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KARṆA AND THE DHARMIK EVALUATION OF CHARACTER IN THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*

1. Introduction

The Mahābhārata (= MBh) is one of the most impressive specimens of epic literature worldwide, and it is a well-known fact, that this statement pertains not only to its sheer volume, but also the complex way its several parts are arranged and enriched by a bewildering number of sub-stories.[1] Originally being about a struggle between two related families reaching back into the hoary Vedic past, the MBh presumably has reached its (more or less) final form before the 7th century CE.[2] During the course of time it became something of a "store-house" for all aspects of human affairs, and the well-known statement occurring two times in the epic bears testimony that at one stage of its history it was deliberately comprehended as such: 1.56.33 "Bull among Bhāratas, whatever is here, on Law, on Profit, on Pleasure, and on Salvation, that is found elsewhere. But what is not here is nowhere else."[3] The number of themes and subjects which occur in the MBh suits this claim, but the concept of *dharma*, its

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[1] For an overview of all aspects of the two Sanskrit epics, cf. Brockington 1998.

[2] Brockington refers to an inscription in Cambodia mentioning a MBh of 100000 verses (Brockington 1998: 131); Fitzgerald and von Simson presume that the epic obtained its final form during the period of the Guptas, 350 – 500 century CE (Fitzgerald 2010: 73; von Simson 2011: 589 f.)

[3]*dharme cārthe ca kāme ca mokṣe ca bharatarṣabha*
yad ihāsti tad anyatra yan nehāsti na tat kva cit.
Translations according to van Buitenen and Fitzgerald, unless mentioned otherwise.

nature and its range of application certainly figures as one of the most important topics.

In recent decades an approach to consider the MBh as literature and thereby by implication to perceive of it as a well-structured whole has gained prominence within MBh-research.[4] Here the interpretative tools of literary theory are required, and to this domain belongs the study of characters who appear in a given text. In a recent study Hiltebeitel has analyzed the character of Yudhiṣṭhira in comparison with Rāma with regard to the concept of *dharma*,[5] but given the importance of this concept within the MBh it may be promising to consider other epic characters in relation to it as well. Therefore an attempt to do so with regard to the character of Karṇa will be untertaken by analyzing the way he is depicted. In doing so it may be possible to elucidate the tension between being a *kṣatriya*, the many requirements of dharmik behaviour, and a re-evaluation of *dharma* itself. Furthermore, it will be argued that the tension which comes to the fore in the fate of Karṇa plays a pivotal role within the epic frame: along with other episodes, the fall of Karṇa gives opportunity to envisage a modified idea of *dharma*. This analysis is based on two suppositions: the MBh will be heuristically considered (1) as a piece of literature, i. e. as an elaborate arrangement of textual parts into a structured unit, and (2) as possessing a structure which has been formed intentionally. As Fitzgerald has rightly remarked: "But compositional simultaneity is not required for structural integrity."[6] From this starting point this article will proceed as follows: in the next paragraph (2) the theoretical presuppositions that are based on a model which Mangels has taken up from literary theory and introduced into Epic Studies will be presented. Its main feature is the supposition that literary works possess several narrative frames simultaneously, which are

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[4] One author, who is mainly responsible for this trend is Hiltebeitel; among his many works cf. e. g. Hiltebeitel 2002 and 2011b for the context of this article. The articles collected in Hiltebeitel 2011b are cited according to the pagination of this volume, whereas the original year of publication is put in brackets.

[5] Hiltebeitel 2011a: 411-480.

[6] Fitzgerald 2010: 73.

related to a set of several distinct authors and readers. Applied to the MBh this means that abstract concepts like *dharma* as well as imaginary characters like *Karṇa* figure as elements within its narrative structure. Therefore, any attempt to ascertain their meaning within the epic has to take the relation between them and these frames into account. This is done in paragraph 3; in its first part (3.1) it is argued that Karṇa fails to live up to the dharmic norms set by the abstract authors of the MBh, whereas its second part (3.2) is focused on the authorial intention behind this depiction of *Karṇa's* character. The dharmic perspective under which his behaviour is seen suggests that the concept of *dharma* includes the possibility of its alterability. Furthermore, the alterability of it is conceived of as necessary to give it a more humane form. Some thoughts about the consequences these results have for the ideas about *dharma* prevalent in the epic conclude this article.

