

# Lessons from ‘The Hawk and the Dove’: Reflections on the *Mahābhārata*’s Animal Parables and Ethical Predicaments

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## Introduction

The parable of King Śibi appears both in the *Jātkamālā* (stories chronicling the Buddha’s past lives)<sup>1</sup> and in the epic of the *Mahābhārata*. Both versions of the stories are concerned with the principle of protection and generosity (*dānam*) offered by those who possess power and voice to those who are weak and voiceless. Both versions of the tales have the same narrative structure: In the *Jātkamālā*, the Buddha-in-making, Bodhisattva, tells the story of his past life as King Śibi, whose generosity is tested by the god Indra disguised as a blind old man. In his altered form, Indra asks King Śibi, ‘Both my eyes have been stricken blind. Give me one eye, and live with one yourself.’ Hearing the request, the King offers both eyes instead in order to completely restore the old man’s sight.<sup>2</sup> In the *Mahābhārata*’s ‘Hawk and the Dove’,<sup>3</sup> the god Indra disguises

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<sup>1</sup>Jātaka tales are part of the Pāli Canon’s *Khuddakanikāya*. According to Buddhist scholars, the Canon was formed around the third century BCE. These stories document the Buddha’s past lives, several of which were in animal form, before his birth as *Shakyamuni* Buddha.

<sup>2</sup>J.A.B. van Buitenen (1975) provides a translation and the Pāli Canon references for the *Sivirajācāiryam* (‘The Feet of King Sivi’ [=Śibi], pp. 198–199).

<sup>3</sup>The story appears three times in the *Mahābhārata*, but ‘the oldest of versions seems to be the first one in the *Vana-Parvan*’ (Dange 1969, p. 312). I analyze this version in detail in this paper.

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himself as a Hawk (*syena*) and the god Agni as a Dove (*kapota*) to test if the King Uśīnara (famously known as King Śibi) might be ‘equal to gods’ (*devasamam*). In order to protect the life of a voiceless Dove that has taken shelter on the King’s thigh, the King offers his own flesh to the Hawk. Witnessing the King’s ultimate sacrifice, the gods extol his selfless act as the highest example of generosity.<sup>4</sup>

In each retelling, the moral of the story—the virtue of protection of the refugee—is clear. However, a key feature of the three different versions of the parable in the *Mahābhārata* specifically deserves attention. Namely, why have the gods disguised themselves as animals, not as people, as in the earlier version of the parable in the *Jātkamālā*, in order to demonstrate the moral point? Why do the divinities choose to present themselves as mere animals to test the moral rectitude of the righteous King? What does this say about the nature of the *Mahābhārata*’s ethical system?<sup>5</sup> Of course, animal tales are ubiquitous in both the *Jātkamālā* and the *Mahābhārata*. In the context of the *Mahābhārata*, several studies have explored possible reasons for the presence of animals in a voluminous epic that is a repository of *dharma* ethics (complex rules of moral conduct demonstrated through stories). Broadly, such scholarship has focused on five aspects. First, early scholarship has considered the stories of the *Mahābhārata* as ‘folk tales’ where anthropomorphism and the presence of animals are read as being used to convey moral principles (Dange 1969).<sup>6</sup> Second, animal fables have been regarded, problematically, as a reflection of a so-called primitive mind for which ‘all things of the world—the trees, birds, the beasts etc., were on par with human beings’ (Dange 1969).<sup>7</sup> Third, as some scholars have averred, the *Mahābhārata*, like the *Pañcatantra*, the ancient Indian collection of animal fables, uses animals like ‘similes,’ as ‘talking’ animals make the message easily accessible to ‘children’ and the ‘uneducated’ (In Olivelle 2013, p. 19).<sup>8</sup> Fourth, Patrick Olivelle (2013) has argued that ‘talking’ animal stories are pedagogical tools that ‘carry significant messages, sometimes explicit but more often implicit and below the surface, messages that may be religious, philosophical, or scientific. Walt Disney enterprises prove the point’ (19). Such tales, he argues, can instruct ‘even intelligent and educated adults.’ (Olivelle 2013, p. 19).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in the context of Hindu studies, Olivelle has also highlighted the ideological function of the animal fables in communicating essential Hindu ideas, for example, affirming the notion of *svabhāva* (distinct nature) of various peoples of caste as well as emphasizing inherent nature over nurture and the notion of fate in conflict with human effort. Expanding on Olivelle, I suggest that these underlying messages may also concern the animals themselves that are the characters in these tales—and enable their needs to be communicated. As Wendy Doniger (2005) has asserted, ‘Language is the place from which compassion springs. Now we know that dolphins and whales can talk not only to one another but to us’ (32). Giving speech to animals is an attempt to reduce

<sup>4</sup> This version of the story migrates into Buddhism’s narratives and is depicted in Buddhist cave paintings. Perhaps two versions of the story—Indra as a blind man, and Indra and Agni as a Hawk and a Dove—were both part of Indian oral tradition.

