

The Concept of *Dharma*: Classical Meaning, Common Misconceptions and Implications for Psychology

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Abstract

It is common in India as well as elsewhere today to use the word *dharma* as implied in the idea of the ‘Hindu *dharma*’, especially when it is understood as a ‘religion’ in the league of other ‘world religions’ such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. To help clarify the misunderstandings implicit in this usage, I shall first explain the classical definitions as well as relevant features of *dharma* in the Indian tradition, and then point out the differences between Indian *dharmic* traditions on the one hand, and features of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) on the other. Finally, I would point out important implications for psychology that follow from the concept of *dharma* understood in the Indian tradition.

Keywords

Dharma, religion, *puṛuṣārtha*, common rules of conduct, *varṇāśrama dharma*, *jāti*, caste, untouchability

It is common in India as well as elsewhere today to use the term *dharma* as implied in the expression ‘Hindu *dharma*’ such that it is a form of a ‘religion’ in the league of world religions such as Judaism, Christianity

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and Islam. The word religion as used in the English language today has various connotations that imply certain common features of the Abrahamic¹ religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The implicit attribution of such features to *dharma* results in misunderstandings since the nature of *dharma* is in many ways different from that of the Abrahamic religions. Emphasising the differences between *dharma* on the one hand and the Abrahamic religions on the other does not of course mean that there are no commonalities.

Thus, belief in some form of the Divine, and collective prayer or worship are common to Abrahamic religions as well as many followers of the *dharmaic* traditions. However, the idea of *dharma* is much broader than that of a 'faith' and a form of worship, and the word *dharma* has many different connotations. To help understand the complexities of *dharma*, it would be useful to note the conventional meanings of the word *dharma*, its traditional definitions, and some of its distinctive contributions, especially in the context of psychology.

Multiple Meanings, Definitions and some Distinctive Features of *Dharma*

The word *dharma* originates in Sanskrit, and has become part of the vocabulary of several Indian languages derived from, or influenced by, this ancient language. Monier-Williams's *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* lists the followings meanings of the term *dharma*: prescribed conduct, duty, right, justice, virtue, morality, religion, religious merit, good work according to a right or rule, among others. In contemporary Indian languages, the word *dharma* seems to have acquired additional connotations. For instance, in Hindi, when a beggar says *dharm karo*, he means give alms. It is not uncommon to hear that someone or something is behaving according to his or its *dharma*. Here *dharma* means the natural tendency of persons or things. As can be easily seen from the dictionary meanings listed above, moral considerations and duties are central to the concept of *dharma*, although they do not exhaust the entire range of meanings. While the modern usage of the word *dharma* emphasises ways of worshipping, such a connotation is not part of the classical concept of *dharma* as defined in the dictionary meanings cited above. What

is most important in the concept of *dharma* is performing the duties one is expected to perform in terms of one's position and standing in the society. This is the meaning implied when *dharma* is listed among the four major goals that all persons are expected to pursue in life, namely *dharma*, *artha* (seeking wealth), *kāma* (pursuing worldly pleasures, including sex) and *mokṣa* (gaining liberation from the burden of past *karma*). The priority given to *dharma* in the traditional listing of the four major goals is not accidental; it implies the greater importance assigned to it. The *Bhagavad Gītā* (7.11) says, for instance, that the Lord manifests Himself in desires (including sex) when they are performed without transgressing rules of *dharma*.² Social life would result in chaos in any society if a majority of people does not follow a consensually supported system of rules. More particularly, without the guidelines of *dharma*, the pursuit of the other three prescribed goals would be compromised.

In addition to the common meanings assigned to it, the term *dharma* has been assigned different technical definitions in various schools of thought. In Jaimini's Mīmāṃsā aphorisms (1.1.2), for instance, *dharma* is defined as (Vedic) injunctions or commands to act in a specific manner.³ A command suggests how people ought to act; they imply prescriptions, rather than descriptions. Although the term *dharma* is most often used in a prescriptive sense, sometimes it is also used in combination of other terms to suggest the description of natural tendencies. For instance, *guṇa dharma* means natural property of any thing, such as curative or poisonous property of an herb, and *svabhāva dharma* implies trait-like behavioural tendencies of persons such as aggressive or talkative without necessarily implying whether it is good or bad to behave this way. In Jaimini's Mīmāṃsā system, the discussion of *dharma* was focused primarily on the correct delineation of rules for sacrificial rituals (*yajña*) described in the Brāhmaṇa texts, rather than ethical principles. Among the Upaniṣads, however, the term *dharma* is often used to designate practice of virtue, along with a list of principles for guiding behaviour. For instance, the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (1.11)⁴ says: 'Speak the truth. Practice virtue (*dharma*) ... Let there be no neglect of study and teaching. Let there be no neglect of the duties to the gods and the fathers...'

