

Conflict of Right Action in the *Mahabharata*

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Abstract

The characters of the *Mahabharata* encounter moral crisis across various contexts. This paper attempts to explore and analyze different episodes of moral dilemmas faced by the major characters. Even the wise and mighty characters hesitate while making their choices. The conflict of right action is an existential problem. This situation is created when a person is caught between ideal and practical, family and society, kinship and friendship, desire and duty, and worldliness and spirituality and so on. The objectives of this paper are: to know the causes of the moral crisis and to find the reasons why people face difficulty in doing right action. I have used the method of textual analysis in this paper. The conceptual framework consists of theories of moral crisis/dilemma. I have also used the philosophies of law of karma/duty, attachments and renunciation from the *Bhagavad-Gita*. The findings are: the characters' attachments have caused their moral dilemmas in doing right action. Self-control is the key to triumph over moral crisis. The consequence of right thinking is right action.

Keywords: moral dilemma, choice, existential problem, attachment, detachment

Introduction

Both the Pandavas and the Kauravas face moral dilemmas while making their choices and performing their actions in the *Mahabharata*. These moral conflicts are known as dilemmas of ethics (*dharma sankata*). According to Jani (2014), the *Mahabharata* "presents variety of moral dilemmas" (p. 69). Broadly speaking, the *Mahabharata* depicts the universal existential crisis of humanity. The moral conflicts of the epic characters are caused due to their conflicting moral requirements. The characters across generations in the *Mahabharata* confront ethical dilemmas and they deviate from performing right actions.

Statement of the Problem

The characters in the *Mahabharata* encounter moral conflicts/dilemmas while making their choices and doing right actions.

Research Questions

What moral crises/dilemmas do the characters in the *Mahabharata* face while making choices? Why do they encounter the conflict of right action? How can we cope with this existential problem?

Argument

The characters of the *Mahabharata* make wrong choices because of their ethical quandary. Their ethical dilemmas are caused due to contradictions between their personal preferences and their social norms, their obligations to their family and their duty, and idealism and pragmatism.

Objectives

The objectives of this research paper are: to know the causes of moral crises/dilemmas of the characters in the *Mahabharata*, to find the reasons why they faced difficulty in doing right action, and to suggest some ways to overcome the moral crisis/dilemmas.

Methodology

I am using the method of textual analysis. The episodes of moral dilemmas occurred in the *Mahabharata* are the primary data. I have used R. Menon's English translation of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* in two volumes as the primary text. In this paper, the episodes of moral crisis are

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critically analyzed and interpreted by applying the theories of moral dilemmas and the philosophies of *karma* (duty), attachments/bondages and renunciation as theoretical tools. The mode of textual analysis is interpretative.

Organization

This paper starts with the introduction. Then it presents the textual and thematic reviews. After the reviews, some ideas of moral conflicts/ dilemmas are given as the theoretical tools. Then, the moral conflicts encountered by the characters in the *Mahabharata* are analyzed. The paper ends with the conclusion followed by the works cited list.

Literature Review

It is believed that the *Mahabharata* was originally composed in Sanskrit by Vedavyasa. It is grand in terms of its form and its content. Now the translations of the *Mahabharata* are available in many languages. Out of the vast body of existing literature, I have selected some relevant literature for this paper. The following consists of textual and thematic reviews.

Many writers and critics have analyzed the *Mahabharata*. While translating the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* into English, Buck (2000) wrote that “The *Mahabharata* is an Indian epic, in its original Sanskrit probably the largest ever composed” (p. xiii). Similarly, Debroy (2015) described the *Mahabharata* as:

The text also tells us that there are three versions of the *Mahabharata*. The original version was called *Jaya* and had 8,800 shlokas. This was expanded to 24,000 shlokas and called *Bharata*. Finally, it was expanded to 90,000 (or 100,000) shlokas and called *Mahabharata*. (Vol. 1, xx)

The present *Mahabharata* is one of the greatest epics in the world. Fitzgerald (2007) also described the form of the *Mahabharata* as “the world’s largest epic” (p. 150). Similarly, Das (2009) projected the classical epic as, “The *Mahabharata* is not a text but a tradition” (p. xlix). The *Mahabharata* is an awesome classical epic which portrays the life and creed of Hindus.

