

Making Room for Ahimsa

by Theodore Plantinga

"East is east, and west is west, and never the twain shall meet." This familiar sentiment runs directly contrary to a course I teach in Asian philosophy. One of my objectives is to combat the cultural chauvinism that people of European descent fall into all too easily. The tendency toward such chauvinism is also to be found in most of my students, and so I try to get them to acknowledge that we "westerners" could learn a thing or two from the peoples and cultures of the East.

I make this point especially in relation to health matters. As a vegetarian, I feel comfortable drawing attention to those ideas and aspects of Asian cultures that lend support to abstention from meat. One of them, of course, is the famous notion of ahimsa.

Himsa (a term not as well known as ahimsa) stands for force, violence, infliction of injury, and so forth. Ahimsa is its logical opposite and represents a moral ideal for many followers of Asian philosophies and religions: one should avoid force, violence, and any infliction of injury. One implication of ahimsa is that one should not kill and eat sentient creatures.

What about moral health? The understanding of morality and of the principles underlying right conduct is not the same in Asia as it is in Europe and North America. A great many thinkers of Western persuasion are attracted to the Kantian insistence that once we grasp the fundamental principle of the moral life, we will also recognize that it applies unconditionally to all moral creatures. Thus, if I want moral consideration to be given me, I must show such consideration to all others. But in India one encounters the famous doctrine of the four goods or aims in life, i.e. kama (pleasure), artha (wealth or possessions), dharma (righteousness), and moksha (liberation or salvation). The idea is that one pursues only one of these goods or aims at one time.

The effect of this division into four is to divorce the pursuit of kama (pleasure) or of artha (possessions) from the demands of dharma (righteousness). This

divorce is the reason why western readers detect a somewhat amoral tone in the famous "Kama Sutra," which is a handbook for those who are pursuing pleasure, more specifically, sexual pleasure. Another effect, of course, is that the seeker of moksha (salvation) is not bound by the demands of dharma (righteousness) -- hence the unease or fear which people often manifest in the presence of those who have cast aside conventional rules as they embarked on the ultimate spiritual quest for release from the coils of maya (this world of illusion) and samara (the endless round of birth followed by death followed by rebirth followed by death ...).

The Western tradition in ethics is, by and large, committed to the notion that fundamental principles of morality have to apply to everyone. To be sure, there are exceptions among Western schools of thought, such as existentialism, with its interest in an ethics that will face up to the ambiguities running through human life. Utilitarianism, a major alternative to the somewhat austere Kantian approach to ethics, is also rule-based. There is a basic principle to be followed. Thus J.S. Mill spoke offers us the "Greatest Happiness Principle," namely, that "... actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to promote the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure." [NOTE 1] Followers of this principle will not all adopt the same lifestyle and the same detailed code of conduct, but they would at least have something to appeal to in cases of moral dispute.

Medical ethics also tends to follow general principles and then to adopt or articulate lesser principles that would apply to some of the unusual circumstances that now come up among people who are ill and/or dying. It is hard to see what would become of medical ethics if the fourfold division of goods or aims embedded within Hindu culture in India became widely accepted in the West.

Insofar as we are still willing to engage in old-fashioned ethical reasoning, with the result that we will sometimes wind up telling others what to do and what not to do, we tend to gravitate toward a duty-oriented approach to ethics. Christians have a strong tendency in this direction, even though Christianity is not supposed to be legalistic. Unlike the Orthodox Jews with their 613 commandments, we are supposed to have only ten, which can be summed up in two main commandments, or even reduced to a single idea or principle -- the law of love.

