

- Peer-Reviewed, Open Access Journal
- Index in NepJOL
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Do Humanity and Duty Conflict? A Moral-Philosophical Reading

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore the idea how humanity (human values) and duty conflict in many circumstances. I believe that they cannot be done at the same time and when one tries to do one of them alone, the other comes on the way. And to prove this, I have referred to characters and quotes from different areas of knowledge such as Buddhist and Hindu religions, literature, law, education, medical profession, war, army and, especially from the Bhagavad-Gita. Humanity or human values are truth, right conduct, love, peace, and non-violence. All religions are formed under this basic foundation. Duty is an obligatory act or a course of action that is to be fulfilled according to one's position, social custom, law, religion, or morality of a particular culture.

Key Words: authority, Buddha, duty, Gita, humanity, human values, responsibility, right

Introduction

The two terms “humanity” and “duty” are used in a wide range of disciplines and subjects, such as in philosophy, ethics, religion, literature, history, and politics. According to *Wordnik* dictionary, humanity is “the quality of being humane; the kind feelings, dispositions, and sympathies of man; especially, a disposition to relieve persons or animals in distress, and to treat all creatures with kindness and tenderness.” According to *Journal of Political Sciences & Public Affairs*, humanity “is a kind and sympathetic attitude towards other people, especially when they are suffering in some way.” According to *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, duty means “obligatory tasks, conduct, service, or functions that arise from one's position as in life or in a group.”

Do Humanity and Duty Conflict? It depends on the specific situation whether or not humanity and duty conflict. In many cases, humanity and duty conflict, while in other cases they may not conflict. For example, imagine a situation where you are a soldier in the military and you are ordered to kill an innocent person. Your humanity might tell you that it is wrong to kill an innocent person, while your duty might tell you that you have to obey your orders. In this case, there is a conflict between humanity and duty. On the other hand, imagine a situation where you are

a doctor and you are asked to treat a patient who is injured in a car accident. Your humanity might tell you that you have to do everything you can to save the patient's life, even if it means working long hours or putting yourself at risk. Your duty might also tell you that you have to do everything you can to save the patient's life, because that is your job as a doctor. In this case, humanity and duty are working together towards the same goal.

Here are four more examples of situations where humanity and duty might conflict:

A soldier is ordered to torture a prisoner of war, a police officer is ordered to break into a suspect's home without a warrant, a lawyer is asked to defend a client who they know is guilty, and a doctor is asked to perform an abortion against their conscience.

In each of these cases, there is a conflict between the individual's sense of humanity and their duty to obey orders or to uphold the law. There is no always easy answer to the question, "Do humanity and duty conflict?" In every situation, each individual must decide for themselves how to balance these competing values (humanity and duty) to be wise and practical.

Ultimately, whether or not humanity and duty conflict is a matter of individual judgment. There is no easy answer, and each situation must be evaluated on its own merits. Against this background, the objective of this article is to explore the idea how humanity (human values) and duty conflict in many circumstances.

To explore the idea, moral-philosophical approach is considered while reading the different stories, events, or cases of history, literature, religion and so on. According to Wilfred L. Guerin, Earle Labor, Lee Morgan, Jeann C. Reesman, and John R. Willingham, "the moral-philosophical approach is as old as classical Greek and Roman critics. . . . The basic position of such critics is that larger function of literature is to teach morality and to probe philosophical issues. They would interpret literature within a context of the philosophical thought of a period or group" (25). For example, "Robert Frost's 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' suggests that duty and responsibility take precedence over beauty and pleasure" (26).

Since I did not find writers writing much more about the conflict between morality and duty, I chose the title "Do Humanity and Duty Conflict: A Moral-Philosophical Reading" in order to fulfil the research gap.

Humanity and Duty in the Life of Gautam Buddha

Siddharth Gautam, later known as Gautam Buddha, was born a prince in Lumbini, Nepal. He ignored his duty towards his parents, wife, son, and the other members of his Royal family. Rather he chose the path of humanity. He ignored his duty as a prince. He undermined his duty as a sage as well even after he became a Buddha ("Enlightened"). Instead, he chose a path of humanity.

