

## MAXIMIZING DHARMA: KRSNA'S CONSEQUENTIALISM IN THE MAHABHARATA

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### Abstract

The *Mahabharata*, an Indian epic poem, describes a legendary war between two sides of a royal family. The epic's plot involves numerous moral dilemmas that have intrigued and perplexed scholars of Indian literature. Many of these dilemmas revolve around a character named Krsna. Krsna is a divine incarnation and a self-proclaimed upholder of *dharma*, a system of social and religious duties central to Hindu ethics. Yet, during the war, Krsna repeatedly encourages his allies to use tactics that violate *dharma*. In this paper, I try to make sense of Krsna's actions by analyzing them in terms of categories from Western moral philosophy. I show that Krsna seems to embrace an ethical approach called consequentialism, but that his version of consequentialism differs from Western theories of consequentialism by seeing adherence to *dharma* as an intrinsic good.

Note: In citing passages from the *Bhagavad-Gita* in this paper, I cite Zaehner's 1969 translation. In citing passages from the rest of the *Mahabharata*, I cite two volumes (1973, 1975) of Buitenen's translation, except where otherwise indicated. Where available volumes of Buitenen's translation do not include sections of the *Mahabharata* that I want to cite, I use Ganguli's 1883-1896 translation.

### 1. Introduction

This paper's purpose is to situate moral issues in the *Mahabharata*, an Indian epic poem, in relation to some categories from Western moral philosophy. Some scholars have already tried to do this. For example, Agarwal (1992, pp. 129-142) sees in the *Mahabharata* a conflict between utilitarianism and a more Kantian approach to ethics. In the *Bhagavad-*

*Gita*, a famous section of the *Mahabharata*, two characters named Arjuna and Krsna discuss the morality of an impending war. According to Agarwal, Arjuna argues as a utilitarian, voicing concern about the consequences of fighting, whereas Krsna tells Arjuna to fight because it is his duty. However, this cannot be the whole story regarding Krsna's moral viewpoint. During the war, Krsna repeatedly urges the Pandavas to violate *dharma*, or duty, in order to win. In these cases, he does not seem to think that *dharma* overrides concern about consequences. At the same time, the *Mahabharata* affirms that adherence to *dharma* is the most valuable of human goals, and that Krsna's purpose on earth is to restore adherence to *dharma*. In this paper, I argue that Krsna advocates a form of consequentialism—but one according to which adherence to *dharma* is good in itself.

The *Mahabharata* revolves around the legendary Bharata war, a war between two sides of a royal family. These two sides are commonly called the Pandavas and the Kauravas.<sup>1</sup> The Pandavas and the Kauravas are the sons of the princes Pandu and Dhrtarastra, respectively. Dhrtarastra is blind, and his blindness makes him ineligible for the throne. After Pandu becomes king, he accidentally wounds a sage. The sage curses Pandu to die if he engages in sexual activity. Pandu goes into exile with his wives Kunti and Madri, and Dhrtarastra rules despite his blindness. Kunti and Madri bear sons through divine intervention. The gods Indra, Vayu, and Dharma father Kunti's sons, Arjuna, Bhima, and Yudhisthira respectively. The Asvins, divine twins, father Madri's sons, Nakula and Sahadeva. Meanwhile, Dhrtarastra fathers the Kauravas, the eldest of whom is named Duryodhana. The Kauravas are incarnate demons.

Duryodhana wants the throne for himself. However, when the Pandavas return from exile, Dhrtarastra makes Yudhisthira the crown prince. As one might imagine, this creates tension between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. After a failed assassination attempt, a failed partition of the kingdom, and a rather extreme gambling match that results in exile for the Pandavas, the two sides of the family prepare for war. Friends and relatives must take sides in the conflict. Thus, the Pandavas find themselves facing loved ones on the battlefield. The Pandavas “win” the war, but at a horrible cost. Only the Pandavas and a few others survive. Moreover, the Pandavas find themselves resorting to dishonorable tactics in order to win.

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<sup>1</sup> Technically, both sides of the family are Kauravas (“descendants of Kuru”), for they share an ancestor named Kuru. However, tradition has often reserved the label “Kaurava” for the Pandavas' cousins, and that is how I will use the term in this paper.

To make matters more disturbing, those tactics are often suggested by Krsna, Arjuna's charioteer, who is an incarnation of the supreme god Visnu and a self-proclaimed upholder of *dharma*. For example, consider Krsna's treatment of Bhishma, a warrior for the Kauravas. Bhishma knows that Sikhandi, a warrior for the Pandavas, was a woman in his previous life. Krsna tells the Pandavas to set Sikhandi on Bhishma. Bhishma refuses to fight Sikhandi, who deals Bhishma a mortal wound. Another example concerns Karna, another warrior for the Kauravas. When Arjuna fights Karna, Karna's chariot wheel gets stuck. Karna asks Arjuna to let him get his chariot unstuck before continuing with the battle. But Krsna reminds Arjuna of Karna's misdeeds and tells him to kill Karna immediately. During a mace fight between Bhima and Duryodhana, Krsna tells Bhima to violate the warrior code by using a low blow.

