

Meat and Morality in the Mahābhārata

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1. Once, in London, a famous American Philosopher was giving a subtle argument for a sort of evolutionary ethics. Taking an example, at one point, he remarked that pigs, obviously, had evolved in order to make pork-chops possible. As a vegetarian Hindu I found that bit of his subtle reasoning rather gross. But indeed I should *not* have been shocked at all, because the Vedic Hindus – at least some of them – did seriously believe that beasts – at least some of them – were created to make sacrificial offerings to fire possible. Thus Manu Says quite unabashedly:

“Animals were created by the self-born Brahmā Himself for the purpose of sacrificial offering. A sacrifice is good for all. Hence killing in a sacrifice is not killing.” (*Manusamhitā*, 5/39)

This teleological justification of ritual killing comes after a longish legitimization of slaughtering animals for food to save one's life which starts by enunciating a principle of predatory ordering:

“All this is life's food, this is ordained by the Creator ... what does not move (e.g. plants) is food for what moves, what does not have canine teeth is to be eaten by those who have, those who do not have hands are edible by those who have hands, and those who are naturally timorous are to be eaten by those who are brave,” (*Manusamhitā*, 5/28-29).

What is amazing is that just a few verses after this in the same text Manu goes on to praise the non-carnivorous non-violent abstainer from all flesh-food and says that not only is the butcher guilty of killing but:

- (1) The person who permits or orders the animal to be killed. (anumantā)
- (2) The slaughterer (*nihantā*)
- (3) The carver or chopper of the limbs (*viśasitā*)
- (4) The seller and (5) The buyer (*krayavikrayī*)
- (6) One who cooks it (*samskartā*)
- (7) One who serves (*upahartā*)
- (8) and eats it (*khādaka*)

– all are to some extent to be counted as guilty of killing. Now, how

could such simultaneous permission and prohibition of animal-slaughtering coexist in the otherwise more or less consistent text of the *Mānava Dharmasāstra*?

2. The initial solution of this hermeneutic puzzle is fairly straightforward. Ritualistic scripturally sanctioned killing (*vaidha himsā*) is one thing and habitual eating of scripturally unsanctified futile meat (*vṛthā māṃsa*) is another. Approval of animal sacrifice does not necessarily mean recommendation of meat-eating, just as a humane opposition to animal sacrifice – so seminal to Buddhism – did not entail prohibition of meat-eating. But even this solution strikes us, (far removed as we are from the social milieu where Vedic scriptural sanction by itself was an unquestionable redeemer of any practice) as a make-shift reconciliation. It is amounting as it were to recommending that the otherwise sinful act of killing and eating a deer becomes not only permissible but even obligatory (“If a man refuses to eat legitimately prepared meat while engaged in a ritual for the ancestors then he becomes a beast after death...” *Manu* 5/35) once you sprinkle some holy water along with some mantra on the venison. This is so abhorrent to modern sensibility that I have heard tender-hearted westernized Indians argue for just the converse of *Manu*’s dictate. “I would any day buy lamb from the butchers’ and cook it and relish it but I would never approve of this horrible practice, be it Vedic or Tantric, of ritualistic beheading of an anointed animal with great pomp of fire-or Goddess-worship. It is not only cruel, but hypocritical as well”. While the traditional Hindu could condone meat as “*prasādam*” (sanctified food which has been offered to the Goddess) but never allow meat eating for the sheer fun of it, the reformed Hindu or Brahmo (e.g. Tagore) would hate to defile a temple with the blood of hundreds of innocent mute creatures (*Rabindranath*’s play “*Bisarjan*” has the *Kali*-image thrown away into the river by a disgusted priest who could not take the violence any more!) but would enjoy well-cooked chicken or lamb decently served on the table without any qualms. The Buddha too did allow his monks to eat meat whenever offered as alms provided it was pure in three respects: it is not seen, heard or suspected by the monk that it had been killed on purpose to feed him. It remains controversial, however, whether what the Buddha died by eating was really poisonous pork. Apparently the word “*śūkara maddava*” could mean a kind of roots which pigs love and hence are called “pig’s delight” rather than ‘pig’s flesh’.

