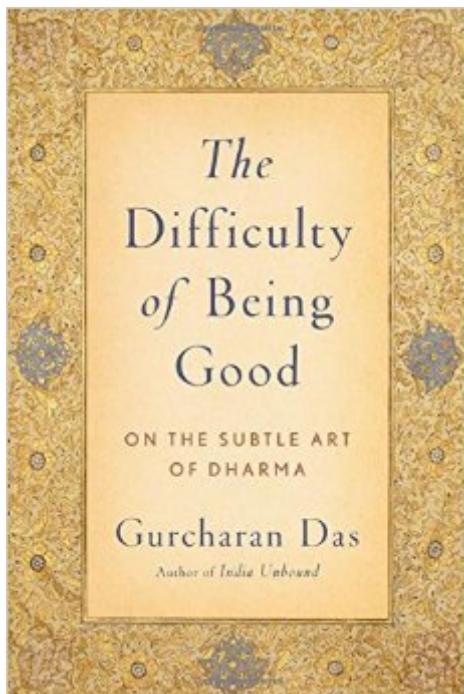


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The Difficulty Of Being Good: On The Subtle Art Of Dharma



Synopsis

Why should we be good? How should we be good? And how might we more deeply understand the moral and ethical failings--splashed across today's headlines--that have not only destroyed individual lives but caused widespread calamity as well, bringing communities, nations, and indeed the global economy to the brink of collapse? In *The Difficulty of Being Good*, Gurcharan Das seeks answers to these questions in an unlikely source: the 2,000 year-old Sanskrit epic, *Mahabharata*. A sprawling, witty, ironic, and delightful poem, the *Mahabharata* is obsessed with the elusive notion of dharma--in essence, doing the right thing. When a hero does something wrong in a Greek epic, he wastes little time on self-reflection; when a hero falters in the *Mahabharata*, the action stops and everyone weighs in with a different and often contradictory take on dharma. Each major character in the epic embodies a significant moral failing or virtue, and their struggles mirror with uncanny precision our own familiar emotions of anxiety, courage, despair, remorse, envy, compassion, vengefulness, and duty. Das explores the *Mahabharata* from many perspectives and compares the successes and failures of the poem's characters to those of contemporary individuals, many of them highly visible players in the world of economics, business, and politics. In every case, he finds striking parallels that carry lessons for everyone faced with ethical and moral dilemmas in today's complex world. Written with the flair and seemingly effortless erudition that have made Gurcharan Das a bestselling author around the world--and enlivened by Das's forthright discussion of his own personal search for a more meaningful life--*The Difficulty of Being Good* shines the light of an ancient poem on the most challenging moral ambiguities of modern life.

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Customer Reviews

"The Unexamined Life is Not Worth Living" -- Socrates

Doing a review of Mr. Das's extraordinary work "The Difficulty of being Good" is like trying to describe Sistine Chapel to a blind person. Yet, I am going to make a sincere effort in doing this because like Yudhistira says "I must". Since Indian philosophy unfortunately is fused with religion ("Hinduism" is not an organized religion around one book or one person), its hard for people to directly compare Mahabharata to Ancient Greek works of philosophers like Aristotle, Plato and Socrates. Its not taught in school since it has religiousness attached to it. Like Mr. Das himself says, if kids in Italy can read "The Divine Comedy", why cant kids in India learn Mahabharatha? Especially if doing so could make them better human beings? I would like to call Ramayana and Mahabharata, Indian tragedies, much like Greek Tragedies. Both end up causing tremendous agony to the reader by the way they end. But, ironically they both teach the reader about the value of life through tragedy. Both are attributed to two different authors but its likely that these works were authored over centuries with multiple redux versions. Much like the works of Aristophanes and Sophacles, these works are filled with deep human emotion, melodrama, fatalistic suffering and moral dilemmas. In both the epics, all the protagonists end their avatars after completing an odyssey that is filled with great suffering, longing, warring and separation from loved ones. Hence, I think they are much like the Greek tragedies. Now, tragedy is a strange emotion. when projected on external parties, it has the power to cleanse the audiences' emotional state of being and give them a sense of relief grown from utter despair. That's called catharsis.

This is a wonderful read for anyone interested in a dissection of the Mahabharata and the questions it poses. Das evaluates every character and it's place in answering the search for the ubiquitous Dharma, and what it exactly entails, reaching to the only conclusion that the Mahabharata tries to teach, that it is subtle. Das compares and contrasts the text with various other Western texts, the Greek ones especially, and conveys a certain authenticity to his ability as well-read enough to write on such a comprehensive and often contentious piece of literature. These comparisons are very interesting and shows the thought process of a researcher completely immersed and dedicated to the quest. Opinion from elsewhere compares this book to Iravati Karwe's, Yuganta, an analysis of the Mahabharatha on similar lines. Das himself brings out Karwe's conclusions and compares his to hers. Very interesting in this light as well. The USP of the book is supposed to be its ability in placing the erstwhile morals in the current context, and its evaluation of the directions in which we drift. Das

achieves this well, especially when he utilizes his life as a driving force in finding the answers to questions he has pondered over. He is candid, which makes it easy for the reader to relate to the dilemmas. He places the very same questions in contexts like Nazi Germany, the Iraq war, India's struggle for independence, etc. and ponders over questions like the efficacy of a Just War, and the Hindu obsession with renunciation. These are definitely wonderful to analyze...

Ambitious work by Gurcharan Das. Conflicts experienced by the central characters are timeless - envy, revenge, deceit, sorrow... This very good book would have been an outstanding work with better editing, and without the constant references to Greek mythology. This very ambitious work by Gurcharan Das seeks to bring the subtleties and ambiguities and conflicts in the Mahabharata and its characters into the modern world, and shed some light on what it takes to be good, and why that can be so difficult. Why did Duryodhana suffer from envy? Don't we suffer from envy too? The author points to himself as an example. When a colleague gets promoted, we suffer immense pangs of envy. Why did Karna suffer from status anxiety? Again, the author points to his own self and family with personal anecdotes to illustrate the point. To get that corner office, to be successful is equally important as being seen successful. Why was Arjuna in a dilemma before the war? To do what is ones duty but that which is bound to cause you emotional pain. What about Bheeshma, or Yudhishtra? What about the terrible revenge extracted by Ashwatthama at the end of 18-day war? The emotions experienced by the characters in the Mahabharata are human emotions. What they experienced thousands of years ago are what we experience today. This book works for the most part. However, crisper editing would have benefited the book. It feels a bit loose. The other crib is the author's insistence of trying to find parallels with Greek mythology. It is evident, from a reading of the book as well as from the bibliography, that the author has done a commendable and copious amount of research into this great Indian epic.

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