2. Theoretical presuppositions: narrative frames

Once the literary quality of the MBh is acknowledged the next step is to look for an appropriate approach to come to terms with it. A promising step in this direction has been taken by Mangels, who in her dissertation applied a communicative model which has originally been developed in literary theory to the MBh.[7] According to this model a literary text figures as a linguistic sign to which a transmitter and a recipient are ascribed. All three participate in the communicative process, which is the *raison d'être* of literature. This model becomes complicated by the postulate that there is more than one realisation of transmitter and recipient, due to the existence of several communicative levels within a text. One has therefore to distinguish between the concrete author, the abstract author and the fictitious narrator, who all have their receptive counterpart (the concrete, the abstract and the fictitious reader). Furthermore, there are also the protagonists whose stories are

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[7] Mangels 1994. The following outline refers especially to pp. 29-35 and 44-59.

told; they are the narrated characters. The concrete author is the person who is responsible for bringing the literary work into existence, and the concrete reader the one who perceives it. It goes without saying that in the case of the MBh it may well be impossible to determine their identities. There is no historical evidence outside the epic tradition for historically identifiable persons who have composed the MBh. The abstract author is the imaginary presence of the author throughout the text, which can be discovered especially in the way the story is depicted. For the MBh Mangels cites the inclusion of *dharma* and Kṛṣṇa-Bhakti into an original warrior epic as an example.[8] His counterpart, the abstract reader is in a way a hybrid entity: on the one hand he constitutes the ideal audience the author wants to address, on the other he figures as an ideal which the concrete readers should approach in their interpretative acts. The fictitious narrator and his audience, finally, are inhabitants of the imaginary work created by the (concrete) author. In the case of the MBh Ugraśravas and Vaiśaṃpāyana, as well as Saṃjaya, are fictitious narrators.[9] Mangels uses this model in order to subject the narrative techniques, as they are attested in the MBh to an examination. She avowedly focuses mainly on the fictitious narrator and the narrated characters,[10] but the application of this model can of course be extended to other narrative levels as well.

The approach of Mangels has two important merits; on the one hand, by the application of methods of literary studies epic scholars obtain adequate additional tools for dealing appropriately with the different kinds of complexities the MBh contains. On the other hand, by following this approach matters

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[8] Mangels 1994, pp. 45-47. It is of course far from generally accepted that *dharma* and *bhakti* aspects are the product of later reworkings (cf. e. g. Hiltebeitel 2002). However, even then these components can be considered as indications of the abstract author.

[9] In her PhD on Karṇa, Greer uses a similar model which operates with the supposition that the meaning of a text results from the interaction between a "model author" and a "model reader" (Greer 2002, especially pp. 51-54); both terms denote theoretical entities which cannot be identified with concrete historical persons. Since the model brought forward by Mangels allows for a more detailed analysis of a narrative structure, due to its larger number of parameters, it has been used in this article.

[10] Mangels 1994: 10.

of controversy about origin and conception of the MBh, which have informed epic research from the beginning, are avoided. A study of the narrative structure of the MBh can be carried out irrespective of its interpretation as a result of interpolations and revisions or as the product of the literary design undertaken by one or several authors.[11] This procedure has therefore the advantage, that in spite of all alleged inconsistencies the meaning-conveying unity of the MBh, which has been perceived as such in the Indian tradition, can be postulated as a starting point for textual interpretation, without the commitment to the assumption that this unity is the outcome of a consciously fashioned design.[12]

There is even one more aspect which might enrich the analysis of Mangels and add to an understanding of the authorial intentions in the MBh. To get an adequate image of them, the function of the different frame stories has to be taken into account. There are, with the exception of the first part of the Ādiparvan, two frame stories constantly present.[13] The narrators, of course, are different: Vaiśaṃpāyana tells the story he learned from Vyāsa on the occasion of Janamejaya's snake *sattra*, and Ugraśravas retells it to Śaunaka and other Ṛṣis in the twelve-year-*sattra* at the Naimiṣa forest, adding the main course of events which led to the performance of the snake *sattra* of Janamejaya. The utmost frame of the epic does usually not become visible in the course of the narration, but it is always present. This opens up the possibility for the abstract author to proceed with several discourses simultaneously: although the course of events is the same for every audience alike, the evaluation of the behaviour of the characters involved, and the norms they are abiding to would proceed differently. The first

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[11] Cf. the summary of the history of epic studies in general in Brockington (Brockington 1998: 41-81) and that of research on the MBh in von Simson (Simson 2011: 679-699).