The overall goal of sacrificial rituals discussed in the Mīmāṃsā system was attaining happiness in this world (by pleasing the god of rains, for example) and finding a place in heaven (*svarga*) in after-life.

By comparison, Kaṇāda's *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra*, which begins with a statement saying that its ostensible purpose is to explain *dharma*, specifies that *dharma* is that which ensures the attainment of prosperity (*abhyudaya*) as well as the highest good (*niḥśreyasa*).⁵ It is assumed that following the ethical guidelines prescribed in the tradition of *dharma* is the key to the attainment of both prosperity as well as the highest good. The Upaniṣadic rules of conduct, such as speak the truth, respect your teachers and parents, and the like mentioned above are considered applicable to every one regardless of age, gender, and position in society. As such, they are called *common* rules (*sāmānya dharma*). However, when it comes to daily life, the rules of conduct need to be specific to one's station in life. Thus, while a teacher or a priest ought to, and also can afford to, follow the rule against killing without any problem, a soldier or policeman responsible for protecting the society from alien invaders and criminals cannot—and should not—avoid killing when appropriate. So, a code of conduct that would provide rules appropriate to various categories of people is needed. This was the idea behind the development of *varṇāśrama dharma*, or a code of conduct appropriate to one's station in society and stage in the life cycle. Here *varṇa* implies the four major occupational categories, namely the priests (*brāhmaṇa*), warriors (*kṣatriya*), traders (*vaiśya*), and labourers (*śūdra*), and the *āśrama* refers to roles appropriate to age grades, namely that of student (*brahmacarya*) in youth, householder (*grhastha*) in adult life, transitional stage of pre-retirement (*vānaprastha*), and lastly that of renunciation in old age (*saṅnyāsa*).

In the history of the Indian tradition, a number of texts generically called *Smṛtis* arose to fulfil the need for developing a code of conduct applicable to each of the *varṇa* and *āśrama* categories. The specific rules in the code were normally based on the general ethical principles, such as speaking the truth, that were enunciated by the *Upaniṣads*. Whereas the *Upaniṣads* were considered to be of supra-human origin (*apauruṣeya*), the *Smṛtis* were undoubtedly composed by human beings. The task of codification of the rules of conduct was assigned to particular scholars from different regions at different times. Important among such scholars are Manu, Yājñavalkya, Āpastamba, Bodhāyana and so on.⁶

These scholars devised specific rules in light of the general ethical principles stated in the *Upaniṣads*. In situations where no clear Upaniṣadic guidelines were available or found inadequate, the scholars

turned to the then-established practices of the region, considering the behaviour of unselfish and learned persons in the community as guides to right behaviour. The *Smṛti* texts systematised and codified sets of rules of conduct to guide in a wide variety of civil matters such as property, succession, and professional conduct, as well as criminal matters such as theft and murder. For centuries, various *Smṛti* texts were used by the kings as guidelines for the judicial systems in their kingdoms. When the British established their rule over the Indian sub-continent, they developed a criminal code based on Roman and British traditions, but allowed their judicial system to follow the guidelines of the *Smṛtis* in civil matters such as succession, adoption, marriage and divorce, and so on. Muslims and Christians as well as tribal communities were also allowed to follow their respective traditions in such civil matters.

Although the *varṇa* categories as described in the *Smṛtis* were supposed to exist in real life in ancient times, it is not clear when they were in force and in what form. Social practices evolved over the centuries, giving rise to a number of communities called *jātis* (or castes in English) that were only loosely grouped into the four *varṇa* categories. The reason to say 'loosely' is that often there is no consensus on which *jāti* belongs to which *varṇa*; while members of many castes considered themselves as belonging to a higher *varṇa*, those in the upper castes often denied them such status. The nature of *jātis*, and their connection with the *varṇa* categories has been a topic of much research and debate in Indian sociology and anthropology. It is not necessary for us to get into that discussion here. The *jātis* were commonly associated with specific trades in the village economy such as priesthood, fishing, smithy, carpentry, pottery-making and so on. *Jātis* were endogamous communities, i.e., groups where members married within the community. Members of such communities developed all kinds of support systems, and usually regulated their internal affairs through committees of elders called *jāti pañcāyats*. Outside of legal matters within the jurisdiction of the kings and legal authorities, the authority of caste councils was respected. These councils ruled in various matters pertaining to alleged breach of conventional rules of conduct within specific caste communities, such as disputes over payments among members of the trading communities, or practising a trade that members of a caste are not supposed to practice, marital and family disputes, and so on.

