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**Righteous Killing or Ethical Dystopia?
Re-examining Rama's Killing of Vali**

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Abstract

One of the most ethically ambiguous moments in the Sanskrit epic literature is the murder of Vali in the Kishkindha Kanda of the Ramayana. The act is traditionally justified as an act of kshastradharmā, the duty of the warrior-king to maintain cosmic and social order, but it also poses the very uncomfortable questions of procedural justice, moral transparency and the sovereign prerogative. The episode is questioned in the paper based on an interdisciplinary approach to it using dharma theory, political theology, just war theory, and the idea of ethical dystopia as it is developed in Western philosophical and literary literature. The paper presents an argument based on close textual analysis of the Kishkindha Kanda and interaction with peer-reviewed scholarship on Valmiki Ramayana, kingship theory, and comparative ethics to argue that the killing of Vali by Rama is paradoxical: both restorative logic of dharmic kingship and disorienting moral disorder that is the hallmark of ethical dystopia. The paper also argues that this ambiguity cannot be deemed an accidental flaw of the moral vision of the epic but rather an invitation to ethical considerations that the author has placed within the structure of the narrative itself. The comparative study of the episode with Aristotelian virtue ethics, Kantian deontology, Manusmṛiti jurisprudence, and Mahābhārata ethics indicates that the episode is incompatible with any particular ethical theory and requires a pluralistic and historically-specific approach to moral decision-making in the classical literature of Indic tradition.

Keywords: Valmiki Ramayana, dharma, kshatra dharma, kingship, ethical dystopia, Kishkindha Kanda, just war theory, Vali, Sugrīva, political theology.

1. Introduction

Despite the many contentious moments in the book of Ramayana by Valmiki, there is hardly an episode that has raised a long-standing ethical debate as much as the killing of Vali in the book of Kishangarh Kanda. Here, Rama, who is in many ways considered to be the embodiment of dharma (dharma-vigraha) himself, shoots the monkey king Vali behind a tree when Vali is in the midst of a single combat with his estranged brother Sugriva. It is a surprise, not sanctioned by any proclamation of war, and it is carried out without granting Vali a chance to organize a defence. Vali, dying, at once objects to the actions of Rama in a level of philosophical and moral acumen, which in this matter, would be appreciated in modern jurisprudence, as pertaining to the question of natural justice, procedural fairness, and proportionality. A justification of Rama is provided, found in a few verses of the Valmiki Ramayana (Kishkindha Kanda, Sargas 1718), based on kshatra dharma and royal prerogative--but the fact that a lengthy justification is necessary indicates that the text is conscious of the moral challenge it has posed.

The meaning of this episode goes way beyond the narrative context of the episode. The idea of the divine king in the Indian tradition of epics cannot be seen outside a specific theory of dharmic violence: the right of the sovereign to annihilate adharma is not only a political right, but a cosmic duty. Meanwhile, as Richman (1991) and Goldman (1984) have demonstrated, the tradition of the Ramayana is not that of one piece, and local re-tellings have often revisited the Vali episode as a place of moral unease and re-evaluation. The episode therefore serves as a milestone in the characterisation of Rama as well as a sort of moral trial case to the tradition as a whole: provided that Rama can be justified in doing so, can the tradition not justify the concept of dharma?

This paper treats the episode in the interpretive light of ethical dystopia, a literary and political philosophical term used in this paper to refer to a state of affairs whereby the institutional arrangements that are meant to guarantee the maintenance of moral order, ironically generate, facilitate or obscure moral disorder. Ethical dystopia, as it is conceived here, does not presuppose a totalitarian political system; it only presupposes that the mechanisms of moral and political authority are being run in such a way that they systematically betray the values which they are supposed to be promoting. It is contended in this paper that exactly this type of paradox is created in the Vali episode: Rama, the greatest upholder of dharma, does something that can, by the norms of the same tradition that Rama embodies, be described by his victim as adharmic.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the existing academic research on interpretations of the Ramayana, ethical arguments concerning the actions of Rama, the scholarship of dharma and kingship and previous studies on the Vali episode. Part 3 presents the theoretical framework, which is based on dharma theory, kshatra dharma, ethical dystopia, and political theology. Section 4 includes a close textual examination of the pertinent texts of the Kishkindha Kanda. Section 5 elaborates the ethical analysis, negotiating with the theory of just war, the deception of violence and the crisis of authority. Section 6 looks at the conflict between ethical dystopia and dharmic restoration. Section 7 reflects on the connection among kingship, justice, and political order in the classical Indian thought. Section 8 provides the comparison of Western and Indian philosophical traditions of ethics. In Section 9, a synthetic discussion is given, and Section 10 wraps up with implications to the study of ethics and Indic literature.

2. Literature Review

2.1 readings of the Ramayana of Valmiki.

England Speaking academy Robert P. Goldman, whose monumental Princeton translation project started in the 1980s and continues into the twenty-first century, had a significant influence on the scholarly tradition on Valmiki's Ramayana. Goldman (1984) treated the text as an artifact of an intricate compositional history, differentiating earlier heroic layers of the text by the later accretions of

devotional texts, and interpreted the Vali episode as an instance of precisely this kind of tension: the earlier, more martial, version of Rama as a heroic archer-king is uneasily juxtaposed with the more recent version of Rama. This philological sensitivity is significant to the present research in the sense that it makes it hard to read the episode as one and the same ethical vision.

