THE ETHICS OF AHIMŚĀ IN THE
MOKṢA DHARMA OF THE MAHĀBHĀRATA*

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The philosophy of Ahiṁśā finds an elaborate expression in
twelve chapters of the Mokṣa Dharma section of Śānti Parva of the
Mahābhārata. Some scholars discern in this the influence of Buddhist
and Jain teaching. But the doctrine of Ahiṁśā as expounded in the
Mahābhārata appears to be as old as the oldest of the upaniṣads which
are ascertained to be clearly pre-Buddhistic. Of them Dr. Radhakrishnan
says: ‘They represent the vedanta in its pure original form and are
the earliest philosophical compositions of the world. These upaniṣads
belong to what Karl Jaspers calls the Axial Era of the world, 800 to
300 B.C. when man for the first time simultaneously and independently
in Greece, China and India questioned the traditional pattern of life.’

The germs of the philosophy of Ahiṁśā are found in the upaniṣadic
protest against ritualistic sacrifice involving killing of animals and its
reinterpretation in ethical terms and in terms of a religion of inwardness.
For example, in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad man’s whole life is likened
to a sacrifice. The best gifts (daksināh) given away at this sacrifice are
said to be austerity (tapo), almsgiving (dānam), uprightness (ārjavam),
non-violence (ahiṁśā) and truthfulness (satyavacanam). Man’s whole
life which is compared to a sacrifice is divided into three periods, the
early, middle and late. The early life lived by him as it ought to be
lived is said to be the morning libation to the gods, the middle period is
the midday libation and the late period is said to be the evening
libation. This would be sufficient to show the antiquity of the
doctrine of Ahiṁśā in India.

The term Ahiṁśā may be translated as harmlessness, abstention
from injury to living things, non-cruelty or non-violence. The last of
the translations is that with which Mahatma Gandhi has made us
familiar. Ahiṁśā is not confined only to abstention from physical
violence. It is comprehensive enough to include non-violence in
thought, word and deed. It is commended in the Mokṣa Dharma as
the quintessence of all Dharma and that which supersedes every other
(ahiṁśā paramo Dharma). There can be no compromise with it to one
who has hitched his wagon to the star of liberation or emancipation.
His supreme loyalty is only to it. The treatment of ahiṁśā as the

* Paper read before Kauttilya Mandali, Mysore.
1 Introduction to The Principal Upaniṣads, p. 18.
2 Chāndogya Upaniṣad, III, 17.4.
supreme ethical ideal is preceded by a discussion as to what constitutes morality and what the sources of our moral beliefs and feelings are.

Yudhishthira states the ethical problem thus. Men are frequently filled with doubts as to what is right or wrong for them to do. How are these doubts to be dispelled? Bhishma who is the Socrates of the dialogue replies that we have to look to three sources of morality. They are the conduct of the good and the mores of a people as they express themselves in their moral and legal codes (Smṛti) and the revealed scripture (Śruti). To these he adds that the nature of the purpose towards which an act is directed must also be taken into consideration in determining what is right or wrong. To the question ‘What is Dharma?’ the first answer is ‘Anything consistent with the Śruti and Smṛti’. Then comes Sīstācāra or the conduct of those called Sīta or good. When one fails to obtain clear and unambiguous guidance from Śruti and Smṛti, his only resort is the conduct of the good. ‘Who are the Sītas?’ is a question that remains to be answered. The answer to this question is found when we discover a leading principle by which a good man’s life is integrated. To adopt the words of Bergson, the morality based on the authority of Śruti and Smṛti may be called ‘morality of obligation’ or of ‘pressure’ whilst the morality inspired by the conduct of men of moral purity (Sāntah) may be called morality of ‘aspiration’. The principle of this morality is described by Bergson as ‘a common imitation of a model’ in his Two Sources of Morality and Religion. The Mahābhārata calls it ‘ānuvartana’. Rāma was described by Vālmiki in the Rāmāyana as the veritable pattern of perfection, the ideal of righteousness captured in a visible image (Rāmo vigrārahavān dharmaḥ). The Buddha is looked upon in a similar way by the Buddhist and Christ by the Christian. Thomas à Kempis spoke of the imitation of Christ. Yudhishthira is named in the Mahābhārata as the king of righteousness. (Dharma Rāja.)

