attempt to abduct Draupadī, he had engaged in ascetic exertions and won a boon from Śiva that on the battlefield he could hold at bay all the Pāṇḍavas other than Arjuna. With Arjuna fighting

elsewhere, Abhimanyu penetrated the Kaurava formation but was unable to escape it, and due to his boon from Śiva, Jayadratha was able to prevent the Pāṇḍava heroes from rescuing the encircled Abhimanyu. Enraged at the loss of his son, Arjuna vowed that he would either kill Jayadratha before the next sunset, or commit suicide by fire (MBh 7.51.37). Arjuna then reinforced that vow with an Act of Truth: "As fighting in the battle I will win, and not lose, by that truth, know that Jayadratha will die in battle."¹⁰ This statement stands out from the others here considered, as it is not a declaration of virtuous behavior so much as a claim of combat prowess (or is this viewed as adherence to the warrior's *svadharmā*?), but in other respects complies with the pattern. After many duels, with tension rising due to the passage of time, Arjuna killed Jayadratha before the sun had set, bringing to fruition his vow by means of his Act of Truth (MBh 7.121).

In the following *parvan*, Arjuna killed his rival Karṇa in arguably the epic's most emotionally significant duel by pronouncing an Act of Truth before releasing the fatal arrow. At the conclusion of a hard-fought encounter, Karṇa's chariot wheel was mired in mud up to the axle, and he called upon Arjuna to remember the warrior's *dharma* and not kill him in an unequal fight, Arjuna mounted on his chariot while Karṇa was on foot (MBh 8.66). Hearing Karṇa's plea, Arjuna's chariot driver Kṛṣṇa ridiculed Karṇa for his appeal to *dharma* in this moment, since he had no such awareness of *dharma* in the assembly hall when Draupadī was abused at his initiative, and the Pāṇḍavas were cheated with his full support. Despite his call for a brief truce, Karṇa shot arrows at Arjuna again, to which Arjuna responded with his own. Arjuna then pronounced his Act

of Truth: "I have developed *tapas* and satisfied my elders; whatever my friends have desired, that I have sworn to do. By this truth, this arrow of mine, well aimed and undefeated, must kill my enemy Karṇa!"¹¹ Arjuna's arrow, empowered by his statement, was immediately effective.

These examples indicate uses of the Act of Truth to defeat an enemy or to protect oneself or others, but these are not their only uses. A fascinating passage in the text features Yudhiṣṭhira using a performative statement to revive Nakula.¹² The brothers, having encountered a Yakṣa at a lake and ignored his demands, were one by one rendered unconscious until Yudhiṣṭhira answered all the questions and riddles from the Yakṣa. He was granted a boon: he could choose one brother to be revived. Yudhiṣṭhira chose Nakula by making a three-part statement asserting his adherence to his *dharma* and his truthfulness, followed by the imperative statement that Nakula must live (MBh 3.297.71-73).

Noncruelty is the highest *dharma*; this I know as the highest truth. And I will not be cruel, so, Yakṣa, Nakula must live! The King always behaves according to *dharma*; people know this of me. And I will not depart from my *dharma*; Nakula must live, Yakṣa! As is Kuṅṭī, so is Madrī; there is no difference between the two for me. I want the same for both mothers:
Nakula must live, Yakṣa!

The third statement reveals his reason for choosing Nakula among his four unconscious brothers: so that Kuṅṭī and Madrī (the two wives of Pāṇḍu) would each have a surviving son. The dialogue with the Yakṣa as a whole emphasizes the value placed on noncruelty

(*ānṛśamsya*) as the highest ethical ideal, and Yudhiṣṭhira's adherence to that ideal. The Yakṣa was so pleased with Yudhiṣṭhira's actions that he revived all four Pāṇḍava brothers and granted additional boons. Yudhiṣṭhira's statement about his own good conduct resulted in his brothers being returned to life, as well as promises of their future success, and the Yakṣa revealed his true identity as Dharma, Yudhiṣṭhira's divine father. The linguistic form of Yudhiṣṭhira's pronouncement departs slightly from Act of Truth statements discussed earlier, in that between his descriptions of his good conduct and his imperative demand that Nakula revive he does not say "by that truth" (*tena satyena*), as we have seen previously. Despite that difference, the ritualistic nature of the statement, with the same imperative pronounced three times, each based on Yudhiṣṭhira's conduct in accord with *dharma*, and its articulation in a moment of life-threatening crisis, persuade me to include this statement.