<sup>5</sup> Later illustrations of the Sivi Jataka, however, include the same motif of offering his flesh.

<sup>6</sup> Sadasiv Ambadas Dange (1969) provided a broad survey of animal fables and tales.

<sup>7</sup> Dange gives the opinion of the schools of Maxmuller (*ibid.*, p. xxxvi.)

<sup>8</sup> Stephanie Jamison (2009) observed, ‘that animal tales are used in education when it is directed at children and the uneducated rather than learned’ (as cited in Olivelle, 2013, p. 19).

<sup>9</sup> Contemporary animal activists and eco-critics emphasize the role of stories in communicating the message of animal sentience.

their Otherness, thus securing intimate bonds and relations between humans and animals.<sup>10</sup> The many animal stories in the *Mahābhārata* (such as the Dove in the tale considered here, and the story of King Yudhiṣṭhira and the Dog at the end of the *Mahābhārata*) aim to incite compassion toward animals who are speechless.

These are valid and important contributions to scholarship on animal tales and demonstrate the evolution of thought with regard to human perception of animals in academia more generally. However, in nearly all these readings, anthropocentric concerns dominate. It is important to note that there are some recent studies which provide a more nuanced analysis of issues regarding animals in Indian religious and philosophical texts.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, animals, as they appear in these texts, are read simply as the means through which complex *dharma* ethics are taught or the means through which ideologies are advocated. What has escaped scholarly attention is the manner in which in the *Mahābhārata*, animals not only serve as the means through which philosophical, social, and moral concerns are articulated but are also presented as sentient beings, who can experience pain, have specific physical needs and emotions.

A literal reading of mythical narratives in which gods disguise themselves as animals may construe this representation of animals as reductive. From this perspective, the animal forms serve as tropes to communicate human/god concerns and are, thus, anthropocentric or anthropo-theocentric. However, using animal bodies as tropes does not necessarily mean that this results in a reductive anthropocentric view of the animal. A more nuanced reading of myths invites us to realize that the gods' choice of animal bodies is deliberate, which in turn leads us to analyze how their choice creates a matrix of moral dilemmas in humanity's interaction with nonhuman animals. This concern fits with the historical context, as the manifold narratives of the *Mahābhārata* were being composed at the same time the concepts of *karma* and *punarjanma* (rebirth) in Indic traditions, led by Jain and Buddhist philosophies, were challenging the boundaries between human and nonhuman animals. Not surprisingly, the ethical discourse of the time implicated care for both humans and animals. Registering the animal kingdom into sacred narratives is a way to direct humanity's attention to the unique needs of nonhuman counterparts as well as their shared concerns. What has been overlooked in traditional readings is that the *Mahābhārata*'s ethical system encompasses the entirety of the animal kingdom, and the text's various narrative strategies, even though they overtly concern humans' conduct, provoke questions which resonate with those asked only recently by today's ethologists, ecologists, and philosophers working in the field of animal studies. These questions include: Do animals have emotions? Do they suffer? Do humans have an ethical responsibility toward animals? What dilemmas might humans face when upholding the value of life for human and nonhuman animals alike?

<sup>10</sup> Wendy Doniger (2005) creatively analyzed anthropomorphism ('projecting human qualities upon animals') and zoomorphism (imagining humans as animals) in ancient Indian and Western literature. She argued: 'Anthropomorphism and zoomorphism are two different attempts to reduce otherness between humans and animals, to see the sameness underneath the difference. But sameness, just as difference, may lead to the inhuman treatment of both humans and nonhumans' (p. 34). Philosophers such as DeGrazia (2007) explore the concept of "personhood" with respect to animals that demonstrate language and cognitive capacities.

<sup>11</sup> Recent studies show more nuanced interpretations of animals in religious and philosophical traditions. For example: Neil Dalal and Chloë Taylor, (2014); Lisa Kemmerer, (2011); Edwin Bryant (2006); Paul Waladu (2001); and Christopher Key Chapple, (1993).

