

## Beyond Performative Morality Based on A Thematic Interpretation of The *Satya-Māyā* Dialectic in The Ethics of Power of Śakuni and Kṛṣṇa in The *Mahābhārata*

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### Abstract

The phenomenon of performative morality and religiosity in the contemporary public sphere (moral and religious expressions intended for public consumption, rather than the manifestation of inner dispositions) highlights the need for a conceptual framework that distinguishes between ethical appearance and substance. This research develops a thematic-hermeneutic reading of the *satya-māyā* dialectic in the *Mahābhārata*, examining how Śakuni and Kṛṣṇa represent two opposing ethical orientations within the relationship between truth and power. This study of the philosophy of religion employs a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to the dice-playing episode in the *Sabhā Parva* and selected *ślokas* from the *Bhagavad Gītā*, combined with a comparative analysis drawing on political realism. The results indicate that Śakuni represents the instrumentalisation of truth and morality as tools of power, whilst Kṛṣṇa articulates an ethic that subordinates power to *satya* and *dharma* through *niṣkāma karma*. *Māyā* is understood as an epistemological condition that enables the disjunction between appearance and essence, whilst *sattva* and *lokasaṅgraha* form the textual basis for leadership with integrity. Performative morality and religiosity are formulated as new analytical categories that bridge performativity theory with the conceptual structure of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, characterised by the gap between appearance and essence, the instrumentalisation of symbols, and visibility, accompanied by critical scrutiny of Kṛṣṇa's controversial actions, without theological justification. The research concludes that the *Mahābhārata* offers a model of the ethics of power that positions truth as the foundation (rather than a tool) of leadership legitimacy; a thesis that holds internally within the text's cosmology and is relevant by analogy (rather than empirically) to contemporary public ethical reflection.

**Keywords:** *Mahābhārata*; *Bhagavad Gītā*; Śakuni; Kṛṣṇa; *Satya*; *Māyā*; Performative Morality; Public Ethics

### Abstrak

Fenomena moralitas dan religiositas performatif dalam ruang publik kontemporer (ekspresi moral-religius untuk konsumsi publik, bukan perwujudan disposisi batin) mendorong kebutuhan kerangka konseptual pembeda tampilan-substansi etis. Penelitian mengembangkan pembacaan tematik-hermeneutis atas dialektika *satya-māyā* dalam *Mahābhārata*, menelaah bagaimana Śakuni dan Kṛṣṇa merepresentasikan dua orientasi etis yang berkontraposisi dalam relasi kebenaran-kekuasaan. Kajian kepustakaan filsafat agama ini menggunakan pendekatan hermeneutis-fenomenologis atas episode permainan dadu *Sabhā Parva* dan *śloka* terpilih *Bhagavad Gītā*, dipadukan analisis komparatif dengan realisme politik. Hasil menunjukkan Śakuni merepresentasikan instrumentalisasi kebenaran dan moralitas sebagai alat kekuasaan,

sementara *Kṛṣṇa* mengartikulasikan etika yang menundukkan kekuasaan pada satya dan dharma melalui *niṣkāma karma*. *Māyā* dipahami sebagai kondisi epistemologis yang memungkinkan disjungsi tampilan-batin, sementara *sattva* dan *lokasaṅgraha* menjadi basis tekstual kepemimpinan berintegritas. Moralitas dan religiositas performatif dirumuskan sebagai kategori analitis baru yang menjembatani teori performativitas dengan struktur konseptual *Bhagavad Gītā*, berindikator kesenjangan tampilan-konduk, instrumentalisasi simbol, dan visibilitas, disertai kehati-hatian kritis atas tindakan *Kṛṣṇa* yang kontroversial, tanpa pembenaran teologis. Penelitian menyimpulkan bahwa *Mahābhārata* menawarkan model etika kekuasaan yang menempatkan kebenaran sebagai landasan, bukan alat, legitimasi kepemimpinan, tesis yang berlaku internal pada kosmologi teks dan relevan analogis, bukan empiris, bagi refleksi etika publik kontemporer.

**Kata Kunci:** *Mahābhārata; Bhagavad Gītā; Śakuni; Kṛṣṇa; Satya; Māyā; Moralitas Performatif; Etika Publik*

## Introduction

Contemporary public ethical discourse frequently highlights the phenomenon whereby moral and religious expressions are displayed primarily for public consumption, rather than as an embodiment of consistent inner dispositions. This phenomenon has been described by a number of observers as a performative tendency in moral and religious life within the public sphere. This study takes this observation as its starting point, whilst limiting itself to a textual-philosophical analysis: namely, examining how the *Mahābhārata*, through the thematic contrast between the characters of Śakuni and Kṛṣṇa, offers a conceptual framework for understanding the tension between truth as appearance (*māyā*) and truth as the foundation of action (*satya*).

As its main conceptual contribution, this study proposes a working definition of the term performative morality, as this term, to the best of the author's knowledge, has not yet been explicitly operationalised in studies of the philosophy of Hindu religion. This term is constructed by borrowing the theoretical framework of performativity from Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical sociology, which distinguishes between front stage behaviour (which is adapted to the audience's expectations) from the more authentic backstage behaviour (Yaqoob and Sindhu, 2026).

