

# DHARMA, MORAL DESERT, AND JUSTICE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY AND HINDU ETHICAL THOUGHT

by

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## ABSTRACT

*The question of who deserves what lies at the foundation of moral philosophy, political theory, and jurisprudence. While Western thinkers such as Aristotle<sup>2</sup>, John Rawls<sup>3</sup>, and Robert Nozick<sup>4</sup> offer diverging accounts of moral desert and distributive justice, Hindu philosophical traditions provide a distinct metaphysical and ethical paradigm rooted in the doctrines of dharma, karma, and the Purusharthas. Aristotle grounds desert in virtue and teleology, Rawls rejects desert as a fair basis of distribution because natural attributes are morally arbitrary, while Nozick dismisses patterned theories altogether in favour of historical entitlement. In contrast, ancient Hindu sources<sup>5</sup> such as the Upanishads<sup>6</sup>, the Bhagavad Gita, Manusmriti, the Ramayana, and Patanjali's Yoga Sutras frame moral desert as the natural and inevitable result of action, intention, and duty across lifetimes. This paper examines these contrasting frameworks, integrating scriptural teachings to show that Hindu thought offers a more holistic and spiritually integrated conception of desert, in which personal responsibility, cosmic law, virtue, and spiritual evolution converge. Through an analysis of morality, truth, justice, action, the Purusharthas, and the types of karma, the research demonstrates how Hindu*

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2 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Trans. by W.D. Ross, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1954).

3 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* 63–65 (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, rev. edn., 1999).

4 Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Basic Books, New York, 1974).

5 G. Bühler (trans.), *The Laws of Manu* (Internet Sacred Text Archive), available at: <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/manu.htm> (last visited on Feb. 7, 2025); F. Max Müller (trans.), *XXXII Vedic Hymns, Part I*, Sacred Books of the East (Internet Sacred Text Archive, 2008), available at: <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe32/index.htm> (last visited on Feb. 7, 2025); Hermann Oldenberg (trans.), *XLVI Vedic Hymns, Part II*, Sacred Books of the East (Internet Sacred Text Archive, 1897), available at:

<https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe46/index.htm> (last visited on Feb. 7, 2025); Swami Madhavananda (trans.), *The Brhadāranyaka Upanishad* (Advaita Ashrama), available at: <https://www.advaitaashrama.org> (last visited on Feb. 7, 2025).

6 Ibid .

*ethics unify social and cosmic dimensions of justice, presenting an alternative to the procedural fairness of Rawls and the libertarian entitlement of Nozick.*

**Keywords:** *Moral Desert, Dharma, Karma, Distributive Justice, Purusharthas, Virtue Ethics.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The issue of justice, and specifically the question of what individuals truly deserve, has long occupied a central place in philosophical inquiry. The concept of moral desert namely, that individuals deserve certain rewards, punishments, or social standings based on their actions, character, or contributions—has been debated across civilizations. In Western philosophy, Aristotle, Rawls, and Nozick have each contributed significant but divergent perspectives on whether desert can serve as the foundation for distributive justice. Rawls challenges the traditional notion of desert by arguing that natural talents, social advantages, and even effort are morally arbitrary because no one chooses the circumstances into which they are born. His theory of justice instead centres upon fairness, institutional design, and the veil of ignorance. Nozick, on the other hand, dismisses desert not because of fairness but because of individual liberty; he argues that justice is based entirely on historical entitlement and voluntary transfer.

By contrast, Hindu philosophical traditions expressed through the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Manusmriti, Ramayana, and Yoga Sutras present an entirely different ethical landscape. Here, moral desert is not limited to a single lifetime but is shaped by a metaphysical law of cause and effect, karma, which governs the destiny of individuals across multiple births. Dharma, the moral and cosmic order, defines the duties appropriate to individuals based on their role, character, and stage in life. The Hindu worldview thus understands moral desert as inseparable from dharma and karma; every circumstance one encounters is a consequence of past action, while present action shapes the future. This perspective challenges Rawls's contention that inequalities are arbitrary and suggests that moral desert is woven into the very fabric of cosmic order.

