

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to the Mahābhārata



- The subjects of the inquiry and their universality
- The method in the inquiry

When Krishna-Dvaipāyana Vyāsa set out to write the *Mahābhārata* he looked for a stenographer, an intelligent one, to find whom was as difficult an undertaking then as it is now. He approached Gaṇeśha, who graciously agreed but not without imposing a condition, that during working hours the dictation would have to be continuous and his pen must not be kept idle even for a moment.¹ In an act of reckless courage the author agreed. But, somewhat cunningly, with a smile on his lips, he imposed a counter-condition: that Gaṇeśha would take nothing down until he had understood the real import of what was said.² What was said had so many levels of meaning that he often took time to understand the essence of a statement, which was the time Vyāsa gained to compose further.³

The author and the stenographer of the *Mahābhārata* made a remarkable team. Vyāsa has left us a portrait of himself. He was of dusky dark colour; hence *Krishna* as a part of his name. His mother, *Satyavatī*, a fisherwoman in the earlier part of her life, known then also as *Matsyagandhā*, ‘the one who smelt of fish’, gave birth to him on an island in the river *Yamunā*; hence *Dvaipāyana* as the other part of his name. The sage *Parāshara* was his father. On seeing young *Satyavatī*, *Parāshara* was greatly roused by her beauty, and she was so awed by his fame and authority, that, while ferrying him across the river in her boat one day, she reluctantly submitted to his desire for her, and *Vyāsa* was born of that most unlikely union.⁴ At the same time she was miraculously cured of her disagreeable smell of fish, and acquired an exquisite fragrance in its place, and would thereafter be known also as *Divyagandhā*, ‘the one with a divine smell’. *Vyāsa* grew to be frighteningly ugly, his visage so fierce, besides his matted hair, that women, when they looked at him, would close their eyes from shock. The story of his birth was later narrated also by his mother,⁵ *Satyavatī*, now a young woman, when this time she captured the heart of a king, *Shāntanu*, who proposed marriage to her, even though she was of a lower social level, and she became his queen. *Vyāsa* had promised his mother that should she ever want him to be of service to her, she had only to think of him, and he would be with her instantly. That promise he kept.

The stenographer looked even more remarkable. He carried on his human body the head of an elephant. His legs were stubby and short. And he had a huge stomach, so grotesquely out of proportion with the rest of his body that, at the sight of him, one day some gods and sages laughed at him. Roused to great anger by that act of gross disrespect, Gaṇeśha broke his right tusk into two, and with the broken end in his right hand he threatened to destroy them and their universe. Knowing that he was perfectly capable of doing so, they apologised abjectly, and took a vow that whenever they would begin a work they would do so by seeking his blessings first, a practice kept up to the present day even by ordinary mortals.

Vyāsa and Gaṇeśha together produced what became a vast and a most systematic inquiry ever undertaken into the foundations of human relationships, a journey towards understanding the human condition: the *Mahābhārata*. Let me begin this work by offering to them my salutations, again, again, and yet again.

The subjects of the inquiry and their universality

The concerns of the *Mahābhārata* are the concerns of everyday life everywhere. In its inquiry into the human condition it raises those very questions the answers to which we all seek in the diverse circumstances of our lives. What is happiness? What is unhappiness? What is health? What is sickness? In what relation does the mind exist with the body? What is pleasure? What is pain? What is the nature of sexual pleasure? What kind of energy is sex? What are the conditions in which it flourishes, and what are the conditions in which it dies? What is wealth? What is poverty? What is truth? What is untruth? Are they absolutes? And also, *whose* truth? What is violence? From where does violence arise? What kind of relation is there between what one does and thinks and what one becomes? What is freedom? What is bondage? Who is wise? And who is a fool? What is it to be a saint? What is purity? What is pilgrimage? Why did a thing happen the way it happened? And, conversely, why did a thing not happen when there was every reason to believe that it would happen? Is one free to make oneself what one is? Or is one determined by some other force: Fate, or God, or History? What is the right ordering of one's relationship with one's self and with the *other*? What relation does it have with time and place? What is governance? What are its foundations? What is order? And what is disorder? What relation do they have with time and place? What

is death? And what is that which is deathless? These and related questions are the substance of the *Mahābhārata*; as, indeed, they are the substance of human life.

In its opening chapter, the *Ādi-parva*, the *Mahābhārata* provides us with a very detailed table of contents. Stated in its brief outline, the inquiry is into the four ends of human life. Related at all times intimately with each other, they are: *dharma*, or the foundations of all relationships, personal and social; *artha*, or the material conditions of life; *kāma*, sexual happiness, or, used in a wider sense, fulfilment of desire; and *mokṣha*, freedom, liberation.⁶ No one of them would have meaning without the other three. And all of them give rise to very many questions, which all of us ask, with varying degrees of intensity, at one turn or the other of our circumstances. And they are the questions the *Mahābhārata* takes up in their concrete expressions.