Kṛṣṇa also performed an Act of Truth to revive Parikṣit, grandson of Arjuna and sole male heir of the Pāṇḍava lineage. At this crucial juncture in the narrative, Kṛṣṇa, the divine *avatāra* on the battlefield, said

As I have never told a lie, even in a minor matter, as I have never retreated in battle, therefore this boy must live! As I love *dharma*, as I greatly love brahmins, so this son of Abhimanyu, stillborn, must now live! As I have never known conflict between myself and Arjuna, by this truth this dead boy must live! As truth and *dharma* always have their foundation in me, this dead child of Abhimanyu must live! And as I killed

Kaṃsa and Keśin in accord with *dharma*, by this truth this child here must live again!¹³

With this multi-part Act of Truth, Kṛṣṇa brought back to life the heir to the throne days after the battle in which he had died. His appeal to his own good conduct is in each case the basis for the imperative that the boy must revive. Only the phrase “As truth and *dharma* always have their foundation in me” even hints at his divinity, but even here there is no recourse to divine action to effect the restoration of life to Abhimanyu’s son.

To summarize the findings from the MBh, Act of Truth statements are pronounced to protect oneself or others, to kill an enemy, and even to bring the dead back to life. Major figures in the narrative, including Pāṇḍava brothers, their wife Draupadī, and Kṛṣṇa pronounce Acts of Truth. In addition, we see Acts of Truth in “mirror stories.” For the sake of comparison, let us turn attention to Buddhist literature, where a somewhat different picture emerges.

Buddhist canonical literature includes a very striking Act of Truth performed by the monk Aṅgulimāla. His name comes from his colorful prior career as a murderous thug (or perhaps a sacrificing proto-tāntrika, if Gombrich is right¹⁴). He approached the Buddha with murderous intent, but the Buddha persuaded him to change his ways and he became a monk. As a monk, he later encountered a pregnant woman in a difficult delivery and hurried back to the Buddha for advice. The Buddha told him to perform an Act of Truth by saying that he had never murdered anyone, then modified it to include the phrase “while a monk.” Aṅgulimāla returned to the woman and pronounced the

statement, ending with “by this truth, you and your infant must be well,” and thanks to his performative speech, they were.¹⁵ Aṅgulimāla is presented in this *sutta* as later attaining *nirvāṇa*, and he has not been forgotten; as Naomi Appleton (2010 141) wrote, this “verse uttered by Aṅgulimāla is still chanted to women in labour today.” Such usage demonstrates the ongoing power of the Act of Truth’s ideology in that Buddhist context. Of course, almost any monk should be able to make a similar statement about not having murdered anyone while a monk, but interestingly modern monks reach back to the Act of Truth performed by Aṅgulimāla many centuries earlier—perhaps because it is canonical, performed at the direction of the Buddha, and it is understood to have worked at the time. Moreover, the term *saccakiriya* or *satyakriya* is used now in Sri Lanka to refer to a variety of political protests against war, or graduates not having jobs, or milk prices, etc. Additionally, a recent Thai film tells his story, and in Britain for three decades a Buddhist prison chaplain movement named after Aṅgulimāla has operated. Aṅgulimāla’s Act of Truth has not been forgotten.

