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Why Should I Be Ethical? Some Answers from Mahabharata

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Abstract

The article seeks to answer the question: Why should I be ethical? For an answer, it examines Mahabharata, the ancient Indian epic. It seeks to explore the complex ethical issues posed by Mahabharata, how they are relevant to us as individuals and to us as managers and teachers of management in business schools and enables us to understand how possibly we could use the insights to better our lives and of those around us. Mahabharata's central message, concludes the article, is that ethics is not for convincing anyone; it is about convincing oneself. Mahabharata tells us that ethics is what makes life meaningful, at the individual level, group level and at the level of society, and cannot be justified in a consequentialist framework.

Keywords

Ethics, ethical dilemmas, existentialism, Mahabharata

Introduction

Why should I be ethical? This is not just a rhetorical question but one we have posed to ourselves sometime or other. Does ethics triumph at the end? Do virtuous people do better in life? The clear answer is no, it does not happen that way. Indeed, it would appear that crooks fare far better, at least one would be justified in feeling so if one observes today's India. People who follow the straight and narrow path of virtue end up being sidelined, if not downright persecuted. Indeed, an ethical person in government or for that matter other organizations is not seen as an asset but as a problem, and the higher ups often do not really know how to cope with a person who has high ethical standards. He/she is altogether too inconvenient.

It is true that by being virtuous, one would most likely increase the trust others would place in him/her, could lead more effectively by virtue of his/her trustworthiness, may accomplish things others with a sleazy reputation may not be able to achieve. But these, in themselves, may neither result in a better welfare for oneself nor for the organization one works in. So, why should I be ethical? What is the payoff? What do I get from being ethical?

To answer this question, we turn to one of the two ancient epics of India, namely, Mahabharata. Ancient India produced two of the four classic epics of the world: Ramayana and Mahabharata (the other two were the Greek epics, Iliad and Odyssey). The two Indian epics tower over the Greek epics not only

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in terms of sheer length but also in terms of their presenting more than a mere story. They get into the very fundamental issues of human life, into its numerous and complex problems, into the deep and complex labyrinths of human minds and often leaves the readers with more questions than answers. This is especially true of Mahabharata.

It is important to understand the fundamental differences between Ramayana and Mahabharata with regard to their approaches to issues of life in general and to ethics in particular. Interestingly, both address themselves to the question of duty at their core: What is my duty? How do I know what my duty in a given situation is? But the two epics arrive at very different answers to this question. Ramayana's approach is simple: your duty is clear, though this may entail sufferings, it does not have any moral dilemmas. Ramayana is a straight forward story of ideals to be pursued, and thus seeks to lift human life to a higher plane. But Mahabharata makes no such pretences; indeed it takes life *as it is*, not as *it should be*, presents no ideals, indeed seeks to bring mankind back to earth if it had indeed soared to a higher level. It does not tell you what your duty is, and indeed, even after the reader has done with its 82,564 couplets of verse, and nested stories, he/she is left wondering what in fact the duty of each character was, and how well he/she discharged it. Ramayana has a happy ending with righteousness triumphing at the end, with Ram, the *maryada purushothama* being back on his throne. Mahabharata, on the other hand, does not leave the reader even with this comfort. Duryodhana never suffers throughout the epic; he and his brothers enjoy the kingdom all the way; and at the time of his death, he mockingly tells Yudhishtira that after his well-fought battle, he is now welcome to the kingdom, a kingdom of widows and orphans. It gives a hollow victory to the victorious, and indeed there are no *maryada purushothamas*, not even Krishna. There is no one who serves as the perfect ideal to follow. It is full of unsolved ethical riddles and dilemmas, which are faced by ordinary human beings, not divinities, and the characters struggle to find what is right, make mistakes and suffer the full consequences. It raises the same question as we asked in the beginning: Why be virtuous when virtue is not rewarded?

It is the purpose of this article to explore what Mahabharata has to tell us by way of an answer to this question. It seeks to explore the complex ethical issues posed by Mahabharata, how they are relevant to us as individuals and to us as managers and teachers of management in business schools and enable us to understand how possibly we could use the insights to better our lives and of those around us. We try to do so by looking at some selected characters who seem to have faced special dilemmas and struggled to find their own answers. In particular, we select the characters of Bhishma, Dhritarashtra, Karna and Krishna.

We assume that the readers of this journal are familiar with the story of Mahabharata, and hence we do not propose to narrate the story (today, one need not spend more than a few minutes to get the story from the Internet anyway!). We shall focus on the analysis of some of the complex and fascinating characters of Mahabharata and seek to draw our lessons from them. Before doing so, however, let us briefly look at the well-known ethical theories and see how they deal with this question.

