Validity of Knowledge

All knowledge is valid in Advaita as it arises (*svataḥprāmāṇya*) since it is the self-luminous *ātman* that illumines the objective knowledge. In other words, there are two elements to knowledge – a *vṛttijñāna*, which is empirical knowledge, which is due to the interaction between the *ātman* and *antaḥkaraṇa*, and a witness (*sākṣin*) knowledge that is always present and is self-luminous. All knowledge, however, is finally invalid as it is only relatively real, from the ultimate view point.

Conclusion

All the *āstika* schools I have examined here can be said to believe in a permanent entity known as *ātman* (sometimes called *jīva/jīvātman/puruṣa*), and they all also accept the existence of a conscious self in worldly experience. All the schools also have a concept of mind (*manas*) that together with *ātman* helps in gaining knowledge in the lived world for *ātman* (self), which can be called the empirical self. The mind is also generally considered to be physical in nature. It is thus different from the understanding of the mind in Western philosophy. The way one gains knowledge for this combined empirical self is through the different *pramāṇa*s, which have not been covered in this article. In order to gain a complete picture of the theory of knowledge in the different schools of Indian philosophy, one has to also study their various approaches to error (*avidyā*).

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Dharma

The word *dharma* signifies one of the central and most ambigious terms within the history of Indian religions, including Buddhism and Jainism. Even within Brahmanical and Hindu traditions, it is characterized by a multitude of connotations based on its primary etymological meaning "support" (from the Sanskrit root *dhṛ* – "to hold," "to support") and reaching from "rule, law" via "cosmic law" to "universal order" and "religion" in general. Although in a certain historical, religious, or even regional context, one of these connotations may prevail, it has to be assumed that the others are at least indirectly included. A profound understanding of the concept therefore has to consider all of these connotations as components of a coherent system that was, however, subject to historical development.

In its basic meaning, the Hindu concept of *dharma* designates a comprehensive complex of rules for individual and social behavior. Its observance not only guarantees the ritual → purity of the person or group and is therefore regarded as a necessary precondition for individual salvation, but also is significant for the maintenance of the social and cosmic order.

According to P. Hacker, *dharma* must be perceived as an impersonal principle that is in its essence independent from any deity. To put it in P. Hacker's words,

> We must imagine *dharma* as primarily a substance or a transcendental, immaterial thing… *Dharma* is… a concrete model of behavior with positive significance for salvation that somehow exists already before its performance and waits for realization. (Hacker, 2006, 490)

Through its substantial character, *dharma* is closely related to → *karman*, "action and its consequences," another central term of Hindu soteriology. The *dharma* decides about the effects of a

certain deed in terms of rebirth (→ *saṃsāra*) and salvation.

In classical literature it was regarded as one of the four existential goals of an individual (*puruṣārtha*): → *artha* (wealth), → *kāma* (pleasure, esp. sexual), *dharma*, and *mokṣa* (→ liberation). While *artha, kāma*, and *dharma* designate the activities and duties one has to fulfill during one's lifetime, the fourth aim – *mokṣa* – presupposes their observance and is placed "at the end of life, to be undertaken only after a man has fulfilled the wordly obligations of *varṇāśramadharma*" (Holdrege, 2004, 239).

The specific content of the various rule sets subsumed under the *dharma* concept is conditioned by the status of the individual or social group within the socioreligious structure of Hindu society, which is basically defined by the *varṇa* (→ caste) system but depends also on the individual's age, gender, caste, marital status, and order of life. These individually shaped norms (*svadharma*) are contrasted by the notion of another category of rules, which is common to all members of the Hindu society: the *sādhāraṇadharma* or *sāmānyadharma*, "common" or "general" rules of behavior (*dharma*). They include general ethical values like nonviolence (→ *ahiṃsā*), truthfulness, and respect for parents and elders.

