

Understanding the riddle of existence through Yaksha Prashna in the *Mahabharata*

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Abstract: This research paper explores the profound philosophical dimensions embedded within the Yaksha Prashna episode of the *Mahabharata*, analysed through the interpretive lens of Soren Kierkegaard's existentialist philosophy. The Yaksha Prashna, characterised by its enigmatic and deeply reflective questions, presents a formidable challenge to conventional notions of life, morality, and the universe. By engaging with these ancient dialogues, this study uncovers nuanced insights into the human condition and the nature of reality, demonstrating the enduring relevance of these philosophical traditions in contemporary discourse. The research posits that the questions posed by Yaksha serve not merely as a narrative device but as a means to challenge and expand our conventional understandings of existence and ethics. This hypothesis is examined through a detailed analysis of the text, employing Kierkegaard's existentialist framework, which emphasises the subjective experience of individuals as they confront existential dilemmas. By drawing parallels between Yaksha's inquiries and Kierkegaard's existential concerns, this paper elucidates the philosophical significance of the Yaksha Prashna in addressing timeless questions of human existence. Central to this study are the research questions: How do the questions posed by Yaksha challenge conventional notions of life, morality, and the universe? What insights can be drawn from the Yaksha Prashna regarding the human condition and the nature of reality? The exploration of these questions reveals that the Yaksha Prashna episode offers profound insights into the human psyche, ethics, and the quest for understanding in a seemingly indifferent universe. The objective of this research is to illustrate how the philosophical inquiries of the Yaksha Prashna are not only relevant but also applicable to contemporary life, offering timeless reflections on existence that resonate with modern existentialist discourse. By employing a rigorous methodological approach rooted in existentialist theory, this study

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contributes to a deeper understanding of how ancient Indian philosophical traditions can inform and enrich contemporary philosophical thought.

Keywords: Yaksha Prashna, existentialism, Soren Kierkegaard, human condition, ancient Indian philosophy

Introduction

Man is not driven by necessity alone. He seeks. And this seeking turns through mundane, ethical, philosophical and metaphysical realms turns him into a metaphysical animal. In fact, the etymological meaning of the word “mortal” encapsulates the essence of what it is to be human. As André Comte-Sponville posits in his *The Little Book of Philosophy*, “Why is there something rather than nothing? Is life worth living? What is goodness? What is evil? Are we free, or are our actions determined? Does God exist? Is there life after death? These questions, which we might call metaphysical in the broadest sense (for they go beyond any possible physical reality), make us beings capable of thought, or rather capable of philosophising (for the sciences also think, but do not consider these questions), and this is what makes us human or, as the Greeks would put it, mortal: by which they mean not those who will die, animals die too - but those who know that they will die, without knowing what that might mean and yet being unable not to think about it ... Man is a metaphysical animal; this is why death is his constant problem. We do not need to resolve the problem, but to confront it.” (Comte-Sponville 2011, 40) Such deliberations on death prompt one to ask a significant question – which one is more dramatic - death or dying? However, such questions cannot be wrestled with without an insight into the mystery of existence. What is death, after all, if not the culmination of life? Thus, across nations and eras, people have been fascinated by the mystery of existence, the meaning of life, and the nature of reality. Philosophical traditions have frequently provided guidance in this endeavour by providing viewpoints and insights that cut across the limits of time and space.

In *Existentialism for Dummies*, Panza and Gale (2013, 132) posit that, “All existentialists believe that living with passion is important. Whereas most people take living with passion to mean living frantically and doing lots of impulsive things, that’s not what passion means from the existential point of view. Instead, passion means living life in an intense and deliberate way, one that flows from grappling seriously with the significance and meaning of your own individual life.” The various aspects of existentialism are clearly visible in the

Mahabharata. In fact, the epic is a testament to the ruthless mixture of human motives – of thought - discursive and non-discursive, a critique and rebellion against the traditional system, absurdity, the enlightenment, which stems from suffering, which in turn is a natural consequence of ego. Thus, one needs to understand the essence of what it is to drink life to the lees to delve into the depths of the aforementioned questions/problems.

