Dharma

Mismatch between the Tree and its Roots: Demystifying Dhārmika Dilemmas from *Mahābhārata*

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ABSTRACT

The concept of Dharma holds a central position in the Bhāratīya philosophical and cultural tradition. Though often translated as "duty," "justice," or "righteousness," such renderings fall short of capturing the term's complexity and contextual depth. Across Vedic and classical Sanskrit literature, the idea of Dharma is understood depending on the context, speaker, and situation. The *Mahābhārata* vividly illustrates this dynamic quality of Dharma through its characters and their Dharmic dilemmas. Particularly, the epic presents Yudhiṣṭhira and Kṛṣṇa as embodiments of Dharma, yet their decisions in similar situations often diverge. A verse in the Mahābhārata likens Yudhiṣṭhira to the tree of Dharma and Kṛṣṇa to its roots, suggesting an intrinsic connection. However, various episodes reveal differing understandings of what constitutes Dharma, raising the question: do they represent the same Dharma, or distinct articulations of it? Such internal variations, even within a single text, contribute to the perception of Dharma as elusive and difficult to define. While general frameworks for understanding Dharma exist, their application remains highly situational and contextual. This paper examines selected episodes from the epic where Dharma entails different courses of action for characters well-versed in it and seeks to rationalize these differences through various well-known definitions and interpretations.

Key words: Dharma, Mahābhārata, Bharatīya philosophy, Morality.

Introduction

In the Indian intellectual tradition, Dharma is often translated as "ethics," or "duty," yet such renderings inadequately represent the term's conceptual depth and fluidity. Across diverse sources—ranging from Saṁhitās to the Smṛtis—the meaning of Dharma shifts, reflecting a multiplicity of interpretations grounded in context, function, and philosophical orientation. This interpretive openness renders Dharma a profoundly intricate concept, elusive even to those deeply immersed in śāstra, let alone to the layperson. The *Mahābhārata*, the monumental epic attributed to Vyāsa, narrates the conflict between Dharma and Adharma across its eighteen parvas. It concludes with the victory for the Dharmic side. Regarded as the "fifth Veda," the epic aims to translate Vedic wisdom into an accessible idiom. Its narrative is replete with complex ethical decisions and moral quandaries, offering profound insights into the lived experience of Dharma.

As Manusmṛti has corroborated, the roots of the Dharma are in the Vedas. Naturally, there are profound discussions about Dharma and Adharma throughout the epic, where the concept of Dharma is illustrated through the behavior of characters. Central to these explorations are the characters of Yudhiṣṭhira and Kṛṣṇa—both upheld as exemplars of Dharma, yet often differing in their chosen courses of action. While Yudhiṣṭhira, extolled as Dharmarāja, is called the great tree of Dharma, Kṛṣṇa is metaphorically described as its very root. A perfect contrast to the character of Yudhiṣṭhira is depicted in the characterization of Duryodhana, who is regarded as an icon of Adharma. This metaphor, however, is problematized by a close reading of the text. In multiple episodes, Yudhiṣṭhira and Kṛṣṇa diverge in their judgment of what constitutes the Dharmic path. At times, even Bhīṣma and Vidura, figures lauded for their ethical insight, offer conflicting views.

The concept of Dharma is shrouded in ambiguity due to such circumstances occurring throughout the epic. Even though there are numerous definitions for Dharma found throughout the epic and even in other Śāstras, Dharma is seen to manifest in varied ways in practical situations. Such apparent discrepancies regarding the nature of Dharma raise a compelling philosophical question: How can the same Dharma give rise to divergent actions among those who are said to embody

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it? This paper seeks to unpack these contradictions through a nuanced analysis of selected episodes in the Mahābhārata. It proposes a theoretical framework that distinguishes between "means-oriented" and "end-oriented" approaches to Dharma, in an effort to clarify the epistemological and ethical principles underlying such apparent contradictions.

