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THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*: THE EPIC OF THE GREATER GOOD

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The *Mahābhārata*: the epic of the greater good

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The Mahābhārata: the epic of the greater good¹

My subject here is some portion of the way that the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* (*MBh*) deals with violence and aggression on the part of the armed stratum of society. In spite of being a vast epic of war, some important parts of the *MBh* made a sustained effort to ‘soothe the savage breast’ of humankind with epic *ślokas*, to borrow a phrase from William Congreve.² How successful this effort was across the past two millennia of South Asian civilization is another matter, and one difficult to gauge, of course. Nor did the *MBh* work to this end alone; this endeavor was only a collateral theme of some of the epic poets. Furthermore, as the *MBh* developed across time, as I understand its development, this effort came to be eclipsed by a spectacular ethical argument of individual duty that blended more harmoniously with the epic’s fundamental nature. Nonetheless, I think it is important to call attention to the effort by some of the epic’s poets ‘to give goodness a language,’³ to borrow now a phrase from Toni Morrison.

As many know, I believe the text of the epic given us in the Pune edition reflects a ‘grand,’ ‘synthetic,’ ‘*mahā-*’version of the epic as it stood around 300 to 400 CE, as the Gupta empire rose to power. While it is certainly impossible to prove very much about the developmental history of this text in a definitive way, I do believe it is fruitful to try to think about the text in developmental terms. If one looks for different voices that might have been speaking to or from different historical circumstances, and might have been in conversation or debate, in the process of the text’s composition or redaction, it may be possible to liberate distinct voices that hold significant interest or importance. If we take the text as it comes to us as the product of a single artistic vision operating at only one point in time, we run the

1 All translations here are my own, unless otherwise indicated. Also, all numeric references to textual passages refer to the Critical Edition (CE) of the *MBh*, unless otherwise specified.

2 (Congreve 1753): ‘Musick has charms to soothe a savage breast,’ which is the first line of the play, spoken by Almeria in Act I, Scene I.

3 (Morrison 2019). ‘Over time, these last 40 years, I have become more and more invested in making sure acts of goodness (however casual or deliberate or misapplied or, like the Amish community, blessed) produce language.’

risk of never hearing the multiplicity of voices that may have been there. I admit that it is possible that I find voices and arguments that were not really there in the past; but I think it better to suggest different voices where I hear them and then discuss whether the text we have makes better sense with them or without them, than to assume that one voice said everything.

What I will present today assumes the following stratification of our text. The *MBh* given to us in the Critical Edition of Pune is a grand comprehensive work of enlightenment that, it tells us, emanated from the benevolence of the unique, supreme God Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa.⁴ This 'Great and Comprehensive' *Bhārata* grew over and around and through the already existent main narrative of the epic, which was centered upon making the eldest son of the Bharata Pāṇḍu, Yudhiṣṭhira, the king of the Bharatas in the face of the opposition of his Bharata kinsmen. I believe this earlier narrative, for which I have coined the term *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata*,⁵ was composed as a politically motivated reformation of an even older epic called, simply, the *Bhārata*. This very old *Bhārata*, which likely existed, as far back as Vedic times or even earlier,⁶ was likely a popular oral narrative tradition that sang tales

4 See 12.334.5-9 and 337.15-69. A similar account of Nārāyaṇa's creating the source of the most important body of learning—Sāṃkhya philosophy, in this case—occurs at the end of 12.290. It could be argued at one level, that the Sāṃkhya philosophy—which serves as the foundation for the epic's Nārāyaṇa-theology—is a kind of epitome of the epic's philosophical teaching.

5 My historical conjectures about the text are obviously informed by and similar to those of E. W. Hopkins (1901, 397–98) in outline. Thus, I cannot agree with V. S. Sukthankar's summary dismissal of Hopkins's general developmental chronology (1957, 8–9), though I sympathize fully with his vexation at Hopkins's lack of sympathy for the tradition of the epic. Though I am a confirmed 'analyst' of the epic, my work here shares some of Sukthankar's well-expressed ideal for the study of the *MBh*: 'On the other hand we have got the poem, about which there is no doubt, and we may be able to puzzle out a good deal about its meaning, its inner meaning, if we tried. Let us then focus our thoughts upon that and try to understand it as best we can. I believe we shall find in the poem itself something far greater and nobler than the lost paradise of the primitive Kṣatriya tale of love and war, for which the Western savants have been vainly searching and which the Indian people have long outgrown and discarded' (*ibid.*, 31).

6 Though Alf Hiltebeitel may no longer think this, in 1976 he wrote: '... comparative studies ... have found strikingly similar stories and sequences of episodes in other

of the intrigues and wars of the Kuru-Bharatas against their neighbors to the southeast, the Pañcālas. To recapitulate this conjectural excavation in reverse order: a pre-Pāṇḍava *Bhārata* glorifying the Bharata tribe above all; a Pāṇḍava *Bhārata* to make Yudhiṣṭhira king of the Bharatas; and lastly, a transformation of that tale that tells it as one instance in the vast history of God's occasional apocalyptic interventions to restore the world's sense of rightness and goodness, *dharma*. Both the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* and the later *Mahā-Bhārata* were supercharged by their creators, who infused their texts with divine energies. In the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata*, brahmin-poets brought the offspring of old Vedic Gods into the narrative as its main protagonists; in the *Mahā-Bhārata* the old Gods were eclipsed by the boundlessness of the one transcendent God, the *paramēśvara*, who normally stands outside of time and form, but who lurks in the shadows of the epic narrative to burst out of hiding and reveal himself at the climactic moment.

The *Mahābhārata* and epic heroism: celebration and doubt

C.M. Bowra's impressive survey of heroic epics in many different societies across more than two millennia turns upon a characterization of heroic men from Pythagoras and other early Greek philosophers: 'they live for action and for the honour which comes from it.' These men are moved by 'an important element in the human soul, the self-assertive principle, which is to be distinguished equally from the appetites and from the reason and realizes itself in brave doings.' According to Bowra, these philosophers 'held that the life of action is superior to the pursuit of profit or the gratification of the senses, [and] that the man who seeks honour is himself an honourable figure....'⁷

Indo-European epic (not just mythic) traditions.... There is good reason to believe that the Indian story, at least in its basic contours and episodes, may have long and deep roots.' (Hiltebeitel 1976, 14).

⁷ (Bowra 1952, 1).

Of course Homer's *Iliad* is a fundamental source of Pythagoras's and Bowra's ideas about heroic character. Its narrative begins with the bitter confrontation between Agamemnon and Achilles from which the latter's enduring rage ensues. And then Homer's narrative turns upon one steely performance after another of men like them. But it is not clear that Homer thinks this pursuit of honor is itself a good. While heroes gain glory for their victories in the *Iliad*, Homer seems to dwell even more upon the damage that ensues from heroic actions. For example, when Homer describes Agamemnon's furious prowess in the Eleventh Book, on the day Zeus tried to discourage the Achaeans by raining blood down upon them just after dawn, he does focus upon the king's wielding his hard weapons; but, as so often, he describes their damaging consequences in a way calculated to horrify and provoke reflection upon the deed. Take Agamemnon's killing the Trojan captain Bienor:⁸ 'Down from the car he'd leapt, squaring off / charging in full fury, full face, straight / into Agamemnon's spearhead ramming sharp—/ the rim of the bronze helmet could not hold it, / clean through heavy metal and bone the point burst / and the brains splattered all inside the casque.'

The extensive slaughter of the Achaeans in the first books of the *Iliad* is the direct consequence of Agamemnon's self-assertive alienation of Achilles and Achilles's humiliating acquiescence at the behest of the Goddesses Hera and Athena. Those events led to the pathetic death of Patroclus effectively disguised as Achilles, the horrifying struggle over the boy's body, and Achilles's guilt at occasioning the death of Patroclus. And these events led on to the divine treachery behind Achilles killing Hector and the moving grief of the Trojan hero's wife, Andromache, and his mother, Hecuba. And then Homer gives us the madness of Achilles abusing Hector's body and the numbing grief of Priam's journey to ransom his son's body. Through it all there is the barely disguised shaming of the Olympian Gods for their petty meddling in the lives of truly noble men and women. Would it be going too far to suggest that one of the implicit arguments of the *Iliad* is that the Gods

8 *Iliad* 11.109-117: Homer, *The Iliad*, translated by Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc, 1990): 299.

are generally not worthy of the men whose lives they hold in their hands?⁹

Characters in the *MBh* narrative also exhibit self-assertiveness abundantly; and they regularly pursue honor in brave deeds of war. The fundamental conflict of the story is based upon the reciprocal self-assertion of two wealthy and armed social groups characterized in the text with the Brahminic designation 'kṣatriya'—the Kaurava Bharatas and an alliance of the Pāṇḍava Bharatas with the neighboring Pāñcālas. The epic describes the resulting war between these two parties at length, with great attention paid to many bold acts of bravery by men seeking honor, men who never brook an insult or an injury to their dignity. Fighting, warfare, is the behavioral norm of the armed stratum of society, the kṣatriyas: The Pāñcāla leader of the Pāṇḍava army, Dhṛṣṭadyumna, declared at one point, "Kill, or, on the other hand, be killed," this is the *dharma*—that is the nature, behavior, duty, meritorious action—of a kṣatriya.' (The word *dharma* refers to all of those at once.) Dhṛṣṭadyumna continued: 'We are taught that not slaying our enemies is wrong (*adharmā*).'¹⁰ At the end of the epic, the seer Nārada explains that each of the heroic warriors of the *MBh*, including the Kaurava villains, 'Reached the way leading to the paradise of heroes, having offered his own body in (the sacrificial fire of) battle.'¹¹ Further, all those warriors who assembled for the battle are thereby the equals of the (heaven-dwelling) Gods. Each 'had reached this place by doing the duty of a kṣatriya [which is to fight in war], having been fearless in the midst of tremendous danger.'¹²

Examples of Bowra's unyielding self-assertiveness are legion in the *MBh*—including some fierce demands for it from their men by prominent women in the text.¹³ For now I present only one illustration, the confrontation at

9 It is almost explicit at *Iliad* 11.83-96; Fagles: 298-99.

10 7.168.36: *avadhaś cāpi śatrūṅām adharmāḥ śiṣyate 'rjuna / kṣatriyasya hy ayaṃ dharmo hanyād dhanyeta vā punaḥ.*

11 18.1.14: *vīralokagatiṃ prāpto yuddhe hutvātmanas tanum / yūyaṃ sarve surasamā yena yuddhe samāsītāḥ.*

12 18.1.15: *sa eṣa kṣatradharmaṇa sthānam etad avāptavān / bhaye mahati yo 'bhīto babhūva pṛthivīpatiḥ.*

13 See Draupadī's mordant criticisms of the Pāṇḍavas before an august assembly

the very end of the war between two key principals, Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas, who are the predicate villains of our *MBh*, and Bhīmasena, the main defender of the honor of the victimized and abused Pāṇḍavas. These two epic protagonists are consistently portrayed throughout the narrative as fearlessly self-assertive. As the principal antagonist for the Kaurava Bharatas, Duryodhana is regularly described as intransigent (*amarṣaṇa*, *amarṣin*, etc.)¹⁴ and full of rage (*krodhavaśā*), and he is often depicted exercising a bullying belligerence that is uncompromising and relentless.¹⁵

of their allies at 3.13.53-64 and 103-113 and of Yudhiṣṭhira in particular at 12.14.1-35. See too her very interesting, strong disagreement with Yudhiṣṭhira's patience at 3.28-33. See Kuntī's exhortations of Yudhiṣṭhira at 5.130, and her quoting the ferocious queen Vidurā's upbraiding her son at 5.131-34. See (Malinar 2007a). Other story traditions are also very familiar with the fierce rhetoric of warlike women: As just one example I quote from <https://avaldsnes.info/en/viking/vikingkvinner/> (accessed January 12th, 2020): 'In sagas and Norse poems: Women are described as strong-headed, proud, independent and vindictive. We also meet women who encourage the men to take revenge in order to keep up the honour of the family. One example is Sigrid Skjalgsdatter who gives Tore Hund the spear that has killed her son Asbjørn. *'Here is the spear which went through Asbjorn my son, and there is still blood upon it, to remind thee that it fits the wound thou hast seen on the corpse of thy brother's son Asbjorn. It would be a manly deed, if thou shouldst throw this spear from thy hand so that it stood in Olaf's breast; and this I can tell thee, that thou wilt be named coward in every man's mouth, if thou dost not avenge Asbjorn.'* St. Olav was later killed with this spear'

14 1.2.100, 2.178; 2.44.1, 71.33; 3.11.18, 239.1; 4.61.23; 5.31.12, 46.9, etc., etc., etc.