Indian philosophy recognises a two-fold approach to understanding the Self and its ways. The first approach draws upon the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads* (*Vedanta*), the *Brahma-Sutras*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which deal with the elementary nature of reality, which is presumed to transcend time and techniques that assist experiential mindfulness and awareness of this reality. These texts together go by the name *Prasthanas Traya*. The second approach includes the two well-known Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, which delve into the conditional nature of reality, which get translated into principles and respectively inhabit the description of the principles of reality pertaining to specific contexts (Narasimhan et al. 2010). These epics contain elaborate accounts of philosophical structures elucidating phenomenological issues pertaining to the principles and ethics of action. The comprehensive study of these epics also aids in providing an all-inclusive description of an individual's belief system. In addition, *Yakshna Prashna* or the conversation with celestial entities, which goes beyond the ordinary and slides into the metaphysical, has been rigorously discussed in Indian Philosophy. This study explores the link between the perpetual mystery of existence and the framework offered by *Yakshna Prashna* in an attempt to shed light on the deepest recesses of the human psyche through the prism of such an ancient philosophical discourse.

The Indian epic the *Mahabharata* has a series of questions called *Yakshna Prashna*, which are asked by *Yaksha* - a celestial being. They cover a plethora of important topics, including duty, morality and the mystery of human existence. The aim of this paper is to unravel the meaning hidden behind these metaphysical questions and study how they contribute to our understanding of contemporary existential issues with the help of the intellectual sophistication and rigour found in *Yakshna Prashna*. By doing so, we open up a dialogic space at the intersection of seeming cultural differences towards epistemic and ethical redemption. While exploring the theoretical underpinnings, methods, and analyses that guide this investigation in the parts that

follow, we hope to shed light on the relationship between traditional knowledge and modern research through such a multidisciplinary discourse, providing a mosaic that deepens our understanding of the riddle of existence. Such a discourse can also be studied through the existentialist lens of Søren Kierkegaard, who posited a framework centred on individual existence, choice, and the search for meaning in life.

Considered the father of existentialism, Kierkegaard has deliberated on several key existential concerns. These include the search for meaning, the nature of selfhood, the significance of choice and freedom, the concept of anxiety and despair, and the individual's relationship with the divine. The works of Kierkegaard provide a precise reflection of the focus on human beings and free will made whilst existing. He goes on to depict human evolution as a sequential phase of progression which borders on the realms of religion, aesthetics and ethics (Narasimhan et al. 2010). Vyasa, on the other hand, journeys into the ruthless mixture of human motives amidst human frailties, imponderables, possibilities and overarching ambition that shape his enviably subtlest saga of the *Mahabharata*. The characters and stories found in it hold the key to comprehending one's dialogue with oneself, with the other, moral quandaries, well-being, and transcendence. The experiences of the character in the epic not only contribute to the epic nucleus but also shape it at various stages of its evolution. In the *Mahabharata*, the difficult pilgrimage of the self takes shape and significance against the backdrop of the central storyline. In fact, they are ingeniously interwoven. The complex characters that make up the epic are so dynamic that they contribute to the countless variations of actions, attitudes, morals, and predicaments. Each character rises in response to the environment and circumstances in life; none is either good or bad. Several main characters, including Yudhisthira, Arjuna, and Gandhari, try to improve and change themselves by experimenting with unforeseen events and repercussions as they go through their aspirations and sufferings. In a way, the *Mahabharata* is a grand journey towards becoming good. After all, does one not become so many people on the way to itself? The parallels between existentialist philosophy and Indian philosophical thought can be primarily identified in concepts such as "being-thrown-into-existence," "pure existence," "concern," "the mundane aspects of daily life," "powerlessness," "absurdity," "boredom," and "disgust." Kierkegaard's continuous fluctuation between subjectivity and

transcendence, along with the predominantly religious context of existentialist themes, holds significant appeal for Indian scholars. This is due to the intrinsic link between Indian philosophy and religious thought, which has never been distinctly separated (Hajko 2017).