The themes of the *Mahabharata* have attracted readers from the East and the West. Moral crisis is one of the most important themes of the *Mahabharata*. Human beings universally face this moral dilemma, the existential problem of humanity. Because of moral dilemmas, people hesitate to perform right actions. In the epic, both the Kauravas and the Pandavas underwent through the conflict of right action. In this context, Das (2009) analyzed moral crises faced by the epic characters, “The epic is obsessed with questions of right and wrong—it analyzes human failures constantly” (p. xxxiii). Each one of us is caught between choices: this or that. The characters are caught between their divided selves.

In the *Mahabharata*, the characters are supposed to do right thing according to dharma. But they are compelled to do according to the need of time. A person's choice determines his /her way of life. Regarding the characters’ making free choice, Das (2009) further analyzed this issue and wrote, “When the epic’s characters choose, they become responsible for their decisions” (p. 255). In the theme of moral crisis, Jani (2014) also explored, “The *Mahābhārata*, which is not only a historical heroic poem (*itihāsa*) but also a book on law and morals (*dharmasāstra*), on ethics (*nīti*), in fact, an encyclopaedia of Indian culture, presents variety of moral dilemmas”(p. 69). The aforementioned reviews show that the characters face the conflict of right action due to their moral dilemmas. This paper analyzes the problem of moral crisis and seeks its solution as suggested in the *Mahabharata*.

Theories of Moral Crisis

The conceptual framework of this article consists of theories of ethical dilemmas. Ethics is the study of right and wrong. In this regard, Thompson (2008), an English writer and philosopher, wrote, “It is about the quest to find what is right and good and the best way to live” (p. 4). Yet, moral dilemmas arise due to our conflicting beliefs regarding our ethical conceptions. Internal conflict happens when

two conflicting wants or desires coexist within the mind of a person. People's moral values are shaped by their religious beliefs and practices. In this regard, Arthur (2019), an American professor of philosophy, expressed, "People's moral views are shaped by their religious training and their current religious beliefs" (p. 25). Sometimes new ideas or values contradict with the deep-rooted ideas in the mind. In this case, an individual faces a dilemma while choosing between two equally desirable alternatives.

The characters in the *Mahabharata* face moral dilemmas. Sometimes they hesitate to perform their duties. Sometimes, they regret what they have done. Matilal (2014), a British-Indian philosopher, analyzed the occurrence of moral dilemmas, "Dilemmas represent irreconcilable alternatives, and the actual choice among them becomes either irrational or is based upon grounds other than moral" (p. 6). Moral dilemmas are unresolved matters. If one chooses one out of more than two moral obligations, he/she violates the other(s).

If a person confronts alternatives of a seemingly similar nature, he/she faces *dharmapāśa* (a moral dilemma). According to Dubey (2014), an Indian professor of philosophy, "A dilemma involves a crisis of choice between two or more alternatives. It arises in a situation where it is difficult to choose either one or the other course of action. Usually it is a situation of 'neither-nor' when one is in a quandary, and can do neither this nor that" (p. 35). It is difficult for a person to choose one out of two or more alternatives. To hesitate to decide is to face a quandary. Everyone mostly confronts moral dilemmas (*dharmapāśa*) while choosing one of alternatives seemingly equivalent nature. There is always the difficulty in choosing right action.

According to the *Bhagavad-Gita*, "The human body is the battlefield where the eternal duel between right and wrong goes on" (Brown, 2016, p. 392). There is no clear-cut demarcation between right and wrong. That is why we daily experience the conflict between right and wrong. In the process of accomplishing duty, one of the legendary characters Arjuna faces a conflict of duties. He is caught between two duties: his duty as a Kshatriya warrior and a member of his family. With a dilemma, he uttered, "Alas! What a heinous sin we are about to commit, in that, from greed of the joy of sovereign power, we are prepared to slay our kith and kin! (Brown, 2016, p. 394). Arjuna faced moral dilemmas and wished to be killed in the battlefield.

Regarding the moral conflict, Das (2009) analyzed, "When the epic's characters make free choices, they become responsible for their decisions" (p. 255). Moral autonomy has been given to the characters to choose. Karna chooses Duryodhana, not the Pandavas. That is why he is bound to face the consequence of his free choice. Duryodhana chooses Krishna's army whereas Arjuna chooses Krishna as his charioteer. Their choices bear consequences. The characters in the *Mahabharata* faced the consequences of their choices. The aforementioned theories and philosophies of moral crisis or dilemma are applied as theoretical tools in the following textual analysis.