3. Whatever may be the solution of the converse inconsistency between the Buddhist permission of nonvegetarian food and the Buddhist denouncement of violence, we are directly concerned with

the Brahminical inconsistency between approval of sacrificial killing and denigration of meat-eating.

This apparent inconsistency comes to a climax when we find *Manusamhitā* (5.56), in a bid to extol abstention from meat-eating, comparing it to the meritorious performance of horse-sacrifice! (The same verse, with slight variation occurs in *Mahābhārata* 13.116.10)

“One who performs the horse-sacrifice every year of his hundred years’ full life, and one who simply abjures meat - earn equal moral merit.”

We can hardly hope to redress the palpable ethical contradiction by reminding ourselves that horse-meat was never a delicacy and kings like Rantideva who are notorious in the Puranas for having filled up their kingdom with the blood and hide of sacrificed animals are also described (*Mahābhārata*, 13.113.63) as vegetarians. They might not have killed in order to eat; yet if they abstained from eating meat so that they do not cause killing, how could they, at the same time, kill so ceremoniously? The temptation to offer historical/anthropological ‘explanation’ in terms of an earlier carnivorous Vedic culture of treating animals as mere edible means and a later emerging humane (Buddhist?) culture of treating them as fellow-living beings, is very strong here. But such an ‘explanation’ does not solve the moral puzzle that the Dharmaśāstras and *Mahābhārata* presents. How could a Dharma-obsessed self-critical hermeneutically meticulous society internalize both of these attitudes within the same moral framework at the same time?

4. For a solution, let me turn, at this point, to *Mahābhārata* – that epic which, somewhat like Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, claims to have answered all important questions such that “if it is not here then it is nowhere else.”

Mbh discusses the issue of violence versus nonviolence, just versus unjust killing in countless passages. The whole *Bhagavadgīta* can be looked upon as a debate about the rightness of killing one’s kinsfolk in a battle. While ‘*ahiṃsa*’ – non-hurting is extolled as a virtue all along, there seemed to be no end to exceptional circumstances where killing is excused and even applauded. Brahmins can kill animals following the injunction of the scriptures in honour of fire or in honour of the ancestors. One recalls here the Cārvāka materialists’ joke that if the sacrificed animal goes straight to heaven why don’t they sacrifice their old parents instead? Kṣatriyas can kill in battle, in punishment of the law-breaker and in recreational hunting. Śūdras can, of course, happily run slaughterhouses as a pious family-

profession!

A provisional solution is suggested in Mbh 13.116.49:

"All this has been said (e.g., eating sanctified sacrificial meat is all right etc.) as worldly dharma which is preferred by result-oriented people (*pravṛtti lakṣaṇe dharme phalārthibhir 'upadrute*). This is not for people who wish to be emancipated (from the world of birth and death." The distinction between two types of moralities – one called "the law for the action-engaged" (*pravṛtilakṣaṇah dharmah*) and the other called "the law for the withdrawing liberation-seeker (*nivṛtilakṣaṇah dharmah*) which is made in the Mbh echoes but does not quite replicate the Upanishadic distinction between the path of the pleasing (*preyas*) and the path of the good (*śreyas*). Thus as long as one wants to enjoy the world with what the Gita calls "desire that does not go against the moral law" (*dharmāviruddha kāma*), one can perfectly blamelessly do so. Most people, including most virtuous people wish to lead this kind of engaged life. In such a life there will be a place for acquiring wealth, enjoying sex and eating tasty food including meat, as long as the wealth is lawfully earned and duly shared and donated, the sex is legitimized by marriage and the food is "left-over from a sacrificial offering to the gods" (*yajñāśiṣṭa*). Eating moderate amounts of meat in this manner one could not incur much "sin" (potential suffering). Indeed, by performing elaborate sacrifices one pleases the gods or the ancestors and as a result attains "merit" (potential post-mortem happiness). Yet two things are to be remembered: a) Mere avoidance of sin and acquiring of merit (which you can do respectively by eating ritually sanctified meat and by sacrifices) do not lead to the highest summum bonum (*nihśreyasah*) although it may lead to morally permissible prosperity (*abhyudaya*).

