

Beyond Duty: Dharma, Character, and the Case for a Virtue Ethics of Indian Philosophy

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Abstract

The present work explores the concept of dharma in the classical Indian philosophical tradition. As proposed in the work, dharma cannot be reduced to any code of duties and obligations of particular social status. Thus, contrary to the traditional view of dharma being reduced to a deontological code of duties for different castes, the paper explores the nature of right actions in the light of particular characteristics of agents and their wisdom as reflected in *Mahābhārata*, Dharmaśāstras, and the tenfold virtues of *Manusmṛti*. Based on the research carried out by scholars such as Matilal, Mohanty, Kuppaswamy, Creel, and Edgerton, the work makes an effort to demonstrate the difference between the context-dependent nature of dharma and the nature of Kantian duty as an imposition and exceptionless norm, giving examples of Kauṣika narrative and moral improvisations of *Kṛṣṇa* in terms of *āpad dharma*. Also, the work discusses the concept of niṣkāma karma as presented in the *Bhagavad Gītā* and emphasises its internalist nature, as well as exploring the principles of Buddhism and Jainism and comparing the virtues of non-violence, truthfulness, and self-restraint in their ethical frameworks represented by the Eightfold Path and *pañcamahāvratas* correspondingly.

Keywords: Aristotelian ethics, Dharma, virtue ethics, Indian philosophy, Bhagavad Gītā, Manusmṛti, Buddhism, Jainism

Dharma: Virtue or Duty

The concept of dharma in the Sanskrit tradition is often simplified as a rigid set of duties that all religious Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists must adhere to. However, a deeper understanding reveals hints that are sometimes overlooked. For instance, duties vary by caste or social position, with Brahmins having different obligations than Vaiśyas, and Jain householders' responsibilities differing from those of Buddhist monks. Moreover, the virtues highlighted in each stage of life (āśramas) and in the cosmic ages also play a considerable role.

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Caste duties are often presented as virtues, exemplified by Brahmins, who are characterised by industriousness, self-control, compassion, truthfulness, discipline, generosity, righteousness, and wisdom (Arokiasamy, 1986, p. 25). This approach mirrors virtue ethics within the framework of dharma, where character traits (*lakṣaṇa*) determine a person's virtues. King Nahuṣa's inquiry in the Mahābhārata exemplifies dharma as virtues such as truthfulness, generosity, forgiveness, goodness, kindness, self-control, and compassion (Matilal, 2017, pp. 79–102). Interestingly, *Yudhiṣṭhira* challenges caste determinism by proposing that a person exhibiting these virtues could transcend their caste designation.

Contrary to viewing dharma exclusively as duty, some interpretations underline it as customs intertwined with virtue. The Laws of Manu, for instance, suggest that an ethical king should uphold the usual practices of virtuous individuals while respecting regional, ancestral, and caste customs unless they conflict with extensive ethical principles. This approach suggests that laws should emerge from the lived experience of customs and virtues to nurture a flexible and tolerant society accommodating diverse customs and virtues.

Instead of being theoretical and based on rules, the dharma concept, as Paul Häcker suggested, is fundamentally grounded in experience and observation (Häcker, 1965). While social customs are often registered after śruti and smṛti in Hindu texts, one could argue that they are the primary source of dharma. For instance, a passage from the Mahābhārata underlines the precedence of customs, noting that dharma arises from good practice and that the Vedas themselves are established upon dharma (Kuppuswamy, 1977, p. 17). Additionally, Āpastamba's Dharmasūtra begins by emphasising the importance of accepted customary laws, which are acknowledged by those knowledgeable in the law and the Vedas, as well as by Āryas who have received proper training. Häcker asserts that this definition of dharma is the most specific and concrete within Hinduism (Häcker, 1965, p. 99).

The concept of dharma progressed from being associated solely with religious rites and regulations, such as rituals, scripture study, and ascetic practices, to embracing all aspects of daily life (Mohanty, 2017, p. 76). Like Aristotle's view of ethos evolving into *ethikē* through the development of virtues guided by practical reasoning and diverse experiences, dharma, according to Bangalore Kuppuswamy, is not about unthinkingly following customs. Instead, one's conduct should be grounded in rationality, contribute to the welfare of humanity, and be guided by conscience (Kuppuswamy, 1977, pp. 51–52). Dharma emanates from religious practices and regulations, yet it expands to encompass all aspects of daily life (Mohanty, 2017, p. 76). Similarly, Aristotle's concept of ethos regenerates into *ethikē* when virtues are cultivated through practical reasoning within diverse life experiences. Kuppuswamy argues that dharma should not be equated with blind observance of custom; instead, one's actions should be guided by reasoning, contribute to humanity's well-being, and be driven by conscience (Kuppuswamy, 1977, pp. 51–52).

