

A THEOSOPHICAL VIEW OF WAR AND VIOLENCE

By John Algeo

How do Theosophists view war and violence? Or, perhaps more telling, how do Theosophists *respond* to war and violence?

It may seem that such a question is needless. After all, the first of the eight parts of yoga is *yama*—a list of five moral prohibitions; and the first of those five is *ahimsa*—harmlessness, nonviolence. Theosophy is the yoga of the West, and the very first step in yoga is nonviolence. That would seem to take care of that. But does it? When two Theosophists meet, there are likely to be at least three opinions between them.

What exactly is a nonviolent response to violence? What is a harmless response to harm? Is it doing nothing? If not, what do we do? How does nonviolence apply in specific cases? Consider the following hypothetical, but by no means impossible, situations and decide how you think you would respond in each situation, given a very limited range of possible responses. Place yourself imaginatively in these circumstances and answer honestly.

FIRST, let's suppose that you are walking down the street in a big city late at night. You are alone. Suddenly out of the shadows steps a very large man who shoves you against the wall of a building and says with a threatening tone of voice, "Give me your money. All of it." You instinctively take a few steps to the right to get away, but he follows and pulls a knife, saying, "Now!" As you are fumbling for your wallet, suddenly you realize that now directly behind the man is an uncovered manhole. If you quickly give him a push, he will fall into it, and quite likely be badly hurt. What do you do? (A) Do you give the mugger your money? (B) Or do you push him into the manhole?

SECOND, suppose you are a policeman walking down that same city street at midday when you see a chimpanzee that has escaped from a local pet shop. The street is full of pedestrians, and the chimpanzee—obviously in a state of intense agitation—is attacking some of the people. It has already bitten several of them. What do you do? (A) Do you get on your walkie-talkie and call for the animal detail to come with tranquilizer darts? (B) Or do you pull out your revolver and shoot the chimp?

THIRD, suppose you are a physician. One of your patients is a young woman who is pregnant, in her fifth month. Earlier in her pregnancy you prescribed a drug which she took for some time. Now you have discovered that the drug has side effects, hitherto unknown, that can damage a fetus. Tests reveal that the fetus is indeed

malformed. The woman requests an abortion. What do you do? (A) Do you refuse to perform the abortion? (B) Or do you perform the abortion?

FOURTH, you are still a physician. A woman in her mid-twenties and in excellent health comes to you. She is in her fifth month of pregnancy, but unmarried. She says that she is unwilling to have a child and requests you to abort the pregnancy. She is sexually active, uses birth control only sporadically, and has had abortions before. What do you do? (A) Do you refuse to perform the abortion? (B) Or do you perform the abortion?

FIFTH, you are driving your automobile in very heavy traffic. You are stopped at an intersection by a red light. There is a long line of cars behind you. Another car from the rear of the line drives forward on the shoulder of the road and pulls up on your right. That car edges forward, and the driver clearly intends to cut in ahead of you. The light turns green. What do you do? (A) Do you let the other driver cut in ahead? (B) Or do you step on the gas in your car to prevent the other car from cutting in?

SIXTH, you are the President of the United States. The Island of Guam has been attacked and captured by a Far Eastern power which claims it has rightful title to that island on historical grounds. The present inhabitants of the island overwhelmingly want it to remain an American protectorate, but the Far Eastern power is on the island and in military command of it. They have also rejected any discussion of the sovereignty of the island and have declared that the only issue they will discuss is how to evacuate those islanders who want to leave. What do you do? (A) Do you begin setting up evacuation procedures? (B) Or do you order the U.S. military forces to prepare for an invasion of the island?

SEVENTH, you are Director of the FBI. A terrorist has hidden an atomic bomb on the island of Manhattan. It is set to detonate within a few days unless he is paid several million dollars, ten friends of his who are in jail for terrorism are released, and safe passage to Libya is arranged for all of them. The FBI has the terrorist in custody, but has no leads on the location of the bomb. One of your subordinates suggests that there is only one way to discover the location of the bomb: subject the terrorist to physical torture. What do you do? (A) Do you wait, hoping that the terrorist will have a change of heart? (B) Or do you tell your subordinate to try physical torture?

EIGHTH, you are the mother of a newborn child. Your child has been kidnapped by a terrorist group and is being held hostage for the release of political prisoners—other terrorists in jail. The leader of the terrorist group has been caught, but refuses to reveal the whereabouts of the others or of the baby. The FBI tells you that they have no clues, but are considering the use of “pressure”—that is, physical torture—to discover where the kidnapers have the baby. What do you do? (A) Do you ask them not to use

physical violence on the kidnapper? (B) Or do you tell them you hope they will do whatever is necessary?

