

Arjuna's Dilemma and Shakuntala's Solution¹

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As India's most popular religious text, the Bhagavadgita has been the subject of a wide and variegated array of interpretations. Among the many novel and surprising claims made by the Gita's pious commentators is Mahatma Gandhi's claim that his doctrine of non-violent activism is rooted in the teachings of the Gita. In some respects, this claim is not so strange: the Gita provides a handy classical source for many of Gandhi's core teachings; his effort to reconcile the twin ideals of engagement in the world and renunciation of the world is well-supported by the Gita. But when we stand back and recall the original literary setting of this text, we are apt to notice a conflict between its teachings and Gandhi's staunch commitment to pacifism.

The Bhagavadgita is not merely a philosophical or theological treatise—although it is often treated as such. It is in fact a very slender sliver of text abstracted from one of the world's longest epic poems, the Mahabharata, a work about ten times the length of the Iliad and the Odyssey combined. The Gita narrates a conversation that takes place at a pivotal moment in the epic's central plot. Two sets of cousins with rival claims to the Bharata throne have amassed their armies on the field of battle; hostilities of apocalyptic proportions are

¹ This is a revision of a paper that I originally wrote for a course at Columbia University. In this version of the paper, I have anglicized the spelling of all Sanskrit names, avoiding diacritic marks. I have followed this policy consistently, altering the spelling of names in quotations for the sake of uniformity.

about to erupt between our heroes, the Pandavas, and their cousins, Kauravas.

At the cusp of action, the foremost warrior among the Pandavas, Arjuna, makes

this request of his charioteer Krishna:

...station my chariot between the two armies, far enough for me to see the eager warriors in position—for, whom am I to fight in this enterprise of war?” (van Buitenen 1981: 71; Bhagavadgita 1.21-22)

When Krishna complies, Arjuna finds himself gazing into the faces of his

kinsmen: his cousins, his uncles, his grandfather and other family elders, as well

as the beloved teachers who taught him how to fight in the first place.

Overwhelmed with compassion, Arjuna laments,

Krishna, when I see all my family poised for war, my limbs falter and my mouth goes dry. There is a tremor in my body and my hairs bristle. [My bow] is slipping from my hand and my skin is burning. I am not able to hold my ground and my mind seems to whirl... I see no good to come from killing my family in battle! I do not wish for victory, [Krishna], nor kingship and pleasures...The very men for whose sake we want kingship, comforts, and joy, stand in line to battle us, forfeiting their hard-to-relinquish lives!...We have resolved to commit a great crime as we stand ready to kill family out of greed for kingship and pleasure! It were healthier for me if the [Kauravas], weapons in hand, were to kill me, unarmed and defenseless, on the battlefield! (van Buitenen 1981: 71; Bhagavadgita 1.30-34, 45)

From this point forward, the Gita devotes seventeen chapters to

reporting the private counsel that Krishna offers in response to Arjuna’s

dilemma. Krishna, as it turns out, is not only Arjuna’s charioteer. He is also

Arjuna’s cousin, and his best friend, and thus Arjuna turns to him as a trusted

adviser. More significantly, Krishna’s identity as Arjuna’s friend and charioteer

is actually a kind of Clark Kent disguise, concealing his true identity as the

Supreme Lord of the Universe. Arjuna does not yet know Krishna’s true identity

when the Gita begins, but before the dialogue reaches its conclusion, Krishna will reveal himself to Arjuna in his full and terrible splendor.

Over the course of the counsel he offers, Krishna meanders through a variety of rarified philosophical and religious themes; but from the perspective of the epic's core narrative these themes are tangential to Krishna's central message: Arjuna must set aside his scruples, take up his bow, and fight. By the end of their conversation, this is what Krishna has persuaded Arujna to do.

This is what is so puzzling about Gandhi's embrace of the Gita. Given its decidedly martial thrust, given the fact that it stands as a prelude to and justification for an internecine bloodbath, how can the Gita provide the foundation for Gandhi's policy of non-violent resistance?

This question was in fact posed to Gandhi on many occasions, and he gave different answers at different times. Early on in his career as a political activist, he argued that the Gita is merely an allegory. According to this reading, the Pandavas and Kauravas represent different aspects of an individual's personality; the struggle to which Krishna urges Arjuna is indeed a holy war, in which the nobler parts of the soul strive for mastery over the baser parts. Later, Gandhi articulated an interpretation that I'm inclined to find more persuasive. This latter interpretation underscores the fact that the war initiated by Krishna terminates in a pyrrhic victory for Arjuna and his Pandava brothers:

[The poet] wrote his supremely beautiful epic to depict the futility of war. What did the Kauravas' defeat and the Pandavas' victory avail? How many among the victors survived? What was their fate? What was the end of Kunti, mother of the Pandavas? What trace is left today of the Yadava race? (Gandhi 1925, cited in Jordens 1986:99)

I'm more easily persuaded by this answer than the former because it preserves the literary context of the Gita, keeping in mind the tragic outcome of Krishna's advice: the near-total extermination of both branches of the feuding clan—including, notably, the Pandavas' own children. Moreover, as the ensuing epic makes heartbreakingly evident, in the Pandavas' quest for the throne, they sacrifice not only their own kinsmen, but also their moral authority. In other words (although Gandhi does not put it in these terms), Krishna's holy war turns out to be an unholy massacre—a fact that we might never have realized if we hadn't read the epic all the way through to its last page.