The caste councils exerted considerable influence on members of their communities by imposing fines, and by ex-communicating errant members in case of more serious violations of caste conventions. Several caste councils wielded power till late into the 20th century. At the time of this writing in the second decade of the 21st century, *khap pancāyats* in Haryana have been in the news for demanding the lowering of age of marriage for girls, for banning marriages within the same *gotra* (descendants of the same male line) and even for honour killings of young couples for marrying against their rules. The continuing existence and power of such *pancāyat* is a vestige of an ancient tradition in which communities regulated the behaviour of their members through representatives who were often elected in systems different from those of contemporary democracies.

Throughout history, the Indian society was pluralistic; there was no insistence on a single code applicable for all; cultural and regional differences were commonly recognised and respected. Different *Smṛti* texts and their differing codes, such as the *Dāyabhāga* and *Mitākṣarā*, were followed in different regions during the same era, and new *Smṛtis* were formulated when historical change made old rules obsolete. Diversity in codes of conduct in different religious, ethnic, and caste communities was taken for granted. Does this mean that there were no common rules applicable to everyone on the basis of universal ethical principles? Not so. Indeed, standards equally applicable to all were well recognised. As noted earlier, these were designated as *sāmānya dharma*. The common ethical principles of the *Smṛtis* were similar to the basic Upaniṣadic injunctions such as ‘speak the truth’, ‘practice virtue’, ‘respect teachers and elders’, and so on. Manu (6.10) lists 10 such principles of *sāmānya dharma*: contentment, forgiveness, disciplining one’s mind, non-stealing, inner and outer cleanliness, controlling lust and greed, cultivating curiosity and lust for knowledge, seeking self-knowledge and insight, truthfulness, and controlling anger. The saints often summarised the essence of *dharma* in simplest guidelines and explained them in vernacular to common folk. The 17th century Marathi saint poet Tukaram (17th century/1973), for instance, explained (in poem #1027) that helping others constitutes meritorious behaviour (*punya*), while maliciousness constitutes the opposite (*pāpa*).

We may return here to the concept of *varṇāśrama dharma*, which specifies different rules for the Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas and

Śūdras. This system has become very problematic in modern times, and for good reasons. This is because the different duties for the priests, warriors, traders and labourers became associated with differential privileges favouring the upper categories over the lower ones. Moreover, the system of such differential treatment of *varṇas* and *jātis* deteriorated further when a fifth *varṇa* was added at the lowest rung, and this section was assigned occupations such as scavenging, forced to live outside the village, and was subject to the heinous practice of untouchability. The long list of indignities associated with the caste system is too well known to need an account here. It is due to the systemic inequities supported by Manu that ‘Manuism’ (*manuvāda*) has naturally become a common slur in India today. Worse still, caste-based inequities not only perpetuated despite the efforts of several Hindu reformers for centuries, but they also infected communities of Indian Muslims and Christians who did not officially believe in the caste system. With the introduction of a democratic system, castes became vote-banks trying to protect common interests and privileges, giving rise to a divided society based on caste politics.

A saving grace in the middle of all this is the fundamental notion that *dharma* was not meant to provide an eternal and unchangeable set of rules cast in stone. *Dharma* has been called everlasting (*sanātana*) mainly because, as a living tradition, it adapts to the historically changing environment. This is particularly true about the aspect of *dharma* that Manu had focused on, namely differential privileges based on *varṇa*. Manu was very clear about the fact that the essence of *dharma* is the actual social practice,⁷ and that social practices demand continual redefinition in changing historical circumstances. Indeed, it is recognised in the Indian culture from ancient times that each new historical era (*yuga*) deserves a new ethos (*yuga dharma*) appropriate for its unique conditions. It is also believed that a new scholar emerges at the dawn of a new era to help put together a new code of conduct. The process of change has been called *dharma-cakra pravartana*, or turning of the wheel of *dharma*, and is symbolically represented in the wheel carved into the capstone of a pillar erected by emperor Asoka in the 3rd century BCE.⁸

Against this background, it makes sense that after independence from the British rule, the new Government of India chose to put the sign of a wheel at the centre of its flag symbolising the turning of the wheel of *dharma*. A new era—or *yuga*—arrived when India adopted in 1950 its

Constitution proclaiming the *yuga dharma* of the present age. The most significant change heralding this new age is the abolition of untouchability by law. It is a sweet irony that the chief architect of the change was Dr B.R. Ambedkar who, like his countless ancestors, had suffered from the indignities of untouchability. Given that the legitimate anger of Dr Ambedkar's followers was sometimes expressed in the form of burning copies of the *Manu Smṛti*, it is even more ironic that he has been sometimes called the latest Manu, as the word Manu has become a generic term meaning a law-giver. At any rate, since Independence, a variety of special privileges have been offered to the under-privileged castes to offset the losses suffered by them over the centuries. Hopefully, the various forms of 'reverse discrimination' will ensure success to the grand experiment in social engineering aimed at bringing about a thoroughly equalitarian society in India.