The Categorical Imperative

The theory of categorical imperatives, advocated by the famous philosopher, Immanuel Kant, asks you to identify a set of absolute dos and don'ts and go by them. His view of ethics is linked to his views of truth telling, whose benefits are 'universalizable' (Kant, 1930). Categorical imperatives are some

universal principles that should serve as ethical guideposts for everyone. For example, do not lie, do not cheat, do not kill other people, etc., are principles that would eventually lead to a better world, if everyone would follow them. It follows the elementary rule that we learnt in school: 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you' (Kant, 1785/1959).

So why should I be ethical? Because if I am, I am contributing to the creation of a better world by following the categorical imperatives and setting an example for the world to follow.

Gandhi was perhaps a close follower of this sort of reasoning. His views on most of moral issues arose out of his reasoning as to what is the right thing to do, and his belief that if most people follow these guidelines, the world will be a far better place to be in.

The major problem is not so much its impracticability ('you can't be a saint in this world'), as the difficulty in resolving the problem of conflict of two categorical imperatives. Obeying one's father is an unexceptional virtue and may be considered a categorical imperative. Of course, not killing a mother would also be a categorical imperative. What if one's father asks his son to kill his mother in a fit of rage? Parasurama, the incarnation of Vishnu, no less, had to face this dilemma, and he chose to obey his father, Jamadagni, and kill his mother, Renuka (this is a well-known story¹ which is available in many Indian mythology books). Even Rama had to deviate from his principles when confronted with the choice between killing Bali surreptitiously and protecting Sugriva who had come to him as a *saranagathi* (seeking refuge) seeker.

Ethical Relativism

This is a modification of the categorical imperatives approach, in that it recognizes that what can be defined as a set of categorical imperatives may vary from country to country and culture to culture (Brandt, 1959; Stace, 1937). While in one society, it may be considered unethical to bribe one's way through, in another, this may be seen as an accepted business practice.

This perspective gives a certain degree of flexibility and does not constrain you to operate in an ethical straitjacket. It argues that one needs to be ethical in a context, but if done the right way, it will lead to the improvement of at least that society one is embedded in.

The problem with this approach is that, in the absence of any clear and categorical dos and don'ts, it could degenerate into pure licentiousness, virtually sanctioning anything. To take an extreme example, the holocaust could be justified on the ground that in German society, it was perfectly alright to kill Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, etc.

Consequentialism

This point of view is popular among economists, since it advises us to look at what will lead to the maximum utility, that is, maximum benefit for the maximum number of people. This stems from the writings of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, the early economic thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This approach recognizes that it is not possible to have one set of categorical imperatives that can be followed at all times, and hence settles down to the possibility that when faced with actual

situations, one might have to violate the imperative towards one group so to enable another group to benefit. Thus, it is quite ethical to drive out thousands from a dam site, if, by building the dam, many more can benefit.

So I should be ethical because by doing so, I can bring about a net positive improvement in the quality of life in many others. Sometimes, by not doing something, I may be guilty of permitting an unfairness in someone else. For example, I fail to build a dam, many more might suffer due to lack of drinking water, and my duty is to ensure the maximum benefit to as many people as possible.

An obvious problem with this 'practical' approach is that it fails to account for justice. In the above example of a dam, it is not just a question of how many are ousted and how many are benefited; it is also a question of whether it is *just* to make some suffer for the sake of many. Coming back to the holocaust example, killing of the old and mentally challenged persons could be justified on the ground that they are a burden on society and the society as a whole would be much better off without them.

Humanism

This approach stems from the writings of David Hume (1739/1978). He argued that there is an inherent moral sense in all human beings. His approach to moral problems is through emotions and appealing to one's moral sense rather than a process of reasoning, as advocated by Kant. This moral sense is equipped with an evaluative mechanism, which can distinguish virtue from vice.

From this point of view, one should be ethical because it is in our nature to be so, and by being ethical, we are congruent with our own inner sense. We bring about a holistic match between what we feel and what we do.

Clearly, while there may be some truth in this argument, this leaves altogether too much for an individual to claim that he/she is ethical simply because he/she feels so. While there could be some dissonance between what one feels he/she ought to do and what one actually does, this may be suppressed by defence mechanisms. As such, while we may actually end up being much more ethical by appealing to our moral sense, it may simply fail to work in a large number of cases.

Now let us turn to the characters of Mahabharata and listen to what they have to teach us.

Bhishma

Bhishma is universally regarded by Indians as the *pitamah*, the very repository of dharma. Yet he had to face all the complexities of earthly life he was cursed to lead. He was sort of divine, having been born of Ganga who assumed a human form and had a most unusual boon from his father: *icha-mrityu* or death at will, and at his will only. He was extremely well-versed in arms as well as in other areas of knowledge needed for a king. In short, he was what all of us aspire to be, at least on a moral plane. By no stretch of imagination was he unscrupulous or unethical; yet his actions, often done without adequate reflection, led to disastrous consequences, not only for himself but for others as well.