b) Just as pleasure – worldly or heavenly – always comes enfolded in pain, that which leads to pleasure viz: moral merit due to scripturally recommended acts (*puṇya* or *dharmā*) always comes mixed with a bit of demerit (*pāpa* or *adharma*). The second point may seem to be controverted here and there in the tradition insofar as the definition of 'heaven' includes the adjective "a pleasure that is not shot through with pain" (*yat na dukkhena sambhinnam*). But philosophical texts like the rather ancient *Sāṅkhya kārikas* of Īśvarakṛṣṇa clearly tell us that scripturally enjoined means of attaining heaven, for instance the horse-sacrifice, suffer from "impurity" (*aviśuddhi*) because the demerit of violence against the animal – however diminished (because it is done not for immediate gastronomic satisfaction but for offering to the gods) – tarnishes the purity of the heaven that comes as a result. The ancient commentary *Yukti Dīpikā* discusses this point

in great detail.

Hence there is no complete, permanent, supreme *cessation of suffering or release from the karmic bondage* by the path of performances (*pravṛtti*). Such release or liberation can only happen through the path of renunciation or detachment (*nivṛtti*). And vegetarianism seems to be the beginning – but only a beginning – of this latter path.

5. But the Mbh does not rest with the above reconciliation. Even for a virtuous engagement with the world and allegiance to the ritualistic part of the Vedas, the *Vicakhyu* – episode of the encyclopedic “Book of Peace” insists, animal-sacrifice need not be obligatory:

“This point is illustrated by the anecdote of the King Vicakhyu....

To be sure, the way of righteousness is very subtle and hard to discern. But within the limits of practicability, non-injury to animals is the best of all virtues.... Offering wine, fish, honey, meat and intoxicants of all sorts to the fire must have been started by wicked deceivers these are not really sanctioned by the Vedas. Worship of gods and ancestors would be conducted in a pure and quiet fashion with milk-products and flowers ... those who out of greed uselessly eat animals on the pretext of sacrifice earn no merit at all”.

Notice that on this view the distinction between legitimate violence and futile violence (*vaidha* versus *vṛthā*) has no significance. Such unqualified denigration of meat-eating, however, goes against the very ethical grain of the Mbh where nothing is said to be bad or good under all circumstances and morality is shown to be situational (*āvasthika*).

The rationale for vegetarianism is elaborately dealt with in chapters 114 through 117 of the thirteenth “Book of Injunctions”. The first argument is general. It is derived from the briefest answer to the central question of the Mbh: “What is Dharma?”

“Donot cause to others that which is abhorrent to yourself. This, in a nutshell, is Dharma and it takes a course other than that of natural desire” (Mbh, 13.114.8).

How this principle entails that meat-eating is wrong or against Dharma is made most graphic by the following thought experiment suggested by Colin McGinn in a recent book (*How to Do the Right Thing*, Duckworth 1993). Let me retell the story very briefly: Imagine a mighty and clever clan of vampires. They can live equally well on human blood or orange-juice. Except for their addiction to fresh human blood which they prefer to orange juice though the latter is available in plenty – these vampires are a very civilized morally responsible lot showing kindness towards poor, sick and old vampires.

These vampires surely are wicked and unjust not only relative to the human point of view but absolutely, just as Hitler was evil not only from the Jews' point of view but simply so. Relativism, apart from being self-refuting in its *unqualified* rejection of absolutism also fails to see the difference between being bad and being considered bad by a group of people. Surely most vampires would not find their own blood-thirst blame-worthy, they might even mock at the conscientious orange-juice drinking minority of fellow- vampires as foolish, prudish and cranky. But that would not make their practice of inflicting mass-scale avoidable pain all right. The fact that humans have intelligence, speech, moral responsibility etc. while beasts do not would not upset this argument because our moral insight that the vampire's blood-drinking is bad has nothing to do with the fact that the blood is sucked from intelligent or morally sensitive creatures. It is surely dependent upon the consideration that in spite of a perfectly healthy and tasty option, just for greed they torture and kill some creatures. As McGinn puts it almost in the language of Mbh.

"The reason it is wrong to cause pain to people is not that they are intelligent or members of the human species. It is that pain *hurts*, it is bad to suffer, hence it is bad to cause others to suffer it."

