THE INDIAN INSTITUTE OF CULTURE

[An American naturalist with a genuine reverence for nature, **Dr. Alexander F. Skutch** of Costa Rica, whose valuable paper on "Life and Immortality from a Scientist's Viewpoint," especially prepared for the Indian Institute of Culture, was taken up at a Discussion Group Meeting of the Institute on January 14th, 1950, and published in THE ARYAN PATH in March, prepared another paper for the Institute on "Ahimsa on the Farm," which was discussed at the Institute in January 1951 and is published below. We wish that Dr. Skutch were right in his assumption of the practice of *ahimsa* by Indian farmers, but between the principle of the philosopher and the practice of the sons of the soil there is too often a wide gulf. The hopeful feature in India is that here, perhaps, more people are awakened to the evils of cruelty, and there is a determination to end the present abuses.—ED.]

AHIMSA ON THE FARM

Of the many lofty ideals which India has given to the world, that of *ahimsa* or harmlessness to all creatures, is one of the noblest and most beautiful. It springs from "divine compassion" and a recognition of the essential unity of all forms of life. It is the doctrine of *noblesse oblige* brought to its highest moral perfection and its ultimate logical conclusion. It is the philosophical development of the homely aphorism: "Live and let live." It teaches us that the true measure of wisdom and power, in individuals or societies, is not how many other creatures they can bend to their own inexorable will and crush for their selfish ends, but rather how well they succeed in adjusting their relations with other living things so that all may dwell together in harmony.

Like all noble ideals, that of *ahimsa* is not easy to put into practice; it does not come to men so naturally as walking and eating. In a world where living creatures compete ceaselessly for space and for food, in which animals can stay alive only by eating other living things, *ahimsa* is exceedingly difficult to follow; perhaps in its perfect manifestation it must remain an ideal toward which we strive rather than an accomplishment. When we recall that the ruthless struggle for existence with resultant natural selection has hastened the evolutionary development of living things and their progressive modification into more complex forms, we may question whether it is in any sense desirable to practice *ahimsa*. But out of this very strife and competition may at length emerge beings so powerful, in one way or another, that if they do not mitigate and control their predatory instincts they cause infinite harm not only to the living world as a whole but even to themselves. And once they have become conscious of the cruelty of the strife, of its grimness and pathos, they cannot go on with it without doing violence to those higher qualities of spirit of which this dawning awareness is an expression.

The practice of *ahimsa* is not equally difficult to all men. The scholar among his books, the mendicant friar, even the professional man and the merchant, if they are just in their dealings with other men, refrain from cruel "sports" and are willing at times to endure small annoyances from animal pests of various sorts, may pass their lives do-

ing very little harm directly to other creatures. But all these people must eat, and if their food comes from farms where *ahimsa* is not practised, in eating it they commit violence or *himsa* indirectly or vicariously—even though they may never see these farms and know nothing of what occurs on them. They cannot be held wholly guiltless and without a share in any deviations from the rule of *ahimsa* perpetrated by the farmer who produces the food they eat. And for the farmer, whose business is the exploitation of living things of certain species at the same time that he competes with those of other species, the practice of *ahimsa* is by no means so simple as for the holy recluse, the man of letters, the philosopher, or the astronomer.

The production of food from the earth is incompatible with the practice of *ahimsa* in the highest degree; it inevitably involves strife not only with vegetable but with animal life. So far as vegetation is concerned, the farmer commits violence not so much against his crops as against those plants which grow spontaneously upon the land that he cultivates. We cannot be held to harm vegetable life when we eat fruits; the plant produces them as an inducement to animals to disseminate its seeds; and the husbandman who nurtures fruit-trees and eats or sells their fruits is co-operating with these trees in such a manner as, could they express their volitions to us, they would doubtless highly approve.

But the farmer's relations with the native vegetation are far less happy than those with the plants he cultivates. He must ruthlessly destroy the forest or other natural vegetable growth which covers the land that he intends to work; and he must wage unrelenting warfare against the weeds of all sorts which spring up in his fields, and which, if allowed to grow unchecked, would overwhelm his crops and make them unproductive. I see no avoidance of this strife so long as men must sow that they may eat. Yet we might make some small amends to the native flora by setting aside areas where it can grow in pristine splendour and not be wholly lost from the earth.