The leading principle of human life is that of righteousness (Dharma). It has been endowed with the power of holding the world together, says Bhishma (loka sangraha samyuktam vidhātṛā vihitam purā). The good are those that hold that the end to be realized and the means for its realization must both be righteous and untainted by aggression or violence. The end must be achieved always by agreeable or peaceful means (sarvam priyābhyaapagatam ṣuṇyamāhur maniṣinah). This is an important criterion to be kept in mind in deciding what is right or wrong. (paśyaitam lakṣanoddeśam dharmaḥ dharma Yudhishthira). This means that the end does not justify the means. Bhishma says therefore that the conduct of the good which is of undoubted excellence is subject, so far as the means they employ are concerned, to numerous restraints and delicate considerations. How-
ever good the end which they have elected may be, they cannot ride rough shod to reach their goal. (*sūkṣma dharmārtha nityatam satām caritamuttamam*).

Righteousness exalteth nations, it is said. Bhishma says that the rule of righteousness has been laid down by divine dispensation in order that man’s journey through the world may be smoothened. Truthfulness is the highest of human values. It is intertwined with non-violence. In the words of Bhishma ‘It is good to speak the truth. There is nothing higher than truth. Everything is upheld by truth and everything rests upon truth’. (*satyasya vacanam śādhu na satyāt vidyate param satyena vidhritam sarvam sarvam satye prathisthitam*). Bhishma mentions a few practical recipes which may be helpful in daily living. Practical guidance as to what is right or wrong is often afforded to us by cultivating the habit of seeing ourselves as others see us. It is Kant who said that one must act in such a way that he can wish his act to be universal. ‘Act on a maxim which thou canst will to be law universal’. This often saves us from many a moral dilemma. Bhishma gives the example of a thief who steals what belongs to others but thinks that it is wrong for others to rob him of what he has acquired by robbery. It is the same case with speaking the truth. A body of brigands would not tolerate falsity of behaviour towards one another. There are therefore certain principles of universal validity and recognized to be such both by the virtuous and the vicious. That vice parades by putting on the guise of virtue is a homage that vice pays to virtue. This manifests itself in what modern psychology designates as ‘rationalization’ and called *mithyācāra* in Mahābhārata. That one should not take what belongs to others is recognized as an eternal obligation either within a smaller group or a larger group.

‘Covet not what belongs to others’ and such other maxims are held by some, says the Mahābhārata, to have been inspired by the helplessness of the weak to protect themselves against the depredations of the strong. Such a view as this must have prevailed in certain circles known as the Carvākas in ancient India. This is analogous to Nietzsche’s teaching that virtues like humility, meekness and self-effacement are the compromise reactions of the weak and the feeble against the strong and the powerful. It is the expression of a slave morality as against a master morality. Nietzsche condemned the entire Christian ethic as slave morality. But as Bhishma points out, the so-called strong and the powerful, when they lose strength or position or power, would plead for an ethical teaching which they formerly discarded as puerile, namely sympathy for the fallen and the weak. They would find it of advantage now to preach sympathy, humility, selflessness and the like. So maxims like ‘live, righteously,’ ‘speak the truth,’ ‘do not covet what belongs to others’,
receive universal recognition, for their abrogation will undermine the very foundations of social life. Such a source of morality has been called by Bertrand Russell 'social compromise' or 'a more or less obscure sense of collective self-interest'. The well-being of all in the world becomes a valuable criterion of morality. In the words of Bhishma 'the discipline of the good life has been laid down for prospering man in his journey through the world' (lokayātrārtha meveha dharmasya niyamah krtah). If the criterion of morality is strength or the interest of the stronger as Thrasymachus put it to Socrates in Plato’s Republic, then one can always expect a stronger person to arise and snatch one's liberty. So one who substitutes strength and muscular strength at that, for virtue and consideration for others, has the element of a quiet and happy life wholly destroyed for him. He lives in perpetual dread of his strength and power being nullified by one who possesses greater strength and power than he has. Therefore, says Bhishma, do not ever set thy heart on aggression, for it is self-stultifying. Do not be lured to do the wrong thing by love of profit or power for this will soon turn into ashes in the mouth. The one universal principle, according to Bhishma, which saves one from doubt, dismay, disappointment and despair is to undeviatingly follow the path of non-violence in thought, word and deed. To fear none and to be feared by none marks the non-violent hero. Neither wealth nor power, but righteousness alone can dower one with enduring happiness and extraordinary courage (abhaya).

