HUNTING DEER AND SEARCHING FOR THE SNAKE'S FEET: EXPLORING CARE ETHICAL AGENCY IN A COMPARATIVE CONTEXT

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Introduction: The Comparative Context

Yet Yudhiṣṭhira acts. According to some contemporary commentators,[1] the eldest Pāṇḍava, the mild-mannered Yudhiṣṭhira, is the hero of the *Mahābhārata*[2] rather than Arjuna, the flashier, swashbuckling protagonist of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. But Yudhiṣṭhira is full of doubts. He is always asking questions—the answers to which only seem to confuse him further. Yet, like us all, he can *not* act: Yudhiṣṭhira after all, though Hamlet-like is not a Hamlet. He is the son of Dharma and is, therefore, 'by conception' tied not only to the realm of action but to good action. This leads us to wonder whether his doubts, his questioning, his hesitations—in short his *irresolution*—could be a mark of ethicality rather than a sign of moral weakness. Furthermore, Yudhiṣṭhira is the only character in the epic who is ushered into heaven in mortal form. Is this suggestive of Dharma being *in/with body* always—of the inseparability of ethicality from embodiment? And could 'being bodied' be tied to irresolution in any way? I will use an affirmative answer to these questions (arising within the *Mahābhārata*) to deepen our understanding of the nature of moral agency in care ethics, a movement originating in the work of development psychologist Carol Gilligan,[3] and often characterized as form of feminist ethics.

Clearly then, I construe Yudhiṣṭhira as a care ethical agent. This anticipates discussions of why the epic lends itself to a care ethical analysis in the first place, and of the plausibility of saddling an admittedly patriarchal text with an explicitly feminist orientation. I do not defend these contentions but work within their parameters in this paper. Briefly, the shift within the *Mahābhārata*, from the notion of *ahiṁsā* or non-violence to that of non-cruelty or *ānṛśamsya*,[4]

I take as marking the transition to the technical notion of 'care'. Moreover, the move from mothers and/or women to a *male king* as the exemplar of the caring voice, has both advantages and disadvantages for the feminist agenda and sets the stage for a nuanced construction of care within a comparative philosophical context. Presupposing this framing, I move the philosophical lens from the nature of the *actor* or the 'relational self' to the nature of *action* and *agency*. The purpose thus is to read certain strands in the *Mahābhārata* as gesturing towards a much-needed theory of action consistent with care ethics.

Of course, the feminist agenda is not just to focus on care in our *ethical* lives but to make it central in the political domain as well. According to Joan Tronto,[5] political life is ultimately about allocating caring responsibilities. Democratic theory must deal with the question of 'who cares?' and re-think the equality of citizens in terms of them being receivers and givers of care. Sidestepping this substantive issue, I try at the end of the paper, to initiate a dialogue between the *Mahābhārata's* vision of ethical agency as articulated here and some contemporary forms of conceiving the political space.

Yudhiṣṭhira as a Care Ethical Agent

The birth of care ethics in the West is traced to the different responses given by Carol Gilligan's experimental subjects, Amy and Jake. When asked whether the penniless Heinz should steal a drug to save his dying wife, Jake had come up with the unambiguous and confident answer that he should. He applied the clear-cut principle 'human life is more than money'[6] to the situation of Heinz and computed an affirmative answer to the moral question 'like a math problems with humans.'[7] Amy, the poster child of the care perspective, on the other hand, tried to flesh out the formal dilemma presented to her. She painted alternative scenarios that situated the choice in a 'narrative of relations that extends over time.'[8] What if Heinz stole the drug and was sent to prison, wouldn't his wife suffer more? What if the druggist depended on the sale of the drug to save his *own* wife? What if Heinz could talk it over with the pharmacist and negotiate a payment in installments? What if the druggist could be persuaded to give the medicine for free? What if.... and what if.....? Each of these imagined scenarios called for a *different* moral response. So Amy stalled. Her deliberations were punctuated by 'I don't know', 'I don't think so', 'It really depends' and the like.

Now what is it about the nature of moral life that makes Amy—and Yudhiṣṭhira—so naturally hesitant? In a telling episode from the childhood of the Pāṇḍavas, their archery teacher Droṇa devised a contest whereby the princes had to pierce the eye of a decoy parrot. They were each asked what they saw before being allowed to shoot their arrows. Arjuna, who was to become the charismatic war-hero later in the epic, won the show by replying that he perceived nothing but the parrot's eye. Yudhiṣṭhira, on the other hand, reported seeing the decoy situated in a larger context. He observed not only the model of a parrot, but the branch it was perched on, the tree, the sky, the clouds—all that formed the background and framed the target. Yudhiṣṭhira was, as we know, summarily disqualified. He failed Droṇa's test just as miserably as Amy had failed to score on Kohlberg's scale of moral maturity. However, there is a method lurking in their apparent incompetence.

What are distracting noise-factors for hitting the bull's eye in archery is the substance of responsible ethical negotiations in a care perspective. Unlike the Utilitarians, the terrain of care is not constituted by agents who are mere 'receptacles of utility'. Rather, the moral domain (in the words of Seyla Benhabib[9]) is made up of un-substitutable 'concrete others' whose individualized and unique histories make them who they are. The wider relational contexts of such subjects, therefore, become *constitutive* of ethical situations. The moral mandate now is to be 'non-cruel' (or avoid harm/pain) of such embodied, relational agents. Consequently, care ethicists cannot work with neutral, universal rules because the specific relational configurations make up the very situations calling for a moral response. This explains why both Yudhiṣṭhira and Amy share a dis-inclination for abstraction and a penchant for contextual and holistic elaboration—why according to them, the right thing to do varies with the relations constituting a particular context. Being mindful of the pain of others (and of oneself) cannot depend on pat formulas, but on heeding the specific relationships that cause the pain in the first place and the particular bonds that can be mobilized to address it.

Furthermore, because we are located in a web-like matrix of *multiple* relations with often contradictory demands, it is quite likely that no matter what one does, someone or the other will get hurt. Moral life is thus a life of dilemmas but relationally responsible ethical subjects negotiate these dilemmas by looking at the details on a case-by-case basis. The *Mahābhārata* too reinforces this stance.