What is *dharma*? What are those foundations upon which all human relationships everywhere are based? Who determines what those foundations shall be? Are they given as inherent in human life itself? Are they subject to the varying conditions and circumstances of a person's life, so that there is one *dharma* for normal conditions, and another in times of distress, for example? Is there one *dharma* for the scholar devoted to learning and teaching; another *dharma* for the householder; a different *dharma* for the king; and a separate *dharma* for one who would maintain services? Is *dharma* a self-determining reality that gives direction to a person's life, and is it to be discovered in a process of self-discovery as to what one is meant to be? And since self-discovery cannot ever be a finished product, is *dharma* a state of *becoming*, changing with the different perceptions one has of oneself at different times? Or is it determined collectively by each society, determined differently by different societies at different times, so that it is history that will determine what an individual person is meant to be? If *dharma* be the order of life, without which life could not be, what are the universally unchanging elements of *dharma*, and what is in it that will necessarily be open to change, which is unpredictable besides? How is this tension between the eternal and the transient to be resolved, when both form parts of the same reality? This question will apply to *dharma* as the foundation of law and governance most of all. The question of *satya*, truth, is inseparable from the question of *dharma*. What is truth, and what is untruth? The same questions that apply to *dharma* apply simultaneously to truth as well. From the beginning to the end, all these questions occupy, in specific contexts, a very considerable part of the *Mahābhārata*'s inquiry into the

human condition. These questions are discussed, in different circumstances of different people, in the *Ādi-parva*, in the *Sabhā-parva*, in the *Vana-parva*, in the *Anushāsana-parva*, in the *Āshvamedhika-parva*, and more especially in the *Shānti-parva*.

What amount of material resources, *artha*, is essential to human happiness and dignity? In what way does the lack of *artha*, and the unending greed for more, both affect one's relationship with one's self and with the *other*? Is wealth necessarily a value? In what measure is *artha*, or material well-being, itself a foundation of *dharma*? In order that there be a sane society, and freedom from the violence of acquisition, to what abiding principles as *dharma* must the acquisition of wealth and its consumption be at all times everywhere subordinate? What must a just and rational economic system be like? Of the four ends of life, is not *artha*, or the acquisition of material resources, of the greatest importance, the quality of the other three depending upon it? By what principles must the king, now the state, be governed in relation to wealth? What shall be the just principles of taxation as the main resource of state revenues? And in what ways must those revenues be spent to create the welfare and the good of the people? In case there is a conflict between *dharma*, as the ethical foundation of relationships, and *artha*, which of the two shall have, in principle, precedence over the other? In what kind of life will material concerns cease to have the hold over the mind which they indisputably have? These questions are raised and discussed in great detail in the *Mahābhārata*, some of them in the *Udyoga-parva*, most of them in the *Shānti-parva*, and some in the *Anushāsana-parva*.

Since prudence, or *nīti*, is intimately associated with the acquisition of wealth and with the keeping of it, as it is with the art of governance, indeed with most situations of life, there is in the *Mahābhārata* a good amount of prudence-literature, or the *nīti*-maxims. They all focus on *svārtha*, self-interest, as the spring of all human actions. Many of them focus on *vānī*, speech, to which everything in the functional world is tied. They discuss the probable conflict between the need to speak pleasantly and the greater need to speak truthfully. In case there is a straight conflict between the two, how is it to be reconciled? Many of the *nīti*-maxims focus on *trust and trusting* which is so very central to all relationships, personal and social, and on the problems connected with them. They discuss the danger that arises when trust is wrongly placed; and they discuss the even greater danger when nobody trusts anybody. Some other *nīti*-maxims focus on the relationship between the strong and the weak: on the attitude the weak should have

towards the strong as a means of self-preservation, and the attitude which the strong must have, equally in their own interest, towards the weak and the poor. There is the problem, besides, that something that is inherently right and, in many circumstances, also a prudent thing to do, that the same thing, in certain other circumstances, may not at all be a prudent thing to do, even though it may be on principle a right thing to do. How is it to be ensured that the element of expediency, present in human situations at all times, does not turn into unprincipled opportunism, which it so very easily can, and often does? Once expediency is allowed as a defensible principle of conduct in *abnormal times*, *āpadkāla*, what is the mechanism by which it can be held in check and not used in bad faith at other times, when the presence of bad faith will be impossible to establish? How is *tension between prudence and truth*, between *nīti* and *dharma*, to be resolved? How is a *dilemma* to be resolved when there is a straight conflict between what is right and what is also right, and both inviolable duties besides? These questions are discussed in the *Mahābhārata* in great detail and in different circumstances, more especially in the area of governance, in the *Udyoga-parva*, in the *Sabhā-parva*, in the *Anushāsana-parva*, and in the *Shānti-parva*.

Of the four ends of life, which one has primacy in actual reality? In one answer to this question, it is maintained that it is sexual impulse, *kāma*, which governs most human conduct. Primacy is assigned to human sexuality, to which everything else in actual practice is shown to be subordinate. But this is only one of the positions taken in the *Mahābhārata*, although a dominant one. Sexual energy, *kāma*, and its varied manifestations, are explored in great depth, and from different angles. What is also examined is the question: between the man and the woman, who derives the greater sexual pleasure? Assigning primacy to the sexual impulse and to its workings, the bounds within which it is to be kept nevertheless, if it can be kept within any prescribed bounds at all, are explored systematically. What is explored in the main is the question whether *kāma* is just physical appetite, as hunger and thirst are, or is it, even in its physicality, a state of togetherness between a man and a woman in the first place? If it is a state of togetherness, then it must also lead to the question of its *disha*, direction. What are the conditions of sexual fulfilment? In other words, what is the relation between *dharma* and *kāma* above all? What does it mean to say that sexuality should be subject to *dharma*? These questions are discussed in the *Mahābhārata*, in great detail, in the *Ādi-parva*, in the *Anushāsana-parva*, and in the *Shānti-parva*, and indeed throughout that work.