Here Bhishma lays down the golden rule (atmaupamya) in the words 'This is the sum of duty; do naught to others which if done to thee, would cause thee pain'. (na tatpareshu kurvita janannapriya-mātmanah). The Biblical version of this is 'All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.' (St. Matthew.) It is remarkable that the golden rule is stated in almost a similar way in all the religions of the world. The Udana Varga of Buddhism says 'Hurt not others with that which pains yourself.' Confucius says, 'Is there any one maxim which ought to be acted upon throughout one's whole life? Surely the maxim of loving-kindness is such.—Do not unto others what you would not they should do unto you.' (Analects.) Talmud, the Hebrew scripture says 'What is hurtful to yourself do not to your fellow-man. That is the whole of the Torah and the remainder is but commentary. So learn it.' Dadistan-i-dinik, a Zoroastrian scripture avers 'That nature only is good when it shall not do unto another whatever is not good for its own self.' The traditions of Islam have it 'No one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.' Exactly in the same words Bhishma says 'What one loves for oneself, he must love for others also.' (Yadyadātmama iccheta tat parasyāpi cintayet). Jainism says 'We should refrain from inflicting
upon others such injury as would appear undesirable to us if inflicted upon ourselves."

Bhishma brings forward a number of examples to illustrate the truth of this. Adulterous conduct is bad. In the light of the golden rule, a man should not covet another man’s wife for the simple reason that he does not wish another man to covet his wife. One should not kill another for he does not want to be killed by another. He must concede to others the right to live inasmuch as he wants others to concede to him that right. The principle is further extended into the principle of equity as applied to the possession and enjoyment of worldly goods. Says Bhishma ‘with the surplus wealth one may happen to own one should relieve the want of the indigent’. The surplus of the haves (atiriktah) must be shared (samvībhajana) with the have-nots (akīncanān). The equitable distribution (samvībhajana) of the surplus (atirikta) alone can justify, according to Bhishma, industrial or commercial activities undertaken for profit. The surplus should not be coveted for its own sake, that is to say, with a mere profit motive to oneself (lobha) but to be put to such meritorious use tending to common welfare (punya). God has so ordained things (vidhairā vihitam) that that surplus which has been gathered from the community must flow back to the community for its consolidation and well-being (lokāsangraha). Bhishma’s view is that this is the norm of things and any disturbance of this or imbalance will upset the delicately set social equilibrium (sūkshmadharmartha niyatam). These delicate considerations inspire the conduct of the good (satām charitam uttamam). So the wise conduct of the wise is poised on a delicate sense of righteousness (dharma sukshma) which depends upon many complex considerations. In other words, Bhishma pleads for a greater human sensitiveness which prevents one from growing callous towards the welfare and happiness of fellow human beings. He pleads for benevolence and sympathy for the whole of Humanity, which characterize the great ones in the world, to become more widespread, catching and infectious. They set the pattern of living for others to follow. More than the asseveration of abstract principles, the concrete exemplifications of them in those whom we recognize as the great and the good would better solve our moral doubts and nullify moral nihilism.

