# Revisiting Dharma: Gurucharan Das' The Difficulty of Being Good in a Global Ethical Discourse

Piyush Bhaira, Research Scholar, Dept of English, Skd University

Seeshpal Singh, Assistant Professor, Dept of English, Skd University

## Abstract

Gurucharan Das' the Difficulty of Being Good (2009) explores the complexities of morality and ethics by engaging with the Indian epic Mahabharata while simultaneously interrogating Western ethical traditions. Das' work highlights how the concept of dharma, as illustrated through the dilemmas of the Mahabharata, challenges rigid moral absolutes found in Western thought, including deontological ethics, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics. Through the characters of Yudhishthira, Karna, Krishna, and others, Das presents dharma as a flexible, context-driven moral framework that offers a viable alternative to universalist moral theories. This paper examines how Das critiques and reframes Western moral philosophy through an Indian lens, arguing that Indian knowledge systems, particularly dharmic ethics, provide valuable insights into contemporary moral dilemmas.

## Introduction

The problem of morality has been a subject of philosophical inquiry across civilizations. While Western ethics, from Kantian deontology to utilitarian consequentialism, tends to Favorss universal principles and rational moral laws, Indian philosophy, particularly the concept of dharma, offers a more nuanced, situational approach to ethics. Gurucharan Das, in his influential work The Difficulty of Being Good, explores these tensions by using the Mahabharata as a philosophical text that speaks to modern moral challenges. He contrasts the dilemmas faced by characters in the Mahabharata with established Western moral philosophies, demonstrating how dharma resists rigid moral absolutism while providing ethical guidance that remains relevant in a globalized world.

Das' work is significant in the broader discourse of moral philosophy because it repositions Indian ethical thought within the global philosophical canon. While much of modern ethical theory is dominated by Western perspectives, Das' comparative approach highlights the richness of Indian moral thought, particularly its emphasis on **contextual morality** rather than **abstract universality**. His analysis suggests that dharma, as illustrated in the Mahabharata, provides a practical ethical framework that can address real-world dilemmas more effectively than rigid Western ethical systems. This paper examines how Das critiques and reinterprets Western moral philosophy using Indian ethical traditions, offering a compelling case for the inclusion of Indian knowledge systems in global ethical discourse.

## Indian Ethical Thought and Its Engagement with the Mahabharata

Indian ethical philosophy is deeply rooted in the concept of dharma, a term that resists precise definition yet encapsulates duty, justice, righteousness, and moral order. Unlike Western moral systems that often seek absolute principles, dharma is inherently contextual, requiring individuals to weigh competing obligations and ethical considerations. Das draws on the Mahabharata, an epic that dramatizes the difficulty of upholding dharma in a world fraught with moral ambiguity. Unlike the prescriptive moral codes found in many Western traditions, the Mahabharata presents dharma as fluid and context-dependent, challenging the notion that morality can be reduced to universal laws.

The complexity of dharma is most vividly illustrated through the character of Yudhishthira, the eldest of the Pandavas, whose unwavering commitment to truth and righteousness is repeatedly tested. One of the most striking moments in the Mahabharata occurs when Yudhishthira is compelled to lie about the death of Ashwatthama to gain a strategic advantage in war. From a Kantian perspective, which upholds truthfulness as a categorical imperative, Yudhishthira's lie would be morally indefensible. However, Das argues that within the framework of dharma,

Yudhishthira's action is justifiable because it serves a greater moral purpose—the restoration of justice and order. This divergence from Western moral thought underscores the key difference between deontological ethics and dharmic ethics: while Kantian morality demands absolute adherence to moral rules, dharma recognizes that moral decisions must be made in relation to context and consequences.

The flexibility of dharma is further demonstrated through the character of Karna, whose tragic fate illustrates the moral dilemmas inherent in loyalty and justice. Karna, despite being an exemplary warrior and a man of great virtue, is ultimately denied justice due to his allegiance to Duryodhana. From a utilitarian perspective, Karna's suffering could be justified in the pursuit of the greater good, as his defeat is necessary for the triumph of dharma. However, Das critiques utilitarianism's impersonal moral calculus, arguing that it fails to account for the deep personal and moral commitments that shape human behavior. Karna's plight highlights the limitations of consequentialist ethics, which prioritize aggregate happiness over individual justice.

The Mahabharata also presents Krishna as a figure whose ethical pragmatism aligns with aspects of Western political philosophy, particularly Machiavellian realism. Krishna's role as a strategist and guide to the Pandavas involves morally ambiguous decisions that prioritize the ultimate goal of establishing dharma. Das contrasts Krishna's actions with Machiavelli's concept of political necessity, noting that while Machiavelli's The Prince divorces morality from politics, Krishna's interventions are always directed toward a moral end. This distinction reinforces the idea that dharma integrates ethics and governance in a way that Western thought often separates.

