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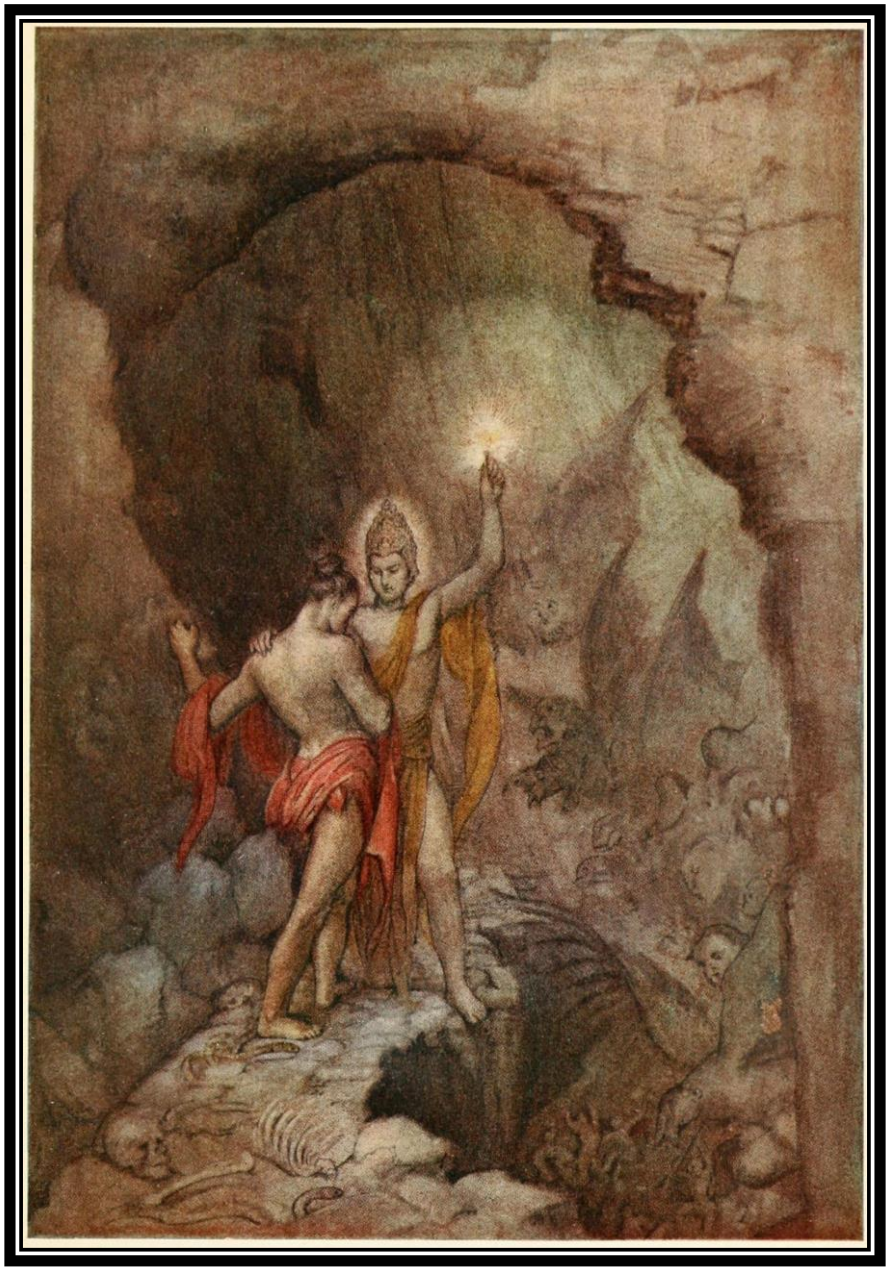
No Cult for Yudhiṣṭhira



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Painting on cover page: "Dark and Difficult was the Road" *depicts Yudhiṣṭhira descending to hell assisted by a heavenly god, in search for his family. Illustrated by Evelyn Paul. Taken from Monro, W. D. (1911).* Stories from India's Gods and Heroes. *New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company (retrieved from archive.org).*

1. Introduction

If there was any knowledge or fact regarding Hinduism which could be considered universally known by almost anyone who has heard of the religion it is that a tremendous amount of gods are worshiped by numerous adherents. From a basic fact like this we can often arrive at the knowledge that Hinduism is but a collective term for a great many religious traditions, each with their own ideologies and important individuals. When thinking of the worshiped gods as figures pertaining to a larger pantheon we can often include other individuals who do not necessarily have divine, omnipotent or omniscient qualities, but can also be salient heroes from epic narratives. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* our prime hero is Rāma, understood to be an incarnation of Viṣṇu and is thus undoubtedly divine. In the *Mahābhārata*, however, the five principal protagonists, the Pāṇḍavas, despite having certain divine attributes, are not universally recognized as gods but can be considered as mere literary characters. However, certain characters are seen as divine by certain cults who worship them. In certain communities in Nepal Bhīma is considered a manifestation of Bhairava (Bühnemann, 2013, 455). There are also statues of Bhīma found in Java, which are suggestive of worship (Stutterheim, 1956, 105). Hiltebeitel also published a two-volume study on a South Indian Draupadī cult (1988, 1991). And even outside these cults who worship these figures as divine, the field of literary studies confirm the popularity among Hindus of the much-beloved, heroic Arjuna by focusing certain studies on him, as can be seen in the work of Katz (1989). Even Karṇa has been focused on as being the hero as evidenced in the study of McGrath (2004). These foci on these particular individuals, or "characters", of the *Mahābhārata* illustrate just how significant this epic story and religious scripture is within Hinduism. These larger-than-life characters have inspired the imaginations of generations of Hindus and provided them with role models to look up to. However, amidst these specific religious cults and academic foci, I have noticed that the character of Yudhiṣṭhira is not that much focused on. Why?

Yudhiṣṭhira is the eldest among the five Pāṇḍavas. He is the royal heir, the one who is destined to take the throne of Hastinapura and rule as the designated king. He is also the *dharma-rāja,* being a character who is both well-versed in and lives according to the precepts of *dharma*. In many of the decisive moments in the epic narrative Yudhiṣṭhira stands at the center. Many situations are played out and happen relative to him, and the narrative concludes with a depiction of his moral worth. He is also the epic's prominent contender of fulfilling the role of a moral exemplar. A moral exemplar is a character whose behavior and often his or her very being is aligned with the didactic dimension of the narrative. The moral exemplar stands

out because he or she embodies moral virtues. The *dharma-rāja* has an inherently moral understanding of *dharma*, which is reflected in his oft-mentioned virtues of patience, pacifism, equanimity and forgiving nature. Why, then, are there no religious cults for Yudhiṣṭhira, or even studies which center only on him? To answer this question we must turn to the entirety of the *Mahābhārata* and to the scholarly tradition devoted to the study of this paramount Hindu scripture. We must acknowledge the complex, puzzling nature of the epic, which is caused not only by the sprawling narrative but also the copious didactic material. All these factors are not only the reason behind the *Mahābhārata*'s famed magnitude but also a justification of the long tradition of scholarship devoted to making sense of it. It will become clear how this complex nature of the epic is the reason behind the complexity of Yudhiṣṭhira's character, which keeps him from being a clear hero, a well-defined paragon or moral exemplar.

To illustrate this situation fully we must start with the fact that Western academia agrees that when one deals with the *Mahābhārata* one deals not with a singular text but a dynamic textual tradition wherein countless of authors revised, edited, but, more importantly, made additions to the text for over hundreds of years. It is nearly impossible to trace this process and as such one cannot claim with certainty the existence of any Ur-text or how that might have looked. Debates, treatises and instructions of religious and philosophical nature have been added alongside the unfolding narrative, creating a prominent didactic aspect as part of the epic. As such, when it comes to discussing the epic's contents it would be considered unwise to assume an overall cohesiveness and continuity of thought and intention. This cautionary approach lead to a bracketing in the *Mahābhārata* scholarship, which mostly separated the didactic religious dimension from the narrative, as these were found to serve completely unrelated goals. However, more recent scholarship, as conducted by the likes of Biardeau, van Buitenen, Fitzgerald, Hiltebeitel, Sutton and Malinar, urge for a revision of such views. They claim that the narrative and didactic parts are not only compatible but also enforce one another and that they mutually enrich an understanding of the other. While not every scholar agrees with such an approach – and even when they do it is not always to the same extent – I myself would argue for this unifying outlook, and I would like to illustrate its validity with my particular focus.

In explaining the role, purpose and complex nature of Yudhiṣṭhira as the moral center of the narrative is to address a number of issues which serves many ends. Firstly, it sheds light on the complex and puzzling nature of the *Mahābhārata* and the call for clarity, inasmuch as it can be achieved. Secondly, it assumes a connection between the different aspects and dimensions of the epic, in which we can find some of this clarity. If there is a moral exemplar

in the narrative then that character is aligned with the teachings and ideals presented in the didactic part of the *Mahābhārata*. It will be shown that through Yudhiṣṭhira the very concept of moral exemplar in itself is appropriated and redefined by the *Mahābhārata*, which is the epic's own way of dealing with a very difficult matter: the multitude of worldviews and philosophies it aims to represent.

The *Mahābhārata* was composed and shaped during a time in India which is coined the Epic Age. Old, world-affirming worldviews were challenged by newly emerging rather world-rejecting philosophies – designating the rise of Buddhism, Jainism and other forms of asceticism. These different worldviews, the former stemming from the Vedas and the latter from a more contemplative and meditative trend, are represented in the epic's didactic portion through copious instructive religious treatises. The tensions between these worldviews give rise to the tensions which take place in the narrative of the *Mahābhārata* (Sutton, 2000, 8). This means that the *Mahābhārata* contains a vast array of morals, which do not often see eye to eye. Therefore, various studies have suggested different heroes and paragons as is witnessed in the focus on Bhīma, Arjuna and even Karṇa. In assuming that a certain quality of either of these individuals is more salient than others would indicate an intellectual allegiance with a certain ideology and its understanding of morality. Here I would point to Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest of the Pāṇḍavas, to be the center-point of moral idealism. Not because he towers above all others in moral standpoint as the *dharma-rāja*, but more because of his conflicting nature. Yudhiṣṭhira, being a *kṣatriya* and royal heir, does not live up to the ideals of either category due to his soft, forgiving and pacifist nature. Not showing assertiveness in the face of adversity and not living up to his duty to punish wrongdoers, Yudhiṣṭhira is a walking contradiction. Whereas others scholars have earlier indicated Yudhiṣṭhira's nature to indicate the tension between one's duty and one's nature, I would go so far as to say that Yudhiṣṭhira is the very locus of the conflicting ideologies and philosophies which characterize the Epic Age as represented in the *Mahābhārata*. The tensions between the ideologies are not only synonymous with the tensions between the different factions and characters in the narrative, but are primarily located within this one individual. The character of Yudhiṣṭhira illustrates the most striking conflicts which defined a historic moment in the intellectual history of the Indian subcontinent contained within this one person. He is indeed a moral exemplar, but because a variety of morals and ideologies are presented Yudhiṣṭhira cannot be portrayed as a clear role model, as he is meant to indicate their contradictions. Because of his qualities as an almost strictly moral character he makes decisions which often result in misfortune for the Pāṇḍavas. Through Yudhiṣṭhira the epic poets of the *Mahābhārata* think beyond the heroism and moral idealism

as characterized by other characters. Yudhiṣṭhira is the hero who makes us question the validity of the concept of heroism, he is the moral exemplar of ideologies which conflict with one another, making us question how far his salient virtues will bring us.

In focusing on Yudhiṣṭhira's qualities and behavior, in his decisions and their results, we gain not only an understanding of the competing ideologies brought forth by the *Mahābhārata*, but also how the latter comments on them. It is often said that the moral dilemmas in the narrative of the *Mahābhārata* are questions posed by the author(s) without any clear solution given, as the audience is encouraged to reflect and make up their own minds (Ibid, 7). Because of this a single definitive reading of the *Mahābhārata* is not possible and I do not make the claim that the reading I provide is more valid than others. I do, however, aim to shed light on the narrative tactics of the *Mahābhārata* surrounding the portrayal of Yudhiṣṭhira as well as the joint effort of both the religious didactus and the narrative to nudge the minds of the audience, often diverse in outlooks and beliefs as attested by the historical period, towards the appropriate queries. Yudhiṣṭhira is meant to be questioned, not seen as a role model. Because of this he is the most important character in the *Mahābhārata*, connecting its narrative and didactic aspects.

The Corpus

I have stated that in order to answer the question why Yudhiṣṭhira is not focused on and in explaining how his character is testimony to the epic's awareness of its complexity we must consider the entirety of the *Mahābhārata* and the academic tradition devoted to understanding the epic. Having an awareness of the didactic and narrative aspects of the text and the tendency of academics to focus on either of these dimensions we need to draw on both to find Yudhiṣṭhira at the center. As such, we will not only look at studies on theology and philosophy but also on literary criticism. As for the *Mahābhārata*, concerning its riddling history and its vastness, there are many versions and translations one can consult, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. For this study I have consulted the translations of van Buitenen (1973, 1975, 1978) and Fitzgerald (2004). Although their translations belong to the same edition (University of Chicago Press), this edition remains uncompleted to this day, as some books, mainly the ones which deal with the actual war, are not translated. The translations of van Buitenen and Fitzgerald are of the critical edition (as designated by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute). Thus, many of the quotes from the *Mahābhārata* in this thesis are translated by either van Buitenen or Fitzgerald.