Yudhisthira listens to Bhishma thus far and consolidates the teaching by recapitulating the propositions of Bhishma thus: ‘Thou sayest that righteousness or duty depends upon delicate considerations, that it is indicated by the conduct of those that are called good, that it is subject to numerous restraints and that its indications are revealed by scripture.’ He then puts forward in addition a point of view with which one is familiar in Ethics known as Intuitionism. Says Yudhisthira ‘It seems to me, however, that I have a certain
inward light (pratibha) in consequence of which I can discriminate between right and wrong.' Yudhishthira's argument is that all the standards or criteria adumbrated above are subject to variation and consequently we are condemned to an ethical relativity which fails to give us universal and infallible moral principles. Duties of people are not all the same. What is duty to one is other than duty to another. What is right for one in distress (āpaddharma) is not right to him when he is in affluent circumstances. What is meat for one is poison for another.\(^1\) Righteousness was defined as the acts of the good. But Yudhishthira points out that this definition begs the whole question, for the problem as to what constitutes the conduct of the good and why it is good remains still to be solved. Further the moral standards of one age differ from those of another age. The scriptural injunctions then cannot be regarded as of universal validity because of their inapplicability to all ages. When the Śrūtis as well as the Smṛitis based on them contradict each other, how can they be regarded as providing an universal and infallible standard of morality? (pramāṇanca pramāṇena viruddhyet śāstrata kutah). So, says Yudhis-
thira, the problem cannot be so easily disposed of and as he expresses it rather paradoxically 'the course of duty is finer than the edge of a razor and grosser than even a mountain' (anīyān kshuradhārayā gariyānapi parvañāt). On account of this subtlety of the matter, some shallow minded persons jump to the conclusion that the edifice of morality which men build up for themselves, is only a 'castle in the air' (gandharva nāgara). Righteousness is dismissed by them as sounding brass and tinkling cymbal, all hollow inside, void of any intelligible content. The standards of righteousness by which a good man may be known are thus based on shifting sands of conflicting popular opinion. Knowledge of moral standard does not therefore depend upon the scriptures, nor upon considerations of happiness or misery. Righteousness or what is right reduces itself arbitrarily to this that what the learned of ancient times called right is right and what they called wrong is wrong. Yudhishthira thus comes to the conclusion that the standards of righteousness or the criteria by which a good man may be known are extremely difficult to ascertain. This is the negative result reached by Yudhishthira. Bhishma replies that the arbitrariness disappears when one comes to examine how the wise men whose example would be a guide to us attained to that wisdom or what it is that characterizes the ruling principle of their life from which all good conduct emanates. The

\(^1\) In this connection it is well to remind ourselves of what John Dewey says: 'Particular aspects of morals are transient; they are often in their actual manifestation defective and perverted. But the framework of moral conceptions is as permanent as human life itself.'
specific characteristic that we derive from the study of the really good men which gives us an inkling into the essence of their goodness is non-violence. It gives rise to duties which are consistent with reason and always observed by those that are good and wise. (upapathyā bhi sampannām nityam sadbhīn niṣeṣvītām). So the unique essence of ethical conduct lies in Ahimsā. And the ‘inward light’ of which Yudhishthira speaks which lighteth the path of every man in the world, is the only resource in us which implicitly recognizes genuine goodness where it lives and allows itself to be guided by it. Ahimsā furnishes the infallible criterion. It is the basic foundation of all individual and social well-being.

In the face of this supreme principle, all other rites and writ duties pale into insignificance. Sacrifices which meant the killing of an innocent animal cease to have any meaning and their place is taken by mental sacrifice, a sacrifice without slaughter of animals, a sacrifice of the beast (pāśu) in us. Bhishma narrates in illustration of his main theme the story of a conversation between a tradesman Tulādhāra (which literally means the holder of the balance, being a merchant whose occupation was to weigh things and sell them) and the proud Brahmin ascetic called Jājali. Mere asceticism or mortification of the body or crucifixion of the flesh is valueless when compared with the zealous cultivation of an attitude of non-violence. High birth and profound learning are irrelevant for the inculcation of the spirit of Ahimsā. Every person, be he prince or peasant, scholar or tradesman is qualified to practise the ethic of ahimsā. Nay, says Bhishma, here is the story of a tradesman teaching the doctrine of Ahimsā to a Brahmin, proud of his descent, learning and austerity.

