THE ETHICS OF DECEIT IN MAHĀBHĀRATA: RATIONALITY AND VIRTUE

Nirmalya Narayan Chakraborty

Abstract

The present essay is an attempt to analyse the act of deceit performed by Yudhiṣṭhira (as found in *Mahābhārata*). All the moral responses to the act of deceit found in the text have been presented including that of Yudhiṣthira himself. Bhīṣma's advice to Yudhiṣthira has been interpreted in the light of contemporary discourse on the failure of rule-guided morality. Bhīṣma's scepticism of rule-guided morality could be validated by Kripke's presentation of Wittgensteinian sceptic who suspects the very idea of rule following. Looked at this way, Bhīṣma could be regarded as championing the idea of a virtuous life as a whole and not keen on dissecting an individual moral situation in terms of a universal moral rule.

Keywords: Morality of deception, rightness of action, virtue, equivocation, lying, moral person, moral decision, particularism, prima facie duty.

Mahābhārata is an epic tale of war and peace, tolerance and ignonimity, truth and lies, vengeance and forgiveness. It is a storehouse of moral dilemmas, where characters face complex situation and stand in front of difficult alternatives, alternatives that are not only exclusive, but are also opposed to each other. For my present discussion, I will focus on the morality of deception[1]. Yudhiṣṭhira's deception leads Droṇa to lay down his weapons. As we shall see later, Kṛṣṇa, Bhīma and Arjuna have different assessments of Yudhiṣṭhira's deceit. An account of all these will help us in discovering the moral maze lying behind Yudhiṣṭhira's deception. Droṇa's relinquishing the war is an important turning point in the epic battle, and this exit of Droṇa is the effect of Yudhiṣṭhira's deceit. Is it right for Yudhiṣṭhira, who is an embodiment of truth, to lie to his teacher Droṇa? What seems more

strange and condemnable is that Yudhiṣṭhira attempts to make his false statement appear like truth; he seems to deceive himself about his own fall from virtue.

Droṇaparva is especially relevant for us to lay down the geography of our problem. Duryodhana, apprehensive of losing the battle, comes up with a mischievous plan. He advises Droṇa to capture Yudhiṣṭhira and then to tell the latter to request the Pāṇḍavas to surrender. Pāṇḍavas cannot turn down the request of Yudhiṣṭhira, for Yudhiṣṭhira is well known for his unquestionable commitment to truth. The success of this plan depends on Droṇa's ability to capture Yudhiṣṭhira alive and Droṇa's promise to tell Yudhiṣṭhira as directed by Duryodhana. Twice Arjuna tries to capture Droṇa, but in vain. Once Arjuna faces Droṇa and requests him to stay back to have a conversation. But Droṇa flees. He returns with all the knowledge of war at his disposal and begins to corner the Pāṇḍava army. The Pāṇḍavas are scared and Arjuna, who alone has the ability to defeat Droṇa, still refuses to fight. It is at this juncture Kṛṣṇa comes up with the suggestion:

He cannot be defeated by force in battle. Leaving aside dharma, O Pāṇḍavas! follow a method fit for victory, so that Droṇa might not kill everyone in the battle. I think he will not fight, if (his son) Aśvathāman were killed. Let some man say that he has been slain in battle Mahabharata (*Mahabharata*, 7.164.67-69. Hereinafter MB)[2]