Brockington (1984, 1998) developed this compositional study and claimed that Kishkindha Kanda, especially, has a lot of later content. According to his work, there are some of the most ethically disturbing elements of the Vali episode which can be interpreted as an effort of a later tradition to find a compromise between an earlier, less scrupulous epic of heroism and a later devotional need to project Rama as ethically innocent. The ambiguity of the ethical aspects of the episode is therefore the potential subject of Brockington work: it might be not an original authorial intent, but a by-product of the complex redactional history of the text.

Writing in a more antique age of Sanskrit studies, Winternitz (1927) and Hopkins (1915) were disposed to interpret the epics as sources of historical and mythological information and not as objects of moral analysis in their own right, and they exercise less attention to the Vali episode. A more synthetic reading was presented by Raghavan (1973) which stressed the role of the episode in the larger thematic framework of the Ramayana as a whole and argued that the death of Vali is structurally required to the furtherance of the dharmic mission of Rama- a reading which changes the ethical question into the narrative and cosmic role.

2.2 Moral Controversies of the Behavior of Rama.

Ethical aspects of the action of Rama have been discussed not only in the tradition of Sanskrit commentary, but also in contemporary scholarly works. This tradition has commentators like Govindaraja and Tilaka who wrote in the medieval period who provided defences of the act of Rama that relied upon a variety of dharmasastric arguments: Vali had broken fraternal law by taking the wife of Sugriva Rumā; he had dethroned his brother; he had refused to release Sugriva even when he had many chances to do so; The complete story of this tradition of legal-moral reasoning is given in Kane, magisterial History of Dharma sastra (1941), and is an indispensable part of the picture of the dharma saastric context of the episode.

Contemporary scholarship has been sceptical to a greater degree. Doniger (2009) noted that the episode was one of many in the Ramayana which revealed how weak Rama was as a moral model, and that the constant attempts in the tradition to justify the killing indicate, paradoxically, that it was aware of its moral price. Goldman (2004) posited that the episode stages a real debate in the text concerning the connection between dharma, gender and hierarchy and that even on its own dharmic grounds, the defence that Rama gives to his action is not absolutely satisfactory. Hildebeitel (2001) places the episode in a larger pattern in Sanskrit epic literature according to which the dharma king is periodically compelled to play a morally disturbing violence in order to perform his cosmic role - a pattern which, according to Hildebeitel, is itself a meditation on the paradoxes of dharmic authority.

2.3 Dharma and Kingship Scholarship

This foundational study by Pollock (1984) of the divine king in the Indian epic is the indispensable point of departure of the kingship aspect of this study. Pollock has shown that the authority of the epic king lies not in hereditary succession, or in military strength, but in a kind of theological pretension to embody and impose the moral order of the universe--a pretension which gives her her power and makes her duty, to enforce that order, even against those who would corrupt it. This paradigm applies directly to the Vali episode: The legitimacy of Rama as the judge of Vali is based solely on the legitimacy of this cosmic command, and the undermining of the legitimacy of this cosmic command is, as a result, an undermining of the entire ideological framework of dharmic kingship.

The Manusmriti (2005) and the Arthashastra (2013) by Olivelle allow introducing a necessary comparison material in terms of the normative legal-ethical situation in which the episode is framed. The Arthashastra, especially, authorizes a repertoire of strategically deceptive military and political maneuvers that could offer a dharmasastric justification of the disguised attack of Rama--but as argued in this paper, does not solve the more fundamental ethical challenge. Both Thapar (1978) and Biardeau (1994) have made significant contributions to the analysis of the relationship between Brahmanical political theory and the dharmic ideology of the epics, and both have highlighted the degree to which the ideology is used to naturalise and legitimise the forms of royal violence that might otherwise be questioned as morally justifiable.

2.4 Past Exegeses of the Vali Episode.

The Vali episode has aroused the interest of the scholars of both hermeneutical and comparative ethical traditions. Mani (1975) coded Vali in a systematic listing of his transgressions, and arrived at a verdict of the traditional dharma system on his death: justified punishment. Lutgendorf (1991) provided a devotional-theological interpretation where the death of Vali is not just a punitive act but a salvific one: in which Vali receives an arrow in the hand of Rama himself and thereby gains moksha and the killing is not a moral issue but a gift of the spirit. Although highly influential in popular devotional settings, it has been criticised by academic commentators as a rationalisation with a theological motive, which is not justified by the text of Ramayana of Valmiki itself.

The edited collection of essays in *Many Rama-nana-yasa* (1991) by Richman presents several attempts at negotiating the ethical challenge of the Vali episode, and the trend that appears is clear: the episode has been everywhere acknowledged as ethically problematic, and has been negotiated by a variety of strategies such as omission, rationalisation, inversion, and even outright critique. The importance of this history of reception to this study is that it proves that the ethical challenge presented in the episode is not a critical projection of the present day but has been identified in the tradition itself over centuries and in different cultures.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Dharma Theory

Dharma is one of the most semantically complicated notions of the Sanskrit intellectual tradition that cannot easily be translated to one of the English equivalents. As Ingalls (1962) noted, dharma simultaneously involves the concept of cosmic order, social duty, moral law and right action, and its application in any given situation involves the use of a contextually sensitive practical wisdom that recognizes the multi-layeredness of the obligation under consideration. Dharma in the Ramayana exists at various levels that are related to each other: as a cosmic law (rita), as a type of social order that is ensured by caste and kinship duties (varnashrama dharma), as a collection of royal duties (raja dharma), and as a code to which a warrior belongs (kshatra dharma). All of these levels interplay at once in the killing of Vali, which is one of the reasons why it is so ethically challenging.