Jājali was given over to austere penances. Heat and cold, pain and pleasure left him unaffected. He could sit or stand at will for any length of time. Dirt or cleanliness was of no concern to him. He conquered hunger and sex. He developed great psychic powers. Pride entered his heart. ‘Who is there like me in this whole world?’ He asked of himself. An unknown voice whispered to him ‘There is one better than you. His name is Tulādhāra. He is of great fame and is engaged in the business of buying and selling.’ Jājali’s vanity was piqued. He resolved to see Tulādhāra who was a grocer in the City of Banaras. Tulādhāra was sitting on the counter. On seeing the great ascetic he stood up and greeted him and both settled down to a conversation. Jājali asked Tulādhāra to tell him the secret of his great fame and moral excellence which he thought were impossible of attainment to one who did not live a retired life but lived in the midst of the world doing the business of buying and selling—an unexpected quarter where one would look for spiritual guidance! Tulādhāra set the doubts of Jājali at rest by his moral discourse. Tulādhāra said that the principle of the good life was very
simple to understand. It is eternal principle (sanātanam) and it consisted in universal friendliness (maitrī) and beneficence to all creatures. (sarva bhūta hīta). The way of life based on harmlessness towards all that lives or in case of actual necessity upon a minimum of such harm, said Tulādhāra, is the highest morality. (na bhūtānām ahimsāyā iyāyām dharmosti kascana). He bought spices and drugs and sold them to others without cheating them. A man is said to comprehend what morality is only when he is the friend of all (Suhrīt) and always engaged in doing good to all creatures (sarve-shānca hite ratah). Non-violence in thought, word and deed is what matters most. Tulādhāra held the scales even for all. In his scales a Brahman did not weigh heavier than a chandāla or an elephant heavier than a dog or a cat. ‘My scales are perfectly even with respect to all creatures’ says he to Jājali and that was his chief vow in life. (samoham sarva bhūteshu pāṣya me jājale vratam tulā me sarva bhūteshu samā thīsthathī jājale). In other words he looked upon all with an equal eye. He was not given to flattering others or pain them by being harsh in his criticism. He viewed the variety in the world with equanimity and was not impatient with it. He feared none and was feared by none. He followed the practices of high-souled and benevolent men. The wise men are those whose hearts are cleansed from all desire of injuring others. Practice of universal harmlessness is the essence of virtuous life. One must follow it to the best of his ability. Whatever results one expected to reap by penances and sacrifices may all be had by practising the duty of harmlessness. The good man is he who gives unto all creatures the assurance of harmlessness. There is no duty superior to the duty of abstaining from injuring other creatures. He comes to look upon all creatures as identical with his own Self. Of all gifts, the assurance of harmlessness to all creatures is the highest in point of merit. There is no duty that is not prompted by some motive of happiness. But duty is very subtle. It is not easy to understand it fully. Amongst conflicting ordinances, some succeed in comprehending duty by observing the acts of the good which are solely directed towards the good of all creatures.

Tulādhāra then embarks on the question of our treatment of animals. We must cultivate a new sensitiveness to the suffering of animals. It is opposed to non-violence to castrate bulls and bore their noses and cause them to bear great loads. Killing animals for human food is a contradiction of the principle of ahimsa. Slavery is a sin against it. To a practitioner of Ahimsa the greatest crime conceivable is the inhumanity of man to man. That such a thing exists is an evidence of the brutalizing and coarsening of human nature effected by custom and convention. Custom blunts sensibility. Every individual is to be looked upon as ‘the dwelling place of all the gods’, however humble he may be. Trafficking in human bodies is an insult to the indwelling soul. Draft
animals oppressed with heavy burdens is an offence against the supreme moral law of Ahimsa. Prevention of cruelty to animals is thus a direct corollary of the principle of Ahimsa. Even agriculture must be pursued without wanton destruction of living things. We do not ordinarily consider the welfare of animals as part of the general good at which we should aim. But Ahimsa demands that we should recognize the sanctity of all life. Animal sacrifice is a sin in spite of the fact that it has been in vogue in ancient times. Tuladhara says 'Do not blindly follow a thing because it is ancient; use your reason and follow the dictates of thy cleansed understanding.' Tuladhara advocates a breaking away from a lower ethical ideal however ancient it may be in the interest of a higher morality.