According to John Powers in his book *A Concise Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, "the term 'Buddha' means 'awakened' and is based on the notion that most people spend their lives in ignorance of the true nature of reality engaging in activities that they believe will result in happiness but they really lead to suffering and continued rebirth" (18). Powers further writes, According to Buddhism, all beings are born over and over in a beginningless cycle, and the factor that keeps the process going is ignorance (*ma rig pa*, *avidya*). Their minds are conditioned to accept the conventional wisdom that acquiring wealth, fame, power, sex, etc. will lead to happiness, but even a cursory examination of the actual state of things reveals that those who most relentlessly pursue their own welfare tend to be friendless and unhappy. Conversely, people who work for the betterment of others and are motivated by sincere compassion and love tend to be content, even if

they have little money and few resources. Buddhas are those who have fully awoken from the sleep of ignorance in which most being spend their lives and who comprehend the true nature of reality. (18-19)

Still further, Powers notes, “They see that every action leads to an opposite and equal reaction, as Isaac Newton observed, and that this pattern pervades the entire universe. Every action (*las, karma*) that one performs produces concordant results, and one’s present situation is a direct result of previous decisions and actions” (19).

The following story of Gautam Buddha will explore the conflict between duty and humanity and the point how he gave a high priority to humanity over his duty every time in his life. Many miraculous stories are associated with great religious leaders’ birth. It so happens with Siddharth Gautam also. Siddharth Gautam was a member of the Shakyas’ clan. His father, Suddhodana, was the king of the clan. His mother was named Maya. His parents raised him in a state of luxury in the hope that he would become attached to earthly things and pleasure and, thus, abandon the religious life. When he was twenty-nine, his wife gave birth to a son, but so little did Siddharth care for worldly attachments that when asked to name the child, Siddharth said, “I will name him Rahul (Fetter).”

The king of Siddharth Gautam was understandably upset when he heard of these things, and he forbade his son to leave the palace. He offered his son anything he wished, but Siddharth replied,

I seek four things.

If you can give them to me, I will

Remain here,

And you will always see me in this house; I will never leave.

My lord, I wish that old age will never take hold of me;

And that I will always have the glow of youth;

That I will always be in perfect health

And that illness will never afflict me;

That my life will never end, and that there will be no death. (*Lalita Vistara*, qtd. in Powers’ *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* 270)

His father, of course, was powerless to give Siddharth these things, and with deep regret he realized that his son was about to leave him. So, shortly after his son’s birth, at night, Siddharth left his loving wife, child, loving parents, luxurious lifestyle, and future role as a leader of his people in order to seek truth as a wandering ascetic. He abandoned all his traditional duties. His supreme duty was to obey his father but he easily ignored it. His duty was to care his parents and his wife, who had recently given birth to a child, but which he did not fulfill. Rather, he decided to pursue a path that might lead to the ultimate good, which would benefit many human beings. Exactly, this was a path of humanity or altruism, which is related to cosmopolitanism and worldly-brotherhood.

When, one night in 535 BCE, at the age of 35, he was seated underneath a large tree, later known as the Bodhi tree (species of Peepal or *ficus religiosa*), he attained enlightenment. He became a savior, deliverer, or redeemer. Then for seven days, he puzzled over his future: whether to withdraw from the world and live a life of seclusion, or whether to re-enter the world and teach his Middle Way. Mara tried to persuade him not to re-enter the world because Mara told Buddha that what he had realized was beyond the comprehension of humans or gods and that no one would understand if he were to teach them. Reflecting on these words, Siddharth saw that they were mostly true, since the understanding of a Buddha surpass all mundane wisdom. After

thinking this, however, he recalled his former resolution to work for the benefit of others, and he was moved by compassion for their sufferings. So, he decided to re-enter the world to proclaim his *Dharma* (teachings, truth) to other humans so that they could also attain enlightenment (Powers in *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* 50). Here he gave priority to his sense of humanity over his sense of duty as a Buddha or sage after attaining enlightenment. Obviously, as a Buddha or sage his duty was to live in seclusion doing meditation.