While the *varṇa* part of *varṇāśrama-dharma* is undergoing historical transformation, the *āśrama* part is also showing signs of major change; indeed, some of its aspects are currently obsolete. People often tend to follow the rituals of ancient origin despite their obsolescence. For instance, the thread ceremony that was designed in Vedic times to mark the beginning of the stage of life as student (*brahmacarya*) is still followed in its traditional form by many Brahmin families. Part of this ritual involves a process where the father gives his young son a begging bowl. During the days when this model was conceived, and was operational, this must have made sense, since the gurus presumably lived a modest life in *ashrams* away from the rest of the population and the students went to nearby households begging for food to support themselves. Continuing to perform such a ritual in this age is out of date to the point of being laughable. Lifestyles and patterns of education have radically changed over the centuries; education is no longer restricted to the Brahmins and some other upper castes; education begins gradually in playschools if not in crèches; only a small minority of families send their children away to boarding schools away from home. Rituals involve symbolic behaviour that is part of religious as well as secular aspects of life that undergo changes through revision, innovation, acculturation and other ways. The graduation ceremonies in Indian universities following Western ways such as wearing gowns and hats, and the increasingly common cutting of cake and singing happy birthday, are examples of

rituals introduced through acculturation. Rituals associated with *dharma* are no exception; like other aspects of the *dharmic* tradition, there are also deliberate changes introduced by some reform-minded followers.

Before ending this section about the traditional definitions and views of *dharma*, it is useful to note a view that occurs in the epic *Mahābhārata*. In its section called the Śānti Parva (109.11), the term *dharma* is discussed in its etymological sense tracing to its root verb *dhṛ*, which means to hold, sustain, or preserve. Thus, it suggests that *dharma* is that which holds a society together.⁹ Insofar as *dharma* implies a set of duties assigned to each person relevant to his or her position in society, the society as a whole would run smoothly without falling apart as long as a majority—if not all—of persons follow the rules. It is in this sense that, according to a traditional adage, *dharma* protects people as long as they protect or preserve it.¹⁰

Keeping in mind the traditional meaning of the concept of *dharma*, we may now proceed to see what follows when the word *dharma* is used in the expression ‘Hindu *dharma*’ with the implicit understanding that it is synonymous to what is called ‘religion’ in English.

‘Hindu Dharma’ as ‘Religion’?

Before we turn to the dictionary meanings of the term religion and see how it applies to the concept of *dharma*, it would be useful to first recognise that its connotations have evolved within the context of the history of the Middle East and Europe, where the three Abrahamic religions originated and flourished. Notwithstanding the fact that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are different from each other in important ways, and also have been in open and continuing conflict, they nevertheless have common historical origins and interesting similarities. The similarities among them have been commonly described by designating them together as ‘people of the book’ (*al Kitāb* in Arabic). To put it in a rather simplistic way, they share the common features of belief in one God (Yahweh/God/Allah), one prophet (Moses/Jesus/Mohammad), one scripture (Torah/Bible/Koran), and one Day of Judgement (*Yom HaDin/al-Qiyāmah*). Sometimes Hinduism is also viewed in the same light, thinking of the *Bhagavad Gītā* as the counterpart of the Bible, and Kṛṣṇa

as the 'founder' of the Hindu 'religion'. This is obviously incorrect; Hindu is the name given by foreigners visiting India who found a variety of practices, including forms of prayer and worship, that were different from what they knew in the countries of their origin. The tradition of *dharma* has always encouraged organisation within communities along the general principles of *sāmānya dharma* without trying to impose a uniform order within its realm. Its unity does not imply uniformity created by a single vision of the Divine or of social order proposed by a specific prophet; it is essentially unity in diversity.