15 Adolf Holtzmann judged such features of character to be noble in their directness and honesty (1892, 14, etc.), and as he pointed out, there are passages in the *MBh* that unambiguously celebrate Duryodhana as a hero (9.60.51-54), though many others revile or ridicule him. Some of the inconsistency regarding Duryodhana in the epic is likely a matter of the text's assiduous preservation of passages composed at different times in its development, but Angelika Malinar puts the overall matter well when she writes: '...the epic authors and redactors do not just play off the "good guys" against the bad ones; rather, on each side one finds dark stains and ambiguities, although, in the end, the Pāṇḍavas shine more brightly. This ambiguity contributes to the narrative depth of the epic Different perspectives, voices and even epic traditions seem to have co-existed' ; (2012, 53). David Gitomer explored this issue thoughtfully in (1992). Of particular interest is Gitomer's presentation of how these issues were developed in later Sanskrit dramas. In my judgment, however, Gitomer was wrong to narrow the issue down to Duryodhana's rejections of Kṛṣṇa as God. As important as this theme may be in the later dramas, the epic criticizes and condemns him long before he takes on Kṛṣṇa. The *dharma* voiced by Yudhiṣṭhira and Vidura that I will present below is an important challenge to Duryodhana from within the tradition well before he came up against Kṛṣṇa and his un-kṣatriya-like tactics.

His principal opponent among the Pāṇḍava Bharatas, Bhīmasena, presents a very similar profile.¹⁶ The two of them met late in the afternoon of the eighteenth and final day of the war in a duel with battle-maces, a weapon in which they were both highly skilled.

Duryodhana is almost the very last warrior alive on his side, and he now stands alone, surrounded by his enemies. Before fighting, Bhīma reminds Duryodhana of the many wrongs he had visited upon the Pāṇḍavas—trying to burn them alive in a fire-trap at Vāraṇāvata, the molesting of their wife Draupadī in the assembly hall, his reliance upon Śakuni's wit to defeat the eldest Pāṇḍava, Yudhiṣṭhira, in the critical dicing match.¹⁷ Bhīma then shifts registers and surveys some of the war's horrible carnage,¹⁸ saying it was the result of '[Duryodhana's] evil deeds toward the innocent Pāṇḍavas.'¹⁹ He calls Duryodhana the lowest of men and says he was the slayer of the Bharata clan itself. Bhīma then announces he will kill Duryodhana with his mace and snuff out his arrogance and his puffed-up hopes of ruling the Bharata kingdom.²⁰

Duryodhana interrupts him and asks why he is boasting so much; 'Fight with me now!' he says. Haughty criticism of mere words as opposed to deeds is a recurrent topos of the *MBh*,²¹ but Duryodhana now turns to boasting himself. He will now drive all eagerness for battle out of Bhīma. He belittles Bhīma, addressing him as 'twerp' (*kṣudra*), and brags that he himself is *no ordinary man*, a man whom Bhīma might terrify.²² He said no one could withstand him, Duryodhana, when he fought with his mace, which looked

16 1.142.28, 180.14; 2.18.23, 63.6, 64.4, 68.15; 3.1256, 34.1, 37.19, etc., etc., etc.

17 9.32.37-38 and in the duplicate passage 9.55.28-30, which latter adds in a reference to their time in Virāṭa's city. This duplicate passage looks very much like an alternative extemporaneous rendition of a set episode.

18 9.32.39-43 and 55.31-34ab.

19 9.32.39: *yāni cānyāni duṣṭātman pāpāni kṛtavān asi / anāgaḥsu ca pārtheṣu tasya paśya mahat phalam.*

20 9.32.44-45 and the abbreviated 55.34cd.

21 2.68.20, 5.160.14.

22 This occurs only in the second version of the encounter, at 9.55.37.

as big as a mountain peak of the Himālayas, not even Indra himself—as long as the fight was by the rules.²³ ‘Stop your rumbling, O son of Kuntī—it is as empty as a dry cloud after the monsoon season is over. Show right here and now, in a fight, just how much strength you have.’²⁴ At this statement from Duryodhana, the allies of the Pāṇḍavas, the Pāñcālas and the closely related Śrīñjayas, roared their admiration and applauded the zealous warrior (*vi-jigīṣu*), the way men stir up the rage of a rutting bull elephant.²⁵

Both men then let out roars and flew at each other violently, like two bulls charging and locking horns. The falling of the blows of their clubs sounded like the crashing of a tremendous thunderstorm.²⁶ As is common in *MBh* battle narratives, the narrator soon drops back to a summary description of the fighting and invokes theological and naturalistic metaphors. I quote: ‘There was a noisy, hair-raising fight between those two, each doing his best to conquer the other—it was like the battle between Indra and the demon Prahāda (56.3).’ Their bodies were soon so drenched with blood that they looked like two *kiṃśuka* trees in bloom (56.4).²⁷ The text then offers an interesting metaphor based on the fact that the maces were made of iron—in Bhīma’s case, steel²⁸—and gave off sprays of sparks when they banged against each other: ‘And as this tremendous and dreadful duel was underway, the sky shone beautifully, as if with clouds of fire-flies.’²⁹ And as

23 9.32.46-48.

24 9.32.49. *mā vṛthā garja kaunteya śāradābhram ivājalam / darśayasva balaṃ yud-dhe yāvat tat te 'dya vidyate.*

25 9.32.50-51. And this was followed in the text by registrations of macrocosmic sympathy: *br̥ṃhanti kuñjarās tatra hayā heṣanti cāsakṛt / śastrāṇi sampradīpyante pāṇḍavānām jayaiṣiṇām* (9.32.52), which are extended when the narrative of the encounter resumes at 9.55.6, after an interruption to recount Balarāma’s Sarasvatī pilgrimage (9.33-53).

26 9.56.1-2.

27 The *kiṃśuka* is the *Butea frondosa*, which is, according to N. L. Bor, ‘[a] small deciduous tree with a crooked trunk [and] ... [on which] scarlet and orange [flowers] ... [occur] in great profusion on the leafless branches. ...’ *Manual of Indian Forest Botany* (Bombay: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, 1953): 92.

28 (Fitzgerald 2000).

29 9.56.5. I follow Ganguli’s undoubtedly correct interpretation of *khadyotasamghair* here, which gets confirmation from *gadasamṣṭajās tatra prajajñuḥ*

the extremely noisy clash continued, both fighters, men who regularly beat their enemies down (*arimḍama*), got tired, and they stopped and caught their breath for a moment. Then the two fierce warriors extended their gleaming clubs, each toward the other, and went at it again. When the Gods and the Gandharvas saw these two tremendous heroes revived and holding their clubs again, each a mighty bull of a man, they were awed—these two boundless heroes were like two furiously rutting elephants fighting over a cow in heat (56.6-9).’

The battle goes on longer and various blows take their toll; the outcome is in doubt until Bhīma strikes a wrongful blow below the waist, shattering Duryodhana’s thigh bones. Bhīma followed this scandalous foul with a display of savagery that is recurrent in his behavior: he taunted the fallen Duryodhana, recalling Duryodhana’s abuse of the Pāṇḍavas’ wife Kṛṣṇā Draupadī, and then he put his left foot on Duryodhana’s head and messed it about, pushing it this way and that (58.3-5), horrifying everyone present. The account of this duel is more extensive and exciting than I can convey here; and as some of you know, Bhīma’s low blow was accomplished after a treacherous signal from his brother Arjuna, who had himself been put up to doing that by the Pāṇḍavas’ cousin and advisor Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva. More on him soon; but we do not have time now to analyze and discuss all these amazing twists in this duel and its aftermath. My purpose in presenting this confrontation has been simply to demonstrate that the *MBh* does indeed display in full measure the sentiments of self-assertion and honor with which Bowra concerned himself.

Bowra’s work is a comparative discussion. He observed that his ‘conception of the hero and of heroic prowess is widely spread, and despite its different settings and manifestations shows the same main characteristics, which agree with what the Greeks say of their heroes.’ Further, a culture that ‘believes in the pursuit of honour will naturally wish to express its admiration in a poetry of action and adventure, of bold endeavours and noble

pāvākārciṣaḥ at 9.57.24. (Ganguli and Roy 1997, vol. 3, p. 155).

examples' (*ibid.*, 2-3). But when it comes to the epic poetry of India, Bowra judged that in the Indian epics 'a truly heroic foundation is overlaid with much literary and theological matter (*ibid.*, v).' Thus, neither the *MBh* nor the *Rāmāyaṇa* were included in Bowra's survey, for they were, he said, 'not strictly heroic.' His decision makes sense given the way he restricted his topic; that decision also saved him a whole lot of work!³⁰

But the *MBh* did more than obscure its heroic foundation with literary and theological matter. It called heroic action and its grisly spawn, warfare, into question harshly, and it championed a more complex notion of virtue, one with some ideals that were the direct opposite of manly self-assertion. The eldest of the Pāṇḍava victors, Yudhiṣṭhira, who could now claim the kingship of the Bharatas, was deeply shocked by the grotesque violence of the internecine war. Upon overseeing the cremation of all the warriors killed in battle, Yudhiṣṭhira rejected attempts to congratulate him upon his victory and condemned the fundamental ethos of martial self-assertion and its violence.

Damn the way of *kṣatriyas*! Damn the power of the mighty chest!
Damn the unforgiving stubbornness (*amaṛṣa*) that brought us to this disaster!
Good are the tolerance, self-control, sincerity, harmonious disposition (*avairodhya*), unselfishness (*amatsara*), harmlessness (*ahimsā*), and truthful speech that are the constant traits of those who dwell in the forest. But we, because of our greed (*lobha*) and our

30 An apt remark of the younger Adolf Holtzmann comes to mind (apt, that is, for those who have not grown up with the *MBh*): 'The work is really incredibly large and does not recommend itself for doctoral dissertations; anyone looking for quick success and recognition, should stay away from the *Mahābhārata*, which requires years of work to read through it the first time. But even less inviting are the difficulties that the poem's peculiar inner design entails; we shall now move on to the presentation of these.' ('Das Werk ist wirklich unglaublich gross und empfiehlt sich nicht für Doctordissertationen; wer rasch Erfolg und Anerkennung sucht, bleibe dem *Mahābhārata* ferne, dessen erstes einmaliges Durchlesen eine jahrelange Arbeit erfordert. Aber noch viel weniger einladend sind die Schwierigkeiten, welche die eigenthümliche innere Gestaltung des Gedichtes mit sich bringt und zu deren Darstellung wir nun übergehen wollen.') (1892, 5).

wrong-headedness (*moha*)³¹, were proud and stubbornly arrogant (*stambhaṃ mānaṃ ca saṃśritāḥ*). We have been brought to this condition by our desire to possess the trifling kingdom. But now that we have seen our kinsmen who pursued that prize lying dead upon the ground, no one could make us rejoice at being king, not even with being king of all the three worlds. (12.7.5-8)

To get a piece of the earth we completely abandoned men who were equal to the earth, men whom we should never have killed. And now we live on, but our kinsmen are dead and our wealth is exhausted. (12.7.9)

He continued with a grievous insult aimed at heroic self-assertion:

We are not dogs! But just like dogs we greedily went after a piece of meat! Now our piece of meat is gone. And so are those who would have eaten it. We should never have given up on those whom we killed! Not for the entire earth, not for heaps of gold, not for every cow and horse there is! (12.7.10-11)

And then he offered a moving lament for all the young warriors throughout all time who have been sacrificed on the altar of war:

Full of desire and passion and anger and indignation, they climbed up on the wagon of Death (*mṛtyuyāna*) and went to the house of the lord of the dead, Yama Vaivasvata. Seeking great prosperity, fathers work to get sons by performing ascetic vows, periods of continence, praising Gods with hymns, making sacrifices to Gods [and the like]... Mothers receive the embryos and bear them for ten months,

31 The word *moha* is often translated as 'confusion' or 'bewilderment,' but often it refers to having an erroneous view of things without having any inkling that something is wrong. In discussions of the quest for ultimate beatitude or release (*mokṣa*) the best translation often is 'fundamental error.'

thinking 'If they are born all right, and if when born they survive, and if when nourished they are vigorous, they should give us comfort in this world and the next'; so say those poor wretches, driven by their hope for some benefit. But when their sons are cut down and go to the house of Yama Vaivasvata while they are still young men wearing shining earrings, before they have experienced the privileges lords of the earth enjoy, before they have discharged their debts to their ancestors and the Gods, then this entire enterprise of the parents is frustrated and bears no fruit. At their birth their mother and father were filled with desires for them, but then, when they have become handsome and strong princes, they are cut down, full of desire, passion, anger, and exhilaration. Never in any way did they realize any fruit from their births. (12.7.12-19)

He and the other survivors will suffer in hell because of what they have done here.