[12] Mangels has used this model in order to discover traces of a brahmanical revision of an alleged *kṣatriya* epic, but her interpretation is not required by the methods she uses.

[13] Minkowski has devoted a number of articles to the study of the epic frame stories (Minkowski 1989, 1991, 2001), in which he has explored the structural similarities between the *sattra* ritual and the use of frame stories for the epics, especially the MBh, as well as Vedic precursors for the frame story of the MBh.

audience consists most prominently of Janamejaya, a *kṣatriya*, who is moreover the direct offspring of one of the main characters and related to nearly all others. There are of course other persons present as well, but the narration of Vaiśaṃpāyana is mainly addressed to him. On the other hand, Ugraśravas' audience consists exclusively of Brahmins. Given the caste difference, it is very likely that their views will diverge from those of Janamejaya. Finally, within the communicative frame of Mangels, each audience belongs to the level of fictitious listeners, but the final recipient within this frame is of course the abstract reader. It is at this point not possible to come to a final conclusion about the nature of the readership, but from what has been said already, however, it can be inferred, that he or she should belong to a society which is ideologically ordered by caste according to the norms of *dharma*. Furthermore, within the dharmik framework the main legal and governmental duties are ascribed to two *varṇa*s, Brahmins and *kṣatriya*s. Many of the conflicts that arise in the narration have their root in the tension between these two groups, and since their outcome was catastrophic, it is likely that the text is addressed to both groups, simply in order to prevent similar events to happen in the future.

This model of different communicative levels applies also to the use of abstract terms in the text. Therefore, with regard to *dharma* several layers have to be distinguished as well. First of all, there is – as Hiltebeitel rightly has emphasized – *dharma* as the subject of moral instruction for Yudhiṣṭhira. Then, there is the twofold audience of the snake-sacrifice of Janamejaya and the *sattra* of the *ṛṣis* in the Naimisha-forest. And finally, there is the audience of the epic as a whole, i. e. we, the readers/ listeners. Depending on the respective level the problem of *dharma* and everything that is related to it can take a different shape.

3. Character and *dharma*: the case of Karṇa

3.1. Karṇa's character and its dharmik evaluation

The character of Karṇa is one of the most fascinating of the epic characters, and the one who is most likely to capture the sympathy of the audience, Indian and western alike. The injustice acted upon him by his mother, the humiliation by the Pāṇḍavas (at the first inconclusive duel) and Draupadī (at her *svayaṃvarā*),[14] and his loyalty to his step-parents and Duryodhana, which he shows in the most impressive ways in his dialogues with Kṛṣṇa (MBh 5.138.6-5.140 and 5.141.43-49) and Kuntī (MBh 5.143-5.144.22) have rarely failed to make a lasting impression. Karṇa is one of the truly tragic (used here in a non-technical sense) characters in world literature.[15] It is therefore no surprise that several studies deal with this fascinating character from different perspectives.[16] Usually, these studies focus on crucial episodes of his life: his dialogues with Kṛṣṇa and Kuntī, or his death in the fight with Arjuna. For a better understanding of the significance of these episodes and their relevance for the audience, the peculiar circumstances of the birth of Karṇa, his martial mastery and his rivalry with Arjuna are mentioned as well. Most of these studies view Karṇa in a rather positive light: as a rule, his loyalty to his foster parents and to Duryodhana, as well as his generosity leave a positive impression.[17]

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[14] This episode has not been included in the text of the Critical edition, but without it Karṇas behaviour towards Draupadī, especially at the game of dice, are difficult to comprehend.

[15] As has been pointed out by Shulman (Shulman 1985, p. 380).

