

An Epic Hindu Perspective on Sacrifice, Non-violence and Abstention from Meat

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Abstract: For the purposes of comparison and discussion, this paper presents an alternative, non-Christian perspective on sacrifice, non-violence and abstention from meat. After providing some historical background, it focuses on two discourses from the thirteenth book of the great Indian epic, the *Mahābhārata*. In these discourses, offered to the king Yudīṣṭhira by the god Bṛhaspati and the dying heroic warrior Bhīṣma, the spiritual importance of non-violence is stressed, yet the ancient Vedic practice of animal sacrifice is also declared to be spiritually edifying. The paper considers whether there is a tension between these two forms of practice, and proposes that, although the text does not straightforwardly confront older Vedic norms, it does represent a transition towards a stronger emphasis on renunciation of worldly desires. This renunciatory spirit is epitomized by abstention from animal flesh.

The religious traditions that are grouped together under the term ‘Hinduism’ have had a long and complicated relationship with principles concerning the treatment of animals. Thus it would be foolhardy to try to provide a comprehensive overview in a single paper. What I intend to do for the most part is to focus on a selection of especially pertinent textual sources and to discuss various implications that they have for a Hindu understanding of sacrifice, non-violence and abstention from meat.

The main text that I want to discuss comes from the great epic poem known as the *Mahābhārata*.² The *Mahābhārata*, as many of you will know, is vast. Its total length extends to around 100,000 verses, divided into eighteen books, several of which comprise over a

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² *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyāsa*, trans. Kisari Mohan Ganguli (originally published between 1883 and 1896 by Bharata Press, Calcutta). Online edition, URL: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/maha/index.htm> (last accessed by me, March 2010).

The Mahabharata in Sanskrit: Parallel Devanagari and Romanization. Online edition derived from electronic files created by Muneo Tokunaga and edited by John D. Smith. URL: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/mbs/index.htm> (last accessed by me, July 2010). Hereafter abbreviated to MBh in footnotes.

hundred chapters each. The part that I'll be focusing on comes from the thirteenth book, which is known as the *Anuśāsana Parvan* or 'Book of teachings'. Before coming to that, however, let me provide a little historical background.

Contextual background

First it will be helpful to say something about the ancient Vedic religion, which constitutes one of the main sources of later Hinduism. Estimates vary widely about when and where the Vedic religion originated, but a few things are generally agreed upon. For instance, that by around 1200 BCE the Vedic religion was prevalent in the north of the Indian subcontinent and that it spread throughout the subcontinent over the several hundred years subsequent to this, becoming intermingled with pre-existing religious traditions in such a way as to eventually produce the colourful and complex mixture that we call Hinduism.

The Vedic religion is so called because its principal teachings and practices were compiled in texts known as Vedas, *veda* meaning, roughly, 'vision' or 'knowledge'. The interesting thing with regard to the treatment of animals is that Vedic religious rituals often included animal sacrifice, and the consumption of animal flesh, including beef, appears to have been commonplace in Vedic society.

One of the ways in which Vedic cosmologies divided up the universe was in terms of the categories of 'eater' and 'eaten' or 'consumer' and 'consumed'. Thus, in the Vedic text known as the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (c. 1000–500 BCE), it is stated that plants and trees are the food of fire (*agni*), water is the food of wind or air (*vāyu*), the moon is the food of the sun (*āditya*), and animals are the food of human beings.³ Commenting on this passage the Sanskrit scholar Brian K. Smith writes that 'Man's power over the animals, and his culinary

³ *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 10.3.4.4, cited by Brian K. Smith, 'Eaters, Food, and Social Hierarchy in Ancient India: A Dietary Guide to a Revolution of Values', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 58 (1990), pp. 177–205, at p. 183. Hierarchies in which animals are classified as food for human beings are not, of course, unique to Vedic culture. Compare, for example, Aristotle, *Politics* 1256b: '... plants exist for the sake of animals and the other animals for the good of man, the domestic species both for his service and for his food, and if not all at all events most of the wild ones for the sake of his food and of his supplies of other kinds, in order that they may furnish him both with clothing and with other appliances' (Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vol. 21, trans. H. Rackham (London: William Heinemann, 1944)).

appreciation of their savoriness, is thus set in a macrocosmic context of alimentary violence ...⁴

In later Hindu traditions, the principle of *ahiṃsā*, which can be translated as ‘non-harming’ or ‘non-violence’, became a generalized ideal, as did a largely or exclusively meat-free diet. Why, we might ask, did this transition from the older Vedic religion occur? Various theories have been suggested, but the most common is that the Vedic religion, which evolved into mainstream Hinduism (often called Brahmanical Hinduism) became increasingly influenced by renouncer traditions. As the French scholar Louis Dumont puts it, ‘vegetarianism forced itself on Hindu society, having begun in the sects of the renouncers, among which are Jainism and Buddhism.’⁵ This remark should be qualified, however, by noting, firstly, that the shift away from meat-consumption appears to have preceded the burgeoning of Jainism and Buddhism in the fourth century BCE, and secondly, that although there were certainly precepts against the slaughter of animals by Buddhist monastics, the acceptance of offerings of meat by such monastics was rarely condemned. Jainism, meanwhile, does appear to have been stricter in these respects.