The Pāñcālas and Kurus who were killed, and those of us who were not, shall all go to the lowest of worlds because of what we have done. (12.7.20)³²

This heartfelt diatribe and moving lament came just before Yudhiṣṭhira rejected outright the kingship which the Pāṇḍava victory had earned for him. He wanted to retire to the wilderness for the rest of his life, where he would not be tempted to behave in warlike ways ever again. He wanted to live there like an ascetic and expiate his grievous sins. The third-born Pāṇḍava brother Arjuna could take over the kingdom in his stead.

32 My translation of 12.7.5-20, modified and adapted from (Fitzgerald 2004, 180-81).

The Pāṇḍavization of an ancient *Bhārata*

While it may seem rather strange that this kṣatriya prince in his mid-thirties, a man long trained in weapons and warfare, a man who had been involved in a number of bloody battles in his earlier lifetime, a man who had earlier launched a bid for universal kingship—whose very name means something like ‘steadfast in battle’—would lose heart after having put himself and so many others through the grotesque ordeal of the great war. But this spasm of guilt and grief is intrinsic to the character of Yudhiṣṭhira as developed by the poets of the *MBh* and was integral to the drama of the new epic story in which Yudhiṣṭhira was to star.

Yudhiṣṭhira and his four Pāṇḍava brothers were designed by brilliant brahmin poets who found themselves working in what I believe was an ancient oral epic tradition of *Bhārata* poetry. As I have argued elsewhere, I think there was an earlier form of our *Bhārata* epic that did not know the five Pāṇḍavas—a popular oral narrative tradition that basically sang tales of the intrigues and wars of the Kuru-Bharatas against their neighbors to the southeast, the Pañcālas. While several of the protagonists of our *MBh* were known to Vedic literature before the latter half of the first millennium BCE,³³ the Pāṇḍavas were not. Is there any better explanation than postulating that the putative *Bhārata* epic of an earlier age simply did not know them? The logical corollary of that, then, is that the epic with the Pāṇḍavas at its center, what I call the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata*, is a radical transformation of that earlier epic saga. As some of you will recognize, my view here is similar to the ‘inversion theory’ of the *MBh* put forward by the Holtzmanns a hundred and twenty years ago, though my argument is fundamentally different.³⁴

33 (Witzel 2005).

34 See (Brockington 1998, 43 and 45). I agree with the gist of the younger Holtzmann’s generalization, ‘An ingenious poet took one particular narrative out of available saga-materials and formed it into an independent work of art, the *Mahābhārata*, in its oldest form’ (1892, 67; translated from the German). As were many scholars of his day, the younger Holtzmann was partial to ideals of heroic action like those Bowra described. Such sentiments led him to be favorably impressed by the noble consistency of character in Duryodhana (and Karṇa and Aśvatthāman); likewise,

If my earlier conjectures about the history of the text are correct, the Brahminically educated poets now working in the *Bhārata* epic tradition intended to make an argument for a brahmin-centered view of polity and society to an audience the brahmins had not previously addressed in ancient India—the public at large. Accustomed to addressing only other brahmins or other members of the Aryan community, the brahmins who took up the *Bhārata* tradition of public narrative were now addressing the wide and diverse audience that had existed for the old oral *Bhārata*.³⁵ (This is the reason this new form of the epic eventually came to be called the Veda of women and śūdras, two kinds of people excluded from the Veda.) With a keen

he was scandalized by Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva's unscrupulous behavior and ignoble counsel to the Pāṇḍavas (*Das Mahābhārata*, 78-88) and by the Pāṇḍavas themselves. Holtzmann saw Yudhiṣṭhira as effete, arrogant, and self-servingly preening (*ibid.*, 70), as well as frequently pusillanimous and duplicitous; the frequently brave Arjuna would take Kṛṣṇa's cunning advice reluctantly and then whine and complain about it afterward (76). Holtzmann might have quoted Balarāma's summation of the duel of Bhīma and Duryodhana as an emblem of his understanding of the original tale: 'Since he killed the righteous Suyodhana [= Duryodhana] in a wrongful way (*adharmeṇa*), the Pāṇḍava (Bhīmasena) will become famous in the world as "a crooked fighter." And the righteous king Duryodhana will traverse the everlasting way (to heaven). The king was killed as he fought the right way, that king, the son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra.' 9.59.23-24. (*hatvādharmeṇa rājānaṃ dharmātmānaṃ suyodhanam / jihmayodhīti loke 'smin khyātiṃ yāsyati pāṇḍavaḥ // 23 // duryodhano 'pi dharmātmā gatiṃ yāsyati śāśvatīm / rjuyodhī hato rājā dhārtarāṣṭro narādhipaḥ // 24*. Duryodhana is labeled *dharmātmā*, 'righteous,' twice in 9.59.23-24! This stanza is the only place in the Critical Edition and its apparatus where that happens.) Another of Holtzmann's hermeneutic anchor-points was that he was deeply offended by the Brahminic glorification and divinization of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva in the later *MBh* (*ibid.*, 10, 14, 93, etc.). Holtzmann thus saw the text as a tendentious reworking of an originally Buddhist-inspired epic by Vaiṣṇava brahmins. By my hypotheses, the nobility of Duryodhana may well have been prominent in an ancient Kuru-Pāṇḍava *Bhārata* (Gitomer re-raised these issues as well: (1992, 222-25)); and his predicated demonization (as the Asura Kali) was a component of the Vaiṣṇava master-narrative of the relieving of the Earth's burden in the *Mahā-Bhārata*. But that *Bhārata* was not a Buddhist-inspired epic (as Holtzmann thought), and though the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* that superseded it was brahmin-inspired, it was not yet the Vaiṣṇava apocalyptic narrative of the *Mahā-Bhārata*. It would be of great interest to follow Holtzmann's example and launch a fine-grained review of all the behavior of the epic's villains and heroes—Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva and Yudhiṣṭhira in particular (see Gitomer, *ibid.*, 232).

35 See (Fitzgerald 2010b, 104-5) for my brief paraphrase of Richard Martin's brilliant characterization of the genre of epic poetry found in his (2005).

sense of the fascination and persuasive power that tales of the deeds of Gods can have, these poets transformed the old epic story by weaving into it new protagonists who were the offspring of Gods and who would establish the rule of a properly *brahmanya* king, that is, a king respectful of the Vedas and guided by the brahmins who knew and used the Vedas—a new Pṛthu, the mythic king whom brahmins had fashioned from the body of his evil father Vena after they killed him in rage.³⁶ Under the bad king Vena there had flourished a general confusion of the orders of society—*varṇasaṃkara*, which refers to the breakdown of the social roles people should fulfill, not just to the biological mixing of different groups. *Varṇasaṃkara* was a Brahminic way of describing the cosmopolitanism of the Nandan and Mauryan empires and the religions that successfully institutionalized under their rule. These did not recognize the Brahminic layering of society. Of course the most important feature of their not seeing those layers was the doing away with the special inherited status of brahmins. One of the principal effects of this cosmopolitanism was that men who did not know or honor the Vedas were lavishly funded by princes and wealthy patrons, to the lasting humiliation and impoverishment of brahmins whose identities and livelihoods were tied to knowing and using the Vedas. The eldest of the new Pāṇḍava protagonists, Yudhiṣṭhira, would preside over a war-party of the Gods led by the sons of Gods as it purged the corrupt princes of the central heartland represented by the old Bharata Kurus—and then establish a new *brahmanya* reign as a new Pṛthu.

This story and its underlying argument seems to have enjoyed great success across much of South Asia in the centuries following its invention, and one reason for that would have been that its main protagonists were new manifestations of the marvelous Gods who fathered them. Bhīmasena, the second oldest, is the son of the Wind God and constantly amazes with

³⁶ This story is told to Yudhiṣṭhira at 12.59.94-132 (Fitzgerald 2004, 309-11). Yudhiṣṭhira had asked Bhīṣma what entitled one ordinary man to be 'king' over others, 12.59.5-12 (Fitzgerald, *ibid.*, 304-05).

his raw power and his often stunning savagery.³⁷ The third oldest, Arjuna, amazes with his lightning fast skills as a warrior and his sexy attractiveness—he is the son of Indra, who was a God of both war and fertility in the Vedas. Yudhiṣṭhira embodies the terrible violence of the king who wields the *daṇḍa*, the ‘stick,’ the ‘rod of force’—he is the son of the God Dharma—a God who is the same as the lord of the dead,³⁸ Yama Dharmarāja, who seems

37 See (Gitomer 1991), for a discussion of the complexity of Bhīma Pāṇḍava.

38 That is the case in most of the thirty or so instances where an anthropomorphized divinity named Dharma appears in the *MBh* in one embodiment or another (it is not always easy to judge when ‘*dharma*’ refers to this being). There are some instances (5 clear ones) where the deity ‘Dharma’ is clearly distinct from Yama (1.160.3; 7.172.51; 9.44.15; 12.192.3, 321.08), but there are numerous others in which the identity of Yama and Dharma is quite clear (including two narratives [the story of Aṇīmāṇḍavya’s curse of Dharma in 1.101 and King Somaka’s intercession with the Dharmarāja on behalf of his damned priest]; the account of the young wife Sāvitrī’s recovering her dead husband’s soul from Yama [see 3.277-83] never identifies Yama as ‘Dharma,’ but Sāvitrī’s colloquy with the God in 3.281 contains many plays upon the name Yama and also invokes ‘*dharma*’ repeatedly with possible *double-entendres*), even though, as Madeleine Biardeau correctly noted, ‘Nowhere in the epic is it said that the God Dharma is identical to Yama, the lord of death’ (Biardeau 1994, 156). E.W. Hopkins was forced to admit that the identity is sometimes clear, though he strained unwarrantedly to keep the two figures apart; ‘The epic scarcely knows Yama as Dharma, but always calls him Dharmarāja or Dharmendra (7.6.6 [= CE 7.5.26c var. in Ś₁ K_{1-3.5} B₂₋₅ Dc Dn1 D_{1-5.7.8}; JF]), except in one tale [Aṇīmāṇḍavya] ...’ But he is aware that ‘Dharma in post-epical literature is constantly used for Yama;’ (Hopkins 1915, 115). On this last point see too Biardeau, *ibid.*, 156, n. 14. Sørensen saw that Dharma was ‘sometimes co-ordinate to Yama;’ (1904, 241). Dhṛtarāṣṭra offers Duryodhana an interesting evocation of Yudhiṣṭhira’s connection to death at 5.63.3: ‘You cannot know ... Yudhiṣṭhira... without facing your last journey,’ *yudhiṣṭhiram hi kaunteyam param dharmam ihāsthitam / parām gatim asampreksya na tvam vettum ihārhasi //*. At 7.5.26, in a listing of four major holy figures, Yama is styled *pitṛṇām dharmah*; (*vasiṣṭha iva viprāṇām tejasām iva bhāskarah / pitṛṇām iva dharmo ‘tha ādityānām ivāmburāt*). There are some instances in the epic where manifestations of the God Dharma are somewhat or completely detached from the trappings of death, on his way to, or already arrived at, representing an abstract principle of justice or goodness: somewhat detached in the narratives at 12.126 and 264 and completely detached in 12.163-67 (as the long-legged bird called Rājadharmā) and 12.192.3, 256.5, 322.2, 326.13, 332.19, 335.1; 14.32, 92-93, 96. A curious statement by Vyāsa about the shared nature of Vidura and Yudhiṣṭhira (after Vidura died by merging into Yudhiṣṭhira) compares the universality of *dharma* to that of the five elements (15.35.19-20; quoted and translated below in the section ‘The goodness of Vidura joins that of Yudhiṣṭhira’).

