

# Hindu Mythology and the Limits of Binary Moral Thinking

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**Abstract:** This paper will explore how Hindu mythology presents a significant challenge to binary moral thinking that orders public and moral life, and offers an alternative moral imagination of ambiguity, context-dependent judgment, and interpretive plurality through the concept of *dharma*.

Drawing insights from the work of Bimal Krishna Matilal, Iravati Karve, A.K. Ramanujan, and Gurucharan Das, this paper will demonstrate how moral thinking in Hindu thought emerges not by opposition, but by dialogue and negotiation among competing claims.

It finally argues that Hindu mythology exposes the limitations of a binary moral system and proposes a more complex way of thinking about conflict, accountability, and justice. When examined in the context of Western moral frameworks, the contemporary relevance of Hindu myths for considering public life challenges and moral dilemmas deepens at a time of growing polarization.

**Keywords:** *Dharma*, Hindu Mythology, Moral Philosophy, Binary Thinking, Moral Imagination

## Introduction

The greatest intellectual challenge is binary moral thinking, which reduces the complexity of moral life into black-and-white terms such as right or wrong, loyal or traitor, righteous or corrupt, us or them. This type of discourse has become a dominant model of public discourse that is simple: Moral questions become ideological positions, disagreement becomes animosity, and ambiguity becomes a sign of weakness.

This is true around the globe; in the United States, disputes over education, climate, and historical memory become entrenched political identities; in Europe, disputes over migration and sovereignty become divided into opposing moral camps; in the United Kingdom, the Brexit event has made political disagreement a division of civilization; and in India, questions of religion, secularism, and tradition become either/or questions that are presented as opposing one another.

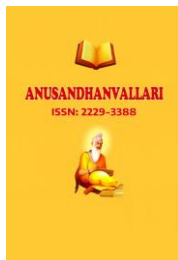
This polarization is a philosophical issue as well as a political one; it is a limitation of moral imagination. Binary thinking makes the assumption that moral life has two distinct sides, but this is not always the case.

Moral duties come into conflict. Justice can be painful. There is a moral price to pay for every choice. At this stage, Hindu mythology offers a fundamentally different moral schema: instead of structuring morality as an opposition, the mythological stories continually blur this distinction, they do not divide the moral world into good-evil, hero-villain, order-disorder, but rather explain why it cannot be done.

*Dharma*, the foundation of this moral imagination, refers to duty, righteousness, relational responsibility, and moral order, but is not confined to simple rules. *Dharma* often presents itself as a decision-making problem, not a solution (Matilal 4). It is argued that Hindu mythology draws our attention to the boundaries of binary moral thinking and offers an alternative moral grammar, grounded in ambiguity, plurality, and interpretive reasoning.

## The Limits of Binary Moral Frameworks

Binary moral thinking, which assumes that questions of ethics can ultimately be resolved into a series of either/or categories, appeals to certainty: it provides ethical clarity that simplifies conflict, frames difficult questions in terms of recognizable situations, and transforms ethical complexity into what seems like a clear decision, based on oppositional structures (good versus evil, innocent versus guilty, justice versus injustice, order versus chaos), which



seems natural in times of crisis (ambiguity is intolerable) but which provides the reassurance that moral decisions can be made cleanly and without remainder.

In addition to being unduly simplistic, the binary moral framework frequently necessitates simplification in order to uncover the truth. In order to resolve moral conflicts, it is assumed that all behaviours, people, and circumstances can be classified into a small number of categories. However, moral life cannot be so neatly divided.

The moral question is frequently "When do I make this decision when every option has a moral cost?" rather than "When is it right to take sides?" Human actions result from the tension between competitive loyalty, incomplete understanding, structural limitations, historical contexts, and conflicting bonds. Such inquiries cannot be accommodated by binary moral frameworks. This problem has philosophical roots in traditions that respect universality. Western ethical philosophy, particularly in its classical form, has created the most significant ethical systems in contemporary thought in an effort to establish moral behaviour as universal and rule-based.