From 500 or 400 BCE onwards, orthodox Brahmanical texts on social and religious norms, known as Dharma Sūtras and, later, the Dharma Śāstras, placed the principles of non-violence and abstention from meat among the most salient criteria for determining a person’s spiritual purity and hence also his or her social status. As a general rule, the distance of one’s occupation from the killing of humans and animals was indicative of one’s position in the social and cosmic hierarchy – within, that is, the bewilderingly recondite ‘class’ and ‘caste’ systems.

This general rule was made more complicated by two notable facts. Firstly, there was the fact that animal sacrifice continued to play an important role in Hindu religious worship well into the Dharma Śāstra period, and those who performed these sacrifices came from the brāhmaṇa class, which was indisputably regarded as the most spiritually pure of the four main social classes. Secondly, there was the fact that the second-purest class, the kṣatriyas,

⁴ Smith, *ibid.*

⁵ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, trans. Mark Sainsbury (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 149.

comprised rulers and warriors, professions which frequently involve warfare and other forms of violence, and which are also associated with hunting animals for food and sport. These two facts generate an awkward tension that ripples through various traditions of Hinduism, and which manifests from time to time in some central Hindu texts.

The *Anuśāsana Parvan* of the *Mahābhārata*

This is where the *Anuśāsana Parvan* of the *Mahābhārata* becomes especially relevant, for it is among a small number of ancient and highly authoritative Hindu texts that deal in an explicit and relatively sustained manner with the questions of animal sacrifice and eating meat. While I'm doubtful that the text fully resolves the tensions I've noted, it does make some intriguing and significant suggestions.

The *Mahābhārata* as a whole cannot be dated precisely. Its composition is usually situated somewhere between 500 BCE and 500 CE, but it may well contain material from even earlier. The dating of particular books and chapters is no more precise than that of the whole epic, so there's no agreed date to which the thirteenth book, the *Anuśāsana Parvan*, can be assigned. The passages that I'm especially interested in here derive from chapters 114 to 117 of the *Anuśāsana Parvan*, which comprises 168 chapters in total.⁶ These chapters contain dialogues between a king named Yudiṣṭhira and two important teachers. The first of these teachers is a *deva* – a divine being or 'shining one' – whose name, Bṛhaspati, translates roughly as 'Lord of prayer'. The second is the great uncle of Yudiṣṭhira, named Bhīṣma, who raised him along with his four brothers and who is a renowned expert in warfare. Following the central battle of the *Mahābhārata* epic, Bhīṣma now lies dying of numerous arrow wounds, yet is nevertheless able to respond at considerable length to Yudiṣṭhira's requests for guidance.⁷

The guidance that Yudiṣṭhira seeks concerns the relative merits of various forms of spiritual or ethical practice, and he's especially eager to know how to fulfil his *dharma* – that is, his religious and moral duty – in a way that is consistent with traditional norms. In the figures of Bṛhaspati and Bhīṣma we see represented the authority of divine power and

⁶ The chapters range in length from six verses (chapter 13) to 199 verses (chapter 14).

⁷ Bhīṣma participated in the battle on the Kaurava side, who fought *against* Yudiṣṭhira and his Pāṇḍava brothers. He received his fatal injuries from prince Arjuna, the brother of Yudiṣṭhira who is best known for his part in the series of discourses collectively known as the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

ancestral heritage respectively, and the replies that these two figures provide complement one another in interesting ways. Bhīṣma's discourse is longer than that of Bṛhaspati, and contains far more elaboration of the principles of sacrifice and abstention from meat. Bṛhaspati, however, makes some intriguing proposals concerning non-violence more generally, and hence it will be useful to examine his discourse before coming to Bhīṣma's.

Bṛhaspati's discourse

Which is the best form of practice? In his opening question to Bṛhaspati, Yudiṣṭhira lists six forms of spiritual or ethical practice and asks which of them is the best for a person to undertake.⁸ The forms of practice are the following:

- *ahiṃsā*, which, as I noted before, can be translated as non-harming or non-violence;
- *vaidikaṃ karma*, which means the performance of Vedic rituals;
- spiritual meditation or contemplation;
- restraint of the senses;
- performance of austerities or ascetic practice; and
- service to one's teacher (*guru*).

