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Abstract:

*Where there is Kṛṣṇa, there is Adharma: Reproaching God in the Mahābhārata*

The Mahābhārata is unique in its recognition of Kṛṣṇa's divinity at some moments, and its unsparing criticism of him at other moments. Kṛṣṇa is reproached—by a wide variety of epic figures—both for his conduct during the war and his culpability in perpetuating the slaughter of the Kurus. Scholars such as Arti Dhand and B.K. Matilal have argued against the notion that Sanskrit literature offers no coherent ethical theory, and both instead point to the epics as a reflection on ethics. James Fitzgerald has similarly argued that central to the uses of the term *dharma* in the Mahābhārata is “what is ‘transcendently’ good or right to do or be.” If there is indeed an ethical awareness in the Mahābhārata, are these epic figures seriously criticizing Kṛṣṇa's ethics, or are they merely raising an opposing view that the epic would like to refute? If they are criticizing Kṛṣṇa, how seriously does the text take these criticisms?

In this paper, I will argue that the criticisms of Kṛṣṇa reveal an awareness of the ethical problems his role in the epic raises. I will briefly study the Śiśupāla's censure of Kṛṣṇa in the Sabhāparva. I will then use Duryodhana's reproach of Kṛṣṇa in the Śalyaparva as a way to survey Kṛṣṇa's ethics in the war. Attention will be paid specifically to those episodes where there is a real or perceived breach of *dharma* or a use of trickery; this includes the deaths of Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Bhūriśravas, Ghaṭotkaca, Karṇa, and Duryodhana. Based on this, I will analyze the voices that are critical of Kṛṣṇa and his methods, and contrast them with the voices that defend Kṛṣṇa. In the second section, I will shift my focus to two instances in the post-war books of the epic where Kṛṣṇa is reproached for his role in the war, that is, by Gāndhārī in the Strīparva and subsequently by Uttanka in the Aśvamedhaparva.