In line with Gandhi's latter interpretation, I would like to undertake a reading of the Gita that respects its place in the overall narrative trajectory of the epic. No episode in the epic takes place without implicitly commenting upon and being commented upon by other episodes. With this in mind, I would like to put the Gita into dialogue with a story recounted early in the epic, the story of Shakuntala, a distant ancestress of the Bharatas—that is, the royal family that later divides into the Pandavas and Kauravas. As I put these two episodes into dialogue, I will pursue an answer to the following questions: 1) Given Arjuna's acute apprehension of the gruesome fratricide that lies ahead of him, how does Krishna succeed in persuading him to fight? 2) What light does Krishna's mode of persuasion shed upon the epic's broader concerns? and 3) How does the story of Shakuntala speak to these same broad concerns? I hope to demonstrate that the story of Shakuntala provides a solution to Arjuna's dilemma, but that this solution only complicates the question of the benignity of Krishna's advice.

Part Two: Duhsanta's Dilemma and Shakuntala's Solution

Posited as a story about the origins of the Bharata dynasty, the story of Shakuntala serves as an integral link in the Mahabharata's narrative chain. But like the Bhagavadgita, this story has taken on a life of its own, quite independent from the epic. In its popular form, it stands even further from the epic than the Gita; for the Shakuntala story is best known through a dramatic reworking by the playwright Kalidasa, a reworking that alters key elements of the plot and thereby shifts the weight of the story's concerns. I will say more about these changes in a moment.

In its original form, this is the story of a king, Duhsanta, who woos, weds, and then abandons the foster-daughter of a forest hermit. Shakuntala's story is one of abandonment from the very beginning: she is born to a celestial nymph, who promptly abandons her in the woods. The illustrious sage Kanva happens upon the infant, surrounded by a protective flock of *shakunta* birds, and, departing from his strictly eremitic life, adopts her as his daughter, naming her "Shakuntala" after the birds. Having grown up in Kanva's forest hermitage, Shakuntala eventually meets King Duhsanta under unlikely circumstances: he has wandered into the hermit's forest inadvertently, having gone astray from a deer-hunting expedition, and there he finds the young girl alone, her father having gone out to pick fruit; seizing the moment, Duhsanta turns this unlikely encounter into an equally unlikely marriage. Central to this story is the fact that the sage's daughter and the king come from different worlds, worlds that may be

fundamentally incompatible. This is a story that simultaneously exaggerates and challenges the notion of the incompatibility of these two worlds.

This incompatibility manifests in a pair of broken pledges. After consummating the marriage, Duhsanta sets out alone to return to his capital; but before he leaves, he makes two pledges to his new bride: first, that he will dispatch an envoy to the hermitage to escort her to the capital, and, second, that the son whom she now carries in her womb will be designated as the heir to his throne. Of course, if Duhsanta had kept his promises, the story would have come to a quick and uninteresting conclusion. It is his failure to reclaim Shakuntala and conduct her back to his capital that provides the central crisis of the story.

Having waited in vain for word from the king, Shakuntala sets out uninvited to Duhsanta's capital, accompanied by her six-year-old son. There, she is drawn up short by a cold reception. With shocking coarseness, the king disavows any memory of Shakuntala—though the narrator makes clear that “he remembered very well” (van Buitenen 1973:166; Mahabharata 1(7) 68).

Standing in the royal court, exposed before an assembly of priests and nobles, in the face of the king's harsh refusal to recognize her and accept his son, the infuriated Shakuntala remains composed, countering the king with a steadfast and lengthy series of rebukes. The king stubbornly maintains his charade until Shakuntala's departure from the assembly hall. Immediately following her departure, an anonymous “voice from the skies, emanating from no visible shape” (Ganguli 1883: 162), addresses Duhsanta, in the hearing of everyone gathered in the royal court:

Support your son, Duhsanta; do not reject Shakuntala...keep this great-spirited scion of Duhsanta and Shakuntala; for he is yours to keep, and so is our behest. (van Buitenen 1973: 170; Mahabharata 1(7) 69)

From this point on, the narrative advances to a quick and tidy resolution:

At last the king relents and acknowledges the truth of Shakuntala's claim, recalling his wife and son to the assembly hall, he embraces them openly. The boy is named Bharata, he is anointed prince, and he grows up to assume his father's throne. The story concludes by reminding us of its relevance to the epic's central plotline: "From Bharata springs the Bharata fame, from him the Bharata race..." (van Buitenen 1973: 171; Mahabharata 1(7) 69).

This is, ostensibly, a happy resolution.

But it should come as no surprise when I report that, when I taught a preceptorial on the Mahabharata several years ago, my students were outraged by this resolution. For one thing, the mysterious celestial voice strikes the reader as a disappointingly clumsy *deus ex machina*. But even more offensive to the reader's sensibilities is the explanation Duhsanta gives for his hesitation to acknowledge his wife and son:

Listen, good sirs, to what the Envoy of the Gods has spoken! I myself knew very well he was my son. But if I had taken him as my son on her word alone, suspicion would have been rife among the people and he would never have been cleared of it. (van Buitenen 1973: 170; Mahabharata 1(7) 69)

The explanation becomes even more insulting when Duhsanta addresses

Shakuntala directly:

The alliance I made with you was not known to my people; that is the reason why I argued, so that I might clear you, my queen...And if you have spoken very harsh words to me in your anger, dear wide-eyed wife,

it was out of love, and I forgive you, beautiful woman. (van Buitenen 1973: 170; Mahabharata 1(7) 69)

I forgive you? The words sting the reader like salt in a wound. Duhsanta not only tries to sidestep his responsibility, but he shifts the blame for their acrimonious exchange to Shakuntala herself. For my students—and, I would imagine, for most of us—Duhsanta ends up looking like a deadbeat dad persisting in denial until he has no other choice. He comes across as a repugnant character, beyond excuse and beyond hope of claiming the reader's sympathies.