Dharma as the most important of the Puruṣārthas

The concept of puruṣārtha is central to the philosophical traditions of India. The four puruṣārthas—Dharma, Artha, Kāma, and Mokṣa—are extensively discussed in the *Mahābhārata*. Among these, Mokṣa leads the seeker toward *nivṛtti-mārga* (the path of renunciation), while the other three—Dharma, Artha, and Kāma—are associated with *pravṛtti-mārga* (the path of worldly engagement). While the person on the path of Mokṣa can still engage in worldly engagements, human beings, by nature, are more inclined toward Artha (wealth) and Kāma (desire). Fulfilment of desires inevitably depends on the acquisition and use of resources, i.e., Artha serves the realization of Kāma. However, the ethical question lies in the means of acquiring Artha and the manner of using it to pursue Kāma. If everyone were to pursue their desires unchecked, resources would become insufficient, leading to unsustainability and potential infringement upon the rights of others. Hence, the guidance of Dharma becomes indispensable to ensure balance, justice, and restraint in the pursuit of human goals.

Ancient Indian texts consistently emphasize that it is only by adhering to Dharma that one can regulate and channel Artha and Kāma in a righteous manner. Thus, Dharma serves as the regulator and moral compass for the other two. These three, Dharma, Artha, and Kāma, together are referred to as the Trivarga, especially in the context of worldly or social life. Dharma, variably defined as duty, morality, ethics, or law, inherently demands that an individual curb certain desires or restrict certain means of fulfilling them. This is necessary to contain the primal urges of human beings and ensure conformity to societal norms and order. For instance, society cannot allow individuals to resort to violence or murder in response to personal grievances. Dharma, through its emphasis on *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), places such necessary boundaries on human behaviour. Naturally, this gives rise to a profound philosophical question: How far can one go in compromising personal desires in adherence to Dharma? The answer lies in the ultimate puruṣārtha, Mokṣa, the state of liberation in which all worldly desires are extinguished. Mokṣa offers a transcendental resolution to the ethical dilemmas of life, but it is an ideal that is neither easy to understand nor achieve.

The *Mahābhārata* provides a rich and complex canvas to explore this dilemma. Dharma is a recurring and dominant theme of the epic. On the surface, the *Mahābhārata* appears to depict a conflict between Dharma and Adharma, with the Pāṇḍavas upholding Dharma and the Kauravas representing Adharma. However, the epic does not offer simplistic moral binaries. Rather, it presents Dharma as an elusive and often ambiguous principle, subject to the nuances of context, intent, and consequence. This complexity is well captured in a verse from the *Śānti Parva* of the *Mahābhārata*:

यश्चतुर्गुणसम्पन्नं धर्मं ब्रूयात् स धर्मवित्।
अहेरिव हि धर्मस्य पदं दुःखं गवेषितुम्॥

[He is said to be conversant with Dharma, who explains it in terms of the four-fold qualities. For, just as the feet of a snake are difficult to find, so is the path of Dharma hard to determine.]

Characters like Kṛṣṇa, Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīṣma, and Vidura are portrayed as being deeply knowledgeable in Dharma. Yet, even among them, situations arise where their interpretations of Dharma diverge significantly, leading to moral and strategic dilemmas. The righteous course of action is not always universally agreed upon, and often, no single perspective offers a complete resolution. In the following sections, we shall examine specific incidents from the *Mahābhārata* that bring out these divergent understandings of Dharma among the key characters, thereby revealing its multifaceted and paradoxical nature.

The Dharmic Dilemmas in Mahābhārata

In this section, we shall take some case studies from the *Mahābhārata* and examine the divergent opinions on Dharma.

Scene 1 - The Game of Dice: Among the most pivotal and ethically charged episodes in the *Mahābhārata* is the infamous game of dice (*dyūta*), which not only raises profound questions regarding the Dharma of Yudhiṣṭhira and other key characters but also marks the narrative fulcrum around which the eventual descent into the Kurukṣetra war unfolds. The seeds of the catastrophic conflict are sown in this moment of strategic manipulation and moral ambiguity.

In the *Vana Parva*, Kṛṣṇa explicitly cautions Yudhiṣṭhira against four specific vices—women, gambling, hunting, and drinking—each of which, he asserts, originates from excessive kāma (desire) and leads to spiritual and material decline. These four are regarded as inherently corrupting forces that erode a person's fortune and righteousness:

स्त्रियोऽक्षा मृगया पानमेतत् कामसमुत्थितम्।
दुःखं चतुष्टयं प्रोक्तं यैर्नरो भ्रश्यते श्रियः॥

तत्र सर्वत्र वक्तव्यं मन्यन्ते शास्त्रकोविदाः।

विशेषतश्च वक्तव्यं द्यूते पश्यन्ति तद्विदः॥

[Women, dice, hunting, and drinking—these four arise from desire. These are said to be the four sources of misery by which a man loses his prosperity. Scholars well-versed in the *śāstra*s consider all of these as condemnable, but particularly emphasize the dangers of gambling.]