A new interpretation is given here of sacrifice. It does not mean shedding of blood of other animals but giving up animal nature in oneself. The highest object of life can be attained only when one gives up all lowly ambitions and petty desires, becomes free from envy and practises truth and self-restraint. That is the real sacrifice. The wise man is he who has given up all desire of fruit, who does not exert himself to reap profit and pleasure, who never bends his head to others, who never wastes his breath in praising others or condemning them and who is endued with the strength of the soul.

This leads Tuladhara to dwell on what he calls 'mental sacrifice.' The inner meaning of a pious life is brought out here. Religion or righteousness does not consist in the outward acts but in the attitude of the soul. 'O Jajali!' says Tuladhara, 'The soul is itself a Tirtha. Do not wander about on earth in search of sacred places. A person by observing the duties that do not involve any injury to other creatures attains the highest goal.' These are duties, Bhishma comments, that are consistent with reason and that are always observed by those that are good and wise. All acts which involve harm or injury to other human beings or animals undermine the moral and spiritual foundations of society and warp the good of the individual. Compassion towards all that lives is a spontaneous expression of the Ahimsa attitude.  

1 Bertrand Russell writes: 'It is true that in modern times humanitarians have protested with a certain measure of success, against cruelty to animals; nevertheless fox-hunting continues. Moreover the church has always taught and still teaches that man has no duties towards the lower animals; on this ground Pope Pius IX regarded the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals as ethically heretical, and forbade the establishment of a branch in Rome.' (Human Society in Ethics and Politics, p. 67).

2 It is incorrect to suggest as Albert Schweitzer does in his book Indian Thought and Its Development that 'The commandment not to kill and not to harm does not arise, then, from a feeling of compassion, but from the idea of keeping undefiled from the world.' This has been nowhere suggested either in the Upanishads or in the Mahabharata.
When Jājali heard Tulādhāra’s words he felt he had grown to be a regenerate person and attained great tranquillity and grew humble and felt beholden to the grocer for imparting the great wisdom of Ajīmā.

In the next chapter following the sequence of ideas in the discourse of Tulādhāra to Jājali, Bhishma narrates the story of King Vichakhnu who enters a strong protest against animal sacrifices. He was full of compassion for all creatures. He heard the exceedingly painful groans of the kine in a cow-slaying sacrifice and felt a sense of revulsion. He recalled Manu who applauded the observance of harmlessness in all religious acts. He came to the conclusion that harmlessness to all creatures is of all duties the highest (ajiṃsā hyevo sarvebhyo dharmebhyo jyāyasi matā.) Belief in the necessity of animal sacrifice to appease a deity arises out of an error of judgment. The wise know that leaves and flowers alone are to be offered to God. Whatever act is regarded as worthy and whatever else is held as pure by persons of pure hearts and cleansed natures and those eminent for knowledge and holiness, are all worthy of being offered to the supreme Deity and not unworthy of his acceptance. A verse from one of the Vaisnava Agamās says that the true flowers of worship are flowers of the spirit. They are ajiṃsā, (ajiṃsā prathamam puspam), self restraint (ātma vinigraha), compassion for all living beings, (suvabhūta dayā) patience (ksamā) and others like these are the flowers dear to the Lord. (visnoh pritikaram bhavet)

In the chapters that follow we are presented with a problem of moral conflict and how it comes to be resolved by resorting to the solution of Ajīmā in the form of always preferring a non-violent solution to a violent solution, the latter inspired by haste and hate and the former inspired by patience and forbearance. It is the story of Chirakārīn who was a man of great wisdom. He was always in the habit of reflecting long before he embarked on any important act. The long-drawn reflection to which he was used made people scorn him as an idler or a procrastinator. He being ‘sickled over with the pale cast of thought’ was thought to be a person incapable of taking a decision, and was even dubbed foolish for that. The protracted deliberation before he acted earned for him the name Chirakārīn or literally, the one slow to act. Chirakārīn was the son of Gautama. Gautama suspected the fidelity of his wife and before he repaired