**Comparative Ethical Analysis: Dharma and Western Morality**

Gurcharan Das' analysis reveals significant tensions between dharma and Western ethical theories, particularly deontological ethics, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics. One of the central debates in moral philosophy concerns whether moral principles should be absolute or contextual. Western ethics, particularly Kantianism, insists on absolute moral duties, whereas dharma is inherently situational. This fundamental difference is evident in the ethical struggles faced by the characters of the Mahabharata, whose decisions cannot be easily classified as right or wrong according to universal principles. As Das notes, "Dharma is not a rulebook but a means of navigating ethical dilemmas" (Das 54). Das' engagement with Kantian ethics is particularly revealing. Kant's philosophy, which upholds duty as the highest moral imperative, leaves little room for flexibility. In contrast, dharma requires an individual to constantly balance competing duties. The Mahabharata does not present morality in binary terms but as a dynamic and evolving process. Yudhishthira's ethical struggles illustrate this point vividly: his adherence to truth is not an absolute virtue but one that must be weighed against other moral considerations. As Matilal observes, "Indian ethics, unlike Kantian deontology, does not operate in absolute terms but through contextual reasoning" (Matilal 112).

Utilitarianism, with its emphasis on maximizing overall happiness, is also subjected to Das' critique. While Western utilitarian thinkers such as Bentham and Mill argue that moral decisions should be based on their outcomes, dharma does not operate purely on consequentialist logic. Das highlights the limitations of utilitarianism by analyzing Draupadi's humiliation in the Kaurava court. From a purely utilitarian standpoint, allowing Draupadi's dishonor might be justified if it serves the larger goal of political stability. However, the Mahabharata rejects this reasoning, emphasizing that justice cannot be sacrificed for expediency. As Pollock asserts, "Justice in the Mahabharata is not a function of consequences but of moral integrity" (Pollock 87). Das' engagement with virtue ethics, particularly Aristotle's concept of the good life (eudaimonia), presents another point of comparison. While both dharma and virtue ethics emphasize character and moral development, dharma differs in its situational adaptability. Aristotle's ethics is rooted in cultivating virtues through habitual

practice, whereas dharma demands constant moral discernment, requiring individuals to respond differently depending on the circumstances. As Olivelle argues, "Dharma is best understood as an adaptive framework rather than a fixed set of rules" (Olivelle 29).

Das' exploration of dharma in relation to Western ethics provides a compelling argument for the contextual nature of morality in Indian thought. Dharma, as depicted in the Mahabharata, does not lend itself to rigid classifications. The epic's heroes are frequently caught in dilemmas where no single principle can dictate the correct course of action. This is best exemplified by Arjuna's moral crisis on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, where he is torn between his duty as a warrior and his familial obligations. Krishna's guidance in the Bhagavad Gita reflects the essence of dharma: it is not a static rulebook but a fluid and evolving principle that must be interpreted in light of the situation. This contrasts sharply with Kantian ethics, where moral duty is absolute and universal. Kantianism holds that one must act according to maxims that can be universally applied, a principle that does not accommodate the complexities of real-world moral dilemmas as dharma does. As Sen notes, "The rigidity of Kantian ethics often struggles with the subtleties of lived ethical experience" (Sen 146).

Furthermore, Das' analysis underscores the limitations of utilitarianism when applied to moral dilemmas in the Mahabharata. Utilitarianism seeks to maximize overall well-being, often at the cost of individual rights or duties. The episode of Draupadi's humiliation serves as a stark illustration of this limitation. If one were to judge the incident solely by its consequences, one might argue that allowing Draupadi's dishonor was justified for the sake of political stability or preventing greater bloodshed. However, the Mahabharata does not condone this line of reasoning. Dharma demands that justice be upheld irrespective of its consequences. Bhishma, Drona, and other elders in the Kaurava court remain silent during Draupadi's humiliation, adhering to their perceived duties of loyalty and obedience. Yet their inaction is ultimately condemned, demonstrating that dharma requires active moral discernment rather than passive adherence to duty. This situational nature of dharma stands in opposition to the utilitarian emphasis on aggregate happiness as the sole determinant of moral action. As Bilimoria states, "Moral agency in the Mahabharata is assessed not by consequences alone, but by adherence to justice and righteousness" (Bilimoria 175).