It would appear that this judgment of Duhsanta is not exclusively modern. As I've mentioned, this story is much better known in somewhat altered form in a play by Kalidasa. In its more familiar form, Kalidasa lets Duhsanta off the hook by giving him an excuse: he has amnesia. By creating this excuse for Duhsanta, Kalidasa implicitly acknowledges that we would not otherwise find him to be a sympathetic character; with this revision, Kalidasa seems intent upon introducing some dramatic complexity to a play that would otherwise come across as a flat melodrama about a debaucher and his victim.

But perhaps this underestimates the depth of the story in its original form. I hope to demonstrate that this story has deeper and more subtle concerns than may be evident on a first reading, and that these concerns may shed light upon our reading of the epic in general and the Bhagavadgita in particular. To demonstrate this, I'll have to address the following question: Why does Duhsanta hesitate to acknowledge Shakuntala when she stands before him in the assembly hall?

Despite all appearances, I don't think it's because he's an unrepentant philanderer attempting to dodge the consequences of his actions. In defense of this claim, let me cite the epic's narrator, who affirms for us that, in response to the celestial announcement, Duhsanta is, in fact, genuinely delighted, because he is finally able to embrace his son (van Buitenen 1973: 170; Mahabharata 1(7) 69).

Moreover, the sage Kanva, who is not only unquestionably interested in his foster-daughter's welfare, but is also gifted with clairvoyance, tells Shakuntala, "Duhsanta, the man you went to lovingly, is a good man...great-spirited and law-minded" (van Buitenen 1973: 164-165; Mahabharata 1(7) 67). What I'd like to suggest is that, despite all appearances, the reason that Duhsanta hesitates to acknowledge Shakuntala is that he struggles with a moral dilemma, a dilemma that we're meant to take seriously, even sympathize with. This dilemma is rooted in the difficulty of translating private speech into public speech. For some reason, Duhsanta finds that the words he exchanged in private, intimate conversation with Shakuntala cannot be spoken in public.

In an effort to illuminate Duhsanta's dilemma, I'm going to depart from the Mahabharata for a moment and take a little detour to the west, enlisting the help of a couple of western literary and philosophical resources. I'd like to turn, first, to Shakespeare's *King Lear*. I turn to *King Lear* because I think this play presents us with a parallel dilemma, in a more familiar and more sympathetic form. I'm thinking of Cordelia, who is a decidedly more sympathetic character than Duhsanta, but who seems to struggle with a similar problem. Like Duhsanta, Cordelia is pressured to translate her most intimate feelings into the

public language of the royal court. Consider the difficulty into which Lear forces his youngest daughter when he asks her to compete with her sisters and proclaim her love for him publicly. Crippled by scruples in the face of inevitable hypocrisy, Cordelia finds herself unable to give voice to her love:

Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty
According to my bond, no more nor less.
(Folger Shakespeare Library Edition, 1.1.100-102)

Of course Cordelia loves her father much more than this, and much more than her sisters do. So why does she refuse to confess her love openly, before the royal court? I think that the answer to this question will resemble the answer to my previous question—Why does Duhsanta refuse to acknowledge Shakuntala?

To answer both questions, I'd like to avail myself of a quotation from another western source: the 20th century French philosopher Simone Weil.² It is perhaps worth noting that Weil had a peculiar fascination with both *King Lear* and the Bhagavadgita. But in the particular quotation I wish to cite here, it seems that she's thinking primarily of the Gospel according to John. Let's look at the quotation. In a letter written to a friend and clergyman, reflecting upon her spiritual struggles, Weil writes the following words:

Christ himself who is Truth itself, when he was speaking before an assembly such as a council, did not address it in the same language as he used in intimate conversation with his well-beloved friend, and no doubt before the Pharisees he might easily have been accused of contradiction and error. For by one of those laws of nature, which God himself respects, since he has willed them from all eternity, there are two languages that are quite distinct although they are made up of the same

² In an earlier incarnation of this paper, I also quoted a number of passages from the 20th-century philosophers Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. Because of time constraints, I have had to delete all these quotations from the lecture and focus on the quotation from Weil. But, no doubt, the influence of both Buber and Levinas is still discernible in this lecture in its abbreviated form.

words; there is the collective language and there is the individual one. The Comforter whom Christ sends us, the Spirit of truth, speaks one or the other of these languages, whichever circumstances demand, and by a necessity of their nature there is not agreement between them.