Dharma is *avasthā* (situation)-generated moral embroilment and hence, is *āvasthika* or contextual. But importantly, the consequent ethical open-endedness is not a cause for lament but is foregrounded in the epic as a unique meta-ethical stand on moral epistemology. I dip into this as a conceptual resource to make sense of ethico-political agency consistent with the care perspective—a perspective that demands (for example) that we do the right thing when faced with the options of staying at home with a sick child or attending a professional meeting, but gives us no rules that tell us which is the right choice.

The Problem—Moving Snakes and Absence of Rules

So Yudhiṣṭhira laments. There is after all, a comfort and safety in rules which he yearns for. Very much like Arjuna in the *Gitā*, Yudhiṣṭhira at the end of the war gives up on morality (*dharmo me śithilīkṛtah,* he says. Śānti Parvan 142.2) when he learns that even the sage Viśvāmitra's stealing dog-meat from the house of a *candāla* is an acceptable action according to the text. The *Mahābhārata* regales us (and Yudhiṣṭhira) with a panorama of stories about exemplary ethical behaviour. But there is no consistent thread running through them. An action lauded as 'right' in one case is criticized as 'wrong' in another. In fact, instances of the traditional vices—lying, stealing, cheating, killing, betraying—are all marked as virtuous in some situations. Confused by these moral reversals (particularly in the times of crises (*āpat-kāla*)), Yudhiṣṭhira plaintively and desperately asks if there are *any* lines that cannot be crossed, if there is *some principle* which could be held up as inviolable even in the most extreme of circumstances. 'Even bandits and thieves seemed to have a code of conduct, so why was nothing absolutely prohibited for a ruler facing the consequences of a dire and depleting war?' he asks (Śānti Parvan, 142).

But wherein lies the root of this desire for universal principles? This question plunges us into the debate between universalists and particularists in ethics. Universalists rely on laws and principles. A moral principle is a universal claim to the effect that all actions with a certain general nature have a certain ethical quality. The advantage of this is twofold: First, such laws tether values to the world of concrete, natural events. For example, an action that *causes happiness* (a natural property) may be designated as being 'right' (a non-natural property); or behaviour that involves *willful distorting of facts* (a natural property) may be deemed morally 'wrong' (a non-natural

property). In this way, we have law-like connections 'grounding' the ethical in the ordinary, natural world. This removes the metaphysical weirdness of value-facts and tames the mystery of ethical distinctions. Secondly, knowledge of these regularities enables us to choose responsibly, reliably and rationally. Rules are not only action-guiding and help us stay 'on the rails'[10] but also explain and account for the rationality of moral decisions. It is easy, for instance, to ward off the suspicion of foolhardiness about a maneuver that risks our life and those of others in an attempt to save a drowning neighbor, if there is a universal rule requiring us to do so.

The *Mahābhārata's* classification of the same action as right in one situation and wrong in another belies such law-like connections. Even if (for example) an action is deemed wrong in a particular context because it is the cause of (say) death and injury, we cannot use the feature 'causing death and injury' as a sign of moral disvalue in another context and choose accordingly, because the same natural feature might well lose its negative moral valence in a different situation. To use Margaret Little's[11] example, a dab of red may enhance the aesthetic value of a picture because of its relation to the particular colors on the canvas; but that is no 'reason'[12] to believe that a red patch augments aesthetic value across the board. Given a holism, no natural feature per se can be the mark of ethical value in *all* situations. But without rules, Yudhiṣṭhira is left wondering if there is any non-random distinction between good and bad; and whether without such a reasoned distinction, the moral effort of *trying to choose responsibly* itself becomes meaningless.

The *Mahābhārata* registers this philosophical angst of Yudhiṣṭhira in an evocative metaphor in Śānti Parvan 132.20. Feet are the standard means of locomotion. But what are Dharma's feet whereby moral excellence can move into our lives and move our lives? Our desire to be good usually seeks out rules of the form: 'in such and such situations, everyone with such and such end should act in such and such a way'. While contemplating a future action one weighs alternative *kinds* of deeds. And action-types are general 'such and such ways' of doing. Thus, rules connecting moral qualities to natural properties in a proto-nomic fashion become the *dharmic* feet. They provide usable criteria for applying moral predicates. But according to the *Mahābhārata*, *Dharma* is like a snake. It moves meanderingly but with no feet. If ethical situations are inhabited by concrete particulars, not subsumable under general concepts, then there can be no moral laws. *Just as there are no snake feet.* Yuddhiṣṭhira's

problem then is that the logic of the *Mahābhārata* narrative positions him within a particularist framework. However, the resources accounting for responsible moral action are available only within a Universalist perspective. Clearly then, an alternative account is needed: for remember that snakes do move and slither *even without feet*. But what could non-standard means of locomotion be?

Care ethics too, like the *Mahābhārata,* is a particularist ethic. Concrete subjects are embedded in webs of relations that determine the moral valence of any act. Thus what is right in one situation can be inapplicable given a different relational constellation. There are no a priori rules—like there are no snake feet to take us to the morally right end. Yet, reminiscent of the snake, care ethical agents *do* act and often act *well* when negotiating conflicting needs. But figuring out how we learn to do the right thing is as painfully difficult as finding the mechanism of locomotion in snakes (*aheriva hi dharmasya pada dukham gaveṣitum*: Śānti Parvan, 132.20). And that is the philosophical challenge raised by Yudhiṣṭhira's moral angst. He asks Bhīṣma point blank *how* one can be ethical in the absence of moral rules, thereby squarely confronting the need (more than Western care literature) to give an alternative account of responsible ethical choice within the particularist framework of care.