In light of his divine status, Krsna's apparent disregard for *dharma* presents a puzzle. Remarking on Krsna's adharmic behavior, Sukthankar calls him "that paradox of paradoxes" (1957, p. 12). The actions of this "devious divinity", as Matilal (1991, pp. 401-418) calls Krsna, create numerous ethical—not to mention theological—issues. In this paper, I try to make sense of Krsna's moral viewpoint.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. *Intrinsic and extrinsic goods*

Before continuing, I must introduce some terminology. First I will distinguish between various kinds of *goods*. By "goods", I mean things that are good. Goods are either intrinsic or extrinsic. When I say that X is an *intrinsic good* or is *intrinsically good*, I mean that X is good in itself. When I say that X is an *extrinsic good* or is *extrinsically good*, I mean that X is good because of its relations to other things. The most obvious examples of extrinsic goods are *instrumental goods*. When I say that X is an instrumental good or is *instrumentally good*, I mean that X is a means to other goods.<sup>3</sup> For instance, consider money. Money allows one to buy other goods. Thus, money is instrumentally good.

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2 In writing a two-paragraph summary of a sprawling epic, I have not bothered to support every statement with burdensome and unnecessary citations. However, a published summary of the *Mahabharata*, which includes most of the details that I mentioned, can be found in Buitenen (1973, pp. xiii-xv).

3 As Anderson (1993, p. 19-20) points out, not all extrinsic goods are instrumental goods. (Anderson uses the term "intrinsic value" where I use the term "intrinsic goodness", but her point is the same.) Anderson uses the following example to illustrate this point. Suppose that a friend gives me an ugly bracelet as a gift. For me, the bracelet is only an extrinsic good: I value it only because of its relation my friend. Yet the bracelet is surely not a *means* to achieving other good things. Thus, the bracelet is not an instrumental good.

Note that a thing can be both an intrinsic good and an extrinsic good. Consider happiness. A person regards his happiness as good in itself. Thus, he regards his happiness as an intrinsic good. At the same time, if a person is happy, then he is more likely to benefit others. Thus, a person may also regard his happiness as a means to the good of others. That is, he may also regard his happiness as an instrumental good.

### 3. *Consequentialism, deontology, and dharma*

I will now discuss two ethical terms that appear frequently throughout this paper—*consequentialism* and *deontology*.

Consequentialism is one approach to ethics. For consequentialists, the sole aim of morality is to produce good consequences. More specifically, consequentialists think that the sole aim of morality is to maximize intrinsic goods.<sup>4</sup> Consequentialists disagree about what counts as an intrinsic good. According to one kind of consequentialism, hedonistic utilitarianism, pleasure is the only intrinsic good. Other consequentialists believe that pleasure is not the only intrinsic good. In fact, some consequentialists regard certain consequences as good apart from their impact on people's welfare.<sup>5</sup> Besides disagreeing about what counts as an intrinsic good, consequentialists disagree about the use of rules. According to *act-consequentialism*, the right action is whatever action maximizes intrinsic goods. According to *rule-consequentialism*, right actions are actions that obey certain rules, where the rules have been chosen based on their *tendency* to maximize intrinsic goods. However, despite their disagreements, consequentialists agree that the point of morality is to maximize intrinsic goods.

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4 According to the usual definition, consequentialism seeks to maximize goods or good consequences. However, given our division of goods into intrinsic and extrinsic goods, and our further division of extrinsic goods into instrumental and non-instrumental extrinsic goods, we must specify what *kind* of goods consequentialism ultimately seeks to maximize. Purely instrumental goods are good only as a means to other goods. Thus, no one, consequentialist or otherwise, is interested in maximizing purely instrumental goods for their own sake. It is less obvious to me that no one would seek to maximize *non-instrumental* extrinsic goods for their own sake. Nonetheless, consequentialism is generally understood as a moral system whose goal is to maximize intrinsic goods (cf. Anderson, 1993, pp. 30-31: Anderson uses the term "intrinsic value" instead of "intrinsic goodness", but her point is the same), and I define consequentialism accordingly in this paper. If consequentialism's goal were expanded to include the maximization of non-instrumental extrinsic goods, my main line of argument in this paper would not be much affected.

5 For example, Hurka (1993) advocates a form of "maximizing consequentialism" (p. 55) whose account of what is good in life "should never be expressed in terms of well-being" (p. 17). For discussion and overview see Sinnott-Armstrong 2006.

