

**THE VEDIC HORSE-SACRIFICE AND THE
CHANGING USE OF THE TERM *AHIMŚĀ*:
AN EARLY INSERTION IN TB 3.9.8?**

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*The point is ... that every religion has a vision of divinely
legitimized violence – under certain circumstances.*
Sudhir Kakar (1995: 248)

*Where one is grounded in non-violence,
enmity is given up.*
Yoga-Sūtra 2.35

1.1. The notion of *ahimśā*, glossed as “non-violence”, became a powerful international concept of political and social action in the course of the 20th century (cf. the ideas and activities of M. K. Gandhi and of M. Luther King). It became so strongly connected with India and Indian religion that a number of scholars have found it difficult to accept that at one time even the sacrifice of a human being was acceptable to followers of early “mainstream” Indian (Vedic-Brahmanical) religion (cf. my references in Houben 1999: 121, note 31). Among those who saw human sacrifice nevertheless as probably generally acceptable in earlier times are J. C. Heesterman (1967; 1993: 72–73), H. Krick (1977), and Asko Parpola (1974: 507–508; 1983) – apart from several earlier scholars such as A. Hillebrandt (1897: 153). In Houben 1999 I argued that sacrificial violence in general, and human sacrifice in particular, were indeed *acceptable* at a very early Vedic time (even if their actual *occurrence* at a specific place and time cannot be demonstrated), and, after a period in which they were either questioned or rejected, also in the period of Brahmanical revival from around the beginning of the first millennium C.E. onwards. In the course of time, *ahimśā* became the crucial term referring to the ideal of the complete rejection of any violence including sacrificial violence. While some scholars saw the later development of the ideal of *ahimśā* as originating outside and in opposition to

Brahmanical ritual circles (e.g. Alsdorf 1962), others, especially H.-P. Schmidt (1968; 1997), and J. C. Heesterman (1984), have argued that it resulted from a development within Brahmanical thought and practice (cf. on this issue also Houben 1999). In the present article I will have a closer look at the earliest traceable stages in the development of the term *ahiṃsā* (rather than of the ideal which was later referred to by this term), on its central meaning and on changes or variations in its employment and connotation. For this purpose I will focus on a passage in the Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa which gives an explanation (*brāhmaṇa*) on aspects of the Aśvamedha or horse sacrifice.

1.2. The passage, TB 3.9.8.1–3,¹ has been translated as follows by P.-É. Dumont (1948: 485, with minor adaptations):

- (1) 1. After he had created the creatures, Prajāpati, through love, entered into them; but he could not disengage himself from them and arise from them again.
2. He said: "He shall prosper who shall disengage me from these, and restore me to unity."
3. The gods, by means of the horse-sacrifice, restored him to unity; then they prospered.
4. Whosoever offers the horse-sacrifice, he restores Prajāpati to unity and (consequently) prospers.
5. (At the horse-sacrifice) he (the Adhvaryu) seizes a man (and binds him to the sacrificial stake).
- (2) 6. Man is certainly related to the Virāj(-metre).
7. (Consequently) it is the Virāj(-metre) he thus obtains.
8. And the Virāj(-metre) is certainly food.
9. (Consequently) it is food he thus obtains.
10. (At the horse-sacrifice) he (the Adhvaryu) seizes a horse (and binds him to the sacrificial stake).
11. The horse is consecrated to Prajāpati.