The second argument is not based on pain but on the dearness of life. Life is as dear to other creatures as it is to the eater of meat himself (*prāṇā yathātmanao' bhiṣṭā bhūtānamapi te tathā*). Every living thing is afraid of death. Therefore the gift of life is the best gift of relief from fear (*abhaya*). The argument that "Even if I stopped eating meat animals would be killed any way because other people will kill and eat them" is a useless one because it fails the universalizability test and tries to evade the truth that every eager carnivore is a member of that class for the sake of which animals are butchered. As Bhīṣma puts it cuttingly: "Meat does not grow out of grass, tree or stone. There is no meat without some killing hence the eater kills just by relishing other's flesh".

The third argument – repeated several times – seems to spring from a suppressed premise of equality of value (which is hard to defend eventually) of each living body.

"One who tries to increase one's own flesh by the flesh of another is the meanest and cruelest of all" (13.117.10).

If we have to reconcile this argument with the predatory hierarchy of creatures mentioned earlier, we need to distinguish between the order of nature and the order of morality. That the stronger would feed on the weaker is the order of nature. But we saw that the Mbh clearly states how Dharma goes against the course of desire (which is

linked up with biological nature). Hence, instead of calling such a natural tendency sinful it just urges us to try to reduce it by practising treating other animals as equally loving life and owning their own flesh as we own our bodies, by way of not killing them in order to fatten my own body.

The fourth argument appeals to the dirtiness of dead flesh insofar as it has the same filthy origin as semen, excreta, blood etc. This argument would have little force unless one has the traditional Hindu ritualistic sensibility of clean and unclean.

The fifth argument couched in a playful etymological exercise points towards some sort of a retributive justice in nature by which:

"The killer always gets killed, the capturer is captured, the haarsser is harassed and the hater is hated." (13.117. 35)

The Sanskrit word for meat is "Māṃsah" which can be simply broken up into two parts "Mām" (me) and "Sah" (he). Bhīṣma tells Yudhisthira that this "me - he" signals towards the dire consequences of consuming flesh. The creature, as it were, feels "Well, this human being is eating me. One day I shall eat him". But more realistically the eater should feel "*This animal food is going to eat me*". The idea of the eater being actually eaten up by the food that he consumes with greed goes back at least to the Taittiriya Upanishad. It is quite entertaining to notice that one can play the same word-game with the English word, because MEAT can be broken up as "ME-EAT(s)".

There is another argument prevalent in the tradition which Bhīṣma does not employ which has to do not so much with the cruelty in procuring meat but with the spiritually degrading effects of nonvegetarian food upon the body. Meat is often counted as *rājasika* or stimulating food which makes it harder to concentrate and enhances carnal feelings. That meat is invigorating and delicious was not unknown to Bhīṣma. "As far as taste goes, there is no food better than meat" says Bhīṣma at the start of his anti-meat lecture. In a frivolous piece called "On the fierceness of Vegetarians" Russell remarks that vegetarians are usually the most pugnacious people "perhaps they would not hurt a fly... But their charity towards flies certainly does not extend to human beings."

So the final attitude of Bhīṣma is that of tolerant non-aggressive discouragement of carnivorousness. The whole point of vegetarianism, of course, is foiled if vegetarians become violent offenders of their fellow-humans who happen to be meat-eaters. Mbh decries verbal violence as vehemently as hurting with weapons (sometimes, it says, the former is more painful). Therefore, the vegetarian's indictment of the meat-eater should not be vitriolic, which, unfortu-

nately, it often is nowadays.

6. It is not clear, however, that even this mitigated vegetarianism is the final stance taken by the Mbh. Not only Russell, but even the ancient Indian Purāṇas tell us about extremely short-tempered excitable fruit-eating ascetics, a Viśvāmitra who would go around cursing people, a Durvāsā who could not tolerate the slightest hint of neglect, and a Parāśara who would be unstopably aroused by a beautiful fisherwoman!. I shall end with the same solution of the meat-eating issue suggested by the vegetarian butcher whose long discourse on Dharma called *VyādhaGīta* (Mbh, 3, 198-206) runs for eight full chapters. Kaushika, the irate brahmin who was advised by the dutiful wife (to whom he first went) to go to Mithila and meet a certain hunter who can teach him the essence of Dharma is initially repulsed by the sight of the slaughterhouse surrounded by street-dogs where this hunter was selling buffalo-meat!

