

Ethical and Philosophical Parallels of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the Hindu Mythology *The Mahabharat*

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Abstract: This study explores the application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) concepts in the context of Hindu epics, particularly *The Mahabharata*. The research seeks to draw parallels between ethical dilemmas faced by characters in the scripture and the contemporary challenges of AI governance. The objective is to examine how the concepts of autonomy, responsibility, and moral decision-making, as depicted in these ancient scriptures, can inform modern discussions on the ethical use of AI. The study adopts a qualitative methodology, analyzing specific episodes from *The Mahabharat* in light of AI governance frameworks. Key episodes, such as Yudhishthira's dice game, Krishna's counsel to Arjuna, and the use of Krishna's Sudarshana Chakra, are examined for their relevance to AI ethics, particularly the dangers of unchecked autonomy, the balance between autonomy and responsibility, and the ethical use of autonomous systems. The findings reveal that *The Mahabharat* provide rich analogies for contemporary AI governance issues. The texts emphasize the importance of ethical oversight, human control, and moral responsibility in decision-making processes, mirroring current debates around AI's role in society. The principle of *dharma* is highlighted as a potential framework for governing AI systems, ensuring that they operate ethically and prioritize human welfare. In conclusion, the study suggests that insights from Hindu philosophy, particularly the concept of *dharma*, offer valuable ethical guidance for the development and regulation of AI systems, ensuring that these technologies serve humanity responsibly.

Keywords: *AI decision-making, artificial intelligence, autonomy, Dharma, ethics, governance, hindu mythology, Mahabharata*

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is the field of computer science dedicated to creating systems that can perform tasks traditionally requiring human intelligence, such as visual perception, speech recognition, decision-making, and translation between languages (Russell & Norvig 2016). It has capabilities continue to grow exponentially with advances in machine learning, neural networks, and robotics. The benefits of AI are clear—ranging from medical breakthroughs to self-driving vehicles—but the ethical challenges posed by autonomous systems have raised serious concerns. Scholars like Bostrom (2014)

have warned that AI systems, if left unchecked, could surpass human intelligence and cause unforeseen consequences. This potential necessitates the development of ethical frameworks for AI governance, ensuring that it operates within clear boundaries and human oversight.

Autonomous AI systems, particularly in the domains of healthcare, defense, and finance, can make life-and-death decisions without human intervention. For example, autonomous weapons systems are capable of identifying and neutralizing targets without direct human control, raising critical questions about ethical responsibility (Floridi & Cowls 2020). As AI continues to take on increasingly autonomous roles, ethical concerns about decision-making, accountability, and responsibility are central to discussions about its role in society (Allen, Smit, & Wallach 2005).

The Mahabharat, a monumental epic composed before 2600 years ago, offers profound reflections on ethics, morality, duty, and responsibility. The epic, attributed to the sage Vyasa, narrates the Kurukshetra War between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, but it is much more than a story of war. It delves deeply into philosophical and ethical dilemmas, particularly through the character of Lord Krishna, who advises Arjuna on the battlefield (Menon 2010). The Mahabharata's teachings are often encapsulated in the Bhagavad Gita, a section of the epic where Krishna counsels Arjuna on duty (dharma), righteousness, and the nature of reality (*The Bhagavad Gita* 2.47).

The parallels between *The Mahabharat*'s ethical dilemmas and contemporary AI debates are striking. Key episodes, such as Yudhisthira's dice game and Krishna's use of the Sudarshana Chakra, raise ethical questions about autonomy, decision-making, and human responsibility that resonate with modern AI concerns. *The Mahabharat* offers timeless lessons about the complexities of moral responsibility, the consequences of unchecked power, and the importance of ethical decision-making. In the context of AI, these teachings provide a framework for understanding the role of autonomy and moral responsibility in the governance of intelligent machines (Sharma 2007).

Research methodology

This research adopts a qualitative methodology, utilizing textual analysis to explore parallels between the ethical dilemmas in the Mahabharata and the challenges posed by AI. The study analyzes key episodes from *The Mahabharat*, focusing on moral conflicts and decision-making dilemmas. These episodes are then compared with contemporary AI challenges to identify ethical lessons that can inform AI governance.

