



“ETHICS ON VIOLENCE”

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ABSTRACT

This work is a thought experiment on violence and also over all view of my M.Phil dissertation by taking references of the Bhagvad Geeta and western philosophy that tries to seek a general definition of ‘what is just?’ in trying to understand how violence occur and what are its solution? However, there is no ultimate solution or end of violence in this article. Can we look at violence as we would look into an object with its properties? An extensive attempt to understand the value of life and its meaning that is added to it. When we think deeply, life has meaning and no meaning t the same time, we live to die. In the journey towards death lies everything such as love, pride, honor, duty, peace etc. etc. To communicate with each other, all we need is, understanding; yet that is not sufficient, we demand sophisticated language followed by correct grammar. Not only that, we also want to have dominant over languages to prove one’s superiority and other’s inferiority, so, basically it is about the definition of power and not about right and wrong. Therefore, in my article I tried to ethicize violence if it is at all possible.

I would like to begin with a statement, which states that ‘The story of humankind is plausibly the history of warfare’. Aristotle, for example, describes warfare - the art of *war* - as an aspect in the

*art of acquisition*¹. Thomas Hobbes in “state of nature” says; the society is a disguised war-field. What is violence? Is violence only an emotion like any other emotion such as anger, happiness, joy, sorrow, pain, pleasure and others? Is it innate or people learned it as they grow? An experiment taken over emotions when treated unequally; let’s take two monkey M1 and M2, when offered one banana to each monkey, the behavior of them remain same, however, when treated unequally like giving two banana to one monkey and one banana to another, the one who was favored less would show a gesture of unhappiness and act differently. If possible, the less favored monkey would make noise or refuse to take one banana as an expression of retaliation. Revolution is an act of retaliation against injustice. The result is that it may turn violent in various degrees. Violence is a form of resistance and also a form of destruction. Is there any possibility of giving justification on violence as a means of defence or offence? How this resistance and destruction does go at par with each other?

Keeping in this mind, I have tried to emphasize few things through my work ‘Ethics on Violence’:

- (1) Defining violence, through the understanding of Plato’s definition of virtue and Justice, and
- (2) Justification of war from the epic Mahabharata
- (3) Satyagraha, a peaceful mean

Is not it the obvious fact that each individual person seeks a happy and peaceful life? Yet, then how these common interests’ leads to the result that is not even closer to the common goal? How do we reach to the common definition of justice? The answer would be to find the common definition of values. What is value then?

Is there one kind of value or various kinds of values? Consider A,B,C,D various categories of people, who answer to my given question, A says, nothing is more valuable than life itself. B says, honor is valuable than life. C says, wealth is valuable and D says others. As Hegel puts it; *“Genuine tragedies in the world are not conflicts between right and wrong. They are conflict between two rights.”* Thomas Hobbes states that human are born free and the sense of freedom can create political chaos. Therefore, there is the necessity of political order and law, because

¹ Nicomachean Ethics

without it everyone would have unlimited natural freedom, including the "right to all things" and thus the freedom to plunder, rape, and murder; there would be an endless "war of all against all." Therefore, it is important to uphold ethics to impart certain norms and values in the warfare. War 'ought to be' fought in order to seek peace; the motive 'ought to be' upholding what is right and not to show one's might, for defence and not for oppression.

Can human beings ever take part in war without seriously violating moral obligations? How can war be initiated that the moral standards are not violated? What ought to be done to ensure lasting peace?

The issues on violence spring from the extreme notions of realism and pacifism in ethics. Where both theories stand firm justifying their theories, it is a necessity to bridge the differences between these ideas. Realism holds that the states of the world exist in an anarchical and hostile environment. In order to survive and prosper in such an environment, it is in every state's best interest to develop and expand its power as best as it can. In its brute form, power involves military might. Pacifism on the other hand holds that war is never justified from a moral point of view.