Despite this warning, Yudhiṣṭhira accepts the invitation to the dice game initiated by Duryodhana and orchestrated by Śakuni. His initial refusal eventually gives way when Śakuni provocatively frames the game as one of intellectual prowess, played by discerning and refined minds. Yielding to this taunt, Yudhiṣṭhira accepts the challenge, invoking a personal vow:

आहूतो न निवर्तेयमिति मे व्रतमाहितम्।

विधिश्च बलवान् राजन् दिष्टस्यास्मि वशे स्थितः॥

[It is my solemn vow never to turn away when challenged. O King, destiny is powerful, and I am bound by its force.]

Yudhiṣṭhira proceeds with the game, and after losing once to Śakuni's cunning, he continues to play—ultimately staking and losing his kingdom, his brothers, and even Draupadī. This sequence of losses leads to the exile of the Pāṇḍavas for thirteen years, with the final year to be spent in incognito.

The ethical discord is apparent: despite Kṛṣṇa's explicit warning against gambling, Yudhiṣṭhira does not perceive participation in the game as antithetical to Dharma. His decision seems to be driven by a rigid adherence to personal vows (*vrata*) and royal protocol. This incident starkly illustrates the variance in the conceptualization of Dharma. Kṛṣṇa's understanding of Dharma, grounded in pragmatism and concern for cosmic order, contrasts sharply with Yudhiṣṭhira's vow-bound interpretation. Thus, the dice game episode becomes a case study in the tension between ideal Dharma and its contingent application in complex socio-political contexts.

Scene 2 - The Request of Five Villages and Avoiding War: Another instance where a significant divergence emerges between Kṛṣṇa and Yudhiṣṭhira on the matter of Dharma is found in the *Udyoga Parva* of the *Mahābhārata*. After the Pāṇḍavas complete their thirteen-year exile, they seek restoration of their rightful share of the kingdom. However, Duryodhana and Dhṛtarāṣṭra resolutely deny their legitimate claim. To avert the impending war, Yudhiṣṭhira offers a substantial compromise: he asks not for half the kingdom, but merely five villages for the Pāṇḍavas to rule. Despite the apparent reasonableness of this proposal, Duryodhana rejects even this minimal request with scorn. This situation places Yudhiṣṭhira in a profound dilemma. On the one hand, he is aware of the duties of a *Kṣatriya*, which include the defence of one's honour and rightful possessions. On the other, he is deeply perturbed by the prospect of widespread destruction that war inevitably entails. In expressing his anguish, Yudhiṣṭhira articulates a disillusioned view of war, wherein both victory and defeat are equally catastrophic:

सर्वथा वृजिनं युद्धं को घ्नन् न प्रतिहन्यते।

हतस्य च हृषीकेश समौ जयपराजयौ॥

पराजयश्च मरणान्मन्ये नैव विशिष्यते।

यस्य स्याद् विजयः कृष्ण तस्याप्यपचयो ध्रुवम्॥

[War is inherently sinful; who can slay without being slain in turn? O Hṛṣīkeśa, for the slain, victory and defeat are equal. I consider defeat no worse than death, and even for the victor, loss is inevitable.]

From Yudhiṣṭhira's standpoint, Dharma in this context mandates avoidance of large-scale bloodshed, even if it comes at the cost of political rights. His ethical compass prioritizes the minimization of harm and the preservation of life over the assertion of political sovereignty. In contrast, Kṛṣṇa offers a fundamentally different interpretation of Dharma, rooted in the imperatives of *Kṣatriya-dharma*. He admonishes Yudhiṣṭhira for his reluctance, equating his pacifism with the conduct of an ascetic, not a ruler. For Kṛṣṇa, such withdrawal from rightful conflict is neither virtuous nor dignified:

न चैवं नैष्ठिकं कर्म क्षत्रियस्य विशाम्पते।

आहुराश्रमिणः सर्वे न भैक्षं क्षत्रियश्चरेत्॥

जयो वधो वा सङ्ग्रामे धात्राऽदिष्टः सनातनः।

स्वधर्मः क्षत्रियस्यैष कार्पण्यं न प्रशस्यते॥

[This renunciatory conduct is not suitable for a Kṣatriya. The wise say that a warrior must not live by begging. Whether victory or death results from battle, both are ordained by destiny. This is the eternal Dharma of a Kṣatriya, and faint-heartedness is never praised.]