A couple of points are worth noting immediately. Firstly, the second of these practices – the performance of Vedic rituals – may reasonably be assumed to include animal sacrifice, and hence, on the face of it, to be incompatible with the first. By placing *ahiṃsā* and Vedic ritual next to each other like this, the author of the text appears to be inviting consideration of the relation between them. The remaining four practices are relatively uncontroversial by comparison and are certainly not mutually incompatible.

The second noteworthy fact is that most of these forms of practice are traditionally more closely associated with male Hindus belonging to the brāhmaṇa, or priestly, class than to the kṣatriya, or warrior, class to which Yudiṣṭhira belongs. It is those who are relatively aloof from everyday social activities – the brāhmaṇa scholars and priests – who are able to maintain the vow of non-harming; not those whose class position requires them to take up arms in defence of the kingdom. And although wealthy kṣatriyas may sponsor the performance of

⁸ *ahiṃsā vaidikaṃ karma dhyānam indriyaśamyamaḥ | tapo 'tha guruśuśrūṣā kiṃ śreyah puraṣaṃ prati* (MBh 13.114.1).

elaborate Vedic rituals, the performance itself is conducted by brāhmaṇa priests. Similarly, sustained meditative discipline, perhaps involving devotional chanting, along with the withdrawal of attention from sensory objects sits more comfortably within the contours of a brāhmaṇa lifestyle than within those of a kṣatriya. Austerities such as extreme fasting, celibacy, and self-mortification are most typical of ascetics who live outside the mainstream class system, yet they are, again, better suited to the character of a brāhmaṇa than to that of a ruler or warrior, for the latter’s character is traditionally expected to be constituted primarily by energy and passion and only secondarily by purity and equanimity.⁹ Service to one’s teachers is something that warriors can perform as well as brāhmaṇas, though still it is not a form of practice that warriors are *especially* well placed to observe.

In responding to Yudiṣṭhira’s question, the god Bṛhaspati begins by affirming that all six of the aforementioned practices are efficacious ‘doors to *dharma*’, where *dharma* can be understood as the right way to act and live – the way that is in harmony with the cosmic order.¹⁰ He then proceeds to focus almost exclusively on the first, namely *ahiṃsā*, albeit in a way that connects it with broader spiritual themes. In particular, he links it with the relinquishing of personal desire and with the submergence of one’s individuality within a more universal identity.

Non-violence ‘That man’, declares Bṛhaspati, ‘who performs the *dharma* of non-violence to all beings achieves [or fulfils] goodness.’¹¹ This, he adds, requires restraining both desire and aversion,¹² and cultivating a high degree of fellow feeling with all creatures. ‘The man who regards all creatures as his self,’ he continues, ‘suppressing anger and laying aside the rod, achieves *sukha*’,¹³ *sukha* being a term denoting a wide range of positive states of happiness or well-being; it is always at least implicitly the opposite of *duḥkha*, which is suffering, distress, or dissatisfaction.

⁹ See, for example, the commentary of the eighth or ninth century Vedānta philosopher, Śaṅkara, on *Bhagavad Gītā* 18.41, cited by Dermot Killingley, ‘Enjoying the World: Desire (*kāma*) in the *Bhagavadgītā*’, in Julius Lipner (ed.), *The Fruits of Our Desiring: An Enquiry into the Ethics of the Bhagavadgītā for Our Times* (Calgary: Bayeux, 1997), pp. 67–79, at p. 79 n.2.

¹⁰ *sarvāṇy etāni dharmasya pṛthag dvārāṇi sarvaśaḥ* (MBh 13.114.2a).

¹¹ *ahiṃsāpāśrayaṃ dharmam yaḥ sādhayati vai naraḥ* (MBh 13.114.3b).

¹² *kāmakrodhau ca saṃyamya tataḥ siddhim avāpnute* (MBh 13.114.4b).

¹³ *ātmopamaś ca bhūteṣu yo vai bhavati pūruṣaḥ | nyastadaṇḍo jitakrodhaḥ sa pretya sukham edhate* (MBh 13.114.6).

This latter term, *duḥkha*, is frequently used to designate that which is to be escaped from or eradicated according to Hindu soteriology. The salvific goal is a release from the ongoing cycle of births and deaths, which cycle is held to be ineliminably pervaded by *duḥkha*. The ultimate *sukha*, therefore, would obtain only when the spiritual self transcends the wheel of reincarnations. It is thus noteworthy that non-violence and the dissolution of barriers, both ethical and ontological, between oneself and other creatures are conceived as intimately connected with soteriological aspiration and attainment. There is, we might say, a mutual entailment between renunciation of the self and renunciation of violence. As the *Mahābhārata* scholar, Alf Hiltebeitel, observes, ‘*ahiṃsā* bears the ascetic imprint of the *desire* not to kill or harm creatures, which, in its ascetic framework, is a desire to overcome the desire for life.’¹⁴

The question of motivation The motivation for non-violence in epic Hinduism is, then, difficult to characterize straightforwardly. One might be tempted to regard it as instrumental insofar as refraining from violence is viewed as a means to releasing oneself from further suffering. In this respect, the motivation appears to be self-centred rather than other-directed, and hence to preclude the virtues of pity or compassion. But, given that the release from suffering involves a dissolution of one’s very individual selfhood, the motivation can hardly be construed as self-serving. Indeed, the cultivation of non-violence appears to stem from an impulse that many Christians, for example, might see as going too far in the direction of self-abnegation and away from the imperative to love the other *as oneself*.