Ethic on violence is a research on 'what ought to be done in times of confusion based on pacifism and realism?' Thus, to maintain the society's order, understanding on ethical issues can be an act to maintain peace, by constantly defining the general concept of virtue and justice. An act of violence destroys the beauty and innocence of life from every sphere affecting children, women, folk, and nature. Systematizing violence possibly enhance the existing social system. Individual justice can be obtained when each individual develops his or her ability to the fullest. In this sense, justice means excellence. For the Greeks and Plato, excellence is virtue. According to Socrates, virtue is knowledge. Thus, knowledge is required to be *just*.

However, the mass problem lies in knowing; "what justice is?" knowledge plays a great role here. Epistemologically, knowledge is justified truth believe. How do we define the notion of justice? How do we know the quality of justice? We knew from book of Bible that King Solomon was a just king. So, what made him? Why do we call him just? Is it because he makes the right decision? Is it because his law scale was impartial no matter what conditions are applied? What makes a person just? Because there are number of definition for what makes a person just.

Justice is the abstract concept like Plato states in Menon by defining what good is, through the conversation between Socrates, Menon, a slave of Menon and Anytos though it is difficult to say if they have really define what is good. Instead, the concept good turns out to be different in different subject matter. Socrates questioned Menon, ‘what is virtue?’ to which Menon gave answer by stating;

“...this is a man’s virtue to be able to manage public business, and in doing it help friends and hurt enemies, and to take care to keep clear of such mischief himself. Or if you like woman’s virtue, there’s no difficulty there: she must manage the house well, and keep the stores all safe, and obey her husband. And a child’s virtue is different for boy and girl, and an older man’s, a freeman’s, if you like, or a slave’s, if you like. There are a very large number of other virtues, so there is no difficulty in saying what virtue is; for according to each of our activities and ages each of us has his virtue for doing each sort of work, and in the same way...”²

This implies that, virtue cannot be explained in one definition. If the virtue lies in helping one’s friend and avenging enemies, how do we get the idea of right and wrong or the justice and injustice? In one hand, justice demands one to avenge whereas taking life itself may be morally condemnable. How do we define justice when the universal moral concept conflict with the practical stand. We talk about choosing the path of non-violence; what a person suppose to do when she/he is in danger of losing his/her life and the only option for him/her lies in choosing violence. Can anybody stick to the absolute moral principle of non-violence? Hence, the ethics of violence is an attempt to search the meaning of violence thereby looking at the modes to minimize it in every possible means.

The next question of Socrates towards Menon was if this kind of variation lies in the meaning of other thing also or is it the case only with virtue. The next definition by Menon

“...I say virtue is to desire handsome things and to be able to provide them.”³

The irony showed by Socrates was that ‘do people desire only good thing?’, ‘can people desire bad thing also knowing that it is bad?’ human mind is such that, no one can really depict what an

² Rouse W.H.D: Great Dialogues of Plato

³ Ibid

individual seek. May be an experiment would help in this quest. Taking a classroom analogy, where the number of student let's say, a,b,c,d,e.....n sits for a class. Observation can tell that given a free choices some student remains obedient even in the absence of teacher in the classroom; some are conditional in behavior, very obedient in front of teacher but the moment teachers leave the classrooms they are not obedient anymore. However, there will be students who would like to create nuisance no matter what condition they are in, they would enjoy bullying their fellow mates, poke then with pencil. These things, does anybody needs to teach them? The answer is probably no. If Socrates opinion is right over people's action where he states that, 'no man can desire bad things knowing that it is bad.' Are we to agree on what Socrates says on this matter? If it is the case then we ought to systematize violence. Therefore, Plato concludes that virtue can be obtained through three stages of development of knowledge: knowledge of one's own job, self-knowledge, and knowledge of the Idea of the *Good*.

The concept of dharma/highest duty:

*"To refrain from injury is one's highest duty"*⁴

Beginning with a quote taken from the book "The Mahabharata" by R. K. Narayan, I try to reason on the question, *what is the highest duty of a man? If the answer is to refrain from injury then to what extent it ought to be refrained. Can there be any quantifying method in the tabulation of man's highest duty?* That means it is important to study the complete social frame not only objectively but also, subjectively considering each individual's role and their duties that comprehends and regulates the society. Hence a search on deontic approach and the teleological approach towards one's duty. The former is about the divine duty without looking into the consequence, the later is dependence on the consequences of action. The former is unconditional whereas the later is conditional.