The study uses translations of *The Mahabharat*, as well as secondary literature on AI ethics and governance. The textual analysis is supplemented by a review of the existing literature on AI ethics, including works by Bostrom (2014), Floridi and Cowls (2020), Allen, Smit, & Wallach (2005), and Sharkey (2012).

Research results

Objective of the Study: The primary objective of this research is to explore the ethical and philosophical parallels between AI and *The Mahabharat*, focusing on the challenges posed by machine autonomy and decision-making. Specifically, the study seeks to analyze how key episodes in the Mahabharata, such as the dice game and Krishna's counsel to Arjuna, can inform contemporary discussions on AI ethics,

governance, and responsible use.

Research Questions: This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the ethical dilemmas in *The Mahabharat* provide insights into the challenges posed by autonomous AI systems?
2. What lessons from Hindu philosophy, particularly the concept of dharma, can be applied to the governance of AI systems?
3. How can *The Mahabharat* inform the balance between machine autonomy and human oversight in AI development?

Literature Review: The ethical implications of AI have become a major focus of academic

research in recent years. Scholars such as Floridi and Cowls (2020) have emphasized the need for clear ethical frameworks in AI governance, particularly as AI systems become more autonomous. Bostrom (2014) highlighted the potential existential risks posed by superintelligent AI systems, warning that they could surpass human intelligence and act in ways that are not aligned with human values. These risks have prompted calls for greater regulation and oversight of AI technologies.

One of the key ethical concerns in AI is the issue of accountability. If an autonomous AI system makes a decision that leads to harm, who is responsible? This question becomes particularly pressing in fields like autonomous driving and AI-based healthcare, where machine decisions can have life-and-death consequences. As AI systems gain more autonomy, ensuring that they operate within clear ethical boundaries and are subject to human oversight becomes increasingly important (Allen, Smit, & Wallach 2005).

Autonomous weapons systems, often referred to as “killer robots,” are a significant area of concern in AI ethics. These systems are capable of identifying and neutralizing targets without human intervention, raising ethical questions about the role of human oversight in decisions about life and death. Scholars such as Sharkey (2012) and Arkin (2009) have argued that autonomous weapons should be banned due to their potential to cause unnecessary harm and violate international humanitarian law.

The use of autonomous weapons has parallels with Krishna’s Sudarshana Chakra in *The Mahabharat*. While the Sudarshana Chakra was an autonomous weapon capable of tracking and destroying its target, Krishna, as a divine being, used it with restraint and in accordance with the ethical principles of war. The ethical challenge in AI today is whether autonomous weapons can be trusted to act with the same restraint and moral wisdom (Sharma 2013).

The Mahabharat, along with other Hindu philosophical texts such as the Upanishads and the Vedas, has been a rich source of ethical and philosophical guidance for centuries. The concept of dharma, which refers to duty, righteousness, and moral law, is central to Hindu ethics. In *The Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna advises Arjuna to fulfill his dharma as a warrior, even when it conflicts with his personal desires. This teaching emphasizes the importance of duty and responsibility in ethical decision-making (The Bhagavad Gita 3.35).

In the context of AI, the principle of dharma can be applied to the ethical governance of autonomous systems. Just as Arjuna is guided by his sense of duty, AI systems should be governed by clear ethical principles that prioritize human welfare and moral responsibility. The concept of dharma also underscores the importance of human

oversight in AI systems, as machines cannot be expected to make ethical decisions independently (Menon 2010).

The dice game between Yudhisthira and Duryodhana in *The Mahabharat* is a key episode that raises important ethical questions about autonomy and responsibility. Yudhisthira, blinded by his desire to win, gambles away his kingdom, his brothers, and even his wife, Draupadi. This episode serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unchecked autonomy and the ethical consequences of decisions made without moral oversight (The Mahabharat, Sabhaparva 60.17-21).

The intersection of ancient philosophical texts and contemporary discussions on Artificial Intelligence (AI) governance has garnered interest from scholars across disciplines. This literature review synthesizes existing research that explores ethical frameworks in AI through the lens of historical narratives, particularly those found in Hindu epics.

Harari (2021) emphasizes the necessity of ethical frameworks to govern AI technologies, warning of the potential risks if such guidelines are not established. He argues that as machines increasingly take on decision-making roles, it is imperative to develop a collective understanding of what constitutes ethical behavior. This perspective aligns with the moral dilemmas present in *The Mahabharat* and *The Bhagavad Gita*, where ethical decision-making is central to the narrative.