Since the *Mahābhārata* itself is famous for its expansiveness it would be both impractical to focus on everything and impossible to contain that within the confines of this thesis. As such, I will focus only on passages which revolve around Yudhiṣṭhira or put him aside other characters for the sake of comparison but also instances which provide a clear picture or give us insight into the nature and character of Yudhiṣṭhira. I will especially focus on certain quotes wherein the character's thoughts, reasoning and desires are laid bare. I would also like to focus on quotes from characters who directly comment on Yudhiṣṭhira's behavior and decisions, as this gives us an impression not only how other characters in the narrative regard Yudhiṣṭhira but also because they seem to echo how the epic poets thought about his character and what he stood for. I will also consult academic writings on the historical period wherein the *Mahābhārata* took form, the Epic Age. I will focus here especially on the history of the intellectual developments during this period as herein we can find the worldviews represented in the *Mahābhārata*.

As such, among the theological academic studies I will primarily use Sutton's Religious Doctrines in the *Mahābhārata* (2000), which I will be quoting extensively. Malinar's study on the *Bhagavad Gītā* (2007), for her insights in the connection between the didactic and the narrative. Bowles' study on *dharma* represented in the *Mahābhārata* and his chapter on Yudhiṣṭhira in *Dharma, Disorder and the Political in Ancient India* (2007). I will also draw on Bronkhorst's studies on ancient intellectual Indian history in *Greater Magadha* (2007).

The Argument

All these and more sources will be consulted in my study of the role and purpose of Yudhiṣṭhira within the *Mahābhārata*. It starts with the realization of the fact that Yudhiṣṭhira has never been a popular focus, either in religious cults or academic studies. Although there are scholars who have realized the nature and importance of Yudhiṣṭhira as a means to explore the contrasting ideologies (Bowles, 2007, 133), or just his primary importance in the narrative (Hiltebeitel, 2001, 47). However, neither of these examples provided a full study on Yudhiṣṭhira alone, and if the awareness of him being the locus through which the contrast between philosophies is explored, it is not tied to a grander argument or realization that Yudhiṣṭhira is a character in the narrative through which the didactic portion is explored, hinting at a more cohesive quality behind the vast *Mahābhārata*. The prime question which pervades this thesis is whether or not my view regarding Yudhiṣṭhira, his role in the *Mahābhārata* and the assertion of its wholesome quality is justified. I will arrive at this

realization by asking: Why is Yudhiṣṭhira used as a conduit for this end? Why should the contrast between the ideologies be explored? What do these ideologies and philosophies teach and why? And how is this all explored and realized through one character?

In answering these questions my study will in the second chapter illustrate a historical awareness by providing a clear overview of the developments and contradictions of the Epic Age and how this influenced the making of the *Mahābhārata*. It will be shown in the third chapter how the *Mahābhārata* was composed because of and as a reaction to these historical developments which decidedly influenced Indian culture and Hinduism significantly. This will illustrate the nature of the *Mahābhārata* being both a religious scripture and reflexive narrative to further the intellectual traditions of debate also to resolve certain conflicts in ideology. In the fourth chapter I will focus on Yudhiṣṭhira's role in this endeavor by illustrating instances in the narrative where his character sheds light on these issues. And in the fifth chapter I will both challenge and justify my focus on Yudhiṣṭhira as being the most important character in the narrative, and what this means for the purpose for which his character was used. In its entirety, this thesis will add to the scholarly discussion of the *Mahābhārata* and whether or not we ought to regard the different didactic and narrative aspects as enriching one another and will argue that they should not be seen as distinct from one another. And, more importantly, it will do this through focusing on the character of Yudhiṣṭhira, whose significance between the narrative and didactic aspect has hitherto not been subject to a similar emphasis.

2. The Epic Age

Before any thorough assessment of Yudhiṣṭhira's moral dimension can be performed we are required to understand a significant chapter in Indian history, for in the *Mahābhārata* an expansive period is reflected upon and a sound understanding of this history results in the clarification of some of the most puzzling of the epic's aspects. The period in question, roughly the first millennium BCE (Keay, 1999, 37), is often termed the "Epic Period" or "Epic Age", and this majestic prefix largely owes its placement not only to the formation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, the two major Sanskrit epics and most famous Hindu narratives, but also to the formative developments which took place during this age of radical transformations. Amidst a gradual and complex process of Aryanization the established worldviews of Vedic ritualism were challenged by a newly emergent world-rejecting asceticism, marking the birth of non-Vedic schools of thought such as Buddhism and Jainism. The ascetic tendencies of these emerging traditions provided a new standard and philosophical ideal based on renunciation. This world-rejecting tendency progressively came to pervade almost all religious and social layers of the subcontinent. The traditions and ideologies which ensued from this, all with a varying degree of eclecticism, eventually influenced Indian culture and Hinduism into forms and patterns more recognizable according to today's standards.

As decidedly illuminating this particular period is, however, much of our knowledge on it is drawn from a variety of sources which contain almost all but a clear historical chronicle. The oft-mentioned issue of India's frustrating absence of historical accounts weighs heavily on any attempt at providing a historical context as I intend to here. As history has been "teased from less articulate subjects such as coins, random inscriptions, tidbits of oral traditions, *literary and religious texts*" (Keay, 1999, xvii, emphasis is mine), and *itihāsa,* the Sanskrit term for history ("what happened"), also refers collectively to the two Sanskrit epics (Carman, 2001, 138). Although there might be a certain degree of history reflected in the heroic epics, it is, however, not our concern to detect whether specific instances in the narrative really happened but look at the grander dynamic of the story which seem to hint to historic developments. The chapters devoted to the royal exile into the wilderness, patterns of the noble endeavor of Aryan "colonization" settlement of the subcontinent (Keay, 1999, 23) narrate a process of settlement, which led to the collision of various different philosophies and ideologies. The emerging ascetic ideas and the Vedic worldviews that they rivalled comprise a period of far-reaching contradictions, all of which are reflected upon in the *Mahābhārata*. These spiritual conflicts

are the source for some of the most meaningful tensions in the epic (Sutton, 2000, 1), and are the main driving forces behind the complex personage of king Yudhiṣṭhira.

Dharma

Although *dharma* as pertaining exclusively to Yudhiṣṭhira, the *dharma-rāja*, will be fully focused on in the fourth and fifth chapters, it is important to introduce the generality of this concept, as well as its complexity. Throughout the Epic Age the concept of *dharma* grew more influential but also difficult to understand. This centrality and complexity of *dharma* is by far the greatest issue explored in the *Mahābhārata* in both its didactic and narrative portions. The concept of *dharma* finds its power in its centrality and near universality to Indian civilization, irrespective to linguistic, sectarian or regional differences (Olivelle, 2017, 1). The notions underlying this term are as varied as the religious traditions in which it is featured, to the point that *dharma* can be ascribed to have both a unifying and dividing quality thanks to its criticality across both Hindu and even Buddhist and Jain traditions and their different understandings of it. Even within the confines of the *Mahābhārata* the word *dharma* "signifies a concept that is one of the most central and important topics of thought and debate" (Fitzgerald, 2005, 671). Many of the tensions within both the narrative and didactic dimensions of the epic are played out through, or even caused by the subtlety of *dharma*[1]. Hudson even states that the prime question the *Mahābhārata* asks is "why is the dharmic path implicated in so much sorrow?" (2013, 28). This "subtlety" is largely caused by the baffling amount of understandings individuals have of the concept. Whereas simply believed to be "right conduct", the following quote from Fitzgerald aptly summarized how exactly such an understanding gives way for confusion and thus tension:

> The single biggest problem in coming to terms with *dharma* in the *Mahābhārata* is the tremendous abundance of instances of it, and then the many different modes of variation within and among those different instances of the word. The word *dharma* occurs in a number of different contexts and applications in the epic and these various pragmatic situations give the word an initially indistinct range of nuances and colorings. Many passages in the *Mahābhārata* often present the value and importance of *dharma* as taken

[1] This is quoted by the character Bhīṣma himself when he is unable to answer Draupadi's piercing questions after her humiliation at the hands of the Kauravas. He says that the matter, and to an extend *dharma* (here translated as "law", is "subtle, and mysterious as well as grave" (MBh: 2.62.17-19, transl. by van Buitenen, 1975).

> for granted, but it is not easy to abstract a common, taken-for-granted element from all these passages. Also, the *Mahābhārata* does not always speak with one voice about the particular behavior or behaviors that actually have the status of *dharma*, and sometimes what particular actions or behaviors constitute *dharma* are said to be unknown. A number of didactic passages in the text take it upon themselves to spell out in detail the variety of behaviors that are *dharma* for different people, an action that, besides its explicit messages, implies that someone felt some kind of need to put these matters straight. Many other passages see the word *dharma* invoked when characters in the epic debate among themselves whether some behavior is *dharma* or not, or debate the evaluation of actions done in the past, or pit one claim of *dharma* against another, or set one character to persuading another, or others, that some behavior is or is not *dharma*. The word is also used to praise (or, if its opposite, a*dharma*, occurs, to criticize) some agent's motives, ethical sensibilities, or the general quality of his or her life and accumulated deeds (2004, 672).

A single term that refers to a more moral human existence can create such confusion because its definition has been used over centuries for different ends. Fitzgerald's description of the complex situation illustrates exactly how the *Mahābhārata*, in both its narrative and didactic aspects, reflects on the developments of the Epic Age.

Vedic Values

While the earliest mention of the term *dharma* can be found in the *Ṛgveda*, we are not able to gather a lot of information regarding its meaning and what implications it might have had for the religious traditions who placed the Vedas central to their philosophies. Meaning can be derived from its Sanskrit root word *dhṛ-*, which means "to hold" or "to support" (Horsch, 2004, 424). Factor in the Vedic worldview where a cosmic equilibrium is maintained between men and gods through the medium of mandatory sacrifices, and the notion of "support" can quickly be interpreted to signify the foundations of creation, the Vedic sacrifices (Brereton, 2004, 485). This cosmic order and balance is in the Veda's actually understood as *ṛta*, and this concept might be the predecessor of *dharma* (Rukmani, 1989, 23). However, more information is not provided by the Vedas as to any more practical usages of the term *dharma*, let alone what it induces an individual to do or, more importantly with subsequent usages of the term, *how* to do things. In fact, in most of the Vedic literature, which include the Vedas, Brāhmaṇas,

Āraṇyakas and Upanishads, the term *dharma* was a marginal term at best, explains Olivelle, and it did not play a central role in the religious worlds depicted in these texts (2004, 491). Perhaps there were concepts similar to how *dharma* is described, but they were not yet designated as *dharma,* the only thing that comes closest to it is *ṛta*. This concept in which ritual sacrifices comprised the most instrumental of societal responsibilities to uphold a balanced relationship with the Vedic gods, personifications of the forces of nature, signified a symmetric cosmic power balance. In such a worldview, where the brahmins were at the apex of the societal pyramid, comprised a very *this*-worldly outlook in which spirituality entailed little more than the endeavor of securing a viable afterlife among one's ancestors. An awareness of this duty-bound ideology is relevant not only to the other ideologies which challenged this, but also to the reflection of this ageing system in the much later *Mahābhārata*.

But it would take centuries before the term *dharma* would connote any such school of thought, let alone take a central position in any of these schools in a manner similar to its centrality in the *Mahābhārata*. Only within the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* an instance occurs where we find *dharma* used in a manner relevant to its usage in the *Mahābhārata*. *Dharma* here signified the law and order in society, an "abstract entity that stands above and gives legitimacy to *kṣatra*, the ruling power of the king" (Ibid, 497). Its use around royalty is crucial, as this reflected on a period where royal rule was slowly becoming a unifying norm. *Dharma* referred to matters for which people came to the king, such as legal disputes. *Dharma* was thus placed within the public realm of law and social norms that must be overseen by the king (Ibid, 495). brahmins depended on such a ritually stratified society, with rules depending on ritual consecration and advice of the brahmins. Yet this system was threatened by the slow advent of urbanization, which also gave rise to asceticism and other worldviews, which in turn challenged the caste system and other elements of this-worldly lifestyles. Brahmins were able to remain in position by these duties of royalty. Thus this worldview of the 'dharmic duties' of the king were propagated by texts composed to serve brahmin causes of upholding a cultural Vedic hegemony, as its presence became undermined by new players which emerged on the stage of Indian history.

Asceticism

Figureheads such as the Buddha and Mahāvīra became influential because of a growing dissatisfaction with Vedic ritualism, and thus a larger trend of alternative spirituality grew into what are now known to be the biggest rival traditions within the dharmic religions of South

Asia. A trend so far-reaching in its popularity and sometimes even outrageous in their practices that the high-caste brahmins were forced to present a response with a rivalling ideology (Sharma, 1992, 176) (Bronkhorst, 2015, 2). As I had mentioned before, with the advent of urbanization the trend of asceticism grew rapidly as alternatives for the now unsatisfying world-view of the Vedas and their ritualism. Why exactly this asceticism emerged is still unknown, and while it is easy to entertain the possibilities of Axial thought, if we are to focus on merely one geographical area and not a worldwide phenomenon more viable explanations have to be considered, regardless of our lack of definite knowledge on the time period. The very process of urbanization is considered by Olivelle to be the cause of this. Whereas the original Aryans were nomadic tribesmen, pastoralism and agriculture had caused a more localized settlement and dependence on natural phenomena, as evidenced in the Vedic mythology. Yet as this urbanization grew, a larger amount of people were exposed to a myriad of diseases and other natural disasters such as floods. This awareness of a seemingly imminent presence of death and the rather arbitrary ways in which it could manifest inspired a more pessimistic outlook on the world and human activity in it (Olivelle, 1998, 6). The concept that suffering pervades life by default is a notion we see resurfaced in Buddhism, even in the life story of Siddhārtha Gautama himself. Needless to say, the transition to urbanization, however gradual, was also accompanied with a growing sense of individualism. A growing market and broadened economy is commonly believed to have aided this process, but what remains most crucial behind our awareness of this individualism is not how it came about but what it came to contrast, the communal spirit which pervaded the Vedic worldview. Because this individualism expressed itself most fervently in spiritual terms we are able to witness the rise in popularity of concepts such as individual karma and reincarnation, and the more central role of the concept of *dharma*, which took on a more moral-salvific connotation.