In the context of human sexuality, but not in that context alone, what is examined is *desire* and its workings. Desire, in being a human attribute, and therefore to be acknowledged with respect, can also lead to its tyranny and violence—the tyranny of desire. The *Mahābhārata* acknowledges the evident psychological force of desire, *kāma*, that permeates all life; but at the same time it examines the greater need for its disciplining, if desire is not to become self-destructive, and become destructive also of the *other*, which it so easily can. Does *self-discipline* mean self-denial? The *Mahābhārata* examines them as two different paths; the latter, if turned into a principle, being quite as destructive as self-indulgence.

Desire for *sukha*, pleasure, and avoidance of *duhkha*, pain, being the two main driving forces of human life, the *Mahābhārata* explores in a most thoroughgoing manner these twin realities, and man's blinding subjection to them. 'Pleasure' and 'pain' are discussed in some forty chapters spread over different *parva*-s. Connected with this subject is the analysis of human faculties, of the body and the mind, and their workings either in harmony with each other or out of joint. What emerge are reflections on human freedom.

The question of *mokṣha*, human freedom, forms a substantial part of the *Mahābhārata*. It is only *in* freedom that one can be fully human. But what *is* freedom? In the first place, freedom is freedom *from*. So what is *mokṣha* freedom *from*? That freedom once gained, what still remains to be gained is freedom *into*. What is the state of *mokṣha* like? How is *mokṣha* to be gained? What are the paths to *mokṣha*? What is *mokṣha* in its relation to *dharma*, *artha*, and *kāma*? In that state of freedom, are those three dissolved as any further concerns of one's life? Or, are they, in that state, only the more heightened as to their meaning to life? What kind of person, in relationship with the *other*, is he, or she, who has achieved freedom? Or is *mokṣha* a going beyond *all* relationships, beyond all ties and human bonds? Or, in that state, are they actually not repudiated but only perceived differently, away from the narrowness of their limits? These questions are raised in the *Mahābhārata* again and again, in different contexts, in the process of reflecting upon *mokṣha* as human freedom, the ultimate end of life. They are to be found in the *Vana-parva*, in the *Anushāsana-parva*, in the *Shānti-parva*, and in the *Āshvamedhika-parva*.

The question of human freedom is seen in yet another light. Most of human drama takes place between *the opposites* of every kind—birth and death, pleasure and pain, attraction and repulsion, happiness and suffering,

prosperity and adversity, confusion and clarity, gain and loss, laughter and tears, joy and sorrow, success and failure, praise and condemnation, coming together and parting. If man is not to be a dangling man between one and the other, dangling perpetually, then he must seek freedom from the workings of the opposites. It is a necessity for ordinary human sanity as well. The *Mahābhārata* takes up this question in its concrete expressions in human living in the afore-mentioned *parva*-s.

But *is* man truly free? Is a person free to determine what he, or she, shall be? Or does some other force, over and above the individual, govern a person's destiny? Why do things happen the way they happen, or why do they not happen the way they *should* happen, given the appropriate conditions of their happening? This raises the familiar question concerning *free will vs determinism*, which, in its essence, is the question of causality. And this is not some question of abstract philosophy, but is intimately related to every person's life. The *Mahābhārata* throughout has this as one of its fundamental concerns: *karma* or *daiva*? Human endeavour *or* fate? Reflections on *kāla*, time, as the force which determines a person's changing fortunes, and the attitude that one can accordingly adopt towards the events of one's life, form another substantial part of the *Mahābhārata*. The problem of causality remains unresolved, as it must, by its very nature; but, the *Mahābhārata* suggests, it need not lead to moral paralysis of the will. This subject is spread throughout the *Mahābhārata*, in the context of one human situation or another, but is discussed in a more concentrated form in the *Ādi-parva*, in the *Udyoga-parva*, in the *Vana-parva*, in the *Anushāsana-parva*, and in the *Shānti-parva*.

Even if predeterminism was to be acknowledged, in whatever degree, as that which conditions human life, the question would still remain: *who*, or *what*, determines in advance how things shall be? Is it Time that is the cause of every event, the changing Time explaining the changing circumstances of one's life? Or is it human effort, individual and collective? In any case, on what basis is there predeterminism? Does it have rationality, the human mind can grasp and come to terms with it thereby, or is it capricious and arbitrary, wrapped up in a mystery beyond human reach? Predeterminism may still be *self-determinism*, which the *Mahābhārata* explores systematically, in its application to the individual and collective life. For the question of *responsibility* is at all times inseparably connected with one's own acts, *karma*, as being ultimately the determining factor in what one makes of oneself. The question of *the causality of karma*, which

in essence is self-determinism, remains throughout a central concern of the *Mahābhārata*, and is examined from very many different angles in the afore-mentioned *parva*-s.