Analysis

In the “Yaksha Prashna,” Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandavas, engages in a dialectic with a Yaksha - the god of death - Yama-Dharma, one who also happens to be the former’s father. The conversation between Yaksha and Yudhishtira appears in the Aranya Parva of the epic amidst the last day of the twelve-year exile endured by the Pandavas amidst the anxiety to avoid being discovered in the thirteenth year, where they were supposed to live incognito. The Pandavas, in the pursuit of retrieving the firewood of a priest stolen by a deer, end up exhausted and parched. Each brother, apart from Yudhishtira, goes to a lake to fetch water, disregards the warning voice of a disembodied supernatural creature, and ends up dead. Eventually, Yudhishtira joins in and goes on to answer all the 125 questions of Yaksha, which are self-reflective, phenomenological, and spiritual in nature. To Yudhishtira’s happiness, he is granted water from the lake and along with the lives of the four brothers, restored.

In the context of the event, Yudhishtira’s statements or precise answers cannot be categorised as generic given the situation and time but can be viewed as an attempt at the brilliance and described as ‘sthidadhipurusa’ (“sthitadhi” can be translated as “unperturbed wisdom”) which is evident in his name, Yudhishtira (Yudhi means war and sthira means steady), which can etymologically define someone who maintains a steady stance in his perspective during the war (Dasgupta 1932). Here, one is reminded of one of the oft-quoted slokas from the second chapter of the *Bhagavad-Gita* (2019, 56) “The sage, whose mind remains unperturbed amid sorrows, whose thirst for pleasures has altogether disappeared, and who is free from passion, fear and anger, is called stable of mind”.

The Yaksha goes on to pose a series of profound questions that probe into the essence of human existence, the nature of knowledge, and the tenets of righteousness (dharma). Yudhishtira’s responses reflect a deep understanding of Vedic wisdom and the moral imperatives governing human life. Kierkegaard, a precursor to existentialist thought, emphasises the subjective experience of the individual and the importance of personal choice and commitment in

the face of existential dilemmas. He posits that true understanding and authentic existence arise from the individual's confrontation with their own limitations, anxieties, imponderables and responsibilities. In this regard, Yudhishtira's interaction with the Yaksha can be interpreted as an existential encounter, wherein he confronts fundamental questions of life, death, and the Self. The tradition is replete with such enviably insightful dialogues. Here, one recalls the dialogue between Nachiketa and Yama, Satyakama and Jabala, Janaka and Astavakra Rishi, Rama and Vasishta, Yajnavalkya, Maitreyi and Katyayani, Arjuna and Krishna, Savitri and Yama, Bharata and Rama and so on. The import of such dialogues is far-reaching. They not only centralise a uniquely dialogic tradition, but also ensure its continuity through the undulating whisper of time. In fact, they form the kernel of Bhashya Literature. The *Mahabharata*, which evinces many such dialogues concerning matters sacred and secular, is no exception to this rule.

Nearly every character in the *Mahabharata* is prone to taking chances and paying for decisions they didn't consider beforehand and into whose vortex they were eventually sucked. The encounter between the Pandava brothers and Yaksha, a demi-god watching over a forest lake, is a classic example of how choice and decision-making define the course of action. The Yaksha Prashna episode has immense significance, as it reinstates the value of fortitude and patience in the face of adversity and dilemma. Here, Yudhishtira is seen addressing crises at various levels. At a physical level, he initially demonstrates strength but succumbs to his emotions upon discovering his lifeless brothers. Physiologically, he manages his thirst and exhibits a degree of control over his biological needs. His deep sense of loyalty and values enhances his psychological resilience. Spiritually and transcendently, his inclinations drive him towards the pursuit of knowledge. At each level, he displays specific symptoms and resolves various predicaments, each contributing significantly to his overall self. He uses his extensive wisdom in every situation, enabling him to provide carefully considered responses to questions that test his ability to handle dilemmas and crises. In essence, his quest for knowledge creates a vital internal space, enabling him to comprehend the questions posed, which are fundamental riddles of life. However, does Yudhishtira solve any of the riddles deepened by the questions of Yaksha or does he turn them into unsolvable paradoxes? As Bimal Krishna Matilal writes in his essay, "Moral Dilemmas: Insights from the Indian Epics", in the book *Epics and Ethics: The Collected Essays*

