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Introduction

The Theme in Historical Perspective

The history of philosophical and religious speculation about the vicissitudes of human life is characterized by two principal lines of thought. There is the more optimistic view that men and women, though dwarfed by the immensities of the Cosmos, nevertheless have what it takes to change society and themselves, and to “conquer Nature.” The opposite, and more pessimistic, view is that human beings are forever the victims of circumstances beyond their control, hostages to an implacable and irrevocable fate.

These two positions, or rather attitudes to life, are seen in the writings of both the West and the East. In classical Greece, Plato saw clearly how most of us are lost in the shadows of our own prejudices and passions (*ekasia*). He nevertheless believed that the human soul can escape this unhappy condition through an epistemological ascent to the vision of the Good: “the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful, . . . the authentic source of truth and reason.”¹ Contrast this to the world of fifth-century tragedy, as Clytemnestra stands over her murdered husband and the chorus chants: “Alas, it is the will of Zeus, Who caused and brought it all to pass. Nothing is here but was decreed in heaven.”² Christianity retains the eschatological hope, albeit with a sense of impotence in the face of the power and glory of God,³ or of one’s ultimate demise without the saving Grace of Jesus Christ.⁴

In India, too, these two traditions have a venerable antiquity. In the early Ṛgvedic hymns, human beings are largely subservient to the whims of the gods, who are praised for the favors they bestow in exchange for the sacrifice (*yajña*). This attitude is also evident in the expiatory sacrifices designed to mollify the wrath of the god Varuṇa, or to remove

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guilt, often expressed as some kind of defilement or disease. This humble dependence on the gods changes dramatically, however, when the priests gain control of the gods by their knowledge of the ritual. A new sense of power thus emerges in the Brāhmaṇas, reinforced, in part, by a magical tradition that received orthodox approval in the Atharvaveda.⁵

Dramatic as these changes were, the new ritual knowledge still left the human agent at the mercy, as it were, of external forces. The secret of the cosmic power had passed into human hands, but only to a priestly caste (*varṇa*), not to the average man or woman. The desires (*kāma*) themselves are one's own, but they are fulfilled not directly, but mediately through an esoteric knowledge of the general order of the world over which one would otherwise have little or no control. Private actions would appear vain, impotent, or even illusory when set against the inexorable tide of events. Although accountable for what one does, there would be little to inspire confidence in one's inherent abilities to shape one's own destiny. Lacking is the depth and coherence of inner life that would point to the existence of an autonomous, self-directing center of willing and doing; what we would call a "person."

Such a situation does little justice to the creative potential within human nature itself, which lends dignity and uniqueness to the individual person, and hardly provides an adequate explanation for moral responsibility and human conduct in general. To the extent that one attributes one's actions to external agencies, one is determined by them, and thereby diminished. To the extent that one attributes these same actions to oneself, one is at least potentially free to choose one's own ends, to be called to account for what one does, and to accept some responsibility for the conditions of one's own life.

In ancient Greece, a similar clash of ideals gave rise to the tragic situation of the hero who faces an impasse (*aporia*) demanding an agonizing choice on which his entire fate depends. He is never actually free to choose between these two possibilities—only to recognize the tragic path he has to take, and, in so doing, to understand the purpose of his life. This conflict was never pushed to such extremes in classical India, but the human agent nevertheless remained suspended, as it were, between the external forces that bear down upon him and a margin of free choice that finds its latest and most developed expression in the moral causality of karma, the doctrine that the conditions of life are the inevitable fruit of past behavior, whether in this or in some previous life. The natural corollary of this more human centered view is that humanity is capable of determining the shape of its future all by itself, without the need to propitiate the gods—or the sacrificial experts among the Brahmin priests. This opens the way for the individual human subject to

become the center and source for his or her own self-development as a spiritual being.