Franklin Edgerton defines dharma as propriety or socially approved conduct concerning interactions with fellow beings (Edgerton, 1965, p. 30). It involves aligning one's nature (*svabhāva*) with one's prescribed duties (*svadharma*). Austin Creel emphasises that dharma is not an external code but an inner law reflecting an individual's actual capacities and appropriate function within society (Creel, 1977, pp. 4–5). This inner law, however, differs from Kant's rational autonomy, as it is rooted in

the individual's innate characteristics, termed *svabhāva* in Sanskrit (Mohanty, 2017, p. 53).

This outlook extends beyond traditional Hinduism, including Gandhi's revised vision of the caste system, where individuals were expected to follow their fathers' pursuits. Gandhi's challenge to his followers resonates with the freedom of the Hindu ascetic, as outlined by Purushottama Bilimoria, who asserts that an ascetic's dharma is determined by their innate constitution and self-determination (Bilimoria et al., 2014, pp. 296–297). This illustrates the development of one's prescribed duties according to one's inherent nature. However, within Gandhi's own circle, it was not without controversy that he claimed such liberty in deciding his *svadharma*.

Dharma as a Wing of Puruṣārtha

Dharma is the primary moral principle that defines righteousness, ethics, and good. The term should not be blended with 'religion' but understood in the context of the four *puruṣārthas* — *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kāma*, and *Mokṣa*. Here, Dharma unambiguously refers to the sense of morality that identifies the ethical rightness or wrongness of actions.

Dharma has a twofold function in this framework. Firstly, it acts as the moral judge, determining whether the pursuits of *Artha* and *Kāma* are ethically legitimate. Only when *Artha* and *Kāma* are pursued through dharmic (righteous) means do they attain genuine value, rather than becoming immoral enjoyments lacking a higher purpose. Secondly, Dharma guides and directs the functioning of *Artha* and *Kāma*, ensuring that the pursuit of prosperity and pleasure happens in a healthy, compatible, and sustainable manner. Just as a car needs a steering wheel and brakes to be driven safely despite its accelerator, Dharma works as the ethical control mechanism that keeps *Artha* and *Kāma* from veering into self-destructive or excessive territory when left unchecked (Mishra, 2016, p. 28).

An analogy summarily captures this: when Dharma is destroyed, it destroys us in turn; when Dharma is protected, it protects us (*dharmā eva hato hanti, dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ*). Dharma forms the foundation that holds people in support (*dharmo dhārayate prajāḥ*) and upon which the entire world rests (*dharmo viśvasya jagataḥ*). Accepting and upholding Dharma is a choice — it sustains us only when we sustain it through ethical conduct (Mishra, 2016, p. 29).

Philosophically, Dharma depicts the universal principle of morality, righteousness, and cosmic order that must be incorporated into all human pursuits and value systems for them to be meaningful and sustainable. It is the indispensable compass that guides and harmonises material and psychological pursuits with overarching ethical and spiritual ideals. Neglecting Dharma leads to license and self-destruction, while upholding it clears the way for holistic well-being and elevated existence, according to the wisdom of Indian philosophy.

This raises the question of why Dharma should be followed, and in what way it benefits the individual. Dharma is not merely a means to attain *Artha* and *Kāma* but is an end in itself; being moral and virtuous is intrinsically good and desirable. Following Dharma gives inner satisfaction and joy by gratifying one's conscience and connecting with one's true Self. Moral consciousness strengthens the mental faculties, willpower, and ability to pursue *Artha* and *Kāma* successfully, whereas immoral thinking erodes these capacities. The gist of Dharma is wishing good for all, since true happiness comes from hoping for the happiness of others as well. There is also a cosmic law of

moral governance, or *ṛta*, operating through the law of karma, by which good or bad actions determine the fruits one reaps. Finally, pursuing Dharma leads to self-purification and self-realisation (*mokṣa*) by removing inner restraints and allowing one's true nature to shine.

Determining universal ethical principles is complex, yet for practical purposes in ordinary dealings, morality is innately understood as a matter of attitudes and intentions towards others. Acting selfishly without considering the good of others is immoral; acting for the good of others while avoiding harm to them is Dharma (Mishra, 2016).

The seer Vyāsa offers a similarly direct definition of morality: across all eighteen Purāṇas, he is said to have made only two claims — that doing good to others is virtue, and that doing harm to others is vice (*aṣṭādaśa-purāṇeṣu vyāsasya vacanadvayam, paropakāraḥ puṇyāya pāpāya parapīḍanam*). In the same spirit, a further moral guideline holds that one should not treat others in a way one would regard as unfavourable for oneself (*ātmanaḥ pratikūlāni pareṣāṃ na samācaret*) (Mishra, 2016, p. 32). This principle advocates extending to others the same regard one would desire for oneself: just as one would not wish to be subjected to harm or ill-treatment, one should avoid inflicting such conduct on others. Moral and spiritual teaching converges on the principle that the only authentic path to flourishing is to embrace the good of all as one's own good; selfishness inhibits genuine well-being, while compassionate altruism aligns the individual with the universal laws governing cosmic harmony and abundance.