Characters' Moral Crises in the *Mahabharata*

The epic characters of different generations undergo through different kinds of ethical dilemmas. Ultimately, they face the conflict of right action. The following are some of the representative episodes of conflict of right action in the *Mahabharata*.

Shantanu, was captivated by Ganga's physical beauty. He accepted Ganga's condition that he would not question her activities. The king had moral obligation that he could not stop Ganga throwing his newly born children into a river. When Ganga was about to throw his eighth child into the river, he had intense mental conflict. He was totally confused what to do. "What tormented him most, whenever he thought of it, was his queen's nonchalance at what she did, which was so monstrous" (Menon, *Adi Parva*, Vol. 1 7). Similarly, Shantanu wanted to gratify his carnal desire by marrying her, but her father, the king of fishermen put condition to him that her son would be the king of Hastinapura after him. The condition was like this, "You can have my Satyavati, if you give me your word that her son will be king after you" (*Adi Parva*, Vol. 1 17). He terribly wanted to marry her but

he was puzzled thinking about Devavrata's future. This situation thrust Shantanu into dilemma because he had already declared Devavrata the *yuvaraja* (crown prince).

Devavrata (later Bhishma) vowed to remain a celibate throughout his life. But he abducted three princesses namely Amba, Ambika and Ambalika for his half-brother Vichitravirya. Due to his vow of life-long celibacy, he could not marry Amba though he liked her. Despite her appeal, he rejected her to be his wife. "He wanted to take her in his arms and keep her there forever. But instead, he said, "How can I marry you, child? I am too old for you" (Adi Parva, Vol. 1 34). It was Bhishma's dilemma/existential crisis caused by his own choice.

Dhritarashtra knew that Duryodhana would not hesitate to take the Pandavas' lives if he could not be king. The king also knew that Duryodhana had already plotted against them. "The choice before Dhritarashtra was clear: the life of his own son or those of his brother's sons" (Adi Parva, Vol. 1 197). He chose the life of his own son rather than the life of his brother Pandu's sons. The blind king suffered because of his choice. Gradually, the king suffered from his existential predicament. He was isolated and alienated. He led a life of doubt and dilemmas.

Pandu knew that he could not have his own children. Pandu had an intense desire to father his own children. These contradictory situations created moral crisis/conflict in him. Pandu yearned for his own children. He was obsessed with this idea. "Pandur found he could not meditate any more. When he shut them to still his mind, images of fantasial children danced before his eyes" (Adi Parva, Vol. 1 76). Day and night, he saw visions of his wives with sons in their arms. Pandu's intense desire was deeply rooted into his consciousness as a result he had a mental crisis. Pandu permitted Kunti to call upon any god so that she could be pregnant. Pandu desires to have his own children to reign the kingdom of Hastinapura. First he renounced the throne of Hastinapura to Dhritarashtra. Later he desired it for his offspring. These contradictory things created moral crisis/conflict in him.

Youthful Kunti could not resist her sexual desire. She invoked Suryadeva for her sexual gratification. She misused the divine mantra (a sacred word or utterance) granted by Sage Durvasa. She delivered a son and she floated the child putting in a box on the river fearing the society. She saw the small, brilliant face of him who lay in that box and Kunti thought she would go mad with guilt. "... whenever she was alone, an unvarying image haunted her dreams and her solitude. She saw a wooden box floating away from her" (Adi Parva, Vol. 1, 71). Kunti was caught in between desire and dogma. She suffered from this guilt throughout her life. It was her existential predicament. She created it by her own choice.

Yudhishtira was an ideal person. The Kauravas were prospering despite their evil doings. The Pandavas were suffering. Then Yudhishtira doubted the path of dharma. Then Yudhishtira asked Lomasa:

Muni, why do I suffer like this? I have always walked the way of dharma, even at some cost to myself. My enemies, Duryodhana and his brothers, care nothing for truth. They will do anything to gratify themselves, with no thought for what is right or wrong. Yet, they live in comfort in a palace, and here I am in the jungle with my unhappy family. (Vana Parva, Vol. 1 586)

Yudhishtira doubts the outcomes of dharma. It is his mental crisis. The source of this crisis is his doubt. A person is conditioned by his/her choice. Yudhishtira was suffering from his self-reproach. He blamed himself as a cause of the Pandavas' suffering. Dharmaraja was caught between idealism and realism.

