

Madeleine Kleinerman

Religion 358

Professor Seeman

15 March 2023

### Week 8: Hindu Bioethics

So far in this course, as well as in more general discourse on bioethics, Judeo-Christian understandings of the world have been central. Both of the texts this week challenge and expand these understandings. In *Magical Progeny, Modern Technology: A Hindu Bioethics of Assisted Reproductive Technology*, Swasti Bhattacharyya lays out a bioethics that centralizes narrative and places value on the construction of ethics in specific situations. In "Impossible Gifts: Bodies, Buddhism and Bioethics in Contemporary Sri Lanka," Bob Simpson complicates the idea of "the gift of life" by situating it within a culture that values giving parts of the body. Bhattacharyya and Simpson both use traditional Hindu and Buddhist religious frameworks to generate a bioethics—to apply each tradition to "modern" situations, to articulate which reproductive technologies would be allowed and how they could function. This is important. But more interestingly, I think, Bhattacharyya and Simpson present completely different approaches to bioethics than what we've seen so far. Since Maya wrote so much about Simpson's piece, and since I have more to say about Hindu bioethics, I want to focus on Bhattacharyya's book.

Late in the book, Bhattacharyya lays out six characteristics of Hindu thought that frame her discussion of Hindu bioethics. First is the centrality of society. In Hindu society, individuals are born into four traditional castes. The individual also passes through four stages of life, one of which is the householder, or *gṛhasṭha* stage—the stage occupied by each character trying to produce children in the *Mahābhārata*. Second is the unity of all life—or the idea that "the

*Ātman*, being ultimately identical with *Brahman*, is immortal and indestructible" (67). Third is *dharma*, a concept without an English equivalent, but that translates roughly to "duty"—or what one should do in a given situation. Fourth is the multivalent nature of Hindu traditions. Fifth is the theory of *karma*, which is the idea that every action has a consequence (that is not necessarily bad.) Sixth is the commitment to *ahimsa*, or nonviolence.

Bhattacharyya draws on several narratives within the *Mahābhārata*, but centrally on those of Kunti, Madri, and Gandhari. I find these stories a bit complicated—there are lots of characters—but useful in understanding Bhattacharyya's Hindu bioethics. In Kunti and Madri's story, after the king Pandu is cursed to die if he ever tries to have children, Kunti tells Pandu about a boon she was granted, in which a mantra would allow her to have a son with whichever god she chooses. (*niyoga*, the traditional practice of levirate marriage, allows women to have intercourse with other men in order to reproduce—Pandu and Dhritarashtra are also born through *niyoga*.) Kunti first summons Dharma, then Vayu, and finally Indra. Kunti also allows Madri a one-time use of her boon, and Madri calls upon twin gods. Gandhari is granted a boon from Vyasa that says she will have one hundred sons. She marries Dhritarashtra and carries a pregnancy for two years. After hearing of the birth of Kunti's first son, she attempts and succeeds to expel the product of conception, and delivers a solid mass of blood. Vyasa returns to warn Gandhari that her sons will cause great destruction. After she insists, he instructs her to place each of the hundred pieces of the ball of flesh into clay pots filled with ghee.

One of the things Bhattacharyya points out is that in each of these narratives, women are operating within patriarchal contexts. In the *Mahābhārata*, women are primarily valuable as mothers, especially as mothers of sons. However, Bhattacharyya highlights how, within this patriarchal system, women maximize "their abilities to control their own procreative situations"

(54). Creative and imaginative methods of producing children are acceptable—and women themselves may orchestrate these methods. All this said, there are limits. Kunti only allows herself to use her boon three times—after this she believes it is no longer socially acceptable. Madri is viewed as greedy for her use of the boon to bear two children instead of just one. While reproductive creativity is allowed, it cannot exceed what is allowed by society. Women must consider their role in society, their *dharma*, as well as the consequences of their actions, or *karma*—in fact, Gandhari must later deal with the grief caused by the war waged by her one hundred sons.

