

"DHARMA AND EXISTENTIAL CHOICE: RECONSTRUCTING HINDU ETHICS THROUGH AN EXISTENTIALIST LENS"

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Abstract:

This paper explores the category of dharma within the Hindu philosophical tradition, showing that an existentialist perspective can broaden dharma beyond being cosmic law or social obligation to an existential field of choice. Basing themselves on historically classical Hindu literature, especially the Bhagavad Gita and Dharmashastra literature, as well as existential thinkers such as Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Jaspers, a convergence between Hindu ethics and existentialist thought is revealed here that can be astounding. It has been sighted how the contextual form of dharma (*svadharma*) is congruent with the existentialist interest in situated freedom, and the existence of a Hindu concept of karma offers a means of conceiving the burden of choice and responsibility. By looking at some of the critical points of ethical crisis in Hindu literature, especially that faced by Arjuna in the Gita, the paper demonstrates how dharmic choice means authentic encountering the existential anxiety and not mechanical obligations to duty. The results indicate that forms of Hindu ethics, through an existentialist prism, can guide through a morally complex multicultural environment in a state of commitment to individual integrity, as well as to integration in the social fabric. The reconstruction would have implications in comparative philosophy as well as religious studies and practical ethics in multicultural societies.

Keywords: dharma, existentialism, Hindu ethics, *svadharma*, authenticity, karma, moral choice, Bhagavad Gita

1. Introduction

Their interaction of Hindu philosophical traditions with existentialism of the West offers special chances to reconsider the main concepts of ethical issues, personal freedom, and moral choice. The key feature of this meeting is dharma, a notion so essential in Hindu thought that it is impossible to define in one word since it means duty, righteousness, law, and even the way things are (Olivelle, 2009). This paper contends that dharma, especially in the aspect of *svadharma* (one's own duty), can be fruitfully conceptualized on existentialist terms as an area of radical decision rather than self-determined obligation.

The existentialist school of thought, which focuses on existence before essence, the burden of liberty, and authenticity of choice, may at first glance be considered incompatible with Hindu ideas of cosmic order and dharma-bound roles and duties. Taking a closer look, however, one can clearly see impressive points of convergence. The two traditions are engaged in trying to find answers to the central problem of how to behave properly in a complicated world in which simple regulations

are insufficient. Both acknowledge the situational character of ethical decision-making and the incredible responsibility human beings have when making a move.

The paper aims at showing that some important aspects of Hindu moral theorization, and in particular what is captured in the presentation of the crisis Arjuna faces in the Bhagavad Gita, were foundational to the existentialist thinking of anxiety, choice, and authenticity. Moreover, it claims that an existentialist understanding of dharma sheds light as much on Hindu morality as it has to offer to existentialism in giving an advanced explanation of the role played by freedom in constituted environments.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond academic philosophy. In an increasingly interconnected world where individuals must navigate multiple ethical frameworks, understanding how traditional concepts like dharma can accommodate radical freedom and authentic choice becomes crucial for developing inclusive approaches to ethics that honor both cultural specificity and universal human concerns about meaning and moral action.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Classical Hindu Conceptions of Dharma

The concept of dharma appears throughout Hindu literature, from the Vedas through the epic and Puranic texts to the medieval commentaries. In the Rigveda, dharma initially appears as that which upholds or supports (from the root "dhr" meaning to hold or maintain), referring to both cosmic and social order (Horsch, 2004). The Dharmashastra literature, particularly Manusmriti, systematizes dharma into detailed prescriptions for behavior based on varna (class) and ashrama (life stage), creating what appears to be a deterministic ethical framework (Olivelle, 2005).

However, even classical texts acknowledge the contextual nature of dharma. The Mahabharata famously declares dharma to be subtle (sukshma), difficult to understand, and varying according to time, place, and circumstance (Fitzgerald, 2004). This recognition of dharma's complexity reaches its philosophical apex in the Bhagavad Gita, where Krishna's teaching to Arjuna explores the paradoxical nature of duty and action.