The Answer—the Running Deer and 'Balancing'

The *Mahābhārata's* response to this issue is found in another elaborate metaphor of a hunter chasing down a running deer (Śānti Parvan, 132.21). But before coming to that, it is interesting to note that the text's immediate response to Yudhiṣṭhira's moral angst is a celebratory entrenchment and deepening of exactly *what had caused* his anxiety in the first place. Conflicts between different scriptures, between scriptures and our intuitions, between different conventions and even between different exemplars of good conduct are re-iterated in an odd bid to reassure Yudhiṣṭhira who is puzzled *because* of these conflicts! Note also that when befuddled, Arjuna had listened to only a single divine authority in the *Gitā.* (Although even he found the single Divine voice to be indulging in double-speak: 'Now you praise renunciation, then again you commend engagement'; *Bhagavad Gītā* 5.1) However, Yudhiṣṭhira's muddles are often sorted out under the tutelage of several authorities - his four brothers, his brilliant wife, and Vidura—each with *conflicting moral persuasions* and advice. In fact, one such teaching session is even called the *Śādjagītā*—the 'Song of the Six.'[13] From the

Mahābhārata's point of view, this immersion in conflicting variety is *dvaidha*, literally 'two-ways' or 'forked' (Śānti Parvan 142.8). Chasing the meaning of the running deer for a while will enable us to grasp the central concept of *dvaidha* and understand the seemingly perverse strategy of dissolving ambiguity by underscoring and heightening it.

Hitting upon the right thing to do is like hunting down a wounded, but still running deer (*yathā mṛgasya viddhasya padam ekam padaṃ nayet*: Śānti Parvan, 132.21). The deer has four feet. But when it runs and leaps forward, only one of them touch the ground at any particular time. The running deer leaves a trail of blood. And the hunter chasing after it conjectures which particular foot will next hit the ground, when and where, by looking at this bloody trail (*lakśed rudhiralepena*). Based on such speculation, he takes aim. But he gets his game only if lucky. Hitting a moving target is always chancy.

A layered reading of this metaphor enables us to pull out three different threads here. The central idea is the notion of a distinctive way of knowing that may be called 'balancing' or 'cumulative reasoning.' This I claim, references the special faculty of *yukti*. However, *yukti* in turn is associated with contextualism and uncertainty—both of which are configured in the metaphor of the deer hunt. Let us look at each of these in turn.

The running deer foregrounds contextualism in a straight forward manner. The commentarial literature on this metaphor speaks of four 'legs' of an elusive *dharma*-deer as the four disciplines of (i) *ānvīkṣiki* (logic/philosophy), (ii) *veda* (scriptural injunctions), (iii) *vārtā* (norms of social practice like agriculture and commerce) and (iv) *daṇḍanīti* (laws sanctioned by an administrative, penal code). The running deer is supported by *different* legs at different times, suggesting that the particular system of rules / codes that are appropriate for guiding action depends on and varies according to the context. Moreover, the injunctions of these four systems often pull in different directions. How then does an agent decide what to do and which particular code, amongst the four, to rely on when making an ethical decision?

This leads to the second layer in the metaphor. To identify the particular leg supporting the deer at any particular time, one has to look at the trail of blood left by the other legs when they had previously touched the ground. I read this incredibly vivid image as suggesting that all systems of rules are exclusionary. Thus, no matter what principles are followed, *some harm* is bound to occur. Scriptural

rules (*vedas*) are notoriously discriminatory. *Daṇḍanīti* serves only the interests of those regarded as citizens. The *Mahābhārata* often refers to insects and worms that are 'hurt' through the practice of agriculture (*vārtā*), and logic (*ānvīkṣiki*) harshly 'excludes' our emotional needs. An ethical agent must, therefore, keep in mind the constellation of 'pains' caused by each of these systems—their 'bloody tracks'. But how then does she pick the system of rules to rely on when making a choice? The agent, it is conjectured, is like the hunter. She keeps the bloody tracks of each of the suggested (and imagined) courses of action in mind and while 'holding them together', balances them,[14] and *projects* to a leg to be targeted. This is extrapolation to the course of action deemed the least harmful in a particular situation.

Nilkantha, a prominent commentator on the *Mahābhārata* says that the deliberative practice being referenced here is *yukti. Yukti* is mentioned in the *Caraka Samhitā* as a unique *pramāṇā* (means of knowledge) involved in medical practice and diagnosis.[15] It is 'balancing' or amalgamating the demands of all received normative systems before us and coming to a conclusion, while being mindful of their shortcomings. It is a context sensitive 'holding together' that is more intuitive than discursive, more narrative-imaginative than logico-deductive and is far from rule-based calculations.

The third message in the running deer image is uncertainty. Zeroing in on the best course of action in the above manner is always a hit or miss affair. The deer may well escape our aim and consequential bad luck may inflect our most thoughtful choices. Yet, this does not mitigate ethical responsibility. Our not *knowing* with certainty which leg of the deer to target does not mean that there is no leg to be aimed at or that we should not try. Note here that though we began with parallels between the hesitation of Amy (Gilligan's care ethical mouthpiece) and Yudhiṣṭhira (the *Mahābhārata's* care ethical protagonist), *uncertainty* itself as a care ethical trope has dropped out or been underplayed in subsequent elaborations of care ethics in the West. The *Mahābhārata's* analogy thus reinforces a unique feature of the voice of care as it was originally conceived.[16]

So we return to the irresolution of Yudhiṣṭhira as constituting the core of ethical agency. To begin with, Yudhiṣṭhira firmly desires *Dharma* as a goal and his confusion is restricted to the *means* of achieving it—should he lie to Droṇa or should he not, for example. But then, epistemic doubt about how best to act, morphs into a moral epoch and the very questioning of morality itself as a viable

goal. From an indecision about which course of action is ethically apt, we find Yudhiṣṭhira swinging irresolutely between whether he should remain a morally-engaged dharma-king at all or become a world-renouncing and ethics-jettisoning ascetic. By indicating that moral action does not rely either on firm belief or on rules, the *Mahābhārata* drives a wedge between these two distinct levels of Yudhiṣṭhira's irresolution. The running deer opens up a space to actually celebrate indecisiveness and doubt as the ground of ethical agency without undermining the moral project itself. This rather startling take on moral psychology and phenomenology is the idea of immersion in *dvaidha* or 'double-ness'. The uncertainty associated with *dvaidha* does not lead to *dvidhā* or a paralyzing dithering. It is, according to the *Mahābhārata*, Yudhiṣṭhira's moral strength. Hence, the epic does nothing to mitigate but everything to enhance the initially anxiety-producing open-endedness. But why and how are moral choices tinged with uncertainty? We turn to this question in the next section.