In contrast, according to deontological ethics, morality is a matter of adhering to duties. For a deontologist, if an action violates a duty, then the action is wrong—even if the action produces intrinsic goods. A deontologist need not believe that duties require no justification. In fact, some deontologists provide sophisticated justifications for duties. For example, Immanuel Kant attempts to derive duties from the very presuppositions that agents make when choosing their actions.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, some deontologists think that, in extreme situations, the need to avoid bad consequences can override duties (Alexander and Moore, 2007). However, to qualify as a deontologist, one must hold that an agent has moral duties that are not justified in terms of their consequences.

What does all this have to do with the *Mahabharata*? In the *Mahabharata*, the concept of *dharma* figures prominently. *Dharma* is a “metaphysically based system of laws, duties, rites and obligations incumbent upon a Hindu according to his class and stage of life” (Dimmitt and Buitenen, 1978, p. 353). The words “order”, “justice”, “morality”, “righteousness”, “virtue”, “custom”, and “ritual” each indicate a part of its meaning (Buitenen 1973, p. xli). Buitenen (1973, p. xli) translates *dharma* as “Law” in his translation of the *Mahabharata*. *Dharma*’s negative counterpart is *adharma*, “non-*dharma*”, which can be roughly defined as violation of *dharma*. (In this paper, I will use the term “dharmic” as an adjective for actions that adhere to *dharma* and the term “adharmic” as an adjective for actions that violate *dharma*.) We will explore the nature of *dharma* in more detail later in this paper. For now, the following observation suffices. *Dharma* refers at least partly to a person’s “norms of conduct” (Killingley 2003, p. 40), to his duties. Thus, if Krsna advocates adherence to *dharma* irrespective of consequences, then we have reason to classify him as a deontologist. If he advocates dharmic behavior only when, or only because, it produces

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6 A full discussion of Kant’s ethical theory would be out of place here. However, I will provide a brief overview of Kant’s attempt to establish moral duties. According to Kant, I presuppose that I am free whenever I make a choice. Thus, my practical reason—the reason that I use when making choices—must presuppose that my will is free, i.e. not governed by forces outside of it (Kant, 1785, p. 60). If my will is not governed by forces outside of it, then my will must be “autonomous”: it must be governed by laws that it imposes on itself (Kant, 1785, p. 44). But if my will is governed by laws that it imposes on itself, then my choices must all adhere to principles that my will can accept as laws. Or, as Kant puts it, my choices must obey the command “Always choose in such a way that in the same volition the maxims of the choice are at the same time present as universal law” (Kant, 1785, p. 44). Kant seeks to derive all duties from this “categorical imperative”. (To be precise, this is one formulation of the categorical imperative. Kant gives various formulations of the imperative, e.g. “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means” [Kant, 1785, p. 36]. He claims that these formulations are equivalent to each other.)

good consequences, then we have reason to classify him as a consequentialist.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. *Krsna and adharmic behavior*

In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Arjuna faces a dilemma. It is the beginning of the Bharata war. Looking across the battlefield, Arjuna sees his old friends and relatives in the opposing ranks. As he reflects on the oncoming war, he fears that it will produce bad consequences—death, destruction, social collapse, and finally hell for all those involved (Zaehner, 1969, p. 47). However, Arjuna is a warrior, so his *dharma* includes the duty to fight (Zaehner 1969, p. 50). At face value, this looks like a choice between consequentialism and deontology: on one hand, Arjuna can try to minimize bad consequences by not fighting; on the other hand, he can adhere to his duty and fight, regardless of the consequences. In response to Arjuna's dilemma, Krsna urges Arjuna to fight (Zaehner, 1969, pp. 50, 137) without anxiety about the consequences (Zaehner, 1969, p. 51). Thus, as a first guess, we might say that Krsna rejects consequentialism and accepts “a sort of Kantian ethics of duty” (Agrawal, 1992, p. 137), a deontological ethics.

However, this first guess does not work. Throughout the war, the Pandavas repeatedly pursue victory through adharmic means (Sukthankar, 1957, p. 12). In many cases, Krsna is responsible for the Pandavas' decisions to violate *dharma* (Matilal, 1991, p. 405). Moreover, at the end of the war, voices from heaven confirm that the Pandavas have killed Bhishma, Karna, and others by adharmic means (Goldman, 1997, p. 210). Unfazed by the heavenly voices, Krsna defends the Pandavas' adharmic actions in the following words:

Ye could never have slain them in battle by fighting fairly! King Duryodhana also could never be slain in a fair encounter! The same is the case with all those mighty car-warriors headed by [Bhishma]! From desire of doing good to you, I repeatedly applied my powers of illusion and caused them to be slain by diverse means in battle. If I had not adopted such deceitful ways in battle, victory would never have been yours [...] You should not take it to heart that this foe of yours hath been slain deceitfully. When the number of one's foes becomes great, then destruction should be effected by contrivances and means. The gods themselves, in slaying the [demons], have trod the same way. That way, therefore, that hath been trod by the gods, may be trod by all. (Ganguli, 1883-1896b)

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<sup>7</sup> As an aside, I should note here that, in addition to consequentialism and deontology, there is another major approach to ethics in contemporary philosophy—virtue ethics. The term “virtue ethics” covers a variety of different ethical theories that focus on the cultivation of positive character traits or virtues (Hursthouse, 2007). I ignore virtue ethics in this paper. The *Mahabharata* has a great deal to say on the subject of character and virtue. However, virtue ethics is not centrally relevant to my argument in this paper. In this paper, I argue that Krsna is a kind of consequentialist. As far as I can tell, the main objections to my thesis would rely on passages that suggest that Krsna is a deontologist.