This overlapping of originally different normative systems led to a multitude of meanings attributed to the term *dharma*:

> the accepted norms of behaviour, ritual actions and rules of procedure, moral/religious/pious actions and attitudes (righteousness), civil and criminal law, legal procedure and punishment, and penances for infractions of *dharma*. It is *dharma* that provides the guidelines for proper and productive living and for social organization and interaction. It includes social institutions such as marriage, adoption, inheritance, social contracts, judicial procedure, and punishment of crimes, as well as private activities, such as toilet, bathing, brushing the teeth, food and eating, sexual conduct, and etiquette. (Olivelle, 1999, xxxviiif.)

The sources of these different kinds of *dharma*s are widespread and cannot be traced back to a single authoritative text. On the contrary, we have to concede a multitude of rule sets that were considered normative among the different communities and could considerably differ from one another with regard to their historical and regional background.

The *Dharma* Literature and the Origins of the *Dharma* Concept

The *dharma* concept is already referred to in the oldest Indian religious literature. Already in the early Vedic sources (→ Vedas), the term *dharma(n)* refers to practices, rules, and norms that aim at

> the continuous maintaining of the social and cosmic order and norm which is achieved by the Aryan through the performance of his Vedic rites and traditional duties. (Halbfass, 1988, 315–316)

This fundamental role of *dharma(n)* and its ritual connotation are particularly obvious in the famous *Puruṣasūkta* (*ṚV*. 10.90; → *puruṣa*), which identifies the primordial sacrifice (→ *yajña*) with the first *dharman*s, that is, the first "sacrificial rituals, which provide the prototype for all future rituals" (Holdrege, 2004, 218).

It is a distinctive feature of the *dharma* concept in the later, classical period that it considerably expanded this primarily ritual scope towards other spheres of normative rules including customary law, correct behavior, legal procedure, and so on, thus including a multitude of different norm sets and giving the *dharma* a comprehensive character that eventually led to its reception as "the central concept of Indian civilization" (Olivelle, 2005, 42). This process was mainly based on "discursive strategies to legitimate the extension of the domain of *dharma* from the ritual to the sociocultural realm" (Holdrege, 2004, 220) as developed by the → Mīmāṃsā school of philosophy within the boundaries of a specialized literary tradition: the *dharma* literature (→ Dharmaśāstra). Stressing the empirical character of *dharma*, the oldest texts of this genre define the behavior and practices of the people of Āryāvarta – that is, the region of North India inhabited by Indo-Aryan people (→ regions and regional traditions) – as the paradigmatical norm for the Indian society as a whole (see *ĀpDhS*. 1.20.6–8). Although they take notice of the diverse norm sets, they mainly concentrate on the *varṇa* (caste) and → *āśrama* (stage of life) aspects of the *svadharma*. The historical development of the genre was accompanied by a general expansion of this narrow focus. Local usages of

other regions as well as ethical norms of other groups became gradually incorporated into the system. Most of the *dharma* works are arranged according to the following topics:

- *ācāra,* "behavior" (including *varṇāśramadharma/ svadharma*),
- *vyavahāra,* "legal procedure," and
- *prāyaścitta,* "penances."

The vast bulk of literature on *dharma* can be organized into three major groups, which not only reflect different literary genres but also correspond to historical periods in the evolution of *dharma* literature as a whole.

The Dharmasūtras (3rd–1st Cents. BCE)
From the perspective of literary history, the Dharmasūtras belong to the late Vedic literature, which was composed in the second half of the 1st millennium BCE. Later tradition regards them together with Śrautasūtras and Gṛhyasūtras as part of the Kalpasūtras, one of the "Vedic supplements" (Vedāṅga). Altogether four works of this period survived: the *Āpastambadharmasūtra,* the *Baudhāyanadharmasūtra,* the *Gautamadharmasūtra,* and the *Vasiṣṭhadharmaśāstra.* According to P. Olivelle, "all the Dharmasūtras were probably composed in the area that we today call North India" (Olivelle, 1999, xviii), from around the 3rd century BCE to the mid-2nd century BCE (Olivelle, 1999, xxxiiif.). The *Vāsiṣṭhadharma-śāstra* is perhaps somewhat later and should be dated into the 1st century BCE.