The critique of binary moral thinking developed here becomes deeper when considered in the context of the Western ethical framework. While each framework differs from the other, they exhibit a similar tendency to stabilize morality by dividing it into opposing categories, whether in the form of universal rules, calculating consequences, spiritual dualism, or institutional justice. Hindu mythology does not reject this framework outright but pushes its limits by presenting a moral situation that challenges its stability.

Immanuel Kant is an example of moral philosophy that seeks to ensure morality by logical universality; Kant requires that any action be judged by whether the maxim under which it is performed could be willed as a universal law (Kant 30). This model is strong in that it does not allow moral decisions to be made for convenience, based on emotion, or for personal self-interest. It is a solid defense against arbitrariness, but that abstraction which gives rigour to ethics can also show the limits of ethics, because moral life is not always a case of applying pure principles to clean actions. This can show up as a tension between these principles, as in the case where promises must be broken to prevent harm, or where life must be hidden to save a life, or where the duty to family conflicts with the duty to justice. In this circumstance, the problem is not one of finding the right principles, but the principles themselves are in conflict.

This model becomes complicated in Hindu mythology, where texts such as the *Mahabharata* depict conflicts between duties (e.g., truth versus life, loyalty versus justice, family versus duty). Since the issue is not inconsistency but rather the existence of numerous arguments, universal rules cannot resolve this issue. The idea that Western moral imagination and ethics can be systematized is thus called into question by Hindu mythology.

This includes utilitarianism, which was developed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. According to utilitarianism, moral worth is decided by outcomes, especially when it comes to maximizing happiness and minimizing suffering. However, issues with consequence-based reasoning also occur when values cannot be measured by criteria.

Utilitarianism might seem more flexible than rule-based ethics but it simply reduces all moral complexity to one criterion (utility) and is based on binary thinking: pleasure versus pain, gain versus loss. Hindu mythology does not accept this simplification; in the *Mahabharata*, war restores dharma, but at the cost of suffering, and why can that alone be quantified by profit and loss? The issue is that moral behaviour is not always calculated, and Hindu myth avoids ethical dilemmas with such simple solutions.

Saint Augustine, for example, had a spiritual order to his religious morality, in which the distinction between good and evil was also clear, but Hindu mythology complicates this, with characters such as Ravana or Duryodhana not entirely evil, and Rama or Yudhishthira not entirely good; moral identity is not static, but contingent on circumstance and relationship and inner struggle. Thus, Hindu mythology does not erase the distinction between good and evil, but only reveals its complexity. The philosophical significance of this boundary is very serious, however, not that universal or outcome-based ethics are abandoned, but that they do not exhaust all possibilities for moral reflection. It tends to presuppose that the difficulty of moral choice is ultimately resolvable in rules or

procedures, but that is not the case with very serious moral problems. This becomes apparent when we consider the dilemma of tragic choice. A tragic choice is not a choice between good and evil, but one between competing goods.

This binary moral framework is especially inadequate since it is predicated on the idea that moral life can be clearly divided, but the purity of moral life is compromised by accidental circumstances. This impurity is the starting point of Hindu mythological thought, which frequently views it as a component of moral existence rather than an issue that needs to be resolved. This is a significant distinction. This comparison shows that Western moral thought is constrained rather than flawed. Although they all tend to fix morality in theory, Kant, Bentham, Mill, and Augustine offer potent models of moral reasoning.

Here, in Hindu mythology, we have moral excess, a situation in which moral reality escapes established categories: where duty cannot be harmonized, results do not resolve, a fit cannot be made in the category, even justice is painful. This is not the breakdown of morality, but the actual condition of moral life.

This comparison is important because it allows for non-binary ethical thought. This is not a new system of rules, but a new point of view that substitutes context for rules, discretion for calculation, plurality for a single truth, interpretation for fixed categories. This does not conclude ethical decision-making, but makes it more serious, since without a rigid framework, decisions must be made. Hindu mythology does not see every moral conflict as amenable to some principle. It begins where principle collides with principle.

