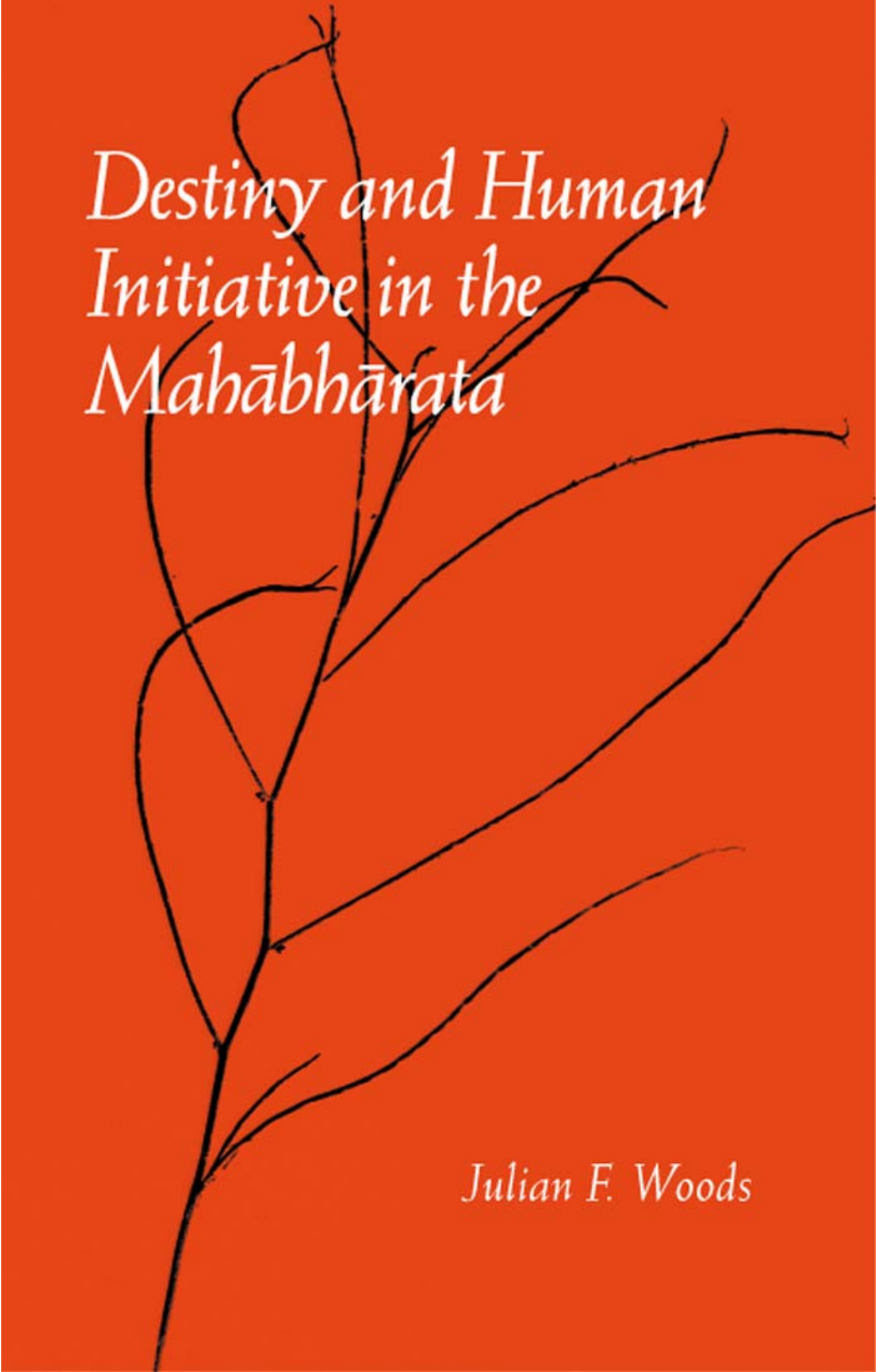
Destiny and Human Initiative in the Mahābhārata



Julian F. Woods

Destiny and Human Initiative in the Mahābhārata

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Preface

The Mahābhārata (or "Great [War between] the descendants of Bharata") has probably had a greater impact on the mind of India than any other religious or philosophical text. It appears to have been composed, in metrical stanzas designed to be recited or sung, sometime between the fourth century B.C. and the fourth century A.D.[1] The prevailing view is that the poem passed through the three stages of:

1. oral composition and recital;
2. written compilation by a group or school of priestly savants, or even by a single poetic genius;
3. final stage of transmission involving supplementary accretion and interpolation by different hands.