Humanity and Duty in *The Bhagavad-Gita*

Barbara Stoler Miller explains that *The Bhagavad-Gita* is the most popular of all the Hindu sacred writings. Its name comes from the Sanskrit words “Gita,” (song) and “Bhagavad” (of God). So, *The Bhagavad-Gita* is The Song of God (10).

The Bhagavad-Gita is related to the story of the Mahabharata, which tells the story of the exploits of two royal families, who trick and fight each other to see who should be the rightful ruler of a country. One of the central characters is Krishna, who acts as the charioteer for one of the warring cousins, Prince Arjun, in the Battle of Kurukshetra. The conversation between Krishna and Arjun before the battle is known as the Bhagavad-Gita. (Gibson 13)

We know the fact that the Kauravas are evil from the background of the Bhagavad-Gita and that the war is being raised because the Kauravas refused to hand back the kingdom that was rightfully Pandava’s including Arjun. Nevertheless, Arjun is not ready to fight against his kith and kin on the ground of humanity or human values. He wants to avoid desire and pleasure as he thinks desire is dangerous and pleasure is poisonous. But Lord Krishna stresses on Arjun’s duty. The sacred duty (“*dharma*”) here of Arjun, a Kshatriya warrior, is to fight against his enemies, the Kauravas, and to reclaim his kingdom. His duty is not to balk with fear and die in shame but to rejoice in the chance to get to heaven through a battle. Lord Krishna has charismatic qualities. He is an authority of religion. In Lord Krishna’s words, Arjun’s duty is:

Look to your own duty,
Do not tremble before it,
Nothing is better for a warrior,
Than a battle of sacred duty. (2.31, translated by Miller)
The doors of heaven open
For warriors who rejoice
To have a battle like this
Thrust on them by chance. (2.32)

His duty as further explained is not to look at the consequences of his actions (Lord Krishna: “Be intent on action, / Not on the fruits of action,” 2.47), but to conquer his desires arising due to attachment to his kinsmen and the material body they possess. So, Lord Krishna says to Arjun:

It is desire and anger, arising
From nature’s quality of passion;
Know it here as the enemy,
Voracious and very evil! (3.37)

Therefore, Lord Krishna again says, “Great Warrior, kill the enemy / menacing you in the form of desire” (3.43). But if Arjun carries out this noble duty, then he will be killing his own cousins, teachers, great grand uncle, revered elders, and others of his kinsmen. Killing one’s own countrymen can never be a righteous act for a man of honor. This will be against human values or humanity. In Arjun’s own words:

Honor forbids us to kill
 Our cousins, Dhritarashtra's sons. (1.37)
 It is better in this world
 To beg for scraps of food
 Than to eat meals
 Smearred with the blood
 Of elders I killed. (2.5)

Also, the moral human values like love, compassion, and respect are at stake. Arjun might be eradicating evil from his land but not all are evil (Bhisma and Drona are Arjun's great grand uncle and teacher respectively, who are nowhere in *The Mahabharata* depicted as being evil) and most of the fighters are there against him because they are compelled by some factors, like the love for the place they grew in or the feeling of reciprocation for their leaders. This is demonstrated in Arjun's saying:

I see men gathered here,
 Eager to fight,
 Bent on serving the folly
 Of Dhritarashtra's son. (1.23)

In addition to these, what good one would bring by killing those for whom the battle is being fought. Arjun sees no good in killing his kinsmen in battle (1.31). So, he says:

We sought kingships, delights,
 And pleasures for the sake of those
 Assembled to abandon their lives
 And fortunes in battle. (1.33)

Arjun says that if he does not act like the philosophers or the learned men and just yields to the desire for the fruit of action, he will be called ruthless, uncompassionate, disrespectful and a human slaughterer, a sinner in all. So, Arjun says, "I lament the great sin" (1.45). On the other hand, if he lets his pity, compassion, and emotions to rise above his duty, he will be acting cowardly and, according to Lord Krishna, cowardice is ignoble, shameful, and foreign to ways of heaven (2.2). He will be straying far from the path to eternity and immortality. This is shown when Lord Krishna says, "When suffering and joy are equal for him / and he has courage, / he is fit for immortality (2.15) but