This research paper examines these contrasting traditions by first exploring Hindu scriptural teachings on morality, truth, justice, and right action, and then comparing them to the philosophical frameworks

of Rawls, Nozick, and Aristotle. The aim is to determine whether Hindu philosophy offers a more comprehensive account of moral desert than modern Western theories by integrating spiritual, ethical, and social dimensions of justice. The paper is structured in multiple sections, each addressing a distinct aspect of Hindu ethics and its implications for understanding moral desert.

## II. MORALITY AND VIRTUE AS THE ESSENCE OF CONDUCT

Across the ancient Hindu scriptures, morality and virtue are consistently presented as the essential foundation of right conduct and the basis upon which individuals earn both social standing and spiritual progress. The Laws of Manu declare that “the rule of conduct is transcendent law... hence a twice-born man who possesses regard for himself should always be careful to follow it”

आचारः परमो धर्मः श्रुत्योक्तः स्मार्म एव च ।

स्मार्दस्मन् सदा युक्तो ननत्यं स्यादात्मवान् निजः ॥ १०८ ॥ (Manu I.108).<sup>7</sup>

Here conduct, or *ācāra*, is treated not as a matter of convenience or social convention but as the manifestation of cosmic law (*ṛta*). The moral law, according to Hindu tradition, is eternal and unchanging; thus, an individual's worth is measured by their alignment with this cosmic order.

Manusmriti further enumerates the “tenfold law” of virtue: “Contentment, forgiveness, self-control, abstention from unrighteously appropriating anything, purification, coercion of the organs, wisdom, knowledge of the supreme Soul, truthfulness, and abstention from anger” (Manu VI.92).<sup>8</sup> These virtues define the moral character that must be cultivated for one to be considered righteous. Moral desert is therefore inseparable from the discipline required to cultivate such qualities.

Similarly, the Taittiriya Upanishad describes an education in virtue that demands a lifelong commitment to truth, right action, and austerity. It proclaims: “The right (*ṛta*), and also study and teaching... The true (*satya*), and also study and teaching... Austerity (*tapas*), and also study and teaching... Self-control (*dama*), and also study and teaching... Tranquility (*śama*), and also study and

7 G. Bühler (trans.), *The Laws of Manu*, ch. 1, v. 108 (Internet Sacred Text Archive), available at: <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/manu.htm> (last visited on Feb. 7, 2026).

8 G. Bühler (trans.), *The Laws of Manu*, ch. 6, v. 92 (Internet Sacred Text Archive), available at: <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/manu.htm> (last visited on Feb. 7, 2026).

teaching.” These repeated pairings of ethical principles with study emphasize that virtue is not inherited but must be cultivated through disciplined practice, reinforcing the notion that desert is produced by effort.

The Bhagavad Gita provides the most explicit catalog of divine virtues that characterize individuals destined for spiritual progress. In Chapter 16<sup>9</sup>, Krishna lists fearlessness, purification, knowledge, charity, self-control, sacrifice, nonviolence, truthfulness, freedom from anger, renunciation, compassion, modesty, gentleness, forgiveness, and freedom from envy among the qualities of a godly person. This extensive list underscores that virtue is both multifaceted and deeply connected to the individual’s internal disposition. The cultivation of these virtues shapes one’s karma and thus determines both worldly and spiritual outcomes.

The Ramayana too highlights the supremacy of moral virtue. Valmiki describes forbearance (kṣamā) as the highest virtue: “Forbearance is charity, forbearance is truth, forbearance is sacrifice... The world is established in forbearance.”<sup>10</sup> This verse suggests that forbearance is not merely a private virtue but the very foundation of cosmic stability. Through such texts, Hindu tradition emphasizes that moral desert arises from virtues consciously cultivated through righteous conduct, patient endurance, and self-mastery.