In this context, as an alternative to conventional readings, I suggest that the animals appearing in the stories in the *Mahābhārata* must be taken seriously as the sites where complex—and radical—ethical issues are expressed and, as such, cannot be read solely as means for ideological or pedagogical ends. Focusing on the literary strategies of the *Mahābhārata*, I will show how its use of animals disrupts the anthropocentric point of view, demonstrating through narrative structures the fluidity of birth in Hindu philosophical systems. Such systems fundamentally challenge anthropocentrism since humans, animals, and gods can change bodies according to their actions. Even as a hierarchy of birth exists, the fluidity of birth does not privilege the human body.<sup>12</sup> Second, by giving voices to animals who are thus able to express their own needs, I observe how the *Mahābhārata* draws attention to nonhuman beings who demand that humans in positions of power (e.g., a righteous king) follow their *dharma* (moral conduct) of protection for both human and nonhuman subjects alike. Third, I argue that the text, by creating a reality in which humans, animals, and gods co-exist, seeks to establish a principle of radical interconnectedness among species in spite of a karmic hierarchy among them. Finally, I concentrate on how narrative strategies in particular demonstrate how animals, far from being mere sacrificial and utilitarian objects (that is, means, rather than ends), are sentient beings deserving just treatment and human empathy, while provoking complex ethical questions and dilemmas in the context of the ethical virtues of complete assurance, protection (*abhaya*), and charity (*dānam*). One site in which readers are invited to contemplate a complex presentation of these virtues is in Book 13, where Bhīṣma, while instructing Yudhiṣṭira (who is also the recipient of the tale of ‘The Hawk and the Dove’), on the proper conduct of a king, states: ‘That learned person who gives to all living creatures (*sarvbhūteṣu*) the gift of complete assurance (*abhaya*), is, forsooth, regarded as the giver of life-breaths in this world’ (13.15.18).<sup>13</sup> Thus, the ultimate moral teaching for the wise person is to give the highest gift of assurance of life and sustenance to all creatures. The parable involving nonhuman animals in Book 3 of the *Mahābhārata* underscores the difficulty of following this directive.

Thus, focusing on the *Mahābhārata*’s parable of ‘The Hawk and the Dove,’ I consider animal needs in this tale from the animals’ point of view, since the narrative does not reveal to the King Śibi the fact that the hawk and the dove are deities in disguise when he is being tested. Throughout the story, the king sees the hawk and the dove as animals and treats them as such, therefore the story cannot be simply construed as anthropocentric. From this perspective, the extraordinarily complex and subtle nature of the parable’s and more broadly the *Mahābhārata*’s ethical system can be considered more fully. Such a system explores issues of self-sacrifice in the resolution of dilemmas, an ethics of care which reflects recent theory and scholarship on the topic, and it addresses basic, though often overlooked, questions about the virtue of protection and care for the Other. In short, the *Mahābhārata* does not simply advocate for the *dharma* of nonviolence but also complicates it since violence is essential to the survival of

<sup>12</sup> Lance Nelson (2006) has argued conversely, insisting that despite the Hindu metaphysical notion of divine unity of the self, ‘Hindu theology and social thought present a view that is unapologetically hierarchical and anthropocentric’ (184). The *Mahābhārata* also plays both sides of the argument (underlying unity and hierarchy on the bases of action), but I see the animal tales as devices to disrupt this rooted anthropocentrism.

<sup>13</sup> The *Mahābhārata* is a war epic, but it celebrates *ahimsā* (abstention from harm) and *abhaya* (complete assurance of fearlessness to living creatures) as highest virtues.

animals. A close analysis of the narrative structure of the tale demonstrates how such ethical concerns are elaborated through literary devices and how the *Mahābhārata*'s ethical system is intricately tied to its literary articulation.

### The Parable of the Hawk and the Dove: the Question of Animal Ethics

Among numerous animal narratives, I have selected the well-known story of 'The Hawk and the Dove' (3.131)<sup>14</sup> to analyze the question of human-animal relationships and humanity's commitment toward animals. The placement of the story in the *Mahābhārata* is significant and demonstrates the importance granted to animals in the tale. The parable appears in Book 3, 'The Forest Teachings'—a book filled with various forms of instructions to Yudhiṣṭhira, the future ruler of the Kuru clan. The Sage Lomaśa tells the story to the son of Dharma, Yudhiṣṭhira, during the tour of the sacred fords. The story is not prompted by any questions asked by Yudhiṣṭhira, nor is it told to justify any point of view, as is the general convention in the *Mahābhārata*. Rather, the story is told when the Pāṇdavas (five Pāṇdu brothers in exile) come upon a mount where King Śibi sacrificed himself after the gods tested his virtue. Thus, the story's structure does not follow a general convention as in the *Mokṣa Dharma Parvan* in the *Mahābhārata* where animal fables are preceded by a moral dilemma that is subsequently addressed by an animal fable by way of illustration. Consequently, the position of the parable of 'The Hawk and the Dove' is significant because the animals are used as the agents of a moral dilemma, not simply as its illustration.