His ethical dilemmas started when three princesses of Kashi, named Amba, Ambika and Ambalika, were abducted by him for his stepbrother, Vichitravirya. Of these sisters, Amba had already given her heart to a king named Shalva, and this was well-known. So Vichitravirya refused to have her for his wife

and sent her to Shalva who, in turn, would now have nothing to do with her, an abducted woman. Poor Amba came back to Vichitravirya and explained her predicament, but was rebuffed. She then approached Bhishma to marry him. This he would not do due to his earlier having taken a vow of celibacy (in order to enable his father to marry a woman who he was infatuated with, namely, Satyawati).

Bhishma, thus, was confronted with his ethical dilemma: He knew he was solely responsible for Amba's plight, and it was his moral duty to do something to save her. But he was also bound by his vow of celibacy. He chose to leave Amba to her fate.

Bhishma, however, had to pay the price. Amba immolated herself, swearing to return in her next life to avenge herself by being the agent to cause his death. She was later born as Shikandi and was responsible for Bhishma's death.

Bhishma considered his responsibility to choose the brides for Vichitravirya's sons, Dhritrashtra, who was blind from birth, and Pandu, who, though a great warrior, was impotent. He did not reveal both these pieces of information to the brides-to-be: Gandhari for Dhritrashtra and Kunti (and later Madri) for Pandu. Gandhari was especially shocked when she discovered the disability of her to-be-husband and promptly chose to blindfold herself for life. She never saw her husband or her sons. This was done outwardly as the duty of a *pativrata*, one who is totally dedicated to her husband, but was as much an act of spite to show her bitterness. Bhishma does not seem to have been in the least moved by the plight of these three women either.

Bhishma's next test came at the *vastraharan* (disrobing) of Draupadi. His real test was in fact much earlier, when he knew what was going to happen in the game of dice planned by Duryodhana. He could have stopped the game from taking place; he did not even try. When clearly unethical practices were being employed by Shakuni, as anticipated, he could have called a halt to the game; again he did nothing. When Yudishtira was betting his brothers, he did not ask whether he had the right to do so or whether what he was doing was right. Nor did he do anything when Draupadi was put as the wager.

But when Draupadi was dragged into the hall and Karna asked her to be stripped naked, things were clearly going too far. When Draupadi called out to him (and to other elders) for help, he hung his head, but said nothing, did nothing.

His last major dilemma was whether to join the Kauravas or the Pandavas (or to stay neutral). In view of his advanced age, he could have remained neutral, and no one could have taken exception to that. He fully well knew that Duryodhana was going back on the terms under which the Pandavas were sent on exile, and this was leading to a disastrous war. Perhaps he could not have stopped the war, but, employing a curious justification of loyalty to the throne, he not only joined the Kauravas but also was in fact their commander-in-chief. But he fought a reluctant war in which he knew he was on the wrong side. On the tenth day, he told the Pandavas how they could kill him (though they could not kill him) through Shikandi. A curious action on the part of a commander, to say the least. Throughout the 10 days of leadership, there was no definite progress in the war, one way or the other; he was indeed advising Duryodhana constantly to make peace with the Pandavas since he would not be able to win the war.

What does Bhishma's Life Teach Us?

Bhishma wanted to lead a spotless life, determined by clear moral categorical imperatives, but life would not let him. It presented him with tough choices, and he did not come out with flying colours in

any of them. He consistently comes out as a well-meaning but confused person, who was utterly bewildered when confronted with ethical questions. This illustrates the difficulty of applying the principle of categorical imperative in complex situations. Valid but contradictory imperatives present themselves and force us to choose between right and wrong.

In Amba's case, he had a duty to keep his vow of celibacy, but he also had a duty to do something for Amba, whose misery was entirely his creation. What was his duty at this time?

The episode shows the difficulty of being right: What is right in this case? He surely had the duty to uphold the vow based on which along his father could marry Satyawati, and if indeed he married Amba and had children, there could be problems. But having Amba to her fate also was not ethical. Two categorical imperatives confront each other, both equally important. In this process, did he choose *his personal* reputation over the life of Amba? How ethical was that?

Even Kant could not have been able to solve this one, for what were involved were two opposing categorical imperatives. Prioritization is impossible in such a case, but could he have chosen a course of, say, marrying her but leading a platonic life? It might still have been unfair to Amba but at least she could have led an honourable life.

If we see Bhishma's actions from a relativistic point of view, we see that the imperatives he is struggling with all had a context. It was in a context that he made his famous vow. In a different context when the stability and continuance of the kingdom were at stake, as was the basic values of fair play and honour for a woman, he should have examined whether those principles apply in the particular case. He failed to do so. Similarly, even from the humanistic point of view, his failure to inform Gandhari and Kunti about their husbands-to-be, what he did in Draupadi's case or in his choosing to side with the Kauravas fail the test. Lastly, from a consequentialist point of view, the question to be asked was what would lead to the maximum good in the kingdom. His refusing to marry Amba set off a line of events that led to his own death, besides instability in succession. His failure to stop the game of dice led to the usurpation of the kingdom by Duryodhana by deceitful means, paving the way for a devastating war. Indeed, in no case he seems to have asked the question as to what was the best in the interests of the kingdom (as opposed to its incumbent kings and princes), and the consequence was misery for a vast number of people who were dragged into this war.