The first textual evidence of a movement in this direction was the appropriation, by Varuṇa, of the role of dispenser of divine justice (for example, Ṛgveda I.24.9). Other gods subsequently assumed this function. This line of development eventually led to the idea of the Divine Grace of Viṣṇu or Śiva as a reward for the conduct of the devotee. The conflict was never completely resolved, but as a general rule, we find that the ascetic (and generally more orthodox) traditions lean toward the goal of individual self-mastery through self-knowledge, while for the devotional cults, justice is often meted out by the Supreme Divinity according to the karma of the devotee. The karma doctrine eventually gained the ascendancy, even in the *bhakti* cults, and “Leaving out the rank materialists who are very few and far between, the entire structure of Indian culture from one end of the country to the other is dominated by the ideology associated with the doctrine of karma.”⁶

The Mahābhārata is an ideal sourcebook from which to study human agency and conduct in the Indian context. Here, in fact, is an entire gamut of ideas on the subject from those reminiscent of the early Vedas to the role of divine Grace and the mature doctrines of karma. The earlier notions are echoed in the attribution of all power to the gods. Indra is credited with assigning “to all beings their strength, glory (*tejas*), offspring, and happiness. When satisfied, the king of the gods distributes all good things. He denies them to evil-doers but grants them to the good (lit. ‘those established in virtue’)” (III.218.9–10). The favors of the gods are also considered vital for certain purposes; Arjuna must propitiate Indra and Śiva to secure divine weapons; Ambā must perform austerities (*tapas*) to get the support of Śiva for killing Bhīṣma (V.188.7–13). More common is the orthodox Brāhmaṇic perspective of the many passages comparing the Brahmins to the gods (for example, III.197.20; XII.329.13; XIII.129.2). Several passages even describe them as the gods of the very gods—*devānāmāpi devatāḥ* (for example, XII.60.41, XIII.35.21, and XIII.136.16–20). There are hints of a power struggle between the gods and the “forest sages” or *ṛṣi* (XIII.6.25). And the gods are finally reduced to the powers of the senses, which, of course, the *yogi* must control (for example, XII.120.44; XII.316.16).

E. Washburn Hopkins was the first Western scholar to recognize different strata of ideas in the Indian epic literature by contrasting the karma theory with one in which “man owes what he gets, not to his anterior self, but to the gods. What the gods arrange is, in any case, whether good or bad, the appointed lot; the “arrangement,” *viddhi*, is fate. If the gods bestow a “share,” *bhaga*, of good upon a man, that

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is his *bhāgya*, “luck, divinely appointed,” *diṣṭa*. As divine, the cause is *Daiva*, which later becomes fate, and is then looked upon as a blind power, necessity, chance, *hatḥa*.⁷

Focus of the Analysis

These terms and ideas are of particular interest since they lead directly to the focus of the present work, which seeks to explore the powers and possibilities of human action in the Mahābhārata. Attention is directed not only to the act itself but to the motive (or “desire”) behind it, and to its potential effects on the actor and on the world. The issue constituted a major philosophical conundrum prompting lively debate at numerous points in the epic. Modern discussion on this topic would likely be framed in terms of Destiny and “Free Will.” However, it becomes increasingly evident as the story unfolds that the actions of the protagonists have little in common with our modern sense of either “will” or “freedom.” Not only has the Sanskrit language no direct counterpart for “will”; the “freedom” involved is not of any function or faculty of the ego (such as a “will”), but of the human spirit—a very different matter. Epic freedom (or *mokṣa*) points beyond what we might recognize as the human “person” to a freeing of the bonds that bind that person to the things and beings of the world itself. The word most commonly employed to describe a motivated action in these epic debates is *puruṣakāra* (lit. “that which is done by a human being”), a term that is more akin to our concept of “human initiative” than to Free Will as such—hence its choice in our title. It is generally matched against the opposing forces of *Daiva* (“that which comes from the gods”), a term we may roughly translate as “Destiny.”⁸

On the one hand, human life and the course of history are seen by many epic characters as governed exclusively by *Daiva* (and the other external forces noted by Hopkins), or by *svabhāva*, a term that suggests something inherent (*sva*) in the nature (*bhāva*) of a thing that makes it act as it does. “Human effort” or *puruṣakāra* is inconsequential, ephemeral, or even futile in the face of the overwhelming tide of events, whether these are the result of sociopolitical conditions, or natural forces beyond the power of the individual to change. Such a position is exemplified by the blind king Dhṛtarāṣṭra, so much so that Georges Dumézil, for example, takes him to be “the very image, if not the incarnation of Destiny, Bhaga.”⁹ All the king can do is to see in his thoughts the destruction of the Kurus: “This, I think, is the law of the course of time (*kāla*) that goes on for ever: all are fixed to the wheel like its rim; there is no escaping its effects” (V.50.58). Many other characters in the

epic speak in the same vein in their troubled moments or when they feel powerless against overwhelming odds. However, Dhṛtarāṣṭra not only expresses these sentiments; he is overwhelmed by them to the point of actually becoming the chosen instrument of *Daiva*.