The Dharmaśāstras (1st–6th Cents. CE)
The production of the metrical Dharmaśāstras begins around the beginning of the Common Era. In traditional classification they belong to the class of Smṛti literature, that is, their religious authority is not based on the revelation of the text to a certain → ṛṣi (Śruti), but on human memory. Moreover, they are not attached to a particular Vedic school but can be ascribed to special schools of *dharma* that claim authority for all Aryans. The most important works include the *Mānavadharmaśāstra* (also known as *Manusmṛti*), the *Yājñavalkyasmṛti,* and the *Nāradasmṛti.* Although Dharmaśāstras were composed until most recent times, the main production stopped around the 6th–7th century CE.

The Commentaries and Compilations (Nibandhas; 8th–19th Cents. CE)
By the 8th century CE, the period of Śāstra composition was followed by extensive commentaries that not only explained the basic text (*mūla*) of the respective Sūtra or Śāstra but also tried to define its position within the broader context of *dharma* literature as a whole. By incorporating and evaluating related passages from other authoritative texts, the commentaries could easily adopt the character of encyclopedic compilations.

In continuation of this attitude, from the 10th century onwards, they were complemented by large anthologies (*nibandha*), which can be characterized as systematically arranged compilations on all aspects of *dharma* literature. Within the commentarial literature, the Dharmaśāstrins developed, with the help of the Mīmāṃsā hermeneutics, an elaborated method of exegesis that helped to unify and stratify the diverse text traditions and to adapt them to a changing social and economical environment. In many instances these commentaries included additional *dharma* material that was not yet represented in the extant Smṛti literature but was drawn from one of the alternative authoritative sources of *dharma,* like regional usage (*deśācāra*; Strauch, 2004).

The most important and influential works of this period are the commentary Mitākṣarā on the *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* written by Vijñāneśvara in the 11th century, the Nibandhas *Kṛtyakalpataru* by Lakṣmīdhara (12th cent.), Raghunandana's *Smṛtitattva* (16th cent.), and Mitramiśra's *Vīramitrodaya* (17th cent.).

The Sources of *Dharma* as Defined by the Dharmaśāstra

One of the main concerns of the Dharmaśāstrins – also with regard to the multitude of sometimes contradicting rules and the steady influx of new rules – was the definition of the authoritative sources of *dharma.* Already the earliest texts admit here the authority of custom:

Gautamadharmasūtra, which was adapted by *Manusmṛti* (2.6), defines the following sources of *dharma*:

vedo dharmamūlaṃ tadvidāṃ ca smṛtiśīle

The root of *dharma* is the Veda, and the tradition and practice of those who know the Veda. (*GauDhS.* 1.1–2; trans. Olivelle, 2006, 44)

Similar statements can be found in almost every Dharmaśāstra text. What is called *smṛtiśīle* "tradition and practice" in Gautama's text is otherwise designated as *ācāra* (accepted behavior), *sadācāra* (behavior of good people), *śiṣṭasyācāra* (behavior of the learned; see Davis, 2004, 119–147).

Thus custom not only was one of the main sources from which the Dharmaśāstrins compiled their normative texts, but also was theoretically admitted as an authoritative source for the concept itself. This fact marks *dharma* clearly as an empirically based concept as stressed by P. Hacker (Hacker, 1965, 2006). But with the inclusion of the Veda as an alternative source, the Dharmaśāstrins introduce a clear transcendental aspect that was developed further by hermeneutic strategies of the Mīmāṃsakas, who always emphasized the Vedic roots (*vedamūlatva*) of *dharma* and established the superiority of those rules, the purpose of which is not obvious, that is, beyond human reasoning (*adṛṣṭārtha*).