With animals of all sorts, too, the farmer inevitably wages war. Hosts of insects prey upon his fruit-trees, his garden vegetables, and his field crops. Although he may, if he practices *ahimsa*, carefully pick the caterpillars from a single small tree or ornamental shrub in his dooryard and carry them to a distance—to starve, most likely, unless they can find another member of that particular group of plants on which they subsist—this is obviously impracticable in the case of a large orchard or an extensive field. Then the farmer must either combat the voracious insects with some poison dust or spray or else lose his labour. The control of insect pests, as well as of fungal diseases of plants, is somewhat easier where agriculture is diversified or scattered and the areas devoted to any particular crop small and separated, than where whole districts are planted almost solidly with a single crop; yet with multitudinous urban populations incessantly clamouring for food, large-scale cultivation with the resulting necessity for drastic control of insect and fungal diseases appears to be inescapable.

Even more lamentable than this warfare against insects is the farmer's strife with birds and mammals, which

are psychically no less than structurally far more closely akin to himself. First he drives them from their ancestral domain of woodland, savanna or prairie, which he clears and subjugates to the plough; then, when, because they have been deprived of their natural sources of food, hunger drives them to claim a portion of the crop produced on the land from which they were expelled, he ruthlessly shoots, traps and poisons them. The law of *ahimsa* no less than a sort of natural justice enjoins us to let them freely take a portion of our fruits and grains. When we know in advance that they will come for their share we can, in some instances, plant a little more for them. The birds repay our bounty with their songs and their bright plumage and their industry in removing destructive insects; the four-footed animals with their grace and the sylvan charm of their presence. But when these wild visitors to our farms become too numerous or persistent and take more than the tithe we can afford to allow to them, we must protect our crops in some fashion or else starve. The first method of control that occurs to the unregenerate is by killing; but if we be wise in the ways of the wild and give thought to the matter we shall find that there are, in many cases, alternative modes of protecting our crops which are economically feasible and not inconsistent with the practice of *ahimsa*.

In our treatment of the domestic animals of the farm the principle of *ahimsa* is often glaringly violated, and with far less excuse than in the case of the wild creatures which at times ravage our crops. We propagate these animals deliberately, and we exercise a greater degree of control over them than over any other living creatures, not even excluding our own children. Society intervenes in a parent's relations with his children to a far greater degree than in a farmer's treatment of his animals. Even where there exist laws for the prevention of cruelty to animals, they can have little force on isolated farms far removed from the eyes of the guardians of the law; and in any case only the more glaring instances of abuse are likely to be brought to the attention of the magistrates. Because the lives of domestic animals are so largely under the owner's control and his treatment of them is regulated by his conscience alone, he is in the highest degree responsible for their welfare.

Happily for these animals, the owner's self-interest operates in their favour even when true kindness and mercy are lacking. If the farmer works his horses or his oxen too hard and with too little food, or maintains his cows on rations too meagre, they may die and he will lose money. But it is amazing how many owners of animals are too stupid or too lazy to look after their own best material interests; and because animal organisms are on the whole so tough and enduring, a good deal of cruelty and abuse may be not incompatible with the economic interest of the owner. On the contrary, as we become more "scientific" we learn how to get more out of our animals, in work or in food-production, with less regard for their natural instincts and comfort, and often by deliberately thwarting them—just as a vindictive tyrant, if he be "scientific," can keep his victims alive for a longer period of torture than if he be quite lacking in science. In the West, at least, the prevailing method is to

handle domestic animals in the fashion which will yield the greatest monetary return, with slight regard for their feelings. Dogs and cats, which although mostly useless are adepts in the art of flattering man, receive the most considerate treatment. Occasionally a horse or, more rarely, a cow will win its master's affection, become a pet, and be pensioned off rather than slaughtered when its period of useful service is past—but these are exceptions to the general rule in the treatment of domestic animals.

Can we, under any circumstances, rear animals for our own advantage without violating the principle of *ahimsa*? It is obvious that raising them for slaughter is incompatible with this principle. But if we keep horses and oxen for traction, cows or goats for milk, chickens for eggs, sheep or llamas for wool, do we not exploit them selfishly and fall short of the full practice of *ahimsa*? This depends, I believe, upon whether we give them a fair return for what they give us. It might be possible to arrange an exchange of services which would be mutually beneficial.

Biologists are familiar with numerous instances of two organisms, often the most dissimilar, which live in close association, to their mutual advantage. Such partnerships are known as symbiosis. One of the most wide-spread and successful of these symbiotic unions is that between algæ and fungi, which, when growing in closest interdependence, form lichens. The fungus provides attachment, protection and raw materials to the embedded green algal cells, which alone are capable of photosynthesis and elaborate the food for both members of the partnership. Each can live alone, but in company they are far more successful and thrive in raw and desolate areas where scarcely any other form of vegetation can exist.

