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A Great Moral Legend from Orissa

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Is it permissible to kill one person in order to save twelve hundred? What if the one person is an innocent child? What if the one person is your own son? What if the one person is you? What if the twelve hundred are not abstract persons or strangers but rather specific people who are known to you and members of your own in-group or community? What if all of the twelve hundred trust you and have been devoted to you for many years? Are you for the twelve hundred or are you for the one?

The moral legends of Orissa are many; and one of those stories is among the greatest ever told anywhere in the world. For many Oriya readers of this essay the question I just posed (twelve hundred or one?) will immediately bring to mind the legend of Dharmapada. Dharmapada was a 12 year old boy whose name means “the path to righteousness” and can also be translated “at the foot of duty.” He was the son of Bisu Maharana, the Divine Architect, who, according to local legend, designed and built the Sun Temple at Konarak. The Divine Architect undertook the building project at the request of the King and under the threat of a mass execution of his work force if the temple was not completed exactly on time (twelve years, not a second longer) by exactly 1200 artisans (not one person more nor one person less). (Even today “Maharana” is a common surname in the Badhei artisan community in Orissa). In a moment I will retell the story (although in much abbreviated form) based on a version originally told to me in the early 1980s while I was conducting comparative anthropological research with Dr. Manamohan Mahapatra and others on moral reasoning in the Old Town of Bhubaneswar in Orissa, India and in Hyde Park, Illinois in the United States. And I will try to explain the significance of the Oriya legend of Dharmapada for contemporary research on moral psychology.

So, returning to the original question: “Is it permissible to kill one person in order to save twelve hundred lives?” That way of putting the question is associated with an influential school of moral philosophy called “utilitarianism”, which is based on the principle that a moral choice ought to aim to minimize aggregate harm and “do the greatest good for the greatest number”. One lesson I have learned from years of research on moral judgment and reasoning is that despite the appealing simplicity of the utilitarian principle “twelve hundred or one?” it is an artificial and dehumanizing way to describe a moral choice. Why? Because that way of formulating the question makes it seem that moral choice is a “no-brainer” (1200 is obviously a bigger number than 1) and is simply a matter of arithmetic, of calculating and maximizing a “utility”, of being able to count the number of lives that will be lost or saved.

Notice too that the very formulation of that question (“twelve hundred or one?”) presupposes that all individuals and peoples should be treated as morally equivalent,

regardless of whom they are. That sparse and narrow framing of the choice forces you to think about the twelve hundred and the one as abstract individuals or strangers devoid of specific personal identities and without actual moral careers or histories of benevolent or malevolent conduct. In order to offer an answer you are required by the slim and narrow framing of the question to view the twelve hundred and the one from such a great distance that you can no longer see the particular features of any of them: you have no choice but to ignore variations in their moral character; you are provided with no information about their past, current and prospective value for your community; you have no choice but to overlook how you and they (he or she) might be related to each other by moral bonds of kinship, guardianship, friendship, patronage or communal identity and solidarity.

Recent research in moral psychology reveals that ordinary folk have a far more complex (because true to life) view of their moral obligations and are not consistently abstract, numeric, and utilitarian in their judgments. Consider the following version of the so-called trolley problem, which is a type of hypothetical question that has become quite popular in contemporary research in moral psychology. “A runaway trolley is about to run over and kill five people, but a bystander can throw a switch that will turn the trolley onto a side track, where it will kill only one person.” This is called “the bystander condition.” When the choice is so described, most people in the world who can count will answer that it is “permissible” for the bystander to throw the switch, killing one person in order to save five lives. (It is not entirely clear what ordinary folk mean by the concept “permissible” when presented with the trolley problem or whether they mean just one thing. The English word “permissible” might mean any of the following things: “Not illegal,” “Not punishable by either god, nature, conscience or other human beings,” “Not damaging to your reputation,” “Not morally incorrect,” “Likely to be viewed with approval by god, nature, conscience or other human beings”. What we do know is that most people say that the bystander in the bystander condition has “permission” to throw the switch.)