Br̥haspati seems to allude to the difficulty of understanding the kind of relation to the other that is intended here when he remarks, enigmatically, that ‘[e]ven the gods, who desire a fixed abode, are bewildered at the path of the one who looks upon all creatures as his own self, leaving no trace behind.’¹⁵ The suggestion here is that the gods, like the vast majority of us, desire to retain some sense of differentiation between themselves and others – some ‘fixed abode’ – and cannot comprehend the path of one in whom that desire is absent.

¹⁴ Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader’s Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 203.

¹⁵ *sarvabhūtāt mabhūtasya sarvabhūtāni paśyataḥ | devāpi mārgē muhyanti apadasya padaiṣiṇaḥ* (MBh 13.114.7).

The Golden Rule? The immediately succeeding verse is one that some translators have been tempted to read as expressing the Golden Rule, whose classical formulation we find in Christ's injunction to 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'¹⁶ Kisari Mohan Ganguli's translation from the 1890s has been especially influential in this regard, for he renders the verse as follows:

One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to one's own self. This, in brief, is the rule of Righteousness [*dharma*]. One by acting in a different way by yielding to desire, becomes guilty of unrighteousness.¹⁷

The aptness of this translation is, however, contentious, as can be seen if we compare it with an alternative one by Christopher Chapple:

From not holding the other
as opposite [to] oneself
there is the essence of dharma;
the other proceeds (as other) due to desire.¹⁸

In this latter rendering, the emphasis is not obviously ethical; or, at least, the practical implications of the verse are left underdeveloped. Instead, what is contended is that the very perception of a distinction between self and other can be resisted, and that it is in the negation of this distinction that *dharma* – rectitude, orderliness, harmony – consists. Exactly what modes of action are expected to follow from the diminution and ultimate elimination of that *perceptual*, or *perceived ontological*, distinction are left unstated.

Given that the verse under discussion occurs within the context of an elaboration of the practice of non-violence, it may seem reasonable to assume that there is a strong implicit link between ontology and ethics here. That is, one may be liable to assume that the injunction to subsume self and other under a unitary ontological principle entails the extinguishing of animosity between individuals, which in turn entails the cessation of both actual and possible

¹⁶ Cf. Matthew 7:12, 22:39.

¹⁷ Ganguli, p. 235. In Sanskrit, the verse reads: *na tatparasya saṃdadyāt pratikūlaṃ yad ātmanaḥ | eṣa saṃkṣepato dharmāḥ kāmād anyāḥ pravartate* (MBh 13.114.8).

¹⁸ Christopher Key Chapple, *Nonviolence to Animals, Earth, and Self in Asian Traditions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 80.

violence. This may well be so, and it is certainly one legitimate reading of the text – a reading that has, as we have seen, guided the way in which Ganguli, for one, translates the verse.

An equally legitimate reading, however, would view the injunction to dissolve the distinction between self and other as calling for a radical revision of our ordinary concepts, including our ethical concepts, such that the very notion of what counts as a violent act, and hence the very meaning of violence itself, is transformed. A poignant precedent for such a transformation of concepts is provided in the discourse between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna that occurs in the earlier part of the *Mahābhārata* known as the *Bhagavad Gītā*.¹⁹

Violence and renunciation in the Bhagavad Gītā When the warrior-prince Arjuna, brother of Yudiṣṭhira, questions the wisdom of participating in a fratricidal war, the divine Kṛṣṇa, incarnation of god Viṣṇu, responds not by encouraging him to renounce violence, but by enjoining him to transcend the earth-bound perspective from which death is seen as something terrible and final. Upon realizing that the same eternal and indestructible principle underlies all of us, Kṛṣṇa declares, we will come to see death’s relative insignificance.

At one place the author of the *Gītā* puts into Kṛṣṇa’s mouth a verse from the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, which exclaims that both killing and death are merely apparent: ‘Who believes him a slayer,’ Kṛṣṇa asserts, ‘And who thinks him slain, | Both these understand not: | He slays not, is not slain.’²⁰ The subject of this verse is the eternal self or being that transcends any particular incarnation. From this eternal perspective, it is merely the bodily forms that are destroyed; and since these forms have no intrinsic value, Arjuna ought not to worry that thousands of them are likely to be slaughtered in the impending battle. The *Gītā* thus appeals to a unitary ontological principle in order to validate a shift in our conception of killing and death, and does so in a way that may leave us wondering whether ethics has any place in the new conception.