In discussing virtue ethics, Das draws parallels between dharma and Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia, or human flourishing. Both frameworks emphasize the cultivation of character and moral excellence. However, a key distinction lies in their approach to moral decision-making. Aristotle's ethics is built on the idea of developing virtues through habituation, where moral agents cultivate traits such as courage, wisdom, and temperance over time. In contrast, dharma does not operate on fixed virtues alone but necessitates continuous moral reasoning. A virtue that is appropriate in one context may not be so in another. Yudhishthira's devotion to truthfulness is an example of this complexity. While truth is generally a noble virtue, his adherence to it during the game of dice leads to disastrous consequences. This highlights the flexibility inherent in dharma, which demands that moral choices be tailored to specific circumstances rather than following predetermined virtues. As Doniger asserts, "The Mahabharata reveals that ethical living requires responsiveness to ever-changing moral landscapes" (Doniger 213).

Das' comparative analysis ultimately challenges the notion of moral absolutism in Western ethics. The Mahabharata portrays a world where moral decisions are fraught with ambiguity, where individuals must navigate conflicting duties rather than adhere to rigid principles. This perspective resonates with contemporary ethical debates on moral relativism and contextualism. In a globalized world, where diverse cultures interact and ethical frameworks collide, the Mahabharata's nuanced approach to morality offers valuable insights. It suggests that ethical decision-making cannot be reduced to simple formulas but must take into account the complexities of human relationships, social roles, and evolving circumstances. While

Western ethical theories provide important moral guidelines, their rigidity often fails to capture the fluid nature of real-world ethical dilemmas. Dharma, in contrast, offers a more holistic and adaptable approach, one that acknowledges the ever-changing nature of moral life. As Keown states, "A comparative perspective on ethics shows that flexibility and discernment are essential in moral practice" (Keown 91).

Das' work, therefore, serves as a bridge between Indian and Western ethical thought, encouraging a dialogue between these traditions. By examining dharma in relation to deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics, he highlights both the strengths and limitations of each framework. Kantianism provides a strong foundation for moral duty but lacks the flexibility needed to address complex moral dilemmas. Utilitarianism offers a pragmatic approach to ethical decision-making but can justify morally questionable actions for the sake of overall utility. Virtue ethics emphasizes character development but does not fully account for the situational nature of moral choices. Dharma, as portrayed in the Mahabharata, integrates elements of all these theories while maintaining a distinct emphasis on moral discernment. It recognizes that ethical life is not a series of clear-cut choices but an ongoing process of negotiation and adaptation. This insight is particularly relevant in contemporary discussions on ethics, where rigid moral codes often fall short in addressing the complexities of human experience. Das' analysis ultimately invites readers to reconsider their own ethical assumptions and to appreciate the depth and richness of the Indian moral tradition.

**Dharma in Contemporary Global Ethics**

The concept of dharma, deeply rooted in Indian philosophical and ethical traditions, is often translated as "duty," "righteousness," or "moral order." However, unlike rigid moral frameworks found in Western ethical theories, dharma is fundamentally context-dependent, requiring individuals to navigate moral dilemmas by balancing competing duties and ethical considerations. This flexibility allows dharma to serve as an essential ethical framework in contemporary global discourse, particularly in addressing issues such as political governance, corporate responsibility, environmental sustainability, artificial intelligence ethics, and social justice.One of the most pressing concerns in contemporary ethics is the crisis of leadership and governance. Political leaders are often faced with morally ambiguous decisions where rigid ethical principles, such as deontological duty or consequentialist cost-benefit analysis, may fail to provide adequate guidance. The concept of dharma, as illustrated in the Mahabharata, offers a context-sensitive approach to leadership and governance, ensuring that ethical decision-making accounts for both principles and real-world constraints.For example, Yudhishthira's ethical dilemmas in the Mahabharata provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by contemporary political leaders. His unwavering commitment to truth and righteousness is admirable, yet it often puts him at a disadvantage in the brutal political landscape of the Kurukshetra war. This mirrors modern political leaders' struggle between ethical integrity and realpolitik. In governance, adhering to absolute ethical principles, such as complete transparency, may not always lead to the best outcomes. Leaders must adapt their ethical commitments to serve the greater good, much like Krishna advises Yudhishthira to be pragmatic while upholding justice.

A contemporary example of dharmic governance is Nelson Mandela's leadership in post-apartheid South Africa. Instead of adhering to the strict moral logic of retributive justice, Mandela prioritized national reconciliation and unity, embodying the dharmic balance between justice and compassion. This decision prevented further violence and laid the foundation for a stable democracy, demonstrating the practical relevance of dharma in global governance.In the modern corporate world, ethics often comes into conflict with profit-driven motives. Traditional Western business ethics, largely influenced by utilitarianism and deontology, either emphasize maximizing shareholder value or adhering to rigid moral principles. However, both approaches frequently fail to address the moral complexity of business decisions, where

multiple stakeholders—employees, consumers, communities, and the environment—must be considered simultaneously. Dharma, with its emphasis on duty and situational ethics, provides a more holistic ethical framework for corporate decision-making.