The well-known statement in the *Mahabharata* that "Dharma is subtle" captures this view precisely. It does not mean that morality can be complicated, but it implies that moral truth itself is not self-evident; it needs to be interpreted, deliberated, and decided on.

Hindu dharma, which tends to be subtler than binary structures, accepts this fact that duties can conflict without one becoming invalid. Loyalty may be morally important, even when justice would have it rejected; compassion may be required, even when the law condemns it.

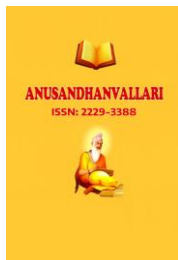
Ethical deliberation involves the struggle to maintain a balance between conflicting truths rather than being restricted to the mechanical application of rules. This explains the significance of Bhishma and Krishna's examination of moral quandaries in the *Mahabharata*. They make it clear that the epic frequently depicts these kinds of circumstances, in which every option is immoral (20).

Uncertainty is the uncertainty of competing obligations, not the uncertainty of ignorance. This distinction is crucial because it makes it clear that ambiguity is frequently the condition that initially necessitates moral reasoning rather than a flaw in moral reasoning. According to Irawati Karve's research, the moral qualities of the epic's characters make them significant because they live in contradiction rather than being pure representations of good and evil (Karve 18).

This transcends the "either/or" of moral reasoning. The literature is not the only source of this influence. Binary ethical thinking appears to be insufficient and conceptually deceptive, providing a false sense of clarity in a complex world if ethical life is composed of interconnected duties rather than straightforward oppositions. This distinction clarifies that ambiguity is frequently the context of moral reasoning itself rather than a failure of moral reasoning. The moral significance of the epic characters exists in contradiction rather than being clearly good or evil (Karve 18)

Characters like Arjun, Bhishma, Karna, and Krishna are intriguing because they defy easy classification into dualistic moral categories. They introduce us to the "fold" of "moral contemplation" as well. This has occurred outside of epic literature as well. Dualistic moral contemplation will seem inadequate and conceptually deceptive if moral life is composed of complicated obligations rather than fierce opposition because it imposes false clarity on a tense reality.

Instead of rejecting ethics, the criticism of binary thinking aims to foster a vivid moral imagination. Saying that moral truths transcend dualistic boundaries does not imply relativism; rather it merely acknowledges that moral judgments are objective subjects of comprehending and navigating complexity rather than of resolving it.



Furthermore, morality does not vanish into ambiguity. It's not that every interpretation has equal weight. *Dharma's* subtlety enhances rather than diminishes responsibility. If there isn't a single rule that guarantees the correct course of action, then conscience plays a bigger role in responsibility.

Humans must make decisions under uncertainty, act with impurity, and assume the moral burden without the comfort of innocence. This is a very different moral vision from binary thinking, and Hindu mythology seeks to preserve it, not by denying the right and wrong but by claiming that such distinctions are often decided in context, in relationships, and in terms of competing claims. Moral thinking is not a zero-sum game; it is work, and it starts where binary thinking leaves off.

### ***Dharma* as Contextual Ethics**

This situational, relational understanding of ethics is at the heart of Hindu mythical thinking and stands in contrast to rule-based traditions of moral imagination, which conceptualize ethics as adherence to rules or abstract principles in the abstract. Ethics is not a matter of following any set rules, or applying any particular principle independent of circumstance, but a wise decision-making process within the context of solid relationships: family, duty, power, social order, cosmic order, and historical circumstance. The idea of *dharma* incorporates this ethical perspective, but the word is not easily translated. It can be thought of as duty, righteousness, law, order, or moral responsibility, but all of these words fail to convey the fullness of the term. It is not one principle, but a domain of duties, the nuances of which must be understood and interpreted by context.

