

CHAPTER VI

GANDHI : THE ARGUMENT FROM UNITY VERSUS THE GREATEST NUMBER

VI

M. K. Gandhi's critic of utilitarianism is significant for a number of reasons. Gandhi was no academic philosopher. As a political activist and leader of mass movements during India's struggle for freedom his views gave expression to the colonised psyche. He develops an anti-utilitarian moral theory and calls it *sarvodaya*, welfare of all. Gandhi, who discards utilitarianism, holds, "... in comparison with *sarvodaya*, utilitarianism shows a lack of dignity and humanity."¹ To put it in his own words :

A votary of *ahimsa* cannot subscribe to the utilitarian formula (of the greatest good of the greatest number). He should strive for the greatest good of all and die in the attempt to realize the ideal. He will therefore be willing to die so that others may live. He will serve himself with the rest, by himself dying. The greatest good of all inevitably includes the good of the greatest number, and therefore, he and the utilitarian will converge in many points in their career but there does come a time when they must part company, and work in opposite directions. The utilitarian to be logical will never sacrifice himself. ...²

The conviction that took deep root in Gandhi is that morality is the basis of all things and truth is the substance of morality. He also realises that India's crisis is moral in nature. Gandhi is particularly critical of the decline in man's faith in religion." He has written extensively and often critically " about the traditional Hindu morality, sexuality, duties of husband and wife, parents and children, teachers and pupils, leaders and followers, employers and employees, on neighbours, friends, widows, government ministers, citizens and those in charge of running private and

public organisations. He criticises ... the Indian lack of punctuality, the habit of not answering letters, wastefulness, the ill-treatment of the poor and the weak and social and economic inequalities and injustices.”³ Gandhi’s problem, it is clear then, is moral besides being political. One of the finest things to honour in Gandhi’s thoughts is that the separation of politics and morality is unacceptable to him. In this respect, he also differs from his political ‘guru’ Gokhale. Gokhale, like most of the thinkers and activists, separates politics and morality, but for Gandhi, the two are inseparable. Bhikhu Parekh writes, “Gandhi was one of the first to define morality in political terms and politics in terms of active struggle against injustice and oppression”.⁴ Gandhi’s political activity is meant for the moral regeneration of the Indian mass and independence has no meaning without national regeneration. For Gandhi, “... true politics consisted in revitalising Indian society, culture and character by working in the villages, fighting against diseases, hunger and local injustices, helping ordinary men and women acquire courage and self-respect, building up local communities and people’s power, and in general devoting oneself to creating an energetic, courageous, cooperative and just country.”⁵ The identity of morality and politics in Gandhi’s philosophy is also evident from the inseparability of both from his concept of religion. In the introduction to his autobiography Gandhi comments that the essence of religion is morality. At the same time, he also refuses to draw a distinction between religion and politics. “To talk of learning religion for politics or politics for religion was incomprehensible to him for he conceived of every activity as determined or governed by one’s religious outlook ... Far from advocating that religion should be kept out of politics, he insists that to be truly religious means taking an active part in political life.”⁶

Gandhi's views on morality and religion are influenced by his family environment. He describes his father as truthful, brave and generous. Gandhi inherits the art of simple living from his parents. Gandhi was born in the *Vaishnava* faith and his parents were deeply religious. He was a regular visitor to *Vaishnava* temples with his mother although the 'Haveli'—the *Vaishnava* temples never appealed to Gandhi much for there were rumours of immoral acts being practised there. He was critical of many aspects of traditional Hinduism, even so his moral and religious ideas were shaped by the deep religious faith of his family.⁷ We will come to this point again later.

But what is it to be moral? Or what should be the aim of our moral life? We have already mentioned that for Gandhi, truth is the substance of all morality. Truth is Gandhi's sole objective. The subtitle of his autobiography is 'The story of my experiment with Truth' and "... his whole life might well be interpreted as an attempt to live in accordance with or an existential quest for Truth."⁸ That truth is the essence of morality reminds us of the Socratic or the Platonic proposition 'virtue is knowledge'. Romain Rolland contrasts Tagore and Gandhi and compares Tagore with Plato and Gandhī with St. Paul. But I find no less similarity between Gandhi and Plato or to be more precise, between Gandhi and Socrates. Whenever Gandhi attempts to explain what he means by truth, he is involved in metaphysical speculations of which he may or may not have been aware. What Gandhi means by Truth or *Satya* is what is meant by the word 'Sat' (Reality) in the Hindu Philosophical traditions. Truth is the 'Sat' of Vedanta, i.e., God or Self. Gandhi makes no distinction between Self-realisation and Truth-realisation or the realisation of God. He maintains,

what he claims to be the Advaita or non-dualist position that the Self within man is at one with the essence of reality, which is Truth or God.”⁹