NINTH, you are a member of a branch of the Society to which a new person has applied for membership. The person is a member of the Ku Klux Klan and of a political party organized along Nazi lines and affiliated with the Klan. He says he intends to continue his membership in the Klan and the neo-Nazi party, but that also he is in sympathy with the three objects of the Society and sees no conflict between these memberships. You are asked to vote on his admission to the Society. What do you do? (A) Do you vote to admit him? (B) Or do you vote to deny him admission?

TENTH, you are a member of a jury that must sentence a convicted murderer. This is his fifth conviction of murder. Twice he killed during the course of armed robberies. Once he was a hired killer. Once he killed a fellow inmate in prison. This time he murdered a kidnap victim. Your choice is to vote for life imprisonment, with automatic review for parole in ten years, or for the death penalty. What do you do? (A) Do you vote for life imprisonment with possibility of parole? (B) Or do you vote for the death penalty?

Although these problems vary greatly in seriousness and in their possible consequences, none of them is necessarily a clear-cut moral issue. They are concocted (some more than others) and the possible responses were deliberately limited to two for each problem—an unreal limitation in most situations. However, not all Theosophists agree on how they would, or should, respond in such dilemmas. These problems, like most of those we face in day-to-day life, are not simple choices between right and wrong, between the good and the bad, but are rather choices between two or more options, none of which is clearly satisfactory. If life is a banquet, too often we find that the menu consists only of dishes all of which give us indigestion.

There is a newspaper cartoon called “Kudzu,” about a teen-aged boy in a small Southern town, who is trying to find his way about in a confusing and frustrating world. His chief advisor is a preacher of uncertain denomination who aspires to be spiritual counselor to the rich and powerful, but hasn’t made it. One day young Kudzu, as the boy is named, complains, “Life is hard, Preacher!” The preacher responds, “Kudzu, son, life is a test and you’ve got to be prepared.” “Oh,” answers Kudzu, “I’m prepared for the test, Preacher . . . but I prepared for true-false and it’s turning out to be multiple-choice!” That is exactly our problem. We would prefer that our tests in life all be true-false, with a clear choice between good and evil, right and wrong, peace and violence. Instead the tests are all multiple-choice, with directions that read: “Choose the best response.” Only none of the options seems quite right.

How does theosophy help in such dilemmas? How does it help us to see problems of war and violence? In H. P. Blavatsky's *Key to Theosophy* (section 3, pp. 48–49), the inquirer asks, "Have you any ethical system that you carry out in the Society?" and the Theosophist answers:

The ethics are there, ready and clear enough for whosoever would follow them. They are the essence and cream of the world's ethics, gathered from the teachings of all the world's great reformers. Therefore, you will find represented therein Confucius and Zoroaster, Laotze and the Bhagavat-Gita, the precepts of Gautama Buddha and Jesus of Nazareth, of Hillel and his school, as of Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and their schools.

The ethics of all the great reformers and schools can be summed up simply in the Golden Rule. In whatever words it is expressed, it is the basis of ethical action and hence also of our response to violence: Deal with others as you would have them deal with you. (The Rule is sometimes phrased in the negative—Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you—and is then called the Silver Rule. People have argued about which form of the Rule is better. There is also what might be called the Brass Rule—Do unto others before they do unto you.) The Golden Rule is usually expressed in some such exoteric form. The esoteric form of the rule, however, might go something like this: There are no others, so whatever you seem to do to another you actually do to yourself. That esoteric form of the rule follows from the third Fundamental Proposition of *The Secret Doctrine*: "the fundamental identity of all Souls with the Universal Over-Soul." If you and I are indeed one, identical with each other through our identity ultimately with the Ground of all being, then how could I ever want to harm or do violence to myself? All beings desire their own well-being. I must therefore wish for you what I wish for myself, since we are one.

The Golden Rule can also be summarized in the single word *ahimsa*. In dealing with our fellow beings, who are ourselves under another guise, we must be harmless, nonviolent—that is, deal with them as we would have them deal with us, or as we would deal with ourselves. But does nonviolence always mean doing nothing, just passively observing what others do? Not necessarily. There are times when *ahimsa* must be very active. Indeed, there are times when it is required to do what might look like violence and harmfulness.