Furthermore, Judith Butler's concept of performativity, which posits that certain identities and dispositions can be constituted through the repetition of stylised acts rather than by expressing a pre-existing inner essence (Butler, 1999). These two frameworks are borrowed analogously (rather than literally), as both were developed for the contexts of sociology and gender theory, not Hindu religious philosophy. Consequently, this study defines performative morality as the disjunction between the performance of moral or religious acts in the presence of a social audience and the inner orientation of the actor.

Within the conceptual framework of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, this disjunction can be mapped onto four key concepts analysed in this study, namely: (1) *satya*, as the correspondence between speech, action and inner state; (2) *māyā*, as the tendency of consciousness to fixate on appearance rather than substance; (3) *niṣkāma karma*, as action without attachment to outcomes or external recognition, which is structurally opposed to a performative orientation that seeks validation from an audience; and (4) *dharma*, as an objective standard that serves as a reference for action, irrespective of the image it produces.

Performative religiosity, as a species of performative morality, is defined more specifically as a religious expression whose indicators include: (a) a discrepancy between

public ritual display and private ethical conduct; (b) the instrumentalisation of religious symbols for socio-political capital rather than a teleological orientation towards *dharma* or liberation; and (c) an orientation towards visibility in the presence of an audience rather than towards the praxis itself. Previous research relevant to this topic can be categorised into several clusters.

Firstly, studies on political ethics in the *Mahābhārata* in general, such as Subagiasta (2016) who explores its relevance to contemporary Hindu leadership philosophy. Meanwhile, Bansal (2025) explains that the central concept linking epic narratives with political ethics is *Rajdharma*, a doctrine which positions the king not merely as a political figure but as the guardian of *dharma*, whose authority is legitimate only insofar as he upholds ethical governance, social harmony and the cosmic order; however, this study is general in nature and has not specifically focused on the figure of Śakuni or on the concept of *satya-māyā*.

Secondly, studies on the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, such as Putra (2024), who interprets their dialectic as a critique of the artificiality of modern life, whilst Anam (2025) through a phenomenological, interprets Arjuna's crisis as an existential-psychological form of attachment, rather than merely a moral-theological dilemma, this study provides an important methodological precedent for philosophical readings of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, but does not address the figure of Śakuni or the theme of political power. Thirdly, studies on *satya* and *dharma*, such as Lipner (2019) demonstrates that *satya* within the Hindu framework of *dharma* is aimed at the welfare of the world (*lokasaṅgraha*), a finding that serves as an important reference for this research, although Lipner does not discuss the *dyūta* episode in the *Sabhā Parva*.

Fourthly, studies on *guṇa* and the ethics of leadership, such as Saha (2025) who examines the ethical structure of *guṇa* comparatively with classical Chinese thought, providing a methodological precedent for interpreting *sattva* as an ethical category, rather than merely a metaphysical one. Fifth, studies on performative religiosity and religious populism, such as Yilmaz and Morieson (2021) who map the literature on religious populism globally, whilst Dzulfikri et al., (2020) examine the politicisation of religion in the Indonesian context, both of these studies fall within the realm of contemporary empirical political science, differing from the textual-philosophical approach of this research.

From this mapping, it is apparent that no study has yet specifically combined a thematic reading of Śakuni and Kṛṣṇa through the lens of the *satya-māyā* dialectic as a conceptual model of the ethics of power. This is the research gap that this study seeks to address. It should be emphasised that the claims regarding contemporary politics, religious populism, or the crisis of democracy in this study are presented as a field for conceptual reflection made possible by a textual reading, rather than as empirical findings based on actual political data.

To guide this investigation, the study will focus on three research questions, namely: 1) How can the character of Śakuni, in a thematic reading of the *dyūta* episode in the *Sabhā Parva*, be interpreted as a representation of the instrumentalisation of truth and morality for the sake of power? 2) How does Kṛṣṇa, in selected *śloka*s of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, articulate an ethical model that subordinates power to the *satya-māyā* distinction, and to what extent can this model be conceptually distinguished from conventional moral performativity?, and 3) What is the conceptual and interpretative (rather than empirical) relevance of this ethical dialectic between Śakuni and Kṛṣṇa for reflections on contemporary public ethics, particularly for an understanding of performative religiosity?.

## Method

This study is a library-based research project in the field of philosophy of religion, employing a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to interpret primary texts as its material and formal objects, it is not a socio-empirical study that tests hypotheses against field data. The primary data sources consist of two corpora, namely the dice-playing episode (*dyūtaparvan*) in the *Sabhā Parva*, and the text of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Secondary data, comprising studies in Indology, philosophy of religion, and relevant national and international journal articles, are used as interpretative comparators. The analytical procedure was carried out in four operational stages, namely first, the identification and extraction of *ślokas* and narrative episodes relevant to the themes of *satya*, *māyā*, *niṣkāma karma*, and *dharma* second, textual interpretation taking into account the internal context of the chapter and the narrative flow third, testing the internal coherence of the interpretations and their historical continuity with the entire corpus of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Mahābhārata* and fourth, a comparative-heuristic analysis that juxtaposes readings of Śakuni and Kṛṣṇa, whilst also placing them in an analogical dialogue with Western political realism to sharpen the interpretation, with a view to formulating a conceptual synthesis regarding the relevance of the *satya-māyā* dialectic to public ethics. The validity of the argument is tested through logical-textual coherence and explanatory power regarding the phenomena of public ethics that are the subject of reflection, rather than through empirical replicability, the Śakuni-Kṛṣṇa is interpreted thematically and interpretatively rather than as a philological reconstruction of a single literal dialogue scene, whilst popular narrative elements outside the critical corpus under analysis are explicitly stated as references to the tradition of reception, not as philological findings.