However, still much controversy remains regarding this period, and while the chronology provided above seems to satisfy any attempt at conceptual clarification, whether or not it completely makes sense cannot be validated. If urbanization wrought the conflict of such distinct worldviews at the turn of the millennium, then why could the civilizations of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro not achieve a similar development, almost an entire millennium preceding the period in question? Our lack of archeological and documental evidence from either of these places keep us from gaining a clear picture, therefore we are unable to put the Indus Valley Civilization in the history of these intellectual developments. And yet there is reason to believe

that the ancient religious traditions[2], which existed most likely before and alongside the Vedic Aryans, already possessed a spirituality in which notions such as karma and reincarnation were already present, regardless of any trend of individualism which urbanization might have started. Another possibility is put forth by Bronkhorst, who surmises that ideas of karma, rebirth and liberation originated in a region called Greater Magadha[3]. These worldviews with concepts such as karma and reincarnation had already prevailed in that region before it collided with the distinct Vedic culture which came from the West. In their eastward expansion, the brahmin culture subsumed that of Greater Magadha and appropriated their spiritual concepts of karma and reincarnation which were alien to Vedic beliefs, all between the second century BCE and the second or third century CE (Bronkhorst, 2007, 2). Bronkhorst's views, however, are considered highly problematic. The number one issue found with the above claims, is the apparent anachronism with the evidence found in Vedic literature itself. Ideas of karma, reincarnation and liberation are found in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya Upaniṣads* - texts usually assigned to the sixth or fifth century BCE, early enough to suppose an origin within the sphere of Vedic religion (Wynne, 2011, 1). Some of Bronkhorst's insights, however, prove extremely relevant and edifying in realizing the stark difference between the ideologies. It is also the next stage of appropriation and transformation of the concept of *dharma*. Thus, with the aforementioned criticism in mind we will consider Bronkhorst's contribution.

Both in Buddhism and Jainism can we find the characteristic concepts which defined the culture of the Greater Magadha, and while we are uncertain in what manner and when these streams had come in contact with brahmanism, it has become clear that the concept of *dharma* had been appropriated from Buddhism, to become a canvas to which a variety of traditions attributed their spiritual values. In Buddhism *dharma*, or *dhamma*, was an already complex concept, as it connoted ideals on spiritual teachings, the idea of right or proper conduct – ideally in relation to a king but also beyond that, nature – as in an individual's nature or the nature of things, and Truth – the kind that is capitalized (Gethin, 2004, 518). Whereas most of these meanings came in use over time, the entire idea that a single term was used in a manner central to an ideology, denoting the path to liberation (Bronkhorst, 2004, 736), had far reaching repercussions.

[2] Often designated as *śramana*, most likely the first to believe in karma and reincarnation.
[3] Although Bronkhorst does not include any map to designate the area in question, he described it to be "stretched by and large from Śrāvastī, the capital of Kosala, in the north-west to Rājagṛha, the capital of Magadha, in the south-east" (Bronkhorst, 2007, 4).

The salvific path in Jainism has some slight differences to that of Buddhism. Nevertheless, the concepts of karma and rebirth also stand central in this spiritual ideology. To trace the precise meaning of *dharma* in Jainism would not be relevant for our understanding. Suffice it to say that just like in Buddhism the term *dharma* had assumed a myriad of meanings, the most frequently used being its referral to the Jain teaching in general (Qvarnström, 2004, 599). Thus here *dharma* was also imbued with the specific eccentricities as found in the religion itself, and this was a very peculiar brand of asceticism. Just like in Buddhism the Jain ideal was similarly expressed in a world-rejecting philosophy. This would manifest in asceticism in which the appropriation of karma was sought to be countered, primarily through meditation and the elimination of action. Living according to *dharma* had, for these traditions, a slight difference in what they considered to be the source of the accumulation of karma. According to Bronkhorst the Jains saw evil in physical activity, whereas the Buddhists believed mental activities to be the source behind misery (2007, 18). Thus living according to *dharma* was expressed according to the former in suppressing any physical activity – taking the form of motionless mendicants in the wilderness – or meditation stilling mental qualms and desires according to the latter. In the Jain case Bronkhorst seems to stress on the severity of Jain asceticism in particular, stressing the cessation of all activity (2001, 15), Wynne, however, reminds us that these extremes occurred seldom and are in no way representative for common spiritual practice among the Jains (2011, 3). Yet what is relevant is how the term *dharma* fared around the formation of these ideals. If attachment to and involvement in material affairs could bring only suffering then remaining aloof would be the most beneficial option, *dharma* had slowly come to represent this attitude, which would eventually be the backdrop of Yudhiṣṭhira's preferred understanding of *dharma*, as a universally moral code which emphasized detachment.

Brahminical Reclamation

After these developments, witnessing the voluntary withdrawals from society among an increasing amount of individuals, the brahminical caste was forced to respond. This response would reinstitute a society based on caste wherein brahmins could remain instrumental, and for this the term *dharma* was appropriated. Brahmanic ideology would not purge itself from ideas commonly associated with their rivals, as we see in Upaniṣadic philosophy the world-rejecting outlook was almost fully appropriated, though never forsaking the authority of the Vedas. It would draw them in a grander whole wherein it could both stay ahead of the trends and uphold

the hegemony of brahmanic authority. The clearest instance of this would be the significance given to *dharma* in the *dharmaśāstras*. The concept of *dharma* was placed in the center of a newly defined worldview, where all the castes had their own respective *dharma*s – which designated their individual customs. Thus the right or proper conduct was as manifold as the different layers of society. It also came to signify an inner-worldly way to salvation, accessible to any caste and possible to be pursued in the acts of everyday life (Wezler, 2004, 648).

Yet it was not through the *dharmaśāstras* alone that brahmin thinkers revitalized and propagated their worldviews. By this time the well-known stories of the Bhārata war and the battle against Rāvaṇa had been reworked to serve the same ends. These stories came to reflect societal systems that were ideal for brahminical influence to prevail, they were laden with the dharmic duties of the king and the prominence of the priestly class in discerning them. Yet it was especially the narrative of the *Mahābhārata* which had undergone this process most. It was so heavily reworked for propaganda purposes; lengthy edifying sermons were interpolated as well as other extraneous additions (Keay, 1999, 38). Any original core text was long buried beneath these revisions and the narrative came to reflect not only the gradual development of Aryan settlement, as I mentioned before, but also reflected on the entire history of ideas and philosophical concepts as I laid out in this chapter. It not only reflected on these developments but also directly presented them as crucial aspects of the narrative. And when for instance the ascetic tendencies of withdrawal seemed too self-destructive the *Mahābhārata* directly responds to them, either in the alienated portrayal of Yudhiṣṭhira and his pacifist attitude or outright condemning them through Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (Bronkhorst, 2007, 35).

3. The Philosophies of the *Mahābhārata*

All these historical developments were formative for Indian culture and society and Hinduism to change into realities more recognizable according to today's standards. However, it was especially the reach and popularity of the epic *Mahābhārata* to highly influence different cultural regions in India into following a somewhat hegemonic brahmanic socio-cultural outlook. Religiously ideological and philosophically spiritual views and tendencies were the foundation upon which such societies and cultures could flourish, and these were found aplenty in the *Mahābhārata*.

During and after these historical developments, as explored in the previous chapter, the *Mahābhārata* was formed. Countless additions and revisions, which we cannot possibly pin any date or individual to, are the reason behind the epic's incredible size. However, the religious and philosophical rich content of the *Mahābhārata* resulted in the dual nature the epic is nowadays associated with. Scholars often talk about a 'narrative' and 'didactic' dimension of the epic (Malinar, 2016, 2). Many early scholars of Sanskrit (Hopkins, 1902) (Dahlmann, 1895, 1899) there was a clear break between these two aspects, as they do not necessarily coincide or reinforce one another. However, it has become a growing trend within western academia to attempt a more 'holistic' reading of the entire epic (Malinar, 2007, 2) (Matilal, 1989, 5). If this chapter aims to bring to the fore the various religious and philosophical teachings of the epic it seems axiomatic I will focus on the didactic aspect. Yet, if my larger argument is kept in mind – which is that one can find the personality of Yudhiṣṭhira, a central character in the narrative of the epic, within these philosophies and that through him their merits are explored – then it becomes clear that I suggest a closer correlation between the narrative and didactic aspects. At the onset I have to state that I do agree with the view that haphazardly connecting hitherto totally unrelated dots scattered among either of these sides does not necessarily reveal a deeper link between them. As such, my focus on Yudhiṣṭhira is meant to show how, through his personality and actions throughout the narrative, these philosophies are reflected upon. Thereby I infer a closer connection between the narrative and didactic parts of the epic. I will now therefore focus on the didactic aspect of the epic, evaluating its main teachings. Only after an awareness of these teaching can I endeavor to locate them within and around Yudhiṣṭhira.

Religious Authority

Before I will focus on the ideological, religious, spiritual and philosophical content of the *Mahābhārata* I would like to reflect on why such a focus is warranted in the first place. Unique for any epic narrative is its own self-awareness and self-assertion as an authoritative religious scripture. Sutton notes how even among its only other counterpart in the Sanskrit literary sphere the *Mahābhārata* differs from the *Rāmāyaṇa* in that the latter does not contain didactic material to the extent the former does (2000, ix). Allusions to the four eternal Vedas immediately come to mind, as the *Mahābhārata* is religiously accepted as the 'fifth Veda', distilling Vedic knowledge in narrative form for all of mankind (Fitzgerald, 1985, 130). According to Sullivan, such an allusion to the continuity of Vedic knowledge goes deeper than a simple claim to authority. One of the most profound ways the *Mahābhārata* argues for its religious significance is through the involvement of Vyāsa (1994, 377). The *Mahābhārata* is, according to the Hindu tradition and the epic itself, authored by Vyāsa, and Sullivan notes how western scholars often tend to see his authorship as merely 'symbolic'. According to Sullivan the fact behind this authorship indicates that "status and authority as religious texts are to some extent dependent on the status and authority of Vyāsa" (Ibid). Vyāsa's image in Hindu mythology represents the head of the lineage of gurus[4], and his role as participant in the narrative of the epic itself reinforces the religious significance and authority of the epic. Vyāsa both created the *Mahābhārata* and fathered the Bhārata family in the narrative. In this dual sense of "creator" Vyāsa both manages the story and serves as ancestor to the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas (Ibid, 379).

His function as both an author propagating a message and a fatherly figure distilling wisdom and knowledge reinforce one another in instances where either of these functions are the prime focus. The image of Vyāsa feeling the need to write down the *Mahābhārata* narrative in the outermost frame story (excluded from the critical edition) for which he employs the aid of Gaṇeśa reassures divine approval (Fitzgerald, 1985, 125). This image can be juxtaposed against Vyāsa admonishing Yudhiṣṭhira for his lack of *kṣatriya* resolve and detailing to him the qualities of a true monarch. Right after winning the war Yudhiṣṭhira is overcome with tremendous guilt: "I am a wicked sinner responsible for ruining the earth" and will "not eat or drink anything at all" in an attempt to absolve his sins (*Mahābhārata*: 12.27.22-24). To this Vyāsa responds:

[4] This, according to Sullivan, also ties in to Vyāsa's relation with Brahma rather than the often discussed relation to Kṛṣṇa. Brahma, just as Vyāsa, is known as the most authoritative of Gurus and both are the ancestors of two factions which end up fighting one another, the *devas* and *asuras* and the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas (1992, 379).

> They must understand that what is Lawful and what is Unlawful are both twofold: There is inactivity and activity; the twofold nature pertains to ordinary life and the Veda. Immortality results from inactivity; mortality is the result of activity. One should understand that bad things are the result of bad actions, and good things are the result of good actions. And the good or bad results of these two would come about on account of the goodness or badness of the actions, whether those results be heaven or something leading to heaven, or life or death (MBh: 12.37.9-11).

This lecture in spiritual practice, one among many similar ones in the *Mahābhārata*, reprimands Yudhiṣṭhira's outlook whereas also commenting on a growing trend of asceticism which worried brahmins, on which I will focus later. Another such instance can be found in the *Aśvamedhika Parva*, where Vyāsa is the chief ritual priest of the *aśvamedha* ritual, advising Yudhiṣṭhira the right course of action (*Mahābhārata,* 14.3.8) in the wake of his disillusionment since the war (Sullivan, 1999, 32). These instances not only serve as profound ways a father figure can advise a son, they also reflect the ideal brahminical way of how society ought to be governed. The *kṣatriya* king seeks advise from brahmins who can provide impeccable knowledge for the benefit of all of society: "brahmins should work together with *kṣatriyas*, the intellectuals should advice the rulers" (MBh: 12.73.15). The fact that this ideal situation is played out by the author of the text and his grandson who is the royal heir and *dharma-rāja* makes its exemplary impact all the greater.