Belief in *rebirth* arises from the mechanism of *karma*; for not all ‘acts’ fructify during one lifetime, although a great many acts do. Even among the latter, some take longer to come to fruition than do others. Every *karma*, individual or collective, starts its own logic; and once set up the logic of *karma* must work itself out. This gives rise to very many other questions: the relation between divine grace and the inexorable logic of *karma*, for example; or the relation between compassion and another’s *karma*, as another example. In the domain of *karma*, is there place for grace? Is there in it any reprieve? Or is there in the logic of *karma* neither grace nor reprieve, and does one stand totally alone? Besides, there is the universally seen puzzle that those who are good suffer and those who are wicked flourish. If all that about *karma* is true, how is *this* disparity to be explained? These questions occupy the *Mahābhārata* from the beginning to the end.

There is, moreover, *the question of history and meaning*. This is explored in the *Mahābhārata* at many different levels. *Kāla*, ‘time’, in which everything originates and is destroyed, the determining factor of one’s destiny, is not the historical ‘time’. Neither is it the ‘time’ that is physically measured. It is a force, say, akin to God, in which originate all that *is* and also all that *is not*. It is the ultimate cause of all happenings. At another level, *kāla*, ‘time’, is a measure of appropriateness. It is combined with *desha* and *pātra*, ‘place’ and ‘the person concerned’. These three, *desha*, *kāla* and *pātra*, that is, ‘the proper place’, ‘the proper time’, and ‘the proper person’, determine the appropriateness of an act, and thus its *meaning*. In other words, they determine the *context*, in which a person lives and has his, or her, being; and meaning lies in context. At still another level, ‘time’ as *history* is examined as giving substance to one’s life. The three attributes of history, the ‘past’, the ‘present’ and the ‘future’, and one’s relationship with them as one’s relationship with one’s self, constitutes one of the subjects of the inquiry into the human condition. At the same time, acknowledging the power of *kāla* in different forms, the *Mahābhārata* raises the question: *am I my history alone?* Is ‘context’ all that there is to ‘meaning’? And with that, the inquiry moves on to a different plane—that of the relationship between history and its transcending, between the eternal and the transient, *nitya* and *anitya*, as the substance of life and relationships. All these questions are to be found throughout the *Mahābhārata*.

A very large part of the *Mahābhārata* is concerned with *danda*, ‘governance’; in other words, with *rāja-dharma*, or with the duties of the State towards the people. ‘What is governance? What is it like? What are its forms? What is it based on? What is its purpose? What is its origin? What is its structure?’ In the course of this inquiry, very many other questions naturally arise, for example, the question concerning *nyāya*, justice, which has the meaning both of *law* and *justice*. The other question is, to take another example, about the relationship between *ends* and *means*. Can the ends justify the means? All these questions are taken up in a thoroughgoing discussion on *dharma* as the foundation of law and governance, which are instruments of regulating human relationships, one’s relationships with the *other*. But governance is not by an external force, the State, alone, but by one’s self in the first place. Self-governance is the best, in the absence of which even the force of the State will eventually not be able to govern. *Dharma* as law is self-regulation, in relation both to one’s self and to the *other*. These questions make up the main part of the *Shānti-parva*, but are to be found no less in the *Ādi-parva*, the *Udyoga-parva*, the *Vana-parva*, and the *Anushāsana-parva*.

The method in the inquiry

If we cast a quick look at the history of thought, especially in the West, we can see that, when systematised into an *ism*, the various explanations of the human condition had fiercely rejected each other. The rationalism of eighteenth-century Enlightenment rejected faith and tradition, and therefore all religions, not just Christianity. Romanticism rejected the Enlightenment. Utilitarianism and psycho-analysis rejected romanticism. Existentialism rejected them all, although there were two or three Christian existentialists, like Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel and Jaspers. Marxism, a child of the Enlightenment, rejected romanticism, liberal individualism, nationalism, and much of existentialism as well. There has been, in the history of Western philosophy, a continuing war between rationalism and empiricism, and between idealism and realism, other *isms* aligning themselves with the one or the other. Positivism rejected moral statements as subjectivism and also most of metaphysics as nonsense in a literal sense. Science rejected the mystical; and mysticism rejected science. Objectivism despises all forms of relativism; and relativism has tried to show that objectivism, especially in science, is an intellectual myth. Materialism

rejected spiritualism as emotional froth; and spiritualism looked upon materialism as base and ignoble. The universal has been defined in such a way as to remove all particularities from it: there has been, therefore, a war between the assumed universalism of the Enlightenment idea of history and the visible particularities of human life. That soon gave rise to the claims of regionalism and of nationalism. And then, in turn, it became regionalism vs nationalism, and nationalism vs universalism. And Man has been set against Nature.

But, although fiercely rejecting each other, all these *isms* have one thing in common—a logic which fragments human attributes into irreconcilable polarities, and then assumes that *either* the one *or* the other is *the* reality, and constructs its world view wholly on that, or the logic of *either/or*.