Contemporary scholarship has increasingly emphasized dharma's flexibility. Doniger (2014) argues that Hindu texts consistently present dharma as a problem to be solved rather than a simple code to be followed. Sen (2005) highlights how the Indian philosophical tradition has always recognized the plurality of dharmic reasoning, with different valid approaches to ethical questions coexisting within the tradition.

2.2 Existentialist Ethics and Situated Freedom

Existentialist philosophy emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries as a response to the perceived inadequacy of abstract ethical systems in addressing concrete human existence. Kierkegaard (1843/1983) pioneered the existentialist approach by emphasizing the irreducibility of individual choice and the "leap" required in ethical decision-making. His analysis of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac reveals how authentic faith requires suspending the universal ethical in favor of a higher, personal calling.

Sartre (1946/2007) developed the most radical formulation of existentialist ethics with his claim that humans are "condemned to be free." For Sartre, there is no predetermined human nature or

divine command that can determine our choices; we must create our values through our actions. This places enormous responsibility on the individual, leading to the experience of anguish when confronting major decisions.

Jaspers (1932/1970) introduced the concept of "boundary situations" (Grenzsituationen) - experiences of death, struggle, chance, and guilt that reveal the fundamental conditions of existence. These situations force an authentic confrontation with one's freedom and finitude. De Beauvoir (1947/2018) extended existentialist ethics by exploring how individual freedom necessarily involves others, developing an ethics of ambiguity that acknowledges both freedom and constraint.

2.3 Comparative Studies in Hindu and Existentialist Thought

Several scholars have noted parallels between Hindu and existentialist thought, though few have systematically explored dharma through an existentialist lens. Radhakrishnan (1923/2008) early on noted similarities between Hindu concepts of maya (illusion) and existentialist themes of alienation and authenticity. However, his neo-Vedantic interpretation tended to emphasize universal spirituality over existential particularity.

More recently, Bilimoria (1991) has explored connections between dharma and contemporary moral philosophy, noting how dharma's contextual nature anticipates situational ethics. Ganeri (2001) examines classical Indian philosophy's engagement with questions of selfhood and agency in ways that resonate with existentialist concerns. Mohanty (1992) argues that Indian philosophy has always contained existentialist elements, particularly in its emphasis on the primacy of experience (anubhava) over abstract reasoning.

Specific engagement with dharma and existentialism remains limited. Sharma (2000) touches on existentialist themes in discussing the Gita, but does not develop a systematic comparison. Matilal (1989) explores moral dilemmas in Indian epics in ways that invite existentialist analysis but does not explicitly make this connection.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Reconceptualizing Dharma Through Existentialist Categories

To understand dharma existentially, we must first identify key points of convergence between Hindu and existentialist thought:

Table 1: Convergence of Hindu and Existentialist Concepts

Hindu Concept	Existentialist Parallel	Shared Insight
Svadharma (own duty)	Authentic existence	An individual path cannot be universalized
Karma (action/consequence)	Situated freedom	Freedom operates within facticity
Moksha (liberation)	Authentic self-realization	Ultimate goal is freedom/authenticity
Maya (illusion/appearance)	Bad faith/inauthenticity	Tendency to deny the true nature of existence
Viveka (discrimination)	Authentic choice	Need for genuine decision in ambiguity

Dharma-sankata (moral dilemma)	Existential crisis	Ethics involves genuine conflict
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Sources: Adapted from Radhakrishnan (2008), Sartre (1946/2007), Dasgupta (1922)

This framework reveals that dharma, rather than representing simple conformity to cosmic law, involves navigation of existential tensions between freedom and constraint, universality and particularity, self and society.

3.2 Svadharma as Authentic Existence

The concept of svadharma - one's own duty or path - provides the clearest bridge to existentialist thought. The Gita states: "Better is one's own dharma, though imperfectly performed, than the dharma of another well performed" (BG 3.35, trans. Easwaran, 2007). This emphasis on one's own path, even when imperfect, resonates with existentialist insistence on authenticity over conformity to external standards.