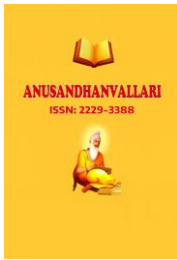
This sets *dharma* apart from the application of immutable moral laws, which are not subject to circumstance, which are not always universally applicable, and whose claims are often relational and conditional (what is appropriate for a ruler is not appropriate for a renunciate, what is justified in war is not appropriate in domestic life, and so on; there are no predetermined rules to resolve such tensions). Therefore, *dharma* requires judgment: it must be interpreted. And interpretation is not distinct from ethics but is ethics.

This is a fundamental distinction from rule-based ethics. The logic of *dharma* does not ask whether a person has followed a universal rule correctly, but rather how a person decides between conflicting duties. Morality has evolved from following rules to making decisions, from certainty to deliberation, and from rules to practical wisdom due to this profound difference. Bimal Krishna Matilal's interpretation of the *Mahabharata*, which is predicated on moral conundrums of this nature, is particularly significant in this context (20). There is a genuine conflict of duties in this scenario; the correct response is not concealed and waiting to be discovered.

This binary structure presumes that all conflict can be neatly compartmentalized into opposing sides. This is not the logic of *dharma*, which says that the conflict can remain after the decision. There is no such thing as a wholly pure moral act; only a more or less responsible response. For this reason, *dharma* is not a precept but a mode of thinking; it does not resolve the ambiguity, but teaches how to live with it.

In the *Mahabharata*, the crisis of Arjun before the war is often described as a conflict between karma and akarma, but when looked at closely it is a conflict of competing duties: the duty to family, the duty to justice, the duty to protect society, all of which are significant, and not resolved by one duty proving wrong, but by a reinterpretation of karma in the context of competing claims. Therefore, Bhishma is the tragic figure who is faithful to his promise, the moral implications of which are disastrous, and Karna is the unjustly loyal warrior who has moral dignity, and Yudhishthira, the embodiment of *dharma*, is the character who repeatedly finds himself in dilemmas in which the very meaning of the truth becomes unstable.

*Dharma* is more often characterized as conscience, rather than doctrine, and even that term is a poor translation. It ties judgment not only to the individual conscience, but to the larger social and cosmic order, and the individual does not think in isolation, but in a web of obligations. It is a relational dimension of paramount importance. In modern ethical reflection, the free individual is often put at the centre. In *dharma*, decisions are placed in interdependence. Man acts not only as "self" but as son, ruler, friend, teacher, warrior, husband, wife, citizen; each role demands duty, and these duties can conflict.



Morality emerges not despite, but because of the complexity of relationships. *Dharma* resists abstraction for this reason. It can only be comprehended in situ. And if circumstances matter, then context is not an afterthought in morality, but a central ingredient of it. This critique of binary ethical thinking is important to the distinction between dyadic thinking and context-based ethics. Dyadic thinking looks for solutions through simplification, but context-based ethics argues that the right decision cannot always be arrived at independently of the circumstances. This is not a license to do anything at all. It does not eliminate moral standards. It simply states that standards must also be understood in light of the circumstances.

This is a far more challenging ethical approach, as it requires responsibility without assurance. Utter certainty with no judgment, and innocence without action. The moral seriousness of *dharma*, in fact, is that it offers no assurance of moral purity; it acknowledges that *karma* done in a broken world is bound to be a burden. And this realism confers enduring philosophical authority to Hindu mythological ethics.

The notion of understanding *dharma* as context-based morality does not simply mean that morality is circumstantial; it means that moral truth emerges from an interpretation of the situation itself. Moral thinking does not precede decisions; it is made in decisions. It is this insight that challenges binary moral thinking most profoundly, for if morality is context-based, relationship-based, and interpretive, then it cannot be reduced to aspects; it must be understood prudently in its totality.