Unity in diversity is assured in the *Rg Veda*, the most ancient scripture, when it says that the real is one, but the learned men call it by different names.¹¹ This principle of multiple interpretations of the same reality allows for, and encourages, varied visions of social order to co-exist and live together in harmony without having to force a particular code as the only one allowed. Similarly, here is a common expression that allows the co-existence of different forms of worship; it says that the obeisance to varied images of the divine is ultimately addressed to the same God (*sarva deva namaskāraḥ keśavam prati gachchati*). Indeed, not only worshippers of different deities, but also atheists of different shades learned to live together. There are many places in India where we can find temples of Śiva and Viṣṇu standing next to each other, as well as caves carved out by the side of a single rocky mountain by Jains and Buddhists. Despite the unending debates over their irreconcilable views on endless matters, theists and atheists within the *dharmic* orbit competed in literally constructive ways rather than trying to destroy one another.

Here we may turn to dictionary definitions of religion and see how the concept of *dharma* compares with them. According to the Oxford Dictionary, religion involves 'the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or Gods'. The Webster's dictionary presents virtually the same idea defining religion as 'the service and worship of God or the supernatural'. Thus, the idea of religion and belief in God are inextricable, and this equation follows from the common features of Abrahamic religions. However, the same does not hold in the case of the *dharmic* traditions. Thus, there is no place for God in Buddhism and Jainism, both of which claim to follow *dharma* (*dhamma* in Pali). Interestingly, even some of the so-called

‘orthodox’ schools of thought associated with Hinduism are atheists. Most important in this context is the Sāṃkhya system, which is clearly atheistic, and yet it provides the basis for core concepts of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Yoga, which is the natural twin of Sāṃkhya, accepts the concepts of Īśvara, only to define it as a Puruṣa or a soul that is not stuck with afflictions such as ignorance and pain that are common to many other souls. Thus, Īśvara is more of an abstract principle than a personal God who would bestow grace or absolve us from our sins. Even followers of the Mīmāṃsā system, who believed in propitiating the Gods to help attain a place in heaven, often debated what the Gods were like. Indeed, some even argued that the names of Gods in the Vedic prayers were nothing more than words inserted in sentences to fulfil the grammatical requirement to specify the recipient of the offerings (see Clooney, 1988). While an ‘atheist Christian’ is an oxymoron, an atheist Hindu is just as authentic as a devout worshipper of Rāma, Śiva, Govinda or Kālī.

Another common connotation of the concept of religion involves having a certain set of *beliefs*. One of Webster’s definitions of religion, for instance, is that it involves ‘a personal set or institutionalised system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices’. Note that in the same vein, the Oxford definition of religion mentioned above begins with the word belief. The Nicene Creed¹², which is basically the affirmation of belonging to most sects of Christianity, begins with the words ‘We believe in one God’ and the words ‘we believe’ are repeated three times in the short text. In contrast, it is hard to find a single sect within the *dharmic* tradition that requires its members to affirm that they believe in the tenets in a standard list. Note now that Webster’s definition of religion just quoted suggests that it refers to institutionalised beliefs. Unlike the Catholic church which keeps a close watch on the possible subversion of its beliefs and uses various devices to protect the belief system from those dangers, the *dharmic* traditions have built no such institutions. Dictionary.com defines religion as ‘a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies...’ Clearly, the beliefs about the creation of the universe by God are the nub of the matter in regard to the current problems in the relationship between religion on the one hand, and science on the other.

The two main theses of modern science militated against the core beliefs held by the Church, leading to the science-religion conflict. First, Copernicus's view of the sun as centre of the universe offended the geocentric view suggested by Ptolemy and adopted by early Christians. Bertrand Russell (1935/1961) explains why the belief in the centrality of earth was so critical to Christianity: because it was thought that God could not have chosen to place man, whom He created in His own image, anywhere but at the centre of the universe. Demoting the earth from its central place in the heavens was therefore an affront to God. The second most important cause of friction between the Church and science is, of course, Darwin's view of evolution by natural selection over millions of years, that goes against the Biblical view of creation of Adam by God in six days. Since the conflict between the Biblical and scientific world-views continues till this day, and also affects the current enterprise of psychology, it deserves some discussion here, especially in view of the radically different implications to psychology in the *dharmic* tradition.

The Implications of Dharma for Psychology

The mainstream contemporary psychology is clearly of Western origin, and is deeply shaped by the history of ideas in Europe in ways very different from the historical development of psychology in India. The reason for this difference is mainly, if not exclusively, the science-religion conflict in the history of the West, and the absence of such a conflict in the history of India. Moreover, since one of the central goals of *dharma* has been to foster spiritual development (*niḥśreyasa*), it has greatly contributed to the development of psychology in India in a different direction when compared with Western psychology.