Teaching outlines three broad categories of Dharma: Sāmānya Dharma (general dharma), Viśeṣa Dharma (specific dharma), and Āpad Dharma (dharma in distress or emergency). The idea of Sāmānya Dharma embodies general moral standards and values that are universally applicable to everyone and that we follow at all times. The fundamental moral duties of human beings are truthfulness, non-violence, and honourable conduct that are seen as basic duties that do not accept exemptions. Viśeṣa Dharma has to do with particular obligations related to one's position in life, e.g. the obligation of a teacher is to do his/her job effectively, whereas that of a doctor is to be conscientious in treating patients and fulfilling one's duties within the community. In contrast, Āpad Dharma is characterised by the acceptance of deviation from normal behavioral norms in cases of need where the physical wellbeing of the individual or an innocent person is at risk due to no fault of that person. Faithful Dharma is meant to be rational, liberal, and adaptive rather than rigidly uncompromising. While general moral principles remain inviolable, extraordinary situations may call for reasonable departures from prescribed norms for the sake of the greater good and out of charitable consideration. The relationship between purity of means and purity of motive is a subtle and contested issue: while good intentions are laudable, the stricter view associated with *Yudhiṣṭhira* and Mahatma Gandhi holds that adopting immoral means to a good end remains problematic, though the tradition also contends there are deeper dimensions to this question (Mishra, 2016, p. 33).

The relationship between ends and means is complex; ordinarily unacceptable means may become necessary as a last recourse when all other righteous paths are blocked. In such dire circumstances, the eternal principles of Dharma allow for contextual relativity, prioritising the ultimate good over ordinary decrees when no other option is available. Dharma thus encourages a fundamentally sound, ethical, and

humane orientation, while retaining the wisdom to modify prudently in extreme circumstances that transcend simplistic moral absolutism. As Bhīṣma states, speaking the truth is a great value, but speaking what is good is of even higher value than mere truth-telling, for that which serves the absolute good of all is, in his view, the truth even if it takes the outward form of a lie (*satyasya vacanam śreyaḥ satyādapi hitam vadet, yad bhūta-hitam atyantam etat satyam matam mama*) (Mishra, 2016, p. 34).

The same act can be virtuous or unvirtuous depending on context and intention. When the motive is noble and the means ethical, the action coordinates with righteousness; however, dire circumstances may arise in which conventional means are ineffective, yet the fulfilment of a moral imperative becomes unavoidable. Adopting outwardly painful or unconventional means can be permissible if the predominant intention remains to uphold the highest moral good that transcends standard codes. Kṛṣṇa's role in the Mahābhārata illustrates this: he employed strategies that appear unethical on their face, such as sanctioning deception, yet his supreme motive was the vanquishing of evil and the upholding of dharma once all peaceful paths had been exhausted (Mishra, 2016).

The crucial factor is whether ethical means were wilfully disregarded despite their availability, or tragically had to be set aside as an extraordinary final resort to prevent a greater injustice; means become immoral in the former case of deliberate wrongdoing, not when adopted as an unavoidable necessity for the greater good. Bhīṣma's wisdom highlights that blind adherence to rules such as truthfulness can, ironically, violate the very ethics they aim to uphold; the ultimate 'truth' maximises universal compassion and well-being, even where it defies conventional notions of right and wrong. This view permits a context-sensitive ethical relativity while upholding the moral essence at stake, advocating pragmatic wisdom over dogmatism in crises where rote norm-following becomes self-defeating, as illustrated by cases of preventing rape or harm, where unyielding rules such as 'never lie' fail to address real-world moral complications in which the greatest good for the greatest number must be prioritised impartially.

Moral conduct, then, cannot be reduced to simplistic universal precepts divorced from context; it is instead defined by fidelity to the highest intent of maximising welfare and compassionate justice, an intent that may sometimes require setting aside explicit norms in order to preserve their implicit spirit against greater violations. Amid the diverse interpretations of Dharma across scriptures and thinkers, the tradition advises following the path adopted by the mahājana, the genuinely great beings, since the scriptures and remembered teachings are themselves varied and no single sage's view is undivided; the truth of dharma lies hidden, and the path is that which the great have walked (*vedāḥ vibhinnāḥ smṛtayo vibhinnāḥ, naiko munir yasya matam na bhinnam, dharmasya tattvam nihitam guhāyām mahājano yena gataḥ sa panthāḥ*) (Mishra, 2016, p. 37).

The crucial question that follows is who truly qualifies as a mahājana. The term means 'great person', but true greatness is not defined by political power, high position, wealth, or academic talent alone; its hallmark is greatness of heart and depth of wisdom. A mahājana need not be formally educated but deeply understands the secrets of life itself, exhibiting a universal, impartial love for all beings and a liberal thought process unburdened by prejudice, in short, a spiritually enlightened person (Mishra, 2016).