In stark contrast to Rawls’s view that natural talents and social advantages are morally arbitrary, Hindu ethics insists that character is self-created, shaped by karmic residues from previous lives and current deliberate practice. Virtue is earned, and therefore moral desert is fundamentally tied to the disciplined cultivation of moral qualities.

### III. TRUTH AS THE FOUNDATION OF RIGHT (DHARMA)

Truth occupies an exalted and foundational place in Hindu ethical philosophy, serving not merely as a moral guideline but as the essence of dharma itself. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad states unequivocally: “He created still further a better form: Dharma... Therefore there is nothing higher

9 A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*, ch. 16, vv. 1–3 (The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust), available at: <https://vedabase.io/en/library/bg/16/> (last visited on Feb. 7, 2026).

10 K.L. Joshi (ed.), *112 Upanishads*, Jabaladarsanopanisad (Parimal Publication, Delhi, 5th rpt. edn., 2016);

than Dharma... Verily, that which is Dharma is Truth” (Brhadaranyaka Upanishad 1.4.14).<sup>11</sup> This formulation merges truth (*satya*) with dharma, presenting truth not as a subjective human category but as the objective structure of the cosmos. To adhere to truth is therefore to align oneself with the underlying fabric of reality.

This intimate relationship between truth and dharma is affirmed in the Ramayana, where those “versed in the secret of righteousness” proclaim truth to be the essence of virtue and even identify truth with Brahman, the ultimate reality. In Ayodhya Kanda, Chapter 14,<sup>12</sup> truth is described as “the crown of righteousness,” elevating it to the pinnacle of moral achievement. Later, Rama asserts: “Whatever is offered in sacrifice, whatever austerity is undertaken has its foundation in truth... hence truth is the most sacred of all things” (Ayodhya Kanda 109). Thus, every act of worship, discipline, and sacrifice derives its meaning from truthfulness.

The Laws of Manu offer a nuanced articulation of the law of speech, advising: “Let him say what is true, let him say what is pleasing, let him utter no disagreeable truth, and let him utter no agreeable falsehood” (Manu IV.138)<sup>13</sup>. This principle emphasizes that truth must be balanced with compassion and social harmony. Nevertheless, truthfulness remains a non-negotiable moral imperative, shaping the karmic outcomes of individuals who practice or violate it.

Within this framework, moral desert is fundamentally intertwined with truth. Those who live truthfully accrue merit, purify their consciousness, and elevate their spiritual standing. Conversely, those who engage in deceit incur karmic demerit and spiritual decline. Unlike Western theories that detach truth from distributive justice, Hindu ethics situates truth at the center of what individuals morally deserve. Truth is not an optional virtue but the criterion by which actions, intentions, and ultimately destinies are judged.

#### IV. JUSTICE, PUNISHMENT, AND SOCIAL ORDER

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11 Swami Madhavananda (trans.), *The Brhadāranyaka Upanishad*, 1.4.14, available at: <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe15/sbe15008.htm> (last visited on Feb. 7, 2026).

12 Valmiki Ramayana, Ayodhya Kanda, Chapter 14, *Internet Sacred Text Archive*, available at: <https://sacred-texts.com/hin/rama/ry016.htm> (last visited on March 26, 2026).

13 G. Bühler (trans.), *The Laws of Manu*, ch. 4, v. 138 (Internet Sacred Text Archive), available at: <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/manu.htm> (last visited on Feb. 7, 2026).

In Hindu philosophical tradition, justice is both moral and cosmic. Far from being limited to legal institutions or social agreements, justice (*danda, nyaya*) is portrayed as the sustaining principle of the universe. The Laws of Manu warn that “Justice, being violated, destroys; justice, being preserved, preserves” (Manu VIII.15).<sup>14</sup> This statement presents justice as a metaphysical force: when upheld, it safeguards the world; when violated, it leads to social and spiritual collapse.

