

UNITED WISDOM

Dharma and conflicting duties

Freedom and Action

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

A-03-N03 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

Dharma and conflicting duties

Epigraph

> *“All his standards failing him.”*

Sri Aurobindo, Essays on the Gita, First Series, III, printed p.22. A short fragment of the author’s description of Arjuna’s crisis. It concerns a character before battle, rather than any person experiencing doubt. These are the commentator’s words, not a Gita verse. Source.

What this article is about

Mikhail agreed to prepare captions for a small exhibition by Saturday. He also promised to meet his sister at the railway station and help transport her belongings. He thought the first arrangement manageable until the arrival time changed. Now both tasks require the same evening. In our hypothetical scene, scheduling partly explains the difficulty, but another question appears behind it: what does responsible action mean when one promise needs revision? Calling oneself a bad brother or an unreliable exhibition participant is easier than examining what actually happened.

Dharma is not an ancient name for any task list. In our selected reading of Aurobindo it concerns religious, moral and social order, and Arjuna’s conflict occurs before war. We will preserve that context, then separately raise a limited contemporary question: which undertakings were actually accepted, where do they collide, and what can change without promising on others’ behalf? Our example does not reproduce the epic’s scale. The article provides neither a universal ranking of duties, permission to harm through a higher calling nor a tested means of removing moral uncertainty.

I. Dharma is not exhausted by the word duty

In The Human Disciple, Aurobindo connects Arjuna’s dharma with an acquired order of conduct and his position as a warrior. The word encompasses more than a particular voluntary arrangement. Translating it through duty is therefore useful only while preserving its religious and social meaning. This is a selected commentator’s interpretation, rather than a definition of every use of the Sanskrit term. Calling any current task dharma would make the historical thought disappear behind familiar language about good planning and personal responsibility.

Mikhail can examine his promise without deciding whether it has a metaphysical foundation. Who requested the captions, what amount did he accept, and what was known about the deadline? Describing the subject does not devalue the moral question. It gives it material. While

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

a general image of a good person stands in place of a known promise, understanding exactly what needs changing is difficult. One can feel guilty for failing an ideal yet fail to see the other participant now awaiting a specific answer.

Sources of requirements differ too. One was accepted in conversation, another is assumed by family custom, a third relates to a role, and a fourth arose only in one’s own expectation. They may be significant but do not become identical through the word obligation. Establishing where a requirement comes from does not mean discarding everything unwritten. It helps avoid presenting one’s own hope as another’s agreement or mixing an important subject with an anxious judgement of the whole person. Moral seriousness begins here with distinction, rather than convenient release from any inconvenient task.

A historical role also acquires no authority over someone today merely because a respected text describes it. In the selected episode, military function, family ties and religious order form a particular difficulty. This creates no duty for a contemporary reader to submit to anyone declaring themselves a teacher. Our application remains an editorial inquiry. It certifies no spiritual state and allows no naming of someone’s objection as a lower level of consciousness to be overcome for a convenient decision.

II. Arjuna sees the consequences of his own action

In Edwin Arnold’s poetic translation, Arjuna recognises loved and respected people among his opponents before battle. His speech concerns death, family order and guilt; he then seeks instruction. Aurobindo’s chapter makes this a crisis of the previous grounds for action. We distinguish the voices of an epic dialogue from a later commentator. The military episode does not become a harmless metaphor for busyness. Historical ideas about caste, family purity and ancestors’ fate are retained in reading but not accepted as our contemporary norms.

Our own example offers only a limited neighbouring question. Mikhail previously thought both kinds of help expressed reliability. Now he notices that trying to do everything without clarification could leave two people relying on an inaccurate expectation. A consequence becomes discernible although the intention remains the same. This does not make him Arjuna or turn an exhibition into a battle. Comparison helps ask what action actually changes for others. Scale and substance differ; taking a small task morally seriously does not require inflating it into an epic catastrophe.

Sometimes circumstances were known from the beginning but their relationship went unnoticed. Mikhail knew the amount of caption work and the travel time yet assessed each task separately. The difficulty then does not necessarily establish that higher principles are incompatible. A calculation error may need correction. In other cases, a new deadline really appeared later. The difference matters to the next conversation: acknowledging one’s error

and reporting a new condition have different meanings. Neither should be replaced with a ceremonial account of a responsible person’s difficult fate.