If you fail to wage this war
 Of sacred duty,
 You will abandon your own duty
 And fame only to gain evil." (2.33)

Besides these, Lord Krishna tells Arjun that the people will think that he deserted in fear of battle and will start talking about his undying shame and despise him for his low self-esteem and for a man of honor like Arjun, shame is worse than death (2.34, 35). Furthermore, if he quits the battle, he is giving one more chance for the evil, corrupt, and deceitful Kauravas to rule on land and bring the same chaos, the family destruction caused by an intermixture of castes, and social disorder he thinks the war is going to bring (Arjun: "the sins of men who violate / the family create disorder in society," 1.43). The consequences of such conflicts can be disturbing to an individual both physically and mentally. And as a whole it affects the community for individuals who make up the community. Here we can see what happened to Arjun through his own words:

My limbs sink,

My mouth is parched,
 My body trembles,
 The hair bristles on my flesh. (1.29)
 The flaw of pity
 Blights my very being;
 Conflicting sacred duties
 Confound my reason. (2.7)

To summarize, the choices here Arjun faces are just two, either to heed the teachings of Krishna and go to war to fulfill his duty, or to retreat for the sake of human values, but he cannot do both of them simultaneously and when he chooses to do one of them the other comes as a stumbling block. However, finally, Arjun decides to go to war because he sees the ghastly, divine form of Lord Krishna, who justifies his act of killing his countrymen by saying,

They are already
 Killed by me,
 Be just my instrument,
 The archer at my side. (11.33)
 Arjun, a man should not relinquish
 Action he is born to, even if it is flawed. (18.48)

Arjun even learns that the Self (“*Atman*”) cannot be killed and learned men do not grieve for the dead or the living. And ultimately he is assured that he shall be freed from all evils. In this context, Lord Krishna says to Arjun:

Resigning all your duties to Me,
 The all-powerful and all supporting Lord,
 Take refuge in Me alone,
 I shall absolve you of all sins, worry not. (18.66)

Thus, Lord Krishna teaches Arjun that fighting a just war is an honorable action. It is Arjun’s prescribed duty. Lord Krishna does not advise Arjun to go to the forest and meditate. When Lord Krishna explains the meditational yoga system to Arjun, he says that the practice of this system is not possible for Arjun. Lord Krishna advises him not to give up his occupation or duty (fight).

Contrastingly, Lord Buddha says, “Violence can never be stopped by violence. Only non-violence can put an end to it. This is *Sanatan Dharma* or the universal law”(qtd. in Badal 24). In *Kim*, Lama, a seeker of Buddhist truth, holds the view that spiritual life is indebted for its protection to the real world. His question: “What profit to kill men?” receives a sensible, down to earth answer from Kim, his *chela* (“disciple”): “Very little - as I know; but if evil men were not now and then slain it would not be a good world for weaponless dreamers” (Kipling 77), which view is similar to Lord Krishna’s statement in the *Bhagavad-Gita*:

For the protection of the virtues,
 For the extirpation of evil-doers,
 And for establishing *Dharma* (righteousness) on a firm footing,
 I am born from age to age. (2.8)

Thus, Arjun’s conflict between his sense of humanity and duty is resolved by Lord Krishna. And he becomes ready to fight, giving priority to his duty over humanity.

Conflict between Duty and Humantiy in the *Srimad Bhagavata Puran*

The story of Prahlad can be read in the *Srimad Bhagavata: The Holy Book of God* translated

by Swami Tapasyananda. Accordingly, Prahlad had deep faith in Lord Narayan and His universal absolute reality. Hence, he was in Bliss. Prahlad was a son of Hiranyakashipu, a demon. Prahlad gave priority to his religious duty to God. He dismissed the human value that a son should obey to his father. Once Hiranyakashipu fondly asked Prahlad to repeat what he had learnt from his teacher. Then, Prahlad replied, "I have learnt the secret essence of all learning." The father was glad. He asked him again, "Tell me that essential thing which you have mastered." Prahlad boldly said, "Father! He who illumines everything, He who finally absorbs everything within Himself, is the One, the Narayan. Having Him always in the mind and experiencing the Bliss thereof awards fulfillment to all."