What distinguishes the *Mahābhārata* is the method it follows in exploring these human questions. The answers to them in other traditions, religious or philosophical, come from either the divine revelation, or from the definitions that are set up, and from the presuppositions that surround them and are held true *a priori*. But that also means that if one's critical faculties remain unconvinced by what the divine revelation, different anyway in different religions, says about the human condition, then one has to seek answers to them somewhere else. And by now it is undeniable that the answers to them, when they came from the arbitrary definitions and presuppositions of philosophical systems, or from what is called scientific method, were so fragmented that, true in some measure, they falsified human reality in its totality. The definitions of *history*, and the presuppositions about it, offer one example. When human material would not respond to those definitions, then that material would either be dismissed, or would be forced somehow into the mould of those definitions, both leading to untruth. The utilitarian definitions of *pleasure* and *pain* offer yet another example, which, open always to serious questions as ethical or psychological theory, had very nearly devastated the lives of a great many people.

The *Upanishad*-s had, in a most revolutionary shift, moved the human mind away from the fearful worship of many 'gods', which were the elements of Nature. The focus of their inquiry became, instead, that one reality, *Brahman*, which pervades the universe and is manifest also in one's self, the *ātman*. The emphasis now was on what is within and its unity with the outside world. The *Mahābhārata* took another great leap forward; it became an inquiry into the nature of 'self' in relation with the *other*. Since

life is evidently a system of relationships, personal and social, it became an inquiry into what sustains them, their order, or *dharma*, and what destroys them, their *a-dharma*, disorder. Human living, vastly varied and infinitely complex, was the natural material of that inquiry.

The inquiry revolves around the self and the *other*. It begins with the evident fact that, in the first place, one has a relationship with one's self, with one's physical body, desires, hopes, fears, and search for meaning. And one has at the same time a relationship with the *other*. The two constitute the indivisible unity of life. Thus, one's relationship with one's self and with the *other* is the central concern of the *Mahābhārata*. It is around this issue that every parable in it revolves, with which every discussion begins and ends, and it is in it that the philosophical and the political find their ultimate ethical ground.

The *Mahābhārata* shows that it is not until one's relationship with one's self is right that one's relationship with the *other* can be right, and the two being inseparable, it is by achieving a right relationship with the *other* that one comes to one's self, fulfilled. Disturbed in my relationship with myself, I will be disturbed in my relationship with everyone else. Therefore, self-understanding is an essential condition of understanding the *other*. The two are inseparable.

But what is the *right* ordering of one's life and relationships? What criteria will determine what a 'right relationship' is? And who will decide what those criteria are? How are these questions to be answered without either taking them into the bottomless pit of philosophic abstractions or dispersing them into empty moralising? The *Mahābhārata* shows that the answers lie in the rhythms of man's own being. Any view of the ordering of life and relationships, if it is to have a universal meaning, must be derived from life itself, from the rhythms of life, and not be something in which the proof of what you want to prove is already provided. Hence, the method it follows is inherent in life itself; it is not an artificial construct of the mind. This puts the *Mahābhārata* above every school of philosophical and political theory. In this respect, as in many others, the *Mahābhārata* stands distinctly apart from all systems of philosophy. What distinguishes it is its *method* of reflecting upon life and relationships. The following are the main characteristics of that method. They are manifest throughout that work as:

1. Every philosophical school in India had first developed its particular view of *ātman*, Self, or the denial, as in Buddhism, that any such entity exists. Their distinct ethical and spiritual disciplines were based primarily on

that. But their metaphysical positions hardly related to the everyday life and its puzzling complexities. Neither did they throw any great light on how one can understand who one is in his, or her, specific individuality; placed in his, or her, specific situation; with specific relationships; each with his, or her, specific temperament, inclination, desires, fears, and joys. The big ‘self’ of Indian philosophy swallowed the small ‘self’ of the individual. The understanding of the ‘Self’ did not necessarily lead to self-understanding. Therefore, the *Mahābhārata* takes up self-understanding, or self-knowledge, not in the shadow of the big ‘Self’ but in relation to concrete situations and contexts through which one lives one’s life. However, while the small ‘self’ must not be swallowed by the big ‘Self’, the *Mahābhārata* shows, too, that the particularity of the former can be understood only in terms that go beyond the particular. The personal is best understood by understanding the human issues that go beyond the personal.

2. There is in the *Mahābhārata* no dichotomy between the particular and the universal. There is only the demonstration that just as there can be the tyranny of the particular and the specific when separated from the universal, there is also the tyranny of the universal when it is removed from its domain the particular altogether. The tyranny of the transcendent can be as much as the tyranny of the given.
3. The *Mahābhārata* does not base its understanding of human life on divine revelation or on philosophic presuppositions *a priori*. Neither does it ask for the definitions of things but for their *lakṣaṇa*, attributes, by which a thing is known, is recognised. That is how the discussions concerning *dharma* and truth proceed, enumerating their *lakṣaṇa*-s, their attributes, by which they are known, or by which they become manifest. However complex the discussion about them, they invariably are connected with the simple question as to how they are reflected in one’s relationship with one’s self and with the *other*. Likewise the question is not of the definition, say, of ‘happiness’, but: what is a happy person like, or what is an unhappy person like, in relation to himself, or herself, and in relation to the *other*? Similarly, not the definition of ‘love’, but the *lakṣaṇa*-s of love manifest in one’s life by which a loving person is recognised. This applies in the *Mahābhārata* equally to that most prized state, *mokṣha*, supreme freedom. In other systems of philosophy, *mokṣha* is squeezed to death by all kinds of intricacies