## Results and Discussion

### 1. Śakuni: A Thematic Interpretation Of The Instrumentalisation Of Truth

The *dyūtaparva* episode in the *Sabhā Parva* Buitenen (1975) describes a series of events surrounding a dice game that took place in two rounds, namely the *dyūta* and the *anudyūta* (the repeat dice game), in which Śakuni acted as the dice-thrower on behalf of Duryodhana against Yudhiṣṭhira. Through the rigged dice (*kṛtadyūta*), Yudhiṣṭhira successively loses his wealth, his kingdom, his brothers, himself, and ultimately his wife, Draupadī (Gurung, 2026; Ram-Prasad, 2023). Fleming (2021) in his study *Gambling with Justice A Juridical Approach to the Game of Dice in the Dyūtaparvan of the Mahābhārata*, notes that this episode is not merely a spontaneous gamble, but rather a form of juridical brinksmanship (high-stakes legal manoeuvring), in which both the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas strategically employ *Dharmaśāstra* reasoning to outmanoeuvre one another.

In the thematic reading proposed by this study, the episode can be interpreted as a textual representation of a fundamental pattern, namely adherence to the rules of the game in a legal-formal sense (the dice game is a ritual valid under the chivalric code) which simultaneously undermines the substance of justice. This interpretation is enriched (rather than simplified) by Fleming's finding that the text itself contains an internal contestation regarding this tension, wherein, through the legal question posed by Draupadī before the assembly (challenging the validity of Yudhiṣṭhira staking himself after he had already lost and forfeited his status as a free man), the text narratively grants a moral and legal victory to the aggrieved party, even though, formally, the dice game had concluded with Śakuni's victory.

Thus, the *Sabhā Parva* does not merely depict the triumph of the instrumentalisation of law, but also contains the seeds of internal critique against it, a nuance that reinforces (rather than negates) this research thesis regarding the tension between formal legality and substantive justice. It is important to emphasise that this

interpretation represents the author's reading, as the *Sabhā Parva* itself does not include any explicit articulation by Śakuni regarding theories of power or morality what is available in the text are actions, rhetorical strategies and their outcomes, meaning that any reconstruction of Śakuni's motives and worldview remains inferential.

This caution is also consistent with Fleming's (2021) findings, which show that both sides (both the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas) employ subtle and conflicting lines of reasoning from the *Dharmaśāstra* to justify their respective positions; in other words, the text presents a complex, multi-directional battle of legal discourse, rather than a singular monologue by Śakuni on his philosophy of power consequently, the attribution of a theory to this figure remains a reader's construction, not a direct textual finding. Given these methodological limitations, Śakuni's pattern of action can heuristically be compared (not equated historically) with Machiavelli's (2025) thesis of political realism in *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, which positions cunning as an instrumental virtue for the preservation of power, as well as with Morgenthau's structural realism, which emphasises that politics is driven by calculations of interest that may override universal morality (Morgenthau, 1949).

Such cross-tradition comparisons, which juxtapose the classical South Asian ethical-political framework with modern Western political philosophy, have methodological precedents in contemporary comparative ethics, as demonstrated by Saha (2025) when comparing the ethical structure of *guṇa* in the *Bhagavad Gītā* with the concept of *de* (德) in Laozi. However, this comparison is used solely as an analytical framework to highlight the characteristics of Śakuni's actions within the narrative, not as a claim that Śakuni adhered to any particular political theory. This would constitute an anachronistic interpretation, which this study has consciously sought to avoid.

This study also examines Śakuni's patterns of behaviour in a comparative, rather than a classificatory, manner, in relation to the typology of *āsurī sampad* (destructive tendencies) in the *Bhagavad Gītā* XVI.4-10, which encompasses arrogance, violence, and an inability to distinguish between what is proper and what is improper (Pudja, 1999). It should be emphasised that the *Bhagavad Gītā* itself does not explicitly classify Śakuni within this category the parallels proposed here are the result of the researcher's thematic analysis of similarities in behavioural patterns, reinforced by Matilal's (2002) that the moral ambiguity of the characters in the *Mahābhārata* generally cannot be reduced to a closed ethical classification, but remains open to interpretative readings by readers across generations, rather than interpretations directly stated by Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Similarly, narratives concerning Śakuni's personal trauma or political vendetta against Hastinapura, commonly found in popular adaptations such as Rajagopalachari's (1968) work, are not fully explicit in the critical corpus of the *Sabhā Parva*, which serves as the primary reference for this study as Hiltebeitel (1990) in his study of the ritual and performative traditions of the *Mahābhārata*, such biographical elaborations generally developed within an oral and performative tradition of reception that runs parallel to (but is not identical with) the critical textual corpus consequently, their use here is limited to notes on the tradition of reception, rather than as philological findings regarding the text of the *Sabhā Parva* itself. With these limitations in mind, the article proposes that Śakuni's pattern of behaviour can be read as a thematic representation of one end of the ethical spectrum, namely the use of truth and rules as strategic instruments of power, irrespective of whether the text intends to provide a psychological-motivational interpretation of this character. The conceptual relevance of this reading to contemporary political phenomena (including the manipulation of discourse and the polarisation of identity) is discussed further in section 5 as a field for philosophical reflection, rather than as a claim of empirical political analysis.