When genuine friends of God...repeat words that they have heard in secret amidst the silence of the union of love, and these words are in disagreement with the teaching of the Church, it is simply that the language of the market place is not that of the nuptial chamber. (Weil's "Spiritual Autobiography", in Panichas 1999: 23)

Applying Weil's reflections to Shakespeare's play, we can see that Cordelia has been forced into the unenviable position of translating, in the public forum of the royal court, words more appropriate to the intimacy of a private conversation. In the face of this imposition, she is burdened by the consciousness of the incommensurability of this private language and the language of the court—paralyzed by the awareness that, even if she were to repeat verbatim words she has surely spoken to her father in private, their truth would turn to a lie in the context of a public hearing. Though perhaps faulting her for a shameful naïveté or stubbornness of virtue, we can sympathize with Cordelia; we can recognize that she loves her father and understand that she is torn by the contrary demands of private and public speech.

I'd like to take Cordelia's case as a basis on which to build Duhsanta's defense. Now perhaps it will seem like a bit of a stretch to claim that Duhsanta rejects Sakuntala because he cannot heave his heart into his mouth. After all, there is a real asymmetry between Cordelia's position and Duhsanta's; in the case of Cordelia, she clearly stands in a weak position before her regal father, who wields an imperious power even in his family relations. In terms of the balance of power, Shakuntala seems more analogous to Cordelia, and Duhsanta to Lear.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that the distinction that Weil draws between the speech of the public assembly and the speech of the nuptial chamber maps readily onto the Shakuntala story, and that it illuminates Duhsanta's dilemma just as it illuminates Cordelia's. To buttress this claim, let's take a second look at Shakuntala story in closer detail, noticing the ways in which the narrative highlights the tensions between these two kinds of speech.

But before I move forward, let me take a moment to clarify a few things. Simone Weil uses the words "collective" and "individual" to identify these two kinds of speech, but at times I will use the words "public" and "private" to make the same distinction. Although these latter terms are not identical to Weil's, I believe that in using them I am staying faithful to the distinction she has drawn. Moreover, in the remainder of this lecture I'll make the assumption—which Weil doesn't spell out, but she clearly implies—that the private language, what she calls the language of the nuptial chamber, belongs exclusively to a one-on-one relationship, a relationship between two individuals; that is to say, the moment two people are joined by a third person, we have departed from the realm of the private and entered the realm of the public.

With these clarifications in mind, let's take a closer look at the Shakuntala story, starting from the beginning. The story opens in a panegyric mode. The poet glorifies King Duhsanta and sings the merits of life under his rule. Duhsanta's reign is totalistic: nothing lies outside his dominion. The king and his kingdom are harmoniously integrated, both in themselves and with each other. The sovereign and his subjects are upright and law-abiding; there is no

fear of theft, no fear of starvation, no fear of disease; the earth gives forth crops without tilling and gems without mining, and so on (van Buitenen 1973: 156; Mahabharata 1(7)62).

But having established this golden age scenario, the poet does not wait long to subvert it. There is a jarring shift in tone from the pacific to the turbulent as Duhsanta makes his passage from the royal capital to the forest hermitage. To reach Shakuntala's hermitage, Duhsanta must cross through three clearly-distinguished zones; as he moves from zone to zone, he diminishes his entourage and strips away, layer by layer, the garments of his royal identity. When he finally arrives at Kanva's hermitage, he stands alone, poised for a one-on-one encounter with the hermit's daughter.

The first zone through which Duhsanta passes marks his point of departure: the capital city. As the king sets out for the deer hunt, it is evident that a royal hunting expedition is no private sport; it is quite a public affair, and it begins with a spectacular pageant:

...[T]his strong-armed king rode out, with ample strength of men and mounts, to a dense forest, escorted by hundreds of horses and elephants. He progressed surrounded by hundreds of warriors... And as the king went on, the lion roars of his warriors, the blasts of conches and drums, the thunder of the chariot rims reinforced by the trumpeting and of the grand elephants, the whinnying of horses, and the growls and arm-slapping of the men rose to a tumultuous noise. From the balconies of their terraced palaces the womenfolk gazed upon the hero...in all his regal magnificence...and with love they sang his praises and strew rain bursts of flowers on his head. (van Buitenen 1973: 157; Mahabharata 1(7) 63)

All this celebratory noise, the sound of collective joy, is abruptly cut off at the edge of the second zone of Duhsanta's journey; having followed him as far as

they can, the crowds of well-wishers are turned away at the edge of the hunting ground, where Duhsanta forges ahead with his troops. Here, the cheers of the crowd are soon replaced by the sounds of an excruciating cacophony.

Now anyone familiar with classical Indian literature knows that a deer hunt can only lead to trouble. But even by the standards of classical Indian literature, the clamor and calamity of Duhsanta's deer hunt are stunning and awe-inspiring. The king is described as "stalking about", killing thousands of deer—and that's only the beginning of the violence. The poet's depiction of the hunt piles on the carnage and rounds it out with an environmental catastrophe:

The herds of deer, their flocks dispersed, their leaders killed, cried out for help everywhere. The river they sought out was dry; and thin with despair for water, their hearts exhausted with exertion, they dropped down, unconscious...There were mighty elephants that were wounded by swords and ran mad; turning up their trunks, they panicked and stampeded frantically. Dropping dung and urine and streaming with blood, the wild tuskers trampled many men. The forest [was] darkened by a monsoon of might and a downpour of arrows, its big game weeded by the king.... (van Buitenen 1973:158; Mahabharata 1(7)63)

This extraordinary outbreak of bloodshed is meant to serve as a red flag to us: the hunting ground serves as a membrane between the public space of kingship and the private space of the hermitage. To penetrate this membrane is an act of violence, especially when it is penetrated by that most public of figures, the king himself.