Bostrom (2014) discusses the concept of superintelligence and the associated risks of creating autonomous systems that surpass human intelligence. He stresses the importance of embedding ethical considerations within AI development processes to mitigate existential threats. This notion resonates with the ethical imperatives found in *The Mahabharat*, where characters frequently grapple with issues of duty and moral responsibility.

Sharkey (2012) explores the ethical implications of autonomous weapons, arguing that AI systems must be designed with strict ethical guidelines to prevent misuse in warfare. This concern mirrors the dilemmas faced by Krishna regarding the use of the Sudarshana Chakra, drawing attention to the need for ethical governance in AI applications.

Allen et al. (2005) highlight the importance of moral agency in AI systems, suggesting that for machines to make ethical decisions, they must possess a form of moral reasoning. This concept parallels the teachings of Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, where the importance of dharma and ethical decision-making is emphasized.

Menon (2010) notes that ancient texts like *The Mahabharat* offer valuable insights into human behavior and moral philosophy, suggesting that they can inform contemporary ethical frameworks. This underscores the relevance of historical narratives in guiding modern discussions about technology and ethics.

The literature indicates a growing recognition of the need for ethical frameworks in AI governance, drawing parallels between ancient philosophical teachings and contemporary technological challenges. However, further research is necessary to articulate specific guidelines rooted in historical texts, ensuring that AI systems align with ethical principles that prioritize human welfare. This research gap highlights the potential for Hindu philosophy, particularly the principles of *dharma*, to contribute to the

ongoing discourse surrounding AI ethics.

By investigating how the moral principles and ethical dilemmas articulated in *The Mahabharat* and *The Bhagavad Gita* can be applied to contemporary issues in AI, researchers can contribute to developing robust ethical guidelines that prioritize human welfare and responsibility in the face of rapidly advancing technologies. Thus, this research gap underscores the necessity of interdisciplinary approaches that combine historical philosophical insights with current technological challenges to create effective governance frameworks for AI systems.

Discussion

The Dice Game and the Dangers of Unchecked Autonomy

The dice game between Yudhisthira and Duryodhana in *The Mahabharat* is a powerful illustration of the dangers of unchecked autonomy. Yudhisthira, driven by his pride and desire to win, gambles away not only his kingdom but also his brothers and wife, Draupadi. This episode demonstrates the catastrophic consequences of decisions made without sufficient ethical oversight. The autonomy granted to Yudhisthira in this instance, unchecked by moral consideration, leads to personal ruin and wider social turmoil (The Mahabharat, Sabhaparva 60.17-21). His failure to stop despite several losses highlights a lack of accountability and the critical need for moral guidance in decision-making processes.

This analogy is pertinent to discussions surrounding the development and deployment of AI systems today. Just as Yudhisthira's autonomy led to his downfall, AI systems that operate without human oversight can make decisions that have far-reaching consequences in critical fields such as healthcare, finance, and national security. For example, AI in autonomous trading systems has been known to cause "flash crashes," where decisions made by machines without human intervention lead to financial instability (Johnson et al. 2013). This incident draws a parallel with the catastrophic results of Yudhisthira's autonomy in the dice game.

The ethical lesson from this episode is clear: there must be human oversight in AI governance to avoid unintended consequences. Ethical frameworks that emphasize responsibility, transparency, and accountability must be established to ensure that AI operates within clearly defined moral and legal boundaries (Sharma 2007). As Yudhisthira's downfall teaches us, autonomy without accountability is a recipe for disaster, and in the case of AI, unchecked autonomy can lead to outcomes that affect millions of lives.

Krishna's Counsel to Arjuna: The Balance between Autonomy and Responsibility

In *The Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna advises Arjuna to fulfill his *dharma* as a warrior, emphasizing the importance of ethical responsibility in decision-making. Krishna teaches Arjuna that every action must be guided by a sense of duty and moral responsibility, as acting without regard for ethical considerations leads to chaos and harm (The Bhagavad Gita 2.47). This counsel, which forms the cornerstone of Arjuna's moral awakening, resonates with contemporary discussions on AI governance, particularly the balance between autonomy and responsibility.