The central dilemma King Śibi faces in the story of the 'Hawk and the Dove' is whether the King should protect the meager Dove's life or protect the Hawk's right to consume the Dove. The dilemma is discussed in a dialogue between the King and the Hawk, where the Hawk invokes the moral law (*dharma*) and demands that the King release the Dove because it is his food. The Hawk argues for his right to food just as humans argue for their own rights:

Great Lord, it is through food that all creatures find their being, by food that they thrive, by food that they live...If I am deprived of my portion, lord of your people, my spirits will desert my body and go the way of no return. When I predecease them, Law-spirited king, son and wife will perish: so by protecting this dove you will kill many lives. A Law [*dharma*] that spoils the Law is no Law but a bad Law; no, that Law is Law that runs counter to nothing, O King whose might is truth! When matters are in conflict, guardian of the earth, you should decide what is better and what is worse and observe that Law that does not oppress. After ascertaining the weightier and the less weighty in a decision on Law and Unlaw, you should decide on the Law where it does most good, king! (3.131.5–10)

By invoking *dharma* in order to assert his right to the life of the Dove, the Hawk challenges the King to avoid *kudharma* (unlaw). Violence is explicit in the Hawk's

<sup>14</sup> All the citations of English translation of the parable are taken from van Buitenen's translation (Vol. 2, 1975), pp. 470–472.

demand for his sustenance; he argues that, in order to maintain his life, he must kill and ingest another creature. Such alimentary needs underscore the necessity of violence and complicate the *dharmic* (nonviolent) interactions between beings. The Hawk argues for his right to eat the Dove, cleverly reminding the King of his obligation toward his kinfolk, which the Hawk claims is equal to his responsibility for his family. However, the King defends his decision to shelter the Dove on the basis of a law requiring that refugees be protected. In such a situation, King Śibi is a ‘care-ethical protagonist,’ who feels a sense of moral responsibility toward a weak and helpless being.<sup>15</sup>

The King looks then for an alternate way to placate the Hawk while still satisfying his obligation to protect his avian refugee: ‘All this enterprise of yours, bird, is to get some food. But you can get your food in another, even better, way: I shall have a steer, a boar, a deer, or even a buffalo cooked for you, or whatever you want!’ (3.131.15). This proposed substitution seems to present a ‘bioethical’ issue, understood not in its technical usage, but rather as the ethical treatment of different bodies: why should the King differentiate between the lives of the bird and the beasts by offering the Hawk any food as long as it is not the Dove? It is the *immediacy* of the Dove’s plea that gives it a privileged status above the beasts, who appear only as a catalogue of proposed substitutions, not as creatures in distress or in complex situations experienced at close hand. The very fact that the Dove is voiceless but ‘asks’ for its right to life by perching on the King’s thigh makes it worthy of the King’s attention and care. The Dove’s bodily proximity must therefore be read as the corporeal counterpart to the Hawk’s ability to speak; in the tale, bodies in contact are forms of persuasive communication.

The epic system’s *dharma* of assuring the protection of one who takes ‘refuge’ in one’s proximity reflects recent feminist scholarship which explores the relationship between responsibility, care, and proximity. As Nel Nodding wrote, ‘the one-caring has an obligation to care-for proximate humans and animals to the extent that they are needy and able to respond to offerings of care.’<sup>16</sup> Such an approach predicates care on the immediacy of a situation. Such an ethics of care based on the condition of proximity is at the heart of Indian philosophical systems, since all creatures are ‘proximate’ with one another by virtue of the notion that all beings, while individually responsible for their actions and possessing a unique nature, are interconnected by sharing a divine *ātman* (spirit). In the *Mahābhārata* tale, both the Hawk and the Dove appear in the King’s proximity and therefore they become the immediate focus of ethical concern and obligation.

This principle of ethics based on proximity could, of course, result in an endless deferral of the Hawk’s need to eat if every other creature the King names as a substitute turns up to ask for its life as well. But the crucial point is that the Dove has attached itself to the King’s body, as it perches on the King’s knee, literalizing the interconnected nature of bodies, not just of souls. In so close a connection, the King sees the ‘face,’ to use the Levinasian concept, of both the Dove and the Hawk, which moves him to care

<sup>15</sup> Here, I draw on Vrinda Dalmiya’s article (2012) in which she classified King Yudhiṣṭhira as ‘a care ethical agent’ who rejects the offer of going to heaven for a dog in the *Mahābhārata* (pp. 7–28).

<sup>16</sup> A prominent feminist ethicist Nel Nodding developed her ideas on ethics of care and emphasized the role of education in developing caring and loving people. See Sander-Staudt.



for both. For Emmanuel Levinas, the 'face to face' encounter is the basis of ethical responsibility for the Other, although he considers only the human face.<sup>17</sup> According to the *rājadharmā* (a king's *dharma* in the *Mahābhārata* ethical system), a king must protect the one who takes refuge and provide complete assurance of safety to that being, and King Śibi takes his duty seriously. The story honors the Hawk's biological need for flesh and goes beyond the ethics of a radical *ahimsā* (nonviolence, as argued by Jain philosophy and some contemporary animal activists) by arguing for a pragmatic form of compassion and care that is based upon a condition of bodily and 'situational' proximity.