¹⁹ By ‘earlier’, I mean that the *Bhagavad Gītā* appears in a book of the *Mahābhārata* (book number 6, the *Bhīṣma Parvan*) that precedes the *Anuśāsana Parvan*. It does not follow that the text of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is chronologically prior to the *Anuśāsana Parvan*.

²⁰ Trans. Franklin Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1944). Skt: *ya enaṃ vetti hantāraṃ yaś cainaṃ manyate hatam | ubhau tau na vijānīto nāyaṃ hanti na hanyate* (BhG 2.19 / MBh 6.24.19). Cf. *Kaṭha Up.* 1.2.19: *hantā cen manyate hantuṃ hataś cen manyate hatam | ubhau tau na vijānīto nāyaṃ hanti na hanyate* (*The Principal Upaniṣads*, ed. and trans. S. Radhakrishnan (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1953), p. 616).

Without, then, precluding the possibility of reading something at least analogous to the Golden Rule into Br̥haspati's speech in the *Anuśāsana Parvan*, we should be cautious about assuming that this is in fact what is being advocated. The kind of oneness that the text is invoking is not obviously one that involves what we might ordinarily recognize as feelings of compassion, sympathy or empathy, since these feelings *for* or *with* the other appear to presuppose the continuation of a conceptual or ontological distinction between the other and oneself. If one literally takes the other and oneself to be numerically identical, then the possibility of responding to the other as someone with particular needs and interests that transcend one's own is obviated; an ethical vision of solidarity and responsiveness to one's fellow beings, in which one is alert to their vulnerability and mortality, is replaced by a mystical vision in which individuals are merged into an all-encompassing singularity, which is invulnerable and immortal.

This mystical reading is supported by the next verse in the text, where Br̥haspati states that 'the person who sees everything as the self' finds no difference between 'giving and receiving, pleasure and distress, agreeableness and disagreeableness'. Such a person, it is said, 'goes to *samādhi*',²¹ this being a term commonly used in the context of yogic meditation to denote a state of extreme mental stillness. In the classical meditation system described in the *Yoga Sūtra*, for example, *samādhi* is identified as the culminating stage in a progressive deepening of meditative absorption, and is achieved when the distinction between the object of meditation and the meditator's own mind or awareness collapses.²² Such a state cannot be one in which one's ethical *responsiveness* becomes heightened, since it is, on the contrary, a state in which binary differentiations between such things as pleasure and pain are overcome and one's mind and body are inactive. It is, one might say, a state of superlative non-violence, but only in the negative sense that, insofar as it entails doing nothing at all, it cannot involve harming anyone or anything.

²¹ *pratyākhyāne ca dāne ca sukhaduḥkhe priyāpriye | ātmaupamyena puruṣaḥ samādhim adhigacchati* (MBh 13.114.9).

²² See, especially, *Yoga Sūtra* 3.3: 'That [state of consciousness], shining forth as the object alone, as though devoid of its own form, is *samādhi*' (*tad eva arthamātranirbhāsaṃ svarūpaśūnyam iva samādhiḥ*). My translation, from the Sanskrit text in Bangali Baba, *Yogasūtra of Patañjali, with the Commentary of Vyāsa* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1976), p. 66.

In order to examine these issues surrounding the meaning of non-violence in the *Mahābhārata* further, I will now turn to the exchange between Yudiṣṭhira and Bhīṣma, which immediately follows that between Yudiṣṭhira and Br̥haspati. It is there that we find, among other things, a strengthening of the connection between non-violence and abstention from meat, but also a problematizing of that connection.

Bhīṣma's discourse

The bed of arrows When Yudiṣṭhira comes to his grandsire Bhīṣma for further advice, the latter is lying on his deathbed, shot with arrows from prince Arjuna's bow. Given Bhīṣma's status as a great warrior, it may be surprising that Yudiṣṭhira turns to him for instruction on how someone who has committed violence 'in thought, speech and deed' may free himself from the misery or *duḥkha* that ensues from such actions.²³ Yet Bhīṣma at the end of his life ably plays the role of wise sage. Lying on what is described as a bed of arrows, his image constitutes an extreme version of the ascetic who lies upon a bed of nails, or the martyr pierced by the arrows of a deluded and merciless world. Here I will just pick out for consideration a selection of the most interesting remarks from his discourse.