However, the details of this process will likely never be known.[2] What comes down to us, however, is a remarkable compendium of ancient lore, containing all manner of mythical, legendary, didactic, and folkloric material—including an abridged version of the Rāmāyaṇa (the second great Indian epic) and, of course, the famous Bhagavadgītā or "Song of the Lord."[3] The modern "Critical Edition" used here is based on a review of over one thousand manuscripts, mostly written in Sanskrit, a language belonging to the Indo-European linguistic group. It is viewed by the editors as "a modest attempt to present a version of the epic as old as the extant manuscript material will permit us to reach with some semblance of confidence."[4]

Although the work clearly has affinities with European epics and sagas as Georges Dumézil and others have shown, it also differs from them in a number of respects.[5] It differs, firstly, in terms of sheer size. The various texts consulted contain up to two hundred thousand lines of verse, longer than all of the extant European epics combined—eight times as long as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* put together. It differs too in its encyclopedic scope. In an oft-quoted verse the poem itself claims that "whatever is here of dharma (rules of human conduct), *artha* (material prosperity), *kāma* (sensual enjoyment), and *mokṣa* (liberation, that is,

from bondage to the other three of life's goals) may be found elsewhere. But what is not here is nowhere else" (I.56.33 and XVIII.5.38).

However, perhaps the most significant difference with respect to Western epics is the continuing allegiance the poem commands to this day as the most popular and influential of the canons of modern Hinduism. It is regarded, and indeed regards itself, as one of the *saṃhitas* (collections) associated with the four Vedas, in effect a "fifth Veda" (I.1.19).[6]

The purpose and function of the text is clearly designed to be more than exemplary or even didactic; the intent is therapeutic in seeking to prompt the mind to a greater awareness of spiritual truths, and ultimately, to lead it to the joy that springs from the presence of God.[7] As readers-listeners we are challenged to change ourselves through confrontation with the "names and forms" of the world *(nāmarūpa* in Sanskrit), the kaleidoscopic panorama of life itself, viewed through the allegories and images of the poet. This method of fostering spiritual insight and emotional calm and control, leading to liberation or freedom *(mokṣa),* is taken for granted by subsequent commentators.[8]

No English translation can do justice to the original Sanskrit, owing to the great cultural distance separating classical Indian thinking on these matters from our modern notions of autonomy, self-determination—and "freedom of will." I have therefore inserted in parentheses the more important Sanskrit terms behind the relevant English text, and have appended a "Glossary of Sanskrit Terms" to further assist the inquiring reader. Sanskrit words are highlighted in italics, and are capitalized when they appear at the beginning of an English sentence or constitute a proper name (including the personified forms of Dharma, Kāla, and the goddess Earth). However, terms already in common English usage such as karma, Yoga, and dharma, are given without italicization when they appear alone within, or in conjunction with, an English sentence. English terms for the Divinity in His Supreme aspect (referred to by the masculine He, His, etc.) are also capitalized in contrast to the lower forms of the divinity such as the divine incarnation (avatar).

When given without a prefix, reference numbers point to the volume, chapter, and verse numbers of the nineteen-volume Sanskrit Critical Edition published by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Poona.[9] Bhagavadgītā sources include both the reference to the Critical Edition and to the better-known chapter numbers of this famous dialogue. The occasional reference to other Sanskrit sources is prefaced by the name of the source text, the only exceptions being the Gītā commentaries by Śaṃkara (SBG) and Rāmānuja (RBG), respectively. I would also like to direct the reader to the "Glossary of Proper Names," which

is designed to clarify the identities and relationships of the various characters mentioned in what follows.

Translation from Sanskrit into English was much facilitated by the well-respected translation of the Sanskrit Critical Edition by J. A. B. van Buitenen (unfortunately only the first five books and the Bhagavadgītā).[10] Text within square brackets has been added in some instances to improve clarity or readability or to add a comment. Translation from French and German secondary sources is entirely my own unless otherwise stated. Of course I bear full responsibility for any weaknesses that remain with regard to the translations and other matters.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the encouragement and assistance of Dr. Katherine Young of the Faculty of Religious Studies of McGill University. In fact, were it not for her continual urging, this endeavor would have been stillborn. Her own *puruṣakāra* has been truly remarkable. I am also greatly indebted to Dr. Jan Brzezinski who assisted in checking the translations. My sincere thanks must also go to the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute for their financial support during my sojourn in India, and to all the fine scholars and librarians at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune, in particular to Prof. P. G. Lalye, formerly professor and head of the Sanskrit Department, Osmania University, Hyderabad, India. Finally, I would like to thank my wife Jutta for her patience and long-suffering through days of semiseclusion, punctuated by long and passionate discussions on the different aspects of this enterprise. I am eternally grateful that she was able to stay the course.

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1

Introduction

The Theme in Historical Perspective

The history of philosophical and religious speculation about the vicissitudes of human life is characterized by two principal lines of thought. There is the more optimistic view that men and women, though dwarfed by the immensities of the Cosmos, nevertheless have what it takes to change society and themselves, and to "conquer Nature." The opposite, and more pessimistic, view is that human beings are forever the victims of circumstances beyond their control, hostages to an implacable and irrevocable fate.