Kṛṣṇa categorically frames the war not as a personal or political vendetta but as a necessary fulfilment of cosmic order and Kṣatriya obligation. He asserts that, settling for less than what is rightfully due is tantamount to accepting alms—an act unbefitting of a warrior. This episode once again highlights the interpretive complexity of Dharma in the *Mahābhārata*. While Yudhiṣṭhira approaches Dharma through the lens of compassion and societal preservation, Kṛṣṇa invokes the moral absolutism of one's svadharma, even when it involves conflict. The contrast illustrates the *Mahābhārata*'s nuanced portrayal of moral dilemmas, where righteous action is context-dependent and often contested by those who are themselves paragons of Dharma.

Scene 3 - On the Dilemma of Deceiving Droṇa: A

third significant episode demonstrating the divergence in the interpretation of Dharma between Kṛṣṇa and the Pāṇḍavas—particularly Yudhiṣṭhira—occurs in the *Droṇa Parva* of the *Mahābhārata*. During the Kurukṣetra war, Droṇācārya, the commander of the Kaurava forces and former preceptor of both Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas, proves to be an unstoppable force on the battlefield. His unparalleled martial skill and deep emotional ties with Arjuna—his most accomplished student—render Arjuna hesitant to fully engage him in combat. Consequently, the Pāṇḍava army suffers catastrophic losses due to Droṇa. Confronted with this crisis, Kṛṣṇa urges the Pāṇḍavas to abandon conventional notions of Dharma and adopt an unconventional strategy to neutralize Droṇa. He proposes that they deceive Droṇa into believing that his only son, Aśvatthāmā, has been killed in battle. Kṛṣṇa anticipates that such news would emotionally incapacitate Droṇa, causing him to lay down his arms:

यथा न: संयुगे सर्वान्न हन्याद्रुक्मवाहन:।

अश्वत्थाम्नि हते नैष युद्ध्येदिति मतिर्मम॥

[So that the golden charioted one [Droṇa] may not annihilate all of us in battle, I believe he will cease fighting if he hears that Aśvatthāmā is slain.]

Kṛṣṇa's proposal was met with moral resistance. Arjuna outright disapproved of such deceit, grounded in his *guru-bhakti* and *Kṣatriya-dharma*. Even Yudhiṣṭhira, widely celebrated for his unwavering commitment to truth, initially hesitates. The text explicitly notes:

एतन्नारोचयद् राजन् कुन्तीपुत्रो धनञ्जयः।

अन्ये त्वरोचयन् सर्वे कृच्छ्रेण तु युधिष्ठिरः॥

[This plan did not please Arjuna, son of Kunti; all others approved, while Yudhiṣṭhira consented only with great difficulty.]

Eventually, Yudhiṣṭhira agrees to the stratagem but does so with a nuanced concession—he utters the phrase "Aśvatthāmā is dead," followed by an inaudible or ambiguous qualification that the slain Aśvatthāmā was, in fact, an elephant. This partial truth, intended to deceive Droṇa while preserving Yudhiṣṭhira's self-image as *satya-parāyaṇa* (committed to truth), results in Droṇa relinquishing his weapons and ultimately being killed by Dhṛṣṭadyumna.

This moment marks one of the most ethically complex junctures in the *Mahābhārata*, wherein the literal truth is subordinated to strategic necessity. Kṛṣṇa, driven by the pragmatic imperatives of *rājanīti* and the overarching goal of *dharma-yuddha* (righteous war), advocates for a morally ambiguous course of action. The Pāṇḍavas, however, are visibly conflicted, and Yudhiṣṭhira's reluctant acquiescence underscores the internal dissonance between personal virtue and collective responsibility.