¹ TB 3.9.8.1–3: *prajāpatiḥ prajāḥ sṛṣṭvā preṇā 'nuprāviśat | tābhyah pūnaḥ sām̐bhavitum nāśaknot | sò 'bravit | ṛdhnāvad it sāḥ yò metāḥ pūnaḥ sam̐bhārad iti | tāṃ devā aśva-medhēnaivā sām̐bharan | tāto vaī tā ārdhnuvan | yò 'śvamedhēna yājate | prajāpatim evā sām̐bharaty ṛdhnōti || 1 ||*
pūruṣam ālabhate | vairājō vaī pūruṣaḥ | virājam evālabhate | ātho ānnaṃ vaī virāṭ | ānnaṃ evāvarundhe |
aśvām ālabhate | prajāpatyō vā aśvaḥ | prajāpatim evālabhate | ātho śrīr vā ēkaśapham | śrīyaṃ evāvarundhe |
gām ālabhate || 2 || yajñō vaī gauḥ | yajñam evālabhate | ātho ānnaṃ vaī gauḥ | ānnaṃ evāvarundhe |
ajāvī ālabhate bhūmnē | ātho pūṣtir vaī bhūmā | pūṣtim evāvarundhe |
pāryagniḥkṛtaṃ pūruṣam cāraṇyāñś cōtsrjanty āhiṃsāyai |
ubhaū vā etaū paśū ālabhyete yās cāvamō yās ca paramāḥ | tē 'syobhāye yajñē baddhāḥ abhīṣṭā abhīprītāḥ | abhījītā abhīhutā bhavanti | naīnaṃ dam̐kṣṇavaḥ paśāvo yajñē baddhāḥ | abhīṣṭā abhīprītāḥ | abhījītā abhīhutā hiṃsanti | yò 'śvamedhēna yājate | yā u caīnām evāṃ vēda || 3 ||

12. (Consequently) he (the Sacrificer) thus gains (the favor of) Prajāpati.
13. And the race of whole-hoofed animals (such as the horse) certainly is prosperity.
14. (Consequently) it is prosperity he (the Sacrificer) thus obtains.
15. (At the horse-sacrifice) he (the Adhvaryu) seizes (and binds) the cow (i.e. cows).
- (3) 16. The cow is the sacrifice.
17. (Consequently) it is the sacrifice he (the Sacrificer) thus obtains.
18. And the cow certainly is food.
19. (Consequently) it is food he thus obtains.
20. (At the horse-sacrifice) he (the Adhvaryu) seizes goats and sheep in great abundance (and binds them to the sacrificial stakes).
21. Abundance certainly is wealth.
22. (Consequently) it is wealth he (the Sacrificer) thus obtains.
23. After the fire has been carried round the man and the wild animals (i.e. after the performance of the *paryagnī*), they (the Adhvaryu and his assistants) release them (i.e. the man and the wild animals).
24. It is for *ahiṃsā* (i.e. in order to avoid doing harm) (that they release them).
25. (At the horse-sacrifice) these two victims, the lowest (a wild animal) and the highest (a man), are seized (and bound).
26. (Consequently) at the sacrificial ceremony of him (i.e., of the king who offers the sacrifice), the animals of both kinds (the lowest and the highest, the wild and the tame) when they have been bound (to the sacrificial stakes), are (all) desired and beloved (by the gods), conquered (by the gods), and offered (to the gods).
27. When they have been bound (to the sacrificial stakes) at the sacrifice, (and, consequently,) desired and beloved (by the gods), conquered (by the gods), and offered (to the gods), (even) the mordacious animals do not harm him who offers the horse-sacrifice and who thus knows it.

2.1. In this passage, the final section, from sentence 23 onwards, does not seem to link up very well with the preceding sections. Sentences 1–4 contain a general statement on the origin of the horse sacrifice and the results to be expected from it on account of this origin. In sentences 5–22 the sacrifices of five different sacrificial animals in the horse sacrifice are explained: man, horse, cow, goat and sheep. This series of five “animals” which are fit for sacrifice is well known. In AiB 2.1.8 they are enumerated together with a list of five beings not fit for sacrifice, which arise from those fit for sacrifice when their “sap” departs. In sentence 23 it is said that the man *and the wild animals* are set free after the ceremony of “carrying a fire around” the victim. Wild animals were not mentioned before in TB 3.9.8 – but they were mentioned earlier, in TB 3.8.19, and in 3.9.1–3. That a man is being set free implies he had been bound for the sacrifice first. That a man is “seized” (*ā-labh-*) (and hence also bound at the stake) was already said in 3.9.8.1 (sentence 5). Sāyaṇa (on TB 3.9.8) gives a more precise explanation by stating that this refers to the man who is bound on account of the prescription to offer *puruṣī*; this prescription is given, not in the Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa but in the Taittirīya Saṃhitā (TS 5.6.21), where it forms part of a list of numerous domestic animals to be sacrificed at the Aśvamedha. The