Another indicator of the *dharma*'s transcendental aspect is the role it was supposed to play for the salvation of the individual. From a historical point of view, this soteriological dimension of *dharma* can also be interpreted as an adaption of the function that the Vedic sacrifice once fulfilled. This process of Vedification and sacramentalization (Wezler, 1999, 2004) determines the character of *dharma* not as a mere record of customs but as a religious concept with a clearly defined religious base and function.

It can be suggested that this ambiguous character of the *dharma* between empiricism and transcendency considerably promoted its spread as a comprehensive normative system and provided an enormous capacity to adjust to changing historical and social environments without losing its characteristic features, such as the *varṇāśrama* division, which was rooted in its transcendental foundations.

The Historical Evolution of the Classical *Dharma* Concept

Despite its great extent the *dharma* literature represents only the tip of the iceberg and moreover presents the material from the perspective of only one group of social agents: the Brahmans (Brāhmaṇas).

Historically, it can be regarded as an attempt to systematize the prevailing norms and to adjust their diversity to the ideal *varṇa* and *āśrama* system, which guarantees the supremacy of the *brāhmaṇavarṇa* (Brahman class) and provides a strong religious legitimization for its ritual and social position. At the same time, this *dharma* is mainly directed towards the preservation of the given social order with the representative of the secular elite, namely the king, at its top. The most characteristic expression for this strong orientation towards the king and his social function is to be seen in the inclusion of the secular law within the realm of *dharma*.

It can be suggested that this development was largely due to the new role of the Brahmans within the late Vedic society: from mere specialists of ritual, they became more and more involved in secular affairs, that is, state administration, law and order, and natural sciences. This new quality of the relationship between Brahmans and the secular nobility (Kṣatriyas) might also have been caused by the former disintegration of the symbiosis of both these groups. During the centuries that immediately preceded the emergence of the new *dharma* concept, the foundations of the old Vedic society with its chiefdoms rooted in the sacral power of the Vedic sacrifice were largely disturbed. The newly emerging kingdoms as well as a rapidly changing socioreligious atmosphere required on the part of the Brahman representatives a fundamental redefinition of their social and religious position. This need was especially strengthened by the fact that the ruling elite – like the Maurya king Aśoka – started to neglect the Brahmanical interests (Olivelle, 2005, 37–41; Fitzgerald, 2004a, 100–123). The decreasing influence of the Brahmanical group was also caused by the emergence of new religious movements that followed different ethical norms that were mainly indebted to ascetic ideals and gained popularity among large parts of the society and the ruling classes.

On the basis of the traditional Vedic notion of *dharma(n)* as the universal foundation not only that is intrinsically connected to the ritual duty of the individual but also can be simultaneously perceived as "social order" with a special link to royal authority (see Horsch, 2004; Olivelle, 2004; Brereton, 2004), a new, more comprehensive concept of *dharma* was created, which included the following main components:

- the conservative norms of behavior based on the ritual obligations, which are characteristic for the four *varṇa*s and the four patterns of life (*āśrama*);
- the secular customary law of different groups, which was condensed into a coherent system of legal procedure (*vyavahāra*);
- a new ascetic ethic based on principles like nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*), nontheft (*asteya*), and so on.

Whereas the first part – the *varṇāśramadharma* – was mainly indebted to the traditionally established ideal of a strictly divided society into ritually and socially different groups, the two latter components, that is, the newly introduced secular law and the commonly valid *sādhāraṇadharma*, can be interpreted as direct reactions to the changing historical background.