And yet, paradoxically, the epic also carries a commanding message that the lives of both individuals and societies may be changed for the better through human initiative (*puruṣakāra*) in accordance with the dharma, the moral order sanctioned by religious tradition. This is, indeed, the teaching that Kṛṣṇa is at pains to convey to Arjuna in the Bhagavadgītā section of Book VI. Kṛṣṇa himself always acts for the welfare of the worlds (*lokasamgraha*) and he urges Arjuna to do the same. Action not only can but *must* be taken in fulfillment of one's dharma. Arjuna must "get up and fight!" And he is finally urged to make up his own mind about what he should do (VI.40/BG.18.63).

Such encouragement and sanction by the Lord himself suggests that this more positive outlook is not the exuberance of youth or the ignorance of the blind but is justified by the very conditions of existence. However, there is little consensus on the degree to which human initiative (*puruṣakāra*) can change or stem events that unfold as if governed by a greater divine force with a will of its own. Moreover—and this will also claim our attention, there is still some question as to whether the work of the human agent flows from a truly personal decision in the first place. This creates a constant tension between the two opposed poles.

The most revealing summary of the prevailing state of learned opinion on this score is provided by Vyāsa himself, the reputed author of the text, when he states that

Some authorities in the science of action point to human initiative (*puruṣakāra*) [as the cause of events]. However, other learned scholars say [that it is a matter of] destiny (*Daiva*), [while] the materialists [say that] nature (*svabhāva*) [is responsible]. But yet others [maintain that] human initiative, action (karma) and destiny are [nothing but] the naturally-occurring product of [previous] mental states. These three [factors] are inseparable, without distinction. [It is argued] "it is like that: it is not like that" how the world comes into being.¹⁰

This clash of view is somewhat disconcerting at first sight. Vyāsa, however, immediately follows with the assurance that "[It is only] 'those who take their stand in action' (*karmastha*) [who] are of differing opinions (*viśama* = not uniform [that is, in their opinions]). 'Those who take their stand in the truth' (*sattvastha*) look upon all things with an equal eye (*samadarśin*)."¹¹

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This brings us to another radical opposition that occurs throughout the epic, and indeed through all great works of Indian literature, namely, the contrast that is often drawn between the confusions of ordinary men and women and the truths entertained by the person of wisdom who is able to reconcile all opposites in a unitary vision. As V. S. Sukthankar has noted, this literature is “infused with the idea of penetrating behind the phenomena to the core of things, and they represent but so many pulsating reflexes of one and the same central impulse toward seeing unity in diversity, toward achieving one gigantic all-embracing synthesis.”¹² What the real truth is, in this case, is not given directly in the quotation just cited. However, it offers the suggestion that the differences therein expressed are perhaps not mutually exclusive, but point to an underlying vision of human nature, action, and purpose, accessible only to “those who take their stand in the truth” (*sattvastha*).

Reconciliation of these two views can thus serve as a goad in our attempt to determine the respective roles of these powers, their relationship to classical Indian beliefs about karma, and their implications with respect to self-determination and human freedom. It becomes increasingly clear as we proceed, however, that this can be done only in the context of the epic’s unique concepts of human nature, and in taking account of that very special “final” freedom known as *mokṣa*. For, as the *Bhagavadgītā* suggests to us, this “final freedom” is not possible without a quantum shift in self-identity in which the human ego, together with its sense of agency, is “sacrificed” in favor of a larger system of identity, described in the *Bhagavadgītā* as “the self of the self of all beings.” In the last analysis, therefore, *puruṣakāra*, based on ideas of “I” and “mine,” is fated to dissolve with the dissolution of the ego, to be replaced by devotion to the higher purposes of the Cosmos. These “higher purposes,” or *Daiva*, are represented in the epic by Kṛṣṇa, the incarnation (or avatar) of God who has descended to earth to restore the moral order (dharma). *Daiva* thus emerges as the driving force behind the cycles of human history and society, and indeed of the Cosmos as a whole. It is experienced in our own lives as the various obstacles that hinder the fulfillment of “desire” (*kāma*). And in terms of the karma theory, it is the inexorable “fate” resulting from the desire-prompted initiatives of the past.

