

A CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATION OF AHIMSA

by Agehananada Bharati

If Indian intellectuals suffer from any endemic trouble, I believe it is a systematic confusion between the "is" and the "ought". Statements which illustrate this confusion abound in modern Indian parlance: "There is no caste in modern Hinduism"; "Indian culture is more spiritual than Western culture"; and, directly concerning our theme, "Ahimsa is the supreme law". In all these statements, token statements of Indian culture at various times, or in a continuum carrying into our day, the "is" should be replaced by, or should have been avoided in the first place and substituted by "ought". I have heard a common rejoinder to this suggestion: it is not a systematic confusion, but ignorance - so say the modest; or better intuition of the Truth (the capital letter is heard whenever it is used in a rejoinder) - so say the pompous. But whether ignorance or some sort of non-cognitive, superior intuition, the philosophical fact is and remains that no "ought" ever follows from an "is", nor does an "is" ever imply an "ought" -- the two refer to two worlds that cannot meet; or, less Kiplingian, these are two languages which cannot be used together; or again, more technically, "is" and "ought" belong to different, incompatible logical categories. It may one day be the case that there is no caste in India, and it may always have been the case that ahimsa was the supreme law, if this could be proved axiomatically; or it may be the case that there ought to be no caste in India, and that ahimsa ought to be the supreme moral law but these are two totally unrelated types of statement; they are four different statements, not two. I am proceeding on the assumption that ahimsa ought to be the supreme law; "supreme" both in an aggregative sense, as the law that should stand on top of any legal and/or moral hierarchy, and in a universal sense, that it should be binding for all societies at all times and in all circumstances. This may be denied, of course, but then we would not have a topic - it would peter out and this article could not be written. Given, however, that an audience does accept the ruling, I will urge for a new, restrictive, but valid definition of ahimsa, and will try to show that it works in a universal setting which is both humane and sophisticated, yet not sanctimonious, nor pompous or trivial.

The genesis of ahimsa as a moral precept is not, as most people in India and their Western admirers have come to think, Buddhist or Jain. The dictum, "ahimsa paramo dharmah" (non-violence is the supreme dharma) is a quotation from the Mahabharata, and Yudhisthira is the speaker. When asked what he regarded as

moral law (this, of course, is a very general and perhaps a scurrilous rendition of niti, dharma, niyama and other loaded terms), he gives a lengthy disquisition on what people of different social status, and in different, i.e. geographically diversified, societies ought to do and to omit - a rather more prolix summary of the svadharma teachings hinted at in the Gita in another portion of the epic. But when the questioner persists, the King finally comes out with his obiter dictum for all times: "Ahimsa paramo dharmah". Translated into modern parlance this simply means: all rules of action, religious, secular, moral are subject to the societies in which they apply, and are specific to the social status and to the roles played within any particular social setting. The only rule that applies to all societies, at all times, and in the acting of any social role and in any status, is that of ahimsa, for which I retain the Gandhian translation of 'nonviolence' without any critical qualm. "Nonviolence" is so vague and so wide a term that no interpretation can defeat it; and for my own argument, which now follows, it is as it were accidentally helpful, as privative prefixes like "non-" and "a-" are less objectionable to the modern thinker than positive exclamations like 'truth' and 'goodness' when used in a moralizing sense.

A succinct statement of my argument at first: in order to reach a modern, sophisticated definition of Ahimsa, it has to be divested of emotive and spiritual pomp; and in order to jell with Yudhisthira's quasi-canonical (and, to my feeling, justified) claim that it is indeed the supreme dharma, it must be universal. But to be universal, paradoxical though this must sound at first, it has to be narrow enough to permit the inclusion of a vast majority of moral agents who must reject a fundamentalistic, simplistic definition of ahimsa as total abstinence from inflicting any pain whatever. Now, as a counter-balance to the enormous amount of conscious and unconscious sanctimoniousness and the pompous diction of most of the indigenously Indian ahimsa-teachings of the Hindu Renaissance, i.e. of the last five or six decades, it is necessary, on the stylistic side, to introduce sophistication; without it, the intellectuals of all echelons of thought in the Western world and the upcoming generation in India which reads T. S. Eliot, Bertrand Russell, and Freud will not be attracted. The notion that style does not count in making followers is wrong and childish; remember that Aldous Huxley, among many others - the author of this paper among them - was driven out of his native religion very largely by the pompous and balmy diction of his catechets. Thus, the contemporary teacher of ahimsa as the universal moral law and as the supreme value must restrain himself; he must not fall into moralizing harangue. More and more, the young seeking mind, in India following the West, wants sober, superlativeless, and even adjective-less parlance; if ahimsa is

to be taught as the supreme value - perhaps 'supreme' itself should be replaced by something less superlative - it should be couched in such terms as rational, conducive to an egalitarian society, liberal, pleasure-giving and not in such terms as spiritual, sublime, lofty, godlike, etc., for these terms are bound to drive away many potential listeners who have eaten of the tree of modern knowledge which is criticism and analysis.