It is interesting to note how different persons present in the scene react to this controversial suggestion of Kṛṣṇa. Arjuna disagrees with the suggestion. Yudhiṣṭhira hesitates and falteringly condones it. Bhīma enthusiastically accepts it. Bhīma kills an elephant belonging to the Pāṇḍava side whose name happens to be Aśvathāman and then informs Yudhiṣṭhira that Aśvathāman has been killed. Vyāsa tells the reader that bearing in mind that it is an elephant Bhīma speaks falsely that Aśvathāman has been killed. Droṇa, after listening to this news, goes on rampage destroying large number of Pāṇḍava soldiers. Here, in the story we find a number of sages entering the scene to convince Droṇa not to perform this heinous act, for this is both unjust and unbecoming of a Brahmin. Droṇa starts questioning his action and wonders whether what Bhīma says is true or not. Here Droṇa turns to Yudhiṣṭhira to ascertain Bhīma's statement, for Droṇa believes that Yudhiṣṭhira would never tell a lie. Kṛṣṇa is well aware of Droṇa's trust on Yudhiṣṭhira. Kṛṣṇa's suggestion is:

If Droṇa fights in anger for even half a day, I believe, your army will meet destruction. To protect us from Droṇa, a falsehood (*anṛta*) is better than truth (*satya*). A falsehood uttered for the sake of a life

is not touched by falsehood (MB 7.164.98-99).

Bhīma informs Yudhiṣṭhira of the killing of the Pāṇḍava elephant called Aśvathāman and Yudhiṣṭhira succumbs to Kṛṣṇa's "devious divinity", to use B.K.Matilal's expression, and this is what follows:

> Sinking in fear and addicted to victory, Yudhiṣṭhira equivocating spoke out 'Lord, He is slain, the elephant' (*MB* 7.164.106).

Yudhiṣṭhira's announcement does have the desire result. Droṇa collapses in sadness and lays down his weapons. In a brilliant metaphor Vyāsa tells us that by making this statement Yudhiṣṭhira's chariot which used to move few inches high above the ground, touches the ground. Yudhiṣṭhira's fall from virtue is undeniable. The battle, however, took an ugly turn for the Pāṇḍavas. Aśvathāman tries to avenge his father's retreat from the battle, saving narrowly from last intervention of Arjuna. The whole thing put Arjuna in an agonizing situation from which he would be free, he thinks, only by embracing death. See what a mess is created by Kṛṣṇa's advice. Or maybe this mess helps unfolding the events that are destined to happen. All the individuals have got their elbow freedom, a little space to exercise their freedom. But then the whole episode moves towards a final end, an end that is predestined. Kṛṣṇa ensures that final goal is reached and intervenes only when human actions deviate from the path towards the final destination.

It is quite illuminating to see how different people assess the whole episode leading to Droṇa's death. The story goes that after finding Droṇa defenceless, Dhṛṣṭadyumna, the disciple of Bhīma, not only kills Droṇa, he severs Droṇa's head and parades it much to the dislike of Arjuna. When the Kaurava army got panicked following Droṇa's death, which Aśvathāman was not aware of, he enquired the reason for Kaurava army's retreat and came to know Droṇa's killing. Aśvathāman accepts that killing in a war is not wrong. But then to parade the head of Droṇa who is trustworthy and rightfully engaged in a war is something that cannot be defended (MB 7.166.19-27). He also condemns the deceit performed by Yudhiṣṭhira as responsible for the whole thing. Aśvathāman's argument is that Yudhiṣṭhira failed in his duty to take care of his trustworthiness that he himself created. By trusting Yudhiṣṭhira, Droṇa put himself as it were in Yudhiṣṭhira's care and Yudhiṣṭhira betrayed with Droṇa.

Arjuna's assessment, however, is noteworthy. He is in clear disagreement with Yudhiṣṭhira (MB 7.167.33-41) According to Arjuna, this is an act of deceit that is performed by a person who knows what is right and what is wrong. This too to a teacher! Yudhiṣṭhira broke the trust that Droṇa bestowed on him. Yudhiṣṭhira's statement is a