Consequences should also be named to the extent known. Captions unfinished by the deadline may require another preparation arrangement. A delay at the station may leave his sister without expected help. Yet this does not establish that the exhibition will inevitably fail or relationships be destroyed. Others’ possibilities remain unknown. Precision retains the subject’s seriousness without adding an invented scale. Nor does it allow deciding for his sister that her expectation is unimportant because a shared project has a more attractive public name.

III. Collision, limited resources and an additional promise

A conflict can have different structures. Sometimes two actions genuinely cannot happen simultaneously. Sometimes resources exist but were allocated on inaccurate information. Sometimes a person added work that nobody requested. These cases do not receive an identical solution. If Mikhail promised only to prepare text but additionally decided to design every card himself, that expansion should be separated from the agreed subject. Dropping his own addition might preserve both significant tasks without abandoning accepted undertakings.

Distinguishing an obligation from customary availability is useful too. His sister may have relied on a particular meeting, while exhibition participants became used to Mikhail answering at any time. Constant availability does not become a known promise solely because it was convenient before. Yet not every expectation can be presumed insignificant either. Its source needs understanding, and change should be communicated to those actually relying on it. The article establishes neither contractual nor family duties; it proposes naming a subject otherwise lost in a general sense of duty.

Sometimes an anxious description contains an additional demand for infallibility. Mikhail believes a reliable person never changes promises. But that belief does not explain how to act after conditions actually change. Trying to match the image, he may hide the difficulty until the last moment and deprive others of time to decide. Our conclusion does not excuse every cancellation. It distinguishes a change that can be reported from silently maintaining someone else’s inaccurate expectation. Acknowledging a limit can mean attending more precisely to an already accepted subject.

Genuine incompatibility also remains and cannot be removed by a timetable alone. Choice, clarification of substantial obligations and possibly assistance from those who know the circumstances are then needed. A reader need not invent a faultless way out alone. A philosophical word does not replace professional clarification where required. In particular, our

small example cannot be used as a ready solution to violence, legal duties or serious risk. The situation’s scale changes which information and support are actually necessary for action.

Before choosing, it can help to check which resources already exist and which are merely imagined. Travel time, the amount of text and opportunities to work beforehand have concrete features; another participant’s willingness may remain unknown. It cannot be included as fact to obtain a pleasant solution. But declaring the whole conflict insoluble before clarifying it is premature too. A small check of conditions does not replace moral choice; it avoids loading that choice with a difficulty arising solely from an unverified assumption about available actions.

IV. Guilt does not allocate duties for us

Disappointment over an unfulfilled promise can be a significant experience but does not itself determine the right order of choice. The loudest requirement may belong to someone who gives frequent reminders, while a quieter participant remains invisible. Attention therefore cannot be allocated solely through the intensity of one’s unpleasant feeling. In our scene, Mikhail needs to consider both his known promise to his sister and the known exhibition task. Neither has to be declared nonexistent to end the inward collision.

An action already taken can be acknowledged separately from a still possible correction. If Mikhail said the captions were ready when they were not, a new subject has arisen: inaccurate information. It needs correction regardless of how he subsequently divides the evening. This separation does not reduce morality to communication technique. It helps avoid substituting one’s painful state for an answer to its addressee. Knowing a task’s current status may matter more to another person than a detailed account of how distressed its promiser is.

Nor must experience be suppressed for the sake of correct action. Regret can be acknowledged without treating it as final evidence of personal worthlessness or requiring its immediate disappearance after correction. The article proposes no treatment or guaranteed relief. We only sustain the difference between an inward state and a known subject of action. An unpleasant feeling sometimes remains after a precise conversation. That does not make correction meaningless, just as calm alone does not establish that significant consequences were actually considered.

The recipient also retains a right to their response. His sister can be unhappy about change even if Mikhail honestly names its cause. Exhibition participants may decline his proposed deadline. Explanation creates no agreement and does not guarantee forgiveness. Asking to revise an arrangement therefore differs from announcing that it has already been revised. Another person’s place is visible in that distinction. Moral work does not end when a promiser finds a formula allowing him to think of himself as good again.