Manusmriti further asserts that “Punishment alone governs all created beings... punishment alone protects them” (Manu VII.18)<sup>15</sup>, identifying punishment (*danda*) as a necessary tool for maintaining order. In this sense, punishment is not merely retributive but preventative, corrective, and ultimately welfare-enhancing. It aligns the behavior of individuals with the moral order and shields society from harmful actions.

The Bhagavad Gita reinforces this interpretation of punishment as a divine instrument. In Chapter 10, Krishna proclaims, “Among all means of suppressing lawlessness, I am punishment,” signifying that punishment is a manifestation of divine will aimed at restoring equilibrium. The Gita’s commentary on Chapter 2, verse 21 further argues that punitive measures such as capital punishment can even be spiritually beneficial to wrongdoers by expiating their sins and reducing future karmic suffering. This reinforces the idea that justice, in the Hindu worldview, is deeply intertwined with the moral wellbeing of the individual and the community.

Manusmriti adds a powerful metaphysical dimension by stating, “The only friend who follows men even after death is justice” (Manu VIII.17).<sup>16</sup> Unlike wealth, relationships, or social status which perish with the physical body justice, understood through karmic consequences, accompanies the soul across lifetimes. This conception of justice transcends earthly institutions and grounds moral desert in the unbroken continuity of karmic law.

Hindu philosophy thus presents justice as a cosmic mechanism that reflects the moral quality of one’s actions. Punishment is therapeutic rather than merely punitive, aiming to correct moral imbalances. Compared to Rawls’s procedural fairness and Nozick’s rights-based minimal state, the Hindu conception integrates morality, cosmic order, and spiritual welfare into a unified theory of justice.

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14 G. Bühler (trans.), *The Laws of Manu*, ch. 8, v. 15(Internet Sacred Text Archive), available at: <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/manu.htm> (last visited on Feb. 7, 2026).

15 G. Bühler (trans.), *The Laws of Manu*, ch. 7, v. 18(Internet Sacred Text Archive), available at: <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/manu.htm> (last visited on Feb. 7, 2026).

16 Ibid.

## V. RIGHT, WRONG, AND ACTION (KARMA)

The Hindu understanding of right and wrong, and consequently of moral desert, is deeply embedded in the doctrine of karma, which governs the moral structure of the universe. According to the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad, “According as one acts, according as one conducts himself, so does he become. The doer of good becomes good. The doer of evil becomes evil” (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad 4.4.5).<sup>17</sup> This formulation expresses the core principle that every action shapes the nature and destiny of the doer; moral identity is a cumulative product of one’s intentional deeds. The Upanishadic conception thus embeds desert directly into the causal fabric of the cosmos, unlike Rawls’s rejection of desert as morally arbitrary. Karma assures that one’s experiences, virtues, and conditions whether favourable or unfavourable are the product of voluntary moral agency, even if across multiple lifetimes.

The Bhagavad Gita further elaborates on this by distinguishing between right action, wrong action, and inaction. Krishna asserts that the ability to differentiate between dharma and adharma can be clouded by the mode of passion: “That understanding which cannot distinguish between religion and irreligion, between action that should be done and action that should not be done, is in the mode of passion” (Gita 18.31).<sup>18</sup> This emphasizes that ignorance or confusion about right action stems from moral and psychological disorder, not from arbitrariness. The moral desert of the individual therefore arises from clarity of judgment and purity of intention, both cultivated through discipline.

The Isha Upanishad provides a profound ethical injunction emphasizing non-possessiveness and contentment: “By the Lord is all this enveloped... With this renounced, you may enjoy. Covet not the wealth of anyone at all” (Isha Upanishad 1). This verse connects moral restraint with cosmic harmony; wrongful appropriation of others’ possessions disrupts both social order and spiritual equilibrium. Desire and attachment are presented as roots of immoral action, which generate negative karmic consequences.