falsehood wearing the mask of truth. For Arjuna, this is clearly an act of treachery performed driven by the greed for the kingdom. For Aśvathāman what is objectionable is not the killing, but the deceit itself. For Arjuna, on the other hand, the locus of moral injustice is the act of killing itself. It is not only Yudhiṣṭhira's fall from his unflinching allegiance to truth; rather his involvement in the conspiracy leading to the death of Droṇa is what is condemnable. Bhīma thinks otherwise. He argues that Droṇa's behaviour is unbecoming of his *varṇa* viz. *Brāhmaṇa.* In engaging himself in a war, he behaved more like a *kṣatriya.* The *Pāṇḍavas,* on the other hand, are just doing their duty of their *varṇa,* viz., *kṣatriyas (*MB 7.168.14-16). Moreover, Yudhiṣṭhira has not told a lie, he merely fights one illusion with another. These three stances speak of three different moral voices. Breaking the trust is the worst thing that one can do, for Aśvathāman. Arjuna also emphasizes this breach of trust, this too between a student and a teacher. Yudhiṣṭhira is normally a virtuous person, but then he falters in exercising the virtue. He does not go with Kṛṣṇa in saying a simple false statement, nor does go with Arjuna in wholesale condemnation of the deceit.

Yudhiṣṭhira feels remorse after the death of Droṇa and gets ready to lay down his own life but not without first giving a list of Droṇa's wrong acts. When Kṛṣṇa advices the Pāṇḍavas to lay down their arms for time being to shield themselves from the deadly weapon *Nārāyaṇāstra,* Aśvathāman takes up that opportunity to attack the Pāṇḍava brothers. Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna and Bhīma all got seriously injured. At this point Arjuna attacked Aśvathāman with all his might. Aśvathāman got perplexed and left the battle with a significant statement: all this is false (MB 7.172.42). His power of weaponry, his knowledge of rightness of actions – all these are false and enigmatic. Morality seems to be ever elusive. Vyāsa, the author, tells us a story and relates it to the present text *Mahābhārata* and then Aśvathāman understands the significance and grows respect for Kṛṣṇa and the war ends after five days of destruction. Vyāsa's message is that the whole battle and everything related to it is an illusion, an image of cosmos, a hint towards moral imprecision in real life. Through weaving many sub-stories, Vyāsa underscores the point that this whole battle is an illusion, a battle that has already taken place. In the end it seems that both parties in the battle are not fighting against each other, rather they are fighting against a common enemy and this enemy is illusion in all its multiple manifestations. The way to get rid of this illusion is to reflect on one's own self, to rest oneself on *śānta rasa.*

In the history of Christianity we find St. Aquinas suggesting that though one should never tell lie, truth can cleverly be masked (Ganeri

2007:79). In the face of persecution, Christians took recourse to this masking of truth. One way of masking the truth is called equivocation where one utters a statement having two different meanings. The hope is that the listener will take the statement having the false meaning. But the speaker cannot be said to have lied. For the speaker uttered the sentence with the intention of having the true meaning. The other method of masking the truth is mental restriction where the speaker utters a sentence that is true in a restricted sense. If lying is stating something that one believes to be false, then deception in the sense of masking the truth would not be at par with lying, for in the latter the speaker does not believe in falsehood. Of course here the speaker intends to mislead the listener. In deception the speaker is not inauthentic, she could be insincere though.

It is quite well-known that in many of the scriptures telling the truth has been extorted right from the *Upaniṣads* to *Dharmaśāstras*. But nonetheless, there are instances where lying has been regarded as morally permissible. Remember Manu's suggestion "*mā bruyāt satyamapriyaṁ*" (*Manusaṃhitā*, 4.138).[3] So where the alternative is between telling a truth that is unpleasant and telling a lie that is pleasant, there perhaps one's duty is not to say anything that might impel one course of action. Yudhiṣṭhira finds himself in a situation where if he tells the truth, the result would be a defeat of the Pāṇḍavas (the defeat of truth), and, on the other hand, if he tells a lie, that would result in the win of the Pāṇḍavas. Yudhiṣṭhira cannot accept either of the possibilities. He does not tell a straightforward lie, it is lie that masquerades as truth. Or it is a truth that is twisted. The problem here is that it is notoriously difficult to make a moral distinction between a straightforward lie and a deception carried out through twisted truth. One could argue that in a way it is morally opaque to tell a straightforward lie, for here at least the speaker owns up to her responsibility of telling lie. In the case of twisted truth, the speaker claims to be telling the truth, where really speaking truth is rigged or fudged. Perhaps Kṛṣṇa's suggestion to tell a lie is a move toward this direction. Kṛṣṇa thinks that straightforward lying is morally defensible in some circumstances.