Some consequences concern people who were not part of the initial conversation at all. If captions were promised to exhibition visitors, organisers' internal agreement to change the plan does not automatically establish what visitors should be told. Each communication has its own addressee and subject. Details of a family journey need not be disclosed to everyone to state a new arrangement. This distinction avoids turning personal explanation into a public story while also avoiding leaving others with outdated expectations. Responsibility can include several limited actions instead of one general speech.

V. Why the religious answer is not a priorities list

At the selected chapter's end, Aurobindo leads action towards a transformation of the soul's state and life in the Divine. The disciple seeks a clear rule; instruction points deeper than a new outward directive. This is a religious and philosophical interpretation, rather than a time-allocation table. Retaining conflicting duties while removing this answer would read the source incompletely. Transferring its answer literally to our ordinary scene creates another simplification: an unknown spiritual foundation starts justifying a specific decision that still needs assessment.

A person is free to seek religious meaning in their duties. But the article cannot certify that their chosen action expresses divine will. Nor must another participant accept such certification from the speaker. Our contemporary analysis retains a known subject, consequences, agreement and limited authority. These cannot be declared a lower formality simply because language about a higher calling has appeared. Taking the source seriously means acknowledging its own religious goal while avoiding presentation of our limited application as attainment of that goal.

It is particularly important not to use the military scene as general permission for cruelty in the name of duty. Historically the question relates to battle and Arjuna's position; it does not justify any command in any present situation. Someone threatened or coerced is not prescribed another trial of obedience to test their spiritual level. Safety and suitable support matter more than an editorial exercise. Serious harm and significant obligations need separate clarification that a philosophical analogy does not perform for the reader.

Our trial therefore keeps a small scale. Mikhail can clarify what he promised and what changed; he neither establishes liberation nor determines a law of action for everyone. This limit does not devalue religious thought. It lets it remain a substantive interlocutor without attributing a ready answer to circumstances unknown to it. We can hear a question about action's foundation without declaring that one successful schedule revision reproduces the entire path described in the chapter on the human disciple.

VI. Revision does not mean promising for others

Mikhail can offer to prepare some captions beforehand and pass the rest to another participant. But the handover is still a proposal. Others' time does not become an available resource through our difficulty. Willingness and the clarity of the subject need to be established. Without agreement, the exhibition's size or deadline may remain unresolved. Uncertainty should not be concealed by the word allocation. Until someone accepts a task, it is neither completed nor transferred, however attractive a solution looks in a personal plan.

The same applies to helping his sister. Mikhail can propose a different way to meet but cannot declare it equivalent beforehand. Circumstances he does not know may matter to her. Clarification does not require disclosing an entire personal life; only the subject necessary for a decision is needed. An available option can be asked about while preserving refusal. Not every replacement will be suitable. Someone does not lose the right to assess proposed help merely because its proposer is caught between two significant tasks and sincerely experiences the difficulty.

A new deadline must fit actual resources, or revision merely moves the earlier error. If Mikhail promises to finish everything overnight after travelling, it is useful to know whether he is genuinely willing to accept that amount. The article establishes no universal workload norm. It proposes avoiding treating an unlimited future as a place where every incompatible task miraculously fits. His own addition can be reduced, uncertainty named or further work declined. Substantial accepted obligations do not then automatically vanish; their content is clarified separately.

Sometimes honest revision requires reporting an unpleasant result: some work will not happen by the former deadline. It is not a pleasant way out but can provide addressees with known grounds for their own decisions. The communication does not guarantee preserved relationships, recognition of reliability or an absence of consequences. Its meaning is limited: it avoids leaving someone relying on what the speaker already knows is impossible. A demand immediately to approve the choice cannot be added. Participants can retain different judgements even after facts become clearer.

A handover also requires enough description. Even a participant who agreed may not know which captions are already ready, who needs the result and what remains unchecked. Saying a task has been transferred is insufficient if substantial information remains with its former executor. Yet complete direction of another person need not help either: the new participant may choose their own approach. A form's adequacy depends on the known subject and accepted amount. Revision should enable someone else to act, rather than merely release the first person from an unpleasant entry on their list.

VII. Choice can leave loss and uncertainty

Not every conflict permits a solution without a remainder. If Mikhail failed to finish captions at the previous time, some preparation may be lost. If another participant spent an evening covering for him, that expenditure does not disappear after explanation. Acknowledging a limit should therefore differ from asserting that everyone is now happy. Sometimes something remains for separate correction; sometimes consequences cannot be fully repaired. The article does not promise moral purity for any chosen option. It helps avoid concealing known loss behind an attractive account of choosing correctly.