## 2. Kṛṣṇa: An Ethical Model That Subordinates Power To Truth

As a thematic counterpoint to the interpretation of Śakuni, this study examines how Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad Gītā* articulates an ethical model referred to here as ethical realism, a working term that must be explicitly distinguished from two other uses of a similar term in philosophical literature. Firstly, this term must be distinguished from ethical realism in contemporary metaethics, which is the thesis that there are objective moral facts independent of human attitudes. Finlay (2007) demonstrates that the contemporary metaethical debate on moral realism actually encompasses at least four distinct conceptual dimensions (semantic, ontological, metaphysical and normative) each of which presupposes its own argumentative commitment regarding the status of moral propositions.

The use of ethical realism in this study is not intended to take a position in that meta-ethical debate, as this study does not claim the existence of universal moral facts that can be philosophically proven independently of the Hindu theological framework rather, the term is used in a limited sense to denote a single normative-interpretative thesis within the cosmological framework of the *Bhagavad Gītā* alone. Secondly, this term must also be distinguished from political realism as found in Morgenthau, which, on the contrary, emphasises the primacy of interests over universal morality in the analysis of power relations (Morgenthau, 1949).

The term ethical realism used here thus refers specifically to the thesis that legitimate political authority, within the framework of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, derives from submission to ontological truth (*satya*) and the cosmic order (*ṛta*, *dharma*), and not the other way round. This is a normative-interpretative thesis that applies internally to the logic of the text, rather than a description of actual political reality or a self-contained meta-ethical claim. The relationship between *satya*, *ṛta*, *dharma* and *niṣkāma karma* in this study is explained not as a single, pre-given ontological structure, but as an interwoven conceptual framework, each element of which has its own distinct historical roots.

*Ṛta* is an early Vedic concept of cosmic order governing the movement of the universe and ritual actions, which subsequently transformed gradually into *dharma* during the epic and classical periods as the emphasis shifted from cosmic-ritual order towards ethical-social obligations (Flood, 1996). *Satya*, on the other hand, is understood as the correspondence between speech, action and fact however, Lipner (2019) in his study of the *Kauśika* episode in the *Karṇaparvan*, emphasises that within the framework of Hindu *dharma*, *satya* does not stop at mere propositional correspondence, but is directed towards a greater purpose, namely the welfare of the world or *lokasaṅgraha*, so that a statement which is literally true may nevertheless be deemed contrary to *satya* if it deviates from that purpose, and vice versa. This interpretation is important to emphasise that *satya* within the Hindu framework is not a static logical-analytical category, but rather an ethical-teleological category bound by its consequences for the common good. Meanwhile, *niṣkāma karma*, taught by Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad Gītā* II.47, which states that a person has the right to act in accordance with their duty but is not entitled to its fruits Pudja (1999) is an ethical method that links concrete actions to an orientation towards *dharma* without the distortion of personal interests.

Framarin (2007) in his study of the dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, demonstrates that this doctrine does not, strictly speaking, demand the eradication of all human desires (*kāma*), but rather specifically demands the eradication of the desire for the results of one's actions (*phala*), which can distort the moral judgement of the actor. This is an important conceptual distinction to avoid the common misunderstanding that *niṣkāma karma* demands a passive or unmotivated attitude. The interconnection of these four concepts is thus constructed argumentatively by this study, based on a cross-chapter

reading and a synthesis of the aforementioned Indological studies it is not explicitly and systematically presented by the *Bhagavad Gītā* itself as a single, explicit doctrine. This point requires particular methodological caution. Within the narrative structure of the *Mahābhārata*, a number of actions associated with Kṛṣṇa's counsel during the battle of Kurukṣetra are widely discussed in the literature as problematic from a conventional ethical perspective (Matilal, 2002).

Howard and Cates (2025) emphasise that the *Mahābhārata* consistently presents its characters (including Kṛṣṇa) in a state of *dharma saṃkṣāta*, that is, a real existential dilemma that does not always have a single ethically satisfactory resolution, and that the consequences of these choices remain real and are heavily borne by the characters involved, rather than being merely abstract philosophical conundrums. Kosuta (2020) in his analysis which juxtaposes the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Mahābhārata* with the framework of contemporary ethics of war (*jus in bello*), also notes that Kṛṣṇa's teachings on *dharma* in the *Bhagavad Gītā* coexist in a not entirely harmonious manner with the militaristic ethos of *kṣatriya dharma*, which is explicitly advocated in the same text.