of Bimal Krishna Matilal (2019, 19): “Dilemmas are like paradoxes. Genuine paradoxes are seldom solved. They are, generally speaking, resolved or dissolved. Those philosophers and logicians who have tried over the centuries to solve the well-known logical and sentimental paradoxes, have more often than not created new problems elsewhere in the conceptual apparatus, which exposes the non-existence of a universally accepted solution.” But what kind of a philosopher Yudhisthira is in this context in particular and in the context of the epic in general? Thus, a deeper study of the episode of Yaksha Prashna presupposes a study of the character of Yudhisthira. In fact, the Yaksha Prashna highlights the fortitude of Yudhisthira, who is generally perceived as a weak character in the context of the conception of the epic hero. As Buddhadeva Bose (1986, 21) writes in his celebrated book, *The Book of Yudhisthir: A Study of the Mahabharat of Vyas*, “We shall now have to examine the premises on which Yudhisthir’s role as hero can rest. Generally, we regard him as weak and lacking in any initiative, as perpetually dependent on the prowess of Bhim or Arjun and on the counsel of Krishna, Vidur or his own brothers, nearly as indecisive as Dhritarastra and, despite his piety, guilty of unbelievable moral lapses. How shall we accept such a person as hero? His personality is so weakly attractive that no poet from Kalidas to Rabindranath has ever composed a kavya or natak with Yudhisthir as the central figure.” However, if one looks at the epic from the ruthless mixture of motives that life offers, the character of Yudhisthira can be singularly studied as one of the most complex characters in world literature, which a wise study of the epic evinces. In fact, Vyasa’s Yudhisthira and James Joyce’s Ulysses underscores the fact that it’s possible to be heroic in one’s daily life without having the resourcefulness of either Vyasa’s Arjuna or Homer’s Ulysses.

By answering Yaksha’s profoundly progressive series of phenomenological questions, Yudhisthira consolidates his experiential learning and gains deeper self-understanding. His knowledge leads to an expansion of his self-representation and augments his psychological well-being, developing his resources and potential to higher degrees of freedom and renunciation:

The Yaksha asked,—“What is the highest refuge of virtue? What of fame? What of heaven? And what, of happiness?” Yudhishtira answered,—“Liberality is the highest refuge of virtue: gift, of fame: truth, of heaven: and good behaviour, of happiness.” (Roy & Ganguli 1884, 5)

Here, Yudhishtira's answer highlights the importance of compassion as a virtue aligned with divine principles, resonating with Kierkegaard's belief in the individual's ethical and spiritual relationship with the divine. The Yaksha's inquiry into the highest refuge of virtue, fame, heaven, and happiness and Yudhishtira's subsequent responses—liberality, gift, truth, and good behaviour—offer a rich framework for examining Kierkegaard's emphasis on the individual's subjective experience and the quest for authenticity, often framed within a context of ethical and spiritual self-examination. In this light, Yudhishtira's assertion that liberality is the highest refuge of virtue resonates with Kierkegaard's idea of selfless giving and the ethical imperative to transcend self-centeredness. Liberality, or generosity, involves relinquishing the ego and fostering genuine connections and moral integrity. This mirrors Kierkegaard's call for individuals to move beyond their selfish desires and engage in acts that reflect their true ethical and spiritual nature. Similarly, Yudhishtira's response that gift is the highest refuge of fame can be interpreted through Kierkegaard's concept of authentic recognition. Kierkegaard posits that true acknowledgement comes not from superficial accolades but from meaningful contributions that resonate with one's inner self and the community. The act of giving, when rooted in genuine intention, elevates one's standing in the eyes of the other, not through ostentation but through the inherent value of the act itself. This aligns with Kierkegaard's critique of societal fame and his emphasis on authentic existence. When Yudhishtira states that truth is the highest refuge of heaven, it echoes Kierkegaard's profound engagement with the notion of subjective truth and its existential significance. For Kierkegaard, truth is not merely an abstract concept but a lived experience, which involves a deep commitment to one's beliefs and actions. Truth, in this existential sense, is intrinsically linked to one's eternal salvation and the realisation of one's spiritual potential. By adhering to truth, individuals align themselves with their higher purpose, akin to attaining heaven in both a metaphorical and spiritual sense. Finally, Yudhishtira's claim that good behaviour is the highest refuge of happiness directly correlates with Kierkegaard's exploration of ethical living and the pursuit of a meaningful life. Kierkegaard asserts that true happiness is derived from living in accordance with one's ethical principles and engaging in actions that reflect one's authentic self. Good behaviour, therefore, is not merely a societal expectation but a fundamental aspect of existential fulfilment. It is through ethical

conduct that individuals achieve a state of harmony and contentment, transcending the superficial pleasures of the temporal world. Yudhishtira's responses to Yaksha's questions align with Kierkegaard's existentialist themes. The emphasis on liberality, gift, truth, and good behaviour as refuges of virtue, fame, heaven, and happiness, respectively, underscores a deep philosophical coherence that bridges ancient wisdom and modern existentialist thought. This highlights the enduring relevance of these principles in understanding the human condition and the quest for an authentic and meaningful existence.