Only such an enlightened soul can comprehend the essence of Dharma and serve as a wise guide, their discerning wisdom (*viveka*) allowing them to judge right and wrong. If needed, a *mahājana* may consciously set aside traditional moral rules and instead follow inner conscience in order to sustain the true spirit of Dharma. Examples of *mahājanas* can be found across time and place. Kṛṣṇa, the Buddha, Christ, and the wider tradition of loving, godly beings who attained spiritual perfection and it is this noble tradition of saints, rather than mere religious priests or pontiffs, that has kept the flame of true Dharma alive. Saints who have realised the highest spiritual truths are the true leaders who define and embody Dharma in thought and conduct; such enlightened *mahājanas* should be considered models rather than mere religious authorities, their lives a bridging the universal ethical and spiritual values for which Dharma stands (Mishra, 2016, p. 38).

Virtue Ethics in Hindu Scripture

In investigating the concept of dharma as duty in Hindu ethics, Matilal departs from the Kantian perspective by highlighting that dharma is not strictly imposed but instead proposed. Drawing on Lingat and Dumont, he suggests that dharma exercises influence from above without directly governing action, a characterisation that, though slightly ambiguous, leads Matilal to view dharma as open-ended, comparable to the flexibility found in virtue ethics (Matilal, 2002, p. 42).

Matilal critiques a rigid explanation of duty exemplified by Rāma, contrasting it with Kṛṣṇa's more adaptable approach (Matilal, 2002, p. 47). He highlights Rāma's attachment to duty even where it leads to harsh or questionable outcomes, such as his unwillingness to break a promise despite potential benefits to the contrary; Rāma's justification for actions such as shooting Vālin from behind reflects a strict interpretation of duty that overlooks moral considerations regarding the mistreatment of another, a perspective Kant would find wanting, since it reflects poorly on one's character. Moreover, Rāma's extreme conception of a wife's duty, evident in his treatment of Sītā, has perpetuated unrealistic expectations for Indian women under the notion of *strī-dharma*. This ideal demands steadfast loyalty to husbands regardless of circumstance and has set a challenging standard that generations of women have felt pressed to uphold.

Matilal shows how Kant's absolute duty to tell the truth and keep promises faces grave criticism in Hindu literature. Kant assumes rational harmony among duties such that they cannot conflict; Matilal, however, notes that Kant and Indian ethics alike recognise the close connection between truth-telling and promise-keeping, the latter understood as 'protecting the truth' (Matilal, 2002, p. 26).

Matilal interprets Kṛṣṇa's use of the Kauṣika story as a response to Kant. A comparable case is presented: while at a friend's house watching a game, an armed and deranged person arrives demanding to kill the friend; remaining silent would reveal that the friend is present, so one lies that he is not home. For Kant, prudence may counsel lying, but the act has no moral worth, since the duty of truth-telling has been violated. The virtue ethics perspective differs in holding that the action does have moral worth, because the right thing was done in that situation; as a habitual truth-teller, this single lie does not destroy one's virtue; one feels guilt and recommits to virtue. On Matilal's reading, Kauṣika's dharma was dictated by the restrictions of the situation (Matilal, 2002, pp. 26–27). While lying under oath typically leads to hell, exceptions are made to save a life, according to the *Dharmaśāstras*; Dharma 'cannot be

known as universally fixed', and practical wisdom must adjust to circumstance (Matilal, 2002, p. 50). Genuine remorse, as distinct from mere regret, indicates only a temporary lapse of virtue (Matilal, 2002, p. 33).

Kṛṣṇa justifies the use of immoral means to prevent the evil Kauravas from winning the war, implying a utilitarian principle of the greater good. Yudhiṣṭhira observes that there are many moral paths, and that the way to find the right one is to follow the conduct of good people (mahājana); Matilal reads this as an early form of utilitarianism, oriented towards the happiness and well-being of the many (Matilal, 2002, p. 68). Yet where utilitarianism offers a single moral principle, Matilal argues that dharma-morality is pluralistic, while implying that this plurality need not be irrational (Matilal, 2002). His focus on 'practical wisdom' as the guide to moral decision-making points toward a virtue ethics view, in which virtuous persons practise a form of character consequentialism rather than the mere maximisation of pleasure.

Matilal uses the story of a king who decrees the creation of a 'lake of milk' for the greater good, based on considerations of utility, only for individuals to pollute it out of self-interest — showing that even where an authority demands sacrifice for the collective good, human nature may undermine it (Matilal, 2017, p. 79). The broader argument is that virtues preceded moral rules, which are abstractions from virtuous practice, just as vices gave rise to prohibitions; no moral rule could stand alone without virtuous action providing its ethical core, even though moral rules retain normative force as abstractions. Dharma, on this reading, can 'propose' moral guidance, but must accommodate context and the individual (Matilal, 2017).