Thus, Krsna clearly believes that adharmic actions can be justified by their good consequences. Therefore, he does not appear to be a deontologist. On the contrary, his defense of the Pandavas' adharmic behavior seems clearly consequentialist.

At the same time, Krsna's primary goal is apparently to restore dharmic behavior. In the *Gita*, Krsna says that he comes to earth "whenever the law of righteousness [i.e. *dharma*] withers away and lawlessness [i.e. *adharma*] arises" (Zaehner, 1969, p. 58). Visnu says the same thing in another part of the epic: "Whenever, sage, the Law languishes and Unlaw rears up, I create myself" (Buitenen, 1975, p. 592). (Recall that Krsna is an incarnation of Visnu.) If Krsna's mission is to restore dharmic behavior, then why does he encourage adharmic behavior?

Here is one possible answer: perhaps Krsna is a "threshold" deontologist (cf. Alexander and Moore, 2007). That is, perhaps he is a deontologist who believes that, in extreme cases, the need to avoid bad consequences can override duties. Suppose that Krsna is a threshold deontologist. Further, suppose that horrible consequences will ensue if the Pandavas lose the war. In that case, Krsna can violate *dharma* in order to help the Pandavas win the war.

Here is another possible answer: perhaps Krsna values dharmic behavior merely as a means to good consequences. According to the *Mahabharata*, the rules of *dharma* are designed to produce good consequences: "Dharma is created for the wellbeing of all creation. All that is free from harm to any created being is certainly Dharma" (*Mahabharata*, Kama Parvan 69.51, quoted by Khan, 1965, p. 35). Thus, dharmic behavior tends to produce good consequences. In that case, perhaps Krsna has come to earth to restore dharmic behavior, but only because dharmic behavior is a means to good consequences. If so, then nothing prevents Krsna from acting adharmically whenever doing so will produce good consequences.

Both of these proposals have something to be said for them. In fact, perhaps both of these proposals are true of Krsna at different times. I cannot rule out this possibility. The *Mahabharata* is an epic, not a modern philosophical treatise, and Krsna's moral viewpoint may not be completely consistent throughout. However, I believe that the text of the *Mahabharata* suggests another possibility. This possibility makes Krsna a consistent consequentialist, but without reducing dharmic behavior to a mere means.

### 5. *Dharmic behavior as an intrinsic good*

According to a widespread Hindu tradition, *dharma* is one of the *purusarthas*, or goals of man (Krishan, 1992, p. 53). The other *purusarthas* are *kama*, sensual pleasure, and *artha*, worldly prosperity. Here *dharma* means not the set of rules called *dharma* but, rather, adherence to those rules: “As an aim in life, rather than as a rule of conduct, *dharma* refers to ‘being established in *dharma*’” (Koller, 1972, p. 131). Thus, according to this tradition, dharmic behavior is one of life’s goals. This tradition appears in the *Mahabharata*. Moreover, the *Mahabharata* repeatedly says that *dharma* is more valuable than *kama* and *artha* (Krishan, 1992, p. 62). Thus, at least within the epic, dharmic behavior seems to be the most valuable of earthly goals.

This implies that dharmic behavior is an intrinsic good. If dharmic behavior were good only as a means to other goods, then it would not be one of life’s goals; rather, it would be only a means to those goals. But in the *Mahabharata*, dharmic behavior is one of life’s goals. Thus, dharmic behavior is not a purely instrumental good. Is dharmic behavior some other kind of purely extrinsic good? That is, does dharmic behavior have value only in relation to other things? This strikes me as unlikely, given the *Mahabharata*’s claim that dharmic behavior is the most valuable of earthly goals. At any rate, for want of a more plausible proposal, I conclude that dharmic behavior is an intrinsic good.

The *Mahabharata*’s characters also seem to view dharmic behavior as an intrinsic good. In many cases, they go out of their way to adhere to the letter of *dharma*. In one passage, the Pandavas trick Drona, a warrior for the Kauravas, into thinking that his son Asvatthaman is dead. At Krsna’s suggestion, they kill an elephant named Asvatthaman and then tell Drona, “Aswatthaman hath been slain” (Ganguli, 1883-1896a). As a result, Drona withdraws from the war to grieve. Now, whether or not the Pandavas had killed the elephant, the outcome would have been the same: Drona would have been tricked into thinking that Asvatthaman was dead. However, truthfulness is a supreme norm in Hindu thought (Buitenen, 1975, p. 177; Goldman, 1997, p. 189; Khan, 1965, p. 204). By killing the elephant, the Pandavas ensure that they are *technically* speaking the truth when they say, “Aswatthaman hath been slain.”