The exploration of life, morality, and the human condition provides relevant and valuable perspectives for contemporary philosophical inquiry, particularly in the context of existentialism. One of Kierkegaard's central themes is the "leap of faith," the notion that rationality alone cannot provide all answers to existential questions, and thus, an individual must embrace faith and make choices that transcend mere empirical evidence. In the Yaksha Prashna, Yudhishtira exemplifies this concept through his unwavering adherence to dharma despite the perilous circumstances. His responses to Yaksha's questions demonstrate a synthesis of rational thought and deep-seated faith in the ethical and spiritual values espoused by his culture. According to Neelakanta, an expert commentator of the *Mahabharata*, the renunciation of the four vices, which are pride, anger, desire and avarice, enables one to control the mind. The primary life goal, according to the Yaksha Prasna, is the accomplishment of the state of a sarvadhanee, a human being who is apprehensive not only about his salvation but is extremely interested in the spiritual well-being and the happiness of mankind (Iyer 1969). Through telling these and many other stories, the *Mahabharata* highlights the idea that life's options come in binaries, are interrelated, and are not spelt out most of the time as to which one could be chosen.

The Yaksha asked,—“What is that which, if renounced, maketh one agreeable? What is that which, if renounced, leadeth to no regret? What is that which, if renounced, maketh one wealthy? And what is that which if renounced, maketh one happy?” Yudhishtira answered,—“Pride, if renounced, maketh one agreeable; wrath, renounced leadeth to no regret: desire, if renounced, maketh one wealthy: and avarice, if renounced, maketh one happy.” (Roy & Ganguli 1884, 5)

Yudhishtira's response on pride, wrath, desire, and avarice, respectively—offers timeless insights into the human condition and

moral philosophy. These responses gain additional depth and relevance when examined through the lens of Kierkegaard's existentialist thought. Kierkegaard's existentialism emphasises the individual's journey towards self-realisation and authenticity, often by renouncing superficial or socially imposed values. In this context, Yudhishthira's answers align closely with Kierkegaard's ideas. Renouncing pride, for instance, aligns with Kierkegaard's call to humility and the shedding of ego to achieve a more authentic self. By letting go of pride, an individual becomes more agreeable, fostering genuine connections with others, unencumbered by the need for self-aggrandisement. Similarly, the renunciation of wrath resonates with Kierkegaard's exploration of inner peace and the resolution of existential anxiety. Kierkegaard posits that wrath, rooted in the individual's struggle against perceived injustices and existential angst, ultimately leads to regret and suffering. By renouncing wrath, one finds serenity and a clearer perspective on life's challenges, thus minimising regret and cultivating a more harmonious existence. The notion that renouncing desire leads to wealth is particularly evocative of Kierkegaard's critique of materialism and his emphasis on spiritual wealth. Kierkegaard argues that the relentless pursuit of worldly desires often leads to existential despair. In his view, true wealth is found in spiritual fulfilment and the pursuit of higher existential truths. Yudhishthira's assertion that renouncing desire brings wealth echoes this sentiment, suggesting that true prosperity is not measured in material terms but in the richness of one's inner life. Finally, the renunciation of avarice as a path to happiness underscores a key tenet of Kierkegaard's philosophy: the importance of living a life of ethical and spiritual integrity. Avarice, driven by insatiable greed, prevents individuals from experiencing genuine happiness. Kierkegaard advocates for a life of simplicity and moral clarity, where happiness is derived from ethical living and the pursuit of existential purpose rather than wealth accumulation. In this context, Yudhishthira's response to Yaksha's question encapsulates fundamental existentialist principles that are deeply compatible with Kierkegaard's philosophy. By renouncing pride, wrath, desire, and avarice, individuals can achieve agreeableness, avoid regret, attain true wealth, and find happiness. The choices we make bring out various aspects of ourselves, allowing several possibilities to express themselves for each choice that is made. In the process of choice, and in choosing upon the actions, values, attitudes, and other critical aspects of our being, we add depth and