the spiritual heir of the ancient divine sovereign Varuṇa.³⁹ He is the terrestrial manifestation of the divine Yama Dharmarāja, the ‘guardian of *dharma*,’ the king who passes judgment on the goodness or badness of people’s deeds, and sends some to their death by judicial execution and confiscates the property of, or banishes, others. The king’s ‘*daṇḍa*’ is a characteristic emblem of the God Yama, Yudhiṣṭhira’s father, and its other terrestrial manifestation is the king’s army. When the king wages war he ushers some, or many, of his own subjects as well as his enemy’s subjects into the next world. There is a good old word to describe the role of this conductor of a dying soul between this world and the afterworld, ‘psychopomp’; and we shall see that Yudhiṣṭhira functions as a psychopomp on several important occasions in the narrative. Art does not get much more thrilling than when it tells the doings of the fearsome God who presides over the journey people make between this life and what comes next.⁴⁰ The divine conductor of the

39 As well-noted by David White, Yama shares a number of traits with the sovereign, omniscient and punitive divine king Varuṇa. They both used the lariat and the club and both were accompanied from time to time by dogs; (White 1989, 293, n. 38).

40 Dramatizations of the passage between terrestrial life and whatever is imagined to follow it are consistently, and in many places and eras, some of the most popular narrative themes of myth, literature, drama, and film. The *MBh* has several famous scenes in which the herdsman or conductor of dying souls turns up to take charge of someone and lead him away. One of these is the cherished episode (3.277-83, mentioned above in note 38) in which the princess Sāvitrī saves her husband Satyavan with moving praise of Yama and of Righteousness (*dharma*). A less elaborate and less famous instance of recovering one’s mate from the Lord of the Dead occurs in a round of stories the *MBh*’s bard, Ugraśravas, told his audience Śaunaka and his forest brahmins before he started in on the *MBh*. The abbot Śaunaka had asked to hear about his Bhārgava ancestors, so the bard told him the story of Ruru Bhārgava. Ruru’s intended bride, Pramadvarā, was killed by snakebite a few days before their wedding. In his terrible grief Ruru believed that his accumulated virtue could bring the girl back to life. But an angel—an exact translation of *devadūta* (‘messenger of the Gods’) here—told him Pramadvarā’s life was over. But the angel went on to tell him the Gods had devised a means for her to come back to life. Ruru jumped at the offer and was told that his bride could live, if he would offer half his own life-energy to her. He readily agreed. The girl’s father was the king of the Gandharvas, handsome celestial musicians and heart-throbs, the ‘rock-stars’ of the ancient Indian *imaginaire*. So the King of the Gandharvas and Ruru’s angel-friend went together before the Dharmarāja, that is, Yama, and formally requested that he raise the girl up with half of Ruru’s life. The Dharmarāja assented and that happened. Unlike Romeo and Juliet, Ruru and Pramadvarā each lived half a happy life and they engendered a baby named Puppy Dog (Śunaka), who was the

dying frequently quizzed and tested his captives as the two of them went along, so that the Dharmarāja could determine whether the person should be led to heaven or hell. We shall see that the poets of the *MBh* turned the tables on Yudhiṣṭhira more than once as he was poised in the space between this life and the next one.

Besides the five Pāṇḍavas, these poets wrote other deities into the text, including a direct incarnation of the Goddess Śrī, also known as Lakṣmī,⁴¹ who was born as the princess of the Pāñcālas from the earthen fire-altar at a Vedic sacrifice her father sponsored. There was also the direct incarnation of the God Dharma as uncle Vidura of the Bharatas. And there were some others whom we must pass over here, such as Karṇa, the son of the Sun-God. Lastly, to these divinities and divine offspring, they added a principle of dark or hidden energy, *kṛṣṇatva*, which, by the time of its full development and deployment, was operative in three different characters in the epic, each of whom had the name Kṛṣṇa. First was the incarnation of the Goddess Śrī, the Pāñcālī princess, whose name was Kṛṣṇā (better known as Draupadī), who became the one wife common to the five Pāṇḍavas. Second was the new seer of the Vedas, Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa, who contributed his seed to two childless Bharata widows and fathered three sons for the Bharata dynasty: uncle Vidura, King Pāṇḍu, 'the Pale,' and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the congenitally blind man who, by default, stood at the helm of the Bharata dynasty through the main events of the *MBh*. Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa unexpectedly turned up in the narrative from time to time and imparted critically important advice to the Pāṇḍava brothers. Lastly, there was Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, a maternal cousin of the Pāṇḍavas, who, in the course of the development of the *MBh*, came to be seen as a direct incarnation of the supreme lord of all creation, Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa. Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva allied himself to the Pāṇḍavas in the war as a non-combatant advisor, and as such he

father, or an ancestor, of the abbot Śaunaka.

41 1.61.95-97. See too 1.189.20-40 for an explanation of the polyandry (all the five Pāṇḍavas had, in the course of many eons, existed in the form of the God Indra, the original consort of the Goddess Śrī-Lakṣmī).

devised a number of dark tactics, ‘crooked stratagems’ (*jihmopāyas*), that ensured the Pāṇḍava victory. (Kṛṣṇa’s suggesting to Bhīma, via Arjuna, that Bhīma smash his mace into Duryodhana below the belt was one of them.) This assembly of *kṛṣṇa* characters was a covert-counterpart to the overt war-party of the Gods formed by the five Pāṇḍavas, whose very name alludes to their being ‘bright’ and ‘clear.’ There is a clear tension across the *MBh* narrative between agents who are out front and in the open and the *kṛṣṇa* agents whose influence is more obscure, off to the side or oblique. This tension is similar to a regular oscillation in the epic narrative, in which the Pāṇḍavas are sometimes visible in the public space and then absent from it as the tale moves forward.⁴² This oscillation and the broader theme

42 From the point of view of the Bhārata capital, the Pāṇḍavas appeared suddenly from nowhere, having been born high up in the Himālayas, on the outskirts of heaven, whence they descended to Hāstīnapura and required various seers to vouch for their paternity. Their emergence was followed before long by their occultation when everyone thought they were killed in a fire at Vāraṇāvata. Having escaped Duryodhana’s fire-trap, they went into hiding, only to emerge again into plain sight with their marriage to the princess of the Pāñcālas, Kṛṣṇā Draupadī. Yudhiṣṭhira then waxed mightily in a grand display of power and splendor at a rite affirming a kind of imperial rule (*sāmrājya*) only to subject himself and his family to enslavement to the Kauravas by his being outplayed in a dicing match at the conclusion of the rite. This fate was commuted into twelve years’ exile and one year of complete hiding as a result of its legality being challenged by Kṛṣṇā Draupadī, who cast Yudhiṣṭhira into deeper shade in doing so. The Pāṇḍavas emerged from this long obscurity to win the war, at the end of which Yudhiṣṭhira, overheated and glowing with a surfeit of grief (*śoka*), sat for many days of ‘cooling instruction’ (*praśamana*) from the incarnate form of the God ‘Father Sky’ (‘Dyauḥ Pitā’), ‘Grandfather’ Bhīṣma, who lay fading away to death at the approaching winter solstice (see Fitzgerald 2004, 98–99). Cooled down, Yudhiṣṭhira ruled for thirty-six years, turned the kingdom over to the only Pāṇḍava descendent, Arjuna’s grandson, Parikṣit, whose very name refers to his having been born dead (*parikṣiṇa*; he was then revived by Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva), and then led his family on the trek up toward heaven which was concluded with a final back and forth between the darkness of hell and the light of heaven (see below in the text around and between notes 78 and 86). In (Fitzgerald 2010a): 81-86, I wrote that the *MBh*’s ‘juxtaposition between the “bright” and the “dark,”’ including the Pāṇḍavas’ periods of occultation and public appearance, ‘seems based ultimately in the stunning chiaroscuro of the heavens, particularly the profound celestial display of the moon across every four weeks.’ This idea follows up on some of Georg von Simson’s interesting suggestions of celestial phenomena influencing the *MBh*’s poets (1984), (1994), and his quite persuasive (2009), in which he took a cue from (Kirfel 1959, 147).

of the darkness, the obscurity (*kṛṣṇatva*, ‘being dark or black’), of the Kṛṣṇa characters contributes a strong apocalyptic dimension to the *MBh*. At least in its final form, this epic is a narrative of the surprising apocalypse, that is, disclosure, of the divine agency of the supreme God Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa who has been active in all events, but in a veiled way.

I think the presence of these divine agents in the text was the jet fuel that powered the new *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* for its audiences, making it into a highly popular and persuasive story tradition, one that got put into writing sometime in the first c. BCE. I suspect the *MBh* persuaded many princes to adopt its *brahmaṇya* ideology and support brahmins because many of their subjects were intrigued and awed by the various forms of divine energy written into the text—both ‘the one-fourth part’ that was expressed overtly in the narrative, and—to borrow a meme from the RV—‘the three-fourths of it’ which lay hidden in the world beyond.⁴³ The brahmins still kept their Vedas secret, but in the *MBh* they offered the whole public a striking history of Gods in action on earth.

Yudhiṣṭhira between life and death

Yudhiṣṭhira is the central character of the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata*, and the epic poets derive a great deal of dramatic tension from his being regularly poised on the threshold of life and death—both as a king and as a psychopomp guiding souls between this life and the next. The epic poets also represented this liminality by associating him with two theriomorphic forms of death, the dog and the giant stork,⁴⁴ and at two critical points of the narrative the poets use Yudhiṣṭhira’s acting as a psychopomp to give goodness a language.

43 An allusion to the description of God in RV 10.90.3: *etāvān asya mahimāto jyāyāṃś ca pūruṣaḥ / pādo ’sya viśvā bhūtāni tripād asyāmṛtaṃ divī* (‘So much is his greatness, but the Man is more than this: a quarter of him is all living beings; three quarters are the immortal in heaven,’ (Jamison and Brereton 2014, 1539).

44 The two-meter tall Indian ‘Adjutant’ Stork, *Leptopilos dubius*; sometimes referred to as *kaṅka*, sometimes as *baka*. See (Fitzgerald 1998).