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<sup>17</sup> Swami Madhavananda (trans.), *The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad*, 4.4.5, available at: <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe15/sbe15008.htm> (last visited on Feb. 7, 2026).

<sup>18</sup> Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 16, *Internet Sacred Text Archive*, available at: <https://sacredtexts.com/hin/gita/bg16.htm> (last visited on March 26, 2026).

The Kathopanishad adds a metaphysical dimension by urging the seeker to articulate a truth that transcends both dharma and adharma: “Apart from the right and apart from the unright... apart from both what has been done and what has not been done here—speak that!” (Katha Upanishad 2.14). This reflects the Upanishadic attempt to reveal an ultimate truth beyond dualities, suggesting that while karmic law governs moral desert within worldly existence, liberation arises from the transcendence of even karmic distinctions.

In Hindu philosophy, rightness and wrongness are thus neither arbitrary nor socially constructed; they are tied to intention, moral clarity, self-restraint, and alignment with dharma. Actions yield consequences not based on human judgment but through an impersonal cosmic law. The doctrine of karma establishes a morally structured universe where every act- mental, verbal, or physical creates an imprint (saṃskāra) that shapes future experiences. As articulated in your uploaded article, this distinguishes Hindu thought from Rawlsian egalitarianism and Nozick’s libertarianism by embedding moral desert into the natural order rather than institutional structures.

## **VI. RIGHTS, DUTIES, AND THE PURPOSE OF LIFE (PURUSHARTHAS)**

The Hindu philosophical framework identifies four major aims of human life—dharma (righteousness), artha (material prosperity), kama (pleasure), and moksha (liberation)—collectively known as the Purusharthas. These aims structure the moral, social, and spiritual pursuits of individuals, offering a comprehensive ethical system within which moral desert is interpreted. Dharma stands at the forefront of these aims, as expressed in the Ramayana: “Dharma is the highest good on earth, truth and dharma are one” (Ayodhya Kanda 21). The Ramayana consistently presents dharma as the essence of moral order and the foundation upon which all other aims must rest.

Dharma regulates the pursuit of artha and kama, ensuring that wealth and pleasure are sought responsibly and ethically. The Laws of Manu encapsulate righteous duty as abstention from harm, truthfulness, purity, and control of the senses (Manu X.63). These ethical imperatives reflect the necessary conditions for legitimately deserving material and emotional fulfilment. Artha, in Hindu thought, is not condemned; rather, wealth attained through ethical conduct is considered deserved. The person who acquires resources through hard work, honesty, and responsibility earns both social respect and karmic merit. This aligns with Aristotle’s teleological view that goods ought to be allocated based on the function and virtue of the recipient, though Hinduism ties this directly to cosmic

law.

Kama, similarly, is not dismissed as immoral but must be tempered by dharma. Pleasure becomes deserved when it arises from relationships grounded in mutual respect, fidelity, and ethical conduct. The moral distinction between deserved and undeserved kama rests on the degree to which desire is pursued without harming others or undermining one's responsibilities. This stands in contrast with Western theories, which seldom integrate pleasure into accounts of justice or desert. Hindu ethics instead recognize that balanced enjoyment is part of a fulfilled life, provided it does not violate dharma.

Moksha, the highest Purushartha, transcends worldly desert. Liberation from the cycle of rebirth is not an arbitrary reward but the cumulative result of lifetimes of disciplined ethical conduct, self-realization, and detachment from desires. The pursuit of moksha reveals the ultimate horizon of moral desert: one deserves liberation not through divine favoritism but through spiritual maturity and alignment with ultimate reality. In this respect, Hindu thought parallels Aristotle's eudaimonia while extending beyond it into metaphysical liberation. As discussed in the uploaded article, this cosmic grounding of moral desert distinguishes Hindu ethics from Rawls's emphasis on procedural fairness and Nozick's emphasis on entitlement.

The Purushartha framework thus establishes an integrated model in which human aims are coordinated through dharma and where moral desert is distributed across both worldly and spiritual domains.