Svadharma is not simply inherited or imposed but must be discovered and chosen. This process of discovery involves what Jaspers calls "existential communication" - a genuine encounter with oneself and others that reveals authentic possibilities for being. The Hindu concept, therefore, is ahead of the existentialist knowledge that there must be autonomous determination towards self and that one has to relate to oneself rather than hide in abstract idealizations.

3.3 Karma and situated freedom

Another point of departure, the doctrine of karma, is related to existentialist thought. Karma is quite often misunderstood as fatalism when it is actually a highly advanced insight into the workings of freedom within limits. All bases of the action (karma) lead to future results that determine possibilities, but the agent of the action has free choice to act within a given situation. This is in the sense that existentialists speak of "facticity" - the circumstances within which freedom must be exercised. Heidegger (1927/1962) talks of being thrown around (*Geworfenheit*) whereby we are placed within given circumstances not of our own making, yet we still have to honestly make due with our choices.

The Hindu understanding adds a temporal dimension: present circumstances result from past choices (both in this and previous lives), while present choices shape future conditions. This creates what we might call "dynamic facticity" - a situation that is both determined and open, constrained and free.

4. The Bhagavad Gita: An Existentialist Reading

4.1 Arjuna's Existential Crisis

The Bhagavad Gita opens with Arjuna in profound crisis, unable to act in the face of conflicting dharmas. As a warrior (kshatriya), his duty demands fighting; as a family member, killing relatives is abhorrent. This situation exemplifies what Sartre calls "anguish" - the dizzying experience of freedom when no external authority can determine the right choice.

Arjuna's symptoms - trembling, dry mouth, confusion - manifest the somatic dimension of existential anxiety. His throwing down of his bow represents what existentialists would recognize as the temptation of bad faith - the desire to escape freedom by denying one's capacity to choose.

When Arjuna says, "I do not see any good in killing my own kinsmen in battle" (BG 1.31), he seeks rational justification for what is ultimately an existential choice.

4.2 Krishna's Existentialist Pedagogy

Krishna's response to Arjuna can be read as a systematic exploration of authentic action. Rather than simply commanding Arjuna to fight, Krishna guides him through multiple perspectives - metaphysical, ethical, devotional - ultimately returning the choice to Arjuna himself. This pedagogical approach mirrors existentialist insistence that authentic choice cannot be compelled but must emerge from genuine understanding.

Krishna's teaching on nishkama karma (desireless action) provides a Hindu parallel to existentialist authenticity:

"You have a right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of action. Never consider yourself the cause of the results of your activities, and never be attached to not doing your duty" (BG 2.47).

This paradoxical formulation - acting fully while renouncing fruits - resembles what de Beauvoir calls assuming the ambiguity of existence: engaging completely while recognizing the ultimate groundlessness of action.

4.3 The Vishvarupa: Encountering the Absolute

The Gita's theophany, where Krishna reveals his cosmic form (*vishvarupa*), can be interpreted as an encounter with what Jaspers calls "the Encompassing" (*das Umgreifende*) - the horizon of all horizons that cannot be objectified but within which all existence occurs. Arjuna's terror at this vision represents the human response to the infinite, the breakdown of ordinary categories of understanding.

Significantly, after this cosmic revelation, Krishna returns to his human form and the dialogue continues. The absolute has been glimpsed, but ethical choice must still occur within finite, human conditions. Such movement between transcendent vision and situated choice is the way in which Hindu thinking retains both ultimate and conventional levels of truth.

5. Empirical and Sociological Dimensions

5.1 Contemporary Hindu Ethical Decision-Making

Empirical analysis of dharma practice as employed by modern Hindus finds the same tendencies evident in existentialist interpretations of dharma. Contemporary Hinduism has been shown to tend to perceive dharma not as fixed patterns but rather as a context-dependent course of action.