Dvaidha and the Different Shades of Uncertainty

We have spoken of *yukti* as 'balancing' or 'cumulative reasoning' underlying the choice of a particular course of action in a particular situation. This non-rule-based weighing of pros and cons is enabled by the capacity of insight or intuition called *prajñā* in the text (Śānti Parvan, 142.3, 4). Thus the extrapolative and projective function of *yukti* presupposes the intuitive faculty of *prajñā*. *Prajñā* gives the moral agent an epistemic vantage point. It is compared to the balcony of a high palace *(prajñā prāsādam āruhya)* from where a king can survey the panoramic view of the field of action down below. However, the natural propensity of *prajñā* needs to be trained. In subsequent philosophical literature, the ancient philosopher of grammar, Bhartṛhari, commented that one can project and extrapolate very little by the exercise of *individual* subjunctive reasoning (*svatarka*) that is isolated from others. According to him, *prajñā* needs to be refined by *viveka* through listening to conflicting and diverse traditions and philosophical views (*prajñā viveka labhate bhinnair āgama-darṣanaiḥ*[17]). One could conjecture that the *Mahābhārata* expresses this same insight by saying that *prajñā* needs to be trained through *dvaidha*. Thus successful *yukti* leading to appropriate decisions about what to do is based ultimately on a *dvaidha*-trained *prajñā*. *Dvaidha* then, becomes foundational to ethical choice.

Dvaidha can be translated as 'double-ness' or 'forking'. The concept hinges on the fact that any action judged to be 'right' can turn out to be wholly or partly 'wrong' in a different context. *Dvaidha* acknowledges this and is the condition that every action (or judgment about an action) appears different from the 'other'/ 'opposite side' *even while it appears a certain way from one side. Dvaidha* thus, on a first level urges on us the imaginative flexibility to 'double think'.

The text asks us to actively imagine a 'right' action in situations when it is considered not right. We are actually told to widen the differences among these alternative scenarios by imaginatively playing out each option to its limits like 'poets' (*kavibhih*) or people who can creatively 'see far into the horizon' (*krānta darṣi*). But we are then asked to bring together these conflicting possibilities and *set them side by side* as it were, as counterbalancing or counter-point to each other (*pratividhāna*).[18] This is not a tentative assimilation or synthesizing of alternatives. Rather, it generates an imaginatively enriched, multi-faceted experience funneled like 'collected drops of honey' (*sambhṛtam madhu*) and collected into a pool of an experiential store of plurality (*bahvyah*). This pool is the source of epistemological nourishment. *Prajñā*—the capacity underlying extrapolation—is strengthened through an immersion in such a pool of diversity and difference actively generated by 'double-think'. When strengthened in this way, it makes imaginative counterfactual connections (*ūheta*[19]: Śānti Parvan, 142.19) and extrapolates the right course of action on a case by case basis (*tataḥ tataḥ*: Śānti Parvan, 142.4).

It seems clear then, that according to the *Mahābhārata*, confining oneself to single-minded judgments of the good weaken the imaginative muscles of moral sense. In fact, a moral decisional faculty that has not confronted the possibility of variety stalls and freezes when faced with real life dilemmas (*na eka śākhena dharmeṇā yatraiṣā sampravartate*: Śānti Parvan, 142.4). The point is that ethical decisions based on *yukti* require improvisation and creativity. This imaginative flexibility is enabled by a *prajñā* that is nurtured by exposure to the double-ness of 'double-think'.

Now, such a moral epistemology based on *dvaidha* introduces an ethically enabling (rather than disabling) uncertainty in three different ways. First, as noted, *dvaidha* is at bottom 'double think' or seeing a particular as having a value opposite to what we ascribe to it even as we ascribe an original value to it. We may judge, for instance, 'taking someone's property without permission' to be bad.

But we are asked to imagine (perhaps Robin Hood like) situations wherein that action is good. Such thinking of the action from the 'opposite side' not only de-stablizes its fixed classification on the moral scale but imaginative explorations of alternatives to our view open up the possibility that these alternatives are actually held by others. Thus, recognizing 'double-ness' also makes visible what can be called 'second knowledge'—views and ideologies explicitly opposed to ours. Our conviction in the virtues of socialism for example, is balanced by equally strong arguments against it. We thus face an array of diverse world views that plunge us into the second level of uncertainty about the cogency of our own view. After all, rational disputations can well end in a tie.

The uncertainties of 'double think' and 'second knowledge' are both hesitations *prior* to the critical hour of decision-making. A faculty exposed to and trained by these ambiguities, however helps us zero in on the salience of a particular alternative before us. So paradoxically, doubt about how to classify acts and what to believe, enables us to *act firmly* and unhesitatingly. Firm action here emerges from temporarily *silencing*—and not eradicating—the other possibilities in our 'pool' of epistemic consciousness. But this simmering and clamoring background of alternatives from which a choice is made, is ever-present. Their multiplicity of claims forces us to step back and question an action *after it has been performed*. The hesitations associated with *dvaidha* now becomes a way of encouraging 'second thoughts'—a third level of uncertainty that reflects back in humility on the actions and choices.

On this model then, ethical action is flanked by irresolution both before and after. The uncertainty that propels us to action is because of seriously entertaining alternatives to our perception of the world through 'double-think' and 'second knowledge'. The uncertainty after the action is performed is having 'second thoughts'—the self-critical moment born of humility. The heart of progress is thus infused with uncertainty. The movement of the dharma-snake gets stalled in a life wedded to the closure, smugness and certainty of rules.