Ethics is not merely about *knowing what to do, but in doing it*. It involves taking a stand on complex issues. An act of omission could be as unethical as one of commission, and the Draupadi episode highlights this point. Bhishma could not, or rather would not, take a stand when such a despicable act was suggested by Karna, and indeed was initiated by Dushasana. He seems to have been more concerned with the legality of Draupadi's question as to whether Yudhishtira had the right to wager her, since he had already wagered himself and lost, than with the truly important issue as to whether it was right to do such a thing with a woman in this manner. Gurcharan Das seems to give him the benefit of doubt in quoting his famous answer to Draupadi, that Dharma is *sukshma* or subtle (Das, 2010). But this was not of much comfort to Draupadi, nor would it be to us if we were in such a situation and we look forward to the elders and seniors to take a stand for us. The fact remains that Bhishma failed to take a stand, even though he knew that had he taken a stand, it would have been infinitely more difficult for the *vastrahara*n, or indeed the game of dice itself, to proceed.

Again, no one could have really objected if he had chosen not to fight in view of his age. Why did he choose to fight? And having chosen to lead the army, why did he not lead them with all his heart? Does it not show a certain lack of understanding of his duty, and his role, once he had accepted it?

Perhaps Bhishma was ambivalent with regard to his duties all the time. He thought his sworn allegiance to Hastinapura meant his support for whatever action the *incumbent king* would take. In other words, he could not distinguish between the position and the person occupying it. By failing to make this distinction, he achieved proudly the opposite of what he wanted to do: His actions and inactions led to the destruction of Hastinapura and the Kuru clan.

His self-sacrifice was clearly outstanding: He gave up his claim to the kingdom and he swore not to marry. He was content with being a senior courtier in the court of a much younger Pandu, and later, Dhritarashtra. Even though he brought about miseries to both Gandhari and Kunti due to his choice of their husbands, we have to concede that he had no personal motive in any of his actions.

But, as Irvati Karve points out in her book *Yuganta* (Karve, 1974), this sort of complete self-sacrifice also made him unaccountable. His ethics could not now be questioned by anybody except himself. This put a great burden on himself, and was it the case that he became so careful that he was not willing to take a position even when Draupadi was being humiliated or the Pandavas were being cheated out of their rights? Did his omission to take a position on an ethical issue lead to as disastrous consequences as an actual commission of an unethical act?

Bhishma never asked the question why he should be ethical; he was too noble a soul for that. He never was consciously unethical, but was indifferent to the ethical aspects of at least some of his actions. But he simply never understood how to be ethical under conflicting demands. This brings us to the first important lesson: One needs adequate reflection on one's actions before performing them. Once certain actions are performed, they acquire a momentum of their own, and decision on what is ethical becomes progressively more and more difficult. Could a consequentialist line of reasoning justify his actions, as, for example, he did what was needed for the kingdom as a whole, though it might have led to serious difficulties for a few individuals. But even this reasoning fails, for nothing could have been more disastrous than the war that ensued. This highlights the major flaw in the consequentialist approach: It is not possible to foresee the consequences of one's action. Life is too complex for that.

Dhritharashtra

Dhritharashtra was the elder son of Vichitravirya, but because of his having been born blind, he was not considered for inheriting the kingdom, and his younger brother Pandu was crowned the king. This was a sore point with Dhritharashtra throughout his life, and though Pandu died not long after his coronation, and Dhritharashtra sat on the throne, he was never formally crowned the king. As subsequent events showed, he was found seriously wanting in his ability to be a king any way.

It was clear, even when the Kauravas and Pandavas were children, that a succession issue was there, and possibly there would be war between the cousins. The rivalry between Kauravas and Pandavas was common knowledge, and Dhritharashtra, as the king and patriarch, did nothing to encourage or force a reconciliation. Even when Kauravas tried to kill Pandavas on a number of occasions, when they were children, he did nothing; indeed Dhritharashtra was secretly happy when news of any of the Pandavas having been killed arrived, and disappointed when it turned out to be false. Outwardly, he appeared to be impartial between Kauravas and Pandavas, but inwardly he was very partial to his own sons. Indeed, he became so influenced by his sons, especially his eldest son Duryodhana, that he virtually took leave of

all his judgement and acquiesced to all the wishes of his sons and never questioned the right and wrong of any demand from Duryodhana.