The son of Dharma's persona is intrinsically twofold: brutal and gruesome violence was inherent to his nature as a king (the *yama*,⁴⁵ 'restraint, rope, fetter,' that is his essence) and necessary for establishing right order and prosperity on the earth. But it was also necessary that the king know the right and be righteous (the *dharma* at his essence, his being *dharmātman*, 'righteous, virtuous'), so that he could exercise justly his awesome power to move people from this life to the next.⁴⁶ The *dharma* side of Yudhiṣṭhira's nature grew into a deep ambivalence, even a profound hostility, toward the violence called for by his role, some of which I just quoted for you.⁴⁷ Another developmental conjecture I make is to suggest that the epic poets extended and qualitatively changed the inherent righteousness of the terrestrial

45 Recall that the word *yama* was a homonym for the name of the lord of the dead, Yama, whose name had the basic meaning 'twin.' Yama was the son of the Sun (Vivasvat) and 'the first father of mankind and the first of those that died' (Macdonell 1917, 212), and *Ṛg Veda* 10.97.16 pleads for release from Yama's 'shackle' (Jamison and Brereton 2014, vol. 3, p. 1554), *pāḍbīśa* (literally a 'foot-fetter'), a kind of '*yama*.' Yama and his twin sister Yamī reach back into India's shared cultural past with Iran; in *Ṛg Veda* 10.10 Yama resists the incestuous overtures of his sister. See (Jamison and Brereton 2014, vol. 3, pp. 1381–1383).

46 Obviously kingship and conducting the dying are closely related offices, and knowledge of what is right and violence are common to both. The august sovereignty of the ancient God Varuṇa and his intrinsic connection with *ṛtá* ('true, real, right') and his association with death also loom in the background of Yudhiṣṭhira's story. See F.B.J. Kuiper's interesting survey and discussion (1979), especially pages 67–74.

47 Another instance of antipathy to warfare is Yudhiṣṭhira's proposal before the war, to drop his claim to his half of the kingdom and accept just one single village for each of the five Pāṇḍava brothers (5.31.18–23). But on the other hand, Yudhiṣṭhira is intransigently belligerent at the end of the battle. When only four members of Duryodhana's party were still alive and Duryodhana himself was hiding in the waters of a lake, Yudhiṣṭhira refused to let Duryodhana cede the kingdom without further struggle and retire to the forest (9.30.41–50). Having averred to Kṛṣṇa that Duryodhana would not escape him alive (*na me jīvan vimokṣyate*, 9.30.4d) and emphasizing *kṣatradharma* and its self-assertiveness, Yudhiṣṭhira characterized Duryodhana's proposal as an unacceptable gifting of the kingdom to him (9.30.52–55). Furthermore, if both Yudhiṣṭhira and Duryodhana remained alive after the war, 'Everyone would doubt we had won' (*āvayor jīvato rājan mayi ca tvayi dhruvam / saṁśayaḥ sarvabhūtānāṃ vijaye no bhaviṣyati*, 9.30.64). But then, when Duryodhana agreed to come out of the water and fight for the kingdom, Yudhiṣṭhira shockingly offered that he should face but one Pāṇḍava in single combat and if he prevailed the kingdom would be his (9.31.25)! The one trait shared by these three decisions of Yudhiṣṭhira is a penchant for paradoxical self-denial.

Dharmarāja by introducing new developments in the sense of *dharma* into the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* by way of the later-added, direct incarnation of the God Dharma as uncle Vidura (see below in ‘Vidura brings the God Dharma directly into the epic narrative’).

As the *Book of the Beginning* of the *MBh* story, the *Ādiparvan*, came to its end Yudhiṣṭhira was a king,⁴⁸ but only half the king he should have been. The tension between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍava ‘interlopers’ flared up when the Pāṇḍavas reappeared after their presumed death in the fire-trap at Vāraṇāvata and won the hand of the Pāñcāla princess Kṛṣṇā. But that tension was brought to a standstill when the Bharatas invited the Pāṇḍavas (now firmly allied to the Pāñcālas by marriage) to return home and then divided the ancestral Bhārata kingdom in half—with the Kauravas resident in the ancestral ‘City of the Elephant,’ Hāstinapura, and the Pāṇḍavas now established in the newly fashioned city ‘Indra’s Station,’ Indraprastha, in the Khāṇḍava tract.⁴⁹ But the poets of the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* wanted Yudhiṣṭhira to be king of the entire Bharata kingdom seated at Hāstinapura and that could happen only if the Kauravas withdrew or were vanquished. The tension between the phratries intensified to irreconcilable alienation, a great war was fought between them and their multitudes of allies, and the victorious Yudhiṣṭhira did become king of the Bharatas.⁵⁰ The story leading up to his accession to the throne saw Yudhiṣṭhira suspended from his kingly duties for thirteen years before then being engaged in them furiously for the eighteen days of the war and then threatening to desert them altogether, forever, before finally acquiescing to a multitude of arguments for the rightness of kingship.

48 1.200.6: ‘After he gained the kingdom, the highly energetic Yudhiṣṭhira, who always honored his agreements, guarded the earth Righteously, along with his brothers,’ *prāpya rājyaṃ mahātejāḥ satyasaṃdho yudhiṣṭhiraḥ / pālayām āsa dharmeṇa pṛthivīm bhrātr̥bhiḥ saha.*

49 1.199.26ff.

50 The *abhiṣeka*, ‘sprinkling,’ of Yudhiṣṭhira’s coronation took place at 12.40; see (Fitzgerald 2004, 259–60).

One chapter of this story sees the king at Indraprastha, Yudhiṣṭhira, seek imperial ‘over-kingship’ (*sāmrājya*⁵¹) of all lands, including that of the Bharatas, through the Royal Consecration Ritual (Rājasūya)—a kind of narrative doubling of the theme of making Yudhiṣṭhira king. The main drama leading up to the great war, and the war itself, occur as a consequence of this ambitious ritual, as Yudhiṣṭhira actually lost the ritualized dicing match that normally concluded the successful Rājasūya.⁵² Yudhiṣṭhira’s loss at the dice resulted in the five Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī being suspended in limbo for thirteen years—required to wander the wilderness for twelve and then live in undiscovered seclusion for one more—an occultation that itself obviously resembles death.

Yudhiṣṭhira’s state of suspense during these thirteen years—to be followed by the extraordinary eighteen days of the great war—is foreshadowed in a story told about his divine father in *The Book of the Beginning*. As the Gods carried out a sacrifice, Yama took a busman’s holiday from his usual office of rounding up those destined for death in order that he might serve as the *śamitr* priest at that sacrifice—the *śamitr* was the priest who smothered the animal to be sacrificed and then butchered it. But as a result of Yama’s neglect of his usual office, there was effectively no difference between Gods and humans and the Gods were offended at that. The universal Creator God, Brahmā, then assured those Gods that human beings’ reprieve from death was entirely temporary, that after Yama had fulfilled all his responsibilities in the rite, ‘he will then become the death of them (mortal beings)’ as he takes the form of manly heroism (*vīrya*).⁵³ Though this story is merely a

51 Another echo of Varuṇa; see Kuiper, *ibid.*, 26.

52 I take my cue here from the brilliant essay on the structure of the *Sabhāparvan* by my teacher, Hans van Buitenen, published in the Festschrift for his teacher, Professor Jan Gonda (van Buitenen 1972).

53 ‘Brahmā said: That son of the Brilliantly Shining Sun (Vivasvat; hence Yama is “Vaivasvata”) is pre-occupied because of that sacrifice, so mortals are not dying. He is concentrated on this task alone for now, but when he has fulfilled all his responsibilities in the rite he will then become the death of them.’ *brahmovāca: vaivasvato vyāpṛtaḥ satrahetos tena tv ime na mriyante manuṣyāḥ / tasminn ekāgre kṛtasarvakārye tata eṣāṃ bhavitaivāntakālaḥ // 1.189.7*. Brahmā went on to tell them

mythic analog to Yudhiṣṭhira's eventually presiding over the heroic slaughter of the great Bhārata war, the alternation of suspension and engagement in both is interesting. There is another facet to the parallelism between Yudhiṣṭhira and Yama here. The dicing game was sometimes used to pick the unfortunate man who would serve as the *śamitṛ* in the rite; the loser was designated 'the dog,' and would sometimes himself be killed as a kind of scapegoat.⁵⁴

And there is another theriomorphic representation of Yudhiṣṭhira presiding over the mass slaughter of the war. During the Pāṇḍavas' stipulated year of incognito resulting from the king's loss at the dice, Yudhiṣṭhira took the ironic role in King Virāṭa's court of a gamesman fond of and expert at dicing.⁵⁵ And he also took the name *Kaṅka*. As a common noun, the word *kaṅka* refers to some stilt-legged birds, including the large Adjutant Stork (*Leptopilos Dubius*) that stands almost two meters tall. Interestingly this stork feeds upon carrion when available (other storks, and cranes and herons, do not). This fact takes on significance when we notice that the *MBh* tells us that the *kaṅka* stork prowled, with other carrion feeders, among the hundreds of thousands of corpses on the ground after the battle—at two meters in height, the *kaṅka* towered over all the other animals feeding upon the dead warriors.⁵⁶ Here is the scene at the end of the war, before

that Yama's participation in the rite would strengthen and invigorate him, and Brahmā then made the interesting prediction that writes Yama directly into the script of the central action of the *MBh*: 'Then Yama's body, his form (*tanu*, a word that plays upon Yama's current attenuation, as *tanu* also means "thin") will have grown much bigger (or, expanded widely; *vibhūtā*) and it will be employed on your behalf through the heroism of princes. That will be the end of them at their time of death—truly the form he will have among men will be their heroism (*vīrya*): *vaivasvatasyāpi tanur vibhūtā vīryeṇa yuṣmākam uta prayuktā / saiṣām anto bhavitā hy antakāle tanur hi vīryaṃ bhavitā nareṣu // 1.189.8.*

54 See (Falk 1986, 11), and (Falk 1984, 14–15). David White, (1989, 285), offers the striking generalization: 'The dog ... is the prime Indo-European theriomorphic representative of death, the lord of the dead, and the path to the land of the dead.' As noted above (note 39), Yama and Varuṇa both make use of dogs. See also Kuiper's discussion of the scapegoat in Vedic ritual and its connection to Varuṇa: (Kuiper 1979, 213–22).

55 4.1.20.

56 (Fitzgerald 1998). See too Fitzgerald, *Mahābhārata*, in particular chapters 16 and

Yudhiṣṭhira performed the funeral rites and had the bodies gathered and burned.

Though she was far away, that lady (Gāndhārī) of deep understanding saw, as if she were right there, the awesome, horrifying field where those heroes among men had battled. It was bestrewn with bones and hair, flooded with streams of blood, and littered on every side with many thousands of bodies—blood-befouled, headless bodies of elephants, horses, and warriors—and bunches of heads without any bodies. It was covered with the lifeless bodies of elephants, horses, and heroes and was a gay party for the man-eating Rākṣasas. It swarmed with jackals, jungle-crows, ravens, Adjutant Storks, house-crows, eagles, and vultures and it resounded with the ghastly howling of the jackals.⁵⁷

The *kaṅka* is a remarkably ugly bird and makes a fitting emblem of the lord of death!

Vidura brings the God Dharma directly into the epic narrative

While Yudhiṣṭhira stood alone as the terrestrial Dharmarāja, his divine parent played a direct role in the epic narrative a number of times. He did so mainly in the form of uncle Vidura, but also several times in animal disguises, some of which we will see below. While Vidura, like Yudhiṣṭhira, was highly knowledgeable of *dharma*⁵⁸ and is thoroughly righteous, *dharmātman*,⁵⁹ he could not be and never was a king. Nonetheless he too frequently operated in the space between life and death.⁶⁰ It was he who first recommended to Dhṛtarāṣṭra to get rid of the malevolent baby Duryodhana, whose birth was

22 of Book 11, pp. 54-57 and 64-65.

57 11.16.4-8; (Fitzgerald 2004, 54-55).

58 1.126.28, 133.18, 2.32.8, 72.27, 3.24.21, 5.87.24, 92.15, 146.17, 9.28.90, 28.92, and 11.9.4.

59 2.52.3, 3.5.1, and 9.2.57.