The Mahābhārata, Especially the Bhagavad Gītā

The Mahābhārata, the great Sanskrit epic, deals comprehensively with moral precepts, primarily through the moral counsel of characters such as Bhīṣma and Yudhiṣṭhira. The Bhagavad Gītā, a part of the Mahābhārata, can itself be regarded as a devoted ethical treatise, one whose ideals effectively exhibit the evolutionary nature of Indian moral thought as it progresses from its rudimentary form in the Vedas to a highly refined and elevated position.

The Mahābhārata primarily propagates the high ideals of social morality, even as it does not entirely disregard the importance of Vedic ritualism and individual purity. The text portrays morality as deeply grounded in social custom, tradition, and the consensus of society, rather than treating social good as the sole aim of moral conduct. Surama Dasgupta observes that the moral standards preached in the Mahābhārata recognise both the absolute and relative nature of morality, with the ideals of social progress and social equilibrium determined partly by scripture and partly by the standard of public good, the latter sometimes superseding scriptural injunction and at other times complementing it (Dasgupta, 1961, p. 25).

The Mahābhārata and the Bhagavad Gītā uphold the Indian tradition of maintaining social and individual order through varṇāśrama dharma, while simultaneously recommending universal duties such as non-violence (*ahimsā*), truthfulness (*satya*), the avoidance of anger (*akrodha*), kind speech (*priyavacana*), compassion (*dayā*), love for all beings (*prema*), the renunciation of selfishness (*svārthatyāga*), and the avoidance of speaking ill of others (*paranindātyāga*). Ideals of social good — the preservation of social order (*lokasthiti*), the upholding of custom (*lokasiddhi*), the maintenance of social equilibrium (*lokasaṁgraha*), the promotion of societal welfare (*lokakalyāṇa*), and the fostering of social progress (*lokayātrā*) — are frequently emphasised,

reconciling individual virtue with societal well-being and balancing the relative nature of socially embedded morality with the absolute moral principles drawn from spiritual and scriptural sources.

While propagating social morality, the *Mahābhārata* does not overlook the ultimate ideal of mokṣa (liberation). For those seeking the highest good, it advocates the primary virtues of non-violence and truthfulness while also exceeding them through yoga and self-purification; virtues such as self-control, equanimity, forbearance, and indifference to pleasure and pain are emphasised for spiritual progress. A central principle of this ethics is its internal conception of morality: without wholly rejecting Vedic injunction, it holds that the inner motive and intention behind an action, and not merely the outer act, determine spiritual merit or demerit. Selfless duty, free of egoistic passion, is recommended whether the action in question is a Vedic ritual or a worldly obligation, with social good or individual liberation as the goal rather than narrow selfishness; the Gītā censures those who adhere to the literal words of the Vedas while acting from impure motives such as lust (Bhagavad Gītā, 2:42). True morality, on this view, demands inner purity, such that good intentions matter more than outward action. This connects directly to the Gītā's doctrine of niṣkāma karma, or action performed without attachment to its fruits. If its ethics were to be summarised briefly, it would be the practice of niṣkāma karma together with svadharma, one's righteous duty according to one's stage of life; pure action, free of ego, does not bind one to saṁsāra. According to the Gītā, adherence to one's svadharma, whether by varṇa or āśrama, is itself the most significant moral duty, and the text praises virtues such as non-violence, truthfulness, freedom from anger, non-greed, non-envy, tranquillity, compassion, steadfastness, forgiveness, and humility as hallmarks of moral excellence, while also acknowledging Vedic duties such as sacrifice.

The Bhagavad Gītā states in chapter 18, verse 5, that acts of sacrifice (*yajña*), charity (*dāna*), and austerity (*tapas*) should not be abandoned but performed, since they purify the wise. Tapas, in particular, is not understood as the mere imposition of pain or torture upon oneself, but as the cultivation of restraint of body, mind, and speech, performed with a pure and high aim rather than out of arrogance. The Gītā distinguishes three types of tapas: tāmasika tapas, undertaken to torture oneself or others out of ignorance; rājasika tapas, undertaken from ego, for fame and recognition; and sāttvika tapas, undertaken with faith, disinterestedness, and pure intention (Bhagavad Gītā, 17:17–19). Tapas is further categorised in relation to the body (respect for divinities, teachers, and purity), speech (truthful, harmless, and studious speech), and mind (silence, equanimity, and self-control) (Bhagavad Gītā, 17:14–16).

Yajña and dāna are classified in the same threefold manner. Sāttvika yajña is performed with a calm mind, solely as duty and without desire for results; rājasika yajña is performed with pride and ostentation; and tāmasika yajña is deficient in faith, procedure, and accompanying charity (Bhagavad Gītā, 17:11–13). Sāttvika dāna is given to a worthy recipient at the proper time and place without expectation of reward; rājasika dāna is given with the expectation of return; and tāmasika dāna is given disrespectfully, to an undeserving recipient, and without proper consciousness (Bhagavad Gītā, 17:20–22). The Gītā thus redefines sacrifice, austerity, and charity as practices of internal purification, selflessness, and proper consciousness rather than mere ritual, with emphasis placed on performing them with sattvic intention, free from ego, attachment, and ignorance.