Veena Das' evocative interpretation[20] of strands in the epic (of course, for a different purpose) intertwines with the theory of ethical agency given above. Das agrees with Alf Hiltebietel's contention that the *Mahābhārata* employs narrative techniques wherein 'shadows of an alternative present fall on episode(s) as these unfold'[21] in the text. Thus, *hovering unrealized possibilities* are as much part of the present as those that are actualized in the plot. In fact, if

we take the Mahābhārata not just as a Sanskrit text but as a 'tradition', then folk renditions can be seen as picking up on and playing out these alternative trajectories in order to place before us, readers, a rich tapestry of ethical alternatives. In the context of our discussion of ethical agency, this reinforces the insight that the *Mahābhārata* instructs us not just by plot and character, but by keeping alive a *sense of alternatives* beyond the chosen and the obvious. Thus narrative techniques of 'side-showing'—the stylistic framing of the central plot by counterpoints that play out alternative possibilities inherent in it—now becomes not a mere aesthetic ornamentation but integral to the epic as a text for ethical instruction.[22]

The oddity that attends the *Mahābhārata* idea that an agent is morally better off if she 'knows two ways' (*dvaidhjña*) rather than acting on a single-branched ethical order (*eka-śākhā-dharma*) seems to disappear if we interpret *dvaidha* as capturing the notion of scruple. The concept of scruple so deeply entrenched in ordinary moral thinking has not usually been picked up by moral philosophy. *Dvaidha* can easily be cast as a dithering that slides into irresolution—that Hamlet-like quality which standard moral psychology decries as a weakness of character. But 'scrupulousness' is praised as a virtue, flowing from and requiring reflection and critical second thoughts about what one has decided to do. Scruple is not incompatible with resolute action; just as firm action is sandwiched by 'double think' and 'second knowledge' on one hand, and a reflexive 'second thought' on the other.

Yudhiṣṭhira's Good Decision

So Yudhiṣṭhira acts. At the end of the epic he acts without rules, and guided by a *prajñā* that has been nurtured by *dvaidha* all through the epic narrative. Let us look at his last agentic decision in this world - a decision for which he is clearly praised by the text. The episode is familiar from Chapter 3 of the *Mahāprasthānika Parvan*.

Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers set out for the 'final journey' during the course of which the other Pāṇḍavas and their wife, Draupadi, fall in quick succession. Yudhiṣṭhira, however, trudged on alone, accompanied by a stray dog that had attached itself to the group. At one point, God Indra appeared in his chariot with much bugle-blowing fanfare to escort him to heaven. Yudhiṣṭhira was ready but wanted to bring the dog along with him. Indra recoiled in horror. Remember that dogs are pollutants in traditional Indian society and

Indra was headed towards heaven, the purest of all places. He pleaded:

> O king! You have won immortality and status equal to mine; all the felicities of Heaven are yours today. Do cast off this dog. *In this there will be no cruelty* (*na atra nṛśamsyamasti*: Mahāprasthānika Parvan, 3.8, 10).

Yudhiṣṭhira remained unswayed. He saw in the helpless gaze of the dog, trembling in the stark, desolate surrounding, an appeal not to be abandoned. Filled with compassion (*anukrośa*), he was unable to disregard this silent cry. Indra, however, was dismayed by this unexpected and literally, unreasonable obstacle to his mission. He lost his temper and railed that sympathy for a stray dog was really *not* required even for a paragon of justice and that Yudhiṣṭhira had become ensnared in *moha* at the end of his life—entangled in a blind and irrational love. Refusing to be shamed, Yudhiṣṭhira stood firm in his decision. The dog personified in his own words, among other things

> ...a person who is terrified, or one who is devoted to me, or one who seeks my protection saying that he has nowhere to go, or one who is afflicted, or one who is weak and unable to protect oneself .....(Mahāprasthānika Parvan, 3.12)

Yudhiṣṭhira explained that his moral stance was never to abandon such persons.

Of course, there is a happy ending here. The dog revealed himself to be *Dharma* in disguise and explained the entire incident as a test—one that Yudhiṣṭhira did pass this time—with flying colors. But even on his way to Heaven, Yudhiṣṭhira expressed his wish to go where his family members were, provoking a bemused Indra to mutter, 'Why do you *still* cherish human emotion!?'

Yudhiṣṭhira's Agency and Vulnerability

Refracted through the 'theory' of *dvaidha*-agency articulated above, this episode emerges in an interesting light. It forcefully underscores rejection of conventional exemplars and conventional rules. Yudhiṣṭhira takes a stand against the highest exemplar, *God* Indra Himself, who reminds him that extant moral codes clearly did not require compassion for a dog. This negative moral principle is flouted by Yudhiṣṭhira in spite of Indra's admonitions. The point is that Yudhiṣṭhira's compassion for the dog is not the product of applying the universal rule 'Be kind' and hence, is unaffected by Indra's pointing out that dogs were exceptions to that rule.

Yudhiṣṭhira's felt compassion here (*anukrośa*) is rather an assertion of the *valence* of the plight of the dog that he sees in that particular situation. It emerges from a 'balancing' of the details of the empirical condition involving the dog, the conventional codes championed by Indra, and his own self-interest of going to Heaven. The decision not to abandon the dog is an extrapolation (through *yukti*) and is enabled by a *prajñā* trained by Yudhiṣṭhira's lifelong practice of irresolution. Yudhiṣṭhira is very much aware of the 'opposite view' represented by Indra even as he makes and sticks to his own decision.

The decision to stay with the dog when parsed through the above conceptualization of action yields an interesting interpretation of Yudhiṣṭhira's *own* earlier definition of morality. In a previous episode, Yudhiṣṭhira had said: '*The essence of dharma is hidden in the cave/The Way is what the mahājana follows*' (Vana Parvan, 311) Commentators have not tired of pointing out that the term '*mahājana*' can mean either 'majority' or 'exemplary figures'. But there are many different moral exemplars who do not agree with one another, and the views of the majority for the most part, can conflict with those of exemplary figures. Because of this ambiguity, the real nature of *Dharma* is said to be inscrutable–'hidden in the cave'.