Importance of non-violence To illustrate the importance of *ahiṃsā* Bhīṣma uses two animal-related images. First he says (not altogether accurately) that, just as four-legged animals are unable to stand on only three legs, so the dharma, the duty, of non-violence can stand only if all four of its feet are in place.²⁴ From the context of the remark, it appears that, echoing the form of Yudiṣṭhira's question, three of these feet are, respectively, non-violence in thought, word and deed. What the fourth foot or mode of non-violence consists in remains unclear. Later in the discourse, an example of violence in thought is provided when Bhīṣma remarks that one who approves of slaughter is 'stained with sin' even as is the one who actually performs it.²⁵ Bhīṣma also includes purchasing meat as a form of violence.²⁶

²³ *ṛṣayo brāhmaṇā devāḥ praśaṃsanti mahāmate lahiṃsā lakṣaṇaṃ dharmam veda prāmāṇya darśanāt | karmaṇā manujaḥ kurvan hiṃsām pāṛthiva sattama | vācā ca manasā caiva katham duḥkhāt pramucyate* (MBh 13.115.2–3).

²⁴ *yathā sarvaś catuṣpādas tribhiḥ pādair na tiṣṭhati | tathaiveyaṃ mahīpāla procyate kāraṇais tribhiḥ* (MBh 13.115.5).

²⁵ *akhādann anumodaṃś ca bhāvadoṣeṇa mānavāḥ | yo 'numanyeta hantavyaṃ so 'pi doṣeṇa lipyate* (MBh 13.116.39).

The second animal-related image that Bhīṣma uses is that of an elephant's footprint: just as it engulfs those of all other animals, so *ahiṃsā* encompasses all other dharmas or forms of righteousness.²⁷ On this account, then, non-violence is the highest duty, yet it remains to be seen exactly what it amounts to in practical terms.

Abstention from meat Interestingly, having emphasized the ethical centrality of non-violence, Bhīṣma's exposition of what it involves begins with reference to the abstention from meat. He characterizes such abstention as a kind of spiritually purifying austerity (*tapas*), noting that the flesh of animals is like that of one's own son, and that, just as the union of mother and father produce offspring, so the union of flavour and tongue produces conative attachment.²⁸ This attachment – to the world and one's own individual life – is conceived as the opposite of spiritual development, which consists in freeing the mind from the desire for sensory gratification; and the desire for the taste of flesh is cited here as epitomizing such attachment.

Bhīṣma questions how those 'slow' or 'stupid' individuals who eat meat will be able to hear the divine music of drums, cymbals and conch-shells,²⁹ this being a reference to the sort of spontaneous sonic experience that is common to traditional Indian descriptions of heightened spiritual awareness.³⁰ At the end of the first part of his discourse Bhīṣma contrasts those who consume meat with those holy individuals who are willing to sacrifice their own flesh to protect that of others, and who thereby go to the divine realm (*diva*).³¹

Animal sacrifice The second part of the dialogue between Yudiṣṭhira and Bhīṣma begins with Yudiṣṭhira asking a series of questions, one of which concerns the vexed issue of the relation between non-violence and the performance of traditional sacrificial rites. He

²⁶ *yo hi khādati māṃsāni prāṇināṃ jīvitārthinām | hatānāṃ vā mṛtānāṃ vā yathā hantā tathaiva saḥ* (MBh 13.116.37).

²⁷ *yathā nāgapade 'nyāni padāni padagāminām | sarvāṇy evāpidhīyante padajātāni kauñjare levaṃ lokeṣv ahiṃsā tu nirdiṣṭā dharmataḥ parā* (MBh 13.115.6).

²⁸ *putramāṃsopamaṃ jānan khādate yo vicetanaḥ | mātā piṭṛsamāyoge putratvaṃ jāyate yathā | rasaṃ ca prati jihvāyāḥ prajñānaṃ jāyate tathā | tathā śāstreṣu niyataṃ rāgo hy āsvāditād bhavet* (MBh 13.115.10–11).

²⁹ *bherīśaṅkhamṛdaṅgādyāṃs tantrī śabdāṃś ca puṣkalān | niṣevīṣyanti vai mandā māṃsabhakṣāḥ kathaṃ narāḥ* (MBh 13.115.13).

³⁰ See, e.g., Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), esp. ch. 3.