[16] Those most relevant for this article have been Adarkar 2001 and 2005, Chapple 2005, Green 2002, Hiltebeitel 2011b (2007), Jarow 1999, Karve 1969: 169-188, McGrath 2004 and Shulman 1985: 380-400

[17] Eg. McGrath 2004: 1: "I shall argue that he is the most important hero of the poem"; 175 "Karṇa exceeds anything that Arjuna achieves or even considers", or Shulman 1985: 391 "... but this defeat takes the form of an unfair, unworthy attack upon a morally superior, beloved figure whose very nobility constitutes a threat to normative order". The judgements of Adarkar, Hiltebeitel and Greer are likewise rather positive (e. g. Greer 2002: 303: "Karṇa's lonely heroism is far more genuine and inspiring than Arjuna's; he presents to the *Mahābhārata*'s audience a sympathetic portrait of the isolated individual in an uncertain,

Although these traits of Karṇa's character are highly evaluated for god reasons, they in themselves do not suffice to lead to a positive evaluation of his whole character. As a matter of fact, there are also episodes in the MBh which present him in a rather negative way, as will be seen below. Since it is therefore difficult to infer from single episodes with contradicting evaluations to Karṇa's character as a whole, it may be worthwhile to abstain for a moment from ethical judgments and to have a closer look at the way Karṇa is presented within the MBh. For, as Hiltebeitel has reminded us, Karṇa's life is not told as a consecutive series of events but rather, certain episodes are singled out by different persons. Consequently, his biography cannot be developed out of a continuous description, but has to be picked up from throughout the text.[18] As far as I could make out, he is the only one of the main protagonists of the MBh who is presented in this particular way, which seems to be one reason why his character appeals to a contemporary western audience.

However, the introduction of Karṇa as an acting character in the epic main story shows him in a rather negative way; in MBh 1.122.47 he is described by Vaiśaṃpāyana as a pupil of Droṇa but as simultaneously despising the Pāṇḍavas and clinging to Duryodhana: "So did Karṇa Rādheya, the son of the *sūta*, come to Droṇa the teacher, and the *sūta*'s son jealously competed with the Pārtha. With Duryodhana's backing, he showed his contempt for the Pāṇḍavas."[19] This short passage, although somewhat neglected in research, indicates the direction, into which Karṇa's character will evolve. Several details are worth being mentioned. First, this episode shows that Karṇa sided with Duryodhana even before the tournament. Second, Karṇa in this episode goes by the names of *rādheya* and *sūtaputra*, although

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darkened universe"), whereas Chapple and Jarow advance a more balanced view (e. g. Jarow 1999: 63 with regard to Karṇa's behaviour: he is "a walking contradiction"). Only Karve displays a critical stance towards Karṇa.

    [18] Hiltebeitel 2011b (2007): 416.

    [19] MBh 1.122.47: *sūtaputraś ca rādheyo guruṃ droṇam iyāt tadā*
spardhamānas tu pārthena sūtaputro 'tyamarṣaṇaḥ
duryodhanam upāśritya pāṇḍavān atyamanyata

the audience, including the one to which Vaiśaṃpāyana tells the story, already knows that in reality he is the son of Sūrya and Kuntī.[20] Already at this point in his biography, the life of Karṇa is also seen through the lens of dharmik norms. The selection of these names by Vaiśaṃpāyana may just be a means to create suspense, but for the abstract audience things are more complicated: a tension is created between the social status of Karṇa, and his true nature, which finds expression in his caste. However, another aspect is added here, the individual character. It manifests itself in a negative way, as is shown by *atyamarṣaṇa* and the verb *ati man-*. Interestingly, this episode is mentioned another two times, first in MBh 3.293.18-19: "Having allied himself with Dhṛtarāṣṭra's son and being hostile to the Pārthas, he always hoped to do battle with the great-spirited Phalguna. He always competed with Arjuna, O king of your people, and Arjuna with him, from their first meeting onward."[21] And again in the account of Karṇa's life which Nārada gives to Yudhiṣṭhira, after the Pāṇḍavas came to know after the battle that Karṇa was their eldest brother: "He burned within as he brooded upon Bhīmasena's might, Phalguna's skill, your intellect, the twins' sense of propriety, the Gāṇḍīva bowman's childhood friendship with Vāsudeva, and the affection all in the kingdom had for you. Both, because it was fated and because of the natural course of things, he became king Duryodhana's friend in childhood and always bore a grudge against all of you".[22] Especially the last episode points towards one of the decisive factors which are responsible for the tragic course Karṇa's life has taken. His ambitious nature apparently left no room for the recognition of the merits of other persons but only for competition. It seems that right from the

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[20] The episode of Karṇa's birth is contained in MBh 1.104.1-15 and 3.292.