It was this inability to exercise the fairness and impartiality (that was expected from a king) and dispense justice that ultimately led to the war and to the destruction of his loved sons. He could never understand what his dharma was as a king and distinguish it from his duties as a father. This was starkly in evidence as when he found (or thought he had found) a solution to the problem of succession, by partitioning the kingdom and giving a useless wasteland edging on forests (named Khandavaprastha) to Pandavas. The Pandavas, through hard work (and guidance from Krishna), built a beautiful capital, which they named Indraprastha, which was the envy of the world. It certainly aroused intense jealousy from Duryodhana.

Dhritarashtra showed outward happiness at this display of enterprise by Pandavas but shared the jealousy of Duryodhana at the new capital. Duryodhana was now hell-bent on getting this newly built kingdom, and, with his uncle Shakuni, devised a plan of inviting Yudhishtira for a game of dice. It was clear that this was not exactly meant to be a friendly game, but some very major deceptions were going to take place and both Bhishma and Vidura advised Dhritarashtra against sending the invitation (which had to go in Dhritarashtra's name only). Dhritarashtra openly expressed his unwillingness to go against the wishes of Duryodhana.

In a court presided by him, Dhritarashtra watched (or rather heard) with secret pleasure when, in round after round, the game was being won by Duryodhana, and Pandavas were losing everything. Cheating was evident but no one said anything. Dhritarashtra, both as the king and as the father of Duryodhana, could have stopped the game, but did not.

Things went out of control when Yudhishtira wagered Draupadi as the sole 'possession' left. Dhritarashtra said and did nothing at this blatant violation of a woman's basic right to be free. Even when Draupadi was being stripped, he said and did nothing. It seemed all his sense of *Rajdharma*, and even plain decency, had left him. When at last he listened to Draupadi's helpless pleadings and called a halt, it was too late, and the three boons offered to Draupadi could not make up for all that had transpired thus far.

Dhritarashtra again went plainly against basic ethics when, at the end of the exile, Pandavas claimed their kingdom. Krishna came as the emissary of Pandavas not so much to enforce the agreement but to negotiate a settlement, and pleaded for giving five villages or even five houses to Pandavas to live in. Duryodhana refused to give them anything, and Dhritarashtra did nothing. War could have been averted at this stage if he had exerted his authority (the kingdom was still his) but he failed to do so.

What Does Dhritarashtra's Life Teach Us?

Unlike Bhishma, Dhritarashtra had full positional power. He had the powers of a king, and also the duties, and the duties as a king ought to have taken precedence over his duties as a father, especially when the son was so plainly jealous, unscrupulous and unfair. This teaches us that when we are in positions of power—as we are in organizations—we should never abjure the duties such a position gives us. Favouritism ultimately exacts its price. It is an ethical imperative to do one's duty.

From the point of view of the categorical imperative, clearly, Dhritarashtra fails the test even at the first stage. His duty as a king was paramount, and it cannot be said that the duty as a father led to a moral

conflict. He in fact knew what he was doing, knew that it was wrong and paid the price. Thus, even from a humanistic point of view, in as much as he failed to listen to his moral sense, he failed in the ethical test.

Nor could he escape under a relativistic veil. Unlike Bhishma, where harsh choices were posed by differing circumstances, Dhritarashtra had no such problem. Nor can his actions be justified from a consequentialist point of view, for from that point of view, the overall welfare of his kingdom should have been his objective function to maximize. Instead, he focused on the limited welfare of his own children, with disastrous consequences.

Dhritarashtra's blindness is as metaphorical as is physical: He was blind to whatever his sons were doing and unwilling to open his eyes. His wife, Gandhari, was not born blind but chose to blind herself throughout her life after she discovered that she was deceived into marrying a blind person. Again, metaphorically, she could have chosen to open her blindfold and see what was going on, but refused to do so. She chose to continue to be blind. She opened her blindfold only twice: once to look at a naked Duryodhana to make his body invincible through her yogic powers (she failed partially but decisively because Duryodhana had covered himself from hip to knees, making his thighs vulnerable), and the second time, this time for good, when they were in the mountains in their last days. She looked at her own husband and Kunti for the first time—and it was then too late. She also failed in her duties as a Queen, and looked at herself only as a mother. Though, stuck with grief, she told Krishna at the end of the war that he could have stopped the war if he wanted to, the fact is that it was she and her husband who could have stopped the war if they wanted to. They did not want to because they thought their children would surely win the war. A consequentialist perspective at least could have helped them to see the ethical implications of what they were doing.

Lastly, Dhritarashtra's life teaches us that one cannot get a perspective on ethics by being scholarly. Dhritarashtra was a great scholar, and could perfectly understand what was right and what was wrong. Ethics is really a matter of practice and though one could broaden one's perspectives through reading and discussions, ultimately one has to put them all into practice.