A loss nevertheless need not mean accepting every further request as payment for it. If one missed deadline is used to infer an eternal duty of availability, a different subject has arisen and needs separate assessment. Mikhail can acknowledge a specific error without promising endless involvement. This distinction establishes no legal release and cancels no actual consequences. It preserves the moral conversation’s scale: what was done, whom it affected and which correction is now actually possible, instead of an indefinite debt paid with one’s entire future life.

Uncertainty remains an acceptable outcome too. Participants may not yet know whether they need a new deadline, and his sister may not have chosen a travel arrangement. A time for further clarification can be named if actually agreed, without inventing a decision for absent people. A pause is a limited action here only with a clear subject: what is expected and who needs to answer. It is not always suitable, particularly if delay itself creates risk. Assessment depends on the actual situation; our example provides no universal permission to wait.

After choosing, self-regard can change more slowly than a schedule. Someone need not feel immediate inner relief. An absence of relief does not establish that every step was wrong, just as a pleasant feeling is not sufficient verification. One can return to facts: an inaccurate promise was corrected, uncertainty named and no additional amount accepted. This return does not guarantee an emotional outcome. It supplies limited grounds for a further decision without requiring the episode to become an account of personal moral defeat or victory.

VIII. Stoic distinction and religious transformation

In the Enchiridion §1 we read, Epictetus distinguishes our own actions from what is not within our power. In our scene, this helps raise a question about a promise’s limits: one can offer an action without guaranteeing someone else’s approval. This is a philosophical neighbouring question, rather than proof of identity with Aurobindo. His religious transformation of the agent and action in the Divine are not reduced to a Stoic classification. Nor are Epictetus’s historically strong promises accepted here as guarantees of a person’s immunity from harm.

The nearest earlier discussion of Stoicism explores control, choice, exercises and a historical tradition. Our new topic concerns the collision of acknowledged duties and why the source seeks to transform action’s foundation. Simply repeating a distinction between one’s own and external matters would not resolve it. Even when two actions are each available separately, they may require the same limited time. Accepted conditions and possible revision need additional clarification. This is our practical question, not a literal resolution of a dispute between two philosophical frameworks.

The connection with karma-yoga also needs a boundary. Avoiding the purchase of recognition is useful to discussion but does not make a concrete deadline an insignificant external result. People may genuinely have relied on a particular action. Release from a desire for thanks therefore does not equal cancellation of a known promise. Both distinctions can be preserved in our analysis: another’s judgement is not guaranteed, while one’s own communication and accepted subject require attention. A shared word, action, does not combine every religious and philosophical foundation into one convenient system.

This comparison allows sources to be read without requiring one historical authority for every everyday case. A reader can assess the analogy differently, consult their own tradition or leave the exercise aside. The article establishes no correct religious affiliation and demands no abandonment of one. We need to retain our boundaries: a known action certifies no spiritual height, a strong inward feeling establishes no duty for another, and reference to a source does not perform factual clarification of unknown conditions.

IX. Responsibility begins with a concrete answer

Mikhail can complete a first step through two precise messages: state the current caption status and clarify what changed in the arrival time. This is not yet the whole conflict’s outcome, but addressees can respond to actual circumstances. He promises no decision for them and demands no consolation. This concrete answer sometimes appears less impressive than reflection on duty, yet returns another person to the situation. The moral question remains open where a decision really is pending, instead of being given an imaginary overall ending.

If one task remains incompatible with another after clarification, further choice is required. The article does not designate family, work or a public project as an invariably higher priority beforehand. Circumstances’ weight cannot be established from an attractive role name. Actual consequences, substantial obligations and available assistance matter; separate competent clarification is sometimes needed. A ready permission need not be inferred from Arjuna’s encounter with a difficult problem. The historical episode retains its scale and its own religious answer.

Dharma in the selected reading shows how deeply action can relate to a conception of life's order. When former standards collide, a person seeks more than a new task list. But our limited application does not require declaring any time shortage a spiritual crisis. A calculation error can be acknowledged and corrected at its own level. A real moral disagreement can be recognised without pretending it disappeared after a convenient message. Different difficulties merit different ways of clarification.