[21] 3.293.18: *saṃdhāya dhārtarāṣṭreṇa pārthānāṃ vipriye sthitaḥ yoddhum āśaṃsate nityaṃ phalgunena mahātmanā.*

3.293.19 *sadā hi tasya spardhāsīd arjunena viśāṃ pate arjunasya ca karṇena yato dṛṣṭo babhūva saḥ.*

[22] 12.2.6 *sa balaṃ bhīmasenasya phalgunasya ca lāghavam buddhiṃ ca tava rājendra yamayor vinayaṃ tathā;* 12.2.7 *sakhyaṃ ca vāsudevena bālye gāṇḍivadhanvanaḥ prajānām anurāgaṃ ca cintayāno vyadahyata;* 12.2.8 *sa sakhyam agamad bālye rājñā duryodhanena vaiyuṣmābhir nityasaṃdviṣṭo daivāc cāpi svabhāvataḥ.*

start there never was the possibility of a reconciliation between him and the Pāṇḍavas.

His rivalry with Arjuna brought Karṇa to another violation of dharmic norms: eager to obtain mastery of the *brahman*-weapon, he approached Rāma Jāmadagnya and disguised himself as a Brahmin; when detecting that he has been cheated, Rāma cursed Karṇa to lose his mastery in the moment of his final duel.[23] That this episode is told by himself immediately before his final fight with Arjuna, the pivotal moment of his life, enhances the impression that its outcome indeed is a result of Karṇa's fraud.

The picture of Karṇa, that is conveyed to the audience is enriched by another episode, placed in the epic immediately after his birth; here (MBh 1.104.16-20) a crucial event of his life is communicated in anticipation: the offering of his armour and earrings to Indra, for which he receives a spear in return. This offering, by which he loses his invulnerability, is a token of his generosity towards brahmins (Indra disguised himself as one to achieve his aim), and by this trait an effective contrast to the following negative depiction is built up, which contributes to the fascination emanating from Karṇa's character. But again by the way this episode is depicted more levels of meaning find their expression: by losing his invulnerability Karṇa loses an important advantage over his rival Arjuna and the audience is furthermore aware of a sense of doom which prevails in Karṇa's life. And finally, the quality which puts him into a positive light (especially for the brahmin audience at the *sattra*!) is the one which brings about his doom. With regard to the abstract author this can be seen as an advice that living a life according to the rules of *dharma* is not only to be complemented by the right features of character, but also by cognitive factors such as the ability to discern deceptions and to exercise prudence.

The stage is therefore set for the course of events, culminating in the three decisive moments of Karṇa's life: his dialogues with Kṛṣṇa and Kuntī, and his final fight with Arjuna, which leaves him back dead. All of these episodes have been

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[23] MBh 8.29.3-7 and MBh 12.2.10-12.3.33.

dealt with very thoroughly in epic research and will not be covered here in detail,[24] apart from some minor points, which have perhaps not been gone unnoticed by an Indian audience, but which a "modern" audience can easily overlook. First, when Karṇa prefers his foster parents over Kuntī and her sons, his decision has a deeper relevance, as was pointed out by Chapple:[25] if he had abandoned his foster parents, they would have lost the one person who is responsible for carrying out the ancestral rites, and this is another motive for Karṇa to stay with them. Carrying out prescribed rites belongs of course to the domain of *dharma*, and the obligation felt by Karṇa to act accordingly must have appealed to the Brahmin audience at the *sattra*. But this point is perhaps outweighed by his preference of *sūtas*, i. e. lowcasts, over *kṣatriyas*, which is something to be avoided according to the rules of *varṇāśramadharma*. These two points have been certainly present in the minds of the readers, although they are not explicitly mentioned, and they enhance the dilemma Karṇa finds himself in.

Given this state of affairs, it is doubtful that there is one genuine convincing solution to Karṇa's dilemma before the battle; but seen in the way suggested above maybe the whole intention in composing it was to point towards something else; it is a warning that norms alone will not prevent a possible disastrous turn of events, and in order to install them and act in accordance with them it is essential to possess the adequate emotive and cognitive faculties. These are missing in Karṇa in spite of all his good traits, and it seems that he is therefore himself responsible for the direction in which his destiny has turned. Karṇa's behaviour could be said to result from a lack of awareness of the relevance its consequences will have. The audience has been inclined to pardon him for this, but the epic teaches us that this lack of foresight as well as his misguided ambitions have fatal consequences.[26]

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[24] Cf. the literature cited in n. 16.