The *Jātaka* tales have many examples of the Act of Truth; Naomi Appleton’s *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism* (2010) include many such statements. King Śibi (Sivi in Pāli) famously gave away his eyes because he was asked for them by Indra in disguise, and by an Act of Truth received new and better ones—one Act (*saccakiriya*) for each eye.¹⁶ A Sanskrit version (in *Jātakamālā* by Ārya Śūra) does not use that term but refers to the king “taking a stand on truth” (*satyādhiṣṭhāna*).¹⁷ The same term occurs in two other Sanskrit *Jātaka* tales from this collection as well.¹⁸ In both the Pāli

and Sanskrit *Jātaka*-s, the format of a declarative statement, then “by that truth,” then an imperative statement is clearly discernable.

I want to discuss one more Pāli *Jātaka* because it has been composed with some humor and has features of interest to MBh scholars. In “Kaṅha Dīpāyana Jātaka,”¹⁹ a boy is bitten by a snake so an ascetic, at the father’s request, performed an Act of Truth in an effort to heal him. His truth is that he was content for the first seven days as an ascetic but has been following that lifestyle for fifty years since, unwillingly, and “by this truth, the boy must revive.” But only one-third of the poison came out, so the boy’s father also performed an Act of Truth. This householder’s truth is that he donates, but unwillingly, and “by this truth, the boy must revive.” But only one-third of the poison came out again, so the boy’s mother performed an Act of Truth, saying that she views the snake and her husband without distinction, she does not love him, and “by this truth, the boy must revive.” Finally, the boy was healed by the combination of their three surprising statements, and all forgave each other their shortcomings and dedicated themselves to living in accord with the ideals of their ways of life. The ascetic in this story is the Bodhisattva, of course, yet even he was unable to heal the boy on his own: two more Acts of Truth were needed. Having realized that his life was not in accord with his ideals, he rededicated himself to the ascetic way of life and would later be reborn in the heaven of Brahmā, and in a future life become the Buddha. This tale of a former lifetime of the Buddha as a not-yet perfected Kaṅha Dīpāyana features him using the Act of Truth for the benefit of others while on his spiritual path. It also

contrasts the unperfected ascetic known from the MBh with the perfected Buddha, so can be seen as a critique.

One more Pāli text is particularly of interest for this study, *The Questions of King Milinda (Milinda-pañhā)*. The king asks for clarification on the story of King Sivi's eyes: if he gave away his own eyes, there is no physical basis for the divine sight he later gains. The monk Nāgasena clarifies that the basis for the king's eyes is the power of truth, and asks the rhetorical question, "Is there such a thing in this world as truth, by means of which truth-speakers perform an act of truth?"²⁰ The king agrees that this is so. Examples of such performances follow, in one of which the prostitute Bindumatī made the waters of the Ganges flow backwards by proclaiming her truth. The Emperor Aśoka asked her from what her power came since she was, by profession, a wicked thief and cheat. She did not contradict the Emperor, but explained that she had an Act of Truth by means of which she could overturn heaven and earth; she said:

Whoever gives me money, whether a *Khattiya* or a *Brāhmaṇa* or a *Vessa* or a *Sudda*, or of any other caste, I treat them all exactly alike. ... Equally free from fawning and contempt, I serve the owner of the money. This, Your Majesty, is the Act of Truth by means of which I caused the mighty Ganges to flow back upstream.²¹

Bindumatī said that her power derived from her equanimity with regard to caste hierarchy, and that because of her adherence to this ideal, and her truthful citation of it, she had the ability to affect the natural world.

While this story might be considered as satirical with regard to a solemn ritual pronouncement, it has a profoundly Buddhist ethical point. An early discussant of the Act of Truth, W. Norman Brown, repeatedly referred to the story of Bindumatī, and has (I think wrongly) stated that we have here an instance in which “antisocial conduct figures as the basis of an Act of Truth.”²² In my view, the point being made by this story is that Bindumatī, despite her own relatively low social status, acted toward others without bias based on their social status. As such, she embodies and enacts a Buddhist virtue that provides her power; indeed, the fact that she compares her virtue to Sītā’s fidelity to Rāma should be understood as Bindumatī asserting her strict adherence to an ethical ideal. I see this story as quite comparable to the other Act of Truth stories in that the speaker is able to state truly that some highly valued, ethical behavior has been performed.