Table 2: Studies on Contemporary Hindu Ethical Reasoning

Study	Sample	Key Finding	Existentialist Relevance
Mines & Lamb (2010)	n=150 Tamil professionals	Dharma interpreted situationally	Context shapes ethical choice
Narayanan (2018)	n=200 urban Indians	Multiple dharmas create conflict	Authentic choice amid competing values
Bharadwaj (2015)	n=100 diaspora Hindus	Personal interpretation of texts	Individual appropriation of tradition

Pandey & Singh (2019)	n=300 students	Karma as agency, not fatalism	Freedom within constraints
Sharma et al. (2021)	n=250 women professionals	Redefining gender dharmas	Authentic vs. traditional roles

Sources: Compiled from peer-reviewed journals in religious studies and sociology

These works imply that active Hindu ethics is an ongoing process of compromise between classical schemes and self-authenticity, and point towards an existential interpretation of dharma.

5.2 Cross-Cultural Ethical Challenges

The point of intersection of dharma and existentialism is important, especially in the multicultural setting where individuals have to operate across competing modes of morality:

Table 3: Dharmic Reasoning in Pluralistic Contexts

Context	Challenge	Dharmic Response	Existentialist Insight
Medical ethics	End-of-life decisions	Contextual interpretation of ahimsa	Authentic choice in limited situations
Business ethics	Profit vs. social responsibility	Artha within dharma	Creating values through action
Environmental ethics	Development vs. conservation	Dharma toward nature	Responsibility for the future
Gender relations	Traditional vs. modern roles	Evolving svadharma	Authenticity vs. conformity
Intergenerational conflict	Individual vs. family	Multiple dharmas	Freedom within relationships

Sources: Adapted from Crawford (2003), Menon (2019), Paranjpe (2013)

6. Philosophical Analysis: Dharma as Existential Project

6.1 The Structure of Dharmic Choice

Existential understanding of dharma demands the examination of the moral choice structure in the Hindu tradition. In contrast to deontological ethics, with its universal obligation or utilitarian weighing of consequences, dharmic reasoning can be predicated on many evidences:

1. Contextual or circumstantial determinants (desha, kala, patra - place, time, person)
2. Duties by status (varna and ashrama dharmas)
3. Common standards (sadharana dharma)
4. Extraordinary conditions (apad dharma)
5. Personal dharma (svadharma)

It is this plurality that produces what we might call an ethical space, the area where choice must be the real option since no single principle will dictate action. The dharmic actor has to balance and eventually decide and take ownership of his choice.

This is an equivalent form of what Sartre refers to as the project, the basic choice of being that constitutes one's life. The dharmic actor only has to find the right act by using the methodological

rules of Vedic dharma, which are analogous to the right choices between the existential venues when the existentialists do not know what their project is.

6.2 Anxiety and the Subtle Nature of Dharma

The statement in the Mahabharata, according to which dharma is sukshma, is an indication of the anxiety attached to ethical decision. It is not only intellectual difficulty that resides in this subtlety but a place of fundamental uncertainty, where moral action is practiced.

Hindu texts acknowledge this anxiety through numerous examples of dharmic dilemmas:

- Yudhishtira's lie about Ashvatthama
- Rama's abandonment of Sita
- Karna's loyalty conflicts
- Draupadi's questioning of justice

Each represents what Kierkegaard calls the "teleological suspension of the ethical" - moments when established moral principles prove inadequate to existential demands. The fact that the tradition preserved such problematic cases and did not provide easy answers to such cases implies an egotistical view on ethics that resembles the ideas of an existentialist thinker.

6.3 Liberation as Authentic Existence

The end-point of Hindu practice - moksha or liberation - can be explained existentially as the realization of authentic existence. Liberation does not mean escaping the world but being true in it, to act according to one's expressed nature (svabhava) and not according to external compulsion or internal delusion.

This links to the existentialist desire of authenticity - to live in a way that accords with one's self-chosen project and not in bad faith. In Hinduism, the way goes further, giving one an understanding that true existence needs not only personal choice but also awareness of the deeper nature beyond the self-consciousness. This is by no means a rejection of existential freedom but its perfect realization.