[25] Chapple 2005: 137.

[26] Some of them are enumerated by Kṛṣṇa during the final duel between Arjuna and Karṇa, when the later one appeals to the rules of *dharma*, so that he would not be attacked while trying to elevate his chariot, which was stuck in the earth (MBh 8.67.1-5). As Harzer

Shortly before his death, Karṇa himself links his fate to *dharma*: "Dharma protects those eminent in dharma, so those who know dharma always say. But now it is sunk for me. It does not protect its devotees. I think dharma does not always protect."[27] In the light of what has been said above this statement is rather surprising at first glance, for some of the deficiencies of Karṇa's understanding of *dharma* have already been pointed out. On the other hand, there is no doubt about his general adherence to dharmik norms. Is Karṇa's complaint therefore justified? Is *dharma*, the basic concept around which Aryan society is ordered, and which offers rewards in the afterworld, ineffective? Although the argumentation about the necessity to enrich *dharma* with cognitive and emotive faculties seems to be valid, not all problems are removed. After all, should *dharma* not account for apparent injustice and offer a way to escape from it? Otherwise, the solution would be to cling to the Indian form of fatalism, *kālavāda*, which runs counter to establish a society based on deeds and results, but which is present at some places in the epic.[28] To come to terms with this problem it is necessary to look at some particular features of *dharma*, which the epic suggests.

3.2. The alterability of *dharma*

In the preceding paragraphs it has been argued that - conforming to the model of an abstract author - Karṇa is presented to the audience under a dharmik perspective. Thus, the hypothesis has brought forward, that the fate of Karṇa is used by the abstract author to suggest revisions concerning if

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pointed out, the Vulgate editions contain more instances of Karṇa's misbehavior (Harzer 2013: 252f.).

[27] MBh 8.66.43bc: *dharmapradhānān abhipāti dharma; ity abruvan dharmavidaḥ sadaiva / mamāpi nimno 'dya na pāti bhaktān; manye na nityaṃ paripāti dharmaḥ*; translation according to Hiltebeitel 2011b (2007), p. 443.

[28] For epic *kālavāda* cf. Vassilkov 1999, who considers this teaching as the core of "heroic didactics", on which brahmanical doctrines have been superimposed later on (p. 27f.).

not the essence of *dharma*, at least the way humans think about it. But this leads automatically to the question, if the concept of *dharma*, as it prevailed at the time when the MBh gained its final shape did allow for modifications at all. In what follows an answer to this problem will be attempted, which is based on the interpretation of some more passages from the epic.[29] At first, a closer look at the episode of Dharma's cursing by Aṇīmāṇḍavya can shed some light on it. Aṇīmāṇḍavya is the name of an innocent ascetic, who is severely punished (with impalement) for a crime he did not commit. When he asks Dharma for the reason of this punishment, the god replies that he has tortured insects as a boy and now receives an adequate punishment. Aṇīmāṇḍavya in turn curses Dharma to be born as a *śūdra*, and for that reason he incarnated as Vidura. Furthermore, he declares that nothing, that has been done before the fourteenth year shall be counted as sin.[30] Hiltebeitel has rightly taken this episode as one of the fundamental constituents for changing the structure of *dharma* towards "non-cruelty" *ānṛśaṃsya* which becomes more and more important within the epic.[31] According to Hiltebeitel, *ānṛśaṃsya* is the central element in the revision of the concept of *dharma*; the main story of the MBh can be viewed as being about an ongoing spiral of violence and counter-violence, drifting to its terrible finish, and non-cruelty is the means by which this circle is prevented. The necessity to apply *ānṛśaṃsya* results from the problems which occur once an implementation of dharmik norms is attempted. *Dharma* in the MBh is conceived of in terms of *varṇāśramadharma*, and every being therefore has its own *svadharma*, which in turn affects interaction with other living beings. But due to the limited cognitive capacities of humans and the complexities of life, violations of *dharma* are unavoidable, and here the notion of *ānṛśaṃsya* helps to pacify the minds of those who are enraged

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[29] There is of course a wealth of literature on *dharma* (for an introduction into this domain see Strauch 2010 and the literature cited there), but assuming that the content of literature is not exhaustible by argumentative analysis, an approach which takes this structure into account (as e. g. in Hiltebeitel 2011a) suggests itself.