vastness to ourselves. The *Mahabharata*'s teachings of sukha-dukha, contentment and suffering, are therefore intrinsic in its analysis of both dharma and adharma; of truth and untruth; of himsa, violence, and ahimsa, non-violence; of the attitudes concerning having and not having; of sexuality; of life-in-family and life alone; of self-actualisation and self-discipline or the non-appearance of them; and in its probe in the question of causality and human freedom, which is referred to as moksha (Chaturvedi 2007). This alignment highlights the enduring relevance of ancient wisdom in addressing the perennial questions of human existence and underscores the universality of existentialist themes across diverse philosophical traditions.

The Yaksha asked,—“Who is truly happy? What is most wonderful? What is the path? And what is the news? Answer these four questions of mine and let thy dead brothers revive.” Yudhishtira answered,—“O amphibious creature, a man who cooketh in his own house, on the fifth or the sixth part of the day, with scanty vegetables, but who is not in debt and who stirreth not from home, is truly happy. Day after day countless creatures are going to the abode of Yama, yet those that remain behind believe themselves to be immortal. What can be more wonderful than this? Argument leads to no certain conclusion, the Srutis are different from one another; there is not even one Rishi whose opinion can be accepted by all; the truth about religion and duty is hid in caves: therefore, that alone is the path along which the great have trod. This world full of ignorance is like a pan. The sun is fire, the days and nights are fuel. The months and the seasons constitute the wooden ladle. Time is the cook that is cooking all creatures in that pan with such aids; this is the news.” (Roy & Ganguli 1884, 8)

When Yudhishtira is asked, “What is the greatest wonder?” Yudhishtira replies that it is the inevitability of death and yet the tendency of humans to live as if they are immortal. This answer encapsulates the existential awareness of mortality, a key theme in Kierkegaard's philosophy. The recognition of one's mortality is a fundamental existential crisis, prompting individuals to seek meaning and authenticity in their lives. Yudhishtira's acknowledgement of this paradox highlights the existential tension between the awareness of death and the pursuit of a meaningful life. Moreover, Yudhishtira's journey mirrors Kierkegaard's exploration of despair and the individual's confrontation with nothingness. The *Mahabharata*, through the Yaksha Prashna, portrays Yudhishtira's resilience and moral integrity amidst the desolation and despair of exile and loss. His ability to answer Yaksha's questions correctly not only saves his brothers but also signifies his transcendence over existential despair

through applying wisdom and virtue. Yudhishthira's responses are imbued with an understanding that aligns with Kierkegaard's idea of living authentically – making choices that reflect one's true self and ethical convictions. Yudhishthira's response also highlights the paradox of human existence: despite witnessing death daily, people continue to live as if they are immortal. This response underscores a central aspect of the human condition: the denial of mortality and the inherent contradiction between human aspirations and the inevitability of death. Kierkegaard delves into the human condition, emphasising the individual's confrontation with existential anxiety and despair. "Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short it is a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two factors. So regarded, man is not yet a self" (Kierkegaard 1994, 17). In his 1941 seminal work, *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard explores the concept of despair as a fundamental aspect of the human condition, arising from the tension between the finite and the infinite within the self.

Kierkegaard's exploration of "despair" parallels the existential reflections in the *Yaksha Prashna*, where Yudhishthira's answers reflect an acute awareness of human limitations and the search for authentic existence. The dialogue with the Yaksha serves as a crucible for Yudhishthira's existential introspection, compelling him to articulate and affirm his commitment to dharma. Kierkegaard's original and foundational understanding of existentialism is straightforward and uncomplicated.

Existentialism fundamentally rejects purely abstract thought and the supremacy of reason. Instead, it asserts that philosophy must be intimately tied to an individual's personal life and experiences, as well as the historical context in which they exist. Moreover, it emphasises that philosophy should serve as a practical guide for living (Howard & Edna 1992). *Yaksha's* questions and Kierkegaard's philosophy highlight the subjective nature of the search for meaning. Yudhishthira's responses, rooted in reflection and wisdom, align with Kierkegaard's view that individuals must navigate existential questions personally to find authentic meaning.