Heterodox Schools: Buddhism and Jainism

The heterodox systems of Buddhism and Jainism share many central ethical beliefs and presuppositions with the orthodox Hindu traditions, such as karma, saṃsāra, avidyā (ignorance), and mokṣa (liberation); like Hinduism, they preach both objective moral codes and subjective self-purification, with particular emphasis on the latter. However, Buddhism and Jainism depart significantly from Hindu orthodoxy in two respects: their rejection of Vedic ritualism and ceremonialism, and their dismissal of the hierarchical classification of duties based on the varṇa (caste) system.

Despite emerging from the Hindu philosophical background, Buddhism reformulated several basic ethical ideas along more rigorously moral lines, rejecting the ritualistic and supernatural elements prevalent in Vedic Hinduism in favour of an ethicised conception of karma, in which meritorious acts are moral rather than merely ritualistic (Mckenzie, 1971, p. 100). By rejecting the purported efficacy of Vedic sacrifice, Buddhism was able to underline the true spirit of non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) and give it a positive dimension of active love and compassion (McKenzie, 1971, pp. 106–107).

Buddhism generally emphasises virtues of social morality, that is, humility, charity, love, gratitude, sympathy, forgiveness, truthfulness, and justice, and, at the individual level, advocates self-restraint, temperance, contentment, gentleness, celibacy, patience, and purity as moral virtues (Tachibana, 1926, p. 95). Buddhist ethics thus represents a departure from ritualistic Vedic Hinduism towards a more rationalistic, humanistic morality centred on virtuous conduct, self-discipline, compassion, and the transcendence of ignorance, while still retaining core ideas such as karma and mokṣa, rejecting blind attachment to ritual in favour of moral and spiritual development through right thought and action (Tiwari, 2014, p. 102).

Buddhist ethical discipline is contained more particularly within the Eightfold Path prescribed by the Buddha as leading to the highest goal of Nirvāṇa: Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. Of these, the first two fall under the category of *prajñā*, or wisdom; the next three: Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood constitute *śīla*, or moral discipline and virtuous conduct; and the concluding three represent *samādhi*, or meditation and mental cultivation (Tiwari, 2014, p. 103).

Śīla, comprising Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood, most directly summarises Buddhist morality and ethics. Right Speech involves abstention from falsehood, malicious speech, harsh speech, and idle chatter, advocating truthful, kind, and purposeful speech free from selfish motive. Right Action involves observance of the five moral precepts (*pañcaśīla*): non-violence and compassion for life (*ahiṃsā*), not taking what is not freely given (*asteya*), sexual restraint (*brahmacharya*), truthful and honest speech (*satya*), and abstention from intoxicants. Right Livelihood means earning a living through means that do not violate the rights of others through trickery or harm. The *pañcaśīla* is essential for all Buddhists, whether lay or monastic; more extensive codes, such as the eight precepts (*aṭṭhaśīla*) and the ten precepts (*daśaśīla*), are prescribed for those who more fully renounce worldly life, adding abstention from untimely meals, sensual entertainments, and luxurious beds, and, in the case of the *daśaśīla*, sleeping on the ground and refraining from the use of money (Tiwari, 2014).

This emphasis on *śīla* represents a rational and pragmatic approach to ethics, centred on moral restraint, non-violence, truthfulness, and simplicity, intended to develop a

concentrated, compassionate, and mindful way of being instrumental to spiritual progress. The austerity practices specified in the codes of *aṭṭhaśīla* and *daśaśīla* of abstaining from sensual enjoyment, using simple bedding, and renouncing money, bear a resemblance to the Upaniṣadic conception of *tapas*, meant to withdraw the monastic mind from worldly relationships and direct it towards *Nirvāṇa* (Tiwari, 2014, p. 104). While Buddhism emphasises virtues of individual purity for monastics, it also accords importance to virtues of social morality for the wider community, though it gives these ethical virtues a more sophisticated, purely moral meaning than is found in some Hindu traditions.

Like Buddhism, Jainism shares central ethical teachings with Hinduism while rejecting Vedic ritualism and animal sacrifice; it takes the virtue of non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) to an even greater extreme than Buddhism, sometimes inviting mockery for doing so, and also emphasises ascetic virtues, notably for monks, showing Hindu influence in its conception of *tapas*, Jainism being, on the whole, a more severe ascetic model than Buddhism's 'middle way' (Tiwari, 2014). Jaina ethics incorporates observance of the five great vows (*pañcamahāvratas*) that institute right conduct (*samyagcaritra*), and for the attainment of *mokṣa*, Jainism prescribes the 'three jewels' (*triratna*): right faith (*samyagdarsāna*), right knowledge (*samyagjñāna*), and right conduct (*samyagcaritra*); while all three are considered essential, Jainism emphasises right conduct, treating the other two as pointless in the absence of virtuous behaviour.

