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I

The term "pacifism" is typically used to refer to theories which prohibit the practice of killing and violence and have as their common feature opposition to war. There are several varieties of belief which are rightly called pacifistic. This paper is limited to the study of one interpretation of Gandhian pacifism; specifically, the claim that nonviolence not only works against opponents who are sufficiently moral but that it also works, in some important sense, against resolute and brutal aggressors. Notice that the claim is *not* that nonviolence is the preferable *initial* method of defense because it is often effective, but rather that the use of violence is *never* justified because it is an intrinsic and extrinsic evil *and* nonviolence always works. I stress this difference between the tactical and absolute Gandhian pacifist, in part because it tends to be overlooked in the literature, in part because the advocacy of absolute pacifism is not the same as the advocacy of tactical pacifism. Gandhi demanded out-and-out commitment to the principle of nonviolence. According to Horsburgh, Gandhi "explicitly rejected the view, often put forward by sympathetic opponents, that the effectiveness of satyagraha is limited to those situations in which one's antagonists are morally inhibited from meeting non-violent resistance with extreme violence."¹

Nor, I hasten to add, is an understanding of the pragmatic aspects of the theory the same as understanding the full richness of absolute pacifism. For example, Gandhi's theory may be said to have two hearts: the religio/ethical and the pragmatic. At the heart of the religious position is the Hindu conception of a world in which

¹ Horsburgh, H.J.N. *Nonviolence and Aggression: A Study of Gandhi's Moral Equivalent of War*. London: Oxford University Press, 1968. 31.

*In the Interest of Peace: A Spectrum of Philosophical Views, Kenneth H. Klein and Joseph C. Kunke (eds.), Longwood Academic: Wakefield, New Hampshire, 1990, 227-236.

Individuals are separated from the whole, or from God. Souls are incarnated or reincarnated in accordance with their Karma, or predestining deeds of a previous existence; and the guise of the incarnation will be directly dependent upon the nature of those actions. This becomes translated into the form of an ethical command which directs us to act in that way which will cause the least possible rift or disturbance to this soul-substance, or into the nonreligious command which directs us to cause the least possible alienation.

Violence, according to Gandhi, is the creation of a disturbance in the structure of soul-substance. It is any act which tends to accentuate alienation or the separateness of one soul from another and from God. Nonviolence, on the other hand, is a movement towards unity of soul and purity. When explicitly expressed, it requires that we ought to abstain from the use of physical force against all animals, including humans. We ought never kill except when love or regard for soul-substance commands, as in emergency cases involving imminent death and irremediable suffering.

It may seem strange to mention this in a paper which is limited to the study of pragmatic grounds. But, as we shall see, this religio/ethical argument seems to be inextricably connected to the pragmatic arguments. Expressed differently, the argument for the instrumental rationality of pacifism seems to involve at least three different but related claims: (1) nonviolent methods always work to stop acts of aggression; (2) the ideal of pacifism works because human nature or the ultimate nature of the universe somehow nurtures or guarantees the achievement of the harmony of soul-substance; and (3) the ideal of pacifism works even though particular acts may not, because it serves to set a direction in which we can strive. What I wish to suggest is that nonpacifists often take insufficient account of (2) and hardly ever take serious account of (3) and that pacifists generally muddle the difference between the effectiveness of a method and the effectiveness of an ideal.

II

Let us begin with the nonpacifist claim that nonviolent methods do not always work to stop acts of aggression. To be more specific, let us begin with the "resolute and brutal aggressor" form of the "ineffectiveness of nonviolence" argument. The argument

essentially reads: Nonviolence cannot be effective against resolute and brutal aggressors. So-and-so are resolute and brutal aggressors. Hence nonviolence cannot be effective against so-and-so. The argument, of course, is not new. Gandhi was aware of it and admitted that, if sound, it would cut at the roots, and be fatal to, the anti-violence movement.² With typical courage he describes this so-called fatal objection as follows:

Non-violent resistance can only be effective in resisting those who are capable of being moved by moral considerations. Fascism is not only not moved by such considerations, but openly scoffs at them as signs of weakness. It has no scruple in wiping out all resistance, and in employing any degree of brutality in order to do so. Non-violent resistance, is, therefore, hopelessly unpractical in present conditions.³