Why do Krsna and the Pandavas go out of their way to qualify as “truthful” here? After all, their “truthfulness” has no obvious good consequence. A rule-consequentialist might argue as follows: “A rule that requires truthfulness at all times will tend to produce good

consequences. Thus, one should adhere to that rule, even when it does not appear to have good consequences.” Thus, perhaps Krsna and the Pandavas are rule-consequentialists: perhaps they are always truthful, but only as a means to producing good consequences.<sup>8</sup> If so, then they view truthfulness as a purely instrumental good. However, I find it implausible that Krsna and the Pandavas view truthfulness as a purely instrumental good. As we have seen, the *Mahabharata* appears to describe dharmic behavior as an intrinsic good. Thus, it seems more likely to me that Krsna and the Pandavas regard the dharmic behavior of truthfulness as an intrinsic good. If they do, then it makes sense for them to go out of their way to qualify as truthful, even when truthfulness has no obvious good consequence apart from truthfulness itself.

Let us consider another example. Arjuna vows to kill anyone who slights his bow. Yudhisthira slights Arjuna’s bow. Naturally, Arjuna does not want to kill his brother. So instead of killing Yudhisthira, Arjuna insults him, because insulting one’s older brother is disrespectful enough to be “like” killing him (Goldman, 1997, p. 190). Because insulting Yudhisthira is in some sense equivalent to killing him, Arjuna is not *technically* breaking his vow. Why does Arjuna go to such lengths to avoid breaking his vow? Granted, Arjuna refrains from killing Yudhisthira in pursuit of a good consequence, the preservation of Yudhisthira’s life. But Arjuna could have achieved that consequence without insulting Yudhisthira, by simply refraining from killing him. By insulting Yudhisthira, Arjuna suggests that he views the dharmic act of keeping his vow as an intrinsic good.

Again, one could argue that Arjuna is simply being a rule-consequentialist. After all, the rule “Always keep your promises” tends to produce good consequences. Perhaps that is the only reason why Arjuna goes to such lengths to avoid breaking his vow. If so, then Arjuna sees the act of keeping his vow as a purely instrumental good. Again, however, the *Mahabharata* elsewhere seems to describe dharmic behavior as an intrinsic good. Thus, I think it is more plausible to say that Arjuna keeps his vow because he regards the dharmic act of promise-keeping as an intrinsic good.

One might object that dharmic behavior cannot be an intrinsic good in the *Mahabharata*. As we have seen, *dharma* exists to promote wellbeing: “Dharma is created for the wellbeing of all creation. All that is free from harm to any created being is certainly Dharma”

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8 I would like to thank an anonymous referee for pointing out this possibility to me.

(*Mahabharata*, Kama Parvan 69.51, quoted by Khan, 1965, p. 35).<sup>9</sup> In that case, isn't dharmic behavior good only as a means to wellbeing? And if it is good only as a means to wellbeing, then isn't it only an extrinsic good, not an intrinsic good? There is a simple answer to this objection. As we have seen, something can be both an extrinsic good and an intrinsic good. Thus, dharmic behavior can be both an extrinsic good—specifically, a means to wellbeing—and an intrinsic good.

### 6. *Krsna and dharma-consequentialism*

Now we can take another stab at understanding Krsna's moral viewpoint. As we have seen, the *Mahabharata*'s characters seem to regard dharmic behavior as intrinsically good. If dharmic behavior is intrinsically good, then it is something that a consequentialist would want to maximize. In that case, a consequentialist might violate *dharma* if doing so would maximize the dharmic behavior of others. After all, a consequentialist might sacrifice his own welfare to maximize others' welfare. In fact, the upright character Bhishma does precisely that, renouncing sexual activity so that his father can marry a fisher-girl. (For the context of Bhishma's decision, see Buitenen, 1973, p. 226, and the surrounding passage.) Likewise, if a consequentialist believes that dharmic behavior is intrinsically good, then he might sacrifice his own dharmic behavior in order to maximize the dharmic behavior of others. Thus, I propose that Krsna is a "*dharma-consequentialist*", a consequentialist who sees dharmic behavior as intrinsically good.

Interpreting Krsna as a *dharma-consequentialist* seems to give us everything we want. If the Pandavas lose the war, then *adharma* will triumph in the world. Thus, as a consequentialist who sees dharmic behavior as intrinsically good, Krsna helps the Pandavas to win the war, even by means of *adharmic* behavior. Krsna violates *dharma* for the sake of *dharma* itself. Thus, his *adharmic* actions do not conflict with the *Mahabharata*'s claim that *dharma* is supremely valuable. Nor do they conflict with his claim that his primary goal is to restore dharmic behavior.