A richer interpretation emerges given the theory of ethical agency that we have been foregrounding. The controversies, debates and ambiguities in the 'ways' of the *mahājana*—whether of the majority or of exemplars—can be now configured as part of the process of moral training and an immersion in *dvaidha*. The 'essence of *dharma*' lies in the 'cave' in the sense that right choices are grounded in the individual psycho-affective apparatus or inner character—the constellation of habitual dispositions associated with *dvaidha* or a two-sidedly trained capacity of *prajñā*. The right thing to do is 'hidden' there because it cannot be articulated or made public in the form of rules prior to experiencing the situations that call for a moral response. An ethical course of action flows out of years of training in heeding conflicting perspectives of others, authentically feeling double-binds that life puts us through, and self-criticism. We stay on track—but not on a rigid rail—because of 'being a certain way' due to this training.

There are two wrinkles in this neat, non-rule based interpretation of the dog-episode. The first is introduced by Yudhiṣṭhira himself saying that he is the *kind of person* who does not abandon certain kinds of individuals (i.e. those in need). Is this not a characterization in universal terms and the articulation of a self-

imposed rule? In response, one could say that generalizations need not be universalizations *that intend to guide*. There is a distinction between descriptive and prescriptive rules. In saying that he is the 'kind of person' who does not abandon the helpless, Yudhiṣṭhira offers a *description* of virtuous character. Such a compassionate person will still need to decide what constitutes 'abandonment' on a case by case basis. The imaginative, creative or extrapolative aspect of ethical agency is thus not denied.

The second objection queries whether agency in this episode sits well with uncertainty. Yudhiṣṭhira shows no hesitation and is, in fact, lauded for remaining unmoved by Indra's diatribe. Now this is an *iśtāpatti*—a criticism that actually strengthens rather than demolishes the hypothesis. Firm action is, after all, a desideratum for any ethical position—even for the care ethical particularist. The *Mahābhārata's* theory is that epistemic uncertainty always moves in tandem with firm resolve. The *dharma*-serpent progresses slowly in a three-stepped manner. The decisional moment undergirded by *yukti* is sandwiched by different kinds of hesitations before and after. Yudhiṣṭhira is able to firmly extrapolate to the moral salience of the dog's fear because of a prior history of questioning and doubt. If the narrative had not ended just then—if he had not been beamed into heaven the minute he formed this resolute will—Yudhiṣṭhira would have *acted* out his resolve. The dialectic of ethical agency then, according to what I have been suggesting, would have required him to revisit, re-consider and question the action, post facto.

Moreover, there are resources in the dog episode that also reinforce uncertainty in ethical life. The story, after all, is a story of vulnerability that comes with embodiment—and responses to it. Yudhiṣṭhira is moved by the fear and trembling of the dog. But care ethical protagonists, as embodied, are also embedded in *natural causal networks*. Consequently, they have to contend with circumstances beyond their control. '(T)he very young and old, the weak, the sick, ... *depend* on the sense of moral responsibility of others (who are) *unlucky* enough to be stuck with the circumstances of their need...'(my emphases).[23] My embodiment makes me count on the ethical agency of others in times of my bad luck of (say) sickness. But this imposes on those *others*, the bad luck of being morally responsible for situations that they never have dreamed of. I might, for example, choose to go for a walk; but I do not orchestrate the drowning child I encounter as I make the next turn. You don't orchestrate my sickness but might still be required to morally respond to it. In this case, responsibility outruns control. Moral life

is thus infused with luck which brings uncertainty in its tow.

Yudhiṣṭhira 'finds' himself facing the fear of a helpless dog due to 'circumstantial luck'. Indra urges him to shrug off this sheer happenstance as ethically irrelevant. But Yudhiṣṭhira does not do so. Moreover, embodied agents trying to address the needs of other embodied agents must be prepared for the natural order taking over and their best intentions going awry. 'Resultant luck' always lurks around the corner. Being bodied therefore, entails the vulnerability of being surprised—and hence an openness to uncertainty and doubt. Amy, Gilligan's care ethical subject, makes this poignantly clear while ruminating on her choice. She says:

> If both the roads went in totally separate ways, if you pick one, you'll never know what would happen if you went the other way – that's the chance you have to take, and like I said, it's just really a guess.[24]

Expanding accountability to include surprises brings with it the possibilities of recognizing failure, of critique, shame and remorse. All of which inhabit the same conceptual space of self-reflexivity—the 'second-thoughts', the 'second knowing' and the 'double-think' of *dvaidha.*

Thus Yudhiṣṭhira acts. In spite of uncertainty and because of uncertainty. And he acts well. Steady in strife, firm in battle is after all, what *Yudhi-ṣṭhira* means. Steady one must be, but only after and through an inner strife. Firm one has to be in the midst of the double-nesses of a divided morality.

Dvaidha-Nourished Agency and Politics

To conclude, let us briefly explore how such an articulation of agency on the moral register bleeds into an understanding of political agency. Care, after all, is intended as a feminist political voice and it is a bonus if a (care) ethical agency, crafted in terms of *dvaidha,* can sustain a robust notion of the *political* as well. Of course, there is no consensus on what the latter term signifies. I gesture towards mapping of *dvaidha* onto three different ways in which politics can be conceived. Each of these involves oppositions and conflicts in the public domain. A choice between these alternatives - or their reconciliation—remains an agenda for further research and closer comparative study.

Politics, in its 'routine mode'[25] constructs shared ends out of different—often conflicting interests. It crafts a common goal through contest of reasons in public space, which is then concretized

in institutional forms. A *dvaidha*-nourished *yukti* in this world of praxis is part of the policy-maker's eclectic tool-kit, just like it is part of the medical healer's bag of epistemological tricks. It signifies a deliberative process that acknowledges standpoints of others before 'projecting' to a solution deemed to be binding for all. This makes it a potential resource of 'public reason'.