[30] MBh 1.101.

[31] Hiltebeitel 2002: 192-195.

about them. To Hiltebeitel's convincing analysis one point may be added: the low rank of Dharma among humans and his exclusion from high-ranking positions, let alone from being king, are in accordance with the regulations of *dharma*! In making the god Dharma the victim of the restrictions of *dharma* as a set of norms, the abstract authors of the MBh have found an impressive way of indicating the injustice inherent in *dharma* and have also hinted at a way to improve it.

The alterability of *dharma*, which this episode illustrates, has consequences for the evaluation of Karṇa's decisions: on a human level they are understandable, for it is easy to understand his feelings for his foster parents, and also his attachment to Duryodhana may to some extent be acceptable. However, within the framework of *dharma* they are not justified: he failed to recognize his own wrongdoings and he also was not able to understand, that implementing *dharma* means much more than obeying norms; it means applying prudence and aiming not at the fulfilment of personal ambitions, but at more humane conditions (this, after all, is what applying non-cruelty amounts to). One may object, however, that Karṇa could not have been completely wrong, for he shares the fate of the Pāṇḍavas instead of joining the Kauravas in his afterlife. Although I am not able to meet this objection completely, it should be possible to understand his otherworldly existence as an acknowledgment on the part of the abstract author that Karṇa cannot be held completely responsible for all that befell him. As Nārada indicated in his report about Karṇa's life to Yudhiṣṭhira, Karṇa met with adverse fate and crooked behaviour.[32] These factors seem to be taken into account here, so that it is justified for the author to put him at the same place where Draupadī and the Pāṇḍavas are staying. Thus, this may be another instance for the effort to give *dharma* a more humane form. From this perspective the curious fact that Karṇa is not cursed once, but twice becomes liable to an interpretation. As was mentioned above he was cursed by Rāma Jāmadagnya for pretending to be Brahmin, but there is a second curse as well; after accidently

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[32] 12.5.15a *evaṃ śaptas tava bhrātā bahubhiś cāpi vañcitaḥ.*

killing the cow of a Brahmin, Karṇa was cursed by him, although he apologized and offered riches as a compensation.[33] In both instances of their retellings these two curses appear side by side and by this arrangement the abstract author is able to highlight the ambiguity of Karṇa's character, for he was cheating in one case, whereas he killed the cow unintentionally in the second case. But he accomplishes even more; virtually situated amidst a terrible battle or after its end, respectively, the audience is not likely to have forgotten about two of the most impressive episodes in Karṇa's life, his dialogues with Kṛṣṇa and Kuntī. It is highly probable then, that it will regard at least the second case as overly strict, and this can be seen as a further reminder also for the brahmanic audience not to act cruel.

With regard to *dharma* Karṇa is an ambiguous character, and for this reason the following statement applies only to some extent to Karṇa: "The Sanskrit epics' noble heroes and heroines are known to be noble even in their flaws."[34] In his flaws at least K. is not noble; on the other hand, his decisions against the offers brought forward by Kṛṣṇa and Kuntī are even more impressive, and the conclusion Hiltebeitel draws at another place seems the more justified: "[…] Karṇa inspires admiration, affection, and a wish for things to have gone otherwise, as is ultimately expressed by Kuntī and Yudhiṣṭhira."[35] That he can act noble in spite of his flaws makes him an appealing character who catches the attention of an audience even today.

4. Conclusions

It has already been mentioned, that the MBh taken as a whole is not liable to a completely coherent interpretation, and one of the reasons for this have been singled out: the artful arrangement of linguistic units on all levels, i.e. its quality as literature and the open-ended process of hermeneutical attempts

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[33] MBh8.29.31-39 and 12.2.19-29
[34] Hiltebeitel 2011b (2004): 582.
[35] Hiltebeitel 2011b (2007): 431.

it requires as such. In order to come to terms with the complex arrangement of the MBh, the assumption of several narrative frames and different communicative levels, introduced by Mangels, has been adopted. Thus, it was possible to point out the existence of several simultaneously ongoing discourses about dharma, which may account for some of the bewildering features the use of this term can have in the MBh. With regard to the nature of *dharma*, it has been argued above, that an understanding of the way *how* the composers operated with this concept is affected by the uncertainties with which literary texts are imbued, the long discourses on *dharma* notwithstanding. In this epic the pitfalls which (it seems inevitably) arise when a realization of dharmik norms is attempted are amply illustrated, but solutions are usually missing, and it seems that part of the artistry this work displays is the ability to mirror the complexities of the world with its own complexities; in doing so it underlines its own claim of being co-extensive with reality, as Shulman has observed.[36] But one characteristic feature of *dharma* which has been emphasized in MBh is its alterability, as the story of Aṇīmāṇḍavya shows.