This internal tension underscores that the *Bhagavad Gītā* itself does not offer a clear-cut ethical resolution to the issue of violence in war. The *Bhagavad Gītā* IV.7-8, in which Kṛṣṇa states that he incarnates whenever *dharma* is in decline Pūdja (1999) could potentially be read as a theological justification for whatever actions Kṛṣṇa subsequently takes. Dowd (2011) in his analysis of what he terms Krishna's consequentialism, demonstrates how an argumentative framework based on the ultimate end (upholding *dharma* as a whole) is frequently employed (both by the figure of Kṛṣṇa within the narrative and by his interpreters) to justify specific actions which, when assessed in isolation, appear to contradict conventional ethical norms.

This study must consciously avoid such an interpretation, as it risks transforming philosophical argumentation into an unconditional justification for controversial actions, a form of reasoning that, by its very structure, can be misused to justify almost any action provided it is labelled as upholding *dharma*. This study therefore does not conclude that all actions associated with Kṛṣṇa are categorically distinct from Śakuni's strategies merely because both are labelled as such rather, it argues that *adhyāya* IV provides a theological framework used by the figure of Kṛṣṇa to claim the legitimacy of his actions, a claim which, as noted by Matilal (2002) and reinforced by Howard and Cates (2025) remains open to critical and alternative readings regarding the moral tensions within it, rather than a closed conclusion simply affirmed by this study.

The distinction put forward here, therefore, is of a structural-argumentative nature, namely that Śakuni's actions are justified by a calculation of interests, whilst Kṛṣṇa's actions are justified by a claim of submission to *dharma*. This is a distinction at the level of normative claims (the type of argument put forward by or on behalf of each character in the narrative), not a final ethical judgement on either action. This clarification is important given that, as Howard and Cates (2025) demonstrate, the *Mahābhārata* as a corpus deliberately maintains openness and incompleteness regarding its ethical dilemmas rather than resolving them with a single conclusion, and thus this research's endeavour to maintain a similar critical caution regarding Kṛṣṇa's actions (rather than definitively ruling them to be always and entirely morally distinct from Śakuni's actions) is consistent with the epistemological character of the text itself.

### 3. Performative Religiosity: An Interpretation Of The Critique Of Ritual Formalism

The textual basis for the concept of performative religiosity, as formulated in the introduction, is found explicitly in the *Bhagavad Gītā* II.42-46, when Kṛṣṇa criticises those who are fond of flowery speech (*puṣpitām vācam*), namely, those who adhere literally to the Vedic ritual texts in order to gain worldly pleasure and power, without any

understanding that transcends a results-oriented approach (Pudja, 1999). Contrary to previous claims that this criticism is directed specifically at the Kaurava elite within a particular narrative episode, it must be emphasised here that the criticism in *Bhagavad Gītā adhyāya* II is general and didactic in nature, addressed to Arjuna as part of philosophical instruction, rather than as a narrative commentary on the actions of specific characters within the plot.

This correction is methodologically significant Framarin (2007) in his study of the dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, demonstrates that Kṛṣṇa's teachings in the early sections of the *Bhagavad Gītā* consistently take the form of general philosophical arguments concerning the nature of desire (*kāma*) and attachment to results, rather than commentary on specific events or characters within the *Mahābhārata* plot. This didactic character distinguishes the discourse of the *Bhagavad Gītā* from the surrounding epic narrative.

This study employs this didactic critique as a conceptual framework, which is then applied in an analogical-interpretative manner to analyse patterns of religiosity within power relations in the broader context of Hastinapura. This constitutes an interpretative application, rather than a direct textual identification of Kṛṣṇa's critique of specific figures, and this limitation must be continually emphasised so that readers do not mistakenly assume that the *Bhagavad Gītā* explicitly targets the Kaurava figures. The three dimensions of performative religiosity formulated in the introduction, namely (a) the gap between appearance and conduct, (b) the instrumentalisation of symbols for socio-political capital, and (c) an orientation towards visibility, are derived deductively from the theoretical framework of performativity Butler (1999); Goffman (1959) which is subsequently tested for coherence against the critique of the *Bhagavad Gītā adhyāya* II, as outlined above they are not derived purely from the Sanskrit text itself.

In other words, these three dimensions constitute imported analytical categories used as a lens for interpretation, rather than an indigenous taxonomy found within the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The first dimension (the gap between appearance and conduct) finds methodological resonance in the recent ethnographic study by Pagis and Guzman-Carmeli (2026), which examines the tension between doing religion as active engagement and being done by religion as an authentic experience of submission, although this study is based on contemporary ethnographic data on Haredi Jewish practices and Buddhist meditation (rather than classical Hindu texts), its conceptual framework helps to affirm that authentic religiosity, in contemporary religious studies, can always be analytically distinguished from religiosity that is merely superficial, a distinction that is structurally parallel to that proposed in this article on the basis of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

The second dimension (the instrumentalisation of religious symbols) can be approached through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of religious capital, which, in its original framework, refers to the accumulation of competence and symbolic authority within the religious sphere that can be converted into other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Verter (2003) systematically expanded Bourdieu's framework into a model of spiritual capital, emphasising that religious knowledge, competence and preferences function as positional goods within a competitive symbolic economy, in which the value of spiritual capital is constantly contested and varies according to its socio-temporal context.