The Main Spiritual Tendencies

However, despite all these lofty descriptions of the *Mahābhārata* being the fifth Veda, i.e. an authorized *śāstra* which distills profound spiritual knowledge, the epic's purpose as a religious scripture does not at all appear clear within the myriad of Sanskrit religious literature. This is because the *Mahābhārata* does not bring forth a single, well-defined doctrine, it presents many. I have stated earlier that the *Mahābhārata* has caused a divisive response from scholars because of its apparently distinct didactic and narrative material, yet within the didactus alone the religious and philosophical contents can be worlds apart and seemingly irreconcilable. This is, of course, a reflection of the history as we already explored. Whereas much can be written on how to deal with this myriad of worldviews, suffice it to say that I adhere to Sutton's insight of the epic's awareness of its many-natured ideologies. No easy coherent doctrinal system is

provided because the text is simply reluctant to resort to simplistic formulae, this largely stems from a greater awareness in Indian thought to subtly approach complex issues which cannot be resolved by a single creed (Sutton, 2000, 8). In my view the character of Yudhiṣṭhira is also used to illustrate this reality, where seemingly irreconcilable natures are part of an individual character, for after a tumultuous history of rivalling thoughts with no central authority truth is seen as complex and subtle (Ibid).

Most dissonance within the didactus concerns various teachings on salvation (*mokṣa*). Although the didactus is densely populated with teachings on *mokṣa*, since it does not directly relate to our character study I will not focus much on these teachings. We can, however, find useful information in the value systems presented which facilitate an eventual salvific goal. There are two main value systems present in the world of the *Mahābhārata* and these are coined *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*. These main themes of epic thought are reflections on and continuations of the Vedic ritualism and Upaniṣadic asceticism from the Epic Age. In their most fundamental manifestations, *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* concern a strict social *dharma* with clear rules and purposes for individuals and groups and a rejection of such social significances where all forms of worldly action are condemned as materialistic, respectively.

Sutton clearly identifies these two strands and pins their fundamentally different characteristics in the following order (2000, 9-10).

	pravṛtti	*nivṛtti*
Social outlook:	Beliefs and practices concerned with worldly existence, exemplified in Vedic ritualism.	Suffering prevails in the material world, acting within it are materialistic and therefore barriers to absolute emancipation.
Value system:	Every individual has a role and purpose in the maintenance of this world (and the cosmos), exemplified in *sva-dharma* and caste hierarchy.	Understand the spiritual identity of the self, distinct from the material forces that bind one. Cease acquisition of karma with absence of material action.
Goal:	*Svarga-loka*, joining one's ancestors and becoming demigods.	Salvation from this world and from material existence.

In his article on the semantics of the Sanskrit root √*vṛt* Bailey confirms how, in its use with a variety of prefixes, the frequency of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* mentioned in the text stand out so much it becomes clear how significant these ideologies are in the text and are also used as devices in framing its contents (Bailey, 2016, 2). They are also used in close enough proximity to illustrate a fundamental difference between the two. In the narrative of the *Mahābhārata* discussions on destiny are multifarious and in how a specific character regards destiny one can associate either of these value systems to them. According to a *nivṛtti* perspective the control of destiny over human existence is so absolute that action in this world is considered to have no meaning. One cannot change the preordained outcome of events, which teaches one to be tolerant of one's misfortunes (Sutton, 2000, 11). On the other hand, a *pravṛtti* outlook entails seeing the efficacy of actions producing desired results, therefore human endeavor is effective in shaping events, albeit still under a controlling force of destiny. However, destiny is not blind but shaped by an individual's previous actions. A dichotomy between these doctrines is expressed as a tension which take place in the narrative as moral conflicts and dilemmas, often through debates (Ibid, 8). In the narrative most conflicts occur around Yudhiṣṭhira, mainly because of his repeated insistence on universal ethics (based on *nivṛtti* values) above those of *sva-dharma*, which his family members urge him to uphold (Ibid, 318). Where exactly these instances play out in the narrative will be discussed in the next chapter.

The claim is often made that the *Mahābhārata* does not propagate either of these value systems of *pravṛtti* or *nivṛtti* as being superior to the other (Bailey, 2016, 2). Yet in an attempt to address and bridge both of these ideologies a third theme of epic thought is presented in the *Mahābhārata*, in arguably the most dramatic moment in the narrative[5]. Kṛṣṇa's teachings in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which are uttered to Arjuna moments before the battle of Kurukṣetra commences, addresses Arjuna's, and in extension Yudhiṣṭhira's, reluctance to fight. Kṛṣṇa propagates the philosophy of *bhakti*, which stresses detachment from the performance of one's actions and their results. The merit of the *Bhagavad Gītā* lies in attempt to mediate between the two opposing referential frameworks of human aspiration (Malinar, 2007, 6). *Bhakti* does not deny or oppose either *pravṛtti* or *nivṛtti* systems but draws them both in and incorporates them into its own system, proving that a reconciliation of the two is possible (Sutton, 2000, 14).

[5] This position of the *Bhagavad Gītā* within a crucial moment during the narrative is for Malinar already a strong indication how the *Bhagavad Gītā* should not be attempted to understood outside its epic context, being intimately connected to the themes and issues of the epic narrative, but also that the *Mahābhārata* itself can be elucidated by the *Bhagavad Gītā* (2007, 2).

The Right Course of Action

If we are to look at the teachings Kṛṣṇa preaches in the *Bhagavad Gītā* to address not only Arjuna's reluctance but also Yudhiṣṭhira's, whereas also serving as an ideology which synthesizes several divergent tendencies, it is useful to look at the particular philosophies which shape Yudhiṣṭhira's rationale and how the teachings of the *Gītā* compare to these. In evaluating the dynamics of the philosophical schools of Sāṃkhya and Yoga compared to *sva-dharma* it will become clear how the *Mahābhārata* infers a preference for the doctrine of detached action[6] and *bhakti* expressed by Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

While scholars may disagree on which philosophical system is considered by the epic as having the most merit, there is some scholarly consensus that, of all philosophical doctrines and schools, Sāṃkhya and Yoga are the ones most often presented in the epic (Malinar, 2016, 6). Especially the Sāṃkhya school seems to be the one most discussed by Sutton, who catalogued all the religious doctrines within the epic. Without delving too deep in this profound realm of philosophy, in its most fundamental form Sāṃkhya philosophy deals with an awareness of the separateness of *puruṣa* and *prakrti*. This basic dualism lies at the heart of this school of thought, and ignorance (*avidya*) keeps one from realizing this dualism. This has the following implications:

> That the self exists separate from the mind–body complex and the suffering associated with it, is the issue. This possibility of release here presupposes a dualism between the body and the self. The dualism between release and suffering and the dualism between the mind–body complex and the self are the main themes. Separation and difference are emphasized in the similes. The message is about non-attachment and the possibility of release from suffering. By not being attached to suffering, a person is released from suffering, just as a bird when a tree falls into the river unattached flies elsewhere (Jacobsen, 2007, 3).

This very negative view of life is also portrayed in the narrative through countless instances where misery, decay, world age, disease and death disillusion both characters in the narrative as well as the audience. Hudson, for instance, claims that the entire *Mahābhārata* seems to drive home this point more than any other, that human existence is characterized by inevitable suffering. For her the *Mahābhārata* seems to muse on the notion whether or not *dharma*

[6] Also referred to as *niṣkāmakarma* (Sutton, 2000, 67).

protects those who follow it (Hudson, 2013, 7). It does seem obvious that the epic stresses a *nivṛtti* outlook on the world.

However, in order to keep individuals from becoming passive ascetics, attempting to stop the acquisition of karma through the cessation of action and shying away from any responsibilities, the brahmins could not possibly solely propagate such views. As the severity of the motionless Jain ascetics in the previous chapter and Vyāsa's admonishment of Yudhiṣṭhira's consideration of the same as mentioned before in this chapter have illustrated mankind should not completely reject this world and their responsibilities in and to society. *Sva-dharma* entails a social view of religious life, where individuals have specific positions in the created order, a clearly defined relationship to all other beings (Sutton, 2000, 12). A preservation of this *dharma* results in both a functional society, with brahmins at the apex of the caste hierarchy, and the maintenance of the cosmic order. This, of course, stems from the idea of Vedic ritualism and the cosmic equilibrium. However, the view that humans must perform the right actions to get desirable outcomes for both this life and the afterlife was met with an increasing amount of skepticism for its materialism, not only in the Epic Age but also within the *Mahābhārata* itself. This philosophical outlook also trumped the ideal of attaining *mokṣa*, a goal that had already dethroned the primacy of *svarga-loka*. Whereas *svarga-loka* was seen as a temporary state after which the soul falls back to earth, *mokṣa* was considered an eternal state of liberation. Yudhiṣṭhira himself wonders who would want to go to *svarga-loka* if even the great gods and *ṛṣis* fall down (MBh: 12.9.34).

Here the philosophy in the *Gītā* attempted to reconcile the differences, all through the emphasis on one creator God, Kṛṣṇa. In eschatological thinking this philosophy had much in common with *nivṛtti*, it did have a negative outlook on the material world and salvation from it was obtained through restraint and a focus on Kṛṣṇa. However, it also accepted a *pravṛtti* perspective on the world by seeing it as God's creation, and therefore it was concerned with the harmony of the universe where all beings were allotted with the right place and duty. These social duties had to be performed with an emphasis on detachment, never seeking personal gain through any action (Sutton, 2000, 65). The preservation of *dharma*, by each individual accepting and following his own *dharma* thus becomes a form of yoga, an act of devotion which pleases the deity (Ibid, 13). With the prominence of feelings of misery, loss and regret after winning the Kurukṣetra war the epic seems to drive home this doctrine of not being attached to the results. What Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna, that his misery is caused by his attachment to the fruits of his actions (Malinar, 2007, 228), applies to Yudhiṣṭhira just as much. Performing

one's duties, albeit without anticipation for their rewards, thus ought to fulfill the needs of both *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* standpoints, and should therefore be conducive to attain salvation.

Yet, the different understandings of what following *dharma* actually entails from either a *pravṛtti* or *nvrtti* standpoint is what causes tensions not only in the didactic portion of the epic but in the narrative as well, and in almost all these tensions Yudhiṣṭhira stands at the center. Whereas following *dharma* from a *pravṛtti* perspective entails following one's prescribed *dharma* in accordance with *sva-dharma*, which is determined by birth, caste, age and gender, a more *nivṛtti* understanding of following *dharma* has a more moral undertone, a code of ethics to be followed universally regardless of all the other criteria. Inspired by the philosophies of Buddhism and Jainism and other ascetic traditions, the qualities which pertain to this understanding of following *dharma* consist, among others, of piety, patience, forgiveness and selflessness as these facilitate a detachment from desire (Sutton, 2000, 111). It will become clear that Yudhiṣṭhira innately follows *dharma* in the *nivṛtti* understanding and embodies these very qualities, which causes the *dharma-rāja* to inadequately follow his duties as an actual king and ruler.

4. Yudhiṣṭhira's Transforming Understanding of *Dharma*

In the previous two chapters I have focused primarily on matters which belong solely to the sphere of religion or philosophical speculation. In showing how the intellectual developments during the Epic Age inspired the variety of didactic components in the *Mahābhārata* it seems that the next logical step is to locate these things within the character of Yudhiṣṭhira, and, more importantly, how this is realized. This is exactly what I plan to do, though this would fulfill only part of my initial aim. My aim was to indicate the intellectual history of Epic India not only in the didactic dimension of the *Mahābhārata* but in Yudhiṣṭhira as well, indicating a closer bond between the epic's didactic and narrative aspects. Locating divergent ideologies in one character should therefore also lead to a consideration of purely narrative dynamics which are at play behind and around this phenomenon. The very focus on Yudhiṣṭhira, a literary character, by definition beckons a literary explanation in addition to the already sophisticated religious-philosophical dynamics at play around and within this character alone. As such, a question can be raised with regards to the interplay of didactic and narrative elements within the epic, and that question would be whether being well-versed in the religious and philosophical currents of ancient India and possessing a sound awareness of the various ideological tendencies of this time would greatly enrich the experience of the *Mahābhārata* narrative alone, realizing the full potential of the story as the authors intended it to be experienced, or whether even prior religious knowledge is essential in fully understanding the issues explored in the story. To counter this question is to state that the story can be understood completely on its own terms, without the copious didactic material or awareness of the intellectual history.

Yet, if the *Mahābhārata* is known as an epic filled with tensions and rivalries it should become clear that these very tensions in the narrative arise because of contradictory religious ideologies. Sutton notes very clearly how tensions arise in the narrative because of conflicting ideological notions on *dharma*, and how specifically Yudhiṣṭhira is at the center of these very tensions because his adherence to *dharma* conflicts with how *dharma* is understood by those around him, especially his family members (2000, 318). Sutton lists ten instances[7] in the

[7] These take place: 1) after the dice match when Bhīma desires revenge but Yudhiṣṭhira does not; 2) in the forest when both Bhīma and Draupadī urge Yudhiṣṭhira to stand up for himself but he sticks to his morality and tolerance over *kṣatriya -dharma*; 3) after Duryodhana and Karṇa are defeated by the *gandharvas* and Jayadratha by the Pāṇḍavas Bhīma wishes to take advantage of their vulnerability like a true *kṣatriya*, while Yudhiṣṭhira shows compassion and sets them free; 4) when Draupadī is harassed by Kīcaka and Yudhiṣṭhira urges tolerance of the situation, which both Draupadī and Bhīma disagree with; 5) in the Udyoga when Kṛṣṇa, Satyaki and other warriors are willing to wage war in revenge for the mistreatment of the Pāṇḍavas, Yudhiṣṭhira does not share in this feeling of revenge. Kṛṣṇa, is unable to convince him; 6) after the war when Yudhiṣṭhira laments over the

narrative in which this conflict of ideology takes place, in various shapes and guises. They all center on Yudhiṣṭhira's pacifist and almost passive forms of restraint which are juxtaposed by his brothers who desire action and retribution. Though all of these instances deserve a close inspection, I would like to focus on two instances in the narrative which can be juxtaposed to see how Yudhiṣṭhira both exemplifies contradictory norms of *dharma* and also how these conflicts advance the main story.