But the Hawk continues to insist on his entitlement to the Dove, invoking a number of moral principles to test the King: 'Guardian of the earth, let that dove loose for me. Hawks eat doves, that is the everlasting rule' (3.31.15). Addressing the King as 'guardian of the earth' (*mahīpāla*), and not as a 'king,' the Hawk presents Śibi with a double-edged *dharmic* dilemma: on the one hand, the King has a duty to protect the Hawk's right to access to his natural food, and, on the other, he has an irreconcilable duty to safeguard the one who has taken refuge with him, according to an ethics of proximity. Frustrated and desperate, the King offers his kingdom to the Hawk: 'You that are adored by the hosts of the birds, reign over this rich kingdom of the Śibis. Or I shall give you whatever you want, hawk, but not, hawk, this bird that has sought shelter with me! Tell me what should I do' (3.31.20). The King's offer to give his kingdom to the Hawk is striking, while asking the Hawk what he should do is a startling inversion of a presumed hierarchy of power and voice that further disorients the human-animal divide that would ordinarily privilege human dominion over animals. The *Mahābhārata* leaves the reader to imagine the unimaginable: a hawk as a sovereign over humans. Thus, King Śibi's willing surrender to the wishes of the Hawk inadvertently suggests that animals could hold sway over humans. What is more, the righteous King has been provoked into considering this complex dilemma by two animal, not human, protagonists, who do not simply represent the binary of predator (the Hawk) and prey (the Dove), strength and weakness, but are instead regarded as beings with instinctual natures and specific needs in an intertwined ethical system. Because the King regards each bird on its own terms, the story moves beyond situating the animals as mere emblems of warring beings.

Finally, after numerous pleas to the King, the Hawk agrees to relinquish his claim to the Dove on one condition: 'If you love the dove, overlord of kings, cut off a piece of flesh and weigh it against the dove. When your flesh balances the dove's, king, you will give it to me, and I shall be satisfied' (3.131.20-25).<sup>18</sup> The King happily agrees to the compromise, considering the small sacrifice of his flesh that would equal to that of a little Dove's weight for keeping his *dharma*: 'Your request I deem a favor, hawk, so I shall give you at once as much of my flesh as balances the dove' (3.131.20-25).

<sup>17</sup> In Levinas's ethics, the Dove attains a privileged status because the text has staged a 'face-to-face' encounter between it and the King. For Levinas (1985), seeing another's face constitutes the most primal ethical scene—the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to relation' and 'the face is what forbids us to kill' (p. 198 and 86). Since we are dependent on the Other for our own self-integration, the very perception of the Other's face implies its request that we not kill it.

<sup>18</sup> *yadā samam kapotena tava māṃsam bhaven nṛpa tadā pradeyaṃ tan mahyaṃ sā me tuṣṭir bhaviṣyati*. This is one of the most poignant points in the text. I provide this in the original Sanskrit to give a glimpse of the poetic nature of the text. It marks the climax of the ethical test.

The King cuts a piece of his flesh to be weighed against the Dove, but he finds that the Dove is heavier than the piece of flesh. The King cuts off more of his flesh, but is not able to balance the scale. The Dove is still heavier. Finally, exhausted, ‘when there was no more left of his flesh to balance the dove,’ the King mounds his entire dismembered body onto the scale as an offering for the protection of the Dove (3. 131.25). Witnessing the King’s dedication to giving the gift of protection to both animals, the Hawk shows his true form as the god Indra and discloses his intention to test the King: ‘I am Indra, Law-knowing king, and this dove is the sacrifice-carrying fire. We came here to you in your offering grove to test you in the Law (*dharma*). This shall be your shining glory, to master the worlds, lord of the people, that you cut the flesh from your limbs!’ (3.131.30).

The Hawk’s proposal to balance the flesh of the Dove is a version of the King’s earlier proposed substitution of animals: physically, the same quantity of a king’s flesh would balance that of a dove’s. And yet, in the *dharmic* world these creatures inhabit, wherein each creature has its unique *dharma* and value despite the underlying unity of essence, substitution is in fact impossible. Each creature in the exchange retains its own quiddity, its own idiosyncratic being and moral and physical ‘weight’ that defies the terms of the exchange; creatures may be bound by a radical interconnectedness, and yet the parable reveals how each creature is unique and demands to be considered on its own terms within an interconnected system of being. In the *dharmic* world established in the *Mahābhārata*, heterogeneity and difference can exist within unity: unity does not subsume difference into a homogenous whole.<sup>19</sup>