60 Biardeau was wrong about this aspect of Vidura; see (1994, 156, n. 14).

accompanied by so many evil omens.⁶¹ It was he who was commissioned at the court to perform the funeral obsequies for Pāṇḍu and Mādrī, when their bodies were brought down from the slopes of heaven, where they had died.⁶² When the Pāṇḍavas were sent off to what Duryodhana planned as a fiery death trap in Vāraṇāvata, Vidura saw them off from Hāstīnapura and, speaking in riddles, he gave Yudhiṣṭhira the knowledge he needed to evade death.⁶³ It was Vidura who was sent to lead the Pāṇḍavas back to Hāstīnapura after they resurfaced at Draupadī's *svayamvara* from what all had believed was their death.⁶⁴ On more than one occasion it was Vidura who forecast the vast slaughter that would ensue from Duryodhana's intransigence and Dhṛtarāṣṭra's blind loyalty to his son, and these predictions of his were remembered in the later narrative more than once.⁶⁵

In the body of Vidura the God Dharma entered the epic with all the goodness of *dharma* but without the violence of the king. In fact, the story of Dharma's direct incarnation as Vidura, the son of a śūdra serving-woman, makes a point that the firm-holding of '*dharma*' needed relaxation; that Dharma needed to experience humanity directly to become more than just the tight connection of deed to consequence.

The story of how the God Dharma, lord of the dead, ended up becoming uncle Vidura reveals an important theme in the design of the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata*. A seer named Aṇīmāṇḍavya was wrongfully convicted of theft and unjustly impaled upon a stake. For some reason, that punishment did not kill

61 See 1.107.24-33, especially 28ff.

62 1.118.1-5. This was Pāṇḍu's and Mādrī's second cremation. Mādrī's death at 1.116.31 ('... the glorious good wife, daughter of the king of the Madras, then quickly climbed up onto that bull among men [Pāṇḍu], who was positioned on the funeral pyre,' *ity uktvā taṃ citāgnisthaṃ dharmapatnī naraṣabham / madrarājātmajā tūrṇam anvārohad yaśasvini //*) is the first description of a wife's 'Going-Along-With (her husband into the afterlife),' *sahagamana*, in Sanskrit literature. It was preceded by an argument between her and Pāṇḍu's senior wife, Kuntī, about which of them should have the honor of dying with him, 116.23-29.

63 1.133.19-29. As often, success requires negotiating Yama's cognitive challenges.

64 1.198.4-25.

65 For example, 2.45.41-58, 2.56.1-10, 3.48.41-42, etc; recollections at 6.92.2 and 9.28.27.

him, and he paid a visit to the seat of the God Dharma and quizzed him as he sat upon his throne. He asked the God why he had been punished so unjustly. Dharma answered that it had not been unjust at all: as a boy, the future sage had tormented insects, impaling them upon the shafts of small reeds. Upon receiving this explanation, Aṅīmāṇḍavya cursed the God Dharma to be born as a human in the womb of a śūdra, a person of the non-Aryan society among whom the Aryans had settled. In addition, the sage fixed a norm: he specified that henceforth the deeds of children under the age of fourteen would not be subject to the tight-holding that is *dharma*. That is, there will *not* be a tight correspondence between their misdeeds and the punishments of those misdeeds, because young children simply are not to be held fully responsible for their deeds. So, as a result of the God Dharma's natural strictness in compensating Aṅīmāṇḍavya's childhood sin, the firm holding of *dharma* would henceforth be somewhat relaxed. And additionally, the God Dharma would get a taste of humanity in order to understand the wisdom of that relaxation.⁶⁶

This relaxation is part of a broader trend found in the *MBh* toward attending to the social and psychological facets of observing ethical norms. This trend manifests itself in 'latitudinarian' arguments found in various places in the epic.⁶⁷ One notable manifestation of this trend is advocacy for relaxing the observance of some duties and obligations when there are exigent circumstances. This theme, which came to be called *āpaddharma*, '*dharma*-in-exigent-circumstances,' was sometimes accompanied by biting

66 The central idea of *dharma* is holding firm—that is how the word *dharma* signifies *karman* that is done in this life that can effect good results in the future—by its holding firm across time, even across death. That is how the word *dharma* signifies justice—the firm connection between the quality of a deed done and the quality of its consequence. That is how it signifies law, the firm-holding of people by norms and people's holding firmly to norms and gaining the just efficacy of their doing so. Aṅīmāṇḍavya had suffered a firm connection between his cruel deeds as a child and the cruel punishment of impalement later in life. And, in response, this sage succeeded in imposing a relaxation upon Dharma.

67 See the discussions (at 14.92-96) following the mongoose's excoriation of Yudhiṣṭhira's Horse Sacrifice.

criticism of some of the brahmins who presided over the rule-books of *dharma*, the *dharmasāstras*.⁶⁸ Another manifestation of this trend is an emphasis on behavioral norms that apply to one and all (*sādhāraṇa dharmas*, ‘universal *dharmas*’) as opposed to the norms that are particular to a person’s situation in life—their sex, their caste (*varṇa*), the phase of their life (*āśrama*). Overall, the God Dharma’s direct appearances in the *MBh*, starting with his incarnation in Vidura, complement and amplify the general righteousness inherent in the Dharmarāja and are the major part of the epic’s giving goodness a language.

The *dharma* of Vidura and Yudhiṣṭhira across the epic

The sense of *dharma* embodied in Vidura and then Yudhiṣṭhira had developed from different sources, brahmin and non-brahmin, and came to prevail in public discourse in north-central and northeast India in the fourth c. BCE—it emphasized forms of righteous behavior that were far-removed from the ancient self-assertive aggression of heroes. Kindness, patience, and self-control were praised as virtues in some of the old Vedic texts and later they were also strongly emphasized by the non-Brahmin movements of the Jains and the Buddhists in the fourth c. BCE. The Jains in particular made the value *ahiṃsā*—which is ‘harmlessness in all aspects of one’s behavior’—the most important factor for the ethical evaluation of actions. Holding *ahiṃsā* to be the paramount value seems to have spread from them to the Buddhists and then to the brahmins and, all across the board, helped encourage a greater focus upon the subjective experience of individual persons, a focus that became one of the major threads of all the self-transformative religious regimens that pursued release from suffering and re-birth, especially the teachings of the Buddha and Sāṃkhya-Yoga among the brahmins.⁶⁹ These virtues were promoted by the third c. Mauryan emperor Aśoka in edicts he published across nearly the entire sub-continent. All

68 See my discussion in the introduction to my translation of the *Śāntiparvan* (Fitzgerald 2004, 152–64) and my remarks in Fitzgerald forthcoming 2020. Mordant criticism of the *dharmasāstra* tradition for narrow mean-spiritedness is found at 12.139-140 and for cruelly hypocritical circularity at 12.254.49.

69 Adapted and quoted from Fitzgerald forthcoming 2020.

these traditions advocated these and similar values such as tolerance and generosity, in a fundamental way. In the Brahmin tradition these are the universal virtues, the *sādhāraṇa dharmas*. Yudhiṣṭhira was a regular exemplar and advocate of these virtues; he is typically described as ‘thoroughly righteous’ (*dharmātman*), and stressing this fact is one of the epic’s points of emphasis. Yudhiṣṭhira is certainly not perfect in these terms at all times, but his lapses from these ideals were strategically designed to call extra attention to them.⁷⁰

The *MBh* challenges heroic self-assertiveness and advocates this more complex configuration of social and personal virtue in the course of many conversations and speeches embedded within the epic narrative. Most of the substance of this argument comes from the mouths of Vidura and Yudhiṣṭhira, the two figures in the epic who are both embodiments of the principle of Right (*dharma*), who are forms of the God Dharma. Uncle Vidura, like Yudhiṣṭhira, favored the newer righteousness and peaceableness, resisting selfishness and discord at every juncture. This consistent message becomes a basic feature of the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata*.

70 Yudhiṣṭhira is frequently characterized as ‘honoring his contracts,’ *satyasam̐dha*, and his two major ethical violations are sins that violate the integrity of interpersonal communication. Yudhiṣṭhira suborned his half-uncle Śalya’s betrayal of Karṇa (5.8), demanding Śalya undermine Karṇa’s morale as he faced Arjuna in their final mortal combat. And Yudhiṣṭhira played the crucial part in telling the teacher Droṇa the lie that undermined his willingness to fight (Bhīma killed an elephant named Aśvatthāman and then told Droṇa that his son Aśvatthāman had been killed in battle; when Droṇa trustingly asked Yudhiṣṭhira to know the truth, Yudhiṣṭhira confirmed to Droṇa that ‘Aśvatthāman’ had been slain, adding the word ‘elephant’ under his breath) (7.164.71-74 and 7.164.97-110). The fact that Droṇa is portrayed elsewhere as pointing the way for this tactic to be used against him alters nothing (6.41.60-61: ‘Not a one of your warriors will be able to kill me until I am ready to die, king, and bereft of my wits, lay down my arms—this I swear to you.[60] And I swear to you, I shall put down my weapons only when I have heard most grievous tidings from a man whose word I trust.[61]’ (translation of van Buitenen: (1981, 151)). Droṇa’s guidance comes at the end of the poignant encounter between Yudhiṣṭhira and Droṇa, at the time the king sought Droṇa’s explicit permission to fight against him in the battle, just before the hostilities commenced: 6.41.45-61.

Yudhiṣṭhira saves the Pāṇḍavas from death and damnation by his commitment to the *sādhāraṇa dharmas*

The *MBh* makes three potent arguments for the overriding goodness of *sādhāraṇa dharmas* in three highly dramatic episodes in the story. All three are important junctions in the narrative and in each Yudhiṣṭhira ushers his family between life and death, or heaven and hell—in fact, not metaphor—and in all three the tables are turned on the terrestrial Dharmarāja, as it is he who is tested by his father, the celestial Dharmarāja. (In two of them the God Dharma appears in disguise, first as a stork and later as a dog.) In each of these exams Yudhiṣṭhira delights his father and saves his family or himself from death or damnation by affirming kindness or loyalty to another person or being in the face of self-interest.

In the first of these tests (*MBh* 3.296-298), Yudhiṣṭhira's father disguised himself as the genie of a locale, a *yakṣa*-spirit in the body of a stork presiding over a marsh. This stork had taken the lives of the four younger Pāṇḍavas, one by one, as each had come, one by one, exhausted and thirsty, and insisted on drinking the stork's water in spite of his demanding they answer his questions first. Yudhiṣṭhira then came along and saw his brothers dead. Thinking that only Yama could have put his brothers down like this, Yudhiṣṭhira undertook to answer the stork's questions, which turned out to be a long series of riddles. Having answered every riddle, Yudhiṣṭhira was invited to retrieve the life of one of his brothers. He surprised his father by choosing Nakula, one of the two sons of Pāṇḍu's junior wife Mādrī. When the stork was puzzled at Yudhiṣṭhira's not choosing one of his co-uterine brothers, Bhīma or Arjuna, Yudhiṣṭhira answered:

I judge kindness to be an obligation (*dharma*) superior to the most urgent personal interest (*artha*) ... I can show no preference as to Kuntī and Mādrī. I want these two mothers to have the same (situation, of having a living son); so, spirit, let Nakula live.⁷¹

71 3.297.71-73: *ānṛśaṃsyam paro dharmāḥ paramārthāc ca me matam / ānṛśaṃsyam cikirṣāmi nakulo yakṣa jīvatu // 71 // dharmasīlaḥ sadā rājā iti māṃ*

Yudhiṣṭhira's own mother Kuntī still had Yudhiṣṭhira alive, after all, and even though Mādri was deceased, a living son was a help to her in the afterlife. Dharma was so impressed by his son's setting aside his own preferences to serve a higher principle, he granted life to all four of the dead Pāṇḍavas.⁷² He then revealed his true nature as Yudhiṣṭhira's father⁷³ and said he had appeared at this juncture of time in order to test Yudhiṣṭhira; he then said that Yudhiṣṭhira's kindness, *ānṛśaṃsya*, had satisfied him. These events occurred just as the Pāṇḍavas' stipulated twelve years of wilderness exile was coming to an end and the required year of incognito was about to begin. Dharma then gave a long list of the *sādhāraṇa dharmas* and said that they were gateways to him and he then offered to grant any wish Yudhiṣṭhira may have. Yudhiṣṭhira asked that he and his brothers pass the upcoming year of occultation without being recognized, and his father granted that request.