In the Bhīṣmaparva, in many places (MB 12. 139.94), Bhīṣma advises Yudhiṣṭhira not to follow a moral rule blindly; instead one should apply one's intelligence (*buddhi*). There is the story of Brāhmin Viśvāmitra eating dog-meat rather than starving oneself to death, even if this results in Viśvāmitra's violation of his *varṇa dharma*. The *Kṣatriyas* should learn the moral rules from different sources, and they should not follow any rule blindly. To this Yudhiṣṭhira raises

the possibility of moral anarchy viz. any act could be morally justified by anybody. Yudhiṣṭhira asks Bhīṣma whether there is any moral rule that one can follow without an exception. Bhīṣma's rather enigmatic reply is that one should always follow the learned and pious Brahmins. What a difficult advice to hear for Yudhiṣṭhira, because Yudhiṣṭhira's statement led to the death of such a pious Brahmin called Droṇa. Moreover, Bhīṣma's reply does not really help, for there are pious Brahmins whose advices do not always cohere. Yudhiṣṭhira's rule–following morality does not get any support from Bhīṣma. *Dharmaśāstras,* however, come to the defence of Bhīṣma in providing us with many exceptions to the rule, especially to the rule of always telling the truth. In another place (MB 12.110.1) Bhīṣma tells us that it is morally right to remain silent or to speak falsely when the listener wants to please by using another's money, or the listener wants to imprison the former or the listener would grow distrust for the former. Bhīṣma's point seems to be that if only one has the legitimate entitlement to truth, then truth should be told, otherwise not and this depends on the individual case.

All this discussion about exceptions to moral rules suggests, to me, a kind of moral particularism. Bhīṣma is perhaps the champion of this view. Yudhiṣṭhira is still ambivalent, but nevertheless feels the urge to entertain a particularist conception of morality and so takes recourse to telling a twisted truth. Kṛṣṇa, in his own way, feels attracted to this view of morality. Particularists think that there is no essential connection between the making of moral judgements and appeal to moral principles (Dancy 2004:1). One does not need to have a set of moral principles in order to be a moral agent. This should not be viewed as an attack on morality itself, as Yudhiṣṭhira apprehended. If Bhīṣma's suggestion is taken seriously, then delinking morality from moral rules is a way of defending moral practice. This is, in a way; counter commonsensical, for we normally look down upon people who do not have any moral principles. Moreover, it is widely held that without moral principles it is impossible to distinguish right from wrong and it is the sole task of ethics to discover a set of moral principles in the light of which one can account for the morality of right/wrong.

There are three questions with reference to which we tend to appeal to principles which are (Dancy 2004:1): (a) what is to be a moral person? (b) how ought one to make moral decision? and (c) how is it possible for an act to be morally right/wrong? A moral person is supposed to be a person with the knowledge of moral principles and ought to take a moral decision by applying a moral

principle to the particular case in hand. Also an act can be regarded right/wrong only if the act can be subsumed under a moral rule.