The Hawk, who at first seemed to be the one who reduced the Dove’s being to its pure materiality by making it into food, paradoxically becomes the vehicle for exposing the unique being of the Dove as precisely more than simply flesh to be consumed. And in doing so, the Hawk provokes the King into experiencing the suffering originally intended for the Dove. In his exploration of animal suffering, Henry S. Salt (1891), who has been credited as being one of the earliest animal rights activists, has reasoned that ‘the cruel man is cruel because he cannot put himself in the place of those who suffer, cannot feel with them and imagine the misfortunes from which he is himself exempt. The cure for cruelty is therefore to induce men to cultivate a sympathetic imagination’ (p. 18). Salt does not propose a means as to how to cultivate such a sympathetic imagination. But narratives of the kind found in the *Mahābhārata* that give voice to animals through gods’ disguises ‘might be read as giving voice to the ‘subaltern’ in order to establish the conditions for both agency and sympathy to occur in others.’<sup>20</sup> In sacred myths and literature, gods always have the choice to use any means to test humans, as in the many other Hindu narratives and Western legends including in the Book of Job in the Bible. In the *Mahābhārata*, the inclusion of the animal world (through ubiquitous presence of animals) disrupts the patriarchal, rigid *dharma* ethical code of conduct. In this story, the King’s sympathy is not imaginary; true sympathy requires real

<sup>19</sup> In this sense, the *Mahābhārata* offers a striking parallel to Gilles Deleuze’s reading of Leibniz in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (1992). Deleuze explores how the concept of the ‘fold,’ which can include and differentiate by enfolding and unfolding simultaneously, elides the binary of multiplicity and unity, allowing each to coexist. See especially, p.135 et seq.

<sup>20</sup> In the *Jātaka* version of the parable, agency is given to a destitute and disabled man, and in the *Mahābhārata* to animals. In addition, a comprehensive volume, Bilimoria and Sridhar (2007), *Indian Ethics: Classical Traditions and Contemporary Challenges*: Vol. I, contains several essays that deal with various issues regarding animal ethics.



bodily action and, in this case, sacrifice. The King must offer his flesh in order to realize the pain of becoming someone else's food—a metaphor for radical sympathy.

While the King's apparent 'indifference to pain' may be interpreted as a 'macho Kshatriya virtue and a badge of ascetic conquest of the body,' as Doniger suggests (2009, p. 273), such a reading overlooks the ethics of the protection of the refugee as well as care and sympathy of the King's decision and misses the nonanthropocentric bias of the tale. The King never overtly prides himself on his determination to sacrifice his body. In fact, the metaphor of self-dismemberment suggests his powerlessness to reconcile the warring *dharmas* that control him. The King is not master of the circumstance here, but its victim: he recognizes the cosmic pull of these two *dharmic* strands and offers himself and his belongings as a sacrifice to satisfy the irreconcilable demands placed on him. Moreover, he is powerless as a narrative agent; he is only rescued from the dilemma by a literal *deus ex machina* (or *deus ex animali*)—another literary device to demonstrate the unresolvable nature of the ethical dilemma. The King is completely committed to his vow of protecting those who seek him out for refuge, and thus, he is never conflicted when given the opportunity to sacrifice his flesh to protect the Dove and placate the Hawk. The gods celebrate his virtue of care for both of his subjects, but it has been a virtue of willing surrender to his own helplessness and moral obligation.

The use of the metaphor of weight suggests that these animals are bodily, not just insubstantial allegorical vehicles for proving the prowess of a king. The competing demands of the Hawk and the Dove are taken equally seriously because both animals exhibit agency with immediate effects: the Hawk, by actively testing the King, and the Dove, by demonstrating in its proximity to the King's body the corporeal connection between creatures. In such a situation, the role of the animals is not to establish a 'vegetarian agenda' (Doniger 2009, p. 273) (hardly possible considering the King offers to cook up and offer all kinds of animals) but, rather, to demonstrate the moral concerns of agency and action in the context of competing 'proximate' situations. Ultimately, the tale presents a radical proposition: there is no equivalence to the body of a dove other than the whole body of a king; a balanced substitution is impossible. But the King's willingness to sacrifice himself demonstrates a higher ethical law that supersedes the mechanical and instinctual law of nature initially articulated by the Hawk. If we see the symbolic meaning of scales as Justice, then it poses a difficult question: is the Dove's life equal to the King's? Certainly, the story disrupts an anthropocentric position, by making the value of a small bird equal to or even surpassing that of the powerful King, especially when other animal substitutions are explicitly refused. The story also reduces the sovereignty of the King from above (heaven) as well as below (his subjects, the Hawk and the Dove), by suggesting that he is subject to a *dharma* that cripples his ability to find a *dharmic* solution for the lives of birds. The gods appear at the moment when the King's commitment to his *dharma* is about to overcome the law of nature (*svabhāva*)—his effort to make his body equal to the Dove's. Each creature possesses a unique subjecthood, despite their metaphysical unity, and as the King's body is becoming a surrogate for that of the Dove, the gods have to intervene and disrupt the exchange.