At the very end of the entire epic, at similar moments of transition between life and death and between paradise or damnation, Yudhiṣṭhira was tested by his father again. As Yudhiṣṭhira led his brothers and Draupadī on a final march up the northern mountains, the Himālayas, to heaven,⁷⁴ a dog trailed after them.⁷⁵ After each member of his family dropped dead along the way, one after the other, Yudhiṣṭhira was left with just the dog. Indra, the king of heaven, came on his chariot to bring Yudhiṣṭhira into heaven bodily. But Indra would not allow the dog to accompany Yudhiṣṭhira, and Yudhiṣṭhira repeatedly refused to mount the chariot without the dog, because of its

mānavā viduḥ / svadharmān na caliṣyāmi nakulo yakṣa jīvatu // 72 // yathā kuntī tathā mādrī viśeṣo nāsti me tayoḥ / mātṛbhyāṃ samam icchāmi nakulo yakṣa jīvatu // 73.

72 3.297.74: *yasya te 'rthāc ca kāmāc ca ānṛśaṃsyaṃ paraṃ matam / tasmāt te bhrātaraḥ sarve jīvantu bharatarābha // 74.*

73 3.3298.6-8: *aḥaṃ te janakas tāta dharmo mṛduparākrama / tvāṃ didṛkṣur anuprāpto viddhi māṃ bharatarābha // 6 // yaśaḥ satyaṃ damaḥ śaucam ārjavam hrīr acāpalam / dānaṃ tapo brahmacaryam ity etās tanavo mama // 7 // ahiṃsā samatā śāntis tapaḥ śaucam amatsaraḥ / dvārāṇy etāni me viddhi priyo hy asi sadā mama // 8.*

74 17.1-3.

75 17.1.23, 32, 2.11, 26.

devotion to him. The dog then revealed himself to be Yudhiṣṭhira's father Dharma, in disguise once again, and he told his son that he had passed another test of his virtue by this demonstration of loyalty and kindness.⁷⁶ The dog-disguise would seem to be an allusion to the fact that the lord of the dead was depicted in the Veda accompanied and assisted by dogs⁷⁷—it contributes directly to the ironic scene of the terrestrial form of Yama making his own way to his own final reward.

Yudhiṣṭhira faced one other such test upon entering heaven. There he found his enemies—all the war-dead of the evil Kaurava phratry—celebrating;⁷⁸ but the members of his family, who had recently died on the trek up to heaven, were all in hell. Yudhiṣṭhira insisted on joining his family and he journeyed to the horrible hell where they were.⁷⁹ When finally he encountered the members of his family, they took some comfort from his presence. The Dharmarāja then excoriated the Gods angrily, including his father Dharma,⁸⁰ and he sent the messenger of the Gods who had guided him there back to the Gods with a message of his own:⁸¹

Tell them, 'I will *not* go there [where the Gods are]! I am staying here.
My brothers here are happy because of my being with them.'⁸²

But shortly after that messenger had informed the Gods of Yudhiṣṭhira's

76 17.3.20-24: *ayaṃ śvā bhakta ity eva tyakto devarathas tvayā / tasmāt svarge na te tulyaḥ kaś cid asti narādhipa // 20 // atas tavākṣayā lokāḥ svaśarīreṇa bhārata / prāpto 'si bhārataśreṣṭha divyāṃ gatim anuttamām // 21 // tato dharmas ca śakraś ca marutaś caśvināv api / devā devarṣayaś caiva ratham āropya pāṇḍavam // 22 // prayayuh svair vimānais te siddhāḥ kāmavihāriṇaḥ / sarve virajasah punyāḥ puṇyavāgbuddhikarmiṇaḥ // 23 // sa taṃ rathaṃ samāsthāya rājā kurukulodvahaḥ / ūrdhvam ācakrame śīghraṃ tejasāvṛtya rodasī // 24.*

77 See (Macdonell 1897, 173).

78 They had all been rewarded for having done their duty as good kṣatriyas, dying in the war. See 18.1.14-15.

79 18.2.10-28.

80 Interestingly, Yudhiṣṭhira's criticism is neither quoted nor paraphrased.

81 18.2.30-54.

82 18.2.52: *na hy ahaṃ tatra yāsyāmi sthito 'smīti nivedyatām / matsaṃśrayād ime dūta sukhino bhrātaro hi me.*

final decision, all the Gods appeared before Yudhiṣṭhira and the Pāṇḍavas and the hell they were in suddenly turned into a paradise.⁸³ The God Dharma pointed out to his son that this had been a third test of his virtue and he told him how pleased he was with his display of virtue, concluding:

This is the third time, son of Kuntī, that I have tested you, and despite all I could do I could not deflect you from your proper nature.⁸⁴

Yudhiṣṭhira's choosing to stay with his family members had completely purified him of sin and qualified him for heaven.⁸⁵ The stint in hell had been necessary for him because of his fatal lie during the war, when he told his guru Droṇa that Droṇa's son had been killed.⁸⁶

83 18.3.1-5.

84 18.3.30: *eṣā tṛtīyā jijñāsā tava rājan kṛtā mayā / na śakyase cālayitum svabhāvāt pārtha hetubhiḥ*. Translation of John Smith: (2009, 785).

85 18.3.33.

86 18.3.14: 'You certainly mistreated Droṇa with a deception about his son, so you have been made to see hell with a deception,' *vyājena hi tvayā droṇa upacīrṇaḥ sutam prati / vyājenaiva tato rājan darśito narakas tava*. See 7.164.60ff., esp. 93-110. See note 70 above regarding the special perfidy of Yudhiṣṭhira in this instance and in one other not mentioned in Book 18.

The Goodness of Vidura joins that of Yudhiṣṭhira

The important connection of Vidura to Yudhiṣṭhira by way of the God Dharma is stressed late in the *MBh* when Vidura's death is described. Sometime after the war is over Yudhiṣṭhira leads the Pāṇḍavas out of Hāstinapura to hold a reunion with mother Kuntī and the elder Bharata generation, including uncle Vidura, who had retired a while before to a retreat in the forest. In the course of this visit, Yudhiṣṭhira encounters Vidura, emaciated as a result of extreme asceticism, in an isolated spot in the woods. What happens next was probably as interesting to ancient Indian audiences of the epic as it is to us today. I quote the translation of John Smith with minor supplementation:

King Yudhiṣṭhira of mighty wisdom (*mahābuddhi*) recognized Vidura of mighty wisdom (*mahābuddhi*) from his look, though he was wasted almost completely away. [15.33.22] Standing before him, the king said 'I am Yudhiṣṭhira' in his hearing. In answer, wise Vidura gestured with his hand; [23] then, gazing unblinking at the king and deep in meditation, he entered into him, fusing his own sight with his sight, [24] his own limbs with his limbs, his own breath with his breath, his own senses with his senses. [25] Thus Vidura, seeming to blaze with fiery energy, used his yogic power to enter the body of King Yudhiṣṭhira lord of *dharma*. [26] As for his own body, it remained as it was, leaning with staring eyes against the tree. The king saw that it was now lifeless; [27] he also sensed that he himself was now many times more powerful than before. [28ab]⁸⁷

87 (Smith 2009, 743–44). 15.33.22-28cd: *taṃ rājā kṣiṇabhūyiṣṭham ākṛtīmātrasūcitam / abhijajñe mahābuddhiṃ mahābuddhir yudhiṣṭhirah // 22 // yudhiṣṭhiro 'ham asmīti vākyam uktvāgrataḥ sthitaḥ / vidurasyāśrave rājā sa ca pratyāha saṃjñayā // 23 // tataḥ so 'nimiṣo bhūtvā rājānaṃ samudaiḥsata / saṃyojya viduras tasmin dṛṣṭim dṛṣṭyā samāhitaḥ // 24 // viveśa viduro dhīmān gātrair gātrāṇi caiva ha / prāṇān prāṇeṣu ca dadhad indriyāṇīndriyeṣu ca // 25 // sa yogabalam āsthāya viveśa nṛpates tanum / viduro dharmarājasya tejasā prajvalann iva // 26 // vidurasya śarīraṃ tat tathaiva stabdhalocanam / vṛkṣāśritaṃ tadā rājā dadarśa gata-cetanam // 27 // balavantaṃ tathātmanaṃ mene bahugunaṃ tadā / 28cd.*

Not long after Vidura's death, Vyāsa joins the family reunion and explains the full background of Vidura to everyone. Vyāsa addresses the brother of the late Pāṇḍu and Vidura, namely Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the father of Duryodhana, the old man whose blindness, both actual and figurative, was the source of so much of the trouble in the Bhārata kingdom.

The everlasting God of the Gods [Dharma] was your brother, great ruler. Using their power of visionary sight [*dhyaṇa*], sages know him as 'Dhar-ma' because he supports [*dhār-aṇa*] what is Good [*śreyas*]. [15.35.16] Everlasting, he becomes larger by means of truthfulness, self-control, restraining one's behavior, being always harmless toward others, generous giving, and ascetic suffering. [17] The King of the Kurus, Yudhiṣṭhira, took birth through this one insightful God of Infinite Intellect, using the power of Yoga-Harnessing. He (Yudhiṣṭhira) is the God Dharma, king. [18] ... He who is Dharma was Vidura, and Vidura is the Pāṇḍava (Yudhiṣṭhira). It is this Pāṇḍava here, who stands at your command, like a servant. [21]⁸⁸

Making Yudhiṣṭhira the king in fact, the terrestrial Dharmarāja

But the primary concern of the epic poets was not to argue against violence and self-assertion—their ideology required an acceptance of the violence of kingship, and their story would deliver that. Yudhiṣṭhira's argument against heroic self-assertion and warfare was a tactically designed, straw-man version of the ethics of the Mauryan emperor Aśoka of the third c. BCE—a claim to advocate non-violence without fully owning up to the violence of kingship—and the *MBh* poets were not going to let that stand. Yudhiṣṭhira had to be persuaded to own his war and become king of the Bharatas. His inherent self-restraint and solicitude toward others would transform the

88 15.35.16-21: *bhrātā tava mahārāja devadevaḥ sanātanaḥ / dhāraṇāc chreyaso dhyānād yaṃ dharmam kavayo viduḥ // 16 // satyena saṃvardhayati damena niyama ca / ahiṃsayā ca dānena tapasā ca sanātanaḥ // 17 // yena yogabalā jātāḥ kururājo yudhiṣṭhiraḥ / dharmā ity eṣa nṛpate prājñenāmitabuddhinā // 18 // ... yo hi dharmāḥ sa viduro viduro yaḥ sa pāṇḍavaḥ / sa eṣa rājan vaśyas te pāṇḍavaḥ preṣyavat sthitaḥ // 21.*

necessary violence of kingship into a greater good, a good for all.

Yudhiṣṭhira stood alone within his family in asserting the superiority of the *sādhāraṇa dharmas* and condemning self-assertion. Yudhiṣṭhira's brothers and the three *kṛṣṇa* characters—Draupadī, Vyāsa, and Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva—harshly rejected Yudhiṣṭhira's tender-hearted aversion to the war and kingship, and they argued long and hard that kingship was right and good, that is, *dharma*, and that it was Yudhiṣṭhira's rightful duty, his *dharma*, to be king. By constructing this persuasion of Yudhiṣṭhira to become king in spite of his misgivings, the poets of the epic were advancing the argument that to install a righteous king, there had to exist a righteous man who could become king. It is this couching of armed violence within principles of self-restraint (the ruler's being *jitendriya*, *dānta*, *niyata*⁸⁹) and solicitude toward people beyond oneself that distinguishes righteous authority from the simple assertion of strength and might. The poets of the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* designed this son of Dharma for the kingship of the purged Bharata realm and that is the story they told. In the end the eldest Pāṇḍava was true to his name, 'he who stands by (*sthira*) his war (*yudhi*, the locative case-form of *yudh*, 'war').' The violence of heroic self-assertion has been appropriated and qualified by the *sādhāraṇa dharmas* for the greater good of society.