Particularism denies all this. There are two possible ways that a particularist can follow: (a) to show that no moral rule is flexible enough that can cover a specific moral situation and consequently they cannot do the job that we want them to do. Each instance of moral life is unique and so complex that no single moral rule can be expected to subsume all the specific moral instances of the same kind. Sameness is just too difficult to have in our moral life. Bhīṣma's advice to Yudhiṣṭhira is of this spirit. Bhīṣma's brand of particularism exhorts not to depend on rules blindly, for individual situation requires unique treatment and for this we need to apply our own intelligence. (b) One can argue against the idea that morality rests on supply of principles. Here, one needs to show that morality can get along well even without imposition of principles. In order to prove this point, one has to give an account of how moral reasoning works. This would be a meta-level study in the sense that this is not directly concerned with the moral rightness/wrongness of an action. But then the idea is that a description of moral reasoning will help us see that we can have moral thought and judgement and we can distinguish moral right/wrong without any appeal to moral principles. Moral judgement can very well go without talking about moral principles.

One way of constructing the relation of morality to moral principles can be called the "subsumptive option" (Dancy 2004: 3). On this view, when we entertain moral thinking, we approach a new case with set moral principles and try to find out which of these moral principles subsume the present case. And the thought is that either it is impossible for the case to fall under more than one principle or if more than one principle is applicable, then all these principles recommend the same course of action. There are several problems with this account. This makes the notion of moral conflict impossible. In a moral conflict we think that there are conflicting reasons in a given case for or against a particular course of action. Subsumptive option rules out such a possibility, for according to this view when one principle is applicable to a particular case, it is decisive and all the available reasons must be coherent with that principle. Yudhiṣṭhira's indecisiveness shows the inadequacy of the subsumption option. Secondly, this account fails to make room for moral regret. We do have experience where there are compelling reasons to do otherwise. On the subsumptive option it is wrong to do otherwise and the principle is decisive of this. So there is no reason to

feel bad for not doing otherwise. And, of course, the logical question about the justification of the right set of principles looms large in the background. Obviously the justification of principles cannot be extracted from the moral judgements concerning particular cases on the pain of circularity.

Rejection of the subsumptive option does not automatically lead to partcularism. One could stop in the midway by talking about "prima facie duty". Here, the idea is that each action has some features, some of which are in favour while others are not in favour of it. And for each feature there is a principle of prima facie duty that specifies whether that feature counts in favour or against the act. Notice different features of the act call for different prima facie duties and here it is different from the subsumptive option. There is hardly any way of weighing conflicting prima facie duties except by an appeal to our intuitive judgement. This is surely an improvement upon subsumptive option. But the idea of prima facie duty still bears the vestige of the subsumptive option in claiming that if a feature justifies the decision to favour an action, then that feature lends favourable decision to all cases wherever it appears. And precisely that is what takes one from the recognition of the presence of the feature to a knowledge of a general principle, to the notion of prima facie duty. Particulatist goes further in claiming that what is relevant in one case is not necessarily relevant in another case. For them, possibility of moral thoughts and judgements does not rest on the applicability of moral principles. They also hold that a feature that is a reason in one case may not be a reason in another case. And this is where a particulatist differs from the idea of prima facie duty.

While analyzing Yudhiṣṭhira's act of deception, one could argue that while evaluating the moral worth of an action, one should note that the feature that might back up a positive evaluation of an action could very well be treated as defending a negative evaluation of the same action in a different context. The fact that Mr. X would be present in the meeting could be a good reason for me attending the meeting and at the same time the absence of Mr. X in another meeting could be a good reason for me to attend the meeting. Of course, one must note that here 'reason' is used in its normative sense and not in the sense of explanatory cause. In the statement 'The long lockdown is the reason behind slowdown in economy' 'reason' is used to determine the cause of the economic slowdown. In the present context, however, 'reason' is used to refer to a norm that could be said to fix the evaluation of an action. Reason in the sense of explanatory cause involves temporal order. The event of

lockdown precedes the economic slowdown. Reason in the sense of explanatory norm is a-temporal. This normative reason is located in the space of norm, a space that moral reasoning creates, a space that scaffolds the structure of morality. This scaffolding is flexible enough to admit and discard individual norms and associated ideas. This very amenability explains why one feature contributes to a positive evaluation of an action while the same feature negates the positive evaluation of the same action in another context.