### **The Mahabharata and Moral Ambiguity**

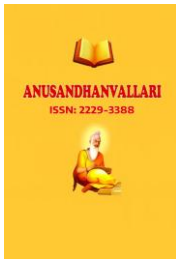
The *Mahabharata* refuses to compartmentalize its moral world into distinct opposing pairs as in other stories in which good and evil, hero and villain, justice and injustice are clearly demarcated and where moral complexity is denied or reduced to simplifications, but the *Mahabharata* repeatedly shakes such distinctions, and in doing so, it does not abandon moral decision-making, but recognizes that in the real world, morality is perhaps never cleanly divided.

That is one reason why the *Mahabharata* is still a philosophically potent text today. The Pandavas, who are consistently portrayed as being on the side of righteousness, are not entirely innocent; rather, this is a world of complexity and entanglement rather than a time of purity. They compromised, used symbolic violence, and made morally challenging choices. During the war, Yudhishtira, who is the personification of *dharma* and truth, lied about Ashwatthama. There is an unavoidable connection between Arjuna's bravery and the destructive violence. Bhima went out solely to exact revenge, but his retaliation was a more profound kind of justice. It is also ambiguous, even if it is on the side of *dharma*.

According to this viewpoint, Duryodhana is more than just a symbol of evil; he stands for injustice and destructive desire, but he also has courage, political cunning, loyalty to his friends, and a sense of his own suffering, all of which are not wholly incorrect. By viewing Duryodhana as evil, his character fights against the inclination to oversimplify moral reasoning and to reject reality. The fact that no one is portrayed in the epic as the devil to discount moral significance is more significant. Because there is no way to view the opposing character as wholly evil, the decision becomes complicated. In the end, Krishna is a moral leader and divine guide, but he also uses dubious tactics. He suggests to Drona that Bhishma be killed by taking advantage of a vulnerability. He encourages Bhima to violate the rules of war by killing Drona in the lower abdomen.

These incidents are an essential component of the moral structure of the epic rather than being isolated incidents. It poses challenging questions (Is justice possible through immoral means, and if so, what is its value?) that are not addressed, which has philosophical implications. This demonstrates that the *Mahabharata* deepens moral thought by challenging authority itself rather than claiming moral authority by avoiding the moral criticism of its main characters. The epic acknowledges moral quandaries as a condition of moral existence rather than just as a topic for discussion.

Iravati Karve's research in *Yuganta* is crucial because, in her view, the epic's characters are people with a variety of compulsions, human limitations, and unfavorable circumstances rather than gods or ideals. If *dharma* is a problem,



then morality cannot be reduced to following rules, and this realization develops in the context of conflict. The *Mahabharata* cannot be read in binary terms; it does not demand that the reader makes the right choice, but that he or she comprehends confusion.

The distress of Arjuna is the clearest example of this. Arjuna is not simply afraid of war; he is confronted with a complex of duties: duty to family, duty to justice, hatred of violence, fear of the destruction of society. It is not clear which side is right, and so their dilemma cannot be resolved by any one rule. This indicates that right things will clash and create moral dilemmas. This is not a simple idea in moral thinking because even when the right choice is made, humans experience moral pain. This further complicates things because Bhishma is morally right but politically wrong to take the vow he does, Karna is morally right to remain loyal to Duryodhana (though wrong politically), and Draupadi is the moral failure of the system as a whole. These contradictions are not isolated but are part of the fabric of the *Mahabharata*.

While the *Mahabharata* is read by many as moral education, it is in fact a moral inquiry, not an inquiry that has answers, but one that asks questions. Matilal states that this epic demonstrates that every choice is accompanied by a moral loss, and thus indicates that the conflict is not about confusion but the incompatibility of multiple moral truths. This means that, once we understand this, binary thinking not only becomes incomplete, but also incorrect. The epic does not ask, who is right, but how to make the right decision in conflict. It teaches us that morality is not in dichotomy, but in judgment, and this is the true force of the text for our time when the world is so often divided into black and white.