Think about children. Being kind to a child is not necessarily permitting it to do whatever it likes, whenever it likes. A child who has no restrictions, no rules, no penalties for infringements is not a happy child. In fact, it will be an emotionally disturbed, ill-behaved, and thoroughly unhappy child. Children want and need to know the limits of acceptable behavior, and they will test those limits to discover them—to find out what they *really* are, as opposed to merely what they are *said* to be.

The parent who punishes a child that has violated the limits of acceptable behavior is not engaging in an act of violence, but on the contrary is practicing the Golden Rule, and thus ahimsa, at a higher level. In *The Key to Theosophy* (section 12, p. 238), H.P.B., while discussing self-sacrifice as the highest standard of behavior, added:

We say, however, that self-sacrifice has to be performed with discrimination; and such a self-abandonment, if made without justice, or blindly, regardless of subsequent results, may often prove not only made in vain, but harmful. One of the fundamental rules of Theosophy is, justice to oneself—viewed as a unit of collective humanity, not as a personal self-justice, not more but not less than to others; unless, indeed, by the sacrifice of the *one* self we can benefit the many.

It is the same with ahimsa and the Golden Rule. They have to be applied with discrimination, to be sure that one is truly being nonviolent and is truly dealing with others as one would actually want to be dealt with.

Haridas Chaudhuri (*Mastering the Problems of Living*, pp. 138–139) tells a story that illustrates the need for discrimination in the practice of ahimsa:

One time a holy man was passing through a village. Some youngsters warned him not to go too near a particular old tree in the hollow trunk of which a giant serpent lived. Every now and then the serpent would come out of its dwelling place and work havoc by killing a goat or biting an unwary child. To the amazement of the children, the holy man headed right toward that very tree. He bent low and seemed to whisper something to the serpent. As he resumed his journey, the youngsters gathered around him and wanted to know what he had told the serpent. The holy man said that he had given the serpent the motto of love (*ahimsa*). He said to the serpent, “Look, you monster, you have been committing terrible sins by killing and poisoning sacred living things. If you want to be saved, you must start practicing, right from today, the motto of nonviolence.” The holy man left the village, and the news of his visit spread. The next day the youngsters found the serpent meek as a lamb. Pretty soon they gathered courage and began to handle him roughly. One day they played tug-of-war with him, pulling at two ends. Once, they twisted him around a stick like a rope. Then one naughty boy swirled the snake and forcefully dashed him against the tree. After that they did not see the snake any more. Two weeks later when that holy man came back to the village, the boys reported to him the apparent death of the snake. When the holy man peeped into the hole of the tree, the coiled serpent, terribly emaciated, complained, “Look, sir, what your gospel of love has done to me. I am badly bruised and mutilated, and am about to die now.” The holy man chided him by saying: “I told you not to bite any living creature. But why did you not hiss when you were attacked?”

There are times when we need to hiss, and perhaps even times when we need to bite.

In “The Golden Stairs,” H.P.B. has given us a set of principles for guiding our behavior that covers many situations. The statement of “The Golden Stairs” contains

thirteen clauses or steps that fall into three groups. The last group, consisting of the final four steps, gives practical suggestions about practicing ahimsa:

A courageous endurance of personal injustice.

A brave declaration of principles.

A valiant defense of those who are unjustly attacked.

And a constant eye to the ideal of human progression and perfection which the sacred science depicts.

—These are the golden stairs, up the steps of which the learner may climb to the Temple of Divine Wisdom.

The first step is to endure courageously injustice directed against oneself. This is the substance of Christ's admonition to turn the other cheek. It is not unrealistic, sentimental advice. It is the most realistic, practical counsel we can follow. As the Buddha said:

If a man foolishly does me wrong, I will return to him the protection of my ungrudging love; the more evil comes from him, the more good shall go from me.¹

For the fact is that evil does not cease by evil, nor hatred by hatred; but evil ceases only by being confronted with good, and hatred by being confronted with love. This fact was the basis of Gandhi's political program of satyagraha (holding on to truth) and of Martin Luther King's passive resistance. Yet, as Gandhi and King demonstrated, our response to evil and hatred and injustice should not be one of passive acquiescence.