The most influential factor in this process was the increasing importance of the secular law within the sphere of *dharma*. While the oldest works contain only small passages on nonreligious law (*vyavahāra*), the period of Dharmaśāstras is characterized by large systematic treatises on purely juridical matters (*Nāradasmṛti, Kātyāyanasmṛti*). Within the conventional system of the *varṇadharma*, the secular law was included as *rājadharma* (king's law) into the rules for a Kṣatriya, since the preservation of the social order was the prerogative of the eminent representative of this group, the king (→ kingship). Originally, the *rājadharma* and its prominent part, the legal procedure (*vyavahāra*), were developed within a separate discipline of Brahmanical science: the Arthaśāstra. Their introduction into the broader perspective of *dharma*, however, marks the fundamental change in the evolution of the *dharma* concept: from a catalogue of norms and penances for ritual observances into a comprehensive guide for the organizational fundaments of a complex society. At the same time, the *rājadharma* acts as the main intermediary between the religious and social spheres. Through the *rājadharma*, the religious law and the ritual purity of the individual or group enters an interdependent relationship to the secular law and the broader sphere of social organization. Thus the king's individual ritual purity depends directly on the fulfillment of his social (royal) duties (*MaSm.* 8.420).

The central position of the secular law is also expressed in the *Nāradasmṛti*, which specializes on issues of *vyavahāra*:

When men had *dharma* as their sole purpose and were speakers of the truth, then there was no legal procedure, no enmity, and no selfishness. Legal procedure came into being at the time when *dharma* was lost among men. The overseer of legal procedures is the king; he has been made the rodbearer. (*NāSm.* 1.1–2; trans. Lariviere, 1989)

According to this statement, the legal procedure was introduced as a necessary corrective to compensate for the inevitable decline of the *dharma* in the world – a perception that is related to the *yuga* theory of classical Hinduism (→ cosmic cycles).

From this period onwards, secular law, including the civil and criminal laws, remained an integral part of the *dharma*. A strict division between both the religious and the secular law not only is hardly possible, but it would also contradict this newly developed conception of *dharma*.

This does not, however, allow the conclusion that the secular law as represented in the Dharmaśāstras has to be taken as positive law that was in fact strictly observed in concrete historical conditions. Although there is strong evidence that Dharmaśāstras could act in this way, they represented clearly only one source of the actual jurisdiction and were complemented by different systems of regional, collective, or public laws (see e.g. Davis, 2005).

This broad notion of *dharma* – including its ritual, social, and cultural aspects – can also be found in both the → *Mahābhārata* and the → *Rāmāyaṇa* (see Fitzgerald, 2004a, 100–164; Brockington, 2004). According to J.L. Fitzgerald, the term *dharma* as used in the *Mahābhārata* comprises three fundamental meanings. First, a "normative action that is beneficial to its agents after death," second, "'the abstract quality of the correctness, rightness, goodness, or justice' of some action – its being normative or not," and third, "the inner attributes of a person, (…) his or her character, his or her enduring attitudes and habits" (Fitzgerald, 2004b, 674f.). It can be suggested that the central role of the *dharma* concept within the epics and the *Bhagavadgītā* in particular considerably contributed to its growing acceptance within nearly all spheres of the Hindu society.

Especially in later times, the importance of *dharma* for the religious identity of the majority of Hindus led partially to an identification of the terms *dharma* and religion. Here not only

P. Hacker's reference to the translational practice of the 19th century (1965, 2006) might be cited, but also Al-Bīrūnī: "The word *dharma* means reward, but in general it is used for religion" (Sachau, 1964, vol. I, 132). The same universal connotation can be observed in the term *sanātanadharma*, eternal *dharma*, which has been used from the 19th century onwards as a synonym for "Hinduism." Although it is based on citations from classical Dharmaśāstra works like *Manusmṛti* (4.138; 7.98; etc.), it mainly must be interpreted as a reaction to Christian notions of religion and ethics (see Holdrege, 2004, 244f.).

The idea of *sanātanadharma* reflects the last stage in the transformation of the Hindu *dharma* concept "from ritual category to sociocultural system to universal ideal" (Holdrege, 2004, 246). However, these stages cannot be considered subsequent periods replacing each other. Instead, each of them embraces the notion of the preceding one and thus represents only one aspect of the multisemantic *dharma* concept in its developed shape.