### **The Ramayana and Conflicting Goods**

While the *Mahabharata* complicates moral decisions by framing them in terms of war, politics, and divided loyalties, the *Ramayana* complicates them differently, by framing them in terms of a conflict between what one should do and what the tragic consequences of doing so will be. The epic does not simply reinforce *dharma*, but it asks, what may one have to sacrifice to uphold *dharma*? This question can be most clearly seen in the moment of moral agony known as the Rama-Sita episode, which has been the topic of centuries of moral debate (and rightly so), and which cannot be divided into black-and-white moral choices because there is no conflict between good and evil, but between two goods. Was Ram true to his royal duties? Was he a bad husband? Was this a tragic sacrifice for the sake of his royal duties? Or does this story itself condemn the society that would allow such a choice to be made? There is no clear-cut answer to these questions, and this lack of clarity is philosophically significant. It suggests that the real question is not whether Ram was right or wrong, but whether this simple dichotomy could possibly comprehend the whole moral complexity.

The entire complexity of morality might be understood by a simple dichotomy. Whether Ram was right or wrong is the question that comes to mind. Myth poses the question, "What do you do when various obligations come into conflict?" This distinction is crucial because the cognitive process shifts when we view morality as a choice rather than a decision. The question of choice arises. The determination of responsibility is based on blame. The king's duty, responsibility to the people, marital fidelity, sense of justice, and social order are all at odds with one another; this is an oversimplification of the situation. This situation will turn tragic if we are unable to accomplish all of these together.

These moral precepts are numerous. Many duties are asserting their rights at the same time. Moral deterioration follows. According to this viewpoint, Ram cannot make a choice that is only "right or wrong"; if he decides for the state, private justice and love will be lost, and if he defends private love, the regulations of royal duty will be broken. Something is lost in every circumstance. This is a depth of morality rather than a moral failure. Moral systems are not always balanced, as this incident demonstrates. The *Ramayana* says that duty sometimes creates conflicts. The notion of conflicting goods is quite helpful here.

Modern thinking frequently casts moral problems in terms of right versus wrong, but myths often present problems arising from a conflict of right versus right, as is the case with Rama. Duty, loyalty, justice: all these are moral values. This cannot be understood through binary thinking, which assumes that one side must be right and the other

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wrong. The reality is, however, that sometimes bad things happen because good things cannot be protected. It is a profoundly disturbing idea. It shatters innocence. For centuries, this incident has been read in different ways, Ram justified, criticized, the incident viewed from different perspectives. This is not an interpretive problem but a part of the moral structure of the story itself, which invites debate, not closes it, which is plural and evident.

Ram is a fair ruler. People start talking about Sita's grief. Concerns about the choice also surface. This diversity is important. Moral judgments are not final. There is no end to this; moral reasoning never stops. Modern literature has also provided additional clarification on this. The enchanted forest serves as an illustration of how the narrative's meaning and point of view change in favour of Sita. It indicates that the meaning of the story changes with perspectives and that straightforward moral thinking is challenged. Binary thinking assumes that moral truth is one. But myth demonstrates that moral truth can be many levels. It does not resolve the decision. It makes the decision deeper.

The nature of *dharma* also comes into question here, for if it requires a choice that inflicts pain on one's loved one, then it is not an absolutely pure moral system; it is a burden that is fulfilled at a high cost. This is a hard but valuable lesson, for it avoids idealization and preserves genuine morality. If, on the other hand, the *Ramayana* is simply a text of ideal behaviour, then we can see the rationale for supporting the depiction of conflict. But the epic forces the reader to reflect. Here, thoughts of Irawati Karve are pertinent again; for *dharma* is not a rule in the epic, but a problem. The *Ramayana* further informs the reader that *dharma* must be comprehended, and that comprehension starts where certainty ends, as a result Sita's exile is philosophically relevant even today. It demonstrates that even good characters can be in dilemmas. *Dharma* itself may be internally bifurcated. And ideal conflict often marks the start of moral thinking. This is crucial for challenging binary thinking.

