

# Subjective nature of truth – by Shyam Bhat



Speaking the truth is not always easy and may not always be the right course of action either.



The ambiguous nature of the moral order of the universe is apparent in the famous story of Krishna's role in the death of Drona.

You probably know the story well: Drona is plundering through the Pandava troops and he needs to be stopped. But he is a formidable warrior and his only weakness is his affection for his son, Ashwatthama. And so, Krishna instructs Yudhishthira to tell Drona that his son, Ashwatthama, is dead. But Yudhishthira, widely renowned for his truthfulness, is reluctant to do so.

Then Bhima kills an elephant named Ashwatthama and roars loudly, "Ashwatthama is dead!" Drona comes to Yudhishthira and asks him if this is true. "Is Ashwatthama dead?" He asks.

Yudhishthira replies, "Yes he is dead." He pauses and adds, "But I don't know if it's Ashwatthama the man or the elephant (*"Ashwatthama hathaha iti, narova kunjaroava."*). The last part, he says under his breath and so Drona, who knows that Yudhishthira can never tell a lie, believes that his son is dead. He bows his head in grief and his head gets chopped off.

One detail that strikes me as strange, and therefore probably symbolic, is the elaborate nature of the lie. Yudhishthira did not lie in a direct manner; in order to protect his own self-image of being Mr Truthful, an elephant was killed and an elaborate ruse contrived, all so that he could justify the action to himself. A psychoanalyst might say that Yudhishthira's superego, his conscience, prevented him from acknowledging his own voluntary participation in a lie, and his mind accomplished this through various psychological defence mechanisms.

The same psychoanalyst would have to say that Krishna, at least, is emotionally more evolved. From his perspective, the war has to be won.

So, may be the moral of the story is that untruths and misdeeds are occasionally necessary, if the ends are justified. And Yudhishthira's role is the addendum to the moral – lie if you have to, but don't lie to yourself. ■

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