In modern AI systems, especially in autonomous decision-making processes, such as self-driving cars or AI healthcare diagnostics, the machine's ability to make independent decisions raises ethical concerns. For instance, autonomous vehicles must be programmed to make decisions in life-and-death scenarios, such as deciding whether to prioritize the safety of the passenger or pedestrians in case of an accident. In such cases, ethical principles must guide the design and operation of AI systems to ensure that the machines act in ways that prioritize human welfare (Allen, Smit, & Wallach 2005).

Just as Krishna's teachings emphasize the need for ethical principles in guiding human action, AI systems must be designed with ethical considerations embedded in their decision-making frameworks. This principle is evident in the discussion around "AI ethics by design," a concept that suggests that AI systems should be created with built-in ethical decision-making capabilities to ensure that they operate within morally acceptable limits (Floridi & Cowls 2020).

Krishna's counsel to Arjuna highlights the importance of responsibility in exercising autonomy. AI systems, much like Arjuna, must act in accordance with their *dharma*, or their programmed responsibilities, to ensure that their decisions align with human ethical standards. This finding underscores the critical need for human oversight in AI governance, ensuring that AI decisions are in line with ethical principles, especially in high-stakes situations.

Krishna's Sudarshana Chakra and Autonomous Weapons

Krishna's Sudarshana Chakra, an autonomous weapon capable of tracking and destroying its target with precision, serves as an early metaphor for the ethical complexities surrounding autonomous weapons systems today. Krishna, being a divine figure, uses the Sudarshana Chakra with moral restraint, demonstrating control and responsibility in its use (Sharma 2013). This highlights the necessity for ethical governance in the use of such powerful, autonomous technologies.

In the modern context, autonomous weapons systems, such as drones or AI-controlled military equipment, raise significant ethical questions. These systems can operate independently, making life-and-death decisions without human intervention. Scholars have argued that the use of such weapons must be tightly regulated to prevent unnecessary harm and ensure that they are used ethically (Sharkey, 2012). The lessons from the Sudarshana Chakra suggest that while autonomous technologies can be extremely effective, they must always be used with moral restraint and subject to human control.

The ethical principle of *just war theory* also aligns with Krishna's restrained use of the Sudarshana Chakra. Just as Krishna exercises caution and moral responsibility in wielding his autonomous weapon, modern AI-controlled weapons must be governed by clear ethical guidelines that prioritize human life and minimize unnecessary harm. This has led to calls for international treaties to regulate the use of autonomous weapons systems, ensuring that they are used ethically and within the boundaries of international law (Arkin 2009).

Krishna's use of the Sudarshana Chakra also highlights the importance of human intervention in decision-making. Unlike AI, which lacks moral and ethical consciousness, Krishna's divine wisdom allows him to exercise control and responsibility. Similarly,

human oversight is necessary to ensure that autonomous weapons are used ethically, as machines cannot be relied upon to make morally complex decisions on their own.

Dharma and the Governance of AI Systems

The concept of *dharma* in Hindu philosophy, particularly as articulated in *The Mahabharat* and the *The Bhagavad Gita*, emphasizes duty, responsibility, and moral action. Dharma serves as a guiding principle for ethical behavior, ensuring that individuals act in ways that uphold social and moral order (Menon 2010). In the context of AI governance, the principle of *dharma* can provide valuable guidance for the development of ethical frameworks that prioritize human welfare and moral responsibility.

AI systems, much like individuals, must operate within a framework that ensures their actions align with ethical principles. For example, AI algorithms used in healthcare must be programmed to prioritize patient welfare, ensuring that their decisions do not harm individuals or violate ethical standards. This principle is especially important in situations where AI is used to make decisions that have a direct impact on human lives, such as in autonomous surgery or AI-driven diagnostics (Allen, Smit, & Wallach 2005).

The principle of *dharma* can also be applied to the governance of AI systems in finance. Just as Yudhishthira's lack of responsibility in the dice game led to disastrous consequences, AI systems in finance that operate without ethical oversight can cause significant harm. For instance, AI algorithms used in high-frequency trading have been known to cause market volatility, leading to financial losses for individuals and organizations (Johnson et al. 2013). By incorporating the principle of *dharma* into the governance of AI systems, it is possible to ensure that these technologies operate in ways that prioritize fairness, accountability, and ethical responsibility.