The Volkswagen emissions scandal (2015) illustrates how the lack of dharmic thinking in business ethics can lead to corporate misconduct. Volkswagen's executives chose to cheat emissions tests to maximize profits and market dominance, violating their duty to consumers, environmental sustainability, and public health. A dharmic approach, in contrast, would demand an ethical balance between profit and social responsibility, encouraging businesses to see themselves as stewards of public trust rather than mere profit-generating entities.A positive example of dharmic corporate responsibility is the Tata Group, one of India's most respected business conglomerates. Ratan Tata's leadership reflects a commitment to dharma in corporate ethics, as the company has consistently prioritized employee welfare, social responsibility, and ethical business practices, even when it meant sacrificing short-term profits. This approach aligns with Krishna's counsel in the Bhagavad Gita—to act without attachment to personal gains while fulfilling one's duty toward society.

The climate crisis represents one of the greatest ethical challenges of the 21st century. Western environmental ethics has often been divided between utilitarian approaches (which emphasize cost-benefit calculations of environmental policies) and deontological approaches (which argue for absolute duties toward nature). However, these frameworks often fail to provide a balanced approach to sustainable development. Dharma offers an alternative perspective by emphasizing interconnectedness and responsibility toward both present and future generations. In Hindu and Buddhist traditions, dharma extends beyond human duties to include environmental stewardship, recognizing that nature is not a mere resource but an essential part of cosmic balance (rita). This idea is particularly relevant in indigenous environmental movements across the world, which emphasize sustainability over short-term exploitation. A striking example of dharmic environmental activism is India's Chipko Movement in the 1970s, where villagers in the Himalayan region embraced trees to prevent deforestation. The movement was not based on legal rights or economic incentives but on a deep ethical commitment to preserving ecological balance, reflecting the dharmic principle of protecting nature as a moral duty.

With the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence, ethical concerns regarding algorithmic bias, privacy, surveillance, and automation have become increasingly important. Traditional Western ethical frameworks—such as utilitarian cost-benefit analysis and deontological data privacy rights—have struggled to keep pace with the complex moral landscape of AI technologies. Dharma provides a more adaptive ethical model for AI governance. Instead of imposing rigid moral rules on AI systems, a dharmic approach would focus on ensuring that AI systems function in harmony with human values and social well-being. For example, AI-driven decision-making in criminal justice systems must not only be technically accurate but also ethically fair, preventing discriminatory biases that disproportionately affect marginalized communities.

India's Aadhaar biometric identification system, one of the largest digital identity projects in the world, has faced criticism for potential privacy violations and exclusionary consequences. A dharmic approach to AI ethics would require balancing technological efficiency with social justice, ensuring that digital innovations serve the public good rather than exacerbate existing inequalities. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, the refugee crisis, and gender rights movements across the world underscore the urgent need for a more flexible and holistic ethical framework for social justice. While Western legal traditions focus on rights-based frameworks, dharma emphasizes duty-based ethics, which requires individuals and institutions to actively uphold justice rather than merely avoid wrongdoing.

A dharmic approach to social justice demands proactive engagement with systemic injustice.

Krishna's counsel to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita emphasizes that those who remain silent in the face of injustice are complicit in moral failure. This principle can be applied to contemporary global movements: corporations, governments, and individuals have a duty to challenge oppression and uphold human dignity.

A practical example of dharmic social justice is Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of Satyagraha (truth-force), which was rooted in dharma. Gandhi's nonviolent resistance against colonial oppression was not based on abstract legal rights but on a moral duty to resist injustice. Similarly, in modern times, climate activists like Greta Thunberg and human rights defenders across the world embody dharmic responsibility by challenging ethical complacency and demanding accountability.

Dharma's relevance in contemporary global ethics lies in its ability to navigate moral complexity without falling into rigid moral absolutism. Whether in political governance, corporate responsibility, environmental ethics, AI ethics, or social justice, dharma offers a balanced approach that considers duty, justice, and the greater good. In an increasingly interconnected and ethically uncertain world, embracing dharmic ethics can provide valuable guidance for leaders, businesses, policymakers, and individuals striving to act with integrity, wisdom, and moral responsibility. By revisiting dharma in the modern ethical landscape, we can foster a more just, sustainable, and humane global order.

## Conclusion

Das' The Difficulty of Being Good serves as a critical intervention in the global ethical discourse by challenging Western moral absolutism and advocating for a more nuanced, situational approach to ethics. His work demonstrates that dharma, with its flexibility and moral depth, provides a compelling alternative to rigid moral frameworks. By integrating Indian knowledge systems into contemporary ethical discussions, Das opens new pathways for intercultural dialogue, enriching our understanding of morality in an increasingly complex world.

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