Having violated this buffer zone, Duhsanta then steps into the third zone of his journey, the forest of the hermits. The tranquility of this site sets it apart from the turmoil of the hunting ground: this forest is carpeted with flowers, gladdened with holy streams, resounding with warbling birds and humming

bees; an idyllic scene in which hermits, deer, and beasts of prey live together peaceably (van Buitenen 1973:159; Mahabharata 1(7)64).

The poet initially tells us that Duhsanta “penetrated by *himself* into the depths of (this) forest”; but to make certain that the reader catches the point, the poet backtracks and describes in detail the diminution of the king’s entourage. First, at the edge of the hermits’ forest, Duhsanta tells his troops of hunters to follow him no further. Then, “Discarding his regalia and accompanied only by councillor and priest, he walked to the grand hermitage...” (van Buitenen 1973: 159; Mahabharata 1(7) 64). Lastly, having reached the sanctum of Shakuntala’s father, the king completely abandons his public persona: “Thereupon the strong-armed king dismissed his councillors and went on alone” (van Buitenen 1973: 160; Mahabharata 1(7) 65).

At the moment of Duhsanta’s arrival, the sage Kanva is absent. Like Duhsanta, Shakuntala is alone. And in the one-on-one encounter that ensues, we are conscious of that third person, the sage, who is spoken of frequently but is absent from the scene. We are conscious that, had he been present, he would have radically altered the scene, disrupting its privacy.

When Duhsanta presses Shakuntala to marry him, she begs him to wait till Kanva returns. She wants to ensure that the marriage is a public event, involving a third person to serve as witness. Duhsanta, however, insists on keeping it a private affair, just between the two of them: “Here I stand for you, my heart has gone out to you. Oneself is one’s own best friend, oneself is one’s

only recourse.³ You yourself can lawfully make the gift of yourself” (van Buitenen 1973: 153-164; Mahabharata 1(7) 67).

In the face of the king’s insistence, Shakuntala draws up a contract with him, stipulating that their son shall be the heir apparent to the throne (van Buitenen 1973:164; Mahabharata 1(7)67). Thus she breaks up the exclusivity of their one-on-one encounter by bringing *another* third person into the conversation: the son who she already anticipates will issue from their union. Moreover, by turning the conversation to the political topic of royal succession, Shakuntala once again attempts to cast a public light on the marriage. The king agrees to her requirement, swearing not by any third party, but rather offering his promise “as my truth” (van Buitenen 1973:164; Mahabharata 1(7) 67).

The king, overwhelmed with the unfamiliar experience of privacy, shows himself to be somewhat naïve; he hasn’t thought ahead about how he will negotiate his transition back to public life; Shakuntala, on the other hand, displays unexpected savvy by looking forward to the politics of the royal court.

How can this be? How can Shakuntala, who has spent most of her life in a sheltered, one-on-one relationship with her foster-father, have any sense of the dynamics of the royal court? What does she know about the public realm? The poet hints at an answer when he tells us how Shakuntala first learned that Kanva is not, in fact, her biological father. She did not learn this fact directly from Kanva. Rather, we are told, Shakuntala discovered the truth of her birth by

³ Compare this with Krishna’s words in the Bhagavadgita: “Let him by himself save himself and not lower himself, for oneself alone is one’s friend, oneself alone one’s enemy. To him his self is a friend who by himself has conquered himself; but when the man who has not mastered himself is hostile, he acts as his own enemy” (van Buitenen 1981: 93, Bhagavadgita 6.5f.).

eavesdropping on a conversation between Kanva and a guest of his, a fellow ascetic (van Buitenen 1973: 161-163; Mahabharata 1(7) 65-66). It's significant that the story of Shakuntala's birth and adoption is a tale that has come to her second-hand. By relating to her own story as an eavesdropper who violates the ostensible privacy of the two sages, Shakuntala already has some insight into the problem of private versus public speech. Whereas Duhsanta later finds himself trapped by an inviolable barrier between these two kinds of speech, Shakuntala has learned, in the seemingly private space of the hermitage, that the barrier between public and private speech is illusory. All speech is public speech. Whenever two are gathered together, there is always a third. For every one-on-one conversation, there is *always*, in fact, an eavesdropper bearing witness to what is being said. Skipping ahead, we will see that this is how Shakuntala solves Duhsanta's dilemma: perceiving the terms in which the king's problem is formulated, she challenges the integrity of his notion of privacy. Under analysis, the notion of privacy dissolves, and with it Duhsanta's dilemma dissolves.

When Shakuntala stands before Duhsanta in his assembly hall, she initiates her rebuke against him in the following terms:

Good sir, alas, you yourself are the witness to your truth and your lie—do not despise yourself! He who knows himself to be one way and pretends it is another way is a thief who robs his own soul...You think you are alone with your self, but don't you know the ancient seer who dwells in your heart? Him who knows your evil deeds? It is before him that you speak your lie! (van Buitenen 1973: 166; Mahabharata 1(7) 68)

Here Shakuntala calls into question the very possibility of an encounter between two individuals. Such a possibility presupposes the existence of the individual—that is, of the undivided soul. Duhsanta may have thought he was by

himself when he met Shakuntala. When he told her, “Oneself is one’s own best friend, oneself is one’s only recourse,” he asserted the integrity of a unified soul. But Shakuntala exposes the plurality implicit in the king’s phrasing by transforming the metaphor of self-relatedness from “friend” to “thief”: again, “He who knows himself to be one way and pretends is another way is a thief who robs his own soul...” Even in a harmonious soul, a plurality of personalities is implied by Shakuntala’s allusion to “the ancient seer who dwells in your heart.”