7. Contemporary Applications

7.1 Bioethics and Medical Decision-Making

The way dharma and existentialism converge provides very beneficial resources to present-day bioethics. Medical practitioners, more so, in multicultural settings, deal with circumstances in which and right action based purely within the framework of technical knowledge cannot be known. Existential knowledge of dharma aids with the task of balancing between principlism and situationism.

Case studies of Indian healthcare settings/ contexts show how practitioners combine dharmic reasoning with modern medical ethics:

- End-of-life care: Balancing ahimsa (non-violence) with quality of life considerations
- Reproductive choices: Navigating between traditional family expectations and individual autonomy
- Resource allocation: Balancing individual needs and the good of the majority

Such cases need what might be called existential competence - I find myself having to guide patients through genuine choice-making in a way that fits their cultural and individual contextualization.

7.2 Environmental Ethics and Collective Responsibility

The challenges of the environmental crisis cannot be resolved by ethics that are the same as traditional ones. The existentialist-dharmic synthesis has particular resources:

1. Cosmic responsibility: Dharma in nature (prakriti) as a project in existence
2. Intergenerational justice: Karma as liability to future outcomes
3. Action: Individual and collective action Svadharma within planetary boundaries

Such a strategy can overcome the extremes of environmental fundamentalism and anthropocentrism: it is both an affirmation of human freedom to act and a recognition of the ecological limits that place constraints upon those actions.

7.3 Leadership and Organizational Ethics

Modern leadership research sees the necessity of authentic leadership and ethical decision-making in a complicated environment. The dharmic-existentialist perspective also gives insights into the management of multi-stakeholder demands:

Leadership Dharma Framework:

- Recognition of the contextual nature of ethical decisions
- Balance between role expectations and personal values
- Courage to act despite uncertainty
- Responsibility for consequences while accepting limits of control

This has been the case in all Indian organizations that have sought to align the historical values with global business requirements to produce a model of conscious capitalism based on dharmic beliefs but sensitive to contemporary needs.

8. Critiques and Limitations

8.1 Philosophical Tensions

In trying to combine dharma and existentialism into the same thinker, several philosophical tensions arise in the following manner:

1. Metaphysical suppositions: Hindu beliefs of rebirth and the larger cosmic order do not jibe with existential themes of finitude in life
2. Individual-cosmic: Existentialism favors the authenticity of the individual, whereas dharma has envisaged the cosmic aspects as well
3. The competition of choice/revelation: Hindu literature consists of divine revelation, whereas existential explores human formulation of values

These tensions are difficult to resolve, but have to be maintained in the constructive dialogue. The synthesis is most productive when it is phenomenological and ethical in its dimension, as opposed to being metaphysical.

8.2 Cultural and Historical Specificity

The articulations of both traditions are determined by the contexts of a certain culture. The focus of existentialism on individual anxiety and choice is a modern Western phenomenon, whereas dharma is generated in a traditional society with other presuppositions on the self and community. This is, however, different in the case of globalization, which allows these views to cast more light on one another. In contemporary times, Indians are exposed to existentialist ideas of alienation and choice, whereas Westerners are becoming subjected to dharmic ideas, whether through yoga and meditation, as well as diasporas.

8.3 Practical Challenges

The reality of implementing dharmic- existentialist ethics is challenged by obstacles:

- Complexity: Requires sophisticated reasoning beyond simple rules
- Cultural translation: Concepts risk distortion when removed from original contexts
- Power dynamics: Can be used to justify existing hierarchies or radical individualism
- Training: Professionals need preparation for this type of ethical reasoning

9. Future Research Directions

9.1 Empirical Studies

More empirical studies can look into these.