Later in the book, Bhattacharyya also compares these narratives with several examples from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. In the *Mahābhārata*, as in Kunti's story, gods and humans work together in the process of procreation. Conversely, in biblical texts, there is "ultimate divine control over human procreation" (59). This difference seems to come from the difference in relationships between humans and gods—in the *Mahābhārata*, they have a "somewhat coequal existence" (62), while in the bible, God is far superior to humans. I found this very interesting. In conversations about bioethics, we often talk about the dangers (or benefits) of "playing God." In the *Mahābhārata*, gods collaborate with humans. At multiple points in the book, Bhattacharyya compares the "divine" with "science." In the setting of the *Mahābhārata*, as well as today, humans are allowed agency because they perhaps are not really so different from gods. Again, though, Bhattacharyya emphasizes the responsibility that comes with "playing god," even for the characters in the epic—there are always consequences that follow from actions. (Even in European popular literature, I think we see this idea of "karma" surrounding narratives of creation on a more individualistic level—for example, in *Frankenstein*, where Frankenstein is forced to deal with the consequences of his act of creation.)

We've discussed identity and positionality a lot in this class—and while I always find this important, I'm not sure my personal experience with religion is especially relevant in the context of this week's readings. I'm not a Buddhist or Hindu, and, conversely, was not raised very religiously or as an atheist. That said, I am a creative writing major, and for this reason was interested in both authors' emphasis on the function of myths, stories, or narratives in shaping society and ethics—Bhattacharyya by centering the *Mahābhārata*, Simpson by noting the limits of (religious) narratives surrounding gift-giving, specifically in the context of colonialism. In past classes we've discussed the difference between texts like *Donum Vitae*, which are more "abstract," philosophical, or theological, and ethnographic texts like Rapp's book which seek to capture (at least a certain part of) reality. Reading this week's texts, it seems possible that fiction bridges the gap between philosophy and reality, in that it either makes philosophy more accessible to people trying to navigate real-life situations, or that it presents its own, more useful version of philosophy. As Bhattacharyya notes, "abstract philosophical theories cannot always assist those engaged in the process of living" (74). While we see philosophy drawn out of the stories of the bible, there is something different about interpretations of texts like the *Mahābhārata* within Hindu traditions—namely, that different interpretations are not only allowed, but embraced. Bhattacharyya writes, "Narratives are not utilized to find '*the* answer," or to eliminate options. Rather, myths are used because of their very pliability, their tendency to invite alternative options and applications" (3). Myths (and especially, here, poetry) do not "translate" into certain theological doctrines, but stand on their own.

Because I was raised in a very liberal college town, I was also intrigued by Bhattacharyya's discussion of "rights" versus "duty." I'm often frustrated by the politics around "choosing a side" and the assumptions that correspond to each one. Bhattacharyya at one point

notes that the pro-life/pro-choice debate is extremely limiting—and while I think most people would agree with this, a Hindu and Buddhist bioethics provides interesting and unexpected challenges to the American debate about "rights," some of which seem to me to overlap with certain feminist critiques of the pro-choice/pro-life binary. In the United States (and as we have seen so far in our readings,) bioethical conversations are dominated by the language of "rights." What are the rights of the unborn child? What are the rights of the person carrying the embryo? Bhattacharyya points out how the language around bioethics, in the *Mahābhārata* and that used by many Hindus, "is one of 'duty'" (87). She writes, "this notion that individuals are ultimately dependent upon one another, unfortunately, is somewhat obscured when undue emphasis is placed on individual rights. With freedom and autonomy comes responsibility" (89). Americans use language that emphasizes rights, not duty, just as we use language that emphasizes the individual, not society. But none of us are totally autonomous; everyone is dependent on each other. I think this also connects to questions of agency—while the women in the *Mahābhārata* are allowed creative agency, they still must deal with the consequences of their actions within their society. What does consideration of our "duty," rather than just our "rights," add to our conversations about reproductive technologies? I think the framework of duty and responsibility, and not just rights, is important because it admits the fact of our dependence on one another and our interconnectedness—our actions, as well as the language we use to discuss them, always have consequences.