The use of the term religious capital in this study is limited to its analogical function as a lens through which to interpret the pattern of the conversion of religious authority into political legitimacy within the narrative of the *Mahābhārata*, it is not a full application of Bourdieu's champ theory or Verter's model of spiritual capital, both of which were originally developed for modern sociological contexts. This second dimension also intersects with the term power fundamentalism, loosely borrowed from

Juergensmeyer's (2017) observations on the politicisation of sacred beliefs to legitimise group domination, with the same methodological caveat regarding the limits of the analogical applicability of these concepts when applied to a classical text born within a completely different cosmology and social structure.

As a field for conceptual reflection (rather than empirical evidence of structural equivalence between the *Mahābhārata* and contemporary politics) this pattern of performative religiosity is relevant to discuss alongside the findings of Dzulfikri et al., (2020) who demonstrate that the politicisation of religion in local power contests in Indonesia frequently positions religious values as a rhetorical vehicle for electoral dominance, as well as the global literature review by Yilmaz and Morieson (2021) on religious populism, which affirms that the use of religious symbols and emotions to consolidate political support is a recurring pattern across geographical contexts and religious traditions.

These two studies, drawn from the fields of empirical political science and contemporary sociology of religion, provide a conceptual point of convergence (rather than proof) for the relevance of the theme of performative religiosity constructed from a textual reading of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. It is important to emphasise this distinction, given that both studies rely on contemporary empirical data collection methods, whilst this article is based entirely on textual and philosophical interpretation. Thus, the entire conceptual framework of performative religiosity proposed in this study rests upon two methodological layers whose clarity must be maintained, the first layer is an interdisciplinary theoretical framework (Goffman-Butler's performativity, Bourdieu-Verter's religious modality, Juergensmeyer's power fundamentalism) which functions as an analytical lens, and the second layer is the text of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *adhyāya* II, as the textual basis whose coherence is tested against that lens.

These two layers must not be conflated in such a way that the categories from the first layer appear to be direct findings from the second on the contrary, the explanatory power of their synthesis lies precisely in methodological honesty regarding the limits and analogical nature of this cross-tradition and cross-epochal conceptual borrowing, a caution which Framarin (2007) is also emphasised as an essential prerequisite for the comparative philosophical study of classical Hindu texts, so as to avoid an anachronistic reading that uncritically projects modern categories onto ancient frameworks of thought.

#### **4. *Satya, Māyā* And *Guṇa*: The Textual Basis For Leadership Ethics**

In this study, the concept of *māyā* is not simply posited as a veil that gives rise to political greed, but more precisely as a tendency of consciousness that treats appearances (actions, symbols, utterances) as reality itself, thereby precluding any verification of their conformity with *satya*. Within this framework, *māyā* becomes an epistemological condition that enables performative morality to occur without the actor's own realisation, rather than merely a psychological explanation of the motives behind greed. It is important to emphasise this limitation of meaning because the scope of *māyā* within the Hindu tradition (from *Sāṅkhya*, *Advaita Vedānta*, to *Vaiṣṇavism*) is far broader and more complex than the limited usage adopted by this study for the purposes of ethical-political analysis (Flood, 1996).

Fost (1998) in his study, demonstrates that within the *Advaita Vedānta* tradition in particular, *māyā* cannot be reduced to a mere illusion in the sense of sheer non-existence, but rather functions as a generative principle that actively plays out or shapes the phenomenal world (*līlā*), an ontological complexity that demands great caution when this term is borrowed for a far narrower and more specific analysis, as undertaken in this study. This methodological caution is not merely an academic formality, but a logical

consequence of the very nature of *māyā*'s operation, as argued here: if *māyā* indeed presents appearances as reality, then the agent under its influence will, structurally speaking, not experience themselves as performing something performative or inauthentic. On the contrary, they will experience their actions as entirely sincere and in accordance with the truth.

This implication is crucial for distinguishing the conceptual framework of this research from explanations that are purely moralistic (accusing the agent of conscious hypocrisy) *māyā*, in this interpretation, actually explains why performative morality can occur without any awareness of its own falsity, an epistemological phenomenon that runs deeper than mere deliberate deception. The textual basis for the notion that the quality of *sattva* is a key pillar of leadership ethics is explicitly referenced in the *Bhagavad Gītā* XIV.5-9, where Kṛṣṇa explains that *sattva*, by virtue of its purity (*nirmalatvāt*), is illuminating (*prakāśaka*) and free from inner afflictions (*anāmaya*), unlike *rajas*, which is characterised by passion and attachment, and *tamas*, which is characterised by inertia and darkness (Pudja, 1999).

Based on this *śloka*, the researcher proposes that *sattva* functions as a state of consciousness that enables perception undistorted by *māyā* thus, by way of argument (rather than being automatically stated by the text), it can be associated with leadership capacity oriented towards *satya*. Saha (2025) in his analysis comparing the structure of the *guṇas* in the *Bhagavad Gītā* with the concept of *de* (德) in Laozi, demonstrates that the structure of the *guṇas* in the *Bhagavad Gītā* is not merely static and metaphysical in nature, but possesses higher and lower ethical layers that can function as a framework for applied public ethics.