The five great vows summarise the essence of proper conduct required of all Jains, whether householders or monastics. *Ahiṃsā* (non-violence) receives the most comprehensive interpretation, extended in Jain ethics beyond physical non-violence to include injury through thought, speech, or careless action; ill will, harsh words, and even coercing another to act against their will are considered forms of violence comparable to physical injury, and Jain monks observe *ahiṃsā* with such rigour that they clean the path before them with soft brushes to avoid crushing insects and abstain from lighting lamps after sunset to avoid attracting and harming them, upholding *ahiṃsā* as an immense spiritual discipline and act of austerity (*tapas*). The remaining vows are *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), and *aparigraha* (non-attachment or non-possession); these largely mirror Buddhism's *pañcaśīla* except for *aparigraha*, which mandates complete detachment from wealth, and *ahiṃsā* receives incomparable attention and emphasis within Jain philosophy (Tiwari, 2014, p. 105).

In addition to these core vows, Jainism establishes numerous subsidiary vows (*aṇuvratas*) for householders and more severe codes of conduct for monastics, aimed at enhancing purity, detachment, self-restraint, asceticism, renunciation, and spiritual austerity. While the ultimate goal of such rigorous observance is spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*), Jain ethics does not overlook virtues of harmonious social conduct and welfare: three of the five *mahāvratas*, that is *ahiṃsā*, *satya*, and *asteya*, together with many of the *aṇuvratas*, demonstrate a concern for ethical precepts that prevent harm and promote a just society built on non-violence, honesty, and respect for the rights and possessions of others (Tiwari, 2014, pp. 105–106). Jain ethics can thus be regarded as an uncompromisingly ascetic spiritual tradition that takes the Hindu-Buddhist emphasis on asceticism and renunciation to one of its furthest extremes, in a relentless quest to eliminate violence, attachment, and impurity, while its core vows simultaneously uphold ethical principles essential to an impartial, truthful, and non-exploitative society.

Manusmṛti: Conception of Virtue

The *Manusmṛti* is a notable ancient Indian text addressing governance, including administration, kingship, and the responsibilities of rulers, and its significance lies in its comprehensive exploration of Indian political structures. While it holds a primary position

and is often viewed as a guide for governance, it is not strictly a legal code for a particular region or community; instead, it offers principles interrelated with Hindu society and governance rather than intended for immediate, uniform practical application. Its influence is evident in how its teachings have been embodied in various aspects of Indian administration, showcasing its abiding authority within Indian political thought (Inflibnet ePG Pathshala, n.d.).

The Manusmṛti, also known as the *Manu Samhitā* or *Mānava Dharmaśāstra*, is the oldest and most renowned smṛti text. Scholars have engaged in extensive debate regarding its dating, with some attributing its origin to the period between 200 BCE and 200 CE, and others locating its roots in the Śuṅga era, a view supported by the text's exaltation of Brahmin status and its bestowal of divine sanction upon kingship (Inflibnet ePG Pathshala, n.d.). A more recent view suggests that the text's final compilation likely occurred in the second century CE or later, based on an analysis of its stylistic and thematic elements, indicating that it underwent gradual refinement and integration over an extended period reflecting the unfolding societal and philosophical developments of its time. Despite these uncertainties, the Manusmṛti remains a seminal work that has thoroughly influenced Hindu thought, law, and social norms, offering a comprehensive vision of dharma and serving as a foundation of ancient Indian jurisprudence and ethical philosophy (Inflibnet ePG Pathshala, n.d.).

Manu gives a ten-fold enumeration of virtue: dhṛtiḥ kṣamā damo 'steyaṁ śaucam indriya-nigrahaḥ, dhīr vidyā satyam akrodho daśakam dharma-lakṣaṇam - steadiness, forgiveness, self-control, abstention from unrighteous appropriation, purity, control of the sense organs, discrimination, knowledge, truthfulness, and the absence of anger (Manusmṛti, 6.92).

Dhṛti (fortitude) is highly emphasised in the Manusmṛti as a quality allowing individuals to face challenges, hardships, and temptations with courage, firmness, and endurance, and is considered essential for upholding one's dharmic duties even in difficult circumstances; those who possess dhṛti sustain their composure without wavering in fear, a quality especially expected of those in positions of authority who must set an example of firm commitment to dharma (The Om Temple, n.d.). The text also underlines the role of dhṛti in overcoming temptation and resisting sensual pleasures that may lead one astray, encouraging the cultivation of the strength of character and mental fortitude necessary to remain steadfast in dharmic adherence (The Om Temple, n.d.).

Kṣamā (forgiveness) is likewise highly regarded: the text commands individuals to cultivate the ability to forgive others' transgressions and to exercise patience, holding that resentment obstructs spiritual progress and that forgiveness, as a token of strength and moral character, benefits both the forgiven and the forgiver by cultivating inner peace, compassion, and freedom from negative emotion, thereby contributing to a more positive relationship with others and a more peaceful society (Bühler, 1886).