and speculations; the *Mahābhārata* only asks: what is a free person like in his, or her, relationships? What are his, or her, attributes by which he, or she, can be recognised? To define a thing is to set its boundary, which is the definition of ‘definition’. But boundaries are set arbitrarily, which explains how empirical facts often upset definitions completely. Life is so diverse and complex that no aspect of it can be limited to the boundaries of definitions without leading to untruth. However, this does *not* mean that there are no boundaries or limits whatsoever, and that all things can mean everything, in which case nothing will mean anything in particular. What the *Mahābhārata* suggests is that these boundaries and limits cannot be conceptual, for life is not limited to concepts, nor is it bound by them. Thus, for example, ‘truth’ is not a *concept*. It is the foundation of life and relationships; and *they* would suggest, and not some arbitrary definition of it, what truth is.

4. Human life, from the beginning to the end, being demonstrably a system of relations, whatever naturally binds them is to be understood *relationally*. Thus, throughout the *Mahābhārata*, ‘*dharma*’, ‘truth’, ‘justice’, ‘law’, ‘governance’, ‘wealth’, ‘sexual happiness’, ‘freedom’, and everything else, even the meaning of ‘death’, are shown to be naturally relational. They are that in the sense that none of them can breathe except in relation with the rest. They are relational in the sense that they do not stand alone as ‘ideas’ or ‘concepts’; they are woven intimately with the relation of the self with the self and of the self with the *other*. Self-understanding and understanding the *other* will have no meaning without them, and they will be empty without *them*.
5. The *Mahābhārata* demonstrates the interrelated nature of the attributes of human personality. In that, it carries forward the method in the *Upanishad*-s by exploring the workings of the body and the mind and of the desire that permeates them. It demonstrates that each human attribute has its own place and value, but that each can be meaningful only in its relation with the rest. Fragment one from the rest and assign it an overriding value—to the pursuit of pleasure, for example—and it soon turns, as it must, into its own negation, which is a state of violence to one’s self. The violence in the outside world is a natural extension of it.
6. The *Mahābhārata* shows that human attributes form a natural unity, their wholeness. Perceiving them wrongly, to fragment any one of

them from the rest, and place upon it either too great a value or too little, is to invite disorder, *adharmā*, and do violence to one's self, from which arises the violence to the *other*. The *Mahābhārata* demonstrates this in a systematic manner. To disrespect self-interest, sexual energy, desire for material prosperity, or the more fundamental desire for pleasure, is to invite violence to one's self. But their idolatry invites even greater violence. In one case, the violence is to the individual and to his relationships; in the other case, because it enters economic and political thought and becomes an ideology, the violence is collective and extensive. The question is one of knowing the true place of everything in the scheme of human life. To value too greatly or too little a particular human attribute in its relation to the rest is to disintegrate the natural wholeness of human personality. To value the material over the spiritual, or the spiritual over the material, the transient over the eternal, or the eternal over the transient, the body over the mind, or the mind over the body, the individual over the society, or the society over the individual, the self over the *other*, or the *other* over the self, is to create conflicts both within one's self and between one's self and the rest of the world.

7. The direction the *Mahābhārata* takes is a continuation of the one that the *Upanishad*-s had taken. The latter had broken away from vedic ritualism and its belief in the magical efficacy of 'acts', and had turned human attention to the *inwardness* of the self instead. The *Mahābhārata* is even more steadfast on that path. The vedic idea of *ṛta*, the cosmic order out there, is replaced with the idea of *dharma* as the foundation of life. The *yajña* or sacrificial act is replaced with self-understanding. Gaining *punya*, merit, is replaced with giving and sharing with no eye on 'reward'. *Tapas* or austerity is given an inward, ethical meaning. *Tīrtha* or pilgrimage is not to some geographical place but to one's inner self in relation with the *other*. Thus *dayā* or kindness, or compassion is a *tīrtha*. The focus radically shifts from 'acts' to relationships. The *Mahābhārata* radically changes the meaning of *yajña*, *tapas*, *karma*, and *tīrtha*; and in making them relational, it gives them a deeply ethical meaning. The word *ṛta* is heard only rarely, and *dharma* becomes the dominant sound. The chanting of *mantras* is replaced with the sound of *inquiry* into the foundations of the relationships of the self with the self and of the self with the *other*.