The *Varṇāśramadharma* as the Structural Basis of the Classical *Dharma* Concept

The *varṇāśramadharma* can be characterized as the conservative basis of the entire *dharma* concept. Its basis is the idea of the division of the society into the four major *varṇa*s, the Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras. They differ from one another mainly with regard to their ritual status, which was, however, also translated into a social hierarchy. The primary goal of the *dharma* was the preservation or – in case of a transgression – reinstallment of the ritual purity of the *varṇa* members. For this purpose rules for the individual behavior and the social interaction in all phases of life, including the rituals for the *rites de passage* (→ *saṃskāra*s) and a complicated system of expiations (*prāyaścitta*), fell into the scope of the *varṇāśramadharma*.

Conceptualized from a Brahmanical perspective, the *varṇāśramadharma* is primarily directed to the legitimization of the superiority of the *brāhmaṇavarṇa* and the maintenance of a social order that contributes to this aim.

The character of the *varṇa* system as both a religious and a social stratification resulted in the inclusion of both features in the concept. The religious status of the *varṇa*s within the *varṇāśramadharma* is mainly defined by their different access to the Veda and the sacrifice as the basic ritual action within the traditional religious model. For realizing their privilege to get access to the Veda and to perform a sacrifice, both the Kṣatriya and the Vaiśya have to make use of a Brāhmaṇa's service. He alone can teach the Veda and sacrifice for others. The Śūdras as lowest *varṇa* have no access to the Veda and its sacrifices.

This ritual stratification is reflected by a parallel social division that ascribes to each *varṇa* an exclusive social function, which must be considered the nonritual basis of their respective *dharma*s. While the Brāhmaṇa had the monopoly of the priestly functions, the Kṣatriya was supposed to rule, and the Vaiśya to carry out agriculture and animal husbandry. The Śūdras had to serve the upper three *varṇa*s.

The *varṇa* system was complemented by another social division: the *āśrama*s, which signify different modes of a religious life. In the classical perception, they came to be reinterpreted as subsequent "stages of life" that a member of the twice-born group was expected to follow. It comprises the *brahmacārin*, "(celibate) student," *gṛhastha*, "married man," *vānaprastha*, "forest hermit," and *saṃnyāsin*, "renouncer, ascetic" (Olivelle, 1993; see → *āśrama* and *saṃnyāsa*).

Speaking in general terms, the whole *varṇāśrama* system was of course an ideal structure that probably never reflected the historical reality. But nonetheless it provided a sound base for structuring and perpetuating the religious and social hierarchy of the society. At the same time, the ideal character of this normative system, which included not only religious but also many social norms, demanded a corrective that would allow a reaction to inevitable deviations from its ideal pattern. In the case of the *varṇa* system as a whole, such a corrective was created by the inclusion of so-called mixed castes into the traditional *varṇa* system. Another very influential instrument was the introduction of the so-called *āpaddharma*s, which sanctioned deviations from the ideal norm in times of distress.

Individual *Dharma* (*Svadharma*) and Common *Dharma* (*Sādhāraṇadharma*)

The *dharma* of an individual (*svadharma*) is generally defined in terms of the *varṇāśramadharma*. With the so-called common *dharma*s (*sādhāraṇadharma, sāmāsikadharma*), a new category of norms was introduced, most probably under the growing influence of ascetic values.

> Abstention from injuring (*ahiṃsā*), truthfulness (*satya*), refraining from anger (*akrodha*), purification (*śauca*), and mastering the organs (*indriyanigraha*) – this, Manu has declared, is the gist of the Law (*sāmāsikadharma*) for the four classes. (*MaSm.* 10.63, trans. Olivelle, 2005)

Many of the terms under the category of "common *dharmas*" (*sādhāraṇadharma*) reflect either general ethical norms or conceptions that are peculiar to ascetic doctrines (e.g. *yoga*) that gained popularity in Indian religious life. Thus they provided a sound base for the integration of a broader spectrum of religious groups into the realm of *dharma*.

The inevitable tension between *svadharma* and *sādhāraṇadharma*, which can easily result in a serious conflict between these different normative categories, is one of the main topics of the *Mahābhārata*. It can be reconciled in different ways, but principally, the *svadharma* as the superior category cannot be neglected.