The *Mahābhārata*'s eclipse of the virtuous Dharmarāja

I turn now briefly to the second argument bearing on my theme, which forms part of an important series of expansions and reinforcements of the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* that make up a thread of Vaiṣṇava teachings that Reinhold Grünendahl has aptly described as 'epic Pāñcarātra.' Pāñcarātra is a particular branch of Vaiṣṇava theology and practice that is based on the theology of the single supreme lord, the *parameśvara* Nārāyaṇa, who exists eternally above the constantly alternating processes of the emergence of the world from its ultimate material cause and its subsequent reabsorption

89 The word *jitendriya* signifies one's having 'won-out over the cravings of his senses;' '*dānta*' signifies 'tamed, self-controlled;' and '*niyata*' means 'restrained, controlled, bound.'

into that cause. This thread is extensive and complex and was woven into the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* at various places, particularly at the beginning of the text and at various critical junctures in it. This thread has been charted and documented by Reinhold Grünendahl,⁹⁰ who describes it as ‘a kind of frame’ that ‘must have been added to the *Mahābhārata* at a relatively late stage in its redaction-history.’⁹¹ I agree with these two assessments.

What is important about this thread for me today, is that one of its main episodes, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, espouses another transvaluation of warrior violence that eschews heroic self-assertiveness.⁹² This new valorization of warrior violence can be viewed in a way that makes it complementary to that of Yudhiṣṭhira’s kingship. But it speaks from and to a perspective that makes the Bhārata kingdom just one small pinprick on the map of the vast cosmos, a perspective that makes the great Bhārata war only a fleeting moment of experience for every one of its participants in their possibly endless journey across the *kalpas* and *yugas* of cosmic time. This second transvaluation not only embraced without hesitation the violence of the warrior when righteous, it offered a sophisticated synthesis of philosophical and religious themes—that is, Sāṃkhya-Yoga teachings and practices combined with *bhakti* devotionism—by which a warrior’s action was fused with the goodness of the cosmic action of the one supreme God.⁹³ One of the most significant effects of this fusion was its absolving the warrior from any and all evaluation of the ethical quality of his actions, as long as he acted in accordance with his *svadharma*,⁹⁴ and then its erasure of the spiritually crip-

90 (Grünendahl 1997). This theological theme is anchored by the *Nārāyaṇīya* (*ibid.*, 210), and of particular importance to it is the bard’s long introduction of the *MBh* to Śaunaka in the very first chapter of the received epic text (*ibid.*, 218-19). See too (Grünendahl 1993; 2002).

91 *Ibid.*, 237 and 240.

92 One illustration of this can be seen in the story of Dambodbhava, especially at 5.94.21. Agents of violence in epic Pāñcarātra narratives (Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, Nara and Nārāyaṇa) do not act from heroic self-assertion.

93 See (Malinar 2007b, 228–32, esp. 232).

94 This argument can be, and has been, understood as applying to any person engaged in performing his or her *svadharma*. See various of the essays in (Minor 1986). See too (Vishnu S. Sukthankar 1957, 101–9).

pling miasma of the warrior's horrific violence.⁹⁵

This teaching was presented to the most skillful warrior among the Pāṇḍava brothers, Arjuna, just before the war began, when Arjuna became squeamish at the prospect of killing many beloved senior members of the Bhārata clan who were arrayed on the other side of the field. It was presented to him by his cousin, brother-in-law, and chariot-driver Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva. The epic Pāñcarātra extended the *kṛṣṇa* theme of the *Pāṇḍava-Bhārata* beyond the three original *kṛṣṇa* characters to a fourth, the Pāṇḍava Arjuna. A particularly important strand of that thread was a recurrent and forceful insistence, at numerous different places in the epic,⁹⁶ upon the identity of Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva with forms of the supreme transcendent God Nārāyaṇa's double manifestation in the contingent world as Nara and Nārāyaṇa, respectively, the 'person, or being' (*puruṣa*) who is the contingent, embodied individual soul, the 'man,' *nara*, and the 'person, or being' (*puruṣa*) who is the supreme, transcendent being (the *puruṣottama*, 'highest of souls, persons, beings') who is the final end and resolution to which all men move (*ayana*), the *narāyana*, the *nārāyaṇa puruṣa*.⁹⁷ These two different instances of the supreme, transcendent reality (the lord, *prabhu*, Nārāyaṇa) are frequently manifested in the world as two 'primordial seers' (*naranārāyaṇāv ṛṣī*, *purāṇāv ṛṣisattamau*) who hover between doing asceticism at their retreat in the northern mountains and deploying breathtakingly efficient military violence in the service of the Gods and *dharma*.⁹⁸

95 The very highest norm of behavior was *ahimsā*, which was not accessible to kṣatriyas because of their *svadharmā*. The *Gītā* effectively dispelled some of the unpleasant consequences of this difference between brahmins and kṣatriyas.

96 (Grünendahl 1997, 207–33).

97 The word *nārāyaṇa* here is an adjective based on the putative noun *narāyana*, which likely is based, as Biardeau suggested (1994, 153), on the Upaniṣadic phrase '*puruṣāyana*,' with the synonym '*nara*' substituted for '*puruṣa*.' See too (Biardeau 1991, 76–80) and (1994, 150–55).

98 They feature prominently in a disturbing narrative prefiguration of the great war to come. At the end of the *Book of the Beginning*, after the Pāṇḍavas had settled into their half of the kingdom, the Khāṇḍava tract, the God of Fire approached Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa in the form of a brahmin and demanded their help in consuming the Khāṇḍava forest to satisfy his hunger. They agreed and were equipped with marvelous weapons

Arjuna was identical to Nara and Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva to Nārāyaṇa. Thus Arjuna, ‘the Bright,’ also came to be referred to as a ‘Kṛṣṇa,’ a ‘Dark One,’ alongside Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva. The epic then came to speak regularly of ‘the two Kṛṣṇas,’ ‘the two Kṛṣṇas on one chariot,’⁹⁹ especially in the account of the war, after the *Bhagavad Gītā* episode.

V.S. Sukthankar, the founding editor of the great project to establish a Critical Edition of the *MBh*,¹⁰⁰ was correct when he wrote, at the end of his career, ‘...the pair Nara-Nārāyaṇa stands for Man and his God,’ and ‘...Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna symbolize the Paramātman and the jivātman ...,’¹⁰¹ which are the supreme transcendent Self and the contingent, embodied self. In the *Bhagavad Gītā* the supreme and enlightened form of the Soul instructs the unenlightened, contingent form of the soul. In the course of this teaching Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva came completely, and spectacularly, out of his occultation, his darkness, and revealed himself to be a terrestrial manifestation of the Supreme Lord working in historical time for the purpose of restoring righteousness, *dharma*, which is, again, the *brahmaṇya* polity and society. You are all familiar with Kṛṣṇa’s flash of revelation:

If in the sky there arose all at once the light of a thousand suns, that would be the like of the light of that Exalted Being.¹⁰²

by the God Varuṇa. Arjuna then battled his father Indra, who tried to save the forest and its creatures with rain-showers; Indra eventually withdrew upon learning the true identity of the Fire God’s two warriors. (1.214-25.)

99 (Hiltebeitel 1984, 6–9). For his statistics, Hiltebeitel relied on Sørensen’s index of the vulgate, in which Hiltebeitel counted 81 references to ‘*kṛṣṇau*’ overall. The Critical Edition contains only 60. For the war books, Hiltebeitel had counted 30 in Book 7 and 28 in Book 8. My count of the CE shows 2 in Book 6, 23 in Book 7, 18 in Book 8, and 6 in Book 9. There are 11 in the CE in Books 1- 5 as follows: 3 in Book 1, 1 in Book 2, 2 in Book 3, and 5 in Book 5.

100 V. S. Sukthankar, S. K. Belvalkar, and P. L. Vaidya, *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933-66).

101 (Vishnu S. Sukthankar 1957, 99–100 and 105–6). I am not endorsing all of Sukthankar’s allegorical interpretations of the setting of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, but I do agree with him on this central and essential point.

102 6.33.12 (= *Bhagavad Gītā* 11.12): *divi sūryasahasrasya bhaved yugapad utthitā / yadi bhāḥ sadṛśī sā syād bhāsas tasya mahātmanaḥ*.

Read in light of the Pāñcarātra thread, the entire *MBh* narrative can be viewed as building toward this dazzling apocalyptic disclosure and the purgative violence that followed it.

The intriguing inclusion of the *kṛṣṇa* theme in the original *Pāñḍava-Bhārata* had developed and matured into the theme of the hidden, *kṛṣṇa*, form of God at work on the earth for the sake of *dharma* on the earth and in a delight with the drama of its apocalyptic disclosure. The paradoxes of a formless reality outside of space, time and matter being the source of the time-and-space-bound world and its inhabitants, and itself becoming an embodied agent in that world, seem to have worked with the epic's *kṛṣṇa* theme to engender the regularly scandalous behavior of the Pāñḍavas and Kṛṣṇa, the 'crooked tactics', *jihmopāyas*.¹⁰³ The purgative violence chartered by the *Bhagavad Gītā* and waged periodically by Nara and Nārāyaṇa is anchored in the idea that action in the service of the transcendent God and the principle of *dharma* justifies, even requires, an ultimate antinomianism. When the broken, dying Duryodhana reviled Kṛṣṇa for his crooked tactics in the war,¹⁰⁴ Kṛṣṇa told him he had been defeated because 'he had followed a path of evil (*pāpamārga*)'. And seeing that the Pāñḍavas felt shame at Duryodhana's list of their crooked moves, he assured them in a booming voice,

Duryodhana ... could not have been slain by you on the battlefield in fair fight. That is why I devised these stratagems...otherwise the victory of the Pāñḍavas could never have happened.... For not even

103 On this theme see (Vishnu S. Sukthankar 1957, 92-96). B. K. Matilal addressed the question of Kṛṣṇa's behavior and moral integrity at some length, but bound himself throughout to concepts of strict rationality and did not confront the *aporia* of the formless (*nirguṇa*) being present to what has form (*guṇavat*) that is explicitly posed in the *MBh* (see the long philosophical expositions of Vasīṣṭha and Yājñavalkya at *MBh* 12.291-6 and 298-306, respectively); (Matilal 1991, esp. 409-19). His clearest efforts to "save" Kṛṣṇa's reputation are the untenable suggestions that 'Kṛṣṇa did whatever he could and tried his best to see that justice was done...' (*ibid.*, 412 and 415) and that 'Kṛṣṇa might be looked upon as a leader' who would 'transcend or breach the rigid code of conduct valued in the society, with the sole idea of creating a new paradigm that will also be acknowledged and esteemed with that order (*ibid.*, 417).'

104 9.60.27-38.

the world-guardian gods themselves could have killed by fair means those four noble warriors.... As for ... [Duryodhana] here, not even staff-wielding Death could kill him fairly if he stood club in hand and free from weariness.... When enemies become too numerous and powerful, they should be slain by deceit and stratagems.¹⁰⁵

Earlier, near the end of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa had told Arjuna: 'Let go of all norms and come to me alone for refuge. I will release you from all your evil deeds. Do not be anxious.'¹⁰⁶

The good such freedom and such a promise from Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva offered people was, for the poets of the later *MBh* tradition, far greater than the good afforded and advocated by a mere king, even the virtuous terrestrial Dharmarāja. The *Mahā-Bhārata* was not Yudhiṣṭhira's *Bhārata* anymore!

105 9.60.56-61; translation of (Smith 2009, 560–61).

106 6.40.66 (= *Bhagavad Gītā* 18.66): *sarvadharmān parityajya mām ekaṃ śaraṇaṃ vraja / ahaṃ tvā sarvapāpebhyo mokṣayiṣyāmi mā śucaḥ*.

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