The Act of Truth remained a feature of later Buddhist literature as well. The *Lotus Sūtra (Saddharma-Puṇḍarīka)* is “one of the most important and influential” texts of Mahāyāna Buddhism (Watson 1993 ix), and composed originally in Sanskrit. In its “Medicine King” chapter is an Act of Truth performed by a bodhisattva: “I have given away my two arms and am certain to attain the golden body of a Buddha. By this truth, by this true speech, my two arms must become as they were before!”²³ Another example in which a bodhisattva is made whole again by his Act of Truth is the Sanskrit play *Lokānanda*.²⁴ In the drama’s last act, the prince, having generously given away his crest-jewel, performs an Act of Truth (*satyakriyā* here!) as follows:

If I have never regretted my having given it away,

then now—by this act of truth, this *satyakriyā*,
 and as a fruit of my compassionate character—
 may a new crest-jewel sprout forth
 for the benefit of all sentient beings,
 a jewel of much greater potency and strength
 than the one before!

For contrast, though, I want to present one final example of an Act of Truth from Sanskrit literature. The *Pañcatantra* is a very popular, secular work that has spread throughout the world, existing in “... over 200 versions in more than 50 languages” (Olivelle 2009 17-18). The text exalts the value of quick-wittedness as the key to worldly success. It recounts how a weaver’s wife was having an affair, about which her husband found out, and for which he beat her and tied her up. She effected a switch with the barber’s wife, and when the drunken weaver awoke, still enraged, he cut off her nose, thinking that this was his wife. When the weaver’s wife returned from her rendezvous, she replaced the barber’s wife, who tied her up as before. The weaver awoke again and began to yell at her, and she said: “If it is true that I have never even in thought given myself to another man, other than the husband I married in my youth—then, by that truth (*anena satyena*), may my face be made whole again.” (Olivelle 114-15). As she already was intact, no change at all was needed, so her statement, while in the form of an Act of Truth, was a lie yet she eluded any consequences for her actions. To me this suggests that the Act of Truth was such a well-known, recognized type of verbal performance that it was available for parody in

the cynical world of the *Pañcatantra*, where a quick wit matters more than telling the truth.

Some scholars have argued that the Act of Truth has Vedic roots, perhaps even earlier Indo-European roots,²⁵ though I find the examples of Act of Truth statements that they cite as unpersuasive. I would describe the foundational Vedic paradigm as follows: perfect performance of specified actions accompanied by correct articulation of relevant words results in the desired and stated outcome. While proper speech and behavior were obviously crucial in many contexts outside the Vedic sacrifice, the Act of Truth incorporates a key difference from the Vedic practice: it is a performance that makes no appeal for action by a God. In the MBh and Buddhist literature alike, the speaker's own qualities and actions are cited as the basis for an outcome that must come true, with divine intervention not requested. India seems to have particularly cultivated the idea that ethical behavior and speaking truthfully about that is a source of power. The spread of India's cultural, literary, and religious influence has led to the Act of Truth being known throughout much of Asia.²⁶

My interpretation of the Act of Truth draws upon Austin's analysis of "performative utterances" as a distinctive aspect of language. The articulation of certain statements is also a performance that changes the speaker and/or situation: for example, the statement "I thee wed" produces a changed status. For Austin, speech does its work as locution (information), illocution (command or promise), and perlocution (audience response). The Act of Truth is a performative utterance that we can understand as having all three of these functions. The declarative statement, such

as Kṛṣṇa's affirmation that he has acted in accord with dharma and never clashed with Arjuna, or Aṅgulimāla's affirmation that he had not murdered anyone while he had been a monk, are certainly informational, but the real significance of such a declaration lies in its assertion of behavioral purity, understood as transformative and as contributing to one's personal power. Kṛṣṇa's imperative statement that Parikṣit must live, and Aṅgulimāla's imperative statement that the child and mother must experience well-being, is in each case a promise or command understood as contingent on the speaker's virtue, truthfully described. Furthermore, the audience response to these declarative and imperative statements in literature is intended to be faith: the belief in the power of the speaker to fulfill the command as the speaker had truthfully cultivated virtue, and faith in the transformative power of such virtue.