These two positions, or rather attitudes to life, are seen in the writings of both the West and the East. In classical Greece, Plato saw clearly how most of us are lost in the shadows of our own prejudices and passions *(ekasia)*. He nevertheless believed that the human soul can escape this unhappy condition through an epistemological ascent to the vision of the Good: "the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful, . . . the authentic source of truth and reason."[1] Contrast this to the world of fifth-century tragedy, as Clytemnestra stands over her murdered husband and the chorus chants: "Alas, it is the will of Zeus, Who caused and brought it all to pass. Nothing is here but was decreed in heaven."[2] Christianity retains the eschatalogical hope, albeit with a sense of impotence in the face of the power and glory of God,[3] or of one's ultimate demise without the saving Grace of Jesus Christ.[4]

In India, too, these two traditions have a venerable antiquity. In the early Ṛgvedic hymns, human beings are largely subservient to the whims of the gods, who are praised for the favors they bestow in exchange for the sacrifice *(yajña)*. This attitude is also evident in the expiatory sacrifices designed to mollify the wrath of the god Varuṇa, or to remove

guilt, often expressed as some kind of defilement or disease. This humble dependence on the gods changes dramatically, however, when the priests gain control of the gods by their knowledge of the ritual. A new sense of power thus emerges in the Brāhmaṇas, reinforced, in part, by a magical tradition that received orthodox approval in the Atharvaveda.[5]

Dramatic as these changes were, the new ritual knowledge still left the human agent at the mercy, as it were, of external forces. The secret of the cosmic power had passed into human hands, but only to a priestly caste *(varṇa),* not to the average man or woman. The desires *(kāma)* themselves are one's own, but they are fulfilled not directly, but mediately through an esoteric knowledge of the general order of the world over which one would otherwise have little or no control. Private actions would appear vain, impotent, or even illusory when set against the inexorable tide of events. Although accountable for what one does, there would be little to inspire confidence in one's inherent abilities to shape one's own destiny. Lacking is the depth and coherence of inner life that would point to the existence of an autonomous, self-directing center of willing and doing; what we would call a "person."

Such a situation does little justice to the creative potential within human nature itself, which lends dignity and uniqueness to the individual person, and hardly provides an adequate explanation for moral responsibility and human conduct in general. To the extent that one attributes one's actions to external agencies, one is determined by them, and thereby diminished. To the extent that one attributes these same actions to oneself, one is at least potentially free to choose one's own ends, to be called to account for what one does, and to accept some responsibility for the conditions of one's own life.

In ancient Greece, a similar clash of ideals gave rise to the tragic situation of the hero who faces an impasse *(aporia)* demanding an agonizing choice on which his entire fate depends. He is never actually free to choose between these two possibilities—only to recognize the tragic path he has to take, and, in so doing, to understand the purpose of his life. This conflict was never pushed to such extremes in classical India, but the human agent nevertheless remained suspended, as it were, between the external forces that bear down upon him and a margin of free choice that finds its latest and most developed expression in the moral causality of karma, the doctrine that the conditions of life are the inevitable fruit of past behavior, whether in this or in some previous life. The natural corollary of this more human centered view is that humanity is capable of determining the shape of its future all by itself, without the need to propitiate the gods—or the sacrificial experts among the Brahmin priests. This opens the way for the individual human subject to

become the center and source for his or her own self-development as a spiritual being.

The first textual evidence of a movement in this direction was the appropriation, by Varuṇa, of the role of dispenser of divine justice (for example, Ṛgveda I.24.9). Other gods subsequently assumed this function. This line of development eventually led to the idea of the Divine Grace of Viṣṇu or Śiva as a reward for the conduct of the devotee. The conflict was never completely resolved, but as a general rule, we find that the ascetic (and generally more orthodox) traditions lean toward the goal of individual self-mastery through self-knowledge, while for the devotional cults, justice is often meted out by the Supreme Divinity according to the karma of the devotee. The karma doctrine eventually gained the ascendancy, even in the *bhakti* cults, and "Leaving out the rank materialists who are very few and far between, the entire structure of Indian culture from one end of the country to the other is dominated by the ideology associated with the doctrine of karma."[6]