Notably, dharma in the Sanskrit epics is not an objectified, written code of rules but a processual and disputed moral discourse. Hiltebeitel (2001) has suggested that the Mahabharata in specific is organized around the realization that dharma is sukshma, subtle, grainy and in most cases imperceptible to human cognition. Although overall it provides a more simplified and optimistic antidote of dharmic fulfilment, however, in the Vali episode, the Ramayana does not lose entirely that darker consciousness of the complexity of dharma and the fact that there can be a real moral dilemma.

3.2 Kshatra Dharma

The dharma of the warrior caste, kshatra dharma, offers the nearest paradigm in which traditional justification of the action of Rama is possible. Both the Arthashastra of Kautilya (Olivelle, 2013) and the Manusmriti (Olivelle, 2005) recognize that the need on the part of the king to uphold

dharma might necessitate the employment of force, and both books condone the various strategic and tactical measures, such as deception and surprise attack, which would be unacceptable in other ethical traditions. Pollock (1984) has demonstrated that this martial ideology has been firmly rooted in the epic tradition and that the readiness of the royal hero to employ morally inconvenient methods to achieve the dharmic goals are themselves indicators of heroic status.

Nonetheless, normative tradition of kshatra dharma is not unitary and counter-principles of the same tradition provide the space of ethical objection of Vali. The kshatriya ideal proclaims open warfare between equals as the paradigmatic type of righteous warfare: the Mahabharata, to give just one example, forbids attacking an opponent in the rear, attacking the unarmed, or killing by stratagem. The actions of Rama breach at least a few of these norms and the criticism Vali levels against him specifically appeals to this other version of the warrior code by stating that Rama has not met the kshatra dharmic criterion of which he purports to be acting.

3.3 Ethical Dystopia as Interpretive Lens

Ethical dystopia is a literary and political philosophical term that is used to refer to a social or political structure in which the institutions and practices that are supposed to facilitate justice and moral order have the systematic result or facilitation of moral disorder. Classical dystopian literature, such as that of Thomas More in *Utopia* or George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is generally seen as a commentary on political systems, whereas the ethical infrastructure can be applied to any context where an alleged ethical system is working against itself. Ethical dystopia is employed in this paper as a heuristic device of analysing the Vali episode: it is not that the Ramayana by Valmiki is a text of ethical dystopia in the literary sense, but that the episode possesses the typical attributes of ethical dystopia: a moral authority regime which generates moral disorder in the very process of purporting to bring it back.

The main characteristics of ethical dystopia that will be of interest to this analysis are: the centralisation of moral authority in one person whose decisions are projected as self-justifying; the repression of legitimate dissent in the prevailing moral system; and the generation of subjects, such as Vali, who are harmed or destroyed by the system that is supposed to be operating in the name of justice and order. All these characteristics can be found in the Vali episode and it is this structural similarity that renders the idea of ethical dystopia analytically useful to the current study.

3.4 Political Theology

Political theology In the Western tradition, and in the analysis of South Asian politics, by scholars like Pollock (1984) and Thapar (1978), it is the theological justification of political power the means by which political power is anchored in, and purports to be manifesting, a divine or cosmic order. Within Ramayana political theology of the kingship of Rama underlies it: Rama is not just a human king who has coincidentally become a virtuous man, but the avatar of Vishnu who has come to reestablish the cosmic moral order which Ravana has upset. It is this theological aspect of his power that makes his judgment of Vali seem to be self-authoritative: how can anyone dispute the moral decision of a divine king whose power is based on the cosmic order as such?

But, as the analysis of political theology suggests, it is the same step, the appeal to an absolute, transcendent basis, which makes the political authority appear most secure, that opens it to its most incisive criticism. When the authority of Rama turns out to be finally theological, then it must be legitimate insofar as the theological system on which it is based is coherent, and the coherence of this system is exactly what the episode of Vali challenges. To say that Vali is questioning not only a specific action but the political-theological structure by which the power of Rama is founded is to say the least.

4. Kishangarh Kanda- Textual Analysis.

4.1 The context of ValiSugrīva conflict.

The ValiSugrīva conflict has a backstory which is presented in the initial sargas of the Kishkindha Kanda (Valmiki, 2017, 4.1-4.9). The disagreement arises out of a misunderstanding: when Vali chases the demon Mayavi into a cave and fails to come out after a long time, Sugrīva who is awaiting outside and thinks that his brother is dead seals the cave entrance with a boulder and goes back to Kishkindha to claim the throne. Vali later appears alive, and on hearing that Sugrīva is still in charge of the kingdom, he sees the closed entrance as not an act of protection, but an act of treachery, and expels Sugrīva, his wife Ruma in his arms. The exile of Sugrīva and the capture of Vali of Rumā are the first moral wrongs that Rama presents in his defense of his next move.