Through an inbuilt receptivity to arguments of those opposed to us, a *dvaidha*-agency helps us acquire sensitivity to the views of others and the epistemological vulnerability of our own position. The stance of 'double-ness' can free us from ideological smugness and extremism. In fact, *dvaidha* generates virtuosity in the classical Aristotelian sense of arriving at a 'mean'—putting us back in the middle ground of extreme views. It underscores the necessity of re-negotiating that location each time and politics becomes a matter of ongoing persuasions and about turns conducted through this unique process of deliberation. Note that the 'song of God' in the *Mahābhārata* could be sung only after the 'devious divinity' complied with Arjuna's request to park his chariot in the *middle* of two warring armies. An Aristotelian agent cannot decide how to be courageous unless he clearly knows what would be rashness (excess) and what would be cowardice (deficiency) in each particular situation. The metaphor of the 'middle' requires us to keep the opposition between two opposite options alive. A sense of *dvaidha* is thus helpful for consensus-building in the face of conflicting plurality. But given its three-fold complexity, it also suggests that no negotiated conclusion is fought out once and for all: constant re-thinking and contestation of an achieved stability and compromise becomes the heart of political life.

But more interesting is to see how *dvaidha*-agency can reinforce what some have called 'politics at its best'[26]—the conception of the political as a site of radical freedom, disclosing 'new' ways of experiencing the world when our tired concepts of making meaning prove inadequate. This is politics as a process of articulating 'reasons that move the imagination.'[27] Mediating solutions are often not a result of what follows logically from what is in place, but requires seeing new, hitherto undreamt of, facets and potentialities. Political excellence now becomes akin to (though not reducible to) artistic excellence—an ability to *imagine* unnoticed connections and 'open up' the world in radically different ways. In this light, the 'double think' of *dvaidha* is an imaginative moment. The 'second knowledge' and 'second thoughts' it inspires enable us to see our best ideas for maximum flourishing as harboring seeds of radical evil. It thus

becomes a means of *making present* the voice of possible victims whom we have learned *not* to see, *not* to hear, and *not* to understand through our faculties of perception and reason. *Yukti* as a non-rule based 'projection' from the *shortcomings* and exclusions of the positions available to us, could well be a leap to imaginatively re-constitute our normative map.

When a concept like equality crafted for white, propertied males is extended, for example, to women, to children not yet born, to the mentally disabled, and now used in a global world with porous national boundaries, then its extension cannot be a mere drawing out of what is already available to entrenched conceptual habits. Rather, it is an artistic creation of novel connections and possibilities—it is a plea for us to *see* radically and differently. Could Yudhiṣṭhira's angst be heard as the call of a political agent in this, second sense—of a political subject yearning, after the annihilation of a destructive war, for the 'new' (after the fashion of a Hannah Arendt[28])? If so, the response of the epic in terms of *dvaidha* comes to signify an encounter with the *particular* not subsumed under pre-given concepts, but of particulars as *examples*—from which we are 'free' to extract new forms that claim universality. Here our discussion of ethical particularism in care ethics segues into an experience of political particularity not subsumable under entrenched concepts.

Finally,[29] an even more radical possibility suggests itself through the agonistic construal of 'the political' by Chantal Mouffe.[30] According to Mouffe, *antagonistic* relations between enemies have to give way to *agonistic* relations between 'adversaries' in a pluralistic democracy. Here we move from the political as a space of deliberation and of freedom aimed at generating agreement, to the political as the realm of conflicts 'for which no rational solution could ever exist.'[31] In this light, the 'second knowledge' induced by the clamoring alternatives suggested by 'double think' captures we/they distinction of legitimate and irreconcilable oppositions. However, as noted above, although *dvaidha*-agency is prefaced and nourished by oppositional alternatives, it results in a moment of decision. This is important in Mouffe's theory as a political or *hegemonic* closure that challenges and upturns an existing power structure. This re-articulation of power is of course, unstable itself because of the legitimate positions it necessarily excludes. The reflexive 'second thoughts' induced by the ever-present alternative(s) to any decision, come to structure an agonistic terrain. It remains possible for any one of them to erupt to the foreground

leading to a 'disarticulation of existing practices and creation of new discourses and institutions.'[32] This reads hegemony, in Mouffe's sense, into the decisional moment of *dvaidha*. The many-layered complexity of *dvaidha* is now appropriated not just to capture a constant struggle against closure, but to signify the decisional moment of re-articulation of power.

One problem in this juxtaposition of *dvaidha* with Mouffe's idea of agonistic conflict is that she is stridently opposed to the 'moralising' of politics. *Dvaidha*, however, has been spelled out above as the heart of moral sense and ethical agency. In using it to understand the political domain, do we not end up introducing the *antagonistic* (as opposed to the agonistic) relation of good and bad, right and wrong in the political space? A defense could lie in pointing out that the *Mahābhārata's* sense of 'right' and 'wrong' is far from that of traditional morality. In fact, the good here is conceived as having a 'constitutive outside'.[33] Just as the meaning of our identities is relational and depends on the nature of what they exclude, the status of the 'good' in the *Mahābhārata* is contextually constituted by the alternatives it rules out in any particular situation.[34] There is nothing that is universally right or wrong. The ethically appropriate is a choice in the strong sense of taking a stand in a genuinely dilemmatic and therefore, rationally un-decidable situation. An ethical decision is therefore, also one that never leaves opposition behind. Consequently, what we seem to have here is a *politicization* of the ethical, rather than the other way around.

Conclusion

To sum up, if decisions of *who we care for* make us *who we are*, and if our decisions to care are based on a *dvaidha*-nourished process, then there is hope for a radically 'new' remodeling of ourselves and our communities. Citizenship is making and re-making of new identities inscribed through relations of care that are institutionally supported. This hope can be teased out on two levels: first as grounding an aesthetico-imaginative and pragmatic process of reaching temporary consensus and creating provisional order out of conflict; and second, as sustaining the limits of rational consensus and the symbolic space of conflict lying at the heart of politicization. In this way, care agency based on *dvaidha*, can ground a truly ethico-*political* agency in different ways. The political here is either the ability to give shape to our life as a collective, or the representation

of the world in terms of inherent oppositions of power. The details of the functioning of these two senses of the political and their oppositions and inter-relationships through the lens of *dvaidha*, is of course the topic of a closer comparative research in the future.