Admittedly this idea of reason as the explanatory norm requires unpacking. Explanatory norm does not come individually. There might be one face of the explanatory norm, but it might have many limbs all of which try to make the face appear prominent. If keeping the promise, for example, is the face of the explanatory norm, then the propositions that the promise was not done under compulsion, that the person who made the promise is able to perform the promised act etc. are auxiliary explanatory norms.

Looked at this way, Bhīṣma could be understood as offering an explanation of reason as explanatory norm. Bhīṣma draws our attention to the flexible nature of the normative scaffolding. If the space of norms is to be taken seriously, then Bhīṣma's appeal not to look for moral principles every time we make a moral judgement is worth listening to. Bhīṣma could very well argue that the feature that is a reason for Yudhiṣṭhira to perform the act of deception could be a reason for not performing the act of deception in a different context. This, of course, is not a license to moral anarchy. This only hints at rejecting the idea that moral thoughts and judgements depend on the availability of a set of moral principles.

The variety of particularism that is being explored here could be contrasted with generalism that claims: the very possibility of entertaining moral thought depends on the supply of suitable of moral principles. This claim of generalism could be reformulated as: no one would be capable of having moral judgements without there being suitable moral principles. This again could be restructured as: no one could be able to entertain moral judgements unless she knew relevant moral principles. While the emphasis in the former is on the ontological status of moral principles, the latter is more concerned with the epistemology of these principles. Since we are talking about the evaluation of the action where the agentive aspect is of crucial importance, the latter epistemological formulation of generalism is relevant for our purpose. Notice that this epistemological generalism talks about the possibility of moral judgement and not about the possibility of true moral judgement. It does not also offer

any suggestion that moral thought is impossible unless some moral propositions are true. This is a tricky area. It is indeed a matter of great debate whether moral propositions are truth-apt or not. Nevertheless, it is expected that knowledge of moral principles would have some bearing on the relevant moral judgement and the onus is on a defender of particularism to specify the nature of this bearing. In order to stop particularism from falling into the hands of moral anarchist, one must claim that particularism does not deny that there are true moral principles. She only redefines the relation between moral judgement and moral principle. She claims that possibility of having moral judgement does require the truth of moral principles. Bhiṣma's call for freeing us from the clutches of moral principles echoes this particularist claim.

Echoing Wittgenstein's idea of mathematical propositions[4] one could think of moral principles as rules of a game and the particular moral judgements are moves in a game, following the rules of the game. Then individual moral judgements cease to be truth-apt, simply because they are not factual in nature. And the moral principles being rule by nature are not descriptive of states of affairs in the world. If the world of morals thus precludes truth-centric discourse, does this signal the end of ethics? I am inclined to reply 'no'. And this is where the idea of virtuous life becomes relevant. I shall come to this point little later.

Normally deductive reasoning is monotonic in the sense that once an inference is logically valid, it remains so no matter what one adds as a premise. Addition of a premise to a valid inference cannot make it more or less valid. But in non-monotonic reasoning addition of a premise can reverse a cogent inference. Think of the following example (Dancy 2004:8):

1. If one causes someone pain, one is doing something normally wrong (p q).
2. If p and the pain is a legalised form of punishment for a recognized offence, then one is not doing something morally wrong (p &r) – q.
3. If p and r and the punishee is unfairly convicted, then one is doing something wrong (p & r) & s) q).

Notice how in this case addition of a premise reverses the whole inference. This is an example of moral reasoning that is non-monotonic in nature. This shows that a feature that lends support in one case, does not lend support in another case. Looked at this way, particularism does justice to the non-monotonic nature of moral

reasoning.