There are a couple of aspects to this backstory that have ethical implications. First the initial misconception, which was the sealing of the cave by Sugrīva, was not always a deliberate betrayal but Vali reads it as a betrayal: the ambiguity is kept in the text (Goldman, 1984). Second, the action of Vali in capturing Rumā is a breach of the fraternity law, which is clearly denounced by the Manusmriti (Olivelle, 2005, 3.553.56). Third, when Vali refuses to set Sugrīva free even after further clarifications on his part amounts to tyranny and, under the dharmasāstric system, makes him an object of the righteousness of the duty of destroying an evil king. These three factors have been said by Pollock (1984) to give a legally and morally satisfactory reason why Rama should intervene however the question remains that the mode of intervention must be justifiable.

4.2 Rama's Justification

A response of Rama to this challenge of the mortally wounded Vali in the Kishkindha Kanda (Valmiki, 2017, 4.18.1-4.18.46) grows in a number of different arguments. The first is that Vali has contravened dharma by his mistreatment of Sugrīva, and that Sugrīva, his comrade in arms, has summoned Rama to justice--a position which places the action of Rama in the context of dharmic friendship and of kingly duty. The second is that Vali is a vanaras (monkey people), and is categorically equivalent to an animal, and that the dharmic rules of fair battle among warriors do not apply to the hunting of animals--a point which Vali instantly spots as a fallacy, pointing out that he had been conducting what seemed to be a legitimate battle with Sugrīva and was therefore, at that time, acting as a warrior. The third is the most theologically ambitious, Rama asserts himself as the enforcer of cosmic dharma, as a universal moral sovereign and not as a participant in a local conflict.

The third argument of Rama is the most revealing to the current analysis, as it reveals the inner logic of the political-theological construction in the most comprehensive way. In case the power of Rama, is based on his cosmic command, as the enforcer of dharma, then the procedural forms, which otherwise would govern his actions, the demands of open challenge, fair battle and due process, are in his view, secondary to the greater demand of dharmic restoration. It is the reasoning of dharmic kingship, as it is made by the epic tradition, Pollock (1984) has argued, when the king who acts motivated by a pure dharmic motive is, in a way, outside of the reach of the common moral laws that regulate lesser agents. However, as this paper will proceed to argue, this reasoning is precisely the reasoning of moral dystopia: a moral authority that poses itself as moral responsibility to moral order.

4.3 Vali's Ethical Objection

One of the most outstanding parts of ethical argumentation in the Sanskrit epic tradition is the dying speech of Vali in the Kishkindha Kanda (Valmiki, 2017, 4.17.1-4.17.42). Crippled and dying, Vali questions Rama at least four ethical points. First, he claims that Rama had no rightful jurisdiction of the conflict between Vali and Sugrīva: as Vali reminds us, Rama was not the king of Kishkindha, and the feud between the two brothers is an internal dynastic affair which an outside party did not have the right to interfere with by using force without declaring his intentions. Secondly, Vali contends that the

method of the killing, which is to attack him in the back of a tree without letting him know he was there, is a breach of the kshatriya code governing honourable combat: had Rama thrown out his challenge, Vali believes he would have either defeated Rama, or acquiesced to his rule, or at least been free in his choice to respond. Third, Vali suggests that although the legitimacy of the mission of Rama can be admitted, killing him during the legitimately waged battle against his brother is a breach of the rule prohibiting one to attack an enemy when he is engaged in combat. Fourth-and most philosophically intriguing-Vali poses what can be described as a procedural objection: he was not charged, tried and allowed to defend himself against the charges brought against him. Both accusation and verdict were united in the killing.

According to Goldman (2004), the speech of Vali is formally recognised in the narrative as ethically cogent: the response of Rama is long and a bit defensive and the text does not imply that it is absolutely final. According to Doniger (2009), it is this very fact that makes the episode to have its enduring ethical force: in the tradition of which Rama purports to be an icon, procedurally, the killing was unjustifiable. This interpretive judgement--which is common to Goldman, Doniger, Richman, and Hildebeitel, although with different degrees of emphasis--will be elaborated in the ensuing ethical analysis.

5. Ethical Analysis

5.1 Just War Theory and the Vali Episode.

The classical tradition of the theory of just war, which has been evolved within the Western philosophical tradition since Cicero, through Augustine and Aquinas, to the contemporary theoreticians, describes a list of conditions, which have to be fulfilled in order to have the use of military force morally justified. Such criteria are just cause, right intention, legitimate authority, last resort, proportionality and discrimination. Although the just war theory is a distinctly Western intellectual tradition, and cannot be directly applied to a Sanskrit epic text, it can be effectively used to compare the ethical framework of the Vali episode, as long as the analysis is mindful of the historical and cultural particularity of both traditions.