Karna

Of all the complex characters in Mahabharata, Karna is one of the most complex of them all. He is at once a highly principled and generous person, and also one who throws away his principles all too easily and can be very petty and mean.

Life deprived Karna of a lot: He was cast away by his mother, Kunti, to whom he was born before her marriage. He is thus deprived of his Kshatriyahood, and grows up in a Suta family, whose duty it was to drive the chariots and look after the horses. He is not interested in doing these duties; he is more enthused by the skills of weaponry. This he does not get by his virtue of his not being a Kshatriya, and Drona rejects him as his pupil. Undeterred, he acquires a great deal of skills on his own, and under Parasurama under false pretences, only to be discovered and cursed that he would not be able to use his special skills when he needs them.

He walks, uninvited, into a demonstration of skills by Kauravas and Pandavas on completion of their education, and not only demonstrates his skills (which he is allowed to do) but also challenges Arjuna to a duel to death. On being asked his identity (princes do not fight with anyone other than princes), he feels

humiliated, and on being rescued by Duryodhana being given a kingdom (which he never seems to visit even once), he swears eternal friendship to Duryodhana. This becomes his ethical albatross, for he now is a part of all the nefarious plans devised by Duryodhana.

Again he gatecrashes into the *swayamvara* (choice of a husband by the bride herself) of Draupadi uninvited, and feels humiliated when Draupadi wants to know who this person whom she might have to marry is. He nurses a bitter grudge against Draupadi for this episode, and he is the one who suggests disrobing of Draupadi after the game of dice is over and she is dragged into the hall by her hair. There was no need for Karna to suggest what to do with Draupadi who was won by Kauravas, albeit using unfair means. He shows his pettiness and meanness on more than one occasion when he makes different remarks about Pandavas at different times and is a part of the Duryodhana–Shakuni machinations and intrigues.

Even his sworn allegiance to Duryodhana he forsakes when Duryodhana enters into a forest inhabited by Gandharvas and is bound hand and foot to a tree. Karna runs away from the scene rather than helping his friend. Although he might have seemed generous when he gifted his *kavach* and *kundal* to Indra who came disguised as a Brahmin, in the process he weakened his friend's side hugely by making himself vulnerable.

If Karna had only the above traits in his character, he would have been one of the most obnoxious, instead of one of the most fascinating, and even attractive personalities in Mahabharata. The two traits that stand out are his steadfast faithfulness to Duryodhana and his generosity in giving gifts to those who come supplicating for them. Unfortunately, he sees these two as the *only* categorical imperatives he needs to concern himself with in his life.

By doing so, Karna reduces life to a simple set of rules and fails to look deeper into the complexities of his decisions. He is rarely confronted with a defining moment, but his truly defining moment, and undoubtedly his finest hour, undoubtedly comes at the end, when just before the war is due to start, he is approached by his true mother, Kunti. Krishna had, just prior to this encounter, told him who his real parents were (Kunti and Surya, the Sun God), but his encounter with Kunti is special. At last his mother and he are face-to-face, and a lifetime of search for his identity, of his search for his parents, is at last over. Kunti not only tells him who he is and the circumstances in which she had to abandon him but also entreats him to desert Duryodhana and join the Pandavas. She offers him not only the kingdom but also Draupadi, to whom he will be the sixth husband (needless to say, Kunti did not consult Draupadi on this new proposal). To his credit, Karna says he would prefer to be now Radheya (his foster mother Radha's son) rather than Kaunteya. He would not ditch his friend at his supreme hour of need.

He certainly gives his gifts (*dana*) to whomever approached him, and the best example, of course, is his gifting his *kavach* and *kundal*. In response to the entreaties of Kunti, he does not let her go empty handed; he promises not to kill any of the Pandavas except Arjuna, so that she could have five sons, whether he lives or not. But in this process, Karna has inflicted a great damage to Duryodhana, his great friend: During the war, though he has the opportunity to kill Bhima (who later on killed Duryodhana) and Yudhishtira himself (which would have ended the war then and there), he let both of them go.

What Does Karna's Life Teach Us?

Karna's life was spent on answering the question, 'Who am I?', that is, searching for his identity. He did not know whether he was a Kshatriya, but he spent his life as if he was one. But he was never accepted

in the Kshatriya society, even by his great friend Duryodhana. Karna could neither imbibe the value systems of Kshatriyas nor the Sutas, and indeed could not develop them himself. He thus emerges as a confused person, sometimes a great person to be admired and sometimes almost contemptible in his behaviour.