Dharma Before and After the War

The two instances I will focus on are the events which take place 1) directly after the dice game, when the Pāṇḍavas go into exile, and 2) in the aftermath of the Kurukṣetra war, during the lamentations. These two instances are highly evocative both in their narrative merits and religious/philosophical speculation. It has been stated time and again, exemplified by Fitzgerald's quote in the second chapter, how *dharma* lies at the center at these issues, and the foci I have chosen are by far the strongest examples of this. Both take place directly after a devastating confrontation between the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas wherein the subtlety of *dharma* is explored, almost even exploited to the fullest extent. During both the dice game and the battle of Kurukṣetra the conflicting notions of *dharma* are fought out and this gives way to *adharma*. Yet while the former indeed provides a turning point for the epic heroes, sending them off to exile during which they can plot their revenge, it pales in comparison to the devastating effects of the Kurukṣetra war. The battle, taking up at least five of the eighteen books (including the night massacre directly following the Kaurava's defeat), is more than just a mere turning point of the narrative (Hegarty, 2012, 73). Its harrowing effects forever impact the characters and shake the very foundations of the world. It is this devastating difference between these two instances which make the events directly succeeding them interesting to focus on.

After these two events have played out, wherein *dharma* is nearly desecrated and leaves the epic heroes disoriented, a moment is taken to reflect on these events. Largely taking the form of debates in which not only the Pāṇḍava brothers and Draupadī partake but even sages and gurus sometimes give their two cents. But what makes these two foci stand out to warrant a juxtaposition are the different reactions Yudhiṣṭhira has to the events which just took place.

devastation of the war and refuses to accept the throne; 7) when Yudhiṣṭhira cannot accept the concept of *dharma* as taught by Bhīṣma; 8) after peace is restored and Yudhiṣṭhira can only think of forgiveness with regards to Dhṛtarāṣṭra whereas Bhīma thinks of him with disdain; 9) during the *aśvamedha* when Dharma comes as a mongoose and asserts that giving food to a beggar is a more significant act of *dharma* than the entire ritual itself, and 10) in the last moment s when Yudhiṣṭhira complains against the heavenly rewards bestowed to Duryodhana for his *kṣatriya* behaviour whereas he lacked any moral worth (Sutton, 2000, 318-319).

In these different reactions of the *dharma* king we not only find a transformation in the literary character but also a gateway into evaluating the merits of certain ideological outlooks. What also makes these instances so significant is how characters like Bhīma, Arjuna and Draupadī either commend or reprimand Yudhiṣṭhira's views and behavior. Their quotes are key to understanding how the epic poets most likely regarded the merits of the ideologies exemplified by Yudhiṣṭhira. His views largely prioritize moral ethics, which exemplify virtues such as pacifism and tolerance, above *sva-dharma*, where an individual must act according to his prescribed duties (Sutton, 2000, 318) (Bowles, 2007, 144). In moments such as these the validity of Yudhiṣṭhira as a moral exemplar is questioned.

"I Act Because I Must"

I will not focus on the dynamics of *dharma* and the behavior of Yudhiṣṭhira during the dicing game itself, for this is focused on more in detail by other scholars[8], I will focus only on the reflections on it in the third book, the *Vana Parva*. Here the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī are exiled to live a life of austerity in the forest. It is an episode in which the epic heroes loathe their humiliation and turn to elder brother Yudhiṣṭhira with their feelings of retribution. Yet it is Draupadī's initial pleas which ask the most profound questions, the ones the audience also wishes to be answered. She asks Yudhiṣṭhira what the point is of being good when it only brings grief, bringing up the classic problem of unmerited suffering: 'why do bad things happen to good people?'(Das, 2009, 64). She states:

> *Dharma* is supposed to protect the good king, but I find that it doesn't protect you. You have never strayed. You have always treated everyone alike. Even after winning all the earth, your head did not grow. After losing the crooked game of dice, you remained faithful to your word.
>
> (MBh: 3.31.3-7[9])

This indubitably refers to Yudhiṣṭhira's silence during Draupadī's humiliation during the dice game. After Yudhiṣṭhira unsuccessfully waged his brothers and himself he was no more than a slave. Brockington notes how this fact of Yudhiṣṭhira having lost himself and therefore being a slave is often overlooked by scholars who question Yudhiṣṭhira's lack of resolve and boldness

[8] See, for instance, Emily T. Hudson's analysis in the second chapter, titled: *Dharma and Rupture in the Game of Dice*, of her book *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahābhārata* (2013).
[9] Transl. by van Buitenen, 1975.

during all the wrongdoings (2001, 255). Whereas this serves as a mechanism in the plot to keep the heroes from seeking justice immediately, taking away any power or agency from them, it also serves to illustrate Yudhiṣṭhira's readiness to follow *dharma*. Him following the *dharma* of a slave, subject to Duryodhana, can be seen as the most extreme extent to which Yudhiṣṭhira will follow *dharma* as long as it prevents further tension or issues. When Draupadī questions why his anger is not set ablaze by the sight of the miserable state of his family members, and what the use is of following *dharma* so meticulously (3.18.17) if no one else does, Yudhiṣṭhira simply answers:

> I do not act for the sake of the fruits of *dharma*. I act because I must. Whether it bears fruits or not, buxom Draupadī, I do my duty like any householder… I obey *dharma*, full-hipped woman, not for its rewards… but by its nature my mind is beholden to *Dharma*.
>
> (MBh: 3.32.2-4[10])

Yudhiṣṭhira's sense of *dharma* here reflect on what has to be done, not specifically for a reward but as a standard of conduct. His almost Kantian outlook to uphold one's duties for their own sake does not satisfy Draupadī (Das, 2009, 67).

Draupadī shares her dissatisfaction with and incomprehension of Yudhiṣṭhira's moral outlook with Bhīma, who, characteristic of his famous *kṣatriya*-attitude, thirsts for vengeance (3.296.2–4). At moments such as these a contemporary reader, one with a penchant towards action and a dislike of asceticism or overt religiosity, would feel inclined to be more attracted to these characters, cheering at how they voice their dissatisfaction with Yudhiṣṭhira's way of handling things. At moments such as these the literary and philology students wonder whether the epic poets consciously decided to portray the royal heir in such a negative light or whether the *dharma-rāja* possesses reasoning the audience[11] ought to consider as wise beyond the capabilities of the likes of Bhīma and Draupadī. Brockington claims the latter is more accurate, stating that despite Bhīma and Draupadī seeming more attractive because of their comments, in essence they are little more than vividly-drawn stereotypes, (2001, 256). According to

[10] Transl. by van Buitenen, 1975.

[11] One of Brockington's most edifying insights is her awareness of there not being an audience but rather a multitude of audiences who heard the story of the MBh, and who all had different reactions to it (2001, 256). Also Reimann recognizes how in the cultural milieu of the poets of the MBh it was not unusual for a variety of audiences to either doubt or agree with Yudhiṣṭhira's character. It is also worth noting how Jains and Buddhists had a completely different understanding of the MBh altogether (2011, 106-107).

Brockington, the audience is supposed to recognize in Bhīma not insightful comments on the nature of dharmic being, but rather the image of a ranting youngling, unable to understand *dharma*'s complexities. Brockington explains why:

> Bhīma was not created to think; thinking is Yudhiṣṭhira's role. Bhīma's is to exemplify might, endurance, unswerving loyalty and the instinctive no-nonsense impulses of the common man, to introduce human warmth and even a little gentle humour, but as a thinker, a younger brother fulfils the same role as a woman: to be automatically wrong. It is not a case of being portrayed actively as stupid, rather that he and his younger brothers are there to enable Yudhiṣṭhira to explain what is right (Ibid).

I mention this quote because it illustrates why Yudhiṣṭhira should be seen as the center of attention, and while this insight is indeed accurate I do not fully agree with Brockington's reasoning. The notion that Yudhiṣṭhira holds a higher ground on knowledge of *dharma* than his younger brothers and wife does prove true during this particular instance in the *Vana Parva*. However, over the course of the story Yudhiṣṭhira's ability to explain what is right dwindles to a point where him being elder is no longer an indication of his expertise or authority. Goldman notes how "the investiture of the older or oldest brother with the authority of the father is a major feature of the Hindu family from the time of the Sanskrit epics down to the present" and that this is why the obedience the junior Pāṇḍavas have to Yudhiṣṭhira is upheld even when he leads them into disaster[12] (1978, 328). This descent does not go unquestioned and this obedience is tested. And if Yudhiṣṭhira's authority as an elder brother is tested, those close to him who question him become more than mere "vividly drawn stereotypes".

"Damn Warrior Behavior!"

The other instance I wish to focus on can be easily juxtaposed with the previous focus to reveal the tremendous change the characters have undergone. The catalyst behind this drastic turnaround is of course the devastating war, where acts of *adharma* and unrelenting violence were necessary evils to keep the horrors from destabilizing even further[13]. As such, the *dharma-rāja* turned to an inconsolable state directly following the war. The lamentations of Yudhiṣṭhira

[12] Goldman's paper (1978) explored whether Indian or Hindu narratives were familiar with Oedipal themes. His awareness of the elder brother having a similar authority as a father figure might also suggest a pseudo-Oedipal motif when Yudhiṣṭhira's younger brothers question his behavior and decisions and claim to know better.
[13] Which is, ultimately, Kṛṣṇa's, or actually Viṣṇu's, reason behind his descent to the world of man: to uphold *dharma* (Sutton, 2000, 296).

are a far cry from his initial dutiful outlook we have seen, as he clings to a completely different understanding of *dharma*. Again a debate on *dharma* ensues between him and his family members, with this time the younger brothers and the wife holding an undoubtedly higher ground with their reasoning[14]. This debate also illustrates the conflict between *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* ideologies, with this instance having a way more decisive consideration of their merits. We also get a glimpse into what might be considered the epic poets', and thus brahmanical, condemnation of the growing trend of asceticism.

Characteristic is Yudhiṣṭhira's condemnation of *kṣatriya-dharma*, abhorring its violent and confronting nature while praising the virtues of equanimity, self-restraint, absence of enmity, non-violence and truthfulness (12.7.3-7). Whereas the war was won, Yudhiṣṭhira does not believe it was done for the right reasons or in the right way, but that the kingdom was won for selfish reasons, thereby renouncing his duty to rule. Disillusioned with the world, he states:

> Abandoning the way of life and the comforts of society, enduring tremendous ascetic observances, I shall live in the forest with the animals, eating only fruits and roots, pouring offerings onto the fire at the right times, bathing both times every day, wearing hides and rags, and piling my hair up on my head; and with my food intake limited I shall be lean. Enduring cold, wind, and heat, tolerating hunger, thirst, and fatigue, I shall dry my body up with the heat of the ascetic practices that are prescribed. [...] Living all alone, reflecting upon matters, living on ripe and unripe foods, satisfying the ancestors and the gods with offering of forest fire, water, and formulas from the Vedas, and thus observing the most fiercely intense set of norms in the rule books for forest life, I will await the dissolution of this body.
>
> (MBh: 12.9.4-6[15])

Since *kṣatriya*-behavior brought about the war and thus the death of his relatives, Yudhiṣṭhira valorizes the behavior of 'forest-dwellers', mendicants who are above petty political squabbles (Bowles, 2007, 140). Here he directly opposes the notion of *sva-dharma* he seemed to follow without question earlier, being an unambiguous critique of brahmanic conceptions of dharmic order. His reasoning closely mirrors that of the Buddhists and Jains, claiming he will "be restricted to just the actions of blinking my eyes and so on, and I shall never be attached to any

[14] This is might be the pseudo-Oedipal motif I mentioned earlier.
[15] Transl. by Fitzgerald, 2004.

of these" (12.9.26[16]). Practices such as these highlight those performed by the most austere ascetics, such as the motionless Jain monks mentioned in the second chapter. Whereas Yudhiṣṭhira always had a pacifist and non-confronting outlook, it should be noted that these lamentations are not merely his feelings of disillusionment after the war since he always possessed tendencies more akin to detached ascetics, as he is caught exclaiming he never wished to rule (13.76.15-16[17]). Yet when his family-members debate with Yudhiṣṭhira on what is the highest *dharma* since he seems to take an opposition considered even extreme for his standards[18], it could be said that "the epic poets used every opportunity to broaden the terms of the debate. Such hyperbole, though quite probably founded in very real issues and debates, has its rhetorical function as well" (Bowles, 2007, 145). For the teachings within this didactic discourse to be considered valid, alternative voices are to be viewed as authoritative.