An act-consequentialist may feel inclined to object at this point. If Krsna and the Pandavas are violating *dharma* for the sake of intrinsic goods, then are they really violating *dharma*?

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<sup>9</sup> Does this passage force us to infer that the dharmic action is whatever action will maximize wellbeing? I do not think so. The passage's literal meaning does not support such an inference. Taken literally, the passage simply says (1) that the rules of *dharma* are designed to promote wellbeing (hence, we can infer that dharmic behavior *tends* to promote wellbeing) and (2) that if an action harms absolutely no one at all, then we can rest assured that it is dharmic.

Perhaps Krsna and the Pandavas never actually violate *dharma*. Perhaps *dharma* ultimately commands that an agent do whatever will maximize intrinsic goods. In other words, perhaps the dharmic action is whatever action will maximize intrinsic goods. If so, Krsna and the Pandavas do not violate *dharma* during the war.

I do not think that this suggestion works. Recall that, at the end of the war, *voices from heaven* condemn the Pandavas' actions (Goldman, 1997, p. 210). Thus, the Pandavas' actions are apparently adharmic.<sup>10</sup> Yet those actions contribute to winning the war and, thus, to maximizing intrinsic goods. Thus, an action is not dharmic simply in virtue of maximizing intrinsic goods. By winning the war by any means necessary, Krsna and the Pandavas do the right thing from a consequentialist perspective, but they are not thereby doing the dharmic thing.

To understand this point more fully, we must distinguish between Dharma and dharmas.<sup>11</sup> By dharmas, I mean particular duties for particular contexts. The *Mahabharata* refers to many such dharmas. For example, there is a specific *dharma* for warriors, "the Law of the baronage" (Buitenen, 1975, p. 586), which includes fighting (Zaehner, 1969, p. 50), and a specific *dharma* for brahmins (priests), which includes prayer (Buitenen, 1975, p. 586). However, Indian tradition often mentions a single universal Dharma, which deteriorates with the passing of great periods of cosmic time called *yugas* (Creel, 1972, p. 160). According to the *Mahabharata*, this Dharma declines by one quarter with each *yuga* (Buitenen, 1975, pp. 505, 593-594).

What is the relationship between dharmas and Dharma? The concept of *dharma* as a cosmic principle seems to have evolved from the early Indian concept of *rta* (Creel, 1972, p. 157; Khan, 1965, p. 30-34). *Rta* is the cosmic order (Khan, 1965, p. 24). But it has a moral aspect, for people can deviate from the cosmic order: the wicked man does not follow the path of *rta* (Khan, 1965, p. 27). Likewise, in the *Mahabharata*, *dharma* seems

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10 There is some ambiguity here, since Krsna's divine authority may trump that of the celestial voices. In the *Mahabharata*, Visnu (of whom Krsna is an incarnation) is one of the supreme gods (the other is arguably Siva). Nonetheless, when the voices declare that the Pandavas had acted adharmically, Krsna does not respond by challenging the voices' understanding of *dharma*. Instead, he simply points out that the Pandavas could not have won by fighting fairly. Thus, it appears that the Pandavas did in fact violate *dharma*.

11 I take this distinction from a lecture delivered by Professor Robert Goldman (South Asian Studies C142, University of California, Berkeley, CA, 9-13 March 2009), which distinguished between "little-d dharma" and "big-D Dharma".

to be a principle not only of morality but also of cosmic order. As *dharma* declines, the natural world deteriorates: “The cows will yield little milk, and the trees, teeming with crows, will yield few flowers and fruits” (Buitenen, 1975, p. 587). Thus, it appears that Dharma is a principle of cosmic order, and that the dharmas are the different rules that different people must follow in order to be in harmony with Dharma. As one scholar puts it, “all ordinary human [little-d] *dharma* is only an aspect of the universal [big-D] *dharma*, and is justified not in itself, but only in the function of the universal *dharma*” (Koller, 1972, p. 141). As another scholar puts it, to violate one’s own *dharma* is “to be out of step with the universe” (Creel, 1972, p. 157).

Now we can explain exactly why Krsna authorizes the Pandavas’ adharmic actions. When Krsna comes to earth, the universe is out of order: demons have incarnated themselves as the Kauravas (Buitenen, 1973, p. 137). To restore the cosmic order—Dharma—the Pandavas must win the war, exterminating the demonic incarnations. Thus, Krsna encourages the Pandavas to violate dharmas when doing so will help them to win the war. By violating dharmas, the Pandavas deviate from the cosmic order themselves, but they help to preserve order in the universe at large.

To grasp this point more clearly, we can use the metaphor of a dance routine. The cosmic order is a huge, coordinated dance routine with many different assigned roles. Demons have started to run amok on the dance floor, interfering with the dance. To save the dance routine from being completely ruined, the Pandavas must stop the demons. But to stop the demons, they must perform actions (e.g. running after the demons) that deviate from their choreography within the dance routine. From a consequentialist perspective, that is exactly the right thing to do: if the cosmic order is intrinsically good, then one should sacrifice one’s own participation in the cosmic order in order to save the cosmic order.