Character is built through being in a society, imbibing the values and by developing one's character through a process of reflection and refinement. Karna never got a chance. He was a Suta in a Kshatriya society, and though he spent so much time in the court of Duryodhana, he could never understand the values of a Kshatriya. Remarkably, though Draupadi was dragged into the court on the orders of Duryodhana, the idea of disrobing her did not occur to any of the Kauravas. It occurred only to Karna. In addition, he called her a slut, having five keepers in the open assembly. It seems that not having a sound value system can plunge even an otherwise noble person into the depths of meanness and indecency when he/she suddenly confronts a major ethical challenge. When faced with the demands of contradictory categorical imperatives, Karna resorts to the simple device of going by two core ones. Nothing wrong in that, but he fails to grasp the larger havoc this brings in, not only on others but on himself. His basic humanistic system of values, at crucial moments, gives way to a narrower set of considerations based on avenging of insults.

He is also unable to take a consequentialistic view of his actions. He fails to see the larger implications his positions have on the society, on the kingdom and even on his own friends. He rarely pauses even to think about such matters.

Everyone has to confront what Badaracco calls 'defining moments'. They present tough choices and challenge a person to show his/her true character. The character of a person is developed through learning from experiences, to build then into future ready-made criteria when a broadly similar situation presents itself. Karna, being in the constant company of the unscrupulous and jealous Kauravas and the devious Sakuni, could never rise above the level of these minds and find his true, perhaps noble, self.

Karna's life also presents us with the unrelenting choices life presents: The choices are stark. Friendship to a person who helped you in distress and to whom you have sworn eternal friendship is good, but one has to draw a fine line when this duty ends and other, superior duties begin. Ethics is never about one duty done or not done, it is about conflicting duties. Karna could perhaps have retained his friendship with Duryodhana without actively getting involved in the clearly contemptible actions of Duryodhana and his brothers. But Karna seems to have defined his dharma as endorsing and actively participating in every misdeed of his friend, just as Bhishma defined his dharma as blind allegiance to the crown. One needs to see, not what is right or wrong, but, in the given sets of choices, none of which may be clearly right or clearly wrong, what is the more acceptable alternative. For this, one needs depth and strength of character, which Karna was found wanting.

Krishna

From an ethical point of view (as well as from many other points of view), Krishna undoubtedly is the most complex character in Mahabharata to understand and analyze. He is not the *maryada purushotham* that Ram is, nor can he be bracketed with the unscrupulous Sakuni. He has codes, and generally observes them, but he also breaks them when necessary. He has many facets, which entitles him to be called the

poornavataar, the complete incarnation. He lives life in full, with all its contradictions, making no efforts to make golden rules or categorical imperatives. He highlights the complexity of human life and ethics.

Krishna is not, in any way, a beneficiary of the succession issue between Kauravas and Pandavas. Yet he is central to Mahabharata, not just because of his discourse of Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna, but is a major influencer of many critical incidents. Nothing seems to happen without him being involved in some way. He is the nephew of Kunti, and is definitely partial to Pandavas, especially to Arjuna and Draupadi, to whom he is a *sakha* (literally a friend, but more like a constant and intimate companion). It is to him, rather than to her husbands, that Draupadi reveals her innermost thoughts, joys, sorrows and frustrations. He is the one who, through his divine powers, saves Draupadi from complete humiliation, not her husbands (who are in fact the ones who put her in such a situation in the first place). Though he is a guest at the *Rajasooya yagna* of Yudhishtira and is indeed chosen as the most honoured one, he does not hesitate to kill Sisupala, another guest whose insults went way beyond the norms of decency. He is sent as an emissary of peace, to try to broker a settlement and avert the war, and he does this with the utmost sincerity. But when it is clear that his efforts were not leading anywhere, he accepts the need for a devastating war. For him, it is not so much a war of succession, as a way to install a new ethical society, a sort of creative destruction. In the war, it is the unarmed Krishna, driving the chariot of Arjuna, who is the master strategist, and through some fair and some unfair means, is responsible for the outcome of the war itself. He does not hesitate to use dubious means to eliminate the most formidable warriors: Bhishma, Drona, Karna and Duryodhana himself; he even breaks his vow of not taking up arms, not once, but twice during the battle. Yet he never steps outside certain limits. He is very clear on achieving his objectives, but he also defines the lines within which he will operate.

What Krishna Has to Teach Us

From an ethics point of view, Krishna seems to tell us that ethics is indeed subtle. He is not bound by any categorical imperatives; he knows that one can never reduce ethics to a set of inflexible categorical imperatives; he takes such action as is warranted by the situation. But he knows that pure ethical relativism is not the answer either. The key is to find the right balance, and this balance one has to discover for oneself, and they are to be applied depending on the situation. No two situations are the same, and the application of ethical standards also needs to vary from situation to situation. He never explains the rationale of his actions, indeed there are no intellectual rationale possible in such situations.

He is a consequentialist and a pragmatist. However, he is also guided by the sense of justice that consequentialism fails to do. His view of consequentialism is also a long term one, as to what kind of society is to be built.