Having challenged the privacy of the one-on-one encounter from within, Shakuntala challenges it from without in her second sally against the king. By turning the metaphor inside out, she unfolds the internal witness into the more explicitly public metaphor of an external audience. Under the gaze of this audience, no one can claim privacy or anonymity:

A man who has done wrong thinks, ‘Nobody knows me.’ But the Gods know him, and his own inner soul. Sun and Moon, Wind and Fire, Heaven, Earth, and Water, and his heart, and Yama, and Day and Night, and both the Twilights, and the Law all know the doings of each man. (van Buitenen 1973: 166; Mahabharata 1(7) 68)

Shakuntala tears down the false veil between the internal and the external, and in doing so she reconstructs Duhsanta’s awareness of being in the public eye—the very awareness that he had recklessly shed in the course of his venture into the forest.

Appealing to Duhsanta’s self-interest, Shakuntala rounds out her tirade with a lengthy discourse on the surpassing value of possessing a wife and a son. Even in this stage of her appeal, we can detect an argument for the schizophrenic nature of personal identity.

A son, the wise say, is the man himself born from himself; therefore a man will look upon the mother of his son as his own mother. The son born from his wife is as a man's face in a mirror...He has been born from your limbs, one man from another: look on my son as your other self, as your reflection in a clear pond...so is he born from you, and you, being one, have been made two. (van Buitenen 1973: 167-168; Mahabharata 1(7) 68)

By begetting a son, Shakuntala argues, Duhsanta has fractioned his internal self and externalized it; being one, he has been made two. He can no longer regard himself as an individual; he can no longer believe naively in the unity the self that he has brought to the one-on-one encounter with Shakuntala.

Having concluded her argument, Shakuntala storms out of the assembly hall, leaving Duhsanta apparently unmoved. But at this point, her argument is taken up by the disembodied celestial voice, and Duhsanta is finally persuaded to embrace his wife and son. In addition to affirming that Shakuntala has spoken the truth, the disembodied voice asserts that:

A wife bears a son by splitting her body in two; therefore, Duhsanta, keep Shakuntala's son... (van Buitenen 1973: 170; Mahabharata 1(7) 69)

With this startling anatomical metaphor, the poet once again reminds us of the divisibility of personal identity. And although the celestial voice initially commands Duhsanta to keep "Shakuntala's son", the voice immediately goes on to rephrase the command, telling the king: "keep this great-spirited scion of Duhsanta and Shakuntala; for he is yours to keep." The child is an ambiguous symbol; he is the bond between his parents; but he is also split up between his parents, and he is that which splits up the apparent unity and individuality of each of his parents. Only by giving up his false sense of unity and individuality can Duhsanta come to accept his role as father and husband.

Still, it is not yet clear why Duhsanta is persuaded at this moment to speak up and acknowledge his son. According to Duhsanta, the celestial voice has spoken with an authority that exceeds his own. But on what grounds does the voice speak with authority? The source of the voice is unseen and unnamed; but it is presumably that of some celestial witness who has seen all that has transpired in the hermitage as well as the court. By announcing itself, this unseen spectator not only validates Shakuntala's paternity suit, but it also serves as living proof of her broader argument: our private room is always in fact a public stage, and there is always an audience sitting somewhere out there in the dark.

Thus the unseen speaker has decisively resolved an unbearable dilemma, bringing victory to Shakuntala and relief to Duhsanta. But it has done so at a great cost: the intimate truth of the private encounter has been erased, making way for the dominance of the public and collective. I'm not at all certain that this is a happy solution. While it's hard to deny that Shakuntala, her son, and Duhsanta himself are better off now that their family bond has been brought out into the open, I worry about the ultimate outcome of this sacrifice of privacy and individuality. Duhsanta's acceptance of his son marks the foundation of the Bharata dynasty, and as such it is both formative and anticipatory of the Bharatas' later destiny. By obliterating the integrity of the one-on-one relationship, I fear that Shakuntala and Duhsanta have planted seeds of violence, seeds that come to fruition generations later in the war between the Pandavas and Kauravas.

Part Three: Arjuna's Dilemma and Krishna's Solution

Let's turn our attention once more to the question that first motivated our inquiry: how does Krishna, in the Bhagavadgita, persuade Arjuna to go to war against his own family? Recall that the Gita begins with Arjuna asking Krishna to draw their chariot up to a spot midway between the opposing armies. In terms of the dichotomy we have been discussing, we could say that Arjuna is confronted with the most exemplary of collectives: a massive army gathered in formation on the field of battle. We can also detect in Arjuna an urgency to overcome this collective representation and break it down into a set of individual images: he wishes to draw close enough to view his opponents' faces. Seen one by one, each face evokes for Arjuna a recognition of his personal relationship to his opponent—he sees his cousins, his uncles, his grandfather, his teachers, and so on. The resulting impression for Arjuna is the incongruity of alternate and competing perspectives on reality, with the competing emotions they call forth; the sight of the collective army spurs Arjuna on to battle, while the sight of the individual combatants stirs Arjuna to compassion. The impact of the face-to-face vision of these combatants is so potent for Arjuna that it unnerves him and unravels his resolve to fight.