Using these criteria to the killing of Vali by Rama, the findings are not clear cut. Just cause is arguably there: Vali is abusing Sugrīva and taking away Rumā: these are true moral wrongs that under the dharmaśāstra system justify punitive action. Right intention is less evident: Rama has a very definite motive to go through with his alliance commitment to Sugrīva, a relational motive rather than a purely moral motive. Legitimate authority is contested: as Vali points out, Rama has no jurisdiction over Kishkindha. The requirement of last resort is not fulfilled evidently: no sign can be seen that Rama tried to solve the conflict by means of negotiations and open confrontation before he could use his lethal power. Reasonableness is dubious: the most severe option that can be taken is to kill Vali. The most egregious is the fact that the criterion of discrimination, that the combatants must be easily recognized and allowed to surrender, is obviously breached by the back-of-the-tree killing (van Buitenen, 1978; Fitzgerald, 2004).

5.2 Ethical Acceptability of the covert strike.

The most debated element of the episode both in the traditional commentary and in the modern academia is the moral legitimacy of the hidden attack of Rama. Within the dharmaśāstric tradition, there is a distinction between open warfare (dharma-yuddha) and strategically deceptive warfare (kutayuddha or kuta-yuddha), and the Arthashastra of Kautilya (Olivelle, 2013, 10.3) explicitly permits and indeed recommends a range of deceptive military practices when they serve the purpose of minimising overall harm and achieving a justified political end. Considered in this light, the hidden ambush of Rama could be seen as an act of kutayuddha and not a breach of warrior ethics.

Nevertheless, there are serious problems with this argument. The Arthashastra does not authorise deceptive warfare with reference to covert assassination by a sovereign of a private person, but with reference to the military tactic between organised armies. And even the epic tradition as such, in the Mahabharata no less than in the Ramayana, itself reiterates the ideology of open, honourable warfare as that of the real kshatriya--a standard to which the Vali episode itself urges us to refer. According to Brockington (1984) the episode therefore generates an internal contradiction in the normative frame of reference of the text itself, and the internal contradiction, not an external critical standpoint, that produces the ethical complexity of the episode.

5.3 Crisis of Authority

The Vali episode sets a stage of essential crisis of authority on several levels. On the immediate narrative level, the fact that Vali is challenging Rama is a genuine jurisdictional tussle: who is entitled to adjudicate two monkey princes whose feud precedes the coming of Rama and is not directly injuring either to Rama or his cause? The episode, at the dharmic level, brings about a paradox of moral authority, in that, in case the authority of Rama as the enforcer of dharma is absolute and self-legitimising, no one, not even Vali, has a legitimate claim to it, but this implies that there is no internal corrective mechanism of the system to correct its own mistakes, or to respond to the grievances of its victims. Theological level questions that arise out of the episode are: how can a divine avatar make a mistake? and how, when the action of Rama is dharmic by definition since he is the incarnation of Vishnu, can the system of dharma have anything to say that does not depend on the particular action of Rama?

This crisis of authority, Thapar (1978) has argued, is a feature of the replacement of tribal by state-based political organisation in early South Asia: the absolute moral authority of the dharmic king is indicative of the ideological requirements of an emerging centralised state, yet it is precisely the absolute character of that claim that renders it structurally susceptible to just the sort of challenge Vali provides. A similar argument has been made by Biardeau (1994), who argues that the recurring repetition of the moral crises in the epics around the figure of the dharmic hero are indicative of a profound cultural anxiety regarding the connection between divine authority and human moral judgment.

6. Dharma and Ethical Dystopia.

6.1 Rama or Moral Paradox?

This paper cannot provide a simple either/or verdict because the main question of this paper is whether the killing of Vali by Rama is a restoration of dharmic order and not a form of ethical dystopia. The interpretation that has been generated in the above sections indicates that both of these characterisations hold true, and that it is exactly this combination that co-exists in the same episode that gives its ethical power lasting appeal. In the sense that dharmic kingship as it is built up by the epic tradition is concerned, Rama does bring order: Vali is overthrown, Sugrīva is placed on his proper throne, and the coalition that allows the defeat of Ravana to be realized is achieved. The cosmic clockwork of dharmic healing is at work.

But, in the sense of the moral subject who is within the system--the voice which Vali dies speaking with such eloquence--the reestablishment of order is made possible by a process that systematically renders invalid the moral claims of that subject. Vali is not only killed, he is killed in a manner that deprives him of the right to defend himself against the accusations made against him, to oppose the jurisdiction in which he is tried, or to execute the agency which his position as a moral subject would otherwise permit him to exercise. Such refusal to be seen as a moral subject in the very process of moral enforcement is, as it is argued in Section 3.3, the hallmark of ethical dystopia.

6.2 Concepts of Justice and Moral ambiguity.

The conflict of justice and moral ambiguity in the Vali episode can be enlightened by the difference between two different understandings of justice that are both at work in the story. The former is what could be referred to as distributive or corrective justice: the reestablishment of proper relationships between persons and groups that were disturbed by the wrong. According to this understanding, this is a corrective justice on the part of Rama - it restores Sugrīva to his rightful position and punishes Vali due to his actual wrongs. The second can also be referred to as procedural justice: that the procedure through which justice is delivered must have a standard of fairness, transparency, and due process. According to this conception, the act of condemning and executing Vali is a grave injustice on the part of Rama, since the procedure involved in these acts contravenes all norms of procedural fairness.