No matter how hard one tries to be ethical, ethical dilemmas are such that they leave one open to criticism and charges of unethical conduct. But the conduct does need to have some broad endorsement from society; one cannot be the *l'etranger* (stranger) of Albert Camus and live in a world of one's own standards. When he was felled and dying, Duryodhana mockingly asked Krishna how, as the professed advocate of dharma, he resorted to *adharmic* means in eliminating everyone of the crucial warriors. Krishna replied simply that he could not have won the war otherwise. The broader context of the war subsumed the compromises to be made at certain times of execution. When, after the war was over, Krishna and the

Pandavas went to Gandhari and Dhritharashtra, Gandhari accused Krishna of deliberately letting the war begin, though he could have prevented it and cursed him. This was clearly an unfair charge, but he took her accusation and the curse stoically. For him the war was a necessity to achieve larger goals.

Krishna's life also teaches us that ethics may not be for satisfying others; it may be more for doing what one genuinely considers right and not worrying about the outcomes. The phrase *nishkama karma*, action without attachment to the fruits of the action, is sometimes interpreted to mean taking action without bothering about the consequences. This is a misinterpretation. Krishna considered the consequences of his actions carefully. What the phrase tells us is to abandon *attachment* to the fruits of one's action. The truly ethical person realizes how little of the consequences that actually ensue are within his control, and beyond surmising the consequences to the extent he can, leaves the rest to happen, to unfold themselves. Having satisfied himself that what he is doing is right *under the circumstances*, Krishna is not moved by subsequent criticism or praise; he is the truly stoic yogi.

Conclusion

Mahabharata shows the limitations of trying to analyze the complex situational ethics of life through a set of theories. None of the theories we outlined in the beginning of this article are really useful to tell us what to do. At the most, they *explain* and help us to evaluate some actions, and even this, only partially. What is more important is to arrive at one's own judgment on what is ethical and what is not.

Mahabharata drives home the existentialist approach to life. In such an approach, it is futile to label an action simply as ethical or unethical, or even provide a grading on its ethical position. Ethics, it argues, is not for convincing anyone; it is about convincing oneself. Coming back to the question we posed at the beginning of this article, namely, 'Why should I be ethical?', Mahabharata's answer is: ethics is what makes life meaningful, at the individual level, group level and at the level of society. James March had observed in one of his lectures at Stanford:

The character of Don Quixote reminds us that if we trust only when trust is warranted, love only when love is returned, learn only when learning is valuable, we abandon an essential feature of our humanness: our willingness to act in the name of conception of ourselves regardless of its consequences. (March, 1996)

A similar statement can be made about ethics: If we act ethically only if it pays, then we lose an essential part of our humanness, what distinguishes us from animals. We can think and reflect on whether what we are doing is ethical. Animals cannot do that. Ethics cannot be pursued for the mere consequences. Life may appear futile and meaningless, but it has a meaning: to force one to find *his/her own* meaning. It is futile to ask life what its meaning is; instead, life turns around and asks you what meaning you can find in it. Thus, the ethical stance taken by Mahabharata is stern and unrelenting: you have to find your own ethical stance yourself, and then take that stand. You need to find *your own* sense of values, *your* direction and *your* moral compass. You cannot get it from *shastras* (scriptures) or books; they might help you to think, but the thinking has to be done yourself. Divine intervention is not the rule but the exception in Mahabharata: Its characters, including Krishna, struggle to find meaning in their own lives, find the right course of action, realize that there is no one clear right action and have to necessarily face the consequences. Life is relentless in its punishment: All the characters in Mahabharata pay the full price

for their actions and inactions, including Krishna. While life is what you make of it, yet ethics is not what you define it as; it emphasizes that there *are* ethical and unethical courses in life, and you have to find them.

Finding them involves finding the answer to the question, ‘Who am I?’ One needs to know oneself. Karna spent his entire life in trying to get an answer to the question, who he was. In this process, his moral compass got confused, and he could not see the larger issues in life. When he did get the answer to the question he was pursuing all his life, the answer was utterly useless and futile, as it was destined to be from the beginning. Dhritarashtra could never figure out who he was, a king or a father, and could never distinguish between these roles. The result was not only the horrible war but also the loss of his progeny, whom he supported all his life, through his actions that were decidedly unethical. Bhishma again could never understand what he was, what stand he should take and could neither prevent the war nor take it to its conclusion.

This points to the need that knowing the self is the key to establishing a clear and stable value system. Such a process of development of one’s self is the result of reflection, improvement and refinement. But in the ultimate analysis, Mahabharata tells us, you are alone, and all your decisions are yours alone. The only reason to teach or discuss ethics is not to show what is *the right* action, but help one to find *your own right* action. That is why, as Hildebeitel (2001) tells us in his book, *Rethinking the Mahabharata: A Reader’s Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*, that understanding ethics is a continuing and never ending education, and not a destination, and our duty regarding being ethical is to make sure we continue in this journey.

Note

1. For the story on Parasurama, visit the following link: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jamadagni>

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