If the goal of our moral life is Truth and Truth is God, how this goal is to be attained? Or to put the question in another way, how should we act towards that goal? To be precise, what is a moral action? According to Hindu teaching, actions themselves bind human beings to the empirical world, *samsara*, the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth. But it is also in the Hindu text—the *Gītā*, that one is enjoined to act without the desire for fruits, *niṣkāma karma*, to attain liberation, *mokṣa*. Gandhi’s views on morality have much to do with the teachings of the *Gītā*. He prescribes an action that is selfless, detached and non-violent. “It is Gandhi’s contention that the only inevitable means for the attainment of Truth is *ahimsā*. *Ahimsā* is the means and Truth the end. But since ends and means are convertible terms for Gandhi, Truth and *ahimsā* are intertwined. The practice of *ahimsā* inevitably leads to Truth.”¹⁰ According to Gandhi, *ahimsā* or non-violence in its negative connotation involves doing no injury to any living being either physically or mentally. *Ahimsā*, in its positive sense means love for all, for our friends as well as enemies. *Ahimsā*, in this sense, “...reflects a great deal of the teachings of the *New Testament* on love and it is not really surprising that Jesus should be referred to as one who manifested *ahimsā* in its perfect form.” Non-violence is the law of our species and violence is the law of the brute.

Gandhi’s non-dualistic religion and the concept of *ahimsā* inevitably lead to his concept of *sarvodaya*. He is also influenced by the core idea of John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last*: The good of the individual is contained in the good of all. And this is what is meant by *sarvodaya*. The ideal of *sarvodaya* is a corollary of *ahimsā*. The upliftment of one cannot be

done at the cost of the welfare of another. The basic presuppositions of the concept are the indivisibility of Truth, the identity of the Self and Truth (or God) and the essential unity of all existence: "By the concept of *sarvodaya*, Gandhi really means universal uplift or the welfare of all and not just welfare or greatest happiness of the greatest number."¹¹ This clearly indicates Gandhi's rejection of utilitarianism as a doctrine of the aim and purpose of life. We may note here that Gandhi is a political activist too, and he fights against the British rule in India. J. S. Mill, the chief exponent of utilitarian philosophy, on the other hand, was an employee of the East India Company. Although Mill was against the transfer of the Company's rule in India to the British Government after the Mutiny of 1857 (he drafted the company's objection) and retired from his post, the philosophical tradition to which he belonged has always been the official philosophy of the British rule. So, Gandhi's opposition to utilitarian philosophy is significant in many ways. We have already mentioned that Gandhi refers to it as an 'inhuman' doctrine. The significance of his allegation may be explained in the following words from Glyn Richards :

It would be in order, for example, as Gandhi shows, to sacrifice the happiness of 49 per cent of mankind in order that the good of 51percent might be promoted. In the light of facts like these, if one were to judge the issue on purely practical grounds alone, *sarvodaya* would appear to be a more dignified and humane doctrine. If it is argued that *sarvodaya* is an unattainable ideal, and that in the end one may have to settle for the happiness or good of 51 per cent, it would be stated in reply, that it is infinitely better to strive for *sarvodaya* and fail to realize it, than to start out with a

limited objective and attain it at the expense of an unfortunate minority. That is, better an unattainable ideal than a limited attainable goal when it comes to the welfare of our fellow men. At least it can be said that the former shows a more commendable motivation.¹²