When the son Prahlad uttered the name of Narayan, the father abhorred Narayan's name. He further said boldly, "Father! You have conquered the entire world, but you have failed to conquer your senses. Therefore in trying to control and conquer our organs, it is very necessary to have confidence in ourselves and faith in God." Prahlad's learning made Hiranyakashipu very angry. Then, Hiranyakashipu tried all methods to divert his son Prahlad from his devotion to God. The child was subjected to every possible kind of torture and ordeal, trampling by elephants, biting by cobras, and immersing in the sea. But, Prahlad's devotion to Lord Narayan saved him. Prahlad did not die by any destructive means used by his father. Disregarding his perverse father, Prahlad held fast to the Lord. Thus, Prahlad did not fulfil his duty to his father, but fulfilled his religious duty to the Lord by loving Him. Actually, to love father is to love humanity, but Prahlad did not give importance to his father's love.

Duty and Humanity in the life of Mira: A Mystical Singer and Devotee of Lord Krishna

Parita Mukta's book *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai (Gender Studies)* is an excellent book on Mira and her biography. It tells the story of Mira from a feminist perspective.

Mira gave priority to her religious duty to Lord Krishna over her husband and family. She was a very dutiful wife. She obeyed her husband Rana Kumbha's commands implicitly. After her household duties were over, she would go to the temple of Lord Krishna, worship, sing, and dance before the image of Lord Krishna daily. The little image would get up, embrace Mira, play on the flute and talk to her.

Surprisingly, Rana's mother and other ladies of the house did not like the manners of Mira, as they were worldly-minded and jealous. They were all annoyed with her. Mira's mother-in-law forced her to worship Durga and admonished her often. But Mira stood adamant. She said, "I have already given up my life to my beloved Lord Krishna." Therefore, she was persecuted in various ways by Rana and his relatives. She got the same treatment which Prahlad had got from his father Hiranyakashipu.

Lord Krishna always stood by the side of Mira. Once her husband Rana sent a cobra in a basket to Mira with the message that it contained a garland of flowers. Mira took her bath and sat for worship. After finishing her meditation, she opened the basket and found inside a lovely idol of Lord Krishna and a garland of flowers. Then, Rana sent her a cup of poison with the message that it was nectar. Mira offered it to Lord Krishna and took it as His Prasad. It was real nectar to her. Then, Rana sent a bed of nails for Mira to sleep on. Mira finished her worship and slept on the bed of nails. Lo! The bed of nails was transformed into a bed of roses. Thus, Mira fulfilled her religious duty to the Lord, but neglected her familial duty to her husband and family, being far away from the sense of humanity or humanism.

Duty and Humanity in William Stafford's Poem

Stafford's poem "Travelling through the Dark" presents the conflict (tension) between duty, responsibility, and efficiency (good judgment) on one side and emotions and human values on the other. In other words, he presents a great tension between two realities or two systems of life. According to his poem, he finds a recently dead doe with an unborn fawn on a narrow road while travelling through the dark. Then, he stops his car, pauses, and thinks as to what best he can do to the unborn fawn which is "waiting, alive, still, [but] never to be born" (43-44).

He becomes emotional and wants to save it out of humanity but, after a long struggle of thoughts and possible answers of his problem, he knows that he cannot do so and, therefore, he pushes her over the edge into the river. This shows that he cannot do two things together simultaneously- fulfilling his duty and humanity. He yields to his duty, responsibility, and efficiency at last. In our own life, we feel "great feelings" or "great faith" or something resembling them, which have to be subdued to the demands of everyday life.

Duty and Humanity in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*

In Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet*, Hamlet goes to kill his uncle Claudius, who had married his mother, to fulfill his duty to avenge his guilty uncle as instructed by his ghost father. But when he goes to kill his uncle, he finds his uncle praying to God. He is reminded of his faiths on humanity, morality, and religion which teach that it is a sin to kill anyone while they are in the service of God. Therefore, he cannot kill his uncle (37-121). Thus, Hamlet cannot fulfil his duty to avenge his father's death due to his overwhelming sense of humanity, morality, and religion. It shows how these two forces (duty and humanity/morality/religion) can sometimes conflict with each other, making it difficult to make difficult decisions in life.