NOTES

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1. Buddhadeva Bose, *The Book of Yudhisthir*, trans. Sujit Mukherjee (Calcutta: Sangam Books, 1986).
2. My references to the *Mahābhārata* are from *The Mahābhārata* with *Bharata Bhawadeepa* Commentary of Nilkaṇṭha, Pandit Ramchandrshastri Kinjawadekar (New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1979).
3. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
4. See for example, Mukund Lath, 'The Concept of *Anūshamsya* in the *Mahabharata*' in T.R.S. Sharma (ed.), *Reflections and Variations on the Mahabharata* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2009), pp. 82-88.
5. Joan Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).
6. Gilligan, *Different Voice,* p. 26.
7. Ibid., p. 28.
8. Ibid.
9. Seyla Benhabib, 'The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Moral Theory' in Eva Kittay and Diana Meyers (eds.), *Women and Moral Theory* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987), pp. 154-177.
10. Evoking John McDowell, 'Virtue and Reason', *Monist*, Vol. 62 (1979), pp. 331-350.
11. Margaret Olivia Little, 'Moral Generalities Revisited' in Brad Hooker and Margaret Olivia Little (eds.), *Moral Particularism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 276-304.
12. To operate as a 'reason' it must be an instance of a generalization codified in propositional form.
13. Śānti Parvan 167. The text references a discussion that Yudhiṣṭhira *invites* with his four brothers and Vidura on which of the 'aims' of life, *dharma, artha* or *kāma* is prior.
14. Note that Michael Slote in *Morals from Motives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) also uses the notion of 'balancing' as the mode of deliberation to meet conflicting needs. Slote explains it in terms of the example of a parent negotiating the demands of her two children. The needs of one child does not trump the needs of another, and neither does he think of 'aggregating' them into a composite good as a Classic Utilitarian would. The demands of neither

child are ultimately given up, though one of them can acquire priority at different times.

15. Yukti is a term of art used to specify a distinct kind of clinical reasoning in the medical sciences. See 26.31 of Sutrasthana (*Caraka Samhita*). It is given the status of a unique *pramā* which is subsequently picked up to be refuted by the Buddhists in *TattvasaC graha*. Thanks to Arindam Chakrabarti for pointing this out to me. This is discussed in a Bangla book, Dalia Bandury, *Carakasamhitar Darsanik Bhavana-Samiksa* (Kolkata: Asiatic Society, 2006). There are two kinds of medical practice: *Dravyajña* (based on chemistry and pharmacology) and *Yuktijña* (based on diagnostic skills). The latter is a deliberative practice that consciously seeks inputs from various sources and then argues 'holistically' or 'cumulatively' *(yojang)*.
16. Recently, Colin Danby in 'Lupita's Dress: Care in Time', *Hypatia*, Vol. 9 (2004), pp. 23-48 has used a post-Keynesian framework to speak of the forward looking responsibilities of care practice as involving uncertainty. As an economic agent, a care ethical agent has an in-time existence where the future is radically and not just probabilistically uncertain.
17. Bhartṛhari, *Vākyapadīya of Bhartṛhari*, Kāṇḍa II, ed. K. A. Subramania (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983), Verse 484.
18. Nilakantha says that *pratividhāna* means *cikitsanīa* or 'to be investigated'. It is fascinating to note that *cikitsqā* which means investigating both sides of a doubt came to mean treatment, therapy, and cure.
19. *ūha*' is a technical term for a form of reasoning. See Jonardon Ganeri, 'Intellectual India: Reason, Identity, Dissent', *New Literary History*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Spring 2009), 247-263, in speaking of the 'resources' of reason in Ancient India that can be mobilized to enrich 'public reason' and articulate dissent mentions both *ūha* and *yukti*. However, he translates *yukti* as 'empirical generalization', p. 251.
20. Veena Das, 'Sexuality, Vulnerability, and the Oddness of the Human: Lessons from the Mahabharata', *Borderlands* e-journal, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2010), pp. 1-17.
21. Ibid., p. 4.
22. Das' reading of the pivotal scene of Draupadi's violent disrobing in court—where all the elders, including Yudhiṣṭhira are silent, is also instructive for our purposes here. We could follow Das in looking at the thundering silence of the '*mahājanas*' in court and wonder whether that signifies the impotency of a rule-based Dharma. Could this be the 'freezing' of an ill-trained *prajñā* in the time of crises? Das says that the epic 'dramatizes the moral as the point when we are put in the grip of an uncertainty' (p. 4). If rules silence ethical judgment, if morality is this uncertainty which 'hangs over the everyday as an unresolved question' (p. 4) then ethical response can emerge only from the experience of *hesitation*. The fact that this silencing signifying a genuine hesitation, arises due to the interrogation emerging from the *body* of a menstruating woman is of course not irrelevant from the perspective of a care ethical interpretation.
23. Margaret Walker, 'Moral Luck and the Virtues of Impure Agency' in *Moral Contexts* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), pp. 21-34, p. 31.
24. Gilligan, *Different Voice*, p. 32.
25. Politics in its 'routine mode' and politics 'at its best' are terms used by Alessandro Ferrara 'Politics at its Best: Reasons that Move the Imagination' in Chiara Bottici and Benoît Challand (eds.), *The Politics of Imagination* (Abingdon: Birkbeck Law Press, 2011), pp. 38-54.
26. 'Politics at its best is the weaving of *vision* into the texture of what is possible'. See Ferrara, 'Politics at its Best', p. 51.

27. Ferrara, 'Politics at its Best', p. 42.
28. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
29. I remain grateful to Maidul Islam for suggesting this direction to me.
30. Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005).
31. Ibid., p. 10.
32. Ibid., p. 33.
33. Ibid., p. 18
34. This might be a reason why *dvaidha* is better seen as mapping agonistic relations rather than *antagonistic* ones. Remember that according to the latter; differences are plotted as 'foes' where resolution implies the elimination/death of one of the parties in the conflict. The differences referenced by *dvaidha* are *inbuilt in* and *constitutive* of a position. Thus, the encroachment of a peasants land by an industrialist is *both* 'good' and 'bad'. We are not allowed the 'death' of one, once and for all. The vanquished side forever raises its head demanding to be taken seriously as an 'adversary' and always tempers the moves made by the victor.