The Mahābhārata is an ideal sourcebook from which to study human agency and conduct in the Indian context. Here, in fact, is an entire gamut of ideas on the subject from those reminiscent of the early Vedas to the role of divine Grace and the mature doctrines of karma. The earlier notions are echoed in the attribution of all power to the gods. Indra is credited with assigning "to all beings their strength, glory *(tejas),* offspring, and happiness. When satisfied, the king of the gods distributes all good things. He denies them to evil-doers but grants them to the good (lit. 'those established in virtue')" (III.218.9–10). The favors of the gods are also considered vital for certain purposes; Arjuna must propitiate Indra and Śiva to secure divine weapons; Ambā must perform austerities *(tapas)* to get the support of Śiva for killing Bhīṣma (V.188.7–13). More common is the orthodox Brāhmaṇic perspective of the many passages comparing the Brahmins to the gods (for example, III.197.20; XII.329.13; XIII.129.2). Several passages even describe them as the gods of the very gods—*devānāmapi devatāḥ* (for example, XII.60.41, XIII. 35.21, and XIII.136.16–20). There are hints of a power struggle between the gods and the "forest sages" or *ṛṣi* (XIII.6.25). And the gods are finally reduced to the powers of the senses, which, of course, the yogi must control (for example, XII.120.44; XII.316.16).

E. Washburn Hopkins was the first Western scholar to recognize different strata of ideas in the Indian epic literature by contrasting the karma theory with one in which "man owes what he gets, not to his anterior self, but to the gods. What the gods arrange is, in any case, whether good or bad, the appointed lot; the "arrangement," *viddhi,* is fate. If the gods bestow a "share," *bhaga,* of good upon a man, that

is his *bhāgya,* "luck, divinely appointed," *diṣṭa*. As divine, the cause is *Daiva,* which later becomes fate, and is then looked upon as a blind power, necessity, chance, *haṭha*."[7]

Focus of the Analysis

These terms and ideas are of particular interest since they lead directly to the focus of the present work, which seeks to explore the powers and possibilities of human action in the Mahābhārata. Attention is directed not only to the act itself but to the motive (or "desire") behind it, and to its potential effects on the actor and on the world. The issue constituted a major philosophical conundrum prompting lively debate at numerous points in the epic. Modern discussion on this topic would likely be framed in terms of Destiny and "Free Will." However, it becomes increasingly evident as the story unfolds that the actions of the protagonists have little in common with our modern sense of either "will" or "freedom." Not only has the Sanskrit language no direct counterpart for "will"; the "freedom" involved is not of any function or faculty of the ego (such as a "will"), but of the human spirit—a very different matter. Epic freedom (or *mokṣa*) points beyond what we might recognize as the human "person" to a freeing of the bonds that bind that person to the things and beings of the world itself. The word most commonly employed to describe a motivated action in these epic debates is *puruṣakāra* (lit. "that which is done by a human being"), a term that is more akin to our concept of "human initiative" than to Free Will as such—hence its choice in our title. It is generally matched against the opposing forces of *Daiva* ("that which comes from the gods"), a term we may roughly translate as "Destiny."[8]

On the one hand, human life and the course of history are seen by many epic characters as governed exclusively by *Daiva* (and the other external forces noted by Hopkins), or by *svabhāva,* a term that suggests something inherent *(sva)* in the nature *(bhāva)* of a thing that makes it act as it does. "Human effort" or *puruṣakāra* is inconsequential, ephemeral, or even futile in the face of the overwhelming tide of events, whether these are the result of sociopolitical conditions, or natural forces beyond the power of the individual to change. Such a position is exemplified by the blind king Dhṛtarāṣṭra, so much so that Georges Dumézil, for example, takes him to be "the very image, if not the incarnation of Destiny, Bhaga."[9] All the king can do is to see in his thoughts the destruction of the Kurus: "This, I think, is the law of the course of time *(kāla)* that goes on for ever: all are fixed to the wheel like its rim; there is no escaping its effects" (V.50.58). Many other characters in the

epic speak in the same vein in their troubled moments or when they feel powerless against overwhelming odds. However, Dhṛtarāṣṭra not only expresses these sentiments; he is overwhelmed by them to the point of actually becoming the chosen instrument of *Daiva*.

And yet, paradoxically, the epic also carries a commanding message that the lives of both individuals and societies may be changed for the better through human initiative *(puruṣakāra)* in accordance with the dharma, the moral order sanctioned by religious tradition. This is, indeed, the teaching that Kṛṣṇa is at pains to convey to Arjuna in the Bhagavadgītā section of Book VI. Kṛṣṇa himself always acts for the welfare of the worlds *(lokasaṃgraha)* and he urges Arjuna to do the same. Action not only can but *must* be taken in fulfillment of one's dharma. Arjuna must "get up and fight!" And he is finally urged to make up his own mind about what he should do (VI.40/BG.18.63).

Such encouragement and sanction by the Lord himself suggests that this more positive outlook is not the exuberance of youth or the ignorance of the blind but is justified by the very conditions of existence. However, there is little consensus on the degree to which human initiative *(puruṣakāra)* can change or stem events that unfold as if governed by a greater divine force with a will of its own. Moreover—and this will also claim our attention, there is still some question as to whether the work of the human agent flows from a truly personal decision in the first place. This creates a constant tension between the two opposed poles.