## **VII. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: RAWLS, NOZICK, ARISTOTLE, AND HINDU PHILOSOPHY**

The contrast between Western theories of moral desert and Hindu philosophical traditions reveals foundational differences in metaphysics, ethics, and conceptions of justice. John Rawls famously rejects moral desert as a basis for distributive justice, arguing that natural talents, intelligence, social background, and even diligence are morally arbitrary because individuals do not choose them. Rawls therefore replaces desert with "legitimate expectations" grounded in fair procedures designed behind a veil of ignorance. His theory aims to correct inequalities rather than justify them. This stands in stark contrast to the Hindu doctrine of karma, which holds that conditions of birth, talent, and circumstance are not arbitrary but the result of past actions. According to the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad and Manusmṛiti, one's present situation is deserved because it reflects prior conduct, even if across

different lifetimes. The Hindu tradition thus embeds responsibility and desert into a cosmic moral framework.

Robert Nozick, while also rejecting desert as a basis for distribution, does so for libertarian reasons. For him, justice is solely determined by whether holdings were acquired through just means and voluntary transfer. Nozick's entitlement theory does not require that outcomes reflect merit, virtue, or contribution. In Hindu thought, however, wealth (*artha*) is ethically deserved only when acquired in accordance with dharma. Wealth obtained unjustly accumulates negative karma, even when legally permissible. Thus, while Nozick's framework upholds procedural justice without moral evaluation, Hinduism evaluates actions based on intention, moral quality, and cosmic consequences.

Aristotle's conception of desert is the closest Western analogue to Hindu thought. Aristotle argues that goods should be distributed proportionally to merit and that virtue is central to deservingness. However, Aristotle limits moral desert to a single lifetime and constructs his theory within a political framework. Hindu philosophy, by contrast, extends moral desert across lifetimes through karma. Virtue accumulated in past lives influences present circumstances, and moral responsibility transcends temporal boundaries. This introduces a metaphysical dimension absent in Aristotle's account.

Moreover, Hindu texts such as the Gita, Upanishads, and Ramayana emphasize internal qualities like self-control, truthfulness, compassion, and purity as determinants of moral desert. Rawls separates virtue from distributive justice, Nozick minimizes its relevance, and Aristotle partially incorporates it. Hindu philosophy fully integrates virtue into every aspect of cosmic justice. Dharma defines duties; karma distributes consequences; and moral desert operates across the continuum of worldly life and spiritual evolution.

Thus, Hindu thought offers a richer and more holistic account of moral desert by unifying ethics, metaphysics, psychology, and social order. It resolves the tension between merit, responsibility, and fairness by grounding justice in cosmic law rather than in human institutions or social contracts.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

This conclusion highlights the fundamental divergence between Western and Hindu conceptions of moral desert. Western theorists such as Rawls, Nozick, and Aristotle largely confine their analyses to the socio-political sphere and the temporal limits of a single lifetime, with Rawls rejecting desert as

morally arbitrary, Nozick prioritizing entitlement through voluntary exchange, and Aristotle grounding desert in virtue within civic life. In contrast, Hindu philosophy situates moral desert within an expansive metaphysical framework governed by the doctrines of karma and dharma, extending across multiple lifetimes. Foundational texts such as the Taittiriya Upanishad and Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, along with the Bhagavad Gita, Manusmriti, and Valmiki Ramayana, collectively emphasize that individual circumstances arise from past actions, while present conduct shapes future outcomes, thereby eliminating arbitrariness. Justice, in this view, is not merely institutional but cosmic, where reward and punishment function to restore moral order. The framework of the Purusharthas further integrates ethical duty, material pursuits, desire, and spiritual liberation into a cohesive system in which desert operates at all levels of human existence. Consequently, Hindu philosophy is presented as offering a more comprehensive and integrative account of moral desert, enriching contemporary debates by incorporating spiritual and metaphysical dimensions beyond the scope of secular Western theories.

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