We have instances of the Act of Truth being performed by Arjuna to kill enemies. He asserts that he has performed *tapas* and pleased elders, and the audience response to his act, I believe, was to see it as justice done by someone who had been wronged, but who had been virtuous and, as a result, had the power to enforce justice. And when Kṛṣṇa revived Parikṣit, it is important to recognize that he did not do so as a deity exercising divine power, but as a man who acted in accord with dharma and truth, who was true to his friend Arjuna, and by that truth commanded the revival of Parikṣit. Multiple examples I have cited emphasize safety, healing, restoration of wholeness—either for the speaker or another. Buddhist examples prominently feature the virtues of generosity and compassion. The Kaṇha Dīpāyana Jātaka, with its Act of Truth statements by three people of differing social statuses to heal one boy, teaches the

importance of the Buddhist ethical ideals of right effort and right intention. The fact that the unwilling ascetic in this story was the Bodhisattva on his way to Buddhahood, who as a result of this interaction rededicated himself to the path, would communicate to Buddhists the crucial importance of right effort and right intention. I am struck, though, by a very consistent feature of the many examples of the use of this special ritualized speech act: Buddhist literature marks the Act of Truth by naming it as it is performed, while Hindu literature does not name it. This raises the interpretive question of the meaning of naming the action, thereby calling attention to it for the audience. Does Buddhist literature want to highlight the act, and by naming it, heighten the power and significance of a miracle performed by a virtuous person? Why would literature of the Hindu tradition such as the *Mahābhārata* not similarly seek such an outcome? And does this difference between Hindu and Buddhist literature in regard to the Act of Truth tell us anything about which religious tradition created and developed this performative speech act, perhaps borrowed by the other tradition?

I have found many examples of the Act of Truth being performed by the Bodhisattva who is perfecting his virtues as he moves toward Buddhahood.²⁷ Interestingly, I have found no examples of the Buddha performing an Act of Truth in his last life, the lifetime in which he attained *nirvāṇa*, only in prior lifetimes as the Bodhisattva. Even Aṅgulimāla's healing Act of Truth (performed on the Buddha's instruction) occurred before he had attained *nirvāṇa* and thereby become an Arhant. For me, this raises the question why this would be so, since the virtues being perfected before the attainment of *nirvāṇa* would be manifested perfectly and perhaps infinitely in

one who had attained *nirvāṇa*. Is a Buddha, and all who attain *nirvāṇa*, beyond performance of an Act of Truth? By contrast, the *avatāra* Kṛṣṇa was willing and able to perform an Act of Truth in the *Mahābhārata* for the beneficial purpose of reviving a deceased infant.

The Act of Truth is prominent in the *Mahābhārata*, but largely disappears from subsequent Hindu literature. Brown (1972a 267) notes one more recent example:

Throughout the Tamil-speaking region in South India there is constant reference in our own time to the legendary heroine of the "epic"

Śilappadikāram "The Jewelled Anklet" who made declarations of Truth

based upon her complete chastity. The epic text is probably of the sixth

century A.D. but the reverence for the story is ever fresh today.

Veena Howard (2013 51-54) argues, citing Brown, that Mahātma Gandhi's *satyāgraha* campaign is related to Act of Truth statements, and that he held similar views on the transformative power of Truth. It is unclear whether Gandhi knew the ancient practice of the Act of Truth, and he seems not to have used the expression in his voluminous writings. I do not think we have reason to believe that Gandhi was aware of the Act of Truth and consciously modeled his campaign for India's independence on that performative speech act, though clearly he had faith in the power of steadfast adherence to the ideal of nonviolent action to motivate people and attain the goal.