Now consider a second version of the trolley problem. “A runaway trolley is about to run over and kill five people, but a man who is standing on a footbridge over the track can push another man off the bridge, so as to stop the train and kill only that one person.” This is called “the footbridge condition.” When the choice is so described many people in the world (even those who can count) do NOT think it is permissible to push the man onto the track, killing one person in order to save five lives. What is going on here? Is this apparent inconsistency of choice in the two runaway trolley situations a problem with everyday moral judgment, a failure of moral logic and human rationality in the application of the utilitarian counting principle? Or could it be that the inconsistency is merely apparent and signifies a problem of a different and deeper sort, perhaps a failure of utilitarian moral theories to understand the true nature of moral judgment in everyday life? Some lessons I learned from my research in Orissa and from the legend of Dharmapada may help us answer those questions.

Here in a narrative nutshell is the legend of Dharmapada, as I first heard it told in the Old Town of Bhubaneswar. Let me tell you a story. Long ago, King Narashimhadev the

First employed the Divine Architect, Bisu Maharana, to construct the Konarak Sun temple. For astrological reasons both the selection of the site of the temple (at a remote location near the Bay of Bengal) and the timing and nature of the construction process had to be exact (1200 artisans working alone and in isolation must build the temple in exactly 12 years). Indeed, their lives were on the line; according to the conditions set by the King the risk of failure of the project would be the execution of the entire work force. The Divine Architect, confident of his abilities and the skills of his twelve hundred artisans, took up the challenge; thus Bisu Maharana left his family behind for twelve years and he and his workmen went into isolation at the remote construction site.

On the night before his departure the Divine Architect's wife became pregnant and nine months later she gave birth to a son. The son, Dharmapada, was a prodigy, a genius who quickly and easily mastered all the books in the family library. (He was so-to-speak the Mozart of architecture.) He grew up hearing majestic tales about his great father, the Divine Architect. He longed to meet his adored yet absent father, but of course that was forbidden by the orders and conditions of the King. Nearly twelve years went by before his mother would allow him to leave the family home and venture off to seek his father at the distant temple site by the sea. As he set off on his journey to Konarak, Dharmapada's mother gave the boy two marks of family identity to carry with him so that his father would recognize him – her wedding ring and a distinctive fruit from the family garden.

After a long trek Dharmapada arrives at the construction site and sees the grand Sun Temple. He also sees several of the artisans. Much to his surprise they are despondent. They tell him that the temple is complete except for the capstone, which keeps falling off. There is a mysterious and disastrous problem with the design of the temple which the Divine Architect has been unable to fix or even detect. Unless the problem can be solved by midnight all of them, including the Divine Architect, will be executed by the King.

The boy walks around the temple and quickly spots a minor and easily corrected flaw. "Take me to the tent of the Divine Architect" he exclaims! The artisans bring the boy to the tent of the Divine Architect where the great Bisu Maharana is going out of his mind trying to figure out what went wrong. "This boy says he can fix the temple", the artisans announce; thereby sending the Divine Architect into a rage over the arrogance of a child presuming to telling him how to design a temple. He drags the boy by the ear to the temple site. The boy points to the flaw, which the Divine Architect immediately recognizes and then corrects. The capstone is successfully placed on the temple and the work is complete, on time.

First there is a great celebration of success but then slowly an anxious and dreadful silence falls over the crowd of artisans. One of the men approaches the Divine Architect and says: "Sir, It is great that we completed the temple on time but if the King finds out that we did this with the help of this boy he will kill us anyway. There is but one way out of this dilemma. It is twelve hundred or one. The boy must be killed; and since you are our leader and the Divine Architect you must kill him."

“But he is an innocent child,” the Divine Architect avers, horrified by the proposal. “Nevertheless Sir, it remains twelve hundred or one.” The spokesman for the artisans impresses on the Divine Architect the inexorable utilitarian moral calculation and urges him to kill the boy. Reluctantly the Divine Architect agrees to end the life of the one person so that the lives of the twelve hundred might be saved.