Addressing Krishna, Arjuna multiplies his reasons for withdrawing from battle, raising questions of ritual and family law. But it is clear that his initial response, and the strongest motivator in Arjuna's newfound pacifism, stems not

from a general question of legal principles but rather from a concrete and visceral response to the sight of his enemies' faces.

Krishna responds in kind to Arjuna's multiple rationales, accosting him, in rapid succession, with a multiplicity of rebuttals in a variety of modes. He taunts Arjuna, telling him to behave in a more manly fashion (Bhagavadgita 2.2f.). He tells Arjuna that he is wrong to despair for the deaths of his enemies—first, because the soul is immortal, and one can neither kill nor be killed (Bhagavadgita 2.11ff.); second, because death is, in fact, inevitable (Bhagavadgita 2.26ff.). Krishna then appeals to Arjuna's sense of duty as a warrior, telling him that it is better to perform his own duty imperfectly than to perform another man's duty well (Bhagavadgita 3.35); he cites the rewards due to a warrior, promising Arjuna heaven and good repute as his payment for fighting in this just war (Bhagavadgita 2.34ff.). Krishna then shifts the goal; he tells Arjuna not to seek heaven but liberation from rebirth (Bhagavadgita 2.39ff.). He identifies the chief obstacle to liberation as action (*karma*), and develops this theme of liberation at considerable length in terms of theory (*sankhya*) and practice (*yoga*). He tells Arjuna that he should seek liberation not in the cessation of action, but in renunciation of the fruits of action (Bhagavadgita 4.20). Thus Arjuna should engage in warfare without worrying about its consequences.

Arjuna is, understandably, bewildered by Krishna's ever-changing and seemingly contradictory advice. Among other difficulties, Arjuna cannot tell if Krishna is exhorting him to withdraw from or engage in action. He asks,

If you hold that insight is superior to action, [Krishna], why then do you urge me on to fearful action? (van Buitenen 1981: 81; Bhagavadgita 3.1)

Responding to this question, Krishna takes Arjuna down philosophical paths that recall passages in the Upanishads, the culmination of Hinduism's holy scriptures.

He encourages Arjuna to model himself after the yogi who

...sees himself in all creatures, and all creatures in himself—he sees everything the same. (van Buitenen 1981: 97; Bhagavadgita 6.29)

While this doctrine of the collective self has already been well established in the Upanishads, Krishna gives it a novel twist by positing himself as the proper target of the yogi's attention. Immediately after telling Arjuna that the yogi "sees himself in all creatures, and all creatures in himself", he goes on to say:

When he sees *me* in everything and sees everything in *me*, I will not be lost to him and he will not be lost to me. (van Buitenen 1981: 97; Bhagavadgita 6.30)

Krishna's recommendation of himself as the focal point of devotional attention is presented broadly as a model for salvation:

If one disciplined soul proffers to me with love a leaf, a flower, fruit, or water, I accept this offering of love from him. Whatever you do, or eat, or offer, or give, or mortify...make it an offering to me, and I shall undo the bonds of *karma*.... (van Buitenen 1981: 107; Bhagavadgita 9.26ff. See also: van Buitenen 1981: 87; Bhagavadgita 4.9ff.)

While the soteriological scheme in the Gita remains essentially the same as that in the Upanishads, urging a reconciliation of the individual self with the collective self, in the Gita, the abstract, collective self is given a personal veneer; it wears the face of Krishna. This shift in focus from the abstract to the personal may give us a clue to the subtlety of Krishna's scheme for resolving Arjuna's agonizing dilemma.

It begins to look as if Krishna is capitalizing on his personal relationship with Arjuna as part of an artful and insightful strategy. Krishna seems to recognize that, for all of his lofty philosophical reasoning, he will never incite Arjuna to take up his bow and fight unless he addresses Arjuna in the very terms that prompted him to put down his bow in the first place. Arjuna's fighting spirit was vanquished by a face-to-face encounter, and Krishna recognizes that he too must confront Arjuna with a face-to-face encounter to restore that fighting spirit. Just as Arjuna's vision of the faces of his family dissolved the collective reality of the hostile army, Krishna must devise an equally personal vision that will reassert and validate that collective reality.

If we recognize this as Krishna's aim, we can see that the primary persuasive force of his sermon lies not in the content of his arguments but the dramatic context in which those arguments are delivered. From this perspective, Krishna's sermon looks like a mere pretext, a sleight of hand trick to capture Arjuna's attention. Krishna has deflected Arjuna's attention away from the facing army and drawn it toward himself. Poised between the militant masses, who are gathered in suspense, Arjuna's gaze is locked onto the face of Krishna, who patiently and persistently engages him in an intimate dialogue. They converse in an oasis of individual relatedness—a scenario staged by Arjuna and exploited by Krishna.

Arjuna, who has despaired to see his teachers among the enemy combatants, now looks to Krishna as his teacher, turning to him in the stance of a disciple, imploring: "Pray guide me, your student who asks for your help!"