³¹ *jīvitam hi parityajya bahavaḥ sādhave janāḥ | svamāṃsaiḥ paramāṃsāni paripālya divaṃ gatāḥ* (MBh 13.115.15).

especially wants to know how meat offerings, which are intrinsic to the performance of the *śrāddha* ceremonies designed to honour the ancestral fathers (*pitṛs*), may be procured without violating the prohibition against killing.³² Bhīṣma's initial response is to declare the killing of animals for sacrificial purposes to be laudable. He specifically mentions the horse sacrifice (*aśvamedha*), noting that the monthly performance of this ritual is equivalent (*sama*) to the renunciation of meat and honey.³³

Six verses later he repeats that these two forms of discipline are equivalent, adding that one who abstains from meat is, or becomes, one who 'always performs sacrifices, always offers gifts, always undergoes austerities.'³⁴ The implication here is, again, that there is, in religious terms, an equivalence between these things. These responses echo the reply that Bṛhaspati gave to Yudiṣṭhira when asked which of six forms of ethico-religious practice is most meritorious. Of those six forms, there is no mention in Bhīṣma's discourse of meditation or the restraint of the senses, but Bhīṣma's suggestion of an equivalence between abstention from meat, ritual sacrifice, gift-giving, and austerities reiterates Bṛhaspati's pronouncement that each of these practices is a 'doorway to *dharma*'.

The proposal that animal sacrifice is consistent with *ahiṃsā* is one that extends back at least as far as the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, which is usually dated to the seventh or sixth century BCE.³⁵ At the very end of that text we read that 'he who centres all the senses in the self, who practises non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) to all beings except at holy places, who behaves thus throughout his life reaches the *Brahma*-world and does not return here again, and does not return here again.'³⁶ The implication here is that harming animals is acceptable provided it is carried out as part of a ritual act at a sacred location (*tīrtha*). It is interesting that there appears

³² *ahiṃsā paramo dharma ity uktaṃ bahuśas tvayā | śrāddheṣu ca bhavān āha pitṛn āmiṣa kāṅkṣiṇaḥ | māṃsair bahuvīdhaiḥ proktas tvayā śrāddhavidhiḥ purā | ahatvā ca kuto māṃsam evam etad virudhyate* (MBh 13.116.1–2).

³³ *yo yajetāśvamedhena māsi māsi yatavrataḥ | varjayen madhu māṃsaṃ ca samam etad yudhiṣṭhira* (MBh 13.116.10).

³⁴ *māsi māsy aśvamedhena yo yajeta śataṃ samāḥ | na khādati ca yo māṃsaṃ samam etan mataṃ mama | sadā yajati satreṇa sadā dānaṃ prayacchati | sadā tapasvī bhavati madhu māṃsasya varjanāt* (MBh 13.116.16–17).

³⁵ See, e.g., Patrick Olivelle (trans.), *Upaniṣads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. xxxvi.

³⁶ My translation and underlining, from the Sanskrit text in *The Principal Upaniṣads*, ed. and trans. S. Radhakrishnan (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1953), pp. 593–648. In Sanskrit the verse reads: *ātmani sarvendriyāṇi sampratiṣṭhāpya | ahiṃsan sarvabhūtāny anyatra tīrthebhyaḥ | sa khalv evaṃ vartayan yāvad āyuṣaṃ brahmalokam abhisampadyate | na ca punar āvartate na ca punar āvartate* (Ch.Up. 8.15.1).

to be an acknowledgement that ritual slaughter does indeed *harm* the animal; the claim is not that, by virtue of being carried out at a holy site, the killing of an animal ceases to be a harmful act: rather, it is that the harming of animals is permissible at holy sites.

A subsequent passage in Bhīṣma's discourse with Yudīṣṭhira in the *Mahābhārata*, though endorsing the view that killing is permissible in those cases where the sacrificial animal has been ritually consecrated, maintains that such acts of killing are not entirely free from fault.³⁷ To do otherwise, Bhīṣma adds, is to defile oneself,³⁸ although it isn't entirely clear from the context whether, by 'doing otherwise', he means merely refraining from performing the sacrifice or, alternatively, actively killing animals that have not been consecrated. In any case, there appears to be an admission in this passage, as in the one from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, that, even under the conditions of religious ritual, the killing of an animal is not a spiritually or ethically pure act; we might, perhaps, say that it involves a compromise between the principle of *ahiṃsā* on the one hand and the commitment to honour the ancestors or the gods on the other.

The notion of purity is complex here, however. For once the animal has been sanctified, its flesh is considered pure, and hence edible without the risk of committing any further impure act. 'Manu himself', writes the author of Bhīṣma's discourse, 'has declared that that which is sanctification by sacred mantras, in accordance with Vedic liturgy, and performed in honour of the fathers (*pitṛs*), is pure (*śuci*)',³⁹ Manu being the primordial legislator of each new cosmic age, the legendary figure to whom is attributed authorship of the *Mānava Dharma Śāstra* or 'Laws of Manu'.⁴⁰ While admitting that consuming unsanctified meat is to behave like a demonic Rakṣasa, Bhīṣma states that no such proscription obtains with respect to ritually purified meat.⁴¹ Later in the discourse, Bhīṣma goes so far as to pronounce that

³⁷ *aprokṣitaṃ vṛthā māṃsaṃ vidhīhīnaṃ na bhakṣayet | bhakṣayan nirayaṃ yāti naro nāsty atra saṃśayaḥ | prokṣitābhyukṣitaṃ māṃsaṃ tathā brāhmaṇa kāmyayā | alpadoṣam ...* (MBh 13.116.42–43).