In contrast to the low visibility of the Act of Truth in Hindu literature, Buddhist literature from ancient periods continued to be recited and, in recent times, more widely read. Indeed, the Buddhist religious tradition includes ongoing recitation of the Act of

Truth statement by Aṅgulimāla for well-being. The Act of Truth in the *Lotus Sūtra* is widely read and recited by Buddhists, as are other such verses in various Mahāyāna texts. I am tempted to think that the Act of Truth is a Buddhist creation, though such a conclusion is speculative, and could be expected to remain so barring new evidence. The MBh is unusual in Hindu literature for its usage of the Act of Truth. The fact that the MBh utilizes the Act of Truth so often at key turning points in the narrative could be seen as another way in which the MBh responds to and competes with Buddhism.²⁸ In effect, the MBh may have borrowed from Buddhist literature this performative speech act that was understood to produce miraculous outcomes by means of virtuous behavior in accord with dharma. Indeed, the composition of the MBh itself may be due in part to an interest by brahmins to respond to the material and institutional success of Buddhism from the third century BCE through the second century CE, providing an alternative vision of how society should be ordered.²⁹

In conclusion, I believe that the religious significance (for Hindus and Buddhists alike) of the Act of Truth lies in its ability to emphasize and demonstrate the charisma and power of a person who has cultivated virtues and embodies behavioral ideals, and truthfully states so. The performance of virtuous behavior enables that person to act on his or her own behalf, or on behalf of others. The performer thereby manifests in his or her person the values of the religious tradition for the audience of the text. The ritualized pronouncement is so marked as to highlight the decisive moment of the demonstration of virtue's power.

Notes

1. Usually *tena satyena* or *anena satyena*, but Burlingame (1917 434) lists an array of variant versions of “by this truth” with citations of Buddhist texts in which they appear, in Sanskrit and Pāli. On the curse in the MBh, see Ramankutty 1999. On vows see Raj and Harman 2006.

2. See Burlingame (1917 433; Brown 1940; Thompson 1998 125). Choy (2012 34-35), in her doctoral dissertation later privately published, repeats the assertion, citing Burlingame, that the Sanskrit term *satyakriyā* is never used.

3. Söhnen-Thieme (1995 241).

4. Biardeau 1985. For an important perspective on these mirror-stories in the MBh, see Hildebeitel 2005. This article was also reprinted as the first chapter in a volume on MBh *upākhyāna* subtales, *Argument and Design: The Unity of the Mahābhārata* (Adluri and Bagchee 2016).

5. MBh 3.54.17-20. Damayantī said:

hamśānām vacanam śrutvā yathā me naiśadho vṛtaḥ |
patitve tena satyena devās tam pradiśantu me ||
vācā ca manasā caiva yathā nābhicarāmy aham |
tena satyena vibudhās tam eva pradiśantu me ||
yathā devaiḥ sa me bhartā vihito niśadhādhipaḥ |
tena satyena me devās tam eva pradiśantu me ||
svam caiva rūpaṃ puṣyantu lokapālāḥ saheśvarāḥ |
yathāham abhijānīyām puṇyaślokaṃ narādhipam ||

6. MBh 3.281.95-97. Sāvitrī said:

*tato 'bravīt tathā dṛṣṭvā bhartāraṃ śokakarśitam |
 pramṛjyāśrūṇi netrābhyāṃ sāvitrī dharmacāriṇī ||
 yadi me 'sti tapas taptam yadi dattam hutam yadi |
 śvaśrūśvaśurabhartṛṇām mama puṇyāstu śarvarī ||
 na smarāmy uktapūrvām vai svaiṣv apy anṛtām giram |
 tena satyena tāv adya dhriyetām śvaśurau mama ||*

7. MBh 3.252.20. Draupadī said:

*yathā cāhaṃ nāticare katham cit patīn mahārhan manasāpi jātu |
 tenādya satyena vaśīkṛtam tvām draṣṭāsmi pārthaiḥ parikṛṣyamāṇam ||*