Christians and Western thinkers, with their duty orientation, tend to be both fascinated and exasperated with the Eastern notion of ahimsa. At first it sounds

appealing -- especially to idealistic youth. But soon the wheels begin to turn in one's brain, and many questions come pouring out. What is one supposed to do in such-and-such a situation? Is our moral concern selective and one-sided? Hans Selye once pointed out: "Curiously, the most outspoken antivivisectionists protest mainly about dogs, cats and monkeys. They are not nearly as concerned with cruelty to plants, microbes, parasitic worms, or even to frogs, chickens or rats. They have never compared themselves to a microbe or a lovely magnolia spreading fragrance in the garden, and they lack the imagination to extend the concept of enjoying life undisturbed to living beings not closely resembling themselves." [NOTE 2]

Eventually it dawns on the eager inquirer that organic processes -- indeed, life itself -- cannot move forward without constant himsa. And it is not only the ferocious carnivore in the jungle that cannot help engaging in himsa; even the gentle vegetarian who has an active immune system at work within himself, destroying micro-organisms, all of this taking place without any conscious direction from the "mind" supposedly in charge of the body in which it is housed, is engaged in constant himsa. Descriptions of this immune system relish the notion of "killer cells" fulfilling their appointed function by getting rid of invaders -- indeed, destroying any cell that doesn't belong. Among the cells under attack are those renegades we call cancer cells.

Does our contemporary knowledge of biology, then, render the notion of ahimsa obsolete? Not in the minds of its most dogged proponents, namely, the Jains, who bring a gentle spirit of common sense to the purist quest of the student enthusiast. They realize that the ahimsa ideal cannot be implemented in an absolutist spirit. The more reflective members in their ranks will therefore recognize that the rationalist and legalist mindset that dominates certain sectors of Western ethics is out of place when considering what ahimsa means in everyday life.

What ahimsa might mean for us in the Western world as we live our everyday lives could well be explicated in terms drawn from feminism. Some of the feminist thinkers seem to suppose that evil in our world has much to do with the male hormone testosterone, which fuels both sexual interest and aggressiveness in many males. Such feminists advocate a more gentle spirit, which they claim to find exhibited in the female psyche. Their desire, it would appear, is to make males over in this female image. By and large, older males, in whom testosterone levels are lower, are more to their liking. The ideal is an affirmative, cooperative society in which people will not quickly resort to force to get their way.

I speak of an "ideal" here because such an approach to life is very difficult to spell out in terms of a set of strict rules. In my judgment the implementation of the ideal has more to do with psychology, that is, a somewhat sophisticated understanding of what makes us tick, than it does with ethics understood in rule- and duty-oriented terms. Back in the days of David Hume and Adam Smith, moral philosophy covered both ethics and a certain amount of what we now call psychology. To make sense of ahimsa and to begin to implement it in our life, we need to recover that union of ethics and psychology. We would then have to cease regarding ethics as a subject divorced from any knowledge of human nature.

Kant's relegation of ethics to what he called the noumenal domain has not served us well in this regard. In his opposition to inclination, Kant radically undermined the practical and psychological dimension of ethical thinking.

When it comes to these matters, we could better take our lead from Confucius, who recognized that the right and the good must eventually be taken up into our individual nature. Thus he explained: "At fifteen I thought only of study; at thirty I began playing my role; at forty I was sure of myself; at fifty I was conscious of my position in the universe; at sixty I was no longer argumentative; and now at seventy I can follow my heart's desire without violating custom." [NOTE 3]

What a fine thing it would be if our inclination (contra Kant) and our "heart's desire" could be to live a life in which himsa was kept to a minimum. Yet this ideal is fully in harmony with a Christian understanding of the good life -- at least, for those Christian thinkers who are not mesmerized by a detailed and legalistic understanding of the service God asks of us. And what is it that he expects of us? In the book of James we are told, as though examples will get the idea across to us without any invocation of a general principle: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." [Chapter 1, verse 27] Religion, here, means service. In the Old Testament we have similar statement in the prophecies of Micah: "... what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" [Chapter 6, verse 8]

The Christian emphasis on overcoming hatred, enmity, envy, and so forth fits in nicely with the notion of making ahimsa part of our approach to life. If we care for all of God's creatures so much that we do not willingly destroy any of them, we will also become earthkeepers. But to be such gentle servants of God, we will need to discover -- or perhaps recover -- the ancient union of ethics and

psychology that can nicely be dubbed "moral psychology." Kant would not approve.

NOTES

NOTE 1

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 194 in the Bantam edition; see also p. 199.

NOTE 2

Hans Selye, *The Stress of My Life: A Scientist's Memoirs* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977), pp. 44-5.

NOTE 3

Confucius, Book II, No. 4 in his *Sayings or Analects*.