When the hunter takes him home Kausika once again forgets that he has come to receive rather than to give wisdom. "I am sorry to say", he says "your profession appears to be so unbecoming of you, my boy, so horrible!"

Modestly but firmly, with a slight touch of irony, the enlightened butcher gives at least six arguments in defense of his own occupation:

(a) This is his ancestral vocation. Any job assigned by society to a certain family (in the context of a period when Indian society was strictly caste-divided and one was not free to elect any profession outside one's caste-duties) is as good as any other. The right thing to do is to stick to one's family-vocation and do the job properly and without greed and unfairness. (There is also an appeal to pre-destination here.)

(B) After all, according to the Vedas, the Fire-god is hungry for flesh-offering. This point goes back to the scriptural rule that for the sake of a sacrifice (*yajna*) one is allowed to prepare meat and even consume it. Mbh has a gruesome story of a hungry fire-god urging the Pāṇḍavas to set fire to an entire forest so that he can consume all the wild birds and beasts. Mbh is not uniformly eco-friendly after all!

(C) It is natural order that animals survive by eating each other. Even the Upanishads declare the entire world to be food for *prana* or living being. We may remind ourselves that at the time of the first feeding of a baby (*annaprāśana*) the *Gṛhyasūtras* prescribe different birds and poultry to be fed to the six month old infant. If you want the baby to have fine speech you feed him small sparrow-like birds called "*bhāradvāji* etc. Mixing goat-meat, lamb, chicken, venison and peacock-meat with rice and butter - one must prepare a special dish

(annapāripātyā) for starting off a healthy life for the child! (*Pāraskara grhyasūtra* 1.19.1)

(D) There are well-known precedents of kings who were famous for their virtue and piety and yet in whose kitchen two thousand cows were butchered everyday. What, after all, can be the criterion of good conduct except the paradigms of exemplary people?

(E) The argument which is most popular against vegetarians, viz: that they too are causing millions of lives to be destroyed in the process of tilling the ground and plucking vegetables or even by walking on the earth. After all, even seeds of rice are alive in a sense. Thus "There is no one who is a non-killer". (*nāsti kaścid ahimsakah*) (3.199.28).

(F) Even if we ignore all the above arguments, some of which can be easily rebutted, we cannot brush aside the last and general argument given by the pious hunter.

"Subtle indeed is the course of Dharma" – he says "such that in life-threatening situations and in marriages (?) falsehood becomes truth and a lie that is told for the overwhelming welfare of living beings is called a truth as well." "One can say very many confusing things in this matter of right and wrong. The best course is to do one's socially enjoined duties sincerely and honestly. At the end the saintly hunter is shown to be most devoted to his aged parents. Just by dutifully taking care of his parents, he claimed to have attained all the equanimity and wisdom that made him known as an enlightened person. No one should consider oneself to be a perfect practitioner of right conduct. Nor should any one judge someone else as a doer of unmixed evil. While involved in a certain contingently inevitable lifestyle – whether it involves meat-eating, hunting, military service, prostitution, or meat-selling – one should try to reduce the amount of cruelty, deceit and pride. Most importantly one must try to develop a character which takes one beyond rejoicing in success or distress in getting distressed in frustration. Nothing is absolutely, in all situations, for everyone, right or wrong. This need not be an easy relativism, because the hunter keeps referring to objective criteria like "testimony of the Vedas" (*śruti pramāṇam*). He says that those who are really nonviolent in spirit – which is all that matters – do not say harsh words to others. Sitting above ordinary deluded people in their own palace of wisdom (*prajñāprāsādam āruhya*) they look indifferently at the large masses who are deluded by this talk about extreme virtues and vices. We must cultivate compassion and kindness to all living beings – humans, beasts, birds, insects, plants, friends, foes, vegetarians and nonvegetarians. What the pious hunter completely

shuns is not meat or meat-eaters, but excessively strong speech and excessively exaggerated pride. (*ativāda-atimānābhyām nivrtto'smi....*" - 3, 199.18). Eating meat may be bad but moral pride is much worse.

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