The next step of "The Golden Stairs" tells us that in the midst of our courageous endurance, we must declare bravely those principles on which we stand and from which we act—the principles that lead us to a nonviolent and loving response. Gandhi made the distinction very clear:

Not to yield your soul to the conqueror means that you will refuse to do that which your conscience forbids you to do. Suppose the "enemy" were to ask you to rub your nose on the ground or to pull your ears or to go through such humiliating performances, you will not submit to any of these humiliations. But if he robs you of your possessions, you will yield them because as a votary of *ahimsa* you have from the beginning decided that earthly possessions have nothing to do with your soul.²

As topsy-turvy as it may seem to ordinary logic, earthly possessions are of infinitely less worth than one's conscience. To lose possessions is to lose nothing of enduring value. To violate one's conscience is to yield one's soul—to risk breaking the golden

¹ Altman, Daniel. *Ahimsa*. Wheaton, Ill.: Theosophical Publishing House, 1980.

² Ibid.

cord that binds the personality to the immortal Self. Thus it is imperative, while enduring personal injustice, to declare the basis of one's action and thus of one's conscience.

It is also important to be aware that we are not asked to endure injustice to another person. On the contrary, the next step tells us to defend valiantly any who suffer an unjust attack. How far may such defense go and still remain within the bounds of ahimsa? That is a question we must each answer when the time and occasion demand. But His Holiness, the present Dalai Lama—a man noted for his gentleness and long-suffering forbearance of violence—has said this:

I believe that having a sympathetic heart, a warm heart, a kind heart, is the essence or the most important thing. Irrespective of whether you believe in a religion or not, or no matter what ideology you follow, if you have this . . . then even such a violent act of killing someone, if it is done with a really good motive, could go beyond the usual level of killing.³

Ahimsa is no simple matter, and there are no simple answers to our moral problems. How do we make the necessary discrimination, to know when someone has been *unjustly* attacked or what degree and kind of force we may use in defending such a person without ourselves crossing the boundary into violence?

The last step in “The Golden Stairs” gives us the direction to look for that discrimination. We are to consider all actions in the light of the ideal of human progression and perfection that the Ancient Wisdom reveals. We have come forth from the One into the manifold. It is our destiny to return again to the One, enriched by our experience of the many. Whatever helps in our return and in the perfecting of our natures is ahimsa—nonviolence and love.

Nonviolence is not, however, by any means the same thing as absence of struggle. H.P.B., who could certainly not be charged with being an uncritical Darwinian, nevertheless accepted two of the key concepts in Darwinian evolution and pointed out that they long antedated Darwin himself:

. . . the idea of Darwinian-like evolution, of struggle for life and supremacy, and of the “survival of the fittest” among the Hosts above as the Hosts below, runs throughout both volumes of our earlier work [*Isis Unveiled*], written in 1877. But the idea was not ours, it is that of antiquity. . . . The “Struggle for Existence” and the “Survival of the Fittest” reigned supreme from the moment that Kosmos manifested into being, and could hardly escape the observant eye of the ancient Sages.⁴

³ Ibid.

⁴ *The Secret Doctrine*, I:202

Struggle is not incompatible with ahimsa because harmless nonviolence is not a matter of action, but of motive.

We are here touching upon one of the most difficult of all philosophical and moral questions—the problem of evil. Human beings doubtless have struggled with this problem as long as they have had minds to do so. In theistic religions the problem is put so: If God is both all-good and all-powerful, why does he permit evil to exist? The Book of Job in the Jewish scriptures considers the problem, as does the epic poem *Paradise Lost*, by John Milton. (A work that deals with the problem is called a *theodicy* because it treats the justice [*dike*] of God [*theos*].) *The Secret Doctrine* envisions no creator God of whom such a question can be asked. But the problem still exists. And in considering it, H.P.B. suggests that what we call evil is as much a part of the nature of things as what we call good:

Thus when the Occultist says that the “Demon is the lining of God” (Daemon est Deus inversus) (evil, the reverse of the medal), he does not mean two separate actualities, but the two aspects or facets of the same Unity.

. . . that divine Homogeneity must contain in itself the essence of both good and evil.⁵

How can that be? What we call evil is sometimes the impulse to diversity, to separateness, to matter, which is necessary for the universe to exist. It is the path of forthgoing, Pravritti, which leads to samsara, the great illusion. On the other hand, what we call good is the impulse to oneness, to union, to spirit. It is the path of return, Nivritti, that leads to nirvana, the unity of all things. In this sense, evil and good are relative to the position one has on the paths. Behavior that is appropriate and good on the path of forthgoing becomes inappropriate and evil on the path of return. In this sense, evil is merely displaced good.