According to the strategy of the 19th-century "Neo-Hinduism" to "ethicize and universilize *dharma*" (Halbfass, 1988, 333), this hierarchy was challenged, and the more general principles of *sādhāraṇadharma* were given more weight.

Negotiating the Multiple *Dharma*

Despite the doubtlessly prominent status of the *varṇa* division in Hindu society and its fundamental importance for the *dharma* concept in particular, there are many other normative systems that influence the concrete individual *dharma* of a person. Among them are special rules for castes (*jātidharma*), religious communities, the family (*kuladharma*), or a region (*deśadharma*). The experts of Dharmaśāstra were fully aware of these multiple codices, which people were supposed to follow according to customary usages.

Although many of them did not become part of the *dharma* system as represented in the canonical scriptures, they were recognized as authoritative guidelines that had to be considered in the definition of *dharma*-conforming behavior. One of the most prominent examples for this type of conflicts is described in the *Bhagavadgītā* when Arjuna has to weigh his obligations towards his family and the duties prescribed by his socioreligious status (*kuladharma* vs. *svadharma* or *kṣatriyadharma*; see Malinar, 2007, 55ff.).

In the *Manusmṛti*, the king is explicitly encouraged to consider the specific law systems before settling a case:

> He who knows the Law should examine the Laws of castes (*jātidharma*), regions (*jānapadadharma*), guilds (*śreṇīdharma*), and families (*kuladharma*), and only then settle the Law specific to each (*svadharma*). (*MaSm.* 8.41; trans. Olivelle, 2005)

The importance that these other kinds of *dharma* are given is also shown by *Manusmṛti* 8.46. Here the general authority of the customs of good men – called here *sat* "virtuous" and *dhārmikadvijāti* "righteous twice born" – is considerably modified by the restriction *deśakulajātīnām aviruddham*, "if such practices do not conflict with those of a particular region, family, or caste" (trans. Olivelle, 2005).

Conflicts between these different categories are naturally part of the system and require the expertise of an acknowledged authority in order to be settled.

The *dharma* is therefore already *per definitionem* not only an empirical entity but also a relative one. Which particular reference frame was chosen in a given situation depends much on the subjective evaluation of the case that had to consider a multitude of different arguments before establishing what can be called *dharma*. Although *dharma* as a principle is eternal, its concrete shape for a given individual in a given situation must be subject to a complicated process of negotiation.

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Divination

Divination may be broadly defined as procedures for predicting the future or otherwise obtaining knowledge by means of secret or hidden correspondences and/or supernatural inspiration. Although such practices are known in most or all human cultures, they are more prevalent in those which also display a high degree of scientific attainment, not excluding modern Western society. In India, *daiva*, a Sanskrit cognate of "divine" and "divination," appears in a list of various branches of (mostly religious) learning in the *Chāndogyopaniṣad* (7.1; → Upaniṣads), and is understood by the commentator → Śaṅkara to refer to "the knowledge of omens" (*utpātajñāna*). In the later language especially, *daiva* generally means "fate, destiny," and the epithet *daivajña*, "knower of fate," is used of diviners, particularly → astrologers.

The many and varied forms of Hindu divination may be classified, firstly, by the medium used – such as celestial phenomena, the cries and movements of birds and beasts, dreams, and so forth – and, secondly, by the nature of the signs interpreted: spontaneous, induced, or preexistent. Examples of preexistent signs used for divination are the shape of a person's body, with its marks, moles and lines; the positions of the stars and planets at his or her birth; or the physical structure of a building or a piece of land. Spontaneous signs include sudden celestial or terrestrial phenomena such as comets or earthquakes, chance encounters with humans or animals of various kinds, and dreams occurring during ordinary sleep, while induced signs comprise a number of more or less ritualized techniques, for instance by rolling dice or by randomly choosing a passage from a sacred text.