The epic Mahabharata shows complicated dilemma in action and virtue. In the epic Mahabharata, the causes and effects of war are shown implicitly and explicitly. It not only depicts the warfare but shows the germination of conflict between the choices that a man has to make in life keeping in mind that he is not only an individual being but a social being and 'Man'

⁴ A great Indian epic retold by a great Indian writer "The Mahabharata": R.K. Narayan

who is *indebted* to the society as Socrates would also say. Certain principles, certain virtues and certain vices of life are depicted well in this epic such as laws, duties, pride, vanity, power, greed, lust, true happiness, and dutifulness dilemmas, and grief, which cover all aspects of physiological existence and psychological temperament of man. This brings out the fundamental characteristic of man as a material and spiritual entity. It is a book of conscious struggle that is being portrayed through the character of Arjuna who laments on the situation where he has to wield sword against his kinsmen. Besides its epic narrative of the *Kurukshetra* War and the fates of the Kaurava and the Pandava princes, it contains much philosophical and spiritual material, such as a discussion of the four "goals of life" or *Purusharthas*, the "ultimate end of life" and universal moral law like Kant's Categorical Imperative. The Principle of Mahabharata states that one may harm in order to save more if and only if the harm is an effect or an aspect of the greater good itself.

Dharma-Yuddha/Ethics in the battlefield

The Mahabharata offers one of the first instances of theorizing about "Just war", illustrating many of the standards that are issues of debates across the world. In the story, one of five brothers asks if the suffering caused by war can ever be justified. A long discussion ensues between the siblings, establishing criteria like proportionality (chariots cannot attack cavalry, only other chariots, no attacking people in distress), just means (no poisoned or barbed arrows), just cause (no attacking out of rage), and fair treatment to captives and the wounded. The two supreme commanders met and framed "rules of ethical conduct", Dharma-Yuddha, for the war.

Apart from the Dharma-Yuddha i.e. fair means in war or the rules of engagement in war, the book of Mahabharata has men's attempt to understand the meaning of 'life' and 'death' for right cause or in nutshell 'doing right things for the right reason at a right time'. The battle was projected within a family in the contest of power/throne, most importantly shown a battle between virtue and vice (clear division of good and evil); where the vicious side has large number and power whereas the good has small number. In this context, what would Dharma suggest to do that virtue is made victorious before vice? From Indian legend/epical point of view, at the end, the right always wins from wrong hence the battle between the dharma and adharma, dharma wins by any means as it also goes that nothing can beat the truth and righteous.

Moral Dilemma

Hamlet's dilemma 'to be or not to be', Arjuna's dilemma, 'to fight or not to fight' as it is his own kin against whom he shall fight... what would a person ought to do given a choice between either greater evil or lesser evil? Is it not his/her duty to choose less evil? Is not it right for him/her to do what needs to be done? Therefore I quote what Krishna tells Arjuna in Bhagvad Geeta

Chapter 2 Text 2

“Shri-bhagavan uvacha

Kutas tva kasmalam idam

Visame samupasthitam

Anarya-justam asvargyam

Akirti-karam Arjuna

Translation: The supreme personality of godhead said: my dear Arjuna, how have these impurities come upon you? They are not at all befitting a man who knows the value of life. They lead not to higher planets but to infamy.”

Materialistic attachment, lamentation and tears are all signs of ignorance of the real self. Compassion for the eternal soul is self-realization. No one knows where compassion ought to be applied. Compassion for the dress of a drowning man is senseless. A man fallen in the ocean of nescience cannot be saved simply by rescuing his outward dress- the gross material body. He is a miserly man who does not solve the problem of life as a human and who thus quits this world like the cats and dogs, without understanding the science of self-realization.

Krishna further elaborates that everything has its proper utility, and the man who is situated in complete knowledge knows how and where to apply a thing for its proper utility. Violence also has its utility, and how to apply violence rests with the person in knowledge.