The ideal of *sarvodaya* is no doubt high, but we must compare it to the utilitarian principle on the question of their practicality. This would involve examining the premises from which the principle of *sarvodaya* follows. Gandhi's concept of Truth corresponds to his concept of religion and conversely. Gandhi maintains that all religions are true and the essence of one religion is identical with that of another. In his autobiography, Gandhi maintains that his father, apart from Hindus, had Jain, Musalman and Parsi friends who paid frequent visits to his father and that he had an early grounding in toleration for all religions. Although he disliked Christianity in his early days, he later developed great respect for that religion. But apart from his commendable openness to the plurality of religious traditions, he is a Hindu by heart. Most of the truths he lives by, for example, the importance of promises, truthfulness, non-injury to living beings, the control of senses and sexual desires etc. for centuries have been important parts of the Hindu moral tradition. Bhikhu Parekh has observed as follows:

... although Gandhi thought otherwise, he was not so much experimenting with truths as living according to already accepted truths, an important distinction blurred by the English expression 'experiments with truth' as well as its Gujrati original (*satyanā proyogo*). He took a good deal of Hindu metaphysics and morality for granted. He accepted

that '*Brahman*' alone was real, all life was one, selfhood was an illusion, and so on, none of which was a truth based on his own or anyone else's experiments. And he uncritically accepted such principles of middle class Hindu morality as vegetarianism, truthfulness, non-violence and matrimonial fidelity. He was not interested in trying out different values or ways of life and making a comparative assessment as, for example John Stuart Mill had proposed. Rather, he was only concerned to live by one set of values. ... His experiments were thus intended not to discover new truths but to try out old ones, and formed part of the technology of moral conduct rather than a science of moral principles.¹³

Thus, in defining Truth, when Gandhi says that it is 'what the voice within tells', his definition faces a problem of relativity of truth. The point is that "... the inner voice or the voice of conscience is not self-authenticating. There are criteria which determine the ways in which a man thinks and acts, and in Gandhi's case, they are the religious and ethical ideals of his own form of life."¹⁴ I would say that one of the most strong factors that determines the nature of the 'inner voice' is his Hindu view of life. "And to attribute knowledge of truth to the voice of conscience in this way, or to the religious and ethical criteria of a particular form of life, inevitably brings Gandhi face to face with the problem of relativity of truth ... That is, there are criteria which determine the way in which others also think and act which may be completely contrary to those of Gandhi."¹⁵

Gandhi admits that it is impossible for man to lay claim to attain or to possess perfect Truth. Moreover, what Gandhi calls Truth is an affirmation of faith according to him.¹⁶ A confession of faith requires no

external verification in the same way as statements of fact. This view not only would face the problem of relativity, it would also face the objection that is raised by S. N. Dasgupta against Kant: "The chief fault of Kant has been the assumption of the transcendental factors which have been permitted to remain transcendent and yet are allowed to take part in experience in which their immanence is denied."¹⁷ The place of the faith in Kant's philosophy is similar to that in Gandhi's moral philosophy. Richards rightly points out that followers of Gandhi explicitly maintain that he was essentially a practical man with no concern for metaphysics ... yet it is clear that whenever he attempted to explain what he meant by Truth, he drifted into metaphysical speculation whether he or his followers realised it or not.¹⁸

Gandhi's theory of *sarvodaya* is exactly contradictory to the utilitarian formula, as far as their logical relation is concerned. It would regard a utilitarian as an advocate of *himsā* (violence), because a utilitarian is ready to sacrifice the good of the lesser number for the greater number, whereas, *sarvodaya* means the welfare of all. If it is argued that *sarvodaya* is an unattainable ideal then its advocate could state in reply that "... it is infinitely better to strive for *sarvodaya* and fail to realise it, than to start out with a limited objective and attain it at the expense of an unfortunate minority. That is, better an unattainable ideal than a limited attainable goal when it comes to the welfare of our fellow men. At least, it can be said that the former shows a more commendable motivation."¹⁹ It sounds good, there is no doubt about that. But to recognize the limitations of *sarvodaya* by the exponent himself as an unattainable formula prior to its application puts it in no better position than utilitarianism. It is no less a weakness to be ignored. And it is not a true that a utilitarian would hold that we must

sacrifice the good of at least one for the good of the rest. To maintain that J. S. Mill could never mean 'hundred percent' by 'the greatest number' would be unjust. The greatest number would well be the total number.