As such, when not just Bhiṣma, Vyāsa and Kṛṣṇa but also Arjuna, Bhīma, Nakula, Sahadeva and Draupadī collectively urge Yudhiṣṭhira not to forsake his *kṣatriya* and *rāja-dharma* and not abandon social life lest the war would have been fought and won for nothing, we clearly see what understanding of *dharma* is being preached as superior. All these individuals proclaim the worldly *dharma* of a householder (*gṛhastha*) and a king to be the most beneficial for both the world and the afterlife, echoing the earliest *dharmaśāstras* (Ibid). With respect to the merits of ascetic life, Bhīma states:

> Renunciation should be made at a time of great distress, by one who is overcome by old age, or by one who has been cheated by his enemies"; so it is decreed. Thus those who are sophisticated do not recognize renunciation here, and those of subtle insight judge it to be a transgression of Law. How is it then that you have come to hold it as your ideal? That you have taken refuge in it? You ought to continue despising that; otherwise you are placing your trust in others. Your understanding of what the Vedas say is a falsehood that has the appearance of truth. It was initiated by unbelieving Naysayers who were impoverished because the Goddess Royal Splendor utterly abandoned them.

[16] Transl. by Fitzgerald, 2004.

[17] "I don't seek the pleasures of ruling, I don't want to rule even for a second! On account of the law I consented to ruling, but there's no law in it! Therefore I've had it with ruling! There's no law in that! Given this, I'll go alone to the forest with the intention of pursuing what's right. There in the pure forests my rod laid down, my senses restrained, I will honour the law as a sage who eats roots and fruits" (MBh: 13.76.15-17, Bowles, 2007, 149).

[18] Yudhiṣṭhira's behaviour is directly polemicized along with the tendencies of ascetic forest dwellers, as they are seen as *nāstikas*, "nay-sayers", which means atheist. While Yudhiṣṭhira is undoubtedly not an atheist, this admonishment is taken to the extreme to get the point across (Bowles, 2007, 145).

> If one resorts to this baldness, this sham-Law, and supports only himself, it is possible for him to subsist, but not to live.
>
> (MBh: 12.10.17-21[19])

Not only do we witness here a clear condemnation of the ascetic way of life and similar ideological tendencies the brahmins had to deal with during the Epic Age, the fact that it is Bhīma, of all individuals, who proclaims such clear wisdom clearly illustrates how Yudhiṣṭhira's expertise of and authority on *dharma* is not to go unquestioned. Bhīma, unlike Brockington's insights, expresses more than a mere *kṣatriya* might with little intellectual potential. Whereas Yudhiṣṭhira was made to think and Bhīma to fight, the latter's readiness to act is favored over the former's overestimation of moral being. Even Arjuna admonishes Yudhiṣṭhira's willingness to give up everything so impulsively, and makes him realize that even when seemingly doing nothing, one cannot live free from sin:

> Not even ascetics—those dummies who have taken to the forest, having removed anger and joy—can keep life going without killing. There are many living creatures in water, in earth, and in fruits, and no one does not kill them. What can one do but make life go? Some beings have such subtle forms that they are known only through inferences, and their bodies can be destroyed by merely batting the eyelashes.
>
> (MBh: 12.15.24-26[20])

Considering the didactic nature of this debate Arjuna's argument should be seen as not just limited to Yudhiṣṭhira's state in the narrative but as a polemic against the wider trend of world-rejection which was gaining more appeal. It takes more to convince Yudhiṣṭhira, however, and it is not until Bhiṣma's instructions in the thirteenth book that Yudhiṣṭhira begins to go back to the importance of *sva-dharma* and the importance of royal duties, having experienced enough to facilitate his transforming views on *dharma*.

It should be noted, however, that the points made by Bhīma, Arjuna, Draupadī and the like do indeed possess a polemic dimension with regard to the asceticism and other world-rejecting tendencies, but they should not be mistaken as the final word and focus on *sva-dharma* and world-affirming outlooks. The insights of *nivṛtti* schools of thought such as

[19] Transl. by Fitzgerald, 2004.
[20] Transl. by Fitzgerald, 2004.

Sāṃkhya and Yoga are essential for the realization of the nature of the Self, and virtues surrounding detachment and equanimity are still recognized as beneficial in this pursuit. An issue arises when an extreme sense of world-weariness is seen as reason for renunciation, which is no more than a naïve attempt to dissuade from one's prescribed duties. Society only functions when every individual holds up their respective *dharma*, not just anyone can so easily turn away from this. The entirety of the *Mahābhārata*'s didactic corpus does variably prize one lifestyle over the other, but in this particular instance the focus is clearly more on *pravṛtti* and *sva-dharma* as extreme world-rejection is seen as naïve and impossible.

A Conclusion of Complexity

This is the teaching Yudhiṣṭhira is meant to imbibe, being a *kṣatriya* and a royal heir he cannot possibly consider forsaking the duties that belong to these categories, yet the *Mahābhārata* is never willing to give such conclusions so easily. At every turn in the narrative, around all the tensions and within all the debates we are constantly reminded of the complexity of dharmic and moral being, and no easy explanation or resolution is given, only an awareness of complications. With regard to Yudhiṣṭhira, around whom all of this happens, the distinction between *sva-dharma* and morality are recognized and explored through his character. This happens both as a doctrinal issue and as a literary device to enhance the drama of the narrative (Sutton, 2000, 303). There are two principal types of *dharma* and the *Mahābhārata* shows an awareness of the tension between them: 1) *sva-dharma* – the specific duties incumbent on each individual in terms of social status, and 2) *sādhāraṇa* – a code of morality everyone is expected to adhere to (O'Flaherty, 1976, 94). The latter is in itself an already unfocused term influenced by many spiritual philosophies, yet we can deduce from its tension with *sva-dharma* that the epic poets imbibed Yudhiṣṭhira with certain qualities and values which we can attribute to *sādhāraṇa*.

If tensions arrive in the narrative because Yudhiṣṭhira prioritizes moral ethics above *sva-dharma* then his famous characteristic virtues of being gentle, patient and pious while also being devoid of violence can be understood as belonging to the *sādhāraṇa* designation. The *Mahābhārata* itself never really designates Yudhiṣṭhira's morality as such, the nature of his very character suggests this moral side of his to be similar to *sādhāraṇa*'s conflict with *sva-dharma* (Sutton, 2000, 305). However, if *sādhāraṇa* is described as "a code of morality everyone is expected to adhere to" then how can Yudhiṣṭhira's virtues and qualities be portrayed as his tragic flaws? It seems more likely that his virtues are considered inappropriate

because they do not belong to his specific *varṇa* at all. The entire misunderstanding between Yudhiṣṭhira and his family members in book 12 (the Book of Peace) is on the proper understanding of *dharma*:

> Yudhiṣṭhira argues for the notion of a highest *dharma* in absolute terms; while the others insist that the only question relevant for Yudhiṣṭhira is what constitutes the highest *dharma* for kings, defending a more conservative brahmanic conception of *dharma* that privileges the householder (*gṛhastha*) above all others (Bowles, 2007, 146).

And it is because Yudhiṣṭhira muses on his notion of the "highest *dharma*" he is both treading on the intellectual jurisdiction of brahmins and at the same time claiming for the universal applicability of virtues such as *ānṛśaṃsya* (gentleness, absence of cruelty) and *ahiṃsā* (nonviolence) which characterize Jain and Buddhist monks. One is thus inclined to think that Yudhiṣṭhira belong to a list of characters – such as Bhīṣma, a celibate *kṣatriya*, Droṇa, Kṛpa and Aśvatthāmā, warrior-brahmins - who threaten the maintenance of law (*dharma*) which drove Viṣṇu to appear on earth to maintain *dharma* (Sutton, 2000, 296). This irony of protecting *dharma* from even the *dharma-rāja* furthers not only the idea that *dharma* in itself is recognized as having become a doctrinal issue but also the idea that Yudhiṣṭhira is a failed hero and moral exemplar who forces us to question the validity of the very concept.

5. Yudhiṣṭhira Juxtaposed and Contextualized

I have taken a thorough look at the nature of Yudhiṣṭhira, his qualities, how he makes decisions based on those and how those decisions often result in unsatisfactory results for those immediately around him. I have focused a lot on how Yudhiṣṭhira received a lot of criticism because of this and this criticism can be extended beyond Yudhiṣṭhira to address the wider trend of world-rejection and we have come to question his dual brahmin-kṣatriya nature. Based on all this it can be easily surmised how the epic poets seem to portray his being and all the qualities relative to this as less than ideal when it comes to embodying an exemplar kṣatriya-king. However, whereas we can safely surmise that the epic poets required us to regard Yudhiṣṭhira with certain reservations, he is also portrayed as a highly capable and incredibly wise individual, who also has the right makings of a king (2.30.2-5[21]). A consideration of Yudhiṣṭhira as not at all embodying what is desired could not be further from the truth. And here we see how the *Mahābhārata* is unwilling to provide clear definitions or descriptions of ideals and truths. It has been stressed time and again that the *Mahābhārata* is not only rife with many philosophies which often contradict one another, but that it is aware of these conflicts and does not want to resolve any issue easily with formulaic dogmatic truths (Sutton, 2000, 7) (Hiltebeitel, 1980, 151) (Gitomer, 1992, 222) (Laine, 1991, 275). Yudhiṣṭhira can therefore never be explained away as a lacking *kṣatriya* monarch because of his brahmanic and ascetic values, as the latter characteristics are also portrayed as his unparalleled strengths.

Many passages are devoted to Yudhiṣṭhira's qualities (3.180.21-30[22]) (5.147.32-33[23]) and how these are also essential for a just rule. However, this can be easily juxtaposed with his reluctance to rule and him failing the standards or values which are expected of a ruler (13.76.15-20). To make sense of this confusion and for it to become clear *how* exactly we are expected to look at Yudhiṣṭhira it is useful to assess him in relation to other major characters. Whereas it is very true that sometimes other individuals are presented as alternatives to consider fulfilling Yudhiṣṭhira's responsibilities better, these are all meant to reflect back on

[21] "…his adherence to the truth, and his subjugation of his foes, all the subjects were bent upon their own tasks; because of the correct collection of revenues and his law-abiding government, the monsoon rained abundantly and the countryside was fattened. All affairs prospered, especially cattle-tending, husbandry, and trade: all this was the doing of the king. Neither from robbers or cheaters, nor from the king's favorite among themselves, did one hear a false word about the king" (2.30.2-5, transl. by van Buitenen, 1975).

[22] "While you lived by the Law, uprightly and truly,/You have won this world and the world beyond./At first you studied, obeying vow, (…)/You found no joy in the Law of the rustics … Nor abandoned the Law out of greed or Profit,/And thus by nature you are King *Dharma*"(3.180.21-30, Ibid).

[23] "He is true to his promises, never distracted,/Upright and prepared to obey his kin, Beloved of the subjects, kind to his friends, In control of his senses, support of the good./Forgiveness, forbearance, uprightness, control,/Avowedness to truth, great learning and zeal,/Compassion as well as authority -/ Yudhiṣṭhira has all the virtues of kings"(5.147.32-33, transl. by van Buitenen, 1978).

the very function of Yudhiṣṭhira within the plot. Such a juxtaposition thus shows more than just how other characters exemplify qualities that Yudhiṣṭhira lacks, it underscores his own qualities with a sense of superiority and this, in turn, warrants why we focus on only him at all.

Yudhiṣṭhira's Qualities and Shortcomings Next to His Brothers

Those unconvinced of Yudhiṣṭhira's capabilities as the *dharma-rāja* and a real king have indeed a lot of material to work with but the fact remains that the epic poets made him the royal heir. This simple and often unconsidered fact could be reason enough to not question his official right or even his worthiness of the throne. Yet one can consider how Karṇa is technically the elder Pāṇḍava, deprived of his right by fate. These dynamics are the reason behind the epic's qualities of complicating matters to challenge the audience, which is also the reason behind its literary genius. Because of Karṇa's fate we question whether we would have had a better contender for the throne if fate had been kinder. We know Karṇa exemplifies *kṣatriya* might and resolve, selflessness, generosity and possesses undying loyalty. Perhaps the tragedy of reality forces us to simply 'make do' with Yudhiṣṭhira and always wonder 'what if'. However, next to this speculation lies the unambiguous fact that a basic importance is given to the *Mahābhārata*'s royal patriline altogether rather than individuals. The patrilineal unfolding begins with Gaṅgā's intervention in the Pūru–Bhārata–Kuru lineage and is thus very much seen as following a divine plan (Hiltebeitel, 2011, 105). Add to this the overriding importance of the dynasty's rulers and the belief that the king stands central in determining the nature of his world and its time (5.130.15-17[24]) and we have the basic reasons behind the importance of Yudhiṣṭhira alone (Thomas, 2007, 185). However, Yudhiṣṭhira is never depicted alone and the epic poets provide us enough material to compare Yudhiṣṭhira with the other Pāṇḍavas.

It is well known that each of the Pāṇḍava brothers are known for their respective qualities and traits taking on symbolic functions which complement one another, representing as a group an organic unity (Laine, 1991, 279). In the narrative situations take place – most of which happen in the *Vana Parva* (Book of the Forest) where the heroes undergo a "liminal" experience, stripped of all marks of differentiation and social status to experience egalitarian solidarity and universally applicable truths – where each character's quality, and thus their wider symbolic value, is given an opportunity to shine (Falk, 1973, 2). In determining both the

[24] "Have no doubt whether the time causes the king, or the king causes the time: it is the king who is the cause of the times" (MBh: 5.130.15-17, transl. by van Buitenen, 1978).

dynamics and usefulness of Yudhiṣṭhira's qualities, his wisdom and restraint, we should look at whether these qualities are made to shine brightest.