I would like to propose to interpret Bhīṣma as giving us a non-monotonic model of moral reasoning. For him, lying may be wrong in one case, but not wrong in another case. So the addition of premise reverses a moral inference. And my hunch is that Kṛṣṇa and Yudhiṣṭhira are a step closer to particularism, though Yudhiṣṭhira's attitude is rather cautious and hesitant. Arjuna, of course, is not happy with particularism and still wants to be content with the subsumptive option. And so he is not happy with Yudhiṣṭhira's deceit leading to Droṇa's killing.

If ethics is concerned with responding to the question 'How should one live?', then one way of looking at the question is through the prism of a virtuous person. Bhīṣma's prescription to follow the path of the *mahājanas* seems to point towards this. This immediately raises the question: what it is for a person to possess a virtue? If telling the truth is a virtue, then a person's telling the truth cannot be the result of a blind habit, or instinct; that the situation requires a certain sort of behaviour (for example, telling the truth) is the reason for him behaving in that particular way (McDowell 1998:52). The truthful person has a kind of sensitivity to a kind of requirement that the relevant situation imposes on him. Understood this way, the knowledge that is formed of this sensitivity is a necessary condition of possessing the virtue. Possession of the sensitivity could be said to explain the actions that manifest the sensitivity and in this sense sensitivity itself results in action that is considered virtuous. It is in this sense virtue produces only right conduct. This in fact makes room for the possibility that a person, though could see what a virtuous person could do in a given circumstance, fails to be virtuous for his sensitivity is blinded by his desire to do the contrary. Remember Duryodhana's confession: *jānāmi dharmaṃ, na ca me pravṛtti.....*".

Getting back to the example of truth telling as a virtue, one could formulate this principle in the form of a practical syllogism: the major premise might consist of the universal knowledge that truth telling is a virtue. The relevant particular situation might be the content of the minor premise. And the judgement expressing what should be done in the particular case turns out to be the conclusion. The major premise formulating the universal principle is perhaps the most important ingredient in this syllogism and precisely here a profound problem lurks behind. The idea of rationality resting on consistently following a rule has been under attack by Wittgenstein as interpreted by Kripke.

Wittgenstein formulates a paradox, in this context, as follows:

No course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made to accord with the rule. For Kripke, this paradox is actually a new form of philosophical scepticism. Kripke presents this scepticism with the help of an example from mathematics (Kripke 1982: 7). Like all the English speakers, I use 'plus' and '+' to refer to the function of addition. By referring to external symbolic representation and by mental exercise I grasp the rule of addition. Kripke draws our attention to the notion of grasp. Although I have performed addition to a very large number of cases, the rule can be applied and I can perform addition in countless number of cases that I have never previously performed. So in learning a mathematical function I grasp a rule in the sense that my past intention regarding the meaning of addition determines uniquely the answer for indefinitely many cases in future. Suppose that I have never performed the addition 86+75. But I have performed many additions in the past. In fact these finite numbers of additions that I have performed in the past imply that such an example exists, example exceeding previously performed computations. Thus I perform the addition and get the result '161'. I am confident that this is the correct answer in the mathematical computational sense and also in the sense that I have used the symbol '+' the way I have used it in past.

And precisely here the sceptic comes in. The sceptic questions my being certain about the performance of addition. She might argue that on the basis of the way I used the term 'plus' in past I intended the answer of the present addition to be 10! Of course the gut reaction to the sceptic's suggestion is that she should go back to school and refresh her arithmetical knowledge. But the sceptic drives the point home that how can I be so sure that I have used the symbol '+' in the present case exactly the way I have used it before. Even if I claim to apply the same function as before, I perform a separate computation in this new instance and I got the result '161'. What function was it that I performed in the past? The numbers that I have dealt with in the past are smaller than 75. The sceptic continues, perhaps in the past I have used the 'plus' to denote a function that may be called 'klus' that may be symbolized as ┼O. One could define this function as x ┼O y= if x, y < 75, = 10 otherwise. May be this is what I meant by 'plus' in the past. I am misinterpreting my previous use of 'plus'. May be I have always meant 'klus' and used the operation accordingly. The sceptic's question might sound bizarre, but it is not logically impossible. In order to silence the sceptic, one has to cite some fact of the matter, fact about my past usage to show that by