In Shakespeare's another tragedy *King Lear*, King Lear decides to divide his property in accordance with the expression of love of his daughters for him. Cordelia, his youngest daughter, replies that her duty towards her father and would-be-husband are different. She can love him only as much as a daughter is expected to do, not more than that. So, Cordelia says to her father, "I love your Majesty / According to my bond no more nor less" (1.1). She cannot love her father and husband equally; half of her love and care goes to her father and half to her husband according to her duty, though equal love is justifiable from the viewpoint of humanity (23-137).

It is similar to our day-to-day case that we cannot love the children of others as much as we do to our own. In fact, a parent can give attention to the needs of their offspring, but they cannot do so to the needs of the children of others though it is expected from humanitarian viewpoint.

Conflict between Right, Duty, and Humanity

Parents, judges, kings, teachers, priests, policemen, entertainers, chairpersons—all exercise their rights or power more in a sense of authority than that of duty (McRae and Boardman 49-53). Rousseau says, "Man is born free but he is in chains [restrictions, duties, under authorities]" (80). Authority enjoys rights and advantages whereas duty benefits others. Authority knows taking but duty giving. As a person having authority, we give orders to others to accomplish our jobs from them whereas as a person having duty, we serve others.

Everyone's humanity is the same. That is, it is universal; it is approved by all people or all religions equally. In one of the Ten Commandments, Jesus Christ clarifies humanity or human religion thus, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy

neighbor's" (qtd. in McRae and Boardman 48). To benefit others is humanity (human religion) whereas to trouble them is a sin.

Everyone's duty differs from each other according to their rank, place, time, society, culture, law, or religion. An individual has more than one duty. For example, the person has different duties as a son to his father, as a husband to his wife, as a parent to his children, as a devotee to his religion, as a public servant to his nation, and so on. The person is only himself inside him all the time but he has to project his different faces in public.

"All the world's a stage," which is a phrase that begins with a monologue from William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, spoken by the melancholy Jacques. The speech compares the world to a stage, and life to a play, and classifies the seven stages of a person's life, sometimes referred to as the seven ages of man: infant, schoolboy, lover, soldier, justice, pantaloon (a foolish old man), and second childhood, "sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." An individual has to carry out different duties in their seven stages of life before the curtain of death falls down (*Wikipedia*).

Conclusion

Humanity and duty conflict in many occasions or issues. They cannot go together towards the same goal. The meaning of humanity is universal. But the meaning of duty is decided or restricted by one's family, society, culture, religion, ideology, or politics.

Humanity unites us all, regardless of our differences. It makes us care for each other, even when we don't know each other. It is the compassion that compels us to help those in need.

Giving, loving, or sharing with everyone equally or impartially is humanity but doing one's assigned job with the sense of compulsion, difference, or partiality for their interest is duty.

There are different authorities—authorities of home, religion, school, church, temple. They impose on us certain duties which we should fulfill. Certainly, we have both authority or right one hand, and duty or responsibility on the other. Generally, rights and duties are correlative and reciprocal.

But there is a conflict between humanity and duty in many cases. We can get many examples of the conflict between humanity and duty in the areas of religion, literature, law, medicine, education, and politics. For example, Gautama Buddha ignored his duty to his family and gave importance to the path of human service, human welfare, and non-violence. But Arjun in *The Bhagavad-Gita* ignored humanity and gave importance to his duty to fight as a warrior for the establishment of righteousness. In literature, Stafford, Hamlet, and Cordelia are torn between their sense of duty and their humanity. In school, a teacher has to award low marks to their students because of their poor answers though they wish to award high marks to their students. A doctor in off-duty has to wake up in the middle of the night to save his patients on the ground of humanity putting aside his duty to his wife and children.

Sometimes, duty and humanity may coincide, for example, it is a mother's duty and humanity to look after her children. Actually, duty and humanity are two sides of life. The balance of life depends upon our prudence in the harmonious use of duty and humanity.

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