The most revealing summary of the prevailing state of learned opinion on this score is provided by Vyāsa himself, the reputed author of the text, when he states that

> Some authorities in the science of action point to human initiative *(puruṣakāra)* [as the cause of events]. However, other learned scholars say [that it is a matter of] destiny *(Daiva),* [while] the materialists [say that] nature *(svabhāva)* [is responsible]. But yet others [maintain that] human initiative, action (karma) and destiny are [nothing but] the naturally-occurring product of [previous] mental states. These three [factors] are inseparable, without distinction. [It is argued] "it is like that: it is not like that" how the world comes into being.[10]

This clash of view is somewhat disconcerting at first sight. Vyāsa, however, immediately follows with the assurance that "[It is only] 'those who take their stand in action' *(karmastha)* [who] are of differing opinions (*viṣama* = not uniform [that is, in their opinions]). 'Those who take their stand in the truth' *(sattvastha)* look upon all things with an equal eye *(samadarśin)*."[11]

This brings us to another radical opposition that occurs throughout the epic, and indeed through all great works of Indian literature, namely, the contrast that is often drawn between the confusions of ordinary men and women and the truths entertained by the person of wisdom who is able to reconcile all opposites in a unitary vision. As V. S. Sukthankar has noted, this literature is "infused with the idea of penetrating behind the phenomena to the core of things, and they represent but so many pulsating reflexes of one and the same central impulse toward seeing unity in diversity, toward achieving one gigantic all-embracing synthesis."[12] What the real truth is, in this case, is not given directly in the quotation just cited. However, it offers the suggestion that the differences therein expressed are perhaps not mutually exclusive, but point to an underlying vision of human nature, action, and purpose, accessible only to "those who take their stand in the truth" *(sattvastha)*.

Reconciliation of these two views can thus serve as a goad in our attempt to determine the respective roles of these powers, their relationship to classical Indian beliefs about karma, and their implications with respect to self-determination and human freedom. It becomes increasingly clear as we proceed, however, that this can be done only in the context of the epic's unique concepts of human nature, and in taking account of that very special "final" freedom known as *mokṣa*. For, as the Bhagavadgītā suggests to us, this "final freedom" is not possible without a quantum shift in self-identity in which the human ego, together with its sense of agency, is "sacrificed" in favor of a larger system of identity, described in the Bhagavadgītā as "the self of the self of all beings." In the last analysis, therefore, *puruṣakāra,* based on ideas of "I" and "mine," is fated to dissolve with the dissolution of the ego, to be replaced by devotion to the higher purposes of the Cosmos. These "higher purposes," or *Daiva,* are represented in the epic by Kṛṣṇa, the incarnation (or avatar) of God who has descended to earth to restore the moral order (dharma). *Daiva* thus emerges as the driving force behind the cycles of human history and society, and indeed of the Cosmos as a whole. It is experienced in our own lives as the various obstacles that hinder the fulfillment of "desire" *(kāma)*. And in terms of the karma theory, it is the inexorable "fate" resulting from the desire-prompted initiatives of the past.

This ubiquitous pressure from above leaves the reader with the feeling that our all-too-human striving for material and spiritual betterment, and for the well-being of society, is ephemeral or somehow unreal. But its value for the epic author(s) is never in doubt. *Puruṣakāra* is universally promoted and prescribed, and is most dramatically exemplified in the person of the king. Without initiative, drive, and the energetic pur-

suit of worthy goals, both the king and his kingdom are lost. On this point the epic is quite clear. The king cannot simply abandon his worldly responsibilities in the manner of a renunciate, but must act in the world with the right attitude. This means giving up all thought of personal gain in the interests of the welfare of the community, something that can only be done by cultivating a spirit of detatchment and devotion to Kṛṣṇa. In this manner, all human behavior, including the inhuman violence and "sacrifice" of the battlefield, may be transformed into a new devotional path leading to the ultimate "freedom" of *mokṣa*. What appears as a dissonance between *Daiva* and *puruṣakāra* may thus be more conceptual than real. The real conflict, if there is one, is between the two distinct visions of human existence in which these notions find their place. These are represented, in the language of the epic, by "those who take their stand in action," and by "those who take their stand in the truth" respectively; the truth that the ego and its sense of agency is ultimately a mental fiction—a case of mistaken identity.