Dama (self-control) is a central teaching, highlighting the importance of discipline and restraint over the senses, desires, and impulses, since indulgence in sensual pleasure hinders the pursuit of dharma; the text recommends self-restraint and moderation in food, speech, and conduct, and control over the five senses, holding that dama maintains mental clarity, enables sound decision-making, and helps individuals resist negative influence and distraction that might compromise their adherence to dharmic principle (Bühler, 1886).

Asteya (non-stealing) is a fundamental principle comprising abstinence from taking what belongs to others and from deceit and fraud, understood as grave violations of dharma that undermine trust, respect, and social harmony; the concept extends beyond material possessions to include the 'stealing' of time, attention, or opportunity, and

intellectual property theft or plagiarism, such that adherence to *asteya* contributes to a society built on trust, respect, and ethical conduct (Mitra, 1982).

Śauca (purity) encompasses both physical and mental purity, considered vital for spiritual growth and the pursuit of dharma; the text recommends maintaining purity in food, speech, and conduct, since impurity is held to obstruct spiritual progress, and emphasises the cultivation of pure thoughts, intentions, and emotions as conducive to clarity of thought, emotional balance, and a deeper understanding of dharma, as well as to reverence for the sacred in religious practice.

Indriya-nigraha (sense-control), closely related to *dama*, refers to the mastery of the five senses; the *Manusmṛti* warns against indulgence in sensual pleasure and recommends restraint in order to avoid temptation, cultivate self-awareness and clarity of mind, and develop detachment from material desire, while also maintaining harmonious relationships by avoiding conflicts that arise from uncontrolled indulgence.

Dhī (wisdom) represents the cultivation of intelligence, discernment, and sound judgment, essential for following the path of dharma; the text encourages the pursuit of knowledge and the capacity to apply the principles of dharma in practical situations, guiding individuals through moral dilemmas and conflicts, while also cultivating humility and preventing arrogance by keeping one open-minded and receptive to guidance.

Vidyā (knowledge) refers to the acquisition and pursuit of knowledge, especially spiritual knowledge and the study of sacred texts, considered a means to wisdom and to understanding one's dharmic obligations; the *Manusmṛti* emphasises study of the Vedas, Upaniṣads, and other scriptures, as well as learning from virtuous individuals and teachers, as necessary for personal growth, self-realisation, and a righteous life, while also fostering humility and respect for the wisdom of the sages (Mitra, 1982).

Satya (truthfulness) is highly regarded, emphasising honesty and the avoidance of falsehood as a moral obligation whose violation undermines trust, integrity, and social harmony; the text urges individuals to cultivate the courage to speak truth even in difficult situations, presenting truthfulness as a pathway to inner peace, self-realisation, and the earning of respect through a life of honesty and integrity.

Akrodha (freedom from anger) refers to the ability to control anger and maintain calm, composed behaviour even in adversity; the *Manusmṛti* recommends the cultivation of patience and the avoidance of anger, which is held to cloud judgement and lead to destructive, dharma-violating action, recommending practices such as meditation, controlled breathing, and the cultivation of compassion and forgiveness as means of overcoming anger, and emphasising *akrodha*'s role in fostering harmonious relationships, peace, and unity within society (Mitra, 1982).

Conclusion

Considering various orthodox and heterodox sources of philosophy in India, a common picture has emerged: dharma is not just a duty imposed from the outside but rather the characteristic virtue cultivated from within, revealed through means like discernment and the practical judgment instead of fixed rules. The Mahabharata understanding around truthfulness, ethics of the motive in Gita and ten types of virtues given by *Manusmṛiti* all of these cannot be simplified as belonging to the category of Kant's rules of duties (acting the same way everywhere, at all times), as the virtue identified

as dharma does mean moral authority inherent for virtuous people emphasized through their situational judgment (viveka) rather than duties prescribed from the outside.

As shown here, the analysed notion is similar to Aristotle's systematic account of its development through the process of habitual virtue and phronesis in the interpretation of dharma by Kuppuswamy and Matilal, representing it as rational, welfare-oriented, and conscience-driven rather than fixed custom or rule-based regulation. While Buddhism and Jainism, being heterodox schools of thought, do not advocate for the Vedic ethos, it can be shown that they only reinforce the perception of the situation. Their respective śīla and pañcamahāvratā codes place the same virtues, such as peacefulness, truthfulness, and non-violence, on the explicitly ethical level.

In a sense, we can conclude that Western classical philosophy does not offer a single theory but a number of virtue-centred ethical approaches that share the principle of rejection of moral absolutism and the belief that moral actions cannot be separated from the character of the morally acting person. This has implications for the historical reconstruction and shows that Indian ethics should be regarded as a serious competitor in terms of contemporary discussions within the framework of virtue ethics theory.

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