As long as the material body exists, there are actions and reactions in the material modes. One has to live in the face of dualities such as happiness and distress, cold or warmth, and by

tolerating such dualities become free from anxieties regarding gain and loss. As it is said in the Holy Bible, “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”⁵ In the same manner, Arjuna knowing the right things should do what is right for the realm not for his sake but for the sake of righteousness. When an unworthy man runs a kingdom, the city, its legacy and its principles are on stake. Knowing what ought to be done, one must not be blinded by emotions rather he should choose the right path. For it is right to fight for *justice* than being silent to injustices.

In the Bhagavad-Gita, Krishna explains to Arjuna his duties as a warrior and prince and elaborates on different Yogic and Vedantic philosophies, with examples and analogies. Leaving aside its religious perspective if we concentrate on the part where Krishna refers to ‘Duty’ as men’s prior dharma, then it is justifiable to analyze the concept of ‘Just War’ as an Ethical issue. Mahabharata authored by R.K. Narayan states that; “Peace, if it is attained without compromise, is certainly to be tried.”

The entire course is determined in terms of action and reaction. *The entire universe and all nature functions and keeps life growing only by a proper balance of action and reaction*; this was the message carried out through the epic Mahabharata. One must remember that when war is on people lose faith in the system, the authority or the government; whatever one prefers to call it, one thing common in all phases is that losing faith makes one engage in crime which leads to more crimes individually and then socially. No one escapes such fate of mass destruction. I do not know if it is reasonable to talk of tolerance in ethic but I feel it is necessary that in ethic every people must learn tolerance towards others in order to avoid anguish.

Krishna delivered a strong message through Bhagavad-Gita: *Not by merely abstaining from work can one achieve freedom from reaction, nor by renunciation alone can one attain perfection.*

Non-Violence:

Ghandhi States that ‘an eye for an eye will make the whole world blind.’

⁵ Holy Bible: Matthew chapter 6 verse 24.

Love for the enemy, or the realization of humanity in all people, is a fundamental concept of *philosophical* non-violence. The goal of this type of non-violence is not to defeat the enemy, but to develop tolerance for all by understanding and loving all beings. According to Mark Kurlansky, "all religions discuss the power of non-violence and the evil of violence."⁶ Such principles or tenets can be found in each of the major Indian religious traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism) as well as in the major Abrahamic religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam). The Chhandogya Upanishad, which is part of the Upanishads, one of the principal scriptures of Hinduism that dates to the 8th or 7th century BCE, bars violence against "all creatures" (*sarva-bhuta*) and establishes non-violence as a code of conduct for Hindus. Examples of non-violence found in religion and spirituality include the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus urges his followers, "love your enemies," in the Taoist concept of *wu-wei*, or effortless action, in the philosophy of the martial art Aikido, in the Buddhist principle of *metta*, or loving-kindness towards all beings, in the principle of *ahimsa*, or non-violence toward any being, shared by Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism.

Gandhi's method of Non-violence is to convert one's opponent, and to win over their mind and heart and persuade them that your point of view is right. An important element is often to make sure that the opponent is given a face-saving way of changing their mind. In non-violent conflict, the participant does not want to make their opponent suffer; instead they indicate that they are willing to suffer themselves in order to bring about change. Non-violence has great appeal because it removes the illogicality of trying to make the world a less violent and more *just* place by using violence as a tool.

Among the techniques of non-violent protest are: peaceful demonstrations, sit-ins, picketing, holding vigils, fasting and hunger strikes, strikes, blockades, and civil disobedience. Gandhi took the religious principle of *Ahimsa* (doing no harm) common to Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism and turned it into a non-violent tool for mass action. He used it to fight not only colonial rule but social evils such as racial discrimination and untouchability as well. Gandhi called it "satyagraha" which means 'Insistence on Truth.' In this doctrine the aim of any non-violent

⁶ Non-violence: Twenty-five Lessons From the History of a Dangerous Idea, 2007

conflict is to convert the opponent; to win over his mind and his heart and persuade him to your point of view.