In comparing the prominence of Yudhiṣṭhira's traits one will notice that his only direct "competitors" – for want of a better term since the brothers are all on the same side – are Arjuna and Bhīma (Nakula and Sahadeva, although incredibly talented and useful, are explored only little in comparison to their elder brothers, therefore I will not focus on them[25]). These three represent a power balance of symbolic functions such as power/energy/violence as opposed to restraint/wisdom. Laine even claims that this balance is mainly played out between the duo of Bhīma and Yudhiṣṭhira, whereas Arjuna "seems to be the focus for the most complete reflections on the hero as an individual possessing a complex variety of qualities" (1991, 280). This wider array of qualities, and thus greater symbolic value, would suggest we are to find in Arjuna perhaps a better candidate for the royal throne. This focus on Arjuna as the true epic "hero" might have a case. Allen, for instance, notes how, although Arjuna never becomes king, he symbolically often occupies that position (2007, 168). This he does representing his brothers collectively, which seem to echo Laine's statement on Arjuna encompassing more than the symbolic power balance between Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīma. Allan also notes that, "when Arjuna holds the spotlight, he does so by displaying *kṣatriya* prowess" (2007, 175).

However, whereas Arjuna might indeed have qualities which span wider than those of Yudhiṣṭhira, the latter's qualities reach further. Yudhiṣṭhira manages to save the day twice through his brahmanic wisdom and restraint. Where his brothers all receive boons which are all related to battle and warfare, Yudhiṣṭhira, in the story of Yama disguised as the crane, is the only one who receives favors related to waiting, disguise and restraint (3.29.23). The *dharma* he symbolizes is that of universal, *saṃnyāsic* virtues and the anti-structural values which characterizes liminality (Laine, 1991, 281). It is exactly through these qualities that Yudhiṣṭhira manages to save his brothers in this particular instance. When Yama asks him who the true brahmin is (3.177.14) Yudhiṣṭhira, although claiming that the virtues of truthfulness, patience and compassion are virtues of a true brahmin (3.177.16), he might as well be describing himself. Although he certainly does come across as some kind of "crypto-brahmin" because he embodies these *saṃnyāsic* values, during his exile his image as a renouncer is reinforced[26].

[25] The insights of Hiltebeitel also influenced me to not focus on them. Hiltebeitel noted how, during the time the Pāṇḍavas are supposed to live incognito, it is mainly Yudhiṣṭhira, Arjuna and Bhīma who take on disguises which seem to further the depth of their characters, unlike the twins (Hiltebeitel, 1980, 150).

[26] It should be noted how Yudhiṣṭhira, in describing brahmanic qualities, lists qualities which are part of *nivṛtti* and ascetic tendencies. This is because during the Epic Age, when brahmins were forced to respond to the growing asceticism, appropriated many ascetic tendencies themselves, leaving the other castes with more action

Using his wisdom he also saves Bhīma from a boa, and is capable of answering its questions. Allan agrees that in the third book the most salient brother is Yudhiṣṭhira (2007, 174). It seems only obvious that Yudhiṣṭhira, the one with brahmanic qualities and his ascetic outlook which caused him to claim that he was going to live as a simple monk in the wilderness, is in his best form in the "Book of the Forest". One might even speculate that when Yudhiṣṭhira wept after the great battle at Kurukṣetra he was reminiscing his time in the forest. This would solidify his steadfastness behind this claim even more, rather than him just acting out and exaggerating because the war left him distraught. In either case, the epic poets did provide Yudhiṣṭhira with a big enough period to live the way that suited him most, expressing tolerance and understanding of the growing trend of asceticism and world-rejection, not to mention emphasizing its strengths. Therefore there was indeed place for such tendencies in a brahmin dominated society, as long as the society's rules were upheld when back in it.

The "Dark Contrast"

One way we can determine which character lies at the narrative center is by looking at who directly opposes the villain, one who stands at the other end of the spectrum. Designating Duryodhana as the main villain is relatively easy since not many other characters appear to adequately fulfill this function. And if Duryodhana is put on one end of the spectrum, only Yudhiṣṭhira stands at the other. These characters are so antithetical that van Buitenen speaks of a "dark contrast" (1973, 15). This seems similar to Rāma and Rāvaṇa's contrast in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. However, whereas this contrast functions on a literary level it is more than just a symbolic representation of "good" and "evil" as a plot device. The contrast between Yudhiṣṭhira and Duryodhana is more layered than this, thus the *Mahābhārata* presents a moral treatise in narrative form (Sutton, 2000, 305).

Since we have seen that despite Yudhiṣṭhira having some of the most salient aspects, he cannot be considered as flawless, considering how some of his qualities are also his vulnerability. Similarly, Duryodhana's traits of egoism, jealousy, impatience and his violent nature are defining enough to antagonize him, yet they also prove as his strengths, illustrating what Yudhiṣṭhira lacks. One of the most basic differences that sets them apart, and something Yudhiṣṭhira perhaps should learn from, is how Duryodhana vies maliciously for the throne whereas Yudhiṣṭhira considers ruling a burden and is even depicted as having no qualms with

oriented duties. Yudhiṣṭhira, in listing these qualities as those belonging to a brahmin, thus feels more like a brahmin.

giving up his birthright. If Yudhiṣṭhira is admonished by Kuntī for showing signs of weakness, not obeying the essential law of a warrior, taking one's stand at all costs, Duryodhana embodies very strengths Kuntī demands of her son unapologetically (Malinar, 2007, 39, 41). This illustrates, in Malinar's words, the "skill of the epic poets" and in making both the Pāṇḍava and the Kaurava sides nuanced with their supporters of both war and peace, the *Mahābhārata* seems to question how to define the law of heroism: "what law must a warrior follow, on what authority, and how does the definition of *kṣatriya-dharma* affect the position of the king, who is supposed to protect and represent it?" (Ibid, 38).

Time and again throughout the epic we are reminded of the superiority of Yudhiṣṭhira's character over that of Duryodhana. However, this is only based on moral and not ritual ethics (Sutton, 2000, 305). The depth of this contrast has a very didactic nature to it and we are confronted with two very different ideals. Yet it should not be mistaken how Duryodhana remains the most antagonistic character, which allows us to question whether the emphasis on Yudhiṣṭhira's superiority over him can be seen as an indication of the importance of moral qualities over strict adherence to, or living in accordance with *sva-dharma*, or 'ritual ethics' according to Sutton. The tension between these two ideologies, which are an extension of the conflict between *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*, indicates how *dharma* has to almost equally valid aspects, and the tension between Yudhiṣṭhira and Duryodhana is thus very consistent with the teachings of the didactic portions of the epic (Ibid, 311).

Yet, while the didactic teachings resonate with the contrast between Yudhiṣṭhira and Duryodhana, the latter's actual rivalry with the Pāṇḍavas are less played out in the narrative between himself and Yudhiṣṭhira over the throne but more between himself and Arjuna but primarily Bhīma over the more simple emotions of jealousy towards Arjuna's prowess and hatred of Bhīma because he used to bully Duryodhana so much. These instances can be traced back to the brothers' childhoods where Duryodhana expressed jealousy over Arjuna's mastery of weapons (1.129.1). But what goes back even more and what probably runs deeper is Duryodhana's hate and jealousy of Bhīma, which can be seen as the main cause of Duryodhana's disdain of the Pāṇḍavas (Allen, 2007, 172). It is primarily Bhīma who is portrayed as uncompromisingly unforgiving to Duryodhana for Draupadī's humiliation, which is portrayed as his chief sin. Yet, since the Pāṇḍavas themselves also commit a number of misdeeds, Duryodhana's overarching sin, in the words of Gitomer, is thus seen as a more heinous wrong, opposition to Kṛṣṇa which theologically means being blind to Kṛṣṇa's divinity (1992, 224). This fact has major didactic significance pertaining to the *bhakti* doctrine of the epic. Duryodhana's blindness of Kṛṣṇa's divinity could be seen as the ultimate sin to be avoided

by the righteous, and Duryodhana himself expresses his views on divinity as believing that the gods, by principle, cannot interfere in the matters of man, and that if they did they would be as weak as man (5.60.2-8[27]). One particular instance that comes to mind where Kṛṣṇa's divinity is blatantly overlooked by Duryodhana is during Kṛṣṇa's first theophany in the Kaurava camp before the war takes place. This can be juxtaposed with the only other instance of Kṛṣṇa's theophany, which happens in the *Bhagavad Gītā* to Arjuna, who is awestruck by the *viśvarūpa* form. This seems to directly contrast Duryodhana with Arjuna, and the latter's acceptance results in the definitive doctrine of *bhakti*.

Yudhiṣṭhira Addressed by Kṛṣṇa

The *Bhagavad Gītā* not only serves as the center-point of *bhakti* theology but also as an all-encompassing ideology which seeks to synthesize the *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* worldviews, thus holding quite an important place in the didactic portion of the *Mahābhārata*. An increasing amount of scholars see Kṛṣṇa's teachings in the *Bhagavad Gītā* as integral to the *Mahābhārata* in both didactic and narrative terms, rather than seeing it as a later interpolation which does not directly relate to the contents of the *Mahābhārata*, with Malinar stating that our understanding of the *Bhagavad Gītā* will benefit our understanding of the *Mahābhārata* and that "it is intimately connected to the themes and issues of epic narrative and thus expresses an important dimension of its meaning" (2007, 2), with Sutton noting how the concerns of the *Bhagavad Gītā* are "difficult to understand without its being set in its epical context" (2000, 326). This dual awareness of both of these texts' function in clarifying the other is driven home by the fact that the *Bhagavad Gītā* should ideally be studied as part of the narrative as context (van Buitenen, 1981, ix). Since I have already focused on the teachings of *bhakti* and *niṣkāmakarma* in the third chapter I will now briefly assess its relevance in the narrative pertaining to the individual characters involved.

Since the philosophical debate is between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, and Kṛṣṇa's teachings are meant to instruct and convince Arjuna to fight, it has become an almost intuitive realization to view Arjuna as the *Mahābhārata*'s ultimate epic hero since he is so much emphasized on (Katz, 1989). Arjuna's well-known dilemma stems from his inability to reconcile *kula-dharma* and *jāti-dharma* with *kṣatriya-dharma*, envisioning that if he acts upon the latter he will not be able

[27] "The Gods never act, like humans, out of love or greed, compassion or hatred, bull of the Bharatas. So if the Fire, the Wind, Dharma, Indra, and the Asvins were to act out of love, they would come to grief. Therefore you should not harbor such worries at all, Bharata, for Gods never concern themselves with other than divine affairs" (MBh: 5.60.5-7, transl. by van Buitenen, 1978).

to live with himself (Brodbeck, 2004, 83). He voices his reluctance to fight with notions of fear, injustice and even renunciation. This all seems incredibly reminiscent of the very dilemmas between the *dharma*s of kings, *kṣatriyas*, family and monks Yudhiṣṭhira struggled with throughout the story. In fact, when Kṛṣṇa admonishes Arjuna for his reluctance and tells him that "this cowardice unseemly to the noble" and urges him to "not act like a eunuch" and to rid himself of this "vulgar weakness" (24[2].2-4). These and many other chidings seem to speak more to the actions of Yudhiṣṭhira than Arjuna, since the latter had hitherto not appeared this reluctant. Even the concerns Arjuna raises and the ideas he sets forth to resolve them are a "contiguous part of the ethical debates that run throughout the *Mahābhārata*" (Sutton, 2000, 326). This not only confirms the *Bhagavad Gītā* deeper connection with the rest of the *Mahābhārata*, it also suggests that the *Bhagavad Gītā* itself is more or less a response to the various tensions which surrounded Yudhiṣṭhira rather than Arjuna. Arjuna's position in the *Bhagavad Gītā* thus "may be identified as being derived from the moral code of ethics repeatedly asserted by Yudhiṣṭhira throughout the epic" (Ibid). This brings Yudhiṣṭhira closer to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, almost seeing its teachings as being meant for him rather than Arjuna.

Yet, Kṛṣṇa's teachings of detached action is not alien to Yudhiṣṭhira. In fact, we have witnessed how Yudhiṣṭhira claims he does not "act for the sake of the fruits of *dharma*" but that he acts because he must (3.32.2). This is exactly what Kṛṣṇa preaches in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, to follow one's duty but not be attached to its fruits. The context of this quote of his did differ from his eventual attempt to distance himself from his duties, but it still shows how the *dharma-rāja* is well versed in all the *dharma*s, he just consciously prefers the universal moral aspects, which he holds on to until the very end.

The Final Virtue

In the *Mahābhārata*'s last moments, when the Pāṇḍavas renounce the world and ascend to heaven, Yudhiṣṭhira is put at the very center of attention and everything happens relative to him. This is the point where most likely a later author or authors tied up loose ends and instill a final, lasting impression. The *Mahābhārata*'s many natures and philosophies are indeed intended to reflect the tumultuous times of change from the Epic Age, there are also inconsistencies which are more likely products of all the gradual additions by authors and interpolators over time, rather than intentional contradictions (Smith, 2009, 101). These many changes were dealt with by later authors in different ways, and it is very likely that the closing section of the *Mahābhārata* was an ideal opportunity to reassert the righteous character of

Yudhiṣṭhira (Gonzales-Reimann, 2011, 102). Yudhiṣṭhira, as we have seen, has been throughout the epic portrayed as having blemishes, inability to prioritize between his duties, lacking not only *kṣatriya* but even basic manly resolve and a tendency to run away from his duties altogether. Next to all this even his most salient features do not seem to redeem him. To somewhat undo this and to reaffirm the efficacy and importance of moral ethics Yudhiṣṭhira is portrayed as being able to overcome these final trials. In both refusing to abandon the dog who followed him all the way up the mountain – who in reality is *Dharma* disguised – and refusing to leave his brothers and wife in hell to ascend to heaven alone serve as proof and final confirmation that he is a true follower of *dharma*. The point of this is for the audience to understand that, despite the blemishes he had throughout the story and in life, Yudhiṣṭhira ultimately is free from guilt (Ibid, 106).