The argument seems to be telling. Yet Gandhi retreats from it and appears to be shifting into another position. Apparently he interprets the phrase "fascism is not only not moved by such considerations" to mean that "fascism is *at present* not moved by moral considerations, but can eventually be so moved." Even the hardest of hearts, Gandhi repeatedly tells us, is open to humanitarian persuasion. He maintains that the Fascists and Nazis "show in their family circles the same tenderness, affection, consideration and generosity that war-resisters are likely to show even outside such circles" and that the difference between the two is only a matter of degree. In a similar vein, he writes that even the so-called democracies have been guilty of doing wicked deeds and "have resorted to ruthless repression." Now if the so-called democracies melt before a given amount of nonviolence, and the Fascists and Nazis have harder hearts, then it just seems to follow that it takes greater patience and a greater amount of nonviolence to melt their hearts. In 1938, Gandhi was so convinced of this that he suggested to the Chinese people that if they allowed half of their 200 million

² M.K. Gandhi. *For Pacifists*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1949. 72-73.

³ Gandhi 71.

population to perish by resorting to nonviolence, Japan would become China's slave.⁴

Let us leave aside the fact that democracies or otherwise moral societies have often resorted to ruthless repression. Gandhi claims and contemporary pacifists argue that wicked men, even moral monsters, typically express kindness, affection, and generosity towards their own family and friends. Who, I should ask, would want to challenge the truth of this statement? Yet what follows from it? Does it necessarily, even generally, follow that because moral monsters understand what kindness is and are kind to those in their close circle, they will act kindly to enemies or what they perceive to be enemies? I think not. Nor does it follow that the resolute and brutal only wipe out those who resist. The historical evidence indicates that genocide is not limited to those who resist, but may include (and has included) in its sweep the most innocent and most acquiescent.

The terrible truth is that human beings can compartmentalize modes of behavior: be perfectly moral to those they like and be perfectly immoral to others. For instance, a man can kill a gypsy infant by throwing the child into an open fire because he believes gypsies are nonhuman or are enemies; and that very evening he can bring home toys and catnip and play lovingly with his child and cat. Now the pacifist does not seem to believe that we can immediately melt this man's heart. But he does believe, and this includes Gandhi and his followers, that we can ultimately melt his heart because he has shown some kindness in some area of his life. It is this belief that strikes many as being false, if not cruelly naive.

As Bertrand Russell observes, when one's opponent is resolute and brutal, the method of nonviolence has no success.⁵ Similarly, Michael Walzer argues that nonviolent defense is no defense at all against tyrants or conquerors ready to adopt terrorist methods. "When one cannot count on the moral code," he writes, "nonviolence is either a disguised form of surrender or a minimalist way of

⁴ Gandhi 63.

⁵ Bertrand Russell. "The Future of Pacifism." *The American Scholar*. 13:1 (Winter 1943-44): 7-8.

upholding communal values after a military defeat."⁶ What this means is that in some situations nonviolence is hopelessly impractical. Sometimes it simply does not work. It does not work against those determined to achieve their end and who, at least for that end-in-view, have set moral constraints aside.

III

If this is the case, then why (aside from fanaticism) do absolute pacifists persist in maintaining that nonviolence always works and that there is never sufficient ground for supposing that we are dealing with a situation in which it cannot work? Why, for example, does Horsburgh claim that "nonviolence has so many advantages that humane agents *never* have sufficient grounds for supposing that they are dealing with an exceptional situation, i.e. one in which violence would be justified?"⁷

Horsburgh's argument is a complex one, and I will not pretend to do it full justice here. What I wish to briefly consider is his claim that "nonviolent methods always have some chance of success." What is remarkable about this claim is that Horsburgh admits that nonviolence may result in extensive suffering, loss of life, and material damage if one's opponents are sufficiently brutal. He also admits that human beings are capable of any wickedness. Nonetheless, he insists that nonviolent methods always have some chance of success and that "it is always wrong to suppose that they [one's opponents] are morally irredeemable, and hence that moral appeals need not be addressed to them."⁸ Horsburgh insists that, since we can never know with certainty how intractably brutal (or resolute) an adversary really is, there is always some chance of success, some chance of influencing him or converting him to nonviolent ways.

There are several difficulties with this argument, some of which have been already mentioned. First of all, it is one thing to say that

⁶ Michael Walzer. *Just and Unjust Wars*. (New York: Basic Books, 1977). 333.

⁷ H.J.N. Horsburgh. "Reply to Nielsen [on Justifying Nonviolence]." *Inquiry*. 24 (1981):60. The emphasis is my own.