In order to illustrate how "those who take their stand in the truth" of things *(sattvastha)* are able to reconcile the conceptual inconsistencies experienced by us ordinary mortals (that is, the *karmastha*), we must clarify the levels of meaning bound up with these notions of *Daiva* and *puruṣakāra*. How far do they penetrate to the very roots of human action itself? Does the initiative come only from the human agent or from both within and without, the same character appearing now as agent, source, and efficient cause of action *(puruṣakāra),* and now as acted upon, engulfed in a force from beyond that sweeps all before it *(Daiva)?* Or does this divine causality only come into play once the human action has been initiated, to block, counter, or divert its effects? In short, how do the lives of the human protagonists fit into the activities of higher beings on higher planes? If human beings are moved by a higher design like a machine *(yantra)*—as suggested by Kṛṣṇa in VI.40/BG.18.61, what freedom can they really enjoy to shape their own destinies and those of the societies in which they live?[13]

The Epic Context

The epic context for these ideas is a great fratricidal war between two sets of cousins, the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, for control of the dynastic succession. For the epic, however, this conflict is simply an episode in the perennial battle of the gods and the demons for the control of heaven, temporarily shifted to the Earth where incarnations ("sons" and "daughters") of these same gods and demons are continuing this battle for supremacy. The growing ascendency of the demon hordes is marked

here below by the gradual moral entropy of human society. This situation can only be reversed by the Creator Himself (since evil at this level is invariably more powerful than good), who engineers a renewal of society through the complete destruction of the old order. The human battle lines are drawn between the hundred sons of the blind King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the eldest of whom is Duryodhana, and the five sons of Pāṇḍu (of whom Arjuna is the main actor). Kṛṣṇa, the incarnation of the highest Divinity, acts as Arjuna's friend and charioteer, though nominally remaining neutral in the conflict. The battle itself may be interpreted as a fitting metaphor for the human struggle "on the field of dharma" between a lower nature and a higher nature acting as a proxy for the spirit (Kṛṣṇa) who takes no part in the action. To what extent the story is purely symbolic, or is based on the facts of history, must remain a moot point.

Clearly, a thematic analysis such as this is only possible if the epic can be read as a synthetic whole (rather than as a haphazard assemblage of disparate materials). This has long been a major bone of contention among Western scholars. But here is not the time or place to enter into the fine points of this continuing controversy. However, I will clarify my own position at the outset by saying that I incline to the view that, while there are clearly all manner of accretions to the core elements of the plot, the epic does, in fact, constitute a *symbolic* whole. By this I mean that doctrinal or sectarian differences do not obscure what amounts to a common vision of the human journey and of the purpose of this life on Earth, presented in a mythological key. This will emerge as we proceed, and will be given concrete expression in chapter 9. I find myself in substantial agreement with Madeleine Biardeau in this regard. The interested reader will find a more complete exposé of scholarly attitudes on the integrity of the epic in the Appendix.

2

Hermeneutical Perspectives

A work as vast as the Mahābhārata may be read in a variety of ways, and this chapter will introduce the views of certain major commentators that have guided our own reading of the poem. Most of the traditional Indian commentators lean toward a particular philosophical position, and we will be mentioning at least two of these in due course to highlight different aspects of our chosen theme. The story as a whole lends itself to interpretation on a number of levels. A good example of the traditional Hindu view is that of Madhva (a well-known thirteenth-century religious figure), who proposes a three-level reading of the poem:

> The meaning of the "Bhārata," in so far as it is a relation of the facts and events with which Śrī Kṛṣṇa and the Pāṇḍavas are connected, is called *āstīkādi* (historical). That interpretation by which we find lessons on virtue, divine love, and other ten qualities, on sacred study and righteous practices, on character and training, on Brahmā and the other gods, is called *manvādi* (religious and moral). Thirdly, the interpretation by which every sentence, word, or syllable, is shown to be the significant name, or to be the declaration of the glories, of the Almighty Ruler of the Universe, is called *auparicara* (transcendental).[1]

A similar three-dimensional interpretation of the Mahābhārata is offered by V. S. Sukthankar, the first editor of the Critical Edition, in a well-known series of four lectures given in 1942. He reads the story on the mundane level as the realistic account of a fierce fratricidal conflict involving the epic characters. He goes on to interpret this war of annihilation on the ethical level as the conflict of dharma and *adharma,* of the principles of good and evil, justice and injustice. At this level the contending parties are incarnations of gods *(devas)* and demons *(asuras)*

and the war ends in the victory of the gods and of dharma. However, beyond these struggles of dharma and *adharma,* Sukthankar also sees a third or "transcendental" level. This is the perennial struggle between our higher and lower natures, a struggle that can only be resolved in our own minds. He captures what he believes is the basic thrust of the epic by contrast with modern science:

> Modern scientists are interested in breaking the Atom, which we are told is a solar system in miniature, in order to release the captive energy for the exploitation of Nature. The Ṛṣis of ancient India were interested in breaking the tangled knot of personality, which is the very cosmos in miniature, in order to release the captive energy for the sublimation of Nature.[2]

