

519. IS THIS HUMANITY?-IV

[October 31, 1926]

Taking life may be a duty. Let us consider this position.

We do destroy as much life as we think is necessary for sustaining the body. Thus for food we take life, vegetable and other, and for health we destroy mosquitoes and the like by the use of disinfectants, etc., and we do not think that we are guilty of irreligion in doing so.

This is as regards one's own self. But for the sake of others, i.e., for the benefit of the species, we kill carnivorous beasts. When lions and tigers pester their villages, the villagers regard it a duty to kill them or have them killed.

Even man-slaughter may be necessary in certain cases. Suppose a man runs amuck and goes furiously about sword in hand, and killing anyone that comes his way, and no one dares to capture him alive. Anyone who dispatches this lunatic will earn the gratitude of the community and be regarded a benevolent man.

From the point of view of ahimsa it is the plain duty of everyone to kill such a man. There is, indeed, one exception if it can be so called. The yogi who can subdue the fury of this dangerous man may not kill him. But we are not here dealing with beings who have almost reached perfection; we are considering the duty of the society, of the ordinary erring human beings.

There may be a difference of opinion as regards the appositeness of my illustrations. But if they are inadequate, others can be easily imagined. What they are meant to show is that refraining from taking life can in no circumstances be an absolute duty.

The fact is that ahimsa does not simply mean non-killing. *Himsa* means causing pain to or killing any life out of anger or from a selfish purpose, or with the intention of injuring it. Refraining from so doing is ahimsa.

The physician who prescribes bitter medicine causes you pain but does no *himsa*. If he fails to prescribe bitter medicine when it is necessary to do so, he fails in his duty of ahimsa. The surgeon who, from fear of causing pain to his patient, hesitates to amputate a rotten limb is guilty of *himsa*. He who refrains from killing a murderer who is about to kill his ward (when he cannot prevent him otherwise) earns no merit, but commits a sin, he practises no ahimsa but *himsa* out of a fatuous sense of ahimsa.

Let us now examine the root of ahimsa. It is uttermost selfless-

ness. Selflessness means complete freedom from a regard for one's body. When some sage observed man killing numberless creatures, big and small, out of a regard for his own body, he was shocked at his ignorance. He pitied him for thus forgetting the deathless soul, encased within the perishable body, and for thinking of the ephemeral physical pleasure in preference to the eternal bliss of the spirit. He therefrom deduced the duty of complete self-effacement. He saw that if man desired to realize himself, i.e., truth, he could do so only by being completely detached from the body, i.e., by making all other beings feel safe from him. That is the way of ahimsa.

A realization of this truth shows that the sin of *himsa* consists not in merely taking life, but in taking life for the sake of one's perishable body. All destruction therefore involved in the process of eating, drinking, etc., is selfish and, therefore, *himsa*. But man regards it to be unavoidable and puts up with it. But the destruction of bodies of tortured creatures being for their own peace cannot be regarded as *himsa*, or the unavoidable destruction caused for the purpose of protecting one's wards cannot be regarded as *himsa*.

This line of reasoning is liable to be most mischievously used but that is not because the reasoning is faulty, but because of the inherent frailty of man to catch at whatever pretexts he can get to deceive himself to satisfy his selfishness or egoism. But that danger may not excuse one from defining the true nature of ahimsa. Thus, we arrive at the following result from the foregoing:

1. It is impossible to sustain one's body without the destruction of other bodies to some extent.

2. All have to destroy some life

(a) for sustaining their own bodies;

(b) for protecting those under their care; or

(c) sometimes for the sake of those whose life is taken.

3. (a) and (b) in (2) mean *himsa* to a greater or less extent. (c) means no *himsa*, and is therefore ahimsa. *Himsa* in (a) and (b) is unavoidable.

4. A progressive ahimsaist will, therefore, commit the *himsa* contained in (a) and (b) as little as possible, only when it is unavoidable, and after full and mature deliberation and having exhausted all remedies to avoid it.

The destruction of dogs that I have suggested came under (4) and can, therefore, be resorted to only when it is unavoidable, when there is no other remedy and after mature deliberation. But I have not the slightest doubt that refraining from that destruction when it is

unavoidable is worse than destruction. And, therefore, although there can be no absolute duty to kill dogs, etc., it becomes a necessary duty for certain people at certain times and under certain circumstances.

I shall now try to take up one by one some of the questions that have been asked me. Some correspondents demand personal replies, and in case I fail to do so threaten to publish their views. It is impossible for me to reach every individual correspondent by a personal reply. Those that are necessary I shall deal with here. I have no right, nor desire, to stop people from carrying on the controversy in other papers. I may remind the correspondents, however, that threats and impatience have no place in a sober and religious discussion.

A correspondent asks:

How did you hit upon the religion of destroying dogs at the old age of 57? If it had occurred to you earlier than this, why were you silent so long?

Man proclaims a truth only when he sees it and when it is necessary, no matter even if it be in his old age. I have long recognized the duty of killing such animals within the limits laid down above, and have acted up to it on occasions. In India the villagers have long recognized the duty of destroying intruding dogs. They keep dogs who scare away intruders and kill them if they do not escape with their lives. These watch-dogs are purposely maintained with a view to protecting the village from other dogs, etc., as also from thieves and robbers whom they attack fearlessly. The dogs have become a nuisance only in cities, and the best remedy is to have a law against stray dogs. That will involve the least destruction of dogs and ensure the protection of citizens.

Another correspondent asks:

Do you expect to convince people by logical argument in a matter like that of ahimsa?

The rebuke contained in this is not without some substance. But I wanted to convince no one. Being a student and practiser of ahimsa, I have had to give expression to my views when the occasion demanded it. I have an opinion based on experience that logic and reasoning have some place, no doubt very small, in a religious discussion.

Young India, 4-11-1926