### Plurality and the Refusal of Absolutism

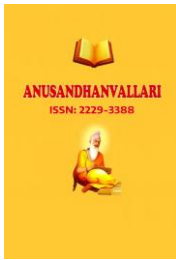
While binary thinking often relies on a single truth, fixed opposition, and final decision, Hindu mythology frequently opposes this through plurality, not only in the form of multiple stories that coexist, nor merely as a sociological fact, but in the form of a philosophical alternative epistemology and ethical framework, according to which moral truth need not appear singular, uniform, or unambiguous. This is important to note because it illustrates how Hindu mythology challenges absolutism.

Binary moral thinking assumes that there is one right answer to questions of moral truth (one side is right, one story is true, and one ethical framework fits all). Plurality challenges this assumption by not denying the truth but by denying that truth can be captured in only one perspective. As A. K. Ramanujan illustrates, in his seminal essay *Three Hundred Ramayanas* that there is no single *Ramayana*, but rather multiple in the many languages, regions, traditions, and eras. This implies that myths' moral significance is constantly reinterpreted, disputed, and altered. Some place a strong emphasis on duty. Sadness for others. Some believe that authority is powerful. It is criticized by others. This disagreement is not an error. The moral sophistication of tradition is reflected in all of this. In this case, plurality is a moral response rather than anarchy.

It asserts that moral truth is constructed through discourse between various voices rather than being singular. Other possibilities are included in pluralism, while binary thinking excludes them. There are unanswered moral questions. This is evident in the various versions of the *Ramayana*, where Sita's suffering is paramount in one version and Rama is the perfect king in another. This is more about the shift in focus, which produces a different moral universe. This makes it clear that the true purpose of myth is to offer a space where moral meanings can be considered in a variety of ways rather than to impart a final lesson. Both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are replete with diverse characters who disagree, quarrel, and leave moral conclusion unfinished.

When we relate this point to the concept of *dharma*, it becomes even more evident. Pluralism is not the opposite of *dharma* if it is complex, context-dependent, and interpretive; rather, it is a prerequisite for it since no single

viewpoint can fully capture the essence of a moral life because different perspectives reveal different truths because, as Indian philosophy suggests, truth can also be multifaceted. The criticism of binary thinking is strengthened by



this. Moral decisions cannot be influenced by a single viewpoint if truth is complex. The idea of absolute truth is directly challenged by the fact that no side is correct, no story contains the whole truth, and no single account contains the meaning of life. After all, a final choice would be required for absolute truth. That final choice is halted by pluralism, but in a profound way.

### Myth and the Ethical Imagination

Hindu mythology is an education in moral perception rather than merely an exercise in moral quandaries. This is an important distinction: if mythology is said to "present" moral conflicts, it can be reduced to little more than a collection of stories with a moral theme. However, if mythology is said to "shape" moral perception, it is understood to be a practice that develops our ability to see, comprehend, and judge; it does not just present challenges for contemplation but also instills the habit of thinking in complexity. In this way, myth is both a story and a teaching tool. Its moral lessons are less significant than how it teaches the reader to behave morally; it teaches discernment, patience with uncertainty, attention to conflicting claims, and, most importantly, that moral understanding frequently starts where certainty ends.

This is why the concept of ethical imagination—not just the ability to envision possibilities of moral value, but also the developed capacity to transcend fixed categories, inhabit the other, embrace conflicting claims, and think sensibly rather than mechanically—is so crucial. It is a particular kind of moral awareness, and myth serves as its training ground. Instead of fleeing the complexity of Arjuna, Karna, Draupadi, Bhishma, and Rama, readers are urged to immerse themselves in them. These characters are not merely ideals or villains; rather, they are sites of moral inquiry, forcing readers to confront conflicting values, divided loyalties, tragic choices, and the weight of decision-making. They force readers to consider not only whether this was the right course of action, but also what responsibilities guided this decision, what competing claims were at stake, what the moral cost of this choice, and how would it would it change.