Thus, this episode vividly illustrates a recurring theme in the epic—the tension between *nīti* (expedient action) and *dharma* (moral duty), particularly when both seem mutually exclusive. Kṛṣṇa and Yudhiṣṭhira, though both oriented toward righteousness, exemplify divergent modes of ethical reasoning: the former situational, the latter idealistic.

Scene 4 - On Staking Draupadi in the Game of Dice: Beyond Yudhiṣṭhira and Kṛṣṇa, the *Mahābhārata* presents several other characters who are well-versed in matters of Dharma. Among them, Vidura and Bhīṣma stand out as exemplars of dhārmic knowledge and ethical discernment. Their contrasting responses to a pivotal event in the *Sabhāparva*—the staking of Draupadī in the game of dice—reveal the depth and complexity of Dharma as conceptualized within the epic. Following Yudhiṣṭhira's loss of his kingdom, his brothers, and ultimately himself in the gambling match orchestrated by Śakuni, he proceeds to wager Draupadī. Upon losing her, Duryodhana commands Duḥśāsana to drag her into the royal assembly. Draupadī is publicly humiliated, and Duryodhana audaciously declares her the "maidservant" of the Kauravas. This act provokes strong opposition from Vidura, who is often described as *Dharmarāja* for his unerring commitment to justice. He asserts unequivocally that Draupadī could not have been lost in the game, as Yudhiṣṭhira, having already forfeited his own freedom, no longer possessed the legal or moral authority to stake her:

न हि दासीत्वमापन्ना कृष्णा भवति भारत ।

अनीशेन हि राज्ञैषा पणे न्यस्तेति मे मतिः ॥

[Draupadī cannot be declared a slave, O Bhārata, for she was wagered by one who was no longer master of himself.]

Vidura's reasoning here anticipates the legal principle expressed in the Latin maxim *nemo dat quod non habet*—one cannot transfer what one does not own. His interpretation is rooted in a juridical understanding of authority and personal autonomy, marking a rational and rights-based conception of Dharma. In stark contrast, Bhīṣma—regarded as the paragon of vows (*pratijñāpālana*) and dhārmic conduct—struggles with Draupadī's question: whether a man who has already lost himself has any moral right to wager his wife. Despite acknowledging the technical invalidity of such a wager, Bhīṣma remains conflicted due to his adherence to conventions. His reply reveals this ambivalence:

न धर्मसौक्ष्म्यात्सुभगे विवेक्तुं शक्नोमि ते प्रश्नमिमं यथावत् ।

अस्वो ह्यशक्तः पणितुं परस्वं स्त्रियश्च भर्तुर्वशतां समीक्ष्य ॥

[O fortunate one, due to the subtlety of Dharma, I am unable to definitively answer your question. A man who is not his own master cannot wager others' property, yet women are regarded as being under the control of their

husbands.]

Bhīṣma's statement reflects a paradigmatic tension between juridical Dharma and socio-cultural norms. While he intellectually recognizes the invalidity of the wager, he remains bound by his allegiance to prevailing customs, thereby refraining from offering a decisive moral judgment. Thus, this episode highlights a fundamental dhārmic dissonance not only between individuals but also between different interpretive paradigms of Dharma itself— Vidura's legal-rational Dharma vis-à-vis Bhīṣma's socially embedded Dharma. The incident underscores the broader *Mahābhārata* theme of the elusive nature of Dharma (*dharmasya tattvaṃ nihitaṃ guhāyām*), especially when moral principles collide with entrenched social structures and emotional loyalties.

From the aforementioned scenarios, a fundamental question emerges regarding the apparent divergence in perspectives on the righteous course of action among central characters of the *Mahābhārata*—namely Yudhiṣṭhira, Kṛṣṇa, Bhīṣma, and Vidura—each of whom is deeply revered for their unwavering commitment to Dharma. If Dharma were a universally applicable principle, one would reasonably expect a degree of uniformity in its interpretation and application across these exemplars. Yudhiṣṭhira and Kṛṣṇa are symbolically portrayed as the tree and roots of Dharma in Mahābhārata. In this context, it becomes particularly striking that, in a dharmic crisis, their conceptions of the righteous path differ so significantly. These disparities challenge a layperson's ability to ascertain the true nature of Dharma and to discern what constitutes morally appropriate conduct in any given circumstance.