³⁸ *iha jñeya viparīte tu lipyate* (MBh 13.116.43b).

³⁹ *havir yat saṃskṛtaṃ mantraiḥ prokṣitābhyukṣitaṃ śuci | vedoktena pramāṇena pitṛñāṃ prakriyāsu ca | ato 'nyathā vṛthā māṃsam abhakṣyaṃ manur abravīt* (MBh 13.116.50).

⁴⁰ *The Laws of Manu*, trans. Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith (London: Penguin, 1991).

⁴¹ *asvargyam ayaśasyaṃ ca rakṣovad bharatarṣabha | vidhinā hi narāḥ pūrvam māṃsaṃ rājan abhakṣayan* (MBh 13.116.51). Cf. MBh 13.117.15b: *ato 'nyathā pravṛttānāṃ rākṣaso vidhīr ucyate*

‘animals were created for [the purpose of] sacrifice’, and that this is affirmed in the Vedic teachings, which were directly ‘heard’ by the sages of old.⁴²

Concluding remarks

Notwithstanding, then, the principle of non-violence, upon which both Bṛhaspati and Bhīṣma lay great stress, and Bhīṣma’s emphasis on abstention from meat in his elaboration of that principle, the legitimacy of traditional Vedic sacrifice is not substantially challenged in the *Anuśāsana Parvan*. At least, this is how things appear on the surface. However, by repeatedly placing non-violence and abstention from meat on a level with the performance of sacrifice, the author or authors of the text do effectively dethrone sacrifice from its once privileged status as the highest of all religious acts. This opens up the possibility of reconceptualising sacrifice itself, which reconceptualisation we find carried out to some extent in, for example, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, where, in several passages, an inner or psychological sacrifice is more highly esteemed than the external sacrifice associated with the Vedas.⁴³

Once renunciation of the self – of one’s own desire for worldly grandeur and enjoyment – is conceived as a form of sacrifice at least equivalent in spiritual value to the offering of sanctified animals to the ancestors and gods, the social need for Vedic sacrifice is diminished. Of course, not everyone can withdraw sufficiently from the throng of worldly activity to be able to pursue a path of complete non-violence; and hence it would be misleading to interpret a text such as the *Anuśāsana Parvan* as a subversion of brāhmaṇa authority in spiritual matters. But in the extolling of abstention from meat as a paradigm of non-violent practice, the discourse of Bhīṣma in this text does contribute towards a general transformation of dietary attitudes, according to which the consumption of unsanctified meat is regarded as spiritually polluting. More generally, the *Mahābhārata* and the Dharma Śāstras can be seen as part of a prolonged and multilayered transition period in the history of Hindu social and religious norms, a period in which the prevalence of Vedic ritual diminishes, to be

⁴² *yajñārthe paśavaḥ sṛṣṭā ity api śrūyate śrutih* (MBh 13.117.15a).

⁴³ See, e.g., BhG ch. 9, where it is declared by Kṛṣṇa that those who, knowing the Vedas, make sacrificial offerings to him ‘taste in heaven the divine enjoyments of the gods’ (*aśnanti divyān divi devabhogān*, 9.20), yet those who constantly focus their minds on Kṛṣṇa alone are rewarded with the goal of their aim (9.22); they ‘come to me’ (9.34).

complemented, or in some instances replaced, by a veneration of world-renouncing ideals and by less formally ritualized modes of devotional worship.

This trend away from Vedic ritual practices continued subsequent to the epic period, until, in contemporary Hinduism, sacrificial rites are rarely, if ever, performed on a grand scale, vegetarianism is widespread, and the consumption of beef in particular is virtually universally condemned. Indicative of the general change of mood in contemporary Hinduism is the fact that, when the Vedic fire ritual known as *Agnicayana* was re-enacted in the south Indian state of Kerala in 1975, disputes over the proposed sacrifice of fourteen goats resulted in rice cakes wrapped in banana leaves being used as offerings instead.⁴⁴ Where animal sacrifice is still carried out, it is usually in connection with non-Vedic worship of the Goddess, in her bloodthirsty ferocious forms, such as Durgā or, especially, Kālī. These associations of Goddess-worship with animal sacrifice are complex and fascinating, but our consideration of them must await another occasion.

⁴⁴ See Frits Staal, *Agni: The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar*, Vol. 1 (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1983), p. 18. For critical discussion of Staal's own treatment of the issue, see Richard Schechner, 'Wrestling Against Time: The Performance Aspects of Agni', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 45 (1986), pp. 359–63.