The significance of Arjuna, for example, lies not in the fact that he is given advice but rather in the fact that he is a symbol of moral hesitation, that his hesitation is a result of careful consideration rather than weakness, and that his bravery in the face of adversity serves as a lesson in the need to tolerate uncertainty before acting morally, which is a kind of moral education in and of itself. Additionally, Karna's loyalty is admirable but morally complex; his dignity is accompanied by poor judgment; and his moral complexity cannot be reduced to simple heroism or villainy.

A different kind of moral action is carried out by Draupadi. She unavoidably raises issues of sexual violence, humiliation, retaliation, and justice, revealing the systems of injustice that conventional heroic narratives frequently conceal. Rama (particularly in his predicament regarding Sita) compels us to consider the weight of responsibility, the collision of ideals, and the necessity of considering conflict; Bhishma teaches us that principle is destructive when it loses touch with reality. Each of these characters challenges our preconceived notions, pushes the limits of our moral consciousness, and forces us to think about conflict. This is a crucial distinction: judgment acknowledges that morality frequently necessitates interpretation, whereas obedience presupposes settled morality. Gurcharan Das illustrates this point by pointing to the *Mahabharata's* ongoing relevance as an exercise in judgment rather than obedience.

Obedience asks, "Did I obey?" Discernment asks, "How do I make responsible decisions where rules fail?" And myth nurtures just that second ability. Therefore, it is a mistake to consider myth simply as a set of moral prescriptions; rather, it moulds the conscience in an indirect but effective way, not teaching so much what to think as how to think morally. By this stage, mythic thought goes in the opposite direction to binary thinking: the latter encourages alignment to a party; myth cultivates discernment, the former demands sides and quick decisions and moral declarations; myth allows decisions to deepen, the former simplifies complexity into slogans; myth widens it into contemplation, the latter treats uncertainty as a sign of weakness; myth treats it as the basis of serious morality.

These are not merely differences, but two different models of moral life: one based on rule-determination, the other on deliberative reason. This is why myth is still important today, not simply for its cultural but its intellectual

significance. This is also because the moral imagination is eroded by the demand for quick decisions in modern public life and the suspicion of nuance and dismissal of complexity as ideological obstinacy. Myth preserves this capacity: attentiveness to context, tolerance for uncertainty, acknowledgment of competing values, empathy for another's position, and the patience to deliberate without rush. In this sense, then, myths are not only cultural memory, but also moral resource

Finally, myth also calls into question the moral pace of modernity; it decelerates decision-making, demands reconsideration, and asks to be read again and again, because the moral meaning of myth is never completed in a single reading. To reread is itself a process of moral maturation, because maturity involves grappling with complexity rather than shirking it. For this reason, myth and imagination are inseparable. Here, imagination is not a daydream, but the ability to see moral possibilities beyond binary thinking: justice other than vengeance, duty other than obedience, responsibility other than purity. Hindu myths are important not because they provide eternal answers, but because they maintain a discipline of asking moral questions, instructing readers to remain within complexity rather than seek a flight from it.

### Conclusion

This article contended that the dialogue between Hindu myth and Western moral tradition was not simply a cultural challenge but an ideological one: One is not right and the other is wrong; rather, the traditional moral ways of thinking, the moral universalism, consequentialism, and dualism, are not enough; Hindu mythology reveals that moral thinking does not necessarily have to be based on clear opposition and that it thereby engenders a moral imagination that tolerates complexity without falling into relativism; this is not only philosophically significant today but urgently necessary.

In contrast to frameworks that seek certainty in contradictory logic, context-free decisions, mutually contradictory duties, and interpretive wisdom, Hindu mythology demonstrates the limitations of binary moral thinking and offers a rich ethical imagination rooted in *dharma*, plurality, and moral ambiguity. It challenges the notion that moral truth must be sought through the lens of stark dichotomies rather than denying the necessity of moral distinctions or dissolving morality into relativism.

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