This is an interpretation that supports, though does not automatically prove, the argumentative link between *sattva* and the leadership capacity proposed by this study. Similarly, the connection between *satya* and *lokasaṅgraha* (the welfare of the world) is reinforced through a direct reference to the *Bhagavad Gītā* III. 19-20, which states that detachment-based actions oriented towards the welfare of the world are actions worthy of being performed (Pudja (1999) in line with Lipner's (2019) interpretation, which explains that the ultimate goal of Hindu *dharma* is to uphold *lokasaṅgraha* through harmony with truth, rather than mere formal compliance with rules.

This interconnection between *sattva*, *satya* and *lokasaṅgraha* thus forms an internally coherent argumentative sequence within the logic of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, wherein the clarity of consciousness (*sattva*) enables perception in harmony with truth (*satya*), and this harmony is in turn directed towards the collective goal of the welfare of the world (*lokasaṅgraha*). This is a chain of reasoning constructed by this study through a synthesis across *adhyāyas*, rather than being presented as a systematic doctrine by the text itself.

The main thesis put forward by this study (that truth legitimises power, not the other way round) is formulated more precisely as follows within the cosmological framework of the *Mahābhārata*, leadership authority built upon the manipulation of truth (as represented by Śakuni) is narratively fragile because it runs counter to the cosmic order posited by the text, whilst authority that claims submission to *satya-dharma* (as represented by Kṛṣṇa) derives narrative justification from the same cosmological framework.

This thesis finds a precedent and conceptual reinforcement in Suraj's (2025) recent study on the theory of power in the *Manusmṛiti*, in which he demonstrates that within the framework of classical *rājadharmā*, the authority of power is embedded in a cosmological theological and normative structure, rather than in a juridico-political consensus as understood in Hobbesian social contract theory or Weberian rational-legal legitimation, a

contrast that aptly illustrates the fundamental difference between the logic of legitimation in the *Mahābhārata* analysed in this study and the logic of legitimation in the modern state. This thesis is a proposition that applies internally to the theological-cosmological logic of the *Mahābhārata*, and its application to modern democratic societies (whose structures of legitimacy rest on legal-constitutional procedures rather than on a cosmological order shared through religion) is analogical and limited.

This study does not claim that truth will prevail over manipulative power holds as an empirical law in contemporary politics, but rather presents it as a normative framework that can enrich ethical reflections on leadership. As Suraj (2025) also demonstrates, the shift from a theologically-cosmic political ontology towards a modern biopolitical regime that manages life through regulatory apparatuses constitutes a profound structural transformation, not merely a change in vocabulary therefore, any attempt to apply a classical religious ethical framework to a pluralistic and secular public sphere must be accompanied by an awareness of these limitations, in line with the limitations commonly acknowledged in comparative studies of political philosophy across traditions and eras.

Thus, the entire argument concerning *māyā*, *sattva*, *satya* and *lokasaṅgraha* in this section culminates in a single normative thesis that maintains a critical distance from its excessive application, namely that within the textual cosmology of the *Mahābhārata*, truth functions as the foundation for legitimate authority, not the other way round. This is a thesis that constitutes a valuable conceptual contribution to cross-traditional ethical reflections on leadership however, its application to the contemporary secular political order must always be mediated by an awareness of the fundamental structural differences between these two frameworks of legitimacy, as emphasised both by Lipner and Saha's comparative study on the applicability and limitations of classical Hindu ethical categories in contemporary discourse, and by Suraj's politico-theological analysis of the epistemological gap between pre-modern and modern ontologies of power.

## **5. The *Mahābhārata*'s Contribution To Reflections On Contemporary Leadership Ethics**

The thematic dialectic between interpretations of Śakuni and Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata* is presented here as a field for philosophical reflection that can enrich the discourse on contemporary leadership ethics, whilst emphasising that this study does not empirically analyse actual political data. This clarification is important given the fundamental difference between text-based studies of the philosophy of religion (which rely on logical-textual coherence and the explanatory power of concepts) and empirical political science research, which demands verification of field data the framework proposed by this study operates entirely within the former realm, and therefore cannot, nor is it intended to, replace or substantiate claims within the latter.

The specific contribution put forward is not a generalisation that Western traditions entirely dominate global public ethics theory or that Indian thought is singular and holistic. These are generalisations that have been consciously avoided in this study. This avoidance is not merely a rhetorical precaution, but is in line with methodological critiques long raised within the field of comparative political theory itself. Dallmayr (1997) in his programmatic article, demonstrates that the dominant theoretical paradigm in comparative political science tends to treat Western political institutions and thought as an ideal benchmark against which non-Western societies are assessed in a one-sided manner, a tendency that is, in fact, reproduced rather than overcome by such binary generalisations of West versus East.

Similarly, March (2009) in his analysis of the nature of comparative political theory, emphasises that such cross-tradition studies should be oriented towards a first-

order evaluation of the contestation of norms, values and principles amongst coherent schools of thought, rather than merely expanding the Western canon to include foreign texts as exotic supplements. El Amine (2016) reinforces this critique by demonstrating that the categories of East and West themselves often obscure the vast internal diversity within each category thus, treating the entirety of Indian thought, for example, as a single holistic entity is just as erroneous and reductive as treating the entirety of Western thought as a single individualistic entity.