term *puruṣī* may be interpreted as an elliptic dual, so that in fact a male and female are to be bound; the other animals in the above-mentioned list also appear in groups of two. Just as the man in TB 3.9.8.2, the *puruṣī* are connected with Virāj. A. B. Keith (1914, on TS 5.6.21) and J. Eggeling (1900: xxvii) were unable to give good reasons for their rejection of the implication that human beings were also offered at the *Aśvamedha* (for an unexpected confirmation that this was at one time an acceptable ritual option, see the *Sāṃkhya-Saptati-Vṛtti* on *Sāṃkhya-Kārikā* 2, and Houben 1999: 136–137).

Following this, in sentences 25–27, the implications of there being two kinds of victims, the highest and the lowest, are explained. In the light of the preceding sentences (up to sentence 22), one would expect the highest and the lowest to be the man and the sheep. But in the light of the wild animals mentioned in 23 and of the mordacious animals mentioned in 27, the two kinds of animals are probably the tame and the wild animals. In these TB-chapters devoted to the horse sacrifice (TB 3.8 and 3.9), the tame and wild animals are also elsewhere referred to as the “two kinds of animals” (e.g., in TB 3.9.2). One may further wonder whether the passage 23–27 can be regarded as internally consistent.

2.2. The section consisting of sentences 23–27 seems ill-suited not only in its immediate context but also in the larger context of the TB-discussion on the horse sacrifice. The presence of tame and wild animals was already discussed in 3.8.19, and in 3.9.1–3; in 3.9.3.3 the wild animals were said to be released after the ceremony of “carrying a fire around” the victims had been performed (*pāryagnikṛtān āraṇyān utsṛjanti*); and it was said why they were released: for the sake of non-injury (*āhiṃsāyai*). In 3.9.3.3 the reference to the wild animals, their release, and the reason for their release was given at the right moment in the discussion about the offering of the sacrificial victims on the second day of pressing (from 3.8.20 onwards). The statements in 3.9.8, however, come at the end of this discussion, after the central ceremonies in connection with the dead horse and the queen have already taken place (TB 3.9.6 and 7). The first two sections could still be seen, in accordance with Sāyaṇa’s suggestion (*aśvamedha-tadīyapaśuvidhayaḥ praśaṃs-yante*), as a general “praise” of the horse sacrifice after the main actions are over, but sentences 23–27, and especially 23–24, are not convincingly characterized in this way.

2.3.1. The use of the expression *āhiṃsāyai* in 3.9.8.3 is peculiar in the light of its employment elsewhere in *Śaṅhitās*, *Brāhmaṇas* and *Āraṇyakas*. The translation and explanatory additions given by Dumont – “It is for *ahimsā* (i.e. in order to avoid doing harm) (that they release them)” – will definitely make sense to a present-day general reader. But it is to be realised that the interpretation suggested by Dumont

makes sense only in the light of the later ideal of *ahimsā* that one should avoid doing harm to any living being. If we compare it with what we find in, for instance, the TS and TĀ, its connotation seems different. Thus, in TS 5.2.8.7 we read:

*yó vā ápanābhim agnīm cinuté yájamānasya nābhim ánu prá viśati
sá enam íśvaró híṁsitor ... sá-nābhim evágnīm cinuté 'híṁsāyai,*

which Keith (1914) translates as:

If he piles the fire without a navel, [the fire] enters the navel
of the sacrificer, and is liable to injure him ... verily he piles
the fire with its navel, to avoid injury.

As the context shows, the concern is here with the safety of the sacrificer. A statement made by Schmidt (1997: 215) – “Frequently we hear that the sacrifices and creatures in general shall not be injured” – is therefore not supported but rather contradicted by TS 5.2.8.7, to which Schmidt refers as an example. I will return below (paragraph 2.3.4) to the other example mentioned by Schmidt, ŚB 2.5.1.14.