One implication of that view is that “evil,” including war and violence, has a place in the economy of the cosmos. That is a tough implication and an unpopular one. But it is a theme of the Bhagavad Gita and of Annie Besant’s World War I pamphlet on “The High Purpose of War.” In times of international conflict it is tempting, of course, to seek justification for one’s own nation and to assume that God, or Dharma, is on our side—that we are good and our “enemies” are evil. But the fact that a truth can be perverted jingoistically does not make it less a truth. Shiva the Destroyer is as necessary to the divine economy as Brahma to the Creator. The body needs both anabolism and catabolism to survive. Civilizations are built up, and civilizations must be torn down. The process of destroying and tearing down is often necessarily a strifeful and strident one. Thus it is always a very difficult decision to know when

⁵ *The Secret Doctrine*, I:235-36, 411.

“evil” is filling a proper and necessary place in the world process, but it is a decision each person has to make.

At other times, what we call evil is a learning experience, a testing of the boundaries that hedge our behavior. Just as children need rules and regulations, and need to know where those rules set the boundaries of acceptable action, so all human beings are constantly pushing at the boundaries of karma—testing the Great Law that governs the universe, to find out what it is. In this sense, evil is our effort to find where we are and to discover those consequences of the inexorable law that teach us we have gone too far. When we lose our tempers, behave violently, or harm another, we are really harming ourselves, and the Great Law sees to it that we find that out. Karma is not punishment, but education. The Lords of Karma are not our stern disciplinarians, but our loving teachers.

If we had the eyes of prophecy and could see the whole world process in the here and now, if we could (as William Blake said) see a world in a grain of sand and eternity in an hour—so that we understood the cosmic pattern—then we would see that all things, even war and violence, have their orderly place. But, of course, to see things that way requires a *very* large vision. When God spoke to Job out of the whirlwind, he asked, “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” To comprehend the great pattern that embraces and harmonizes war and violence as well as peace and love, the demonic as well as the divine, we need a vision that stretches from the foundation of the world to its dissolution. Without such a vision, we can only trust that the Great Plan does in fact order all things.

The fourteenth-century English mystic Dame Julian of Norwich had a number of visions or “showings,” as she called them. She was profoundly disturbed by the existence of evil in the world and in human beings (which Christians call *sin*). She put the problem to Christ in one of her visions, and he responded: “Sin is behovely (necessary) but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” Even what we call evil has a necessary place in the economy of the universe, but all things work toward a final good. It is upon such assurance from the higher self to the personality, from the One to the many, that we rely.

To come back, then, to the question with which these remarks began, how do Theosophists view specific acts of war and violence? That is a question only individual Theosophists can answer, each of us by ourselves. The principles Theosophists can be expected to follow in viewing war and violence are clear enough—they are principles embodied in ahimsa, in the Golden Rule, and in the last four steps of “The Golden Stairs.” But those principles must still be applied in specific cases. And they can be applied only by individual Theosophists, looking within to the dictates of the individual consciences—which are finally one conscience, as we ourselves are finally

one. Our view of war and violence must grow out of our view of our oneness and of the love that unites all humanity and all beings. That is the love which, as Dante said, moves the sun and the other stars.

The world is now threatened by wars and violence. It has always been so threatened, but what is alarming today is the awful ability we have developed to wage war and inflict violence. However, violence is less what we do than how we do it—our motive and attitude. We can learn to purify our motives and better our attitudes only by making conscious, self-aware choices when we are faced with those difficult problems that have no obviously right solution. We must deal with moral ambiguity without succumbing to moral paralysis. And it is possible to learn how to do that by study, meditation, and effort.

Right motives and attitudes are purely individual responsibilities. The world cannot be at peace until you and I are at peace within ourselves. But how, we may ask, can a few persons have any effect on the world. A bit of leaven, as Christ says in the gospels, can raise a whole loaf. No one knows how great the effect is of even a few persons who live, or strive to live, at peace with themselves.

A kabbalistic tradition says that the world includes only a handful of perfectly just persons, but it is on account of those few completely just individuals that the world continues to exist. If they ceased to be, so would all the rest of us. That tradition expresses symbolically a great truth. The peace and progress of the world depend on and grow out of the lives of those persons—however few their number may be—who lead lives of peace and wisdom and love.

As members of the Theosophical Society, we are called upon to lead lives of ahimsa, which means striving to join that small, select company of the perfectly just, those whom we call the Masters. We are called upon to become like them—rooted in the One Life. Our efforts in that direction, no matter how small, will eventually bear fruit. But the personal effort must be made. All of us must do what we can. As in the lyrics of a popular song: “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.”