### **7. Rule-consequentialism in the Gita**

However, we should not forget the starting-point of our discussion—the *Bhagavad-Gita*. In the *Gita*, Arjuna fears that his fighting will have a negative effect on *dharma*. If he fights, then the war will proceed as planned. If the war proceeds, then the elders of his family will die. Without the elders, there will be no one to maintain the family’s norms, and its women will mix with men of lower castes. Caste-mixing, in turn, will lead to widespread adharmic behavior (Zaehner, 1969, p. 47). In the situation in which Arjuna finds himself, “the injunctions of *svadharma* [i.e. individual *dharma*], therefore, appear [...] to be self-

destructive in character” (Santina, 1992, p. 107). Arjuna’s individual *dharma* demands that Arjuna participate in the war; however, from Arjuna’s standpoint, it appears that the war’s ultimate effect will be to decrease dharmic behavior.

Of course, Arjuna is wrong about this. The battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas is not a battle between two merely human foes. Instead, it is a battle between incarnate gods and demons. Arjuna’s concerns would be valid if his enemies were mere humans. However, as incarnate demons, the Kauravas must be defeated at all costs. Arjuna is certainly correct in thinking that the war will weaken the social order. However, if the Kauravas are not exterminated, then the social and cosmic order may be utterly destroyed. With his God’s-eye view, Krsna does not encounter any moral crisis (Dubey, 1992, p. 39); he knows what is necessary to maintain *dharma*. He knows that, contrary to what Arjuna thinks, Arjuna’s fighting will actually help to preserve *dharma*.

However, this is not quite the argument that Krsna presents to Arjuna. In the *Gita*, Krsna’s main argument is *not* that Arjuna’s fighting will help to restore the cosmic order. Instead, Krsna tells Arjuna that he must do the work prescribed by his *dharma* (Zaehner, 1969, pp. 50, 137) without anxiety over the consequences (Zaehner, 1969, p. 51). This advice sounds deontological. Thus, we face a problem: If Krsna is a consequentialist, as we have argued, then why does he present Arjuna with a deontological-sounding argument?

We can mitigate this problem to an extent by noting that Krsna mentions consequentialist considerations in the *Gita*. He points out that some of the bad consequences that Arjuna fears—namely, the deaths of his relatives—are outweighed by the intrinsic goodness of dharmic behavior. Krsna reveals that Arjuna is not really killing his relatives when he kills their bodies, for their souls are immortal (Zaehner, 1969, p. 49). Agrawal argues that this revelation makes the deaths of Arjuna’s relatives irrelevant to Arjuna’s decision:

Realizing not only intellectually but deeply, existentially, that the inner self is immortal, Arjuna now feels no grief at the thought of the death of his affectionate and respected ones. [...] The result of this new orientation of mind is that certain considerations drop out as *irrelevant* in determining how to act. Thus, for example, the fact that Arjuna’s dear ones will die in the war becomes irrelevant to the question of fighting a righteous war. (1992, p. 140-141)

I would not go so far. The soul’s immortality does not change the fact that murder is usually wrong. For example, the *Mahabharata* affirms that the murder of brahmins (priests) is extremely sinful (Buitenen, 1973, p. 134). And, presumably, murder is wrong at

least partly because the preservation of bodily life is good and the loss of bodily life is bad. Thus, the soul's immortality does not mean that the death of Arjuna's relatives is morally *irrelevant*. It simply means that the intrinsic goodness of his relatives' bodily life is not great enough to outweigh the intrinsic goodness of dharmic behavior. Thus, by adhering to his warrior *dharma*, Arjuna produces more intrinsic good than he would produce by not fighting. Therefore, when Krsna tells Arjuna to fulfill his warrior *dharma* without worrying about the deaths that it will cause, he is in fact making a largely consequentialist argument, contrary to appearances.

The problem is also mitigated once we realize that the *Gita* is not just a set of advice for Arjuna. The *Gita* discusses many subjects in minute detail—subjects only tangentially related to Arjuna's dilemma. For example, it discusses the Day and Night of Brahma the creator<sup>12</sup> (Zaehner, 1969, p. 73), the different afterlives awaiting different kinds of worshippers (Zaehner, 1969, p. 76), the greater difficulty of contemplating an impersonal God as opposed to a personal God (Zaehner, 1969, p. 88), and the theory of the three constituents of reality, “goodness” (*sattva*), “passion” (*rajas*), and “darkness” (*tamas*)<sup>13</sup> (Zaehner, 1969, p. 352). The *Gita* does not simply present moral advice; it presents a cosmology. If the *Gita*'s author intended the *Gita* merely as part of the story of the Bharata war, then this degree of complexity would be odd. After all, Krsna's long-winded sermon hardly helps to move the plot forward, except insofar as it motivates Arjuna to fight. Thus, the *Gita*'s author probably intends the *Gita* largely as a message to ordinary people reading the *Mahabharata*.