So much for the new diction of ahimsa. Returning now to the need of narrowing down the definition of ahimsa for the sake of universalising it: a naive, fundamentalistic, literal reading of it is bound to defeat its own purpose of universal acceptance. If, as some Arya Samajists, some literalistic Gandhians, and some Sanatani-oriented fundamentalists do, we insist on 'no killing' as a blank order, well over 90 per cent of all potential listeners in the modern world will turn away; I am referring to the non-vegetarians, who constitute over 90 per cent of all mankind. Now I am perfectly aware - and pointed this out earlier in passing - that no "ought" can be derived from any "is"; the fact that most people do eat meat does of course not imply, logically or morally, that it is right to do so. The question is whether or not the eating of meat is morally wrong and on this point there can be two views. Personally, I hold that it is morally neutral, not on a literal, fundamentalistic interpretation of ahimsa, but on a universalised, narrowed-down, contemporary definition which is the theme of this paper - we are just working towards it but the reader must bide his time until we get there a bit farther below.

On a literal, fundamentalistic reading of ahimsa it is no doubt wrong; but the question arises whether the retention of this fundamentalist reading does not bode more damage to the ahimsa teaching in the process of its universal acceptance, in that it bars a vast majority of people from accepting it. In other words, may there not be greater harm in curbing the universal acceptance of ahimsa, to include the people and the powers that make and dispense the atom, than in the continued killing of animals for food. For given that the atom and the hydrogen bombs once do their nasty job completely, there will be no cowherds and shepherds to tend cows and sheep, nor any cows and sheep to be tended. And the pious hope that the sheer "spiritual" power of the teaching of ahimsa will persuade 90 per cent of humanity to desist from meat eating, is jejune utopia, particularly as the eating of meat is not regarded as morally bad even by a good proportion of the people from amongst whom the teaching originated, namely, the Hindus and the Buddhists. I find embarrassed silence among such vegetarian groups of listening bhaktas as Gujarati

and Marwari speakers who have become devotees of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, when they are told - and I think, for pedagogical and pastoral reasons they have to be told - that both of these masterful teachers of Hindu lore were fish and/or meat eaters, not due to a particularly contrived interpretation of the scriptures, but due to the anthropological fact that Bengalis have been eating non-vegetarian food as a matter of course, with the somewhat hapless attempts of Vaishnava reformers to stop the custom defeated in the long run of Bengali culinary history. And, of course, all intellectually honest pandits know that meat, including beef, had been one of the staples in Vedic and Puranic days. Yet, these arguments from "is" (or "was", which amounts to the same) do not imply any "ought" (or "ought to have been"); for a moral purpose, the above argument (involving the salutariness of the atom and of human versus cattle survival) is valid, because it is an all-out 'ought' argument, involving no "is".

Actually, the only hitch about using a literalistic definition of ahimsa as a universal postulate lies in this dietetic realm; were it not for the historical accident that vegetarianism has acquired high prestige in India, so much so that it is one of the instruments for social climbing in the caste pattern, the fundamentalistic definition as implied by Gandhi and as usually accepted by vegetarian Indians would have sufficed for a universal definition, too. On the other hand, this very accident is fuel for the thinker's thoughts: the fact that a rather easy device - namely the not-eating of meat in traditionally vegetarian segments of India's population and the almost equally easy renunciation of meat by people who want to be different (I discountenance the very few who give up meat out of a feeling of emergent disgust) - has been used to hint at greater spiritual perfection is enough reason for the genuinely ethical thinker to reject status-giving vegetarianism as any means of moral agency. The official culture of modern India being puritanical to an excess, any action or omission that means less potential pleasure in a comparable situation confers greater prestige, as it adds to the ascetical Gestalt of the person who is persuaded and who wants to persuade his fellowmen that there is virtue in his renunciation. I do not say that vegetarianism has no merit; it has, but it is aesthetic rather than ethical, at least in the Indian context. I can see why a humanist or an intellectual in India or among Indians today refuses to eat meat or to drink alcoholic beverages when he does partake of both in non-Indian surroundings: a profoundly ethical mind would be annoyed at partaking in hedonistic pursuits - be they food, drink, or sex - where these pursuits or their omission carry a moralistic value, where they are loaded with value judgements of resentment or of emancipatory smartness. One often has the feeling among

modernistic Hindus who have taken to drink and to meat and to extramarital sex that they do these things not so much for the fun but for the sin of them; but the humanist can be no partner to them - he enjoys these things for their pleasure or their inspiration, but not for some sort of surreptitious catharsis.

This much about meat food, the *bête noire* in a modern definition of ahimsa. If these arguments do not convince the ahimsa-fundamentalist, then he must not expect ahimsa to become a universal doctrine, not because people will not accept it (this would be a forensic inference from an "is" to an "ought" which is forbidden), but because all people do not have to accept it on purely ethical grounds, on the basis of the arguments I proffered earlier.