To help understand the implications for psychology of the science-religion conflict, and the lack of it in the intellectual and cultural history of India, we need to go back in the history of Europe to Descartes (1596–1650), who divided reality into two 'substances' with diametrically-opposite attributes. Descartes did not make clear the distinction between the mind, soul and the self in the way we understand these terms today; his term *l'âme* had all these rolled into one entity (see Boring, 1950, p. 162). Trained in a Jesuit school, and deeply influenced by its priests, the

Christian view of soul must have naturally been uppermost in his mind. At the same time, as a brilliant young man aware of the intellectual currents of his time, Descartes was attracted to the newly-emerging science, especially the work and views of Galileo. He was convinced that Copernicus was right as Galileo was trying to prove. However, he knew of Galileo's troubles with the Inquisition; Descartes was 16 years old when Galileo was brought to attention of the Inquisition for his Copernican views for the first time in 1611. The whole drama of Inquisition unfolded during his adult years. Once, having argued that the nature of soul should rather be an issue for philosophers than theologians to deal with, he realised that this would offend the Church, and left Catholic France to become a tutor to the Protestant queen of Sweden.

Against this personal background, it makes sense that Descartes viewed God as an uncreated substance, who created two different substances, soul and matter. In his view, the soul is intangible and unextended; it thinks and is free to choose between right and wrong. It is also indivisible, implying that it cannot be cut into parts and thereby destroyed as the body can be. Soul, in other words, is immortal. For Descartes, as a Christian this was important as the soul was believed to survive the body and be answerable to its good and bad deeds on the Day of Judgement. Matter or body on the other hand is tangible, extended in space, and moves as strictly determined by the laws of motion—which Galileo had begun to formulate. Also, being divisible, things made of matter such as the body can be cut into parts, implying that the body is divisible and mortal. By conceiving of the two substances with totally opposing characteristics, Descartes cleaved reality cleanly and deeply into two separate compartments that are supposed to be totally unlike each other. Note how, in this formula, he preserves the Christian worldview in that, first, God is the Creator of the two substances, and second, the God-given soul is free to choose between right and wrong. The latter feature is important not only since it affirms the human capacity to obey the Lord's commandments, but as St. Augustine would have it, God's gift of free will to man absolves Him of the blame for creating a world with evil features. Adam, given free will, was free to will otherwise; he chose to sin; God is not responsible for Adam's doing. Now see the other side of the duality: matter is totally determined by laws that God gave nature to follow. The scientist could simply observe the matter in motion and formulate the underlying laws just as Copernicus and Galileo had done before

Descartes, and as Newton was to do after him in a most sophisticated way. Moreover, as Francis Bacon had suggested earlier, men could use reason that God gave them to read the book of Nature, and use their knowledge to establish mastery over Nature.

The long and short of this story is that, caught between the conflicting powers of the Church on the one hand and the newly-emerging science on the other, Descartes called a truce between them by conceptually slicing reality into two separate domains. The soul would then be completely under the authority of the Church, leaving the separate domain of matter for scientists to study as they wish. Despite the clever division of the separate domains, however, Descartes was faced with a crucial problem: for the free will to be effective, it had to be able to control the bodily parts to behave in the right way. How could an abstract and weightless soul make a heavy body move in space, and do so without interfering with the iron-clad laws of motion of matter in space? He solved this problem by suggesting that the soul was lodged at the Pineal gland deep inside the skull from where it would receive messages about events in the physical domain perceived through the senses, and send return messages using 'animal spirits' travelling across the tubes to the bodily organs to move as dictated by the soul. The channels of communication between the senses and the brain suggested by Descartes were recognised later on as the 'reflex arc' and thereby laid the foundation for Pavlov's experiments with dogs, which subsequently became the cornerstone of behaviourist psychology.

Descartes's idea of the unextended soul/mind causing changes in the inexorably determined domain of matter in space has not been convincing to many people right from start. First, the very idea of any connection between two worlds which are totally unlike each other sounds unlikely, and second, the idea of interference with the laws of nature sounds odd—even outrageous for those committed to science. Indeed, Cartesian dualism has invited varied suggestions to solve this dilemma starting right from Descartes's lifetime. Hobbes, a senior contemporary of Descartes, for instance, suggested that thoughts are nothing but the motion of particles in the brain, implying a form of material monism. This idea in varied forms has found repeated expressions till this day. In mid-19th century, von Helmholtz demonstrated that Descartes's 'animal spirits' that were supposed to carry messages back and forth between the sense organs and the brain are nothing but electrical currents, thus removing airy-fairy

entities like the soul from the dualist formula. This is an illustration of many ways in which a materialist view of reality has continued to advance with many philosophers presenting arguments in favour of a theory popularly known as the mind-brain identity theory. All along, the materialist thesis has invoked various reactions against it and the debate continues.