This ubiquitous pressure from above leaves the reader with the feeling that our all-too-human striving for material and spiritual betterment, and for the well-being of society, is ephemeral or somehow unreal. But its value for the epic author(s) is never in doubt. *Puruṣakāra* is universally promoted and prescribed, and is most dramatically exemplified in the person of the king. Without initiative, drive, and the energetic pur-

suit of worthy goals, both the king and his kingdom are lost. On this point the epic is quite clear. The king cannot simply abandon his worldly responsibilities in the manner of a renunciate, but must act in the world with the right attitude. This means giving up all thought of personal gain in the interests of the welfare of the community, something that can only be done by cultivating a spirit of detachment and devotion to Kṛṣṇa. In this manner, all human behavior, including the inhuman violence and “sacrifice” of the battlefield, may be transformed into a new devotional path leading to the ultimate “freedom” of *mokṣa*. What appears as a dissonance between *Daiiva* and *puruṣakāra* may thus be more conceptual than real. The real conflict, if there is one, is between the two distinct visions of human existence in which these notions find their place. These are represented, in the language of the epic, by “those who take their stand in action,” and by “those who take their stand in the truth” respectively; the truth that the ego and its sense of agency is ultimately a mental fiction—a case of mistaken identity.

In order to illustrate how “those who take their stand in the truth” of things (*sattvastha*) are able to reconcile the conceptual inconsistencies experienced by us ordinary mortals (that is, the *karmastha*), we must clarify the levels of meaning bound up with these notions of *Daiiva* and *puruṣakāra*. How far do they penetrate to the very roots of human action itself? Does the initiative come only from the human agent or from both within and without, the same character appearing now as agent, source, and efficient cause of action (*puruṣakāra*), and now as acted upon, engulfed in a force from beyond that sweeps all before it (*Daiiva*)? Or does this divine causality only come into play once the human action has been initiated, to block, counter, or divert its effects? In short, how do the lives of the human protagonists fit into the activities of higher beings on higher planes? If human beings are moved by a higher design like a machine (*yantra*)—as suggested by Kṛṣṇa in VI.40/BG.18.61, what freedom can they really enjoy to shape their own destinies and those of the societies in which they live?¹³

The Epic Context

The epic context for these ideas is a great fratricidal war between two sets of cousins, the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, for control of the dynastic succession. For the epic, however, this conflict is simply an episode in the perennial battle of the gods and the demons for the control of heaven, temporarily shifted to the Earth where incarnations (“sons” and “daughters”) of these same gods and demons are continuing this battle for supremacy. The growing ascendancy of the demon hordes is marked

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here below by the gradual moral entropy of human society. This situation can only be reversed by the Creator Himself (since evil at this level is invariably more powerful than good), who engineers a renewal of society through the complete destruction of the old order. The human battle lines are drawn between the hundred sons of the blind King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the eldest of whom is Duryodhana, and the five sons of Pāṇḍu (of whom Arjuna is the main actor). Kṛṣṇa, the incarnation of the highest Divinity, acts as Arjuna's friend and charioteer, though nominally remaining neutral in the conflict. The battle itself may be interpreted as a fitting metaphor for the human struggle "on the field of dharma" between a lower nature and a higher nature acting as a proxy for the spirit (Kṛṣṇa) who takes no part in the action. To what extent the story is purely symbolic, or is based on the facts of history, must remain a moot point.

Clearly, a thematic analysis such as this is only possible if the epic can be read as a synthetic whole (rather than as a haphazard assemblage of disparate materials). This has long been a major bone of contention among Western scholars. But here is not the time or place to enter into the fine points of this continuing controversy. However, I will clarify my own position at the outset by saying that I incline to the view that, while there are clearly all manner of accretions to the core elements of the plot, the epic does, in fact, constitute a *symbolic* whole. By this I mean that doctrinal or sectarian differences do not obscure what amounts to a common vision of the human journey and of the purpose of this life on Earth, presented in a mythological key. This will emerge as we proceed, and will be given concrete expression in chapter 9. I find myself in substantial agreement with Madeleine Biardeau in this regard. The interested reader will find a more complete exposé of scholarly attitudes on the integrity of the epic in the Appendix.