The abundance of the episode as an ethical resource is that it does not just give preference to one conception of justice to the other. Rather, it plays out their collision and gives the reader the experience of both the power. This characteristic of the episode, which both Goldman (2004) and Richman (1991) have highlighted, is its ability to maintain several, irreconcilable moral readings without a final, definitive judgment. This interpretive openness is no, the current paper is saying, failure of the moral vision of the text; it is an articulation of a highly refined sense of the actual hardness of the moral judgment in complicated circumstances.

7. Kingship, Justice, and Political Order.

7.1 The place of the ideal ruler.

The Sanskrit tradition of the ideal ruler, the chakravartin, the dharmaraja, is characterized by a set of personal virtuous qualities and by a set of public functions. The Manusmriti (Olivelle, 2005, 7.17-7.26) outlines the main responsibilities of the king as safeguarding his people, punishing the unjust, rewarding the righteous and ensuring the social caste structure known as varnashrama. These are supplemented by the Arthashastra (Olivelle, 2013), which is a complete system of political and administrative responsibilities. In this context, the act of Rama against Vali can be interpreted as an act of the punitive role of the king (dandaniti) the application of coercive power to uphold dharma and to punish those who do not follow it.

But limitations upon the exercise of royal coercive power are also prescribed in the Manusmriti and in the Arthashastra: punishment should be equal to the crime, it must be administered in lawful ways, and--most pertinent to the case in point--the king must himself possess the qualities of dharmic character whose punitive office he purports to enforce. The Vali episode is whether a king who pursues a procedurally unjust end by means of dharma can still have the moral authority when performing his punitive role which his position demands. The requirements of the dharma-sastric tradition itself as to a rightful royal punishment are not entirely fulfilled by the act of Rama, as has been argued in an early commentary of the episode by Dharmdhikari (1968), and that is where lies the ethical challenge of the episode.

7.2 State Authority and Violence

The problem of state power and violence in the Ramayana tradition is related to wider issues of the political theology of sovereignty that have been debated in recent scholarship. Pollock (1984) showed that the Ramayana shows the power of Rama as both political and theological- based on his birth, his own virtue and his role as the avatar of Visnu. This triple grounding produces what Weber would have termed a kind of charismatic-traditional-legal authority, but where the three dimensions can even come into conflict with one another: the cosmic mandate of Rama may be in conflict with the procedural norms of the legal-traditional structure within which his authority exists as well.

State violence, the violence that the tradition of political philosophy since Machiavelli, Weber and Foucault have examined as constitutive, enabling violence, which is the basis of political order, is, in the Vali episode, made peculiarly visible. The dharmic order which the kingship of Rama is supposed to be, is shown to be kept at its core by a violence which is not entirely in keeping with the moral standards that it purports to impose. And this discovery is not merely a critical remark outside; it is in the very fabric of the episode, in the voice of the dying challenge of Vali.

8. Comparative Ethical Perspectives

8.1 Western Ethical Philosophy

Comparing it with the Western ethical traditions helps to understand the peculiarities of the dharmic ethical system and the particular character of the ethical challenge the Vali episode presents. The Aristotelian view of the episode would be the question of how virtuous character is connected to virtuous action. To Aristotle (2009), a virtuous individual is not only characterized by the end but by the means: the morally good individual does the right thing, at the right time, to the right person and by the right means. The end, namely the establishment of order and the punishment of a real evil-doer, which is obviously morally defensible, but the method of action (hiding, acting behind the back, without prior warning or confrontation) is incompatible with Aristotle criterion of virtuous agency. Virtue ethics criticism of the episode is therefore not that Rama was chasing the wrong end but that he was chasing a justifiable end by using activities that do not align with the virtuousness of the agent.

The episode is even more problematic according to Kantian approach (Kant, 1998). According to the categorical imperative proposed by Kant, the maxim of our action should be universalisable: we have to be able to act based on a principle which can be recognized as a universal law without contradiction. The maxim of the conduct of Rama, --kill those who wrong thy comrades by attacking them in the rear without previous notice--is not universalisable without the effect of creating an atmosphere of general insecurity, so that no one can be certain that his present occupation in a war will not be the pretext of an attack by a third party. Also, the formula of humanity developed by Kant of rational beings, that they should never be used as a means to an end, but must always be considered as an end in themselves, is obviously breached by the killing: Vali is not viewed as a moral subject, a rational individual with his own needs and demands.

The modern version of virtue ethics, as typified by the writings of theorists such as Alasdair MacIntyre, would focus on the story-based context in which virtuous action should be interpreted-context in which the Indic model would be much more accommodating to contextual and role-based moral judgments. However, even in this context, the episode in question is problematic: the virtues of the ideal king, as the very tradition itself expresses them, extend to martial warlike bravery and dharmic correctness, as well as to justice, receptiveness, and the ability to listen and react to justifiable moral issues. The inability of Rama to hear the challenge that Vali gave him, just before the murder and the rather unsatisfactory character of his reply afterwards indicates that the king did not exhibit the virtues of kings that his own culture glorifies.

8.2 Indian Philosophical Perspectives

The Vali episode can be framed in the Indian philosophical tradition by interacting with the dharma-sastric literature, the moral cogitations of the Mahabharata, and the tradition of Nyaya logic and epistemology. The Manusmriti (Olivelle, 2005) is a rich source of examining the punitive power of the king, yet, as I mentioned earlier, its standards of what is considered as a rightful punishment are not clearly fulfilled by the act of Rama. The Arthashastra (Olivelle, 2013) is less restrictive on strategic deception, but its frame of reference is the organised warfare, not the type of covert murders of an individual that Rama commits.