This study, therefore, consciously avoids both types of generalisation and instead offers a more specific and limited conceptual contribution, namely the interconnection between inner integrity, truth as the foundation of action, action without attachment (*niṣkāma karma*), public responsibility, and an orientation towards the common good (*lokasaṅgraha*). As Sen (2009) notes, the tradition of public argumentation concerning justice (*niti* and *nyaya*) has long been rooted in Asian philosophical discourse, and Bhikhu Parekh emphasises that non-Western traditions offer an understanding of political action that is not isolated from moral relations amongst fellow human beings (Parekh, 2000).

These two references are used not to claim the superiority of one tradition over another, but to emphasise that the contribution of the *Mahābhārata* put forward in this study engages in dialogue with (rather than replacing) other traditions of public ethics. This methodological orientation is in line with what March (2009) describes as a hallmark of a mature comparative political theory, in which there is an equal engagement between traditions as coherent dialogue partners, rather than merely as objects observed from a perspective claiming universal neutrality. It is important to emphasise this dialogical stance, given the risks that must be avoided on both sides both the risk of treating the *Mahābhārata* merely as an exotic addition to the Western canon of public ethics, and the converse risk of claiming that the *Mahābhārata*'s framework offers superior or purer answers than other traditions.

Kapila and Devji's (2013) study on the political reception of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in Indian intellectual history, affirm that such an ethical framework continues to serve as a living resource for ethical-political reflection, rather than a static spiritual legacy. These findings are relevant when read alongside El Amine's (2016) observation that traditional categories are, in fact, constantly undergoing reorientation and reinterpretation in tandem with the accompanying changes in the socio-political context, so that the most fundamental methodological error in cross-tradition studies is not borrowing categories from other traditions, but treating those categories as if they were fixed and unchanging from the moment of their emergence.

Thus, the re-utilisation of the *Mahābhārata* framework by this study to reflect on contemporary leadership ethics is in line with a pattern of living reception that has continued uninterrupted throughout the intellectual history of both India and the Nusantara it is not an anachronistic projection that forces an ancient text onto issues entirely foreign to it. The specific contribution of the *Mahābhārata* to the ethics of leadership, as reconstructed from the analysis in sections 1 to 4, can be formulated as follows: legitimate leadership, within the framework of this text, requires (1) inner integrity in harmony with outward actions, as opposed to the condition of *māyā*; (2) an orientation towards truth as a foundation, not a means to authority, namely *satya*; (3) action detached from attachment to results and social recognition, namely *niṣkāma karma*; and (4) responsibility for the common good that transcends group interests, namely *lokasaṅgraha*.

These four elements do not stand alone, but form a coherent argumentative sequence, in which inner integrity enables undistorted perception, clear perception enables a correct orientation towards *satya*, that orientation is realised through action without attachment and such action, in turn, is directed towards the common good as its ultimate

goal. This constitutes an argumentative structure that has been gradually constructed across the four preceding sub-sections of the discussion. As a field for reflection (rather than a policy prescription), this framework is relevant for collective discussion, yet it does not directly prove or disprove contemporary phenomena such as the politicisation of religious symbols Dzulfikri et al., (2020) or religious populism Yilmaz and Morieson (2021) which were mapped out in the discussion of section 3.

This limitation reaffirms the epistemological character of this research, as emphasised since the methodology section: the explanatory power of the proposed conceptual framework lies in its internal coherence and in its ability to enrich the vocabulary of ethical reflection on leadership across traditions (in line with the vision of comparative political theory proposed by Dallmayr and March), rather than on empirical claims regarding how contemporary politics actually operates. With these limitations in mind, the study concludes by emphasising that the dialectic between Śākuni and Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata*, however ancient it may be, continues to offer a relevant and productive conceptual vocabulary for those wishing to reflect on the relationship between truth, integrity and the authority of leadership in the present day.

## Conclusion

This study presents a thematic-hermeneutic reading of two contrasting ethical orientations in the *Mahābhārata*, namely an interpretation of Śākuni as an interpretative representation of the instrumentalisation of truth for the sake of power, and an interpretation of Kṛṣṇa as a textual articulation of the subordination of power to *satya-dharma*, with *māyā* understood in a limited sense as an epistemological condition that permits a disjunction between moral appearance and substance. As a conceptual contribution, the study formulates performative morality and performative religiosity as analytical categories that bridge the theory of performativity with the structures of *satya*, *māyā*, *dharma*, and *niṣkāma karma* in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, whilst explicitly demonstrating their textual basis in selected *ślokas*, rather than claiming that the *Mahābhārata* comprehensively and unequivocally rejects all forms of political instrumentalism, a generalisation that exceeds the scope of the textual corpus analysed here. The thesis that truth provides a foundation (rather than merely a tool) for the legitimacy of leadership is put forward as a proposition that holds internally within the cosmological logic of the *Mahābhārata*, its application to the public ethics of modern democratic societies is understood analogously and with limitations, given the differences in the structures of legitimacy between the epic's religious cosmology and the contemporary secular constitutional-legal order. This study is limited to the selected textual corpus and to a thematic-interpretative reading that remains open to alternative interpretations; further research is recommended to expand the corpus to other *parvas* within the *Mahābhārata* and to conduct a more systematic philological-comparative study between Hindu and Western traditions of political ethics.

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