It is neither possible, nor necessary, to narrate the long and continuing saga of debates over the 'mind-body problem'.¹³ From its beginning in the late 19th century, modern psychology adopted the methodology of the natural sciences. Although both its founders, Wilhelm Wundt and William James, thought of consciousness as one of the central topics for the new discipline, with the advent of behaviourism in the early 20th century, consciousness got sidelined and mind became a non-issue. It is as if mind and consciousness were aspects of the soul that the 'science' of psychology should better avoid. Wundt, following Wilhelm Dilthey, made a distinction between the natural and human sciences, and thought that psychology needed both. However, by the middle of the 20th century, few like Gordon Allport and Erik Erikson advocated the need to follow the methods and concerns of the human sciences. Both of these psychologists continued the Jamesian tradition of interest in religion, but psychology had little if anything to do with religion or religious experience. Without going into the details and citing other exceptions, by and large, as far as the mainstream of psychology is concerned, science won and religion lost. Advocates of a material monist viewpoint tend to see as if dualism implies going back to Descartes and accepting things like soul and God.¹⁴ Spirituality, the aspect of religious behaviour that has some psychological significance, has been relegated to religious denominations practised under the label 'pastoral psychology'. Against the backdrop of the Cartesian legacy, it is fair to say that the 'mind-body problem' continues to be a hot issue mainly for philosophers and lately for an interdisciplinary group of scholars who contribute to studies in 'consciousness studies'. But for a vast majority of psychologists, consciousness is not a central issue and spirituality is irrelevant.

We may now turn to *dharma* and examine its role in shaping consciousness in India. First, being neutral to belief systems and having no institutions to implement conformity to a particular set of beliefs, the *dharmic* tradition posed no threat to free exploration or expression of ideas. Moreover, the Vedic view of the creation of the universe was

agnostic rather than dogmatic. Thus, in a hymn called the *Nāsadīya Sūkta* (*Rg Veda* 10.129), the ancient sage who composed it poses for himself the question as to how the universe came in to existence. Wondering if the Gods could answer the question, he concluded that this would be of no use since the Gods themselves may have come to existence after the beginning of the universe itself.¹⁵ Such agnosticism about creation stands in sharp contrast with the dogmatic avowal of a myth, a myth that has now reincarnated in the form of ‘intelligent design’. The recent demand by various religious groups that the theory of ‘intelligent design’ or ‘Creation Science’ be taught alongside Darwinian evolution in high schools has led to court cases and continued the bitter struggle between religion and science. By contrast, there is nothing in the *dharmic* tradition that would oppose Darwinian evolution. In fact, the story from Indian mythology that lists a fish, a turtle, a boar, a lion-headed man, and a dwarf man among the 10 incarnations of God Viṣṇu has interesting if unintended parallel to the Darwinian view of evolution. Moreover, having no institutional mechanism to protect and preserve any specific belief system, theories of science face no danger from *dharma*. As far as contemporary psychology is concerned, evolutionism is a source of inspiration; indeed evolutionary psychology is a new branch that is becoming increasingly popular.

Coming now to psychology in the context of the *dharmic* traditions, the situation is quite different when compared to the Western tradition. What is important in this context is the fact that the twin goals of *dharma* include promoting prosperity (*abhyudaya*) on the one hand, and spiritual uplift (*niḥśreyasa*) on the other. It is the pursuit of the latter of the two goals that shaped the distinctive Indian contributions to psychology. In the *dharmic* traditions, the highest good attainable in human life is conceived of in a set of terms that include *niḥśreyasa*, *mokṣa* or *mukti*, *nirvāṇa*, *kaivalya*, *apavarga* and so on. Of these, *mokṣa* as mentioned before is one of the four prescribed goals for life. It implies becoming liberated from the burden of the perpetuating consequences of past actions or *karma*, and is common to Hinduism and Jainism. As is well known, *nirvāṇa* is mainly a Buddhist ideal implying the extinction of desires that helps perpetuate the cycle of actions and the unending chain of their consequences. Regardless of the nuances that account for the differing conceptions of the ideal for human life, the most common factor involves the removal of ignorance about the true nature of the self

through varied techniques of meditation. Yoga is the generic name for the various techniques designed for attaining such ideals; concentrative meditation is typical of Patañjali's Yoga and mindful meditation is said to be involved in the Buddhist technique of *vipāśyanā*. Such traditional techniques are products of the *dharmic* tradition, and these along with their modern variations such as Transcendental Meditation are becoming widely known across the world and are becoming part of the chest of tools at the disposal of contemporary clinical psychology.