The material of the Mahabharata perhaps presents the most directly comparable material, since it is at some length concerned with precisely the type of moral dilemma that the Vali episode presents. Hildebeitel (2001) has demonstrated that the ethical system of Mahabharata is patterned on the understanding that dharma is irreducibly complex, that a moral dilemma is genuinely a dilemma in which all available courses of action have some moral cost to them, and that the hallmark of the true dharmic hero is not moral purity but the ability to act decisively despite this complex. Reading this, the Vali episode may be interpreted as a Mahabharata-type moral dilemma, inserted in the structurally simpler ethical environment of the Ramayana- a point where the sophistication of dharmic judgment cracks the surface of dharmic optimism in the epic.

Although it is not directly applicable to the Vali episode, the Bhagavad Gita (Zaehner, 1969) provides a parallel in its treatment of the situation in which Krishna instructs Arjuna to fight, despite his moral scruples: similarly to Rama, Krishna is acting on a cosmic imperative, which he says takes precedence over the moral restraint against killing, and similarly to Val The parallel implies that the conflict between the divine mandate and the normal morality is not peculiar to the Vali episode but is a structural aspect of the Sanskrit epic tradition dealing with the ethics of righteous violence.

Table 1: Comparative Overview of Scholarly Interpretations of Rama's Killing of Vali

Scholar / Source	Interpretive Position	Key Argument	Ethical Verdict
Pollock (1984) Journal of the American Oriental Society	Textual-historical	Rama acts within rājadharmā; Vali violated fraternal law by usurping Sugrīva's wife and kingdom	Justified within dharmic framework
Goldman (1984) Valmiki Ramayana Vol. 1, Princeton	Narratological	Vali episode reflects tension between heroic and devotional models of Rama	Morally ambiguous; narrative discomfort acknowledged
Richman (1991) Many Rāmāyaṇas, UC Press	Reception-history	Regional retellings contest the episode; ethical judgment varies across traditions	Contested; no consensus verdict
Lutgendorf (2001) Ramayan: The Holy Lake of the Acts of Rama	Devotional-theological	Vali receives mokṣa through Rama's arrow; killing is salvific	Theologically redemptive
Brockington (1998) The Sanskrit Epics, Brill	Philological	Kishkindha Kanda shows later interpolations; original ethical stance unclear	Textually stratified; ambiguity intentional
Mani (1964) Puranic Encyclopedia	Traditional-encyclopaedic	Vali's five transgressions make him deserving of royal punishment	Legitimately punitive

Table 2: Comparison of Dharmic Framework with Western Ethical Traditions

Ethical Dimension	Dharmic Framework (Valmiki Ramayana)	Western Virtue Ethics (Aristotle)	Kantian Deontology (Kant)
Moral Agent	King as upholder of cosmic order (dharma)	Person of practical wisdom (phronesis)	Rational autonomous agent
Basis of Action	Duty, role, cosmic obligation (svadharma)	Virtuous character and telos	Universal moral law (categorical imperative)
Justification of Violence	Kshatra dharma permits righteous force to restore order	Just war permits proportionate defense of polis	Violence justified only if universalisable; concealment is impermissible
Hidden / Deceptive Act	Permitted if dharmic goal is achieved; ends can justify means in kâla-desha context	Deception incompatible with virtuous character	Treating Vali as means, not end, violates categorical imperative
Authority Criterion	Divine mandate + royal lineage legitimise Rama's judgment	Legitimised by city/community role and virtue	Authority derives from rational law, not lineage
Role of Outcome	Restoration of social order (dharma-samsthapana) validates act	Eudaimonia of community as goal	Outcome irrelevant; only maxim of action matters

Table 3: Summary of Ethical Arguments for and Against the Legitimacy of Rama's Act

Argument Category	In Favour of Rama's Act (Dharmic Legitimacy)	Against Rama's Act (Ethical Dystopia)
Procedural Justice	Rama acted in his capacity as sovereign to punish a tyrant	No formal charge, no hearing; Vali killed without confrontation
Moral Deception	Strategic concealment is permitted in kshatra dharma (cf. Arthashastra)	Killing from behind violates warrior code (kshatriya dharma) and Vali's right to fair combat
Dynastic Obligation	Rama fulfils an alliance pledge to Sugriva, a duty of royal word	Personal political alliance cannot override universal justice principles
Cosmic Order	Vali disrupted social order; Rama restores it (dharma-samsthapana)	Restoring order through covert means creates a paradox of legitimate authority
Vali's Guilt	Vali committed five documented moral transgressions	Guilt does not waive right to fair trial or open combat
Salvific Reading	Vali attains liberation (moksha) through Rama's grace	Soteriological rationalisation is post hoc; not present in Valmiki's text
Just War Theory	War was necessary; Sugriva had exhausted peaceful options	Proportionality and discrimination principles violated by covert single killing

9. Discussion

9.1 Reinterpreting Dharma Through the Vali Episode

The discussion established in the present paper points to the fact that the Vali episode lends itself to a re-understanding of dharma, which does not simply rest on the apologetic explanations of the traditional commentary, but also does not simply view the killing as simply immoral. What the episode itself reveals, when looked at through the prism of textual analysis, ethical theory and the notion of ethical dystopia, is that dharma in the Ramayana is not a smooth system of moral guidance that is beyond question but a subject to dispute and moral discourse that is internally difficult to apply to specific circumstances without the use of a judgment that is itself ethically questionable.

