

Review

In Dialogue with the Mahābhārata, by Brian Black. Abingdon: Routledge, 2021. xii + 216pp. £120 (hb), £33.29 (ebook). ISBN 978-0-367-43600-1 (hb), 978-0-367-43814-2 (ebook).

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The Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* is dialogical in form. It consists almost entirely of reported speech, within which other speeches are reported. This book takes the *Mahābhārata*'s dialogical form seriously: 'its use as a literary medium is neither accidental nor ornamental' (p. 2). The text's dialogical aspect is evident not just in the many reported dialogues, but also in that different parts of the text are apparently in intratextual dialogue with each other, thus prompting the audience to engage in dialogue with the text.

This book's central hypothesis is that the *Mahābhārata* provides a model of dialogical philosophical reasoning that is transferable into our own contexts. This hypothesis is supported by five case studies. Each of the five chapters focuses on a different narrative issue and the arguments that various characters make in relation to it. In each case, Black presents, compares and contrasts the various arguments and understands them contextually in relation to the narrative moment and the dialogue partner/s, as well as intratextually in relation to other dialogues on the same or related subjects. The chapters follow the chronology of the *Mahābhārata* narrative and focus, in turn, on Bhīṣma's vows—principally his vow of celibacy—and what the characters say about them; on Draupadī's polyandrous marriage and what the characters say about it, in prospect and in retrospect; on the decision to challenge Yudhiṣṭhira to a dicing match, and Yudhiṣṭhira's acceptance of the challenge; on Draupadī's speeches when she is hauled into the hall after having allegedly been staked and lost by Yudhiṣṭhira; and on Kṛṣṇa's dialogues (including the *Bhagavadgītā*), particularly as they bear upon the subject of his own divinity.

The book thus discusses, in some depth, five of the *Mahābhārata*'s most famous and most crucial narrative and philosophical issues, and in this respect it provides an accessible and nuanced introduction to the *Mahābhārata*'s narrative as the characters perceive it—that is, largely in

terms of *dharma*. Accordingly the book will be very useful, not least to students. Its ethical focus follows in the tradition of B. K. Matilal (*Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata*, 1989) and Emily Hudson (*Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahābhārata*, 2013).

Though containing arguments of its own, each chapter plays the same role in relation to the book's main argument, adding to a growing body of evidence of the text's dialogical operations; hence each chapter is largely self-contained and would make sense in isolation. Nonetheless, the chapters are tied together nicely with cross-references; the signposting is excellent, with useful summaries at the end of each chapter and in the book's conclusion, and the result is smooth and user-friendly. The focus is upon the *Mahābhārata* as a literary object, viewed synchronically (but excluding the *Harivaṃśa*); and since this removes the option of viewing the accumulation of characters' arguments as a by-product of multiple authorship over a period of time, the book undoubtedly succeeds, on its own terms, in carrying its point.

However, in fitting the *Mahābhārata* to serve as an example for polyvalent ethical deliberation in the twenty-first century, Black, to my mind, minimizes what he calls 'the doctrine of the divine plan' (p. 7). The narrator Vaiśampāyana reveals to Janamejaya, before and after he tells the story of the Pāṇḍavas, that the gods took human forms in order to reduce the Earth's burden by prompting a great war. The principal characters in the story of the Pāṇḍavas are thus secret agents on a mission of destruction; and although, with the exception of Kṛṣṇa, they are not aware of this, the audience is. When the *Mahābhārata* is coopted as a resource for twenty-first-century ethics, the deliberations over what the various characters should do, and particularly over what they should do in order to avoid terrible bloodshed, are largely transferable, but the theological agenda is not. Hudson's book excludes this agenda almost completely; Black includes it, but downplays it.

The *Mahābhārata* contains ongoing debate about the relative potency of *daiva* ('that of the gods') and *puruṣakāra* ('human agency'). This aspect has been explored, for example, in books by Julian Woods (*Destiny and Human Initiative in the Mahābhārata*, 2001) and Peter Hill (*Fate, Predestination and Human Action in the Mahābhārata*, 2001), both of which Black draws on. One way of interpreting this debate is as a version of the Euro-American debate about free will and determinism, and Black seems to take it in this way, generally translating *daiva* as 'fate' (pp. 83–88). The *Bhagavadgītā*, for example, facilitates this interpretation by juxtaposing the specific inevitability of Arjuna's participation in the war with a general deconstruction of all human agency into the three *guṇas*. Nonetheless, the idea of determinism whereby human beings simply do not have free will is different from the *Mahābhārata*'s divine plan, in two ways. Firstly, because this divine plan is a discrete event: even if it compromises the Pāṇḍavas' freedom, it does not compromise Janamejaya's or ours, because it was completed before we were born. And secondly, because

even if the divine plan makes war inevitable, Brahmā does not tell the gods in advance exactly how this will transpire, and so there can be play for human freedom along the way. When characters discuss the power of *daiva*, Dhātṛ ('the Placer') and *diṣṭa* ('what is appointed') in regard to specific decisions central to the plot, we and Janamejaya, because of what Vaiśampāyana has told us in advance about the divine plan, can interpret *daiva* as the hidden work of the gods, Dhātṛ as an epithet of Brahmā who devised the plan, and *diṣṭa* as what he planned. In such moments we can almost see the divine aspect of these hybrid characters breaking into their human discourse, as if at some level they know that events must move towards a preordained conclusion; as if they are commenting on their parts as they play them.

By flattening the discourse onto the human level and emphasizing that the characters treat each other as free agents, Black avoids undermining ethical discourse, but he also inhibits an important angle. For not only do words such as *daiva* refer us to the divine plan, but since such words also figure within debates about the extent of human freedom, those debates can also, frame-breakingly, be about the extent to which the divine plan can really explain the war, or should be allowed to. When Saṃjaya says the war is Dhṛtarāṣṭra's fault and Dhṛtarāṣṭra blames *daiva*, this disagreement is not just about what Dhṛtarāṣṭra did or did not do, but is also about the hermeneutic status of the divine-plan spoiler given at the start, the as-if-retrospective trick of passing responsibility for this massacre onto the gods, with all the ensuing philosophical and theological implications. This is something the *Mahābhārata* is in dialogue with itself about—particularly in the moments to which Black's tour of the text takes us—but that Black is not so much in dialogue with the *Mahābhārata* about.

However, despite this drawback, the book is highly recommended. It is written in a lively and engaging style, and the compact annotation (with brief endnotes at the end of each chapter) helps the book to maintain its drive. Chapter 4 on 'Draupadī's Questions' is particularly interesting: by juxtaposing Draupadī's scene in the hall with the stories of Śakuntalā and Sulabhā, it effectively becomes a gender chapter giving timely transferable lessons on the treatment of women in dialogue situations.