But if the idea is put forward by the authors of the MBh that *dharma* is something which can be changed, two questions should be answered: first, how did this idea come up, and second, why is its alterability not discussed explicitly? For the time being the answers have to remain speculative, but some supportive arguments may be adduced in favour of them:

Ad 1) The MBh hints at one of the reasons for the appearance of this idea: the notion that *dharma* is distributed according to the concept of *varṇāśramadharma* and that there is a *dharma* for *kṣatriyas*, which demands a constant display of prowess necessarily involves violence and has on the long run disastrous consequences. The insistence with which the composers of the epic refer to it suggests that some historical

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[36] Shulman 1991: 11: "So the *Mahābhārata* is coterminous with the world […] It presents itself not as a work of art, but as reality itself."

experience can be found behind it, as has been argued by Hiltebeitel.[37]

Ad 2) The epic does not exist in a vacuum, and its authors had certain ideas about its abstract audience. With regard to *dharma* it would presumably consist of brahmins and *kṣatriyas*, those two social units which *idealiter* govern a dharmik society. Their prerogatives are part of *dharma*, and therefore any attempt to alter its form is likely to meet with resistance. So rather than to confront this audience directly with new ideas, it may have seemed wiser and more promising to take the indirect way of illustrating what can go wrong and where to look for a remedy.

If the thoughts presented here are acceptable, it would seem, that the MBh contains, if not an explicitly formulated theory, at least the germ for developing a universal idea of *dharma*, in which the restrictions for caste behaviour have been loosened. After all, the low position of Vidura, Dharma incarnated, is a direct result of the rules of *dharma* itself! And in view of the disastrous consequences of his low position and the resulting disregard of his advice, the epic may be thought of as inviting the audience to reconsider its own views of caste. However, this reconsideration is not carried out consequently. The most obvious indication can be derived from the episode of the lacquer house;[38] here six innocent people are sacrificed for the sake of the Pāṇḍavas, but because they are outcasts (or more exactly Niṣādas) no justification for sacrificing them is given. Therefore, one may suppose that the mechanism of thinking in terms of *jāti* and *varṇa* continued. But if the distinction between concrete and abstract author introduced above is kept in mind, things may seem a bit different: the episode of Aṇīmāṇḍavya not only illustrates the consequences of norms which are implemented too strictly, but the fact that Dharma himself is born in a lower rank than his brothers and therefore excluded from ruling in spite of his greater ability, suggests again, that there was at least on the level of the abstract author an awareness of the injustice that occurs once one's position in

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[37] Hiltebeitel 2002, especially 177-192, and Hiltebeitel 2011b (2004).
[38] MBh 1.136.7-9.

society is determined by birth alone. This does not mean, that the epic argues for an abandonment of the distinctions of *varṇāśramadharma*; its importance and necessity is highlighted again and again.[39] But the emphasis on non-cruelty seems to contain a tendency to attenuate at least the effects of, and perhaps also the violations against dharmic norms.[40]

The mere fact that it is possible to find evidence for these thoughts in the MBh, although they are not explicitly mentioned, may remind us that literary texts are autonomous entities. This does of course not mean that an awareness of this is to be found in all forms of literature alike, but it appears that the MBh is one of those remarkable pieces of literature, where its authors were well aware of it.[41]

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[39] Concisely put e. g. in MBh 12.110.11b *dharmeṇa vidhṛtāḥ prajāḥ* "By dharma creatures are held apart", i. e. they are supported and separated from each other at the same time.

[40] For the tendency of *ānṛśaṃsya* to transcend the limits between living beings, cf. Hiltebeitel 2011a, p. 466.

[41] I would like to thank the audience at the conference in Cagliari, two reviewers, and my wife Mareike for criticism and suggestions; for any mistake I am the sole responsible person.

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