'plus' I meant addition and nothing else. What is the guarantee in asserting that I have not misinterpreted my past usage? And on the basis of my understanding of my past usage I perform the present computation. The main thrust of the sceptic is this: When I compute '86+75', I do not do it the way I like. Nor is it a random calculation. I follow directions that I followed in my previous usages of '+' and this precisely determines the result of my present computation where I say, the result is 161. But what are those directions that I followed in my past usages? This direction certainly does not include that I should say 161 as the result of the present computation. This is a new instance of computation. This direction cannot suggest 'do the same thing as you did before', for in the past the rule that I followed could be a rule for plus and klus as well. This could go on forever backward to trace the history of my past usage.

The sceptic's question could be divided into two sub-questions: (i) whether there is any fact of the matter that could show that in my past usages I did mean 'plus' and not 'klus'. (ii) what is the reason for my being confident that the result of the present computation is 161 and not 10. Needless to say, these two sub-questions are related. I am confident of my present computation because the answer agrees with what I meant by this function in my past usages. It is not the question about my ability to compute, nor is it about the power of my memory. If I meant 'plus' in my earlier usages of the same function, then certainly I am justified in claiming that the result of the present computation is 161 and not 10. So the sceptic could be answered only if we could come up with some fact about my mental state that forms my meaning plus and not klus in my earlier usages. Also it must be shown that such a fact about my mental state must be able to apply itself to any putative case of the relevantly same kind. And this would account for my being confident about the result of my present computation.

Wittgenstein's sceptic argues that the idea of following a rule always, in principle, over determines the formulation of the universal principle. There is no fact of the matter on the basis of which one could justify his following a rule consistently. And this is surely a great threat to rationality. Bhīṣma's reluctance to follow a universal moral principle could be substantiated by the Wittgensteinian sceptic. If rationality requires consistency in the application of universal principles, then the very idea of being guided by a universal principle is susceptible to doubt and this is the conclusion that both Bhīṣma and Wittgenstein's sceptic are sympathetic to. Neither does the sceptic nor does Bhīṣma reject that we follow a rule. What they

seem to question is the conception and ground of following a rule that we normally tend to believe in. Out of our fear that we will lose objectivity in mathematics or in morals, we take refuge in the idea of following a rule. This is nothing but a "consoling myth" (McDowell 1998: 61).

All these reconstructions of Bhīṣma's allegiance to non-monotonic reasoning and his scepticism about universal rule-following imply that a philosophical account of moral reasoning cannot be given from some external standpoint, outside *lokavyavahāra* or form of life. Bhīṣma draws our attention to the contingencies of our existence, to the vagaries of our moral life. So instead of focussing on the specific moral moments of our life, it would be profitable to look at the life as a whole and then participate in moral life in the background of this canvass. This is where the idea of a virtuous life becomes important. How should we live fulfilled life is more important than what should we do (morally speaking) on a particular occasion.

Notes

1. While writing on this topic I am greatly indebted to Jonardon Ganeri (2007), especially Chapter 3.
2. For all the references to *Mahabharata*, I have relied on *Mahabharatam*, Haridas Siddhantavagisa (edited & translated in Bengali), Visvavani Prakashani, Kolkata, 1387.
3. See also *Vaśiṣṭha Smṛti* 16.36 and *Gautama Smṛti* 23.29)
4. A detail explanation of Wittgenstein's views on this can be found in Crispin Wright's *Wittgenstein on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Duckworth, London, 1980

References

Ganeri Jonardon (2007), *The Concealed Art of The Soul*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Dancy Jonathan (2004), *Ethics without Principles*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

McDowell John (1998), 'Virtue and Reason', in his Mind, Value and Reality, Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press.

Kripke Saul (1982), *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.