This paradox becomes even more perplexing when one considers the authorial intent of Vyāsa, the sage credited not only with composing the *Mahābhārata* but also with compiling the Vedas. Given that the *Mahābhārata* is conceived as a text aimed at elucidating the principles of Dharma—principles that are said to be rooted in the very Vedas themselves—it is intellectually provocative that the epic refrains from offering a clear, codified path of righteous action. Instead, Vyāsa deliberately constructs a narrative architecture that foregrounds the contradictions and interpretive plurality surrounding Dharma.This leads to a set of critical questions:

1. Why does Vyāsa portray such contradictions among dhārmic figures regarding the correct course of action?
2. What accounts for the divergence in the understanding of Dharma among the characters of the Mahābhārata, i.e., the mismatch between the metaphorical tree and its roots of Dharma?
3. How is a layperson expected to comprehend Dharma amidst such interpretive dissonance?

These questions demand deeper investigation into the nature of Dharma as portrayed in the *Mahābhārata*—not as a fixed normative code, but as a dynamic and contextually responsive principle, mediated through the embodied experiences and moral struggles of its characters.

Various Definitions of Dharma and their Categorization

To critically examine the paradoxes surrounding Dharma in the *Mahābhārata*, it is essential to engage with the conceptual foundations of Dharma as articulated across a range of textual traditions within the Indian intellectual heritage. The term 'Dharma' is etymologically derived from the Sanskrit root *dhṛ*, meaning "to uphold" or "to support." Across the Vedic and post-Vedic corpus, Dharma is not only defined from multiple perspectives but also manifests in varying ontological and functional roles, including as an abstract principle, a moral code, and even a divinized entity. For instance, in certain hymns of the *Ṛgveda*, Dharma is associated with rituals, as seen in the expression *tāni dharmāṇi prathamānyāsan*, indicating that yajña constituted the earliest dharmas. Elsewhere in the same text, the term is suggestive of immutable principles or standards of behaviour, thereby aligning Dharma with cosmic order and ethical regularity. In the *Atharvaveda*, Dharma is primarily connected with the merit acquired through the performance of sacrificial rites, reflecting its ritualistic and transactional dimensions. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* goes further, identifying Dharma with Satya (truth), suggesting that righteousness and truth are ultimately indistinguishable. The definitions of Dharma found in various source texts can be classified into two types. One set of definitions lists the virtues associated with the concept of Dharma. For example, *Manusmṛti* defines Dharma through a list of ten virtues:

धृतिः क्षमा दमोऽस्तेयं शौचमिन्द्रियनिग्रहः |
धीर्विद्या सत्यमक्रोधो दशकं धर्मलक्षणम् ||

[Firmness, patience, self-restraint, non-stealing, purity, control of the senses, wisdom, knowledge, truthfulness, and absence of anger—these ten are the marks of Dharma.]

Similarly, in the *Anuśāsana Parva* of the *Mahābhārata*, Dharma is defined through qualities such as non-violence, truth, calmness, compassion, and simplicity:

अहिंसा सत्यमक्रोध आनृशंस्यं दमस्तथा ।
आर्जवं चैव राजेन्द्र निश्चितं धर्मलक्षणम् ॥

[Non-violence, truth, absence of anger, compassion, self-restraint, and straightforwardness—these are the definitive characteristics of Dharma.]

Whereas, another set of definitions conceptualize Dharma as a sustaining force—an end to be upheld. The

Karṇa Parva of the *Mahābhārata* articulates this clearly:

धारणाद् धर्म इत्याहुः धर्मो धारयते प्रजाः ।
यत् स्याद्धारणसंयुक्तं स धर्म इति निश्चयः ॥

[Dharma is so called because it upholds, it sustains the people. That which has the quality of upholding is definitively Dharma.]

A more teleological formulation is found in the *Vaiśeṣika Sūtras*, where Dharma is defined as the means of attaining both *Abhyudaya* (material well-being) and *Niḥśreyasa* (ultimate liberation): "यतोऽभ्युदयनिःश्रेयससिद्धिः स धर्मः" (That which leads to both prosperity and liberation is Dharma).