8. One of the most significant contributions of the *Upanishad*-s had been that in the search for the knowledge of reality, no one proposition about reality could ever be a complete statement about it. Hence their suggestion that, to every statement concerning the nature of reality, the word *neti* should be added—and repeated twice. Hence the famous upanishadic discipline—*neti neti*. Unfortunately, the word ‘*neti*’ has *always* been translated wrongly as ‘*not this, not this,*’ which completely misses its proper meaning. Composed of two words *na+iti*, it clearly means ‘*not yet the end*’, ‘*not yet complete*’. *Neti* does *not* mean ‘*not this*’, but ‘*not this alone*’. *Something more remains to be said*. In its inquiry into the human condition, the *Mahābhārata* applies this discipline of *neti neti*, ‘it is not this *alone*: it is not this *alone*’, even more rigorously. The discipline of *neti neti* is quite as much an ethical discipline in the service of truth as it is an intellectual discipline in the service of knowledge.
9. The *Mahābhārata* further shows, as an integral part of its method, that life is to be understood, and lived, paradoxically; for human life is paradoxical. Reality is composed of opposites; and they are related in a way that to assert the one is to assert its opposite as well. The paradox of *having* is that the more one has the greater is one’s discontent. The paradox of *pleasure* is that self-control is the very first condition of pleasure; the pleasure that is unrestrained kills itself. The paradox of *intimacy* is that distance is the first condition of intimacy; the intimacy in which there is no distance turns very soon either into resentment or even into hatred. The paradox of *sexual pleasure* is that all those factors which create sexual pleasure and sexual happiness lie outside sexuality. The paradox of *self-interest* is that the only way of serving one’s interest is to serve the interest of the *other*, that is to say, the pleasure and the happiness of the other is an essential condition of one’s own pleasure and happiness. The paradox of the *self* is that without the *other*, the self will be inconceivable. The paradox of *language* is that silence is its highest function. And there is the paradox of *limits*, which consists in the fact that *one becomes aware of one’s limits only by transgressing them*; there is no known way by which one can know one’s limits in advance. Above all, there is the paradox of *life* itself, which consists in the fact, even biological, but emotional and spiritual equally, that it is by *dying* that life is. One is impossible without the other.

10. Therefore, the *Mahābhārata* systematically confronts one reality with another, one truth with another, when one is clearly the opposite of the other, but both are manifest in life simultaneously. For example, the necessity of *kshmā*, forgiveness and reconciliation, is shown to be fundamental to human relationships, and is spoken of in the highest terms, which are also lyrical. But the opposite truth is also brought up at the same time: that forgiveness is almost always interpreted as a sign of one's weakness. To forgive *always* is to invite further offence and disrespect. And this is demonstrated in as forceful a language as the necessity of forgiveness is. Similarly, the necessity of *ahimsā*, not-violence, as another foundation of life is discussed side by side with the opposite truth, that 'life feeds on life', and that there are situations, moreover, where violence is quite as necessary. This may appear to be confusing, especially when the opposing truths are stated equally forcefully, and there is no denying either of them. But to state only the necessity of forgiveness, or of not-violence, is to turn it into empty moralising, however noble it may sound, and will leave one still confused in the face of situations where forgiveness doesn't help, and violence may be a just necessity, to take only two examples. It is when the opposing truth has also been taken into account that a discourse will keep close to human realities. To state only one side of the truth may create a sense of clarity, but that clarity would have been achieved at the expense of truth.
11. Towards self-understanding, what has simultaneously to be taken into account is the contrary nature of human desires, leading to self-division and conflicts within one's self. Nobody is wholly a coherent being. The *Mahābhārata* consistently portrays the conflicts within oneself, between the contrary desires which constitute the unending incoherent drama of human relationships, of the self with the self and of the self with the *other*. And although the contrary elements in man's being is a universal theme of life, the way that drama unfolds, and the way in which one resolves conflicts within one's self, or does not resolve them, is the story of every specific character. There is the conflict, to take only one example, between the desire for home, and for all that home means, and also for homelessness, and for its freedom. Both have their force. It is by describing the incoherence of what is contrary, and its disquiet, that the *Mahābhārata* shows how to achieve inner coherence and its quiet.

12. There are conflicts generated within one's self not by contrary desires alone. There are familiar conflicts, besides, between what is right and what is wrong, 'right' and 'wrong' being understood not just in conventional terms of conventional morality; and one makes a choice between the two. I know what is 'right', but I may choose to do what is 'wrong'. But there is yet another area of conflict, which is a conflict not between 'right' and 'wrong' but between 'right' and 'right'. *That* produces moral *dilemma*, of having to make a choice between two equally inviolable duties when they are also in serious conflict with each other. Some moral dilemmas may be mild, some others deeply agonising. By what criteria of conduct can one resolve a dilemma between right and right? The *Mahābhārata* does not pretend that there can be any final answer to the problem of moral dilemma; for every answer would have presupposed what is in question. Then how does one act in the face of a moral dilemma?
13. Every question concerning the human condition begins with a personal question, of a specific person, who seeks to understand his, or her, specific situation, in which he, or she, is. That is because the human condition can be experienced and felt only *in* one's person. For example, injustice, untruth, and violence are experienced by a person. They are not mere concepts; they are experiential. In the process of answering a question that relates to a specific individual, the inquiry then points to a ground that goes beyond the individual and the personal, from which injustice, untruth, and violence arise universally. It is in that light that a person's individual situation is understood. The light spreads over a still larger area as one question naturally leads to another question. The inquiry into the personal leads to the impersonal; but at the end, it returns to the individual, as it began with him, or her.
14. The *Mahābhārata* shows, what is evident everywhere, that human life is lived, not so much on the basis of *thoughts* and *ideas*, but on the basis of *feelings*. *Rāga* and *dvesha*, attraction and repulsion, which dominate human life throughout, are feelings. Love is a feeling, and so is hatred. Some say that hatred is even a stronger feeling than love; hatred occupies a person's inner space far more strongly than love. Friendship and compassion are feelings, just as hostility and cruelty are feelings. Trust is a feeling; distrust is a feeling. Joy is a feeling; sorrow is a feeling, too. Contentment is a feeling, and so is greed. Bondage of