The way is now clear for a universally acceptable definition of ahimsa and I shall finally show that Yudhisthira's dictum may indeed be valid, albeit after a much more discursive and sophisticated process of thought than the old king ever dreamed of. This is the definition: ahimsa-nonviolence is an attitude held by a person in all interpersonal situations, and implemented by that person in the majority of his interpersonal activities: the attitude of consciously inflicting no harm, or as little harm as possible, on other human beings.

This definition, of course, requires some elucidation. All moral introjections are attitudes; one does not "act" morally or immorally straightaway, for the physical act is strictly neutral. Each act accompanied by certain cogitations constitutes a moral or an immoral act, or of course a morally neutral act. If the surgeon cuts into his patient's cardiac region to insert a plastic valve, he acts well, and probably morally, too; if he cuts into the same spot by exactly the same method, in order to get rid of his wife's paramour on the table before him, he acts immorally; and when he cleans his hands after the operation he acts morally neutrally, except of course for the ethical stickler who can, if he presses the matter very hard, find some moral correlation in each and every trifling act. "Inflicting" harm must include "permitting harm to be inflicted": if an American doctor drives along Highway 99 and does not stop to pick up a wounded person from the roadside because this makes him (the doctor) responsible for the man, he (the doctor) has consciously permitted harm to be inflicted on a person and is therefore guilty of himsa, violence. "No harm or as little harm as possible" - this is no facile watering down of a moral doctrine, but a logically necessary emendation. "No harm" cannot always be done; there are millions of situations where a choice has to be made between greater and less harm. The famous case in point is that of the

young man during World War II who came to Jean-Paul Sartre to ask his advice: should he, as the Bible taught him, stay at home with Mama and serve her as he was her only son, or should he, as the Bible taught him, serve his country by joining the Resistance for training; Sartre told him to do what he had already decided to do when he came to him for advice: had he wanted to stay at home, he would have gone to some collaborating Padre who would have advised him to stay with Mama; the young man knew that J-P.Sartre was a member of the Resistance. No holy writ can help you in a moral decision in critical situations; and the average "be nice" injunctions which the world's religions have given en masse to last for hundreds of years yet to come are pretty facile and jejune - every sane adult knows that it is "bad" to steal and "bad" to fornicate with whosoever comes by - no Jesus and no Muhammad and no Srikrishna are needed to tell him that. The Sartre example is one from an historically specific critical situation. But examples abound in daily life in society that show that *ahimsa* cannot be done, and that the choice between less harm and more harm is incumbent on the person who would practise *ahimsa*. Take the matrimonial triangle, a ubiquitous pattern in all patriarchal societies: there is the married couple and there is the third person emotionally involved with one of the two. Now if there is no indulgence when emotion is strong and consuming, harm is done to two persons, i.e. the outsider and the married person who refrains from indulgence; if they indulge and the other married partner finds out, it means pain to him and to the other two as well; if they indulge discreetly and if they can scheme it so that the horned partner cannot find it out, it would mean pain to none, unless they believe in a sort of Jungian common soul to which harm may be done in an indirect, abstruse fashion, or if they hold a Kantian categorical imperative enjoining actions whose maxims should be applicable for a universal legislation.

However the quantificatory approach to these marginal situations is dangerous, not for moral but for social reasons: in the first place, there can never be any guarantee for complete discretion, secondly - and more importantly, to my feeling - such involvement tends to put the involved persons on a constant defensive, it tends to jeopardize the affection between the married partners, and it will most probably affect the children of the marital union adversely. But, following G. E. Moore, these are not moral considerations - they are of a sociological, psychological, or of some other non-ethical nature; to assume them to be of moral significance is to commit the *naturalistic fallacy*, the most frequent form of confusing the "ought" with the "is". And as *ahimsa* is a strictly ethical doctrine - unless it is taken in a Brahmanical theological sense as the consummate state of the sage's mind, in which case it is a synonym of

mukti, which sense does not concern us in this contribution - it belongs to the "ought" sphere alone; the consideration that some people do and some people do not act at the behest of ahimsa is totally irrelevant to our purpose of establishing a contemporary interpretation of the teaching.

Finally, in our definition, "no or as little as possible conscious harm"; it really goes without saying that unconsciously inflicted harm does not conflict with ahimsa; stepping on someone's toe in the Delhi bus, as someone else pushes one, is not himsa, unless one calculates on whose toes to land after being pushed, which latter case is a clear infraction of ahimsa.

I think I have shown within a brief compass a less inspiring, less simple, unsanctimonious, but in the long run more valid, and to the intellectuals of the modern world, a more negotiable version of ahimsa - one, I feel, the late Prime Minister Nehru might have been acting upon without formulating it.