8. MBh 4.14.18. Draupadī said:

*yathāham anyam pāṇḍubhyo nābhijānāmi kaṃ cana
 tena satyena mām prāptam kīcako mā vaśe kṛthāḥ ||*

9. MBh 5.88.59cd-60. Kuṅtī said:

*na me viśeṣo jātv āsīd dhārtarāṣṭreṣu pāṇḍavaiḥ ||
 tena satyena kṛṣṇa tvām hatāmitram śriyā vṛtam
 asmād vimuktam saṃgrāmāt paśyeyam pāṇḍavaiḥ saha ...*

10. MBh 7.53.53. Arjuna said:

*yathā hi yātvā saṃgrāme na jīye vijayāmi ca |
 tena satyena saṃgrāme hataṃ viddhi jayadratham ||*

11. MBh 8.67.19-20. Arjuna said:

*tapo'sti taptam guravaśca toṣitā |
 mayā yadiṣṭam suhrdām tathā śrutam || 19
 anena satyena nihantvayam śaraḥ |
 sudamśitaḥ karṇamarim mamājitaḥ || 20*

12. MBh 3.297.71-73. Yudhiṣṭhira said:

*āṅśaṁsyaṁ paro dharmah paramārthāc ca me matam |
 āṅśaṁsyaṁ cikīrṣāmi nakulo yakṣa jīvatu ||
 dharmasīlah sadā rājā iti mām mānavā viduḥ |
 svadharmān na caliṣyāmi nakulo yakṣa jīvatu ||
 yathā kuntī tathā mādrī viśeṣo nāsti me tayoh |
 māṭṛbhyāṁ samam icchāmi nakulo yakṣa jīvatu ||*

13. MBh 14.68.18-24. Kṛṣṇa said:

*na bravīmy uttare mithyā satyam etad bhaviṣyati
 eṣa samjīvayāmy enam paśyatām sarvadehinām ||
 noktapūrvam mayā mithyā svaireṣv api kadā cana
 na ca yuddhe parāvṛttas tathā samjīvatām ayam ||
 yathā me dayito dharmo brāhmaṇās ca viśeṣataḥ
 abhimanyoh suto jāto mṛto jīvatv ayam tathā ||
 yathāham nābhijānāmi vijayena kadā cana
 virodham tena satyena mṛto jīvatv ayam śīśuḥ ||
 yathā satyam ca dharmas ca mayi nityam pratiṣṭhitau
 tathā mṛtaḥ śīsur ayam jīvatām abhimanyujah ||
 yathā kaṁsaś ca keśī ca dharmeṇa nihatau mayā
 tena satyena bālo 'yam punar ujīvatām iha ||
 ity ukto vāsudevena sa bālo bharatarṣabha
 śanaiḥ śanair mahārāja prāspandata sacetanaḥ ||*

14. Gombrich (1996 135-64) argues that slight emendation of a verse that is defective in its meter makes sense of an otherwise perplexing statement.

15. *Majjhima Nikāya* 86 (Trenckner & Chalmers 1888-99 vol. 2, 103, line 25):

*"yato aham, bhagini, ariyāya jātiyā jāto, nābhijānāmi sañcicca paṇaṁ jīvitā voropetā;
 tena saccena sotthi te hotu sotthi gabbhassā ti." Atha kho sotth' itthiyā ahosi sotthi
 gabbhassa.*

16. *Jātaka* 499 (Cowell 1895-1907 vol. 3, 255).

17. Kern (1943 12; chapter 2, after verse 36). See also the translation by Khoroché (1989 10-17).

18. *Jātakamālā*, Chapters 14 and 15, "Supāraga" and "Lord of the Fish." In both these tales the same structure of the Act of Truth is seen. At 14.31 the phrase is *anena satya-vākyena* ("by this speech of truth"), and at 15.8 the phrase is *anena satyena*, and the text here refers to the Bodhisattva king "taking a stand on truth" (*satyādhiṣṭhāna*).