Using plot techniques of gods in animal disguises and other instances of animals arguing for justice, the text thus creates an understanding of the following ethical issues: (1) humans and animals are similar in many

fundamental ways; animality is shared by both human and nonhuman animals. (2) Humans and other animals essentially are in conflict about their rights to their distinct biological needs; as such, the text respects the Hawk's demand for his food and his desire to protect his family as the King himself would. (3) Finally, the *dharma* of the protection and care for other beings requires self-sacrifice, and such a radical form of care leads to the annihilation of the self. Scholars have considered the notion of hospitality (*dānam*) and sacrifice. For example, Jacques Derrida saw the direct connection between hospitality and ethics: '*ethics is hospitality*'; ethics is so thoroughly coextensive with the experience of hospitality' (as cited in Boothroyd 2013, 168). In the *Mahābhārata*'s context, the hospitality is extended to nonhuman visitors.<sup>21</sup> Even though absolute hospitality is difficult, King Śibi lives up to the virtues of charity and complete assurance of protection (*dānam* and *abhaya*) toward the voiceless. The Voiceless shows up at your home, ultimately demanding the highest sacrifice, since the self's existence always depends on the constant destruction of other living beings.

## Conclusion

The *Mahābhārata* seeks to create an 'ecological' matrix in which essential creaturely feelings and paradoxes can be expressed and experienced. The tale of gods disguised as animals invokes human imagination and elicits the emotional experience of animals in need. Contemporary ecologists have emphasized that 'person-based identification' with nonhuman beings plays a role in nature protection, and these stories help humans to experience an identification with nonhumans.<sup>22</sup> By giving voices to the animals, the parable seeks to secure protection for them.

The stories may be interpreted simply as tools for humanist ethics, insofar as animals are used as devices to test human virtue. But such an anthropocentric reading overlooks the complex interrelation of agency exercised by diverse creatures in intimate exchange. The King was never aware of the test until he offers everything to protect the Dove and placate the Hawk. By provoking questions as to the relative values of a Dove and a righteous King, the story presents an ethical model that challenges an essentialism that would establish hierarchies and instead advocates for a form of equality whereby Being or Self

<sup>21</sup> Jack Reynolds (2004) noted on Derrida's theory of hospitality, 'If we contemplate giving up everything that we seek to possess and call our own, then most of us can empathise with just how difficult enacting any absolute hospitality would be. Despite this, however, Derrida insists that the whole idea of hospitality depends upon such an altruistic concept and is inconceivable without it' (177).

<sup>22</sup> Kay Milton (2002) discussed the role of person-based identification: "those who advocate the moral right of nonhuman things, and seek a philosophical basis for such rights, do so by identifying what human beings, as archetypal persons, hold in common with other objects of concern. In the case of nonhuman animals, the important questions are whether they are sentient, can suffer pain, have the capacity for emotional experience' (28). The stories in the *Mahābhārata* help humans imagine a 'personhood' in animals—a concept recent philosophers and activists have begun to argue through arguments and court cases, as when 2014 the court case on the behalf of select animals was filed in the New York's Appellate Court by Steven Wise who was influenced by Peter Singer's book, *Animal Liberation* (1975). Hegedus and Pennebaker (2014).

(*ātman*) is contingent on an 'ethics of situation' and proximity. In the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Lord Kṛiṣṇa teaches the metaphysical unity of all beings: the spirit resides in the body, and despite the different appearances of bodies, their underlying spirit is same. However, this realization does not diminish their otherness and the need for ethical concern. The *Gītā* (5:18) sets up the ultimate test for the person of wisdom: 'The wise ones see the very same in a learned, cultured Brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog—or in dog-cooking outcaste!' (Flood & Martin 2015, 46). This form of perception—or spiritual 'seeing'—requires proximity and leads to ultimate compassion and protection of the other.

Overall, the *Mahābhārata* recognizes the hierarchy of birth, whereby, according to the Indian philosophical theory of karma, animals are lower than humans. But the tale cautions humans to treat the nonhuman beings as possessing as much agency and responsibility as their own, because the individual soul constantly moves up and down the karmic ladder. The very ontological mobility of the karmic hierarchy troubles the human/animal distinction—people reincarnated as animals can still re-purify their karma to become human, and vice versa. The *Mahābhārata* further complicates the hierarchy of birth by disrupting the anthropocentric attitude. It does so by using the literary devices of disguise and animal speech, which aim to create interspecies emotional bonds. By virtue of his commitment to protect the Dove and out of his respect for the hungry Hawk, King Śibi passes Indra's test and proves that 'he is equal to gods.' His self-sacrifice is beyond what humans are normally capable of offering. The parable sets up the complexity of the situation of caring for those competing needs. King Śibi's intention to protect the meek Dove that does not say a word (unlike the Hawk, who is quite loquacious) can be seen as a metaphor for protecting those who lack voice—children, the poor, the subjugated, and animals. The revelation of the Hawk and the Dove as the Vedic deities problematizes the narrative. What other subtle message has been conveyed through this parable? Is the story an allegory for the then-existing tension between animal sacrifice (*yajña*) and self-sacrifice? Do the gods Indra and Agni demand not ritual offerings but the offering of self-sacrifice—the King's sacrifice of the flesh only being metaphoric?