1 The commandments of compassion for animals in the Mahābhārata find an echo in the commandments of Chinese Taoism like ‘Thou shalt not whip nor beat domestic animals’ ‘Thou shalt not with intention crush beneath thy feet insects and ants’, ‘Thou shalt not take delight in fish-hooks or arrows in order to get amusement’ ‘Thou shalt not climb trees to take nests and destroy the eggs’. ‘Thou shalt not catch birds or animals in snares or nests’. (Quoted in A. Schweitzer’s Indian Thought and Its Development.)
to the forest commanded Chirakārīn to slay his mother Ahalya. Chirakārīn was now confronted with a moral dilemma. If he slew Ahalya, he would be committing the grossest sin of matricide. If he refrained from slaying her, he would be guilty of disobedience to his father. “How shall I obey the command of my sire and yet avoid slaying my mother?” was the crucial question for him. He thought long over it for many days and nights without embarking on the act until one day Gautama returned from the forest. He also had pondered in retreat of what he had bidden his son to do and had repented for enjoining on his son the unpleasant duty of killing his own mother. He was glad then that Chirakārīn had saved the situation for him by not acting hastily and by pondering long over the matter. The lesson drawn is couched in the following words: ‘In giving way to wrath, to haughtiness, to pride, to disputes, to sinful acts, and in accomplishing all disagreeable tasks, he that delays long deserves applause! When the offence is not clearly proved against a relative, a friend, a servant, or a wife, he that reflects long before inflicting the punishment is applauded’.

Here is illustrated the principle of non-violence in operation in human relations. Patience, forgiveness, reluctance to retaliate, returning good to injury are all implied in non-violence.

The next question that is adverted to is the feasibility of non-violence in the administration of justice in a state. The problem of capital punishment is discussed in a discussion between Dyumatsena and Satyavat. Dyumatsena was the king and prince Satyavat was his son. A certain number of individuals had been sentenced to death by the king for various offences for which they had been brought to book. Prince Satyavat pleads before his father to stay his murderous hand. He says ‘It can never be possible that the killing of individuals can ever be a righteous act’. (*vadho nāma bhavetdharma naitadbhaviturumāhatai*). Strange, says Satyavat, that in such a case as this the unrighteous act is regarded as a righteous act if it is for reasons of the state and a righteous act i.e. refraining from killing is regarded as unrighteous. Strange perversion of values, wonders the young prince. But Dyumatsena holds on to his view. He argues that without inflicting capital punishment on the murderers, safety of person and property cannot be secured and honest citizens are put in peril. He challenges Satyavat to show him the better way to maintain order in the world without resorting to destroying the evildoers. Dyumatsena may be said to hold the Preventive theory of punishment whereas his son Satyavat urges on his father the Reformatory theory as against the Retributive and Deterrent theories of punishment.¹

¹ Earnest Barker holds a view of punishment which is nearer to Dyumatsena’s point of view than to the point of view of Satyavat. He says that the ‘purpose of punishment is a purpose of general prevention’ and ‘punishment is a reformation of
Satyavat asks the King to reflect on this. His arguments are mainly directed against capital punishment. By slaying one wicked man, he is not slaying only him. A large number of innocent dependents on him become deprived of the means of living. They are indirectly subject to an ill-deserved punishment. The King must therefore reflect deeply on the question of punishment. No man can be looked upon as irredeemably wicked. He stands a chance of being reformed into a good man. ‘asadhuscaiva purusho labhate silamekadā’. The wicked should not therefore be torn up by the roots. (na mula ghūtah kartavyo naisha dharmah sanātanaṁ). They must be rehabilitated. The total extermination of the wicked is not consistent with the quintessence of morality viz. Ahiṁśā. Reformation of the wicked should be aimed at. ‘By smiting them gently (ahiṁśāmayena dandena) they may be made to expiate their offences’. Imprisonment, deprivation of wealth and such other means should be sufficient penalty for the offence. Punishment should be strictly proportionate to the gravity of the offence. If men who ought to know better commit an offence, their punishment should be comparatively more severe than one inflicted on the ignorant. First offenders must be treated leniently but habitual offenders must be more severely dealt with. In no case however should capital punishment be resorted to. And in general, too very severe punishments are scarcely needed or even effective for reforming the world.