Dharma, Religion, Monism and Dualism

It should now be clear that *dharma* is not the same as religion, and that the two have different and long-range implications for psychology, among other things. Although the difference between soul and body antedates Descartes and is not restricted to the West, the specific way in which he formulated it has resulted in a conundrum that continues to be hotly debated till this day. Although it would look as if the specific context of science-religion conflict may have been very specific to a specific context in the life of a particular man, interestingly it has cast a long shadow over the worldview of a major part of the world over centuries. To some extent it is true that, as Gilbert Ryle (1949/1973) pointed out, the 'mind-body problem' is just a matter of the way in which words like mind and matter are used; their opposite characterisation constitutes a 'category error', making it a pseudo-problem not needing any 'solution'. Alternatively, it is only a 'metaphysical' problem to be safely left to the intellectual jugglery that philosophers often engage in; the rest of the world can afford to ignore it. One could also say that if indeed institutionalised religion is responsible for creating the problem in the first place, why not simply ignore the whole issue? The problem is that religion continues to be a force and continues to affect not only the business of doing psychology, but also endangers the enterprise of science. If this sounds far-fetched, note how *Scientific American*, a widely circulated magazine that does a lot to protect science by popularising its highlights, published an article during the Obama-Romney race for presidency of the US in 2012, expressing concern about the adverse effect of Romney's followers on the religious Right on federal funding for science.

All this would make good sense if one takes a look at *dharma* in comparison to religion. Indeed there is no shortage over dualism versus monism in the history of *dharma*; while the Samkhya-Yoga system advocates a form of dualism somewhat like the Cartesian dualism, the Advaita Vedānta system proposes strict monism, and the debate is never-ending. Within the fold of the Vedānta, again, the rival schools propose a number of uncompromising variations such as qualified monism and even dualism and so on. Nevertheless, most schools of Indian thought view the mind as being composed of a subtle form of matter, which avoids the kind of problem that Cartesian dualism has led to. More specifically, *dharma* avoids being hitched to specific belief systems, theological doctrines, or metaphysical theories, and presents no danger to science by setting up institutions to protect particular belief systems.

All this discussion, it is hoped, would help avoid the common tendency of conflating *dharma* with religion, and clarify its unique features and implications.

Notes

1. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are called the Abrahamic religions because they are all descendants of the religious tradition of Abraham (Ibrahim in Arabic), the Biblical patriarch. Abraham is said to be the father of the Israelites through his son Isaac. In Islamic tradition, Abraham is considered a prophet of Islam, an ancestor of Muhammad, through Abraham's son Ishmael.
2. *Dharmāviroddho bhūteṣu kāmo 'smi bharatarṣabha| Bhagavad Gītā (7.11).*
3. Jaimini's words are: *codanā lakṣaṇo artho dharmah|*. See Jaimini's *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* (1.1.2); Jaimini (n.d./1984).
4. For Sanskrit text in Roman transliterations and authoritative English translations, see Radhakrishnan (1953/1994).
5. Kaṇāda's words are: *yato abhyudaya niḥśreyasa siddhiḥ sa dharmah| Vaiśeṣika Sūtra* (1.1.2).
6. An authoritative account of this history and detailed explanation of the concept of *dharma* is available in P.V. Kane's (1939–1977) well-known work, the *History of dharmasāstra*.
7. Manu's words are: *ācāraḥ paramo dharmah|*, Manu (1.108).
8. This pillar was found in Sarnath in central India. The symbol of the wheel now adorns the Tricolour, the national flag of India.
9. The original words from the *Mahābhārata* are: *dhāraṇād dharmamityāhuḥ, dharmena vidhrtāḥ prajāḥ|* (Śānti Parva, 109.11).
10. The wording in Sanskrit goes thus: *dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ|*

11. The original words are: *ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti, agnim yamam mātariśvānam āhuḥ* (1.164.46). As quoted and translated by Radhakrishnan (1929/1999), Vol.1, p. 94.
12. The Nicene Creed is an expression of the foundational beliefs of the Christian faith first adopted by the Council of Nicea in 325 CE. Several websites on the Internet provide the variations of the original text as adopted by various Christian denominations.
13. For a detailed discussion of the mind-body problem in light of current developments and from classical Indian perspectives, see K. Ramakrishna Rao (2011).
14. See, for example, how Paul L. Nunez (2010), who spent a lifetime in brain research trying to reduce mental events and consciousness to electrical activity of the brain, places alternatives to mind-brain identity theory in the context of religion.
15. The words in the *R̥g Veda* (10.129) are: *ko addhā veda ka iha pra vocat, kuta ājātā kuta iyaṃ viśṛṣṭiḥ? arvāg devā asya visarjanena atha ko veda yata ābahūva*||.

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