(van Buitenen 1981: 75; Bhagavadgita 2.7) Arjuna, who has despaired to see his kinsmen and friends among the enemy combatants, receives Krishna's teaching with the trusting intimacy of a kinsman and friend.

Now that he has lured Arjuna into an engagement that is didactic, familiar, and familial, Krishna proceeds to shatter Arjuna's captured attention by staging a glorious affirmation of the collective. This breaking point occurs in the eleventh chapter of the Gita, at Arjuna's request. Arjuna tells Krishna,

Now I wish to set eye on your real, supernal form, just as you have described yourself, sovereign lord, Supreme Person! If you think that I shall be able to look upon it, lord, master of Yoga, display to me your imperishable person. (van Buitenen 1981: 113; Bhagavadgita 11.1ff.)

Krishna consents to Arjuna's request, giving Arjuna what he has wanted to give him all along: a vision that transforms the face-to-face encounter into an affirmation of the collective, a vision of all things in Krishna and Krishna in all things. Confronted with Krishna's transfiguration, Arjuna gasps:

I see all Gods in your body, O God.
And all creatures in all their varieties...

Your own infinitude stretching away,
Many arms, eyes, bellies, and mouths do I see,
No end do I see, no beginning, no middle,
In you, universal in power and form...
(van Buitenen 1981: 113-115; Bhagavadgita 11.18-19)

Far from finding pacification for his anxiety, Arjuna is, understandably, terrified by what he sees:

The worlds are in panic and so am I!

At the aspect of you who are brushing the sky,
Ablaze, many-hued, maws gaping, and eyes
Asparkle and wide, my innards are quaking,
And...I find neither firmness nor peace.

Just watching your mouths that bristle with fangs
And resemble the fire at the end of the eon,
I know no directions and find no shelter—
Have mercy, great God, repose of the world!
(van Buitenen 1981: 115; Bhagavadgita 11.23-25)

In this cosmic vision, Arjuna beholds his cousins rushing like moths into Krishna's numerous flaming mouths (Bhagavadgita 11.29). With Arjuna's eyes locked on this horrific sight, Krishna boasts:

I am Time grown old to destroy the world,
Embarked on the course of world annihilation:
Except for yourself, none of these will survive,
Of these warriors arrayed in opposite armies.

Therefore raise yourself now and reap rich fame,
Rule the plentiful realm by defeating your foes!
I myself have doomed them ages ago:
Be merely my hand in this, Left-Handed Archer!

Slay Drona and Bhishma and Jayadratha,
And Karna as well as other fine warriors—
My victims—destroy them and tarry not!
Wage war! You shall trounce your rivals in battle!
(van Buitenen 1981:117; Bhagavadgita 11.32-34)

Of course Arjuna is shocked, but his shock is multivalent, embracing a startling juxtaposition of terror and love. He tells Krishna,

The world is enraptured and flooded with love...
(van Buitenen 1981: 117; Bhagavadgita 11.36)

The love that Arjuna speaks of here is clearly not the familiar love between intimate friends. In fact, when Arjuna reflects back, at this moment, upon his customary intimacy with Krishna, he melts into regret and self-reproach:

If, thinking you friend, I have too boldly
Cried, "...Krishna! Come here, my good friend!"
Not knowing of your magnificence,
Out of absence of mind or sheer affection,

If perchance I have slighted you—merely in jest—
In matters of sport, bed, seating, or meal,
In privacy...or before others—
I ask your indulgence, immeasurable One!
(van Buitenen 1981: 119; Bhagavadgita 11.41-42)

Arjuna's repentance of his friendship with Krishna makes for an especially gripping and poignant moment, leaving an indelible mark on the reader. Surely it has left its mark on Arjuna as well, long after Krishna has returned to his friendly and familiar form. Even though Arjuna says, "Now that I see your gentle human shape...I have come to my senses and my normal tenor is restored!" (van Buitenen 1981: 121; Bhagavadgita 11.51), he will never be the same again. Arjuna is no longer shaking at the sight of Krishna; but much more telling is the fact that Arjuna is no longer shaking at the prospect of slaying his kinsmen. On the far side of terror, Arjuna no longer clings to the anxiety induced by the sight of his enemies' faces. Having looked into the rancorous heart of the collective, he no longer hesitates to kill.

The vision of Krishna's universal form has served the same purpose for Arjuna that the celestial voice served for Duhsanta in the story of Shakuntala. Each of these men has been led by his most intimate love, paradoxically, to an encounter with grandeur that vanquishes the truth of intimacy. Each of these men has crossed to the far side of the obstacle posed by the face-to-face encounter and emerged into the freedom to fulfill his duty on the epic's public stage. But the results in each case are so different: in the case of Duhsanta and Shakuntala, the translation from the individual to the collective results in the establishment of the Bharata family, both as a nuclear family and as a dynasty; in

the case of Arjuna and Krishna, the translation from the individual to the collective results in the destruction of the Bharata family, both as a nuclear family and as a dynasty. Confronted with these contrary results, I'm uncertain about where I ought to stand. My uncertainty is complicated by the fact that Krishna is, after all, the Lord of the Universe. Does the epic really intend for me to question his advice? I'm not sure. In the end, I think of Gandhi's ambivalence about the holiness or unholiness of Krishna's war, and I find myself torn between reverence and revulsion as I look into the face of the victorious collective.

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