The aim of all punishment must be to make honest men of rogues. Subjects can be made honest by threats of punishment. Punishment must never be retributive in character. Good Kings abundantly succeed in ruling their subjects properly by ensuring good conduct on their own part and on the part of those who surround him as officials and relations, counsellors and courtiers. If the King acts properly the superior subjects imitate him. ‘The masses of people have a natural tendency to imitate their immediate superiors.’ Men are so constituted that they imitate those whom they regard as their betters (sadaiva hi guro vrittam anuvartanti mānavaṁ). The King should be strictly impartial in meting out punishment. Even his friends and his relatives, if they offend against the law, must be dealt with in the same manner and in a spirit of strict impartiality, as the rest. Punishment to an offender inflicted without wrath or vindictiveness and also tempered with mercy and compassion will go a long way in

the wrong doer only in the sense of being intended to prevent him (as well as others, and along with others) from neglecting or rejecting the particular mental rule he has broken and with it the whole system of such rules’. (Principles of Social and Political Theory, p. 182).

1 Cp. Tarde’s Law of Imitation.
generating an atmosphere congenial to the collective practice of ahimsā.¹

The vedic religion of sacrifice is then pitted against the religion of non-violence. Sûmarâśmi defends the former while Kapila extols the latter. Kapila of liberal soul beheld a cow tied for slaughter in the name of a sacrifice. He exclaimed ‘Alas, ye Vedas’. Sûmarâśmi justifies slaughter on two grounds. One is the sanction that Vedas give of it. And the other is the more general one of justifying slaughter on the ground that living creatures must eat in order to live. The very support of life requires the slaughter of life. Kapila says that there is another religion or way of life which is the way of Ahimsa. The injunction to perform sacrifice is a hypothetical imperative which has ulterior objects but the injunction to practise Ahimsa is obligatory on all mankind, at any rate, in the higher reaches of life and progress. One who observes the rule of Ahimsa has every aspect of his life transformed. The common round and the daily task become transfigured by it and the rites and the writ duties become infilled with an inner significance which had remained unrecognized before.

Gandhiji has been the greatest apostle of ahimsà in modern times. He made it the guiding principle of his life and work. In this he was following in the footsteps of the great teachers of ahimsā in the past history of India. He may be said to have gone even further than they in so far as he brought this principle into effective operation in the modern complex social, economic and political life of India. In a recent contribution,² Professor Charles A. Moore of the University of Hawaii states the reaction of a thoughtful Westerner like himself towards the principle of Ahimsā as the supreme ethical principle. ‘At first glance, especially to a Westerner, the Indian doctrine of ahimsā appears to be a purely negative ethical principle without any significance beyond the framework of Indian metaphysics and Indian society and of no significance to the West. A closer analysis of the principle, however, especially in comparison with traditional principles in the West, elicits three major observations: (1) that there is much in the doctrine which recommends it as the basic principle of all morality, East and West, even if this necessitates the subordination of the usual

¹ One is reminded here of the psychological and sociological theory of punishment which is current coin now. In the words of Prof. Ernest Barker ‘the gist of these doctrines is that a great amount of wrong doing is not the conscious and deliberate action of persons responsible for themselves, but the automatic and inevitable action of persons for whom society is responsible in the sense that it has created the set of social conditions in which they have been born and bred, which have made them what they are, and which have produced their acts.’ (Principles of Social and Political Theory, p. 180.)

² A. R. Wadia Essays in Philosophy Presented in His Honour, p. 193.
Western moral principles; on the other hand, (2) that the doctrine itself and its bases (or the arguments for its supremacy) even in India involve fundamental inadequacies and apparent inconsistencies; and (3) that the principle, more adequately understood, well deserves and demands universal acceptance and application."

In the course of his essay Professor Moore makes the statement that ‘ahimsā is not indigenous to Hinduism’, and ‘the doctrine very probably had its origin in Jainism, from which it spread to Buddhism and Hinduism.’ But a reading of the Upanisads and the chapters on Ahimsā in Mokṣa Dharma will convince any one that within Hinduism itself ever since the vedic times there had been offered for man’s acceptance in accordance with their fitness for each, two different paths, one leading to ritualistic ethics and the other leading to an ethics of righteousness, it being clearly recognized that the latter must always supersede the former in man’s gradual ascent to Perfection.