It is said that *sarvodaya* is a necessary outcome of Gandhi's concept of *ahimsā*. It would have been so, if *ahimsā* were necessary and universal like the categorical imperative of Kant. Traditionally, *ahimsā* means non-injury and non-killing. Complete non-violence means complete cessation of all activity. But Gandhi's *ahimsā* is not a passive but an active concept; his view of *ahimsā* diverges from the traditional Indian view. "Gandhi does not equate *ahimsā* with non-killing and notes the distinction between *ahimsā* and *himsā* by indicating that *himsā* means killing from motives of anger or selfishness and *ahimsā* means refraining from so doing. Then it might be possible to be a believer in *ahimsā* and yet kill, ..." ²⁰ This view of *ahimsā* is found in classical India of course. The *Mahābhārata* calls killing an evil-doer, *vadha* but also *ahimsā*, an act of killing but not out of violence, it is an act of non-violent killing. Society has a duty to protect its members and so long as its measures are not motivated by hatred and ill will, it does not constitute *himsā*. We may mention here that Buddhist and Jain thinkers are most critical about the Hindu view of *ahimsā*. (They) say that it encourages casuistry and is exploited by various social institutions and religion to sanction unacceptable violence. Their view of *ahimsā* is categorical. However, Gandhi has revived the concept of *ahimsā* from classical India in his time. I must say that the spirit behind the theory of *ahimsā* is great, but Gandhi's theory itself has some paradoxical features. "On the one hand, he carried *ahimsā* much further than any other theorist of it had ever done. Unlike most of them, he did not merely attack wars but also the institution of state including armies, the police and prisons and

unlike almost all of them, he showed a remarkable sensitivity to the non-human world and insisted on the 'absolute efficacy' of *ahimsā*. On the other hand, he permitted or condoned violence in many more types of situation than most of them had done."²¹ Gandhi recognises that individual existence or our existence as a social being requires some form of *himsā*; killing or injury is permitted for a greater purpose. Gandhi cites the example of a man who in a fit of madness goes about with a sword in his hand killing indiscriminately. To destroy such a man may be necessary and unavoidable in order to protect other members of society.²² We remember Socrates defining justice. Gandhi would not call the above act a violation of *ahimsā*. With all my respect to Gandhi's *ahimsā*, I want to state that what follows from a conditional *ahimsā* is not *sarvadaya* but utilitarianism, the theory Gandhi opposes so much :

Gandhi does not distinguish between politics and morality. Plato does not too. And Gandhi may also be called a utopian like Plato considering the resemblance between the essence of the *Rāmarājya* and the Republic. Gandhi is fond of Geometry. After overcoming the initial fear, he realises that "A subject which only required a pure and simple use of one's reasoning power could not be difficult" and also writes that "geometry has been both easy and interesting for me."²³ So it is quite natural that "Gandhi understood moral life in the image of Euclidean geometry."²⁴ Thus, by referring to *Rāmarājya*, he is not pointing to the mythological *Rāmarājya*. Acharya Kripalini maintains that the Rāma invoked by Gandhi with his dying breath was not the historical Rāma or the mythological Rāma, but rather the highest self. Gandhi himself refers to Rāma as the all powerful essence whose name is inscribed in the heart. Hence the formless, omnipresent Rāma in Gandhi's thought is at one with highest self which in

turn is identical with the Truth. Thus, by insisting for a *Rāmarājya*, Gandhi refers to an ideal state. My analogy between Republic and *Rāmarājya*, I think is not a loose one. Take for example, Gandhi's view on Education. His attitude to education is in some respect reminiscent of Plato. He speaks, for example, of the education of the whole man, body, mind and spirit. Like Plato, Gandhi maintains that gymnastic and music should be an integral part of education for the development of body and soul.²⁵ There is nothing objectionable in Gandhi's view on education, at least in these respects. The similarities I point to are only to show the likeness in thinking and imagination of Plato and Gandhi. Both of them have insisted for a utopia, an ideal state. But in an ideal state, could there be any place for morality? God is not moral as he is perfect. Morality is meant for man because he is imperfect, he suffers from dilemma between the good and the bad. Morality is not needed where everything follows necessarily as in a *Rāmarājya* or a Republic. It may be argued that morality is necessary in order to attain an ideal condition or state. But, first, although I have no doubt about the necessity of the institution of morality, I doubt in man's desire to attain an ideal state where everything would follow necessarily. If man were to choose between paradise and this earth to live in, he would not have chosen paradise. Second, like Plato, Gandhi too recognises the human limitations, the imperfect *irratio* but both of them ignored the fact. It is Aristotle who realises the importance of impurities in human beings and he never argues for a utopia.