This reinterpretation not only has consequences in the interpretation of Vali episode but also in the larger comprehension of dharmic ethics in the Sanskrit tradition. When dharma is recognized as a complex, contested and situationally sensitive moral category, as opposed to a set of rules, then the instances within the epics that seem to flout its standards can be interpreted not as dharmic thought failures but as purposeful attempts to confront the real challenge of dharmic judgment. Both Hildebeitel (2001) and Goldman (2004) have gone this way, and the current paper complements and builds on their work by elaborating the notion of ethical dystopia as a model of explaining how dharmic authority may bring about moral chaos in the very act of purportedly preventing it.

9.2 Epic Literature: Ethical Dilemmas.

The Vali episode is not a unique example of ethical challenge in the literature of Sanskrit epics; it belongs to a larger tendency of moral dilemma which pervades both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. This pattern has been recognized by Hildebeitel (2001) in the Mahabharata and the current analysis indicates that the same pattern is present in the Ramayana, although it is not as well-developed. The dharmic task of the hero in both epics demands that he do things that are in some way in violation of some of the moral principles that are otherwise esteemed by his culture and the violation is not simply hidden behind the scenes by the text, but is played out as a problem with which the characters must live and with which the reader must deliberate.

The implications of this characteristic of Sanskrit epic literature are significant to the study of ethics in literary works in general. The ethical intricacy of myth and epic texts is not something to be explained away as argued by Obeyesekere (1990), but a resource to be worked with: it is precisely their ability to place moral ambiguity in fruitful tension that allows myth and epic texts to continue their ethical reflection over centuries and across cultures. The Vali episode on the reading worked out in this paper is such a paradigmatic instance of this power: it contains in a tension which can not be resolved by any mere judgment the claims of dharmic order, and the claims of individual justice, and it is this fruitless irresolution that has given the episode a permanent place in the tradition of moral thought.

The editorial collections of Richman (1991, 2001) testify to the fact that this interpretive stalemate has been a productive source of creative interpretations of the episode, retellings of it, and critical interpretations of it, in a broad spectrum of regional and temporal contexts. The current paper is a part of this tradition of critical engagement, in that it applies systematically a series of analytical instruments, which have not been previously utilized systematically upon the episode, including but not limited to ethical dystopia, political theology, comparative ethical theory, in bringing out the more precise nature of the moral challenge which the episode presents.

10. Conclusion

The present paper has suggested that the killing of Vali by Rama in the Kishkindha Kanda of the Ramayana by Valmiki is neither directly justified by the norms of dharma nor directly denounced by them, but exists in a paradoxical ethical position that can best be characterised as an ethical dystopia: a state whereby the apparatus of moral authority generates moral anarchy in the very act of purporting

to The argument has been formulated based on a mixture of textual interpretation, interaction with the peer review scholarship on the Ramayana tradition, and comparative ethical argumentation relying on dharma theory, kshatra dharma, just war theory, Aristotelian virtue ethics, Kantian deontology, and the political theology of sovereignty.

The most important findings of the paper are as follows. To begin with, the Vali episode has the typical elements of ethical dystopia: self-legitimising moral authority, the repression of legitimate dissent, procedural machinery to obscure the violence inherent in the functioning of the system, and the creation of moral subjects who are harmed by the system in which they live. Second, the dying objection of Vali is not just a dramatic effect but a philosophically serious issue to the validity of the action of Rama that is not completely responded to in the text, and to which the tradition of scholarship has conceded an ethical force. Third, the fact that the moral challenge in the episode cannot be traced to the influence of a parochial or culturally-specific ethical tradition but can be found in the truly universal issues of procedural justice, moral authority and the legitimacy of the use of violence to enforce the law is confirmed through comparative analysis with Western traditions of ethics and with Indian sources of philosophy.

These findings have implications to the ethics scholarship and the Indic literary studies. To the scholarship of ethics, the episode offers a rich case study of applying multiple, competing moral theories to a single morally complex action, and how the moral theories can shed light on various parts of the moral challenge without any of them being able to give a completely satisfactory analysis. In the case of Indic literary studies, the paper is part of a developing critical mass of research, which does not think of the Sanskrit epics as the stockpile of orthodox moral didacticism but as highly complex and self-aware attempts at dealing with the realities of ethical existence- texts that raise ethical questions in a manner that does not collapse into easy solutions.

Future studies can develop this analysis in various ways: a comparative study of the Vali episode in regional Ramayana traditions, an examination of the various ways that the traditions have negotiated the ethical challenge; a more systematic use of the concept of ethical dystopia to other morally problematic episodes in the Sanskrit epics; a discussion with postcolonial and feminist studies of the episode, which have offered significant challenges to the gendered aspect of The Vali episode, as any great moral dilemma in great literature, yields new insights to every angle of investigation, and the analysis which has just been offered asserts not to have exhausted it, but to have set up new fruitful avenues into it .

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