Saturday may end with a changed exhibition, a different meeting and participants' attitudes still incompletely known. That is an allowable outcome, although not necessarily pleasant. Mikhail is not awarded the title of someone who will never let anyone down again. He can know less: which subject changed, which response arrived and which new promise he is not yet ready to give. Responsibility in our trial does not become boundlessness. It retains its connection with another person through precise acknowledgement of what is known, possible and still requires a decision.

What this means in practice

For separate quiet reflection, choose a small conflict among your own tasks. Name each subject without judging your entire character: what was accepted, communicated to whom, and which conditions are known? Separate a new circumstance, a calculation error and work you added yourself. This is a voluntary editorial trial, rather than a tested method of resolving every duty. It can be done mentally, changed or left aside; no record needs to be shown to addressees.

Consider what can be clarified before a final choice. Are you promising a task handover for someone else? Are you treating desired approval as agreement already obtained? If known information is inaccurate, it can be corrected in the relevant conversation. Significant obligations and consequences are clarified separately. Under risk, threats or coercion, a further shared trial is not prescribed: safety and suitable support in the actual circumstances matter more.

Choose only an available action of your own: report a status, propose a feasible revision or acknowledge that a decision has not yet been established. Do not add a promise of someone else's forgiveness, spiritual liberation or disappearance of loss. Needing more information or competent participation can also be a precise first-step outcome. Our example does not determine legal, professional or religious duties for a reader.

After the trial, note the known result and remainder. What was clarified, which answer arrived, what remains unknown and what did you not promise? The entire conflict need not be declared resolved. Agreement, a pleasant feeling and continued relationships are not guaranteed.

Ending one inaccurate expectation can be enough. The source retains its religious question about action’s foundation; our trial does not claim to realise its whole answer.

Key quotation

> *“There is no moral standing-ground left.”*

Sri Aurobindo, Essays on the Gita, First Series, III, printed p.25. An authorial fragment concerning Arjuna’s conflicting standards. The subsequent exposition leads towards religious transformation of action; this fragment gives no permission to cancel every present obligation. Source.

Connections between traditions

Line	Shared question and limit of comparison
Gita ↔ Aurobindo	A collision between action and acknowledged order. Epic dialogue is not identical with later commentary.
Dharma ↔ contemporary duties	A requirement’s source and subject matter. A historical role does not become a universal task list.
Aurobindo ↔ Epictetus	Action’s foundation and the limits of one’s promise matter. Divine transformation is not identical with Stoic distinction.
Karma-yoga ↔ deadline revision	Desired recognition differs from an accepted subject. Non-attachment does not cancel known conditions.
Standards in crisis ↔ calculation error	An old rule can be insufficient. Not every time difficulty is a spiritual crisis.

Primary sources

1. Sri Aurobindo. Essays on the Gita, CWSA19. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust,1997; the First Series appeared in Arya1916–1918 and was revised for a1922book. The publisher’s note and complete Chapter III, printed pp.20–28, including its religious ending, were read. Both short fragments belong to the commentator’s own exposition, without embedded Gita verses. Current edition rights are retained; permission for every operation has not been established. The whole volume is not claimed as read.

2. The Song Celestial; or, Bhagavad-Gita, translated by Edwin Arnold. Observed title page: New York, Truslove, Hanson & Comba,1900; Project Gutenberg no.2388. The selected closing scene of I and opening of II were read, with surrounding religious propositions. A poetic version, rather than a technical definition of every Sanskrit term. Caste, family and military conceptions are not accepted as contemporary norms; no new direct quotation was inserted.

3. Epictetus. The Enchiridion, §1, translation by Elizabeth Carter. Attribution and the complete selected §1 were read. A limited philosophical comparison, without a direct quotation or transfer of historically strong immunity claims. The page's exact printed basis was not established; the entire treatise is not claimed as read.

Tags

dharma, duties, conflicting duties, Gita, Arjuna, Krishna, Aurobindo, religious context, action, moral order, role, promise, deadline, consequences, agreement, resources, revision, calculation error, responsibility, guilt, regret, correction, uncertainty, choice, loss, Stoicism, Epictetus, karma-yoga, voluntary participation, safety, historical reading, United Wisdom

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a coauthor of United Wisdom. Alongside research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.