Upon closer inspection, these can be broadly categorized into two interpretive paradigms: *means-oriented* and *end-oriented* definitions of Dharma. The *means-oriented* approach emphasizes Dharma as a prescribed path of conduct, ethical practices and dispositions that must be cultivated to live righteously. In contrast, the *end-oriented* perspective treats Dharma as a sustaining force—an end to be upheld rather than merely a set of practices. This plurality of definitions invites the critical question: Do these varied articulations point to a unitary conception of Dharma, or do they reveal competing frameworks?

Analysis of the Nature of Dharma as Gleaned through Comparison of Definitions

The preceding discussion presented various narrative episodes from the *Mahābhārata* that depict divergent understandings and applications of Dharma. Simultaneously, we examined a range of classical definitions of Dharma, which may be broadly classified into two conceptual categories: *means-oriented* and *end-oriented* conceptions. These two categories provide an interpretative framework to analyze the ethical stances adopted by key characters in the *Mahābhārata*, particularly Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīṣma, Kṛṣṇa, and Vidura. Yudhiṣṭhira exemplifies a predominantly *means-oriented* approach to Dharma. His actions reflect a steadfast commitment to normative ethical principles, with a strong emphasis on adherence to established codes of conduct, truthfulness, and non-violence. For instance, in the episode concerning the possibility of war, Yudhiṣṭhira prioritizes *ahiṁsā* (non-violence) as a defining dhārmic imperative, even when the political situation suggests that war may be inevitable and just. This focus on strict ethical conformity, however, often renders him ethically immobilized in complex situations where rigid adherence may conflict with the larger moral outcome.

Bhīṣma, likewise, demonstrates a similar fidelity to established ethical norms and roles. His inability to categorically denounce the staking of Draupadī in the dice game, despite its apparent injustice, arises from his understanding of a wife's dependence upon her husband. Bhīṣma's reticence reflects a paralysis resulting from excessive allegiance to normative duties without adequately evaluating the larger moral context. Thus, rather than seeing a bigger picture, a goal that Dharma needs to achieve, he focuses on staying within the boundaries of norms that define a wife's dependence on her husband. The following table summarizes the difference in approach of various characters towards ascertaining Dharma and the driving force behind those in the scenes mentioned above.

Summary of differences in the approach to ascertain Dharma by characters of Mahābhārata:

Episode from Mahābhārata	Yudhiṣṭhira/ Bhiṣma	Kṛṣṇa/ Vidura
Scene 1: The Dice Game	Prioritizes personal vow in (vrata) and royal protocol while overlooking the consequences	Concern for cosmic order and farsightedness about the consequences
Scene 2: The request of five villages and avoiding war	Societal preservation and avoiding large-scale bloodshed	Concern for cosmic order and priority to Kṣatrīya dharma
Scene 3: On dilemma of deceiving Droṇa	A preference for literal truth	Recognizing the deeper meaning of the truth and strategic necessity
Scene 4: On staking Draupadi in the game of dice	Entangled in customs and conventions, failing to see the bigger picture	A preference for universal values, justice, and rationality

A key critique of both Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīṣma is their preoccupation with the immediate ethical act, often to the exclusion of its long-term consequences and failing to see the broader picture. Their understanding of Dharma is principle-driven but insufficiently responsive to the fluid and conflictual nature of *kāla-dharma* (contextual duty). In this sense, their orientation towards Dharma appears formalistic and, at times, counterproductive when the moral stakes of a situation demand strategic or visionary engagement.

In contrast, both Kṛṣṇa and Vidura demonstrate a teleological or end-oriented approach to Dharma. Their ethical reasoning is oriented towards the preservation of cosmic and societal order, even if it requires transgressing normative principles in specific contexts. Kṛṣṇa's suggestion to mislead Droṇa about the death of his son Aśvatthāmā illustrates this mode of reasoning. From a

strictly means-oriented perspective, this act would constitute falsehood and therefore *adharma*. Yet, Kṛṣṇa justifies it as a necessary deception to prevent the triumph of Adharma, embodied in Droṇa's allegiance to the Kaurava cause.

Similarly, Vidura consistently displays a jurisprudential and consequentialist outlook. His objections to Draupadī's humiliation are grounded not only in moral sentiment but in a reasoned interpretation of juridical principles—namely, that one who has lost himself has no right to stake another. Vidura's view of Dharma is not simply rooted in textual or customary norms, but in the protection of justice and dhārmic order, especially on behalf of the vulnerable and wronged.