The ideal association between man and his domestic animals is this mutually beneficial symbiosis, of which nature provides so many examples. Only at this level can it conform to the principle of *ahimsa*; if the association degenerate into parasitism or helotism it violates the law of harmlessness.

As physicians and lawyers have special codes of ethics related to the peculiar conditions of their occupation, so farmers need an ethical doctrine to guide them in their treatment of animals, plants and the soil. Ethics begins on the land; no society can be considered moral unless it practises a moral agriculture.

Nearly a decade ago, I settled on a rough and rocky farm at the edge of the wilderness in Central America. I was not attracted to the region by its potentialities for lucrative agriculture; I wished merely to live quietly, to observe the life about me, to study and to meditate. But it was necessary for me to produce enough to eat, with a small surplus to sell and cover the operating expenses of the farm. I had not intended to keep many domestic animals. Although for one reason or another I have had more than my original plans called for, the number has still not been great. I have consistently striven to live with them symbiotically or on the principle of a mutually advantageous exchange of services. My experience has been limited to horses, horned cattle, and chickens, but may serve to exemplify the kind of association which it seems necessary to

foster if we wish to practise *ahimsa* on the farm.

My longest and most satisfactory experience has been with horses, which are the most intelligent, friendly and docile of our farm animals. At one time I considered the breeding of horses for sale, but after learning of the abominable treatment of one which I had sold, I abandoned the notion of making a profit from horses and have bred only enough for the use of the farm. In this region, where the natural vegetation is heavy rain-forest with practically no grass, horses could not survive without the aid of man. Pastures must be laboriously made and at considerable expense kept free of woody and weedy growth, which, if allowed to spring unchecked, will soon shade and choke out the grass. Horses also need salt, and grain if they work frequently, and they enjoy delicacies such as sugar-cane and bananas. It is necessary to keep them free of parasites, to disinfect their wounds, and to treat them when they fall sick.

When, in return for these services, we ask a horse to take us on a journey or to carry sacks of grain, I believe that we do not demand anything unreasonable or exorbitant. We merely take some return for value received. Each member of the partnership does for the other something he could not do for himself, or could not do so well; and both benefit by the exchange of services. But if we make a horse's life miserable with blows, overwork and insufficient food, we reduce him to a state of helotage and steal from him just as surely as though we entered a neighbour's house in the night and carried off his property. Since our animals cannot expostulate with us or form unions for collective bargaining, we are the sole judges of the equity of our demands upon them; and the just man will be careful not to require an excessive amount of work in return for the benefits he gives them. He will wish them to live happily no less than himself. I sometimes wonder whether my horses ever surmise the relationship between the journeys they make with me and the pasturage and other food they enjoy.

I should live more placidly without horned cattle, which require unremitting attention to keep them free of a multitude of external parasites from which horses are largely immune, which frequently develop malodorous sores that must be carefully disinfected, and which have far less respect for fences than horses, so that it is more difficult to keep them out of the planted fields. But because my people are never quite content without milk, I perforce keep a few cows. The usual practice on small farms in Central America is to rear all the calves, at least until the age of weaning. In the afternoon or evening the calf is caught and kept separate from its mother during the night; in the morning at milking time it is allowed to take a few sucks at each teat to start the flow of milk—many of the local people believe it impossible to milk a cow without the calf's assistance. Usually the milk is taken from only three of the teats, the fourth being left for the calf, who is turned out with its mother to suckle when it will, and to graze, through the day. The calves thrive under this regimen; a good cow on rich pasturage gives far more milk than the youngster needs; and to take a portion of her milk in return for food and care appears to be a mutual ex-

change of benefits and no robbery. The male calves are trained as oxen to haul carts and to plough, and the same principle of exchange of services applies here as with horses.

Because they are cheaply produced, easy to transport and to keep without refrigeration, and quickly cooked, eggs are one of the most satisfactory forms of protein and help greatly in balancing the diet, especially in tropical countries where so many of the most common foods, such as bananas, plantains and a multitude of root-crops, run heavily to starch. Gandhiji tells in his autobiography how he refused to give eggs to his ten-year-old son Manilal, although the lad was dangerously ill with typhoid and the physician believed that diet necessary to save his life. The religious conviction that it is wrong to eat eggs, held even by those who do not hesitate to drink milk, is apparently based upon the fact that the former may give rise to living animals, whereas the latter serves only for their nourishment. This difficulty might be obviated by segregating the hens from the cocks and producing sterile eggs.