Once we realize that the *Gita* is intended primarily as a message to ordinary people, we can interpret Krsna as consequentialist even in the *Gita*. As we have seen, the Pandavas often violate *dharma* during the war. However, in those cases, they have Krsna—God incarnate—nearby to assure them that their adharmic actions will produce good consequences. Ordinary people do not have God at their side to tell them when it is permissible to violate

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12 Brahma is the creator of the universe, although most contemporary forms of Hinduism do not identify him with the supreme being (Visnu and another god named Siva often receive that honor). The Day of Brahma and the Night of Brahma are vast periods of cosmic time. The universe is destroyed and recreated repeatedly during the Day of Brahma. At the beginning of the Night of Brahma, the universe dissolves completely, to remain “unmanifest” until the next Day. The Day and Night follow each other in an endless cycle (cf. Zaehner, 1969, p. 73).

13 Here I follow Zaehner's translations of the terms *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* (cf. Zaehner, 1969, pp. 16, 140). I enclose the translations within quotation marks to indicate that they are translations of what the *Gita* treats as technical terms.

*dharma*. Hence, ordinary people would be most likely to produce good consequences if they simply had a policy of adhering to *dharma*. As we have seen, the *Gita*'s author intends the *Gita* primarily as advice for ordinary people. Thus, he has Krsna preach a policy of unwavering adherence to *dharma*. In preaching this policy, Krsna is being a good consequentialist: by convincing ordinary people to always follow *dharma*, he is indirectly producing good consequences.

### **8. Rule-consequentialism and dharma-consequentialism**

Before concluding this paper, I must address a final issue. One might think that Krsna's *dharma*-consequentialism is simply a form of rule-consequentialism. After all, an individual's *dharma* consists of a set of rules. So can't we simply replace the word *dharma* with "rule" and conclude that Krsna is a rule-consequentialist? In response to this question, I will make two points.

First of all, the term "*dharma*-consequentialism" is not simply a synonym for "rule-consequentialism", a synonym that substitutes the word *dharma* for the word "rules". A rule-consequentialist selects rules based on the rules' tendency to maximize intrinsic goods. He then says that actions must obey those rules. In other words, rule-consequentialism is called *rule*-consequentialism because it says that right actions adhere to certain rules. In contrast, Krsna's moral system is called *dharma*-consequentialism because it says that right actions aim at maximizing global adherence to the rules of *dharma*; this is very different from saying that right actions themselves adhere to the rules. When Krsna breaks the rules of *dharma* in order to win the war, he adheres to *dharma*-consequentialism, but he obviously does not adhere to rule-consequentialism.

Secondly, however, I agree that Krsna's *dharma*-consequentialism sometimes takes the form of rule-consequentialism. In the *Gita*, Krsna advocates strict adherence to *dharma* without anxiety over consequences. As I have argued, that is because the rules of *dharma* tend to produce good consequences. So, in the *Gita*, Krsna does advocate a form of rule-consequentialism.

### **9. Conclusion**

The Krsna of the *Mahabharata* holds a complex moral outlook. He urges the Pandavas to violate *dharma*, to deviate from the cosmic order. But for Krsna, conformity to the cosmic order, conformity to *dharma*, is intrinsically good. He urges the Pandavas to violate

*dharma* only because their adharmic actions will help to restore dharmic behavior in the universe at large. In short, Krsna is a consequentialist, but he holds a peculiar form of consequentialism in which dharmic behavior itself is intrinsically good.

This *dharma*-consequentialism probably will not find many adherents in the philosophy departments of Western universities. The majority of Western philosophers are neither Hindus nor Indians. Hence, the majority of Western philosophers do not believe in the principle of cosmic order called *dharma*.<sup>14</sup> Thus, although many Western philosophers are consequentialists, the *content* of their consequentialism differs from the content of *dharma*-consequentialism. Nonetheless, the *dharma*-consequentialism found in the *Mahabharata* is a coherent moral theory and represents an alternative to the kinds of consequentialism known in the West.

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<sup>14</sup> However, some Western philosophers—ancient, medieval, and modern—have argued that human ethics is a function of some sort of cosmic principle. For example, the Stoics claimed that a divine fire permeates and organizes the universe, giving each being its characteristic nature (White, 2003, pp. 133-134), and that virtue consists of living according to one's nature (Schofield, 2003, pp. 242-243). We may wonder whether any Western philosopher would agree with Krsna's consequentialist approach to preserving the cosmic order. Does any Western philosopher believe that one should deviate from the cosmic order when doing so will help to keep others in harmony with the cosmic order? Answering this question would require a separate essay. If any Western philosopher did hold such a belief, then his moral theory would be structurally similar to *dharma*-consequentialism. However, it would not be *dharma*-consequentialism, because its principle of cosmic order would not be the *dharma* of Hinduism.

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