When climbing the mountain he is the only one without sin, unlike his brothers and wife, who all seemed to know better than Yudhiṣṭhira which *dharma* he ought to follow, as we have seen in the two instances focused on in chapter 4. Perhaps this inconsistency is further proof that the final section might be a later addition in an attempt to stress Yudhiṣṭhira as the defender of *dharma*. One would even surmise that the other Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī, who seemed to live according to *sva-dharmic* values and did not forsake their duties, would enjoy the proper eschatological reward and thus reach heaven without any obstacles. A case could be made that their suffering in hell was in essence an illusion to test Yudhiṣṭhira, and that they had already reached heaven. We cannot know this for sure since no stress is given to anyone other than Yudhiṣṭhira. Yet, regardless of these vagaries, it seems to be made abundantly clear that not only the experts in ritualism but also the moral person enjoys the delights of heaven after death (Sutton, 2000, 295). This is the final move of the brahmanical *Mahābhārata*, giving in to the universal moral ideals which threatened their existence, only to subsume it in their grander ideology in an attempt to encompass what became almost all of Indian thought.

6. Conclusion

I have repeatedly stressed a number of points which were crucial to my argument of Yudhiṣṭhira's role and importance to the *Mahābhārata*. These points were that 1) the didactic and narrative aspects of the *Mahābhārata* are not to be seen as distinct but part of a grander unity; 2) the didactic portion of the epic presents to us a number of philosophies, ideologies, morals, values and religious truths, and that these are prone to conflict with one another because they refer to different spiritual tendencies with different outlooks on the world; 3) if there are tensions between the different ideologies and philosophies in the didactic aspect that these tensions are represented in the narrative as moral dilemmas which the characters have to deal with; 4) the *Mahābhārata* is aware of its many contrasting philosophies and aims to bring them to the fore to instill an awareness of the contradictory views and the complexity of reality. A fifth point could be that, according to the likes of Sutton (2000), the *Mahābhārata* presents a variety of philosophies and displays an awareness of their incompatibilities for the reader, the diverse audience to make up its own mind by not providing a single, definitive creed to simply resolve any issue. If these points are taken as valid then the role and importance of Yudhiṣṭhira as being a locus of different philosophies and a conduit through which their merits are explored is an argument not hard to make or a conclusion not difficult to reach. Much insight can be gained from being aware of the historical context wherein the *Mahābhārata* took shape, as the didactic portions of the *Mahābhārata* become more understandable when keeping the developments of the Epic Age in mind. The narrative itself also seems to be elucidated by the religious didacticism and philosophical treatises, as we are able to pin characters from the narrative to these teachings. As such, the *Mahābhārata* can thus be viewed as an instrument of the brahmanic endeavor to reassert their relevance and that of their ideologies, although they compromised their earlier standards to fit the needs of the growing trend of world-weariness.

This conflict and eventual compromise between the old Vedic and the emerging ascetic orders lies at the center of the entire issue which is explored through Yudhiṣṭhira and which causes all the tensions and dilemmas in the epic. An age old – almost primordial – philosophical issue pertaining to mankind's role and obligations towards the world, this issue inspired some of the most meaningful existential questions ever asked about mankind's relationship with the world and divinity. Is the world, the creation of divinity, inherently a place we all ought to find our own worth and fulfill our duties for the betterment of a functional society and one's own wellbeing? Or is the world, this material place, inherently evil and only a temporary abode as opposed to the eternity of divinity? Are we meant transcend the material realm, where we seek

entertainment and satisfaction for our senses, only to be lured deeper into this trap of egoism and self-interest, dissuading us from realizing our true Self and our true potential? Do our actions in this world have any worth and can we, through our actions, shape our own destiny and secure for ourselves a better life by living according to our ordained roles and their prescribed rules and duties? Or is action in this world meaningless, only furthering our entanglement in this cycle of karma and reincarnation? As we stay longer in this cycle, do we eventually forget ourselves or become less likely to realize our true self? If this is true, is it then not of utmost urgency to detach ourselves from all things which bind us to this realm, renounce our attachments and desires, calm our demanding senses to still our minds, only to meditate on the nature of Being or of divinity and escape the cycle? These incredibly contrasting ways of reasoning developed during the period in which the *Mahābhārata* was composed. Whereas before brahmanic dominance was equated with a stratified society based on ritualism and a duty-bound existence, the world-rejecting way of reasoning not only heralded the formation of new religious movements such as Buddhism and Jainism but also changed the Indian society and culture for good.

These incredibly contrasting views had significant repercussions for society. If a world-affirming view on life was upheld and every individual lived according to his or her own duties then society would benefit from this. It is true that brahmins stood at the apex of the social hierarchy and that they undoubtedly benefited from everyone following the duties of one's *varṇa*. Especially the ruling class had to accept how brahmanic wisdom served as guidance to the endeavor of ruling justly. Yet, whether or not brahmins reasserted their ideology for their own sake and wellbeing can never be fully attested, one can easily imagine the conundrum brahmins had to face. If an ever-increasing amount of people forsook their duties and society in general to live as ascetics and world-renouncers, and, to the worst extent, chose to inhabit the wilderness in an all-out rejection of the material world then society would suffer. In the worst case an individual as important as the king or any other ruler might act upon their inclination to abandon the royal responsibilities, and then there would be no functioning society. The world-rejecting tendency was a genuine exasperation with the growing complexities of social life and the unavoidable presence of suffering and death. However, in its worst forms it was a naïve belief that no action in this world matters and running away from one's responsibilities could not adequately inspire to undertake a genuine philosophical and spiritual quest. Brahmins were quick enough to portray the most extreme ascetics, such as the motionless Jain monk, as individuals who acted out of ignorance of their own worth and potential, as we have seen in Arjuna's quote in chapter 4. Such extreme cases of renunciation

were not to be condoned if it resulted in encouraging a universal applicability for living such a lifestyle. This way of life was not meant for just anyone. A life of renunciation was harsh and demanding, especially if the spiritual and philosophical capabilities the renouncer must possess are kept in mind. These capabilities all depended on qualities which only a few possessed, thus not just anyone could opt to live such a life.

However, as much as the brahmins wished to counter this growing world-rejection, they also realized how it was naïve to think that everyone could live according to their *dharma*. *Dharma*, as we have seen, was intended for so many different purposes by so many different traditions that *dharma* could not be simply followed as a standard without coming across a number of contradictions and grey-zones. The epic poets wanted to indicate how *dharma* was always believed to be just and right but because of its contested understanding different people can interpret it differently, giving rise to tensions, dilemmas and unclear ways to solve an issue. However, I would argue that the most important conflict of understanding of *dharma* with relation to Yudhiṣṭhira is understanding one's *dharma* to be one's nature. Whereas *sva-dharma* had prescribed duties for each *varṇa*, the belief was also that to be born within a *varṇa* is to innately possess a nature (*dharma*) which automatically coincides with the duties of your individual *sva-dharma*. To belief that every person was born with the innate qualities which helped them realize their place in society was also seen as naïve. Yudhiṣṭhira is the royal heir, being the eldest brother, and a *kṣatriya*. However, his very own nature (*dharma*) has much more brahmanic qualities – as we have seen in chapter 5 during the episode of Yudhiṣṭhira's responses to Dharma in the forest – and evoke a natural born inclination towards asceticism and renunciation. He is the king, the last person to forsake his duties to follow his own inclination, the populace and the kingdom would otherwise be deprived from a just and capable ruler. Whereas his capability was indeed a bit contested, he did turn out a just and effective ruler. But he did so only by ignoring his preferred ideal of living a simpler life. The portrayal of Yudhiṣṭhira having a different *dharma* (nature) than his *sva-dharma* required him to have is a greater awareness of the fact that even the old, Vedic worldview of the brahmins was not ideal. The fact that it was the royal heir who ideally preferred a different life and never sought for the throne is only a greater illustration of the complexity of reality.

Neither the world-affirming *pravṛtti* or the world-rejecting *nivṛtti* ways of thinking were able to fully provide a realistic vision of the world. Both had their strengths and blemishes and it would depend per issue which worldview had more merits. In the *Mahābhārata* we are able to hear the voices from all the Pāṇḍavas during specific issues, as not everyone shares their support of Yudhiṣṭhira's decisions and this only adds to the image of a composite hero,

representative of the many layered society. However, it is also indicated what happens when someone with a more *nivṛtti* perspective stands atop with a position to have the final word. Yudhiṣṭhira is not an effective ruler when he acts too much upon his preferred way of reasoning, which connotes tolerance and forgiveness. He is the last person to be able to afford a stance where he considers himself beyond worldly affairs, it is demanded he invests time and effort in them. He will have the opportunity to live according to his preferred lifestyle, but this can only be after a life in the world already lived. This Bhīma remarks as we have seen in chapter 4, and it indicates how there is no total condemnation of *nivṛtti* reasoning, not even for Yudhiṣṭhira. He can live as an ascetic, renounce the world and focus on meditation and still his senses, to be above worldly affairs, but only if the world itself has no longer need of him. Yudhiṣṭhira's qualities have time and again proven to be helpful, saving the day more than once. He was not given his qualities if he was not to use them. And in the end, they are the reason behind his entrance into heaven.

Yudhistira's sense of morality and his personal understanding of *dharma,* which is closer to *nivṛtti* values and has thus a more universally moral undertone as opposed to the prescribed *dharma*s according to *sva-dharma,* clearly make him the moral center of the story. But can he also be viewed as a moral exemplar? Does Yudhiṣṭhira provide a standard for others to aspire to? Does he even inspire others? This has become the most interesting question with regard to Yudhiṣṭhira's role as a moral exemplar. The *dharma-rāja* does indeed uphold his moral beliefs to a fault, his surroundings and the situations he finds himself in all indicate how his understanding of morality is not always helpful. Yudhiṣṭhira's decisions make us question how far one can come by living with his sense of morality. As such, Yudhiṣṭhira has become, other than a conduit through which the contrasting philosophies are explored, an instrument through which is reflected the entire idea of the concept of a moral exemplar and its validity. Are moral exemplars realistic about the world they inhabit? What does being a moral exemplar mean in a world where everyone has different understandings of it? Yudhiṣṭhira's function as the moral and humane backbone of the Pāṇḍavas turns out to be the least effective and most dysfunctional of all the other qualities which belong to his brothers. But in the end, his depiction implies his lack of sin. What were his tragic flaws before become the qualities which grant him passage into heaven. And it is exactly this multi-layered characterization of Yudhiṣṭhira, this amalgamation of all the contradictory philosophies thrown into one, this most conflicting but by far the most realistic depiction of a flawed hero in an unforgiving world, which make him the most central and important character, and also the most difficult to understand. Bhīma, Arjuna and Draupadī are more popular and beloved because it is easy to appreciate their

qualities because they are clear, paragons of *kṣatriya* heroism and outspoken personalities in the face of adversity. But as a true reflection of reality and its contradictions, Yudhiṣṭhira will unfortunately not inspire similar cults or evoke notions of divinity. Yudhiṣṭhira himself is a thinker, who makes us think.

Further Studies

And yet, there is so much about Yudhiṣṭhira that remains unexplored or unexplained. In the beginning of the fourth chapter I mentioned how Sutton noted about ten instances in the narrative where a moral dilemma takes place because Yudhiṣṭhira prioritizes moral *dharma* over *sva-dharma*. In this thesis only two of those instances have been focused on, for further studies one can fully explore the other instances and the particular dynamics at play within them. Are they in any way similar to the ones I have focused on in terms of their ability to illustrate the larger issue of the tension in the world of religious and philosophical didacticism? Perhaps one can focus on all these issues and trace a gradual transformation of Yudhiṣṭhira's understanding of *dharma* and what this connotes for the narrative by seeing this as part of this character development. All in all, we ought to see more of studies which focus on Yudhiṣṭhira alone, as there is so much to be learned from his statements concerning certain issues. This thesis could serve as an introductory orientation to both a focus on Yudhiṣṭhira, as this was not done extensively before, and him being a clear example of a character in the narrative who is connected to the didactic parts of the epic. Also, I have focused but little on the role of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in relation to all this. Another suggestion for further inquiry could be to trace Yudhiṣṭhira in exact passages of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, seeing where exactly Kṛṣṇa makes statements about those unwilling to perform their duty and how these statements seem to illustrate the behavior of Yudhiṣṭhira. A comparative study could also be done on Yudhiṣṭhira's similarity with Arjuna as he is depicted in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, scared, distressed and reluctant. His concerns seem to directly echo those of Yudhiṣṭhira.

Beyond this particular focus on Yudhiṣṭhira lie other questions yet to be explored. If I insinuated Yudhiṣṭhira to be an indication of didacticism partaking in the narrative, then does that mean that the story of the *Mahābhārata* can only be understood with an overall awareness of the religious and philosophical discussions? How much of the story and the decisions of the characters can make sense to a general reader who is not schooled in the complexities of *dharma* and the contrast of the world affirming and world rejecting philosophies? Are these essential in understanding the story at all? This seems one of the drawbacks of inferring a closer

relation between the didactic and the narrative portions, but in all essence the most illuminating further study lies in the future of the general belief that the *Mahābhārata* does invoke a sense of unity and cohesiveness. In how many more ways can this be argued, proven or even disproven? All this is only testimony to the complexity and vastness of the *Mahābhārata*, its contents and dynamics which invite theologians, philologists and literary scholars to lay its secrets bare, for no one can ever claim to have fully understood the *Mahābhārata*.

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