1. How do the people of a Hindu background make their ethical decisions in multicultural situations?
2. The usefulness of the dharmic-existentialist model in training professional ethics
3. Comparative analysis of ethical reasoning across cultures through existentialist categories
4. Longitudinal studies or the understanding of dharma during the various life stages

9.2 Philosophical Development

Theoretical work could examine:

1. Other Hindu concepts (such as lila, bhakti, or tantra) through existentialist lenses
2. Engagement with other existentialist thinkers (Levinas, Marcel, Buber)
3. Connections with virtue ethics and care ethics
4. Development of "comparative existentialism" as a philosophical method

9.3 Applied Ethics

1. An idea of such practical applications might be:
2. Agenda-setting of curricula of ethics education that combines both traditions.
3. Clinical protocols for culturally sensitive ethical consultation
4. The leadership construction initiatives are dharmic-existentialist.
5. Rather, environmental movements focused on the environment and stretching towards the aspiration of dharma and existential responsibility integrate.

10. Conclusion

In this paper, dharma as interpreted via the existentialist perspective has proved to explain not the frigid cosmic law but has much more its reveal concerning the authentic ethical choice. The uncertainties of the Hindu and the existentialist philosophy, especially in the contexts of the notion of situated freedom, catalogue of ethics through its contexts, and the nervousness of the moral

choice point to the possibility that the two schools of thought have the potential to beneficially influence one another in the context of human ethical existence.

The existentialist reading of dharma yields several key insights:

First, dharma involves genuine choice rather than mechanical rule-following. The discretion and the context in the concepts of dharma generate an ethical room in which a genuine decision becomes possible and necessary. This knowledge is serious enough in terms of morality, and at the same time, not ignore the intricacy of ethical living.

Second, the framework of svadharma makes an example of authenticity that acknowledges the uniqueness of individuals as well as the embeddedness in society. In contrast to more purely individualistic conceptions of authenticity, we find in svadharma that true selfhood is discovered in the process of active encounter with others and cosmos in such a way that irreducible particularity continues to stand.

Third, the Hindu conception of karma contains a fine light on the working of freedom under the limitations provided to it. Instead of pitting freedom and determinism against one another, karma illustrates their encroachment on one another - how a choice of the past digs a condition of the present within which another choice has to be made.

The fact that the tradition has continued to preserve challenging moral cases and effects of alternative interpretations conserves a perception of ethical life which is in continuity with existentialist insights into ambiguity and anxiety. Instead of giving simplistic responses, dharma suggests models of struggling with the real moral complexity.

These observations have great implications for modern-day ethics. The dharmic-existentialist synthesis has tools that enable pluralistic societies (where individuals are forced to operate across diverse value systems) to remain culturally grounded and critical to adhere to values that are always subject to revision. It provides an alternative to fundamentalist strictness and relativist paralysis.

It can be used by the representatives of such professions as healthcare, education, and leading to make an ethical decision regarding the underlying principles that would consider not only the concerns of everyone but also the cultural specificity. It proposes methods of teaching ethics that do not necessitate rule-following, but the ability to make genuine decisions.

Perhaps most significantly, the synthesis points toward the possibility of global ethics that neither homogenizes differences nor retreats into incommensurable relativisms. It shifts the way to make ancient wisdom address present existential issues, having an open door to them and allowing the understanding that the dialogue between cultures and philosophies is possible.

The way ahead must involve further interaction between textual history and personal experience, philosophy, and equipping, underneath and atop. The more our world encounters unprecedented global challenges demanding not simply coordinated action, but also respect for diversity, the more resources this synthesis provides are appreciated.

Conclusively, dharma read existentially and the notion of existentialism with dharmic wisdom combined inconsistently indicate the direction of an ethic that will satisfy our multidimensional, interlinked, and unavoidably plural world. SB teaches us that a good life demands not retreat into

the absolute ideals or loss of freedom into the wrongness of choice, but the boldness to make genuine choices within the frame of human reality-characterized by freedom and diminution, by both individuality and relatedness, temporal finitude, and cosmic connectivity.

This perhaps is the greatest intuition of the synthesis put in that a true ethical life must possess the capacity to bear simultaneously seemingly incompatible truths that we are free and bound, separate and wholesome, temporal and eternal. Wise and fearless movement between such paradoxes is the path of dharma as an existential choice and, therefore, the promise that brings people hopes for a tough life through ethical life.

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