⁸ Horsburgh 68-69.

it is difficult to know how brutal one's opponent is and another thing to say that it is always possible to melt his heart and thereby stop the ensuing injustice or act of aggression. The nonpacifist insists that the latter claim is manifestly false, since the evidence indicates that in certain circumstances it is not possible to stop an act of aggression. Second, there is an epistemic asymmetry in the pacifist's position. For just as it is not possible to know for certain how brutal an assailant might be, it is not possible (in the same strict sense of knowing) to know how receptive to moral conversion an aggressor might be. Third, given this asymmetry and given evidence of brutal and resolute intentions, as well as the moral urgency of adequately protecting life, it seems starkly irrational not to use violence in this and essentially similar circumstances, especially if it is the only effective alternative.

It is difficult to say with assurance how far pacifists would be willing to retreat from the claim that nonviolent methods always work to stop individual acts of aggression. I suspect they might be inclined to say that, since we do not know for certain that nonviolence cannot work, we must not suppose that we are dealing with an exceptional situation, and must therefore act as if nonviolence will always work. It is tempting to reply by saying that although this represents a shift in theory, it is not a shift in practice and that "we suffocate among people who think they are absolutely right, whether in their machines or in their ideas."⁹ But this may not be the whole of the matter. Pacifists would want to remind us that they hold an optimistic theory of human nature or a metaphysic which holds that all living beings are naturally and ultimately disposed to live in harmonious unity. They also, I believe, would reject the nonpacifist's theory of cognitive risk. Pacifists seem to believe that when there is cognitive risk, when one does not really know, one always ought to give the benefit of doubt to the dominant moral ideal. Among other things, this means that when one does not know the extent to which an aggressor might be morally persuaded to change his ways, for the sake of the pacifist ideal one ought to tilt in favor of the possibility of moral education. Finally, pacifists seem to advocate a form of the "Hercules Paradox," the belief that heroic

⁹ Albert Camus. "Neither Victims Nor Executioners." *Seeds of Liberation*. Ed. Paul Goodman. New York: George Braziller, 1964. 27.

achievement takes place only when human beings are committed to high and seemingly impossible ideals. The underlying psychological postulate is that every individual tries to live up to what is expected of him, and from that the pacifist draws the conclusion that heroic achievements take place *only* when the apparently impossible is expected of the individual or from the group.

Full exploration of this pacifist belief about cognitive risk, this theory human nature, and this intensely interesting psychological postulate is beyond the scope of the present paper. But I would not want to close discussion without at least adumbrating a modified line of defense and some of the more salient nonpacifist objections to this change in emphasis.

It is, of course, difficult to say how sympathetic Gandhi would have been to any discussion which focuses on the vindication of the ideal of nonviolence. Horsburgh is probably correct in suggesting that, because his accent fell upon means rather than ends, Gandhi would have been uncomfortable with this focus. For Gandhi believed that if one takes care of the means the end will take care of itself.¹⁰ But such statements are notoriously ambiguous. Therefore, let us be content to say that the discussion which follows is either consistent with Gandhi's theory or not. If it is not, it may be viewed as a non-Gandhian defense of absolute pacifism.

Pacifism, let us suppose, is a combination of a method and an ideal. The pacifist ideal is to end, or greatly diminish, violence and unnecessary death. What this means is that pacifism is not, at bottom, a justification of each and every act of nonviolence, but essentially a justification of the *ideal of nonviolence*. The value of an ideal is not destroyed by mere defeasibility in practice; that ideal, even though not realized or realizable, can be rationally held. The validation and vindication of the *ideal of nonviolence*, accordingly, lies not in its applicability but in its utility for directing our efforts, in its ability to provide direction and moral structure to our evaluative thought and pragmatic action. In other words, even though certain acts of nonviolence may not be effective, nonviolence "works" because, as a moral ideal, it conduces towards realizing some vitally important good. Gandhi talks about the ideal and future of universal love and ahimsa. This "is based on the assumption that

¹⁰ Horsburgh. *Nonviolence and Aggression*. 42-43.

human nature in its essence is one and therefore unfailingly responds to the advances of love."¹¹ Cheyney Ryan talks about the glories of a world where people would not wish to create the necessary distance between themselves and others to make an act of killing possible;¹² Horsburgh about the slow or rapid conversion to nonviolent methods leading to a richer, more lasting and fruitful social reconciliation; and Dennis Dalton about creating an attitude of inclusiveness, where we learn to see each other as fully entitled human beings and not as stereotyped abstractions.¹³ All enjoin us to pursue a similar ideal, a future state of the world where there would be no violence, or considerably less violence, because we would view each other in loving, or at least in inclusivist, terms.