Conclusion

Yaksha Prashna is an exemplary narrative through which Kierkegaardian existentialism can be vividly illustrated. Yudhishthira's answers to the Yaksha's questions reveal a profound engagement with

existential themes such as mortality, duty, and the search for truth. For example, when asked, “What is the path?” Yudhishtira responds that the path is that of the righteous, walked by the great ones, thereby reflecting Kierkegaard’s notion of the “ethical stage,” where individuals make choices based on universal moral laws and the quest for an authentic life. In his exploration of the human existential condition, Kierkegaard differentiates between an individual’s current state—what they presently are—and what they ought to be, or their essential nature. According to Kierkegaard, there is a transition from one’s essential nature to one’s existential condition, a shift from essence to existence. This underscores existentialism’s emphasis on the uniqueness of individual existence (Dhanapal 2014). The questions in the Yaksha Prashna episode of the *Mahabharata* encapsulate core existential themes that resonate with Kierkegaard’s philosophy, such as the search for meaning, the nature of selfhood, ethical living, and the individual’s relationship with the divine. These themes reveal the timeless wisdom of ancient Indian philosophy and demonstrate its relevance to modern existentialist thought. By juxtaposing Yaksha’s questions with Kierkegaard’s existential inquiries, it becomes evident that the Yaksha Prashna offers a unique and invaluable perspective on the human condition that complements and enriches Kierkegaard’s existentialism. Yudhishtira’s reflection on what constitutes a true Brahmin, asserting that it is not birth but virtuous conduct and wisdom, aligns with Kierkegaard’s idea of subjective truth, where personal experience and inner conviction supersede external categorisations. His assertion that a true friend stands by in adversity resonates with Kierkegaard’s emphasis on authentic relationships formed through genuine personal commitment. “The tragic hero relinquishes himself in order to express the universal; the knight of faith relinquishes the universal in order to become the single individual” (Kierkegaard 1994, 75). The narrative also explores existential solitude when Yudhishtira faces the Yaksha alone, reminiscent of Kierkegaard’s “knight of faith,” who must confront life’s ultimate questions in isolation, relying on inner strength and faith. Thus, the Yaksha Prashna not only encapsulates the rich philosophical heritage of the *Mahabharata* but also serves as a profound reflection of Kierkegaardian existentialism, illustrating the timeless struggle for meaning, ethical living, and authentic existence. By situating the Yaksha Prashna within the context of Kierkegaard’s existentialism, this research demonstrates the universal and timeless nature of the philosophical inquiries found in

the *Mahabharata*. The alignment between ancient Indian thought and modern existentialism highlights the enduring relevance of the Yaksha Prashna as a source of wisdom and contemplation for understanding the human condition. In contemporary society, individuals frequently confront existential dilemmas analogous to those addressed by Yudhishtira and Kierkegaard, such as the search for authentic identity, the struggle with ethical and moral choices, and the quest for meaning in an increasingly complex world. The Yaksha Prashna's exploration of virtues such as liberality, truth, and good behaviour, when examined through an existential lens, provides profound insights into navigating these challenges. Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjective truth and the significance of personal experience resonates with the questions posed by the Yaksha, which encourage deep self-reflection and personal growth. In an era where individuals grapple with issues of authenticity and the pressures of societal expectations, the teachings from the Yaksha Prashna offer valuable guidance on living a life of integrity and purpose. Furthermore, the concept of renouncing pride, wrath, desire, and avarice to achieve agreeableness, regret-free living, true wealth, and happiness, respectively, offers practical advice for contemporary issues such as mental health, materialism, and interpersonal relationships. Therefore, the convergence of these ancient and modern philosophies underscores the notion that the core questions about human existence remain consistent despite cultural and temporal differences. This comparative analysis not only enriches our understanding of both the *Mahabharata* and Kierkegaard's works but also bridges cultural divides, demonstrating that wisdom and philosophical inquiry transcend time and geography. In doing so, it reaffirms the significance of the Yaksha Prashna in offering enduring lessons applicable to modern life, encouraging individuals to seek deeper meaning and authenticity in their personal and communal lives.

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