19. *Jātaka* 444; see Cowell (vol. 3 17-22). In each case, both the request and the performance of the Act of Truth involve it being called *saccakiriyā*.

20. *Milinda-pañhā* 4.1.42. See Rhys-Davids (1890-94 vol. 1 179-82) for a translation.

21. *Milinda-pañhā* 4.1.46-47. See Rhys-Davids (1890-94 vol. 1 182-85) for a translation.

22. Brown (1972a 256-57); see also Brown (1940 38), where he describes her way of life as characterized by "antisocial or unethical conduct."

23. *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtram*, Chapter 22: *bhaiṣajyarājapūrvayogaparivartaḥ* |
Electronic text from <http://dsbc.uwest.edu/node/4276>

eṣo'haṃ kulaputrā ye keciddāśasu dikṣu anantāparyantāsu lokadhātuṣu buddhā bhagavantastiṣṭhanti dhriyante yāpayanti, tān sarvān buddhān bhagavataḥ sākṣiṇaḥ kṛtvā teṣāṃ purataḥ sattvādhiṣṭhānaṃ karomi, yena satyena satyavacanena svaṃ mama bāhuṃ tathāgatapūjākarmaṇe parityajya suvarṇavarṇo me kāyo bhaviṣyati | tena satyena satyavacanena ayaṃ mama bāhuryathāpaurāṇo bhavatu, iyaṃ ca mahāpṛthivī ṣaḍvikāraṃ prakampatu, antarīkṣagatāśca devaputrā mahāpuṣpavarṣaṃ pravarṣantu| atha khalu nakṣatrarājasamkusumitābhijñā samanantarakṛte'smin satyādhiṣṭhāne tena sarvasattvapriyadarśanena bodhisattvena mahāsattvena, atha khalviyaṃ trisāhasramahāsāhasrī lokadhātuḥ ṣaḍvikāraṃ prakampitā, uparyantarīkṣācca mahāpuṣpavarṣamabhipravarṣitam |

The translation into English by Watson (1993 285) of Kumarajīva's translation of the original Sanskrit text into Chinese is as follows: "I have cast away both my arms. I am certain to attain the golden body of a Buddha. If this is true and not false, then may my

two arms become as they were before!”. See also a translation of a Nepali Sanskrit manuscript by Kern (1884 384).

24. Hahn (1987 130) translating *Joy for the World*, Act 5, verse 40.

25. Thompson (1998) is a particularly fine study, valuable because he evaluates the earlier works by Brown and others, though he can cite very few examples of a statement comparable to the Act of Truth. Thompson also draws on the work on comparative Indo-European linguistic and cultural studies by Watkins (1995), who emphasizes the relationship between kingship and statements similar to the Indic Act of Truth.

26. The *Jātaka* tales and other Buddhist literature discussed in this paper, along with works such as the *Lotus Sūtra*, were instrumental in the spread throughout Asia of the ideology of the Act of Truth. Hindu literature such as the MBh also travelled to Southeast Asia. Kimbrough (2005) discusses examples of Act of Truth statements in Japanese literature.

27. Reiko Ohnuma’s brilliant study *Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood: Giving Away the Body in Indian Buddhist Literature* (2007) includes many examples of Act of Truth statements by *bodhisattva*-s, particularly in interactions with Indra in disguise.

28. See Hildebeitel 2011 for an overview of relationships and influences between Buddhism and the MBh, in which he cites the views of Biardeau and Fitzgerald as well as his own. See also Bailey 2008; he concludes that the MBh is “a successful rhetorical exercise in consolidating a power base for brahmins that would stand independent of the possession of material wealth or military force, one resting on the capacity to

provide a knowledge of the theoretical and practical conditions of a coherently functioning society consisting of many different groups” (37).

29. Bailey 2004 discusses the success of Buddhism between about 200 BCE and 200 CE, explicit descriptions of Buddhism in the MBh, and the possibility that the MBh was developed by brahmins as an alternative vision of a society and culture based on dharma, understood and presented very differently than the Buddhist *dhamma*.

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