At the only two other places in TS where the word *áhiṁsā* is found (TS 5.6.6.1, 5.7.6.1), it is found in the expression *ātmánó 'híṁsāyai* which says that the Adhvaryu priest performs a certain act or recitation for the sake of his own safety. In the AiB the word *áhiṁsā* occurs only once, viz. in AiB 1.30:

... tat pratiṣṭhāpayaty ātmanaś ca yajamānasya cāhimsāyai.

Keith (1920) translates:

verily thus he establishes them in security, to prevent injury
to himself or the sacrificer.

At other places the word *áhiṁsā* is employed differently, and may come closer to the employment in TB 3.9.8.3, e.g. MS 4.1.10 (p. 12, line 16)

*pṛthivi devayajani má híṁsiṣaṃ tā óśadhīnām mūlam íty óśadhīnām
áhiṁsāyai*

“O earth serving as offering place to the gods, may I not
harm the root of your herbs”, [he says] for the non-injury of
the herbs.

2.3.2. What is the precise difference between the employment in TB 3.9.8.3 and the others? There seems to be some difference, but I did not find it easy to capture the crucial distinctions in a simple formulation.² Having checked all places with *áhiṁsā* in Saṃhitās, Brāhmaṇas and Āraṇyakas to which Vishva Bandhu’s Vedic word-concordance refers, I propose to formulate the distinctions as follows:

² In Houben 1999: 137, n. 58 I spoke of a “late ‘active’ sense” of *áhiṁsāyai* as used in TB 3.9.8.3, but the contrast “active” vs. “receptive” distinguishes TB 3.9.8.3 only from its employment in e.g. TS, TĀ and AiB, not from places such as the one in MS 4.1.10.

The *áhiṃsā* occurrence in TB 3.9.8.3 is distinct from other places where it is used in

- A. a “receptive” context: the non-injury should pertain to the priest, the sacrificer, or to his cattle;
- B. an “active” context where the concern is 1) with some abstract, mythic, or ritual entities; or 2) with entities or plants which finally get hurt (from a daily, non-ritual perspective).

Thus, examples of A are the occurrences of the passages in TS and AiB referred to above, and places such as TĀ 5.4.8, 5.7.8.³ An example of B1 is when an effort is made not to let “these worlds” get hurt from the falling tree out of which the sacrificial post is to be made (MS 3.9.3, p. 116, l. 5 *śāntá evá nīryata / eṣám lokánām áhiṃsāyai*). An example of B2 is MS 4.1.10 discussed above (here the mantra speaks of non-injury for the plants, but in the accompanying act they are actually cut off). Another example of B2 is MS 3.9.3 p. 115, l. 19:

*svádHITE maínam̐ hiṃsīr̐ tī vājro vaí svádhitiṛ vājrad̐ vāvāsmā
etád antár dadhāty áhiṃsāyai*

O Axe, do not injure him; the axe is a thunderbolt; he places
(the grass blade) in between the axe (and the tree) for him
(the tree) for the sake of non-injury.

The tree is finally cut down, while it is “ritually” prevented from being injured by the grass-blade placed between it and the axe.

In the case of the human being referred to in TB 3.9.8.3, *páryagnikṛtaṃ púru-ṣaṃ cáraṇyāṃś cósṛjanty áhiṃsāyai*, the concern is not directly with the priest, sacrificer or his belongings; nor is the object, prevented from injury, an abstract, mythic or ritual entity; nor is it a thing such as a plant which is finally injured from a daily, non-ritual perspective, though it is protected from injury in a ritual way. The man (and the wild animals) are actually set free. From a ritual point of view, the man is a perfect “sacrificial animal”, and hence there could be no ritual objection to killing him in a sacrifice, and there should be no danger arising from his sacrifice for the sacrificer and the priests. It can therefore be said that here a non-ritual perspective, according to which no harm is to be done to, especially, a human being, prevails over purely ritual considerations which would see the man as a suitable sacrificial victim, and which elsewhere allow to give actual injury to, for instance, a plant (tree) while it is ritually protected from injury.⁴ Rather than the first stages of

³ The other occurrences in TĀ also occur in the 5th Prapāṭhaka, the Brāhmaṇa on the Pravgya ritual: 5.8.12 (2x), 5.9.9, and they all concern the safety of the sacrificer and/or priest (category A).

⁴ In ŚB 13