The question which here concerns us is whether it is possible to produce eggs consistently with the practice of *ahimsa*. The domestic chicken, native of tropical Asia, has never, so far as I can learn, been able to establish itself in a feral state anywhere in the American tropics, although opportunities have certainly not been lacking during a period of four centuries and over an immense area comprising almost all the varied ecological conditions to be found in this hemisphere. Chickens thrive with us only if given food to supplement what they can find for themselves, and a roost where they are inaccessible to opossums, tayras, and other predatory animals. Our hens have the freedom of the yard and surrounding pastures and live happily, if we may judge by the frequency of their not too melodious "songs." I look upon the eggs they lay as a fair exchange for the maize, crushed shell, and other food I give them, the safe roost I provide for them. Because I have close control over the rate of reproduction by "setting" hens to incubate only often enough to replace losses through death and predation by animals from the neighbouring forest, overpopulation does not present a problem with chickens as with cattle. There is, however, the difficulty of the ratio between the sexes. Although males and females are hatched in approximately equal numbers, chickens are naturally polygamous; if there are too many cocks in a flock they annoy the hens and sometimes fight among themselves. What to do with the excess cockerels is a problem I have still not solved to my satisfaction.

For a number of reasons I do not keep pigs, although in this locality they yield a good profit for the farmer. Since they are useful to men only for their flesh and fat, breeding them is inconsistent with *ahimsa*. After living for many years in primitive communities where the swine pass freely around and often within the rustic dwellings, creating unsanitary conditions; where their trespasses upon fields and gardens each year cause great loss, discourage the planting of essential foods and occasion endless disputes between neighbours, I salute the wisdom of the ancient lawgivers who forbade their people to eat pork.

As we find it easier to be helpful and generous to our fellowmen when we love them than when we act merely from an intellectual conviction of duty; so it is easier to treat our domestic animals with kindness and justice when we feel a warm affection toward them. We are the more likely to admire and respect these animals the more they retain something of the grace, the alertness and the intelligence which belonged to their wild ancestors. Modern breeders are amazingly successful in developing races of animals which seem to be hardly more than machines for producing flesh, milk, eggs, or whatever else is required of them, at the expense of those qualities which spontaneously engage our admiration. The owners of these highly selected animals, hypertrophied in certain directions and atrophied in others, find it increasingly difficult to consider them as sentient creatures rather than as food-producing mechanisms. These same animal breeders, given a similarly free hand and an equivalent period of time measured in generations rather than in years, could doubtless develop a race of human morons weighing upward of 300 pounds. Would not the presence of a large group of men whose bodies had become hypertrophied at the expense of their spirits play havoc with accepted ethical principles?

The possibility of practising *ahimsa* is closely related to the problem of population control. Men are not likely to give thought to *ahimsa* in the absence of a fairly generous margin between their basic needs and their resources. If the human population increases to the point where it presses too heavily upon the land, so that the farmer can with difficulty wrest a living from his few acres of impoverished soil, he must drive his oxen and his ass, as he drives himself, almost to the point of exhaustion. In order to survive, he will have to devour everything which by any stretch of the imagination can be considered edible, regardless of ethical principles. This situation is familiar to everyone who knows at first hand the poorest and most crowded agricultural districts. Similarly with our domestic animals, if they increase beyond our means to support them, what shall we do with them? In this recently settled district with an increasing human population, I have found it possible to sell excess cattle to neighbours who will take care of them as milch cows or draft-oxen; but how would it be if the market for such animals were already saturated? Certainly my own pastures would soon be filled beyond their carrying capacity and the cattle would starve. It is for this reason that I feel far more confident that I can follow the principle of *ahimsa* with horses, of which both sexes are useful even when they do not reproduce, than with cows, which continue to yield milk only so long as they continue to give birth to calves.

These are some of the experiences and perplexities of one who has been striving to practise *ahimsa* on a farm situated in a country where scarcely anybody else gives much thought to the matter. In the Occident, especially in English-speaking countries, it is, paradoxically enough, far easier to enlist people's sympathies over the fate of dogs and cats, and even of wild creatures, than for the welfare of those domestic animals which so greatly help them to live. The question, at any rate, will scarcely interest anyone

whose values are measured in monetary units alone, whether in dollars or rupees. Doubtless Indian farmers, with centuries of experience in the practice of *ahimsa* to guide them, have advanced far beyond the point I have reached, and it would be of value to Occidentals to know their methods.

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