Thus, while Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīṣma may be considered theoreticians or custodians of normative Dharma, Kṛṣṇa and Vidura emerge as practitioners and visionaries, whose engagement with Dharma is dynamic, context-sensitive, and future-oriented. The former exemplify fidelity to the structure of Dharma; the latter prioritize its function and purpose.

In conclusion, the *Mahābhārata* deliberately presents this tension not as a contradiction but as a philosophical design. It demonstrates that Dharma is not reducible to any singular principle or fixed rule; rather, it operates as a layered and evolving category that requires discernment (*viveka*) and foresight. The following verse underscores this reality:

अन्यो धर्मः समस्थस्य विषमस्थस्य चापरः।
आपदस्तु कथं शक्याः परिपाठेन वेदितुम्॥

[The Dharma of a person in comfortable circumstances is of one kind; that of one in distress is of another. How can Dharma, in times of calamity, be ascertained by scriptural injunctions alone?]

This verse emphatically illustrates that scriptural prescriptions (*paripāṭha*) alone cannot resolve the dilemmas posed by exceptional or adverse circumstances. The ethical disparity between these characters, thus, reflects the inherent complexity of Dharma as both - a path and a goal, a rule and realization.

Conclusion

The second question in the problem statement—*what accounts for the divergence in the understanding of Dharma among the characters of the Mahābhārata*—finds its resolution in the identification of two foundational paradigms of Dharma: the *means-oriented* and the *end-oriented* approaches. These frameworks reflect two distinct modes of ethical reasoning. The divergence between the so-called 'tree' (Yudhiṣṭhira) and its 'roots' (Kṛṣṇa), as metaphorically expressed in the verse cited earlier, thus stems from the differing prioritizations of these approaches. While Yudhiṣṭhira primarily exemplifies a means-oriented understanding—adhering rigorously to ethical norms in the moment—Kṛṣṇa embodies an end-oriented view, wherein the ultimate preservation and upholding of Dharma justifies circumstantial deviations from standard ethical codes.

The first question—*why does Vyāsa depict these internal contradictions at all, particularly among characters renowned for their commitment to Dharma*—can be understood through the symbolic and pedagogical intentions of the *Mahābhārata*. By presenting ethical dilemmas and seemingly contradictory choices among dhārmic exemplars, Vyāsa constructs a narrative that mirrors the moral complexity of real life. In everyday situations, individuals often encounter ethical ambiguities where a singular or absolutist notion of Dharma is insufficient. In such scenarios, having access to multiple perspectives—one focused on present ethical conduct and the other on long-term moral outcomes—is essential for an informed moral judgement.

The narrative strategy of presenting conflicting dhārmic viewpoints serves to cultivate the faculty of viveka (discriminative discernment) in the reader or listener. The epic does not provide formulaic resolutions but instead insists that true understanding and application of Dharma demand reflective judgment that takes into account both context and consequence. However, although both paradigms are explored in depth, the *Mahābhārata* appears to lend greater normative weight to the end-oriented approach. This is illustrated by Yudhiṣṭhira's eventual acceptance of Kṛṣṇa's advice—such as the strategic deception employed to defeat Droṇa—where the immediate ethical compromise is justified in light of Dharma's eventual triumph.

It is crucial, however, to emphasize that this end-oriented understanding of Dharma is not absolutist; it is contextual and deeply nuanced. The course that Dharma takes depends on the *situation*, the *actors involved*, and the *broader consequences*. This fluidity and situational sensitivity are reflected in the *Mahābhārata*'s recognition of Dharma as context-dependent rather than text-dependent. As cited earlier, scriptural prescriptions (*paripāṭha*) alone cannot resolve the dilemmas posed by exceptional circumstances. In such instances, Dharma must be discerned through the application of *viveka*, informed by both scriptural wisdom and contextual intelligence. This appears to be the answer to the third question problematized above.

Thus, while the *Mahābhārata* may initially appear to confound the reader with contradictory moral positions, it ultimately converges on a central philosophical premise: **"**dhāryate iti dharmaḥ"—Dharma is that which upholds. This telos of Dharma, as the sustaining moral order—offers the compass by which individual ethical choices may be evaluated. When this higher principle is kept in view, the exercise of *viveka* becomes a viable means for

navigating the moral complexities of lived experience.

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