Today, there is general agreement that the significance of the text lies in its symbolic rather than in its historical import. In short it has come down to us as "myth" rather than as fact (though probably based on the intellectual and social issues of its own time). And like any good myth, the epic is able

> to function like a perfect prism through which are refracted simultaneously all the possible ways of regarding the problems encountered in the myth. The first level we encounter is the narrative, usually quite a good story, though often with a rather predictable ending. Closely related is the divine level, which concerns mythology as it used to be understood by scholars of the classics: the metaphorical struggles of divine powers and personalities. Above this is the cosmic level of the myth, the expression of universal laws and processes, of metaphysical principles and symbolic truths. And below it, shading off into folklore, is the human level, the search for meaning in human life. Great myths are richly ambiguous and elusive; their truths cannot be filed away into the scholar's neat categories.[3]

Madeleine Biardeau, the well-known French scholar who has spent most of her long career researching the text, goes so far as to claim a "mythical necessity" for the Mahābhārata story, reading the war as a sort of Vedic "sacrifice" of the decadent moral and social order *(adharma)* for the rejuvenation of society and for the establishment of a new path to salvation for the warrior caste (in particular the king). In her view, the seizure of the throne of Hāstinapura by Duryodhana (incarnation of the demon Kali) is simply the culmination of a social malaise originating in the progressive breakdown of the traditional functional relationship between the *Kṣatriyas* and the Brahmins, the two

pillars of epic society. Thus she traces what, in the traditional Indian context, amounts to a progressive reversal of the natural order of things down the generations starting from the reign of Śāṃtanu—whose very name evokes the renunciation of the Brahmin (*śānti* = "peace"), and the Brahmin Parāśara (the destroyer), the father of Vyāsa. We follow her further here, to obtain a taste for the story itself as well as for the symbolic light she sheds on it.

That king Śāṃtanu himself marries a princess (Satyavatī) born from a fish is itself suggestive of disorder (*mātsyanyāya* or "rule of the fish," is the Indian "law of the jungle" where the big fish eat the little fish). Bhīṣma—the *pitāmaha* or (honorary) grandfather, must also bear his share of the responsibility. Though a *Kṣatriya,* he opts for a higher dharma reserved for the Brahmin by renouncing both the throne (that is, *artha*) and his marriage rights *(kāma)*. The result is that he cannot fulfill the duties incumbent upon his royal status, which would have involved marrying the princess Ambā, and providing a legitimate heir to the throne. The responsibility for this is delegated to his Brahmin half brother Vyāsa.[4] The succession is thus defective from the start, and his nephew, king Pāṇḍu, finally abandons his duties to devote himself to the traditional royal vices of lovemaking and the chase, leaving the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra (his half brother) to covet the kingdom in his absence. There follows the extraordinary situation of the generation of the protagonists in which the god Viṣṇu (in the form of Vyāsa, his Brahmin representative) engineers the birth of the demons *(asuras),* while the god Śiva (in the form of the irascible sage Durvāsas) sets the stage for the birth of the gods *(devas)*.

The circumstances leading to the crisis itself are no less irregular. Droṇa, incarnation of the priest of the gods (Bṛhaspati) and mundane representative of the Brāhmaṇic power, is found to be in the service of the demons. Furthermore, he no longer serves as priest but assumes the role of commander in chief of the demon army (on the death of Bhīṣma). This involves a double corruption of dharma. Service on behalf of the demons is substituted for that of the gods, and a Brahmin usurps the functions of the king. As for his son, Aśvatthāman, he embodies the collective venom of Mahādeva (= Śiva), Antaka (death), Kāma (desire), and Krodha (anger) which almost succeeds in foiling the restoration of the dharma symbolized by the resurrection of the dead Parikṣit, the rightful heir to the Pāṇḍava throne. Karṇa too is a strange mixture, being of divine descent (he is illegitimately fathered by Sūrya, the Sun god, on Kuntī, the mother of the Pāṇḍavas) but linked to the demon Naraka. Bhīṣma (Dyaus = "the Heavens") and Vidura (Dharma) are

both captives to the demons. It is evident that the demons have usurped the Brāhmaṇic power to their own advantage, a situation that clearly calls for the intervention of the avatar.

However, since intervention by the avatar inevitably involves destruction on a cosmic scale (or at least on the scale of the three worlds known as the *trailokya*), the Mahābhārata war has been dramatized by the epic author as a cosmic sacrifice analogous to the destruction of the worlds at the "end of the *yuga*" *(yugānta)*. The weapons of war are compared to the fire at the end of a *yuga,* and

> this image is among the most frequent of the whole account. The war is thus a crisis, not only terrestrial, but of the *trailokya,* which suggests the juncture of two *yugas*. We can even say more precisely, between the end of a Kaliyuga and the start of a Kṛtayuga. In fact, since the epic is still a myth, it is not enough to say that the conflict is the image of a *yugānta*. Rather, it is the symbolic transformation, the re-employment of this idea at another level. It is this level, where the *yugas* become asuric princes and the cosmic conflagration becomes war, that defines the epic.[5]

This destruction is represented as a gigantic funeral pyre in which the old order of the world, Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas alike, must perish to give way to a new order established with the assistance of the divine incarnation Kṛṣṇa from the remnant represented by Parikṣit, the perfect monarch embodying the qualities of both Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa.