If only we could conclude on this uplifting note. But we cannot. Unfortunately, when the pacifist shifts from whether nonviolent methods always work to the question of how effective the ideal of pacifism is, he avoids certain problems only to generate others. First of all, the utility of the pacifist ideal is not a self-evident truth. While pacifists believe the net utility of this ideal is overwhelmingly positive, nonpacifists generally believe the opposite. In other words, the pacifist thinks the ideal of nonviolence works because it actually leads toward realizing a more peaceful state of world affairs; the nonpacifist thinks him wrong and reminds us that misguided ideals are often the cause of unnecessary violence and war. Secondly, pacifists generally believe that human beings are creatures motivated primarily by ideals rather than wants, and because of this, conversion to nonviolence is always possible; nonpacifists, more often than not, maintain that wants (or immediate interests rather than ultimate interests) dominate actual behavior, and therefore that deep conversion to nonviolence (or for that matter any proposed deep moral change) is much more difficult to achieve. Thirdly, there is a difference between an ideal, a dream, and an impossible dream.

¹¹ M.K. Gandhi. *Nonviolence in Peace and War*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Pub House, Vol. 1, 3rd ed., 1948. 175.

¹² Cheyney C. Ryan. "Self-Defense, Pacifism, and the Possibility of Killing." *Ethics*. 93 (April, 1983): 520-524.

¹³ Dennis Dalton. "The Problem of Peace: Cross Cultural Perspectives," a paper presented at the 8th Annual Academic Convocation, State University of New York, College at Fredonia, September 16, 1986.

Perhaps we can and often must "dream the impossible dream." Perhaps heroic achievement takes place only when the apparently impossible is expected. But even the most beautiful of all dreams, the messianic dream of perpetual peace, must be limited by practical reason if evidence overwhelmingly indicates that the penalty of being too ardent, in this case of insisting that nonviolent methods are always preferable, results in the nightmare of encouraging unnecessary death or rank injustice.

IV

A final word of caution. It must be admitted that one can be a pacifist without being an absolute pacifist. Craig Ihara argues that there is a more plausible form of pacifism which holds that the life of nonviolence is a morally preferable way of life but one which does not demand absolute adherence to nonviolent action.¹⁴ Similarly, Cady maintains that there is a *continuum* of pacifist views. The first distinct step, he writes,

along the spectrum away from the absolutist doctrine is the view that non-lethal force can be warranted in principle—for example, physical self-defense against unprovoked attack. . . . Further along the scale is a view we might call collectivist pacifism, the position that it is possible in principle to justify even lethal violence while retaining the general pacifist objection to war. The view rests on the realization that one may oppose war, which always involves mass violence, while allowing a lethal self-defensive violence among individuals.¹⁵

Cady then distinguishes between epistemological, technological, nuclear, ecological, and pragmatic pacifism, locating pragmatic pacifism at the weakest extreme along the pacifist continuum.¹⁶

¹⁴ Craig K. Ihara. "In Defense of a Version of Pacifism." *Ethics*. 88:4 (1978): 369-374.

¹⁵ Duane L. Cady. *From Warism to Pacifism*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1989. 62.

¹⁶ Cady 72.

Now, the absolutist need not reject the notion that there are other forms of pacifism. Nor need he be content to suggest that Cady's notion of a pacifist continuum is a watering-down, or cheapening of a noble doctrine. There are more serious objections. Gandhi and his followers believe that to slip from strict adherence to nonviolent methods is, "not simply to bend in a heavy wind, it is to prove oneself, quite simply, a broken reed." They also believe that unless there is an out-and-out commitment to the method of nonviolence, it becomes inexpedient. Opponents will come to view it as a preliminary form of resistance, one which will be succeeded by the use of violent, even lethal force. Most important, they believe that the absolute practice of nonviolence is, in the long run, the *only effective way of achieving the end of universal peace.*

While the latter belief raises even more difficult questions about justifiable moral costs and the rationality of belief, it cannot be denied that if universal peace can be achieved and absolute pacifism is the only effective way doing this, then it occupies a unique position and, at the very least, deserves more careful study.