Nighttime arrives. With blade in hand Bisu Maharana enters Dharmapada’s tent intending to kill him. Standing over the boy’s bed he slowly raises the knife and is about to slay the sleeping child when he notices the wedding ring and the fruit from the family garden. He realizes that this brilliant boy is his son; and he awakens Dharmapada and embraces him with joy and tears. Father and son are united, to their mutual delight.

The Divine Architect, together with Dharmapada, approaches the twelve hundred. “This is my son Dharmapada” the Divine Architect proudly tells his artisans, in anticipation of a great celebration. Yet the twelve hundred are unmoved by this discovery. They press forward with their utilitarian logic. “A moment ago when you did not know the precise identity of this boy you were willing to kill him to save us all. Be consistent! What difference does it make if he is your son? The fact is it is still twelve hundred or one!”

Distraught the Divine Architect becomes immobilized in the jaws of this moral dilemma. He begins to go mad, damned if he does and damned if he doesn’t. “BARasaha badheire dAyee, nA purare DAYee” is the Oriya expression (here written with English letters), which in English translation means “Are you for the twelve hundred artisans or are you for your son?”

Notice that the Oriya formulation is somewhat ambiguous. Does it mean that one is faced with a simple (and “no-brainer”) utilitarian choice between twelve hundred lives and one life; or, alternatively, does it mean that one is faced with a real moral conflict between two different role based obligations, a dilemma in which Bisu Maharana is forced to choose between his protective occupational duties as the Divine Architect towards his artisans and his protective familial duties as a father towards his son? Some of my research on moral reasoning in the Old Town of Bhubaneswar suggests that doing one’s role-based duty is a high moral ideal among many groups in Orissa and that an ethics of community and an ethics of divinity play a significant part in everyday moral reasoning. My colleagues and I have proposed a “Big Three of Morality” (Autonomy, Community and Divinity) and have suggested that a utilitarian calculus focused exclusively on the assessment of aggregate harms and benefits for abstract individuals is not the only way to reason about what is right and wrong (see for example the essays by Shweder, Mahapatra and Miller and by Shweder, Much, Mahapatra and Park, available on the website referenced below).

So how does the great story of Dharmapada come to an end? Over the years I have discovered that most of my American students are unable to predict the conclusion of the Oriya legend on the basis of the plot summary I just provided. They almost never anticipate the final dramatic scene in the story. Dharmapada, recognizing his father’s moral conflict and observing his incapacitating psychological distress, climbs to the top

of the Sun Temple and jumps off, thereby voluntarily engaging in a sacrificial suicide in order to save his father from having to make an immoral or sinful choice between two types of violations of duty. In the end the virtuous soul of this twelve year old boy goes to heaven and is made sacred; and Dharmapada, who is on the path to righteousness, becomes the heroic Oriya exemplar of a dutiful son.

Now finally, let's return to the trolley problem. Imagine a new version of the trolley problem called "the Oriya Dharmapada condition." "A runaway trolley is about to run over and kill five people, but a twelve year old boy who is standing on a footbridge over the track sees what is going to happen, assesses the situation, and jumps off the bridge and in front of the trolley, so as to stop the trolley and kill only himself." Is it "permissible" for the boy to jump? Here as elsewhere the word "permissible" does not quite do justice to the moral character and complexity of the situation. But at the very least, whatever the sadness and embarrassment we might feel about such an outcome, we can be filled with awe and greatly admire the boy for his act of heroic sacrifice. In comparison the actions of the adult male protagonist in the footbridge condition (pushing another man off the bridge instead of sacrificing himself) seems undignified, ignoble and almost self-serving; and of course we can now discern one of the ways the footbridge condition is quite different from the bystander condition, where self-sacrifice is not an option and moral judgment has become so attenuated that it amounts to little more than being able to count.

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<http://humdev.uchicago.edu/shweder-b.html> He wishes to express his gratitude and thanks to friends and collaborators in and from Orissa over the years, including Manamohan Mahapatra, Gagan Dash, Rama Dash, Saradindu Misra, Lata Misra, Prasanna Hota, Rama Hota, Usha Menon, S.K. Menon, Biranchi Puhan, S.K. Misra and Nilamani Senapati.