The question is: what is the significance of this symbolism? In Biardeau's view, it reveals and reflects a sweeping transformation of the ritual values attached to the traditional notion of the Vedic sacrifice. It must be recognized, she says, that the

> victory is not only that of dharma over adharma. The order to be restored is also that taught by Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna at the start of the war in the Bhagavadgītā. Instead of imitating the Brahmin, the *Kṣatriya* should fulfill his royal duties in a spirit of detachment and devotion to Kṛṣṇa, transforming each of his violent actions, beginning with war, into a sacrifice. This is the sense of the year of living incognito prior to the war, corresponding to the period of consecration for the sacrifice: the war being the sacrifice par excellence for the *Kṣatriya* who offers himself as victim with the hope of substituting his enemy for himself.[6]

This leads to the idea that death in battle—the sacrifice of the self *(ātmayajña)* on the battlefield—is the appropriate sacrifice for the *Kṣatriya*. His bow is his sacrificial stake, his bowstring the cord for tying the victims, his shafts are the small ladle, and his sword the large one.

His chariot is the altar and the blood he pours on the battlefield is the clarified butter. His wrath is the fire of the sacrifice and the four steeds yoked to his vehicle are the four sacrificial priests *(hotrī)*. After pouring his own life-breath *(prāṇa)* and that of his foes as libations upon the sacrificial fire of the battlefield, he becomes freed from sin, and secures a place for himself in heaven *(svargaloka)* (cf. XII.24; also XI. Appendix I, nos. 1.33–40; XI.2.11; XI.8,1–4). The initiation theme *(dīkṣā)* of the Pāṇḍavas' forest exile clearly emphasizes the sacrificial character of the war and the yogic preparation necessary for this. This, in turn, leads to the idea that an inner conquest is required to assure victory in the external combat of battle (cf. V.34.52–55; XII.69.4–5).

In this manner, the sacrifice of battle becomes a form of total renunciation *(tyāga* or *saṃnyāsa)* in which one puts one's own life on the line *(ātmayajña)*. Arjuna (that is, the ideal king) can neither abandon his responsibilities nor pursue his own narrow self-interest. Instead, he is called to dedicate his life to the wider goals of human welfare *(lokasaṃgraha),* undistracted by family ties, and without attachment to the results of his actions. The sacrifice he performs becomes an act of Yoga, marked by one-pointed concentration *(ekāgra)* on the task at hand. In this manner the notion of sacrifice is internalized to become a new ideal of human conduct, a new path to salvation.

This epic symbolism is authenticated, in Biardeau's view, by close Purāṇic parallels to the cosmogonic myths of the epic, whatever chronology of textual development is adhered to (the Purāṇas were written down at a later period than the epics). The epics and Purāṇas both project the old ritualistic and Upaniṣadic ideals into a cosmic panorama of space and time. As will be developed further in chapter 3, what began as the mystical adventure of an individual aspirant in the Upaniṣads develops into a collective spiritual march through a hierarchy of worlds constituted by the creator-god Brahmā, the perpetually transmigrating cosmic person whose life span frames the birth and death of the Universe as a whole. As the mythical personification of the sacrificial power of the Brahmin priest (known as the *brāhman*), he symbolizes the orthodox this-worldly religion *(pravṛttidharma)* with its Veda and sacrificial system. In contrast, the Upaniṣadic alternative of turning away from the world and its values *(nivṛttidharma)* is projected onto the divine figure of the *puruṣottama* (Supreme Person), another mythical transformation with antecedents going back to the Praśnopaniśad and to the Puruṣasūkta hymn of Ṛgveda X.90. This epic/Purāṇic symbolism constitutes a sort of cosmic backdrop to the human events used to dramatize what amounts to a complete transposition of traditional Brāhmaṇic religious values into a new system of *bhakti* devotionalism.

Since the task of this book is limited to a single major theme, it uses these more general insights of others as a point of departure to proceed inductively by exploring the different contexts in which the two fundamental sources of human motivation and activity are illustrated or discussed. Chapter 3 profits largely from Biardeau's comparative analysis of epic and Purāṇic cosmogony to illustrate the cosmological setting, where *Daiva* is a function of cosmic Time (with a capital *T*). This overriding vision of things is the primordial factor driving the responses of individual protagonists to the critical situations faced by them, and that they are inevitably forced to explain to themselves.