every kind creates feelings. Freedom of every variety is a feeling. Fear is a feeling; freedom from fear is a feeling. Forgiveness is a feeling, as are anger and revenge. Reconciliation is a feeling; continued enmity is a feeling, too. The calm of the one and the burning fire of the other are feelings equally. The quality of one's life will depend on the quality of *feelings* one has towards one's self and towards the *other*. Thus, most questions in the *Mahābhārata*, which lead to a realm that is universal and not confined to the world of an individual, begin nonetheless with the expressions of a person's feelings as regards his, or her, particular situation, even the question concerning truth. The attributes of truth, in being relational, are a matter of feeling as well. And so are the fruits of untruth. The *Mahābhārata* does not, on principle, separate *subject* and *object* into two mutually exclusive domains. Therefore, it shows that *feeling* is not of less importance because it is something *subjective*, and what is subjective is then assumed, *a priori*, to be also confused and muddled. It may be so; but that is not because it is subjective. The 'objective' discussions about objective reality have been no less confused and muddled. There is in the *Mahābhārata* no idolatry of the objective as an *ism*; but neither is there in it the worship of the subjective, as another *ism*. The *Mahābhārata* only repeats, at every turn: the quality of one's life will depend on the quality of *feelings* one has towards one's self and towards the *other*.

15. The *Mahābhārata*'s inquiry is entirely conversational, as it had been in the *Upanishad*-s. The main difference between the two is that whereas, in the *Upanishad*-s, the conversation begins, and ends, mostly with an abstract problem of knowledge, seeking to know the nature of reality, in the *Mahābhārata*, it begins, and ends, with concrete human living in all its complexities. The inquiry into the human questions listed briefly in the preceding chapter proceeds by means of conversations. Some of them are between two scholars. Some of them are between a sage and a king, often in a royal assembly. Some of them are between a housewife and a scholar, or between a scholar and a shopkeeper. At least one of them is between a young boy and a scholar of great repute, in the form of a debate between the two, in the presence of a king. Some of them are between father and son, and between father and daughter, or mother and son, or between brother and brother. Some of them are between friends; and some between those who have nothing but hatred for each

other but address each other nevertheless. Some of them are between the conqueror and the defeated. And many of the conversations are between husband and wife. Some of them are between a man and a woman seeking pleasure. Some of them are between a human and a god, or even between a man and a bird, or between a man and a beast. Some conversations are brief, some long, some are extended over very many days. The longest of all conversations is between the dying Bhishma, lying on his bed of arrows, and Yudhishtira, who would now be king. Conversations take place in every conceivable human situation. They take place as much in a language charged with emotion as in a language calm and detached.

16. A unique characteristic of the *Mahābhārata* is the intellectual and spiritual presence of women. In a great many conversations exploring the human condition, women are present throughout the *Mahābhārata* not as listeners but equally as teachers. They are portrayed, with utmost respect, as teachers of mankind, and in that, there is no self-consciousness, nor is there a trace of condescending concession. Women challenge kings as easily as they challenge scholars, when they feel that they must, to correct either the arrogance of power or the arrogance of learning. One of the most engaging of all conversations in the *Mahābhārata* is between a woman and the Lord of Death, which is as endearing as it is brilliant.
17. The *Mahābhārata* demonstrates that the understanding of order and truth, and of their negation, revolves around ‘speech’, *vāṇī*. The *Upanishad*-s had done likewise, in showing the interrelation between the mind and speech, *vāc*. What the *Mahābhārata* does, unlike the *Upanishad*-s, is to show in a concrete way, with reference always to concrete situations, how in all relationships *vāc*, speech, is central. More than any other school of philosophy, it shows how the ordering of language is an essential part of the language of order.
18. Another aspect of the method in the *Mahābhārata* is concerned itself with the evident fact that all forms of relationships, personal and social, are rooted in history. *Desha* and *kāla*, ‘place’ and ‘time’, are the two coordinates of history. These keep changing with the flow of time. Self-understanding and the knowledge of the other are thus linked with history, *desha* and *kāla*. This is emphasised at every turn. The *Mahābhārata* then

takes another step. It is to show that undoubtedly while every person is located within history, he, or she, is not his, or her, history *alone*. In every act of relating, it is given to man to transcend history—not as any ethical ‘ought’, but as a spiritual necessity, indeed as an emotional necessity of living. People achieve it all the time; they go beyond given contexts and their histories. And that is how the sanity of human living is possible. And that is how friendship and love are still possible. Hence there is in the *Mahābhārata* the simultaneous presence of two languages: *the language of experience* and *the language of transcendence*. They flow into each other. There is neither the idolatry of *history*, nor the empty abstraction of transcendence. Each when separated from the other leads to *anṛta*, untruth, and to its violence, as it always has.