A deeper analysis of these questions is beyond the scope of this paper. It is worth noting, however, that the gods test the king in his sacrificial grove. By choosing this locale, the tale could be seen to use the animal disguises of gods to challenge the Vedic dharma of animal sacrifices. Such a lesson offers an alternative of the *dharma* of compassion, as was advocated by the Buddha. Intriguingly, a very similar version of the 'Hawk and Dove' parable featuring King Śibi appears in Buddhist tales (in addition to the aforementioned tale of King Śibi's offering of his eyes). It seems that enduring concern for animals was present across Indic traditions. In a Buddhist version, King Śibi is a bodhisattva who is being tested by the gods to 'see if he is truly a bodhisattva.' The King, who is determined to protect the Dove, seeks to appease the Hawk by offering him some other food to which Hawk responds: 'I will eat it,' adding a caveat, 'but it must be meat, and raw, and freshly killed.' After hearing this request, the King contemplates: 'If I give him raw and fresh-killed meat, then I must murder one creature to save another: that would be

both purposeless and wrong. I must preserve the life of everything that lives, and my body is not included' (In Beyer, p. 7).<sup>23</sup> In the Buddhist version, the King is clearly determined to follow the virtue of nonviolence and compassion toward all beings. In both tales, the King is not aware the animals were disguised gods and is dedicated to protect the life of the Dove and the right of the Hawk. Although the gods were intent on testing the King, it is difficult to ignore the obvious presentation of animals' concern.

In our present literary analysis of the *Mahābhārata*, the King's 'godliness' lies in his recognition of each being's unique subjecthood and also the bond of shared 'creature feeling' with other beings, especially between those who can speak and express and those who are silent and can only express their needs through the body.<sup>24</sup> As Alf Hildebeitel (2010) has argued for the *Mahābhārata*'s attitude toward noncruelty:

For a king, non-cruelty is a family value in the largest spiritual sense, one that honors the bonds that connects humans and animals, living and the dead, and ultimately, all forms of life through the spiritual presence that permeates all beings. (81)

The *Mahābhārata* does not leave the reader with the commandment of *ahimsā* (noninjury) and *abhaya* (assurance of protection) on the basis of Hindu doctrine of shared spiritual presence, but makes the reader aware of the difficulty of honoring the creaturely bond when reverence for the life of one creature necessitates dishonoring the life of another. This dilemma can only be partially resolved through the virtue of noncruelty and care—*dharma* ethics is pluralistic and open to interpretation in each situation, as *dharma* is contextual. By creating interspecies dialogue, establishing conditions of proximity through narrative devices of bodily transformations, and giving language to animals, the *Mahābhārata* seeks to disrupt an anthropocentric mindset and engender the awareness of the interconnectedness of various life forms. What animal activists have sought to acquire through legal means, the *Mahābhārata* seeks to accomplish through its literary framework that complicates the human and nonhuman binary. Thus, literary strategies such as anthropomorphism become tools not merely to educate humans through animals, but educate about the sentience of animals. Notably, the text insists upon a hard but radical truth: observance of noncruelty always demands sacrifice. Any animal might be god! The animal parables using the tropes of disguised gods invite us to listen to animal voices for understanding the deeper messages embedded in the tales, messages that disrupt speciesism and address ethical concern for animals themselves.

<sup>23</sup> In the chapter, 'The Tale of the Hawk and the Dove,' Stephen Beyer (1974) takes this version of the tale from the Tibetan collection of the tales called *The Wise Man the Fool*. In this preface to the tale, Beyer writes, 'The Buddhist borrowed many popular Indian forms to express their vision of exemplary virtue: animal fables and ancient tales of righteous kinds became stories of the prior births of the Buddha...' (p.6). Undoubtedly, there was a cross-fertilization of Hindu and Buddhist fables of ethics. Historically, it is difficult to determine which of these versions came first or whether or not the version of the tale in the *Mahābhārata* was influenced by the Buddhist rendering of the tale.

<sup>24</sup> In Alf Hildebeitel's (2010) words, 'it is a "creature feeling" that extends "across the great divides": of those of high and low standing' (p. 81).

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