Arjuna was a Kshatriyaby birth and training. His duty was to fight. At the declaration of war, Arjuna was reluctant to fight against his kith (friends) and kin (relatives). Arjuna faced a quandary whether to fight or not to fight. He had a conflict in his mind in terms of fulfilling his responsibility as a warrior or as a family member. Arjuna cried, "Krishna! My hands shake and my mouth is dry. My body shivers and my hair stands on end" (Bheeshma Parva, Vol. 2 149). His two moral obligations were equally important. He considered killing his friends and relatives was a crime for him. There

was a seismic disturbance in him. It was Arjuna's *vishada* (depression). Arjuna could not fulfill the duty as a family member and a warrior at the same time. According to Krishna, the cause of his dilemma was his attachments/bondages to the worldly things.

Duryodhana felt an existential crisis when his pride/ego was hurt. Such a conceited man also faced mental crisis in his life. "How much better it would have been for me to have died fighting the gandharvas than have the Pandavas save my wretched life" (Vana Parva, Vol. 1 688). Duryodhana's choice thrust him in an existential condition. Duryodhana's course of life was determined by his choice. He craved to be the absolute emperor of Bharatvarsha. He chose to walk through the path of adharma. He opted for war, not peace. He chose Krishna's army, not Krishna. His conceit, pride and envy caused his tragic condition. He had everything but no satisfaction and peace at his heart.

Karna was the son of Suryadeva and Kunti. Atiratha the charioteer and his wife Radha adopted him when he was found in a wooden box on the water of the Ganga. Sixteen years old Karna did not want to be a *sarathy* (charioteer). "Mother, tell me why I am so confused!" (Adi Parva Vol. 1 154). He wanted to be the greatest archer on earth but his situation did not allow him to be so. He was a *suta*'s adopted son. He was living with an agony of being a *sutaputra* (son of a charioteer). So, there was a mental crisis in him. He wanted to be the greatest archer on earth but his situation did not allow him to be so. There was a mental crisis in him

Draupadi was the Kuru empress and the wife of the Pandavas. After the exile the Pandavas began talking about peace. Draupadi had not expected the Pandavas like that. "Not a word of war or revenge, but again words of peace. And today I am amazed to hear Bheema talking of peace!" (Udyoga Parva, Vol. 2 72). Draupadi was burning with a sense of revenge. It brought mental crisis in her. She was driven by her revenge motive. At any rate, she wanted to take revenge on the Kauravas.

Every choice bears its consequence. According to the 'law of karma', the consequence of an action is not with the control of its doer.

Findings/Conclusion

The characters of the *Mahabharata* encounter various mental crises/conflicts according to different times and contexts. Dhritarashtra, and Pandu face moral crisis/conflict due to their obsession with desire, greed, lust, envy. Duryodhana undergoes mental dilemmas due to his doubts, suspicion and disbelief. Dhritarashtra, and Arjuna hesitate while making choices. Then they are thrust in a state of quandary. Karna faces moral crises/ dilemmas because of his contradictory ideas in his mind. Institutions like marriage, family and society also create moral crisis in them. All human beings are destined to go through this moral crisis themselves like the characters in the *Mahabharata*. This is the predicament of every individual.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* addresses the problem of moral crisis of every person in the world. Arjuna, an epic hero, goes through an intense moral/ethical dilemma in the *Mahabharata*. Arjuna is not yet free from the baggage of his social norms and values. Krishna sees *moha* (attachment) in Arjuna. He is enchained in the world of illusion so he is in a state of moral dilemmas. The battlefield of Kurukshetra can be taken as a symbol for the battlefield of life. A person constantly wages war between good and bad intentions, between justice and injustice, knowledge and ignorance, spiritual and material and so on within oneself. Every human being undergoes through the moral crisis that Arjuna faces in the *Mahabharata*. This is an existential crisis of a person. According to Krishna, bonds of karma have to be broken in this life. Here comes the philosophy of renunciation or detachment. Without renouncing the fruits of action and all shades of egoism, one cannot be liberated from the bondage of the world. Various attachments and cravings are the shackles of human life in this world. Self control and right thinking are the ways of overcoming our moral conflicts.

While studying the issues of moral dilemma and existential problems of the people living in the real world and the characters of the fictional world, the future researchers can apply the theories of moral crisis, the philosophies of *karma* (duty), bondage/attachment and renunciation as theoretical tools. This paper has practical as well as philosophical implications.

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