Gandhi was firm that *satyagraha* was not a weapon of the weak - "*Satyagraha is a weapon of the strong; it admits of no violence under any circumstance whatever; and it always insists upon truth.*"⁷

Non-violence in Gandhi's thinking was a tool that anyone could (and should) use and initially it was based on strongly religious thinking:

“One can get a clear understanding of what is involved in non-violence by looking at the instructions that Gandhi gave to followers of his Satyagraha movement in India.

A Satyagrahi, i.e., a civil resister, will harbor no anger.

He will suffer the anger of the opponent.

In so doing he will put up with assaults from the opponent, never retaliate; but he will not submit, out of fear of punishment or the like, to any order given in anger.

When any person in authority seeks to arrest a civil resister, he will voluntarily submit to the arrest, and he will not resist the attachment or removal of his own property, if any, when it is sought to be confiscated by authorities.

If a civil resister has any property in his possession as a trustee, he will refuse to surrender it, even though in defending it he might lose his life. He will, however, never retaliate.

A civil resister will never insult his opponent, and will not take part in many of the newly coined cries which are contrary to the spirit of ahimsa.

A civil resister will not salute the Union Jack, nor will he insult it or officials, English or Indian.

In the course of the struggle if anyone insults an official or commits an assault upon him, a civil resister will protect such official or officials from the insult or attack even at the risk of his life.”⁸

⁷ Gandhi and Non-Violence: William Borman. Sunny press 1986

⁸From the journal Young India, 27 February 1930.

The idea of non-violence seems too ideal to be put into practice. Not everyone has the capacity to do it and it seems impractical too. If no one has done it before then I could never have thought of it but since ages some are successful in practicing it and have achieved great deal out of it like Indian Freedom movement, civil war in America and other successful movement carried through non-violence. I find non-violence as the best alternative that can remove conflict from the society and to its extend the fear of war that generates through violence. If it was not effective then the history will not mention Buddha, Jesus, Martin Luther, and Gandhi as some of the most important figures. As the presence of light can eliminate darkness, empathy, love, compassion can remove hatred and differences amongst people. It has been proved that non-violent approach was more effective than the armed struggle in the Indian freedom movement. Though, the thinker who give propound the sanctity of life may criticize Gandhi's mode of resisting by calling it slow suicide, thereby violating the sanctity of life.

The subject matter of discussion looking from philosophical point is that: life itself is paradox; we talk of war-and-peace, birth-and-death, order-and-chaos, pride-and-humility, creation-and-destruction, right and wrong, etc. If the society was the result of two opposite force, then how do we find balance in this contradicting energy? Secondly, it is important that one should stick with the concept 'Right' and 'Justice' and fight to keep the virtue of it, but the problem is, how do we define what is true right and justice? We cannot even know if violence is the best method to achieve peace. The importance of taking my interest in the study of violence is on the hope that, 'for whoever fights the monster should see to it that in the process they do not become another monster'. I have tried to look into self as Plato, Kant, Gandhi, Nietzsche and other would describe from deontological point of view and also from teleological point of view of the Ethical approaches. Applying the philosophy at the end of my work on the ethics on violence, I would like to put this sentence from Bible as one of the peaceful method of attaining perpetual peace/equilibrium in the universe.

*"Do not do that to another, which thou wouldst not have done to thy self."*⁹

And, love for your neighbor as the perfect state of spiritual harmony

⁹Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). Of Man, Being the First Part of Leviathan. Chapter XV Laws of nature, paragraph 35. The Harvard Classics. 1909–14

“4. Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; 5. Does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; 6. Does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoice in truth; 7. Bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things; 8. Love never fails...”¹⁰

As philosophical tradition, it to end with a question as, which method one ought to apply in order to maintain ethics on violence? Is the method of non-violence the best method to achieve peace? Or the Krishna’s methods of battle winning over evil? Or the Plato’s method of seeking universal standard of ethics on violence to avoid violence?

“True tranquility is of the heart.... Mercy may be defined as wishing happiness to all creatures.... Wickedness consists in speaking ill of others.”¹¹

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¹⁰ Holy Bible: The New King James Version; book 1 Corinthians chapter 12

¹¹ A great Indian epic retold by a great writer “The Mahabharata” R.K. Narayana, 1972, 1987 Vision books page 107.

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