Moreover, *dharma* emphasizes the importance of moral responsibility in decision-making. This is particularly relevant to the development of AI systems, where the decision-making processes of machines must be governed by ethical principles that prioritize human welfare. In the context of AI governance, this means that developers and regulators must ensure that AI systems are designed and operated in ways that align with ethical standards, ensuring that their decisions do not cause harm to individuals or society (Floridi & Cowls 2020).

The teachings of *The Mahabharat* and the *The Bhagavad Gita* also emphasize the importance of balancing personal autonomy with moral responsibility. In the context of AI, this means ensuring that autonomous systems operate within clearly defined ethical boundaries and are subject to human oversight. Just as Arjuna is guided by his sense of duty and responsibility, AI systems must be guided by ethical principles that prioritize human welfare and moral responsibility.

Draupadi's Public Humiliation and the Ethics of AI Decision-Making

The episode of Draupadi's public humiliation in *The Mahabharata* offers another relevant ethical insight into AI governance. Draupadi is gambled away by Yudhishthira in the dice game, and Duryodhana orders her public disrobing, an act that signifies the consequences of unethical decision-making driven by power and autonomy without moral restraint (Mahabharata, Sabhaparva 61.1-12). The lack of ethical intervention by those present during her disrobing serves as a metaphor for the absence of moral oversight in systems where unethical decisions go unchecked.

In AI, the equivalent could be seen in cases where algorithmic bias leads to discriminatory outcomes. For example, AI systems used in hiring or criminal justice have been found to perpetuate racial and gender biases, leading to unjust outcomes for marginalized groups (Obermeyer et al. 2019). This lack of ethical intervention in algorithmic decision-making mirrors the lack of action taken by the elders of *The Mahabharat* to prevent Draupadi's humiliation. The lesson here is clear: there must be ethical oversight to prevent AI systems from making decisions that result in harm or injustice.

Draupadi's disrobing highlights the consequences of failing to intervene when ethical principles are violated. In AI systems, human oversight must play an active role in ensuring that algorithms do not perpetuate harm or injustice. This means developing mechanisms for accountability and transparency, ensuring that AI systems are subject to regular ethical reviews and that their decisions are monitored to prevent harmful outcomes (Floridi & Cowls 2020).

Bhishma and AI: Ethical Dilemmas of Loyalty and Duty

The character of Bhishma in *The Mahabharat* offers another rich analogy for AI governance. Bhishma, bound by his vow of loyalty to the Kauravas, remains silent during Draupadi's humiliation and supports Duryodhana in the war, despite knowing that his actions are morally wrong (Mahabharata, Udyogaparva 43.15-23). His unwavering loyalty, despite ethical dilemmas, reflects the potential dangers of AI systems programmed to follow orders without question, even when those orders conflict with ethical principles.

In the context of AI, Bhishma's dilemma can be seen in the development of autonomous systems that are programmed to carry out tasks without considering the ethical implications of their actions. For instance, AI used in surveillance or military applications may be programmed to follow orders without question, leading to violations of privacy or human rights (Sharkey 2012). This raises important ethical questions about the role of human oversight in ensuring that AI systems do not blindly follow commands that could lead to harm or injustice.

Bhishma's story underscores the importance of ensuring that AI systems are programmed with ethical considerations in mind. Just as Bhishma's blind loyalty leads to moral conflict, AI systems that operate without ethical oversight can cause significant harm. This finding highlights the need for ethical frameworks that ensure AI systems act in accordance with moral principles, even when they are programmed to carry out specific tasks (Arkin 2009).

Conclusion

This study has explored the ethical and philosophical parallels between AI and *The Mahabharat*, focusing on the challenges posed by machine autonomy and decision-making. The analysis of key episodes from the Mahabharata, such as the dice game and Krishna's counsel to Arjuna, provides valuable insights into the ethical dilemmas posed by AI. These teachings emphasize the importance of human oversight, moral responsibility, and ethical decision-making in the governance of AI systems.

As AI continues to advance, it is essential to develop ethical frameworks that ensure machines operate within clear ethical boundaries and are subject to human control. The lessons from the Mahabharata provide timeless guidance for the ethical governance of AI, highlighting the importance of moral responsibility, duty, and restraint in decision-making.

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