Gandhi's criticism of utilitarianism does not mean that the theory is without substance. The theory is being criticised ever since it is proposed, and it is the centre of lively debates right now. Every theory is subject to improvement. In fact the internal critique of utilitarianism has shown that.

Gandhi's use of the 51/ 49 distribution calculus does not mathematically nullify the utilitarian position. 51 percent is marginally greater than 49 percent, but 51 percent is not the greatest percentage. Gandhi and the utilitarian, we may say, are working from different presuppositions. Gandhi, as we have seen, started with the metaphysical presupposition of the unity of all living things. Utilitarianism, on the other hand, assumes that empirical procedures can determine when something maximises utility. It is also rational to adopt a moral theory if it will maximise the agent's or society's expected utility. It can be recommended to a person of broad human sympathies as a theory which maximises the expectation of general welfare. We may also add that every moral theory has the notion of equal regard at its heart, looking at things from the moral point of view, regarding each person as in some sense on an equal footing with every other one. The notion of 'equal regard' is a vague notion. Different moral theories posit this vague notion into different conceptions, utilitarianism into maximisation; every one counting for one. Indeed there are ways in which utilitarianism allows individuals to matter and ways in which it does not. Everyone to count for one means that in a way individuals do matter, they matter equally in the maximisation calculus. Equality crops up in different places although moral theory. There are many possible principles of equality, several of them plausible and others may be doubted. One of the hard jobs in moral theory is to sort out these easily confused but different principles of equality, and get one's thinking about equality straight. It is hard to reject the utilitarian concept of distributive justice from the start as 'inhuman'. The utilitarian theory of distributive justice is impressive, though it stands in the need of supplementation. I think that it even has something to recommend it contrary to received opinions. Utilitarianism is a teleological theory. Virtually all of us are teleologists in the relevant

sense, for virtually all of us believe that the consequences of our actions matter morally in some way. Many of those who criticise utilitarianism on this score may not be consequentialists of the familiar modern variety, but consequences do enter their theories. No plausible principle of equality could be fully distributive without a maximising element.

From what has been discussed hitherto, it can be said that *Sarvodaya* as advocated by Gandhi is a noble ideal, but it is not practicable. A practical idealist like Gandhi is more an idealist than practical. To set an ideal of *sarvodaya* and yet to recognise and admit the difficulties in its attainment is like telling a person who is always late “Your watch is kept ten minutes fast because you are always late”. There is no harm in setting an ideal like *sarvodaya* (welfare of all) as our political or moral goal, as an ethical ideal in spite of the difficulties of attaining it, but it does not mean that utilitarianism has no merit as a tangible moral standard.

Notes and References

- ¹ Glyn Richards, *The Philosophy of Gandhi*, Calcutta : Rupa and Co., 1991, page 74.
- ² *Young India*, 9th December, 1926.
- ³ Bhikhu Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform* New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1989, page 84.
- ⁴ Ibid, page 93.
- ⁵ Ibid, page 92.
- ⁶ *The Philosophy of Gandhi*, page 135.
- ⁷ M. K. Gandhi, *Autobiography* (abridged), Ahmedabad : Navajaban Publishing House, 1994.
- ⁸ *The Philosophy of Gandhi*, page 1.
- ⁹ Ibid, page 32.
- ¹⁰ Ibid, page 8.
- ¹¹ Ibid, page 72.
- ¹² Ibid, pages 72 – 73.
- ¹³ *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform*, page 105.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, page 9.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, page 10.
- ¹⁷ S. N. Dasgupta, *The Philosophical Essays*, Delhi : Motilal Baranasidass, 1990, page 33.

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- ¹⁸ *The Philosophy of Gandhi*, page 1.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*, page 73.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*, page 41.
- ²¹ *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform*, pages 135 – 136.
- ²² *The Philosophy of Gandhi*, page 36.
- ²³ *Autobiography*, page 8.
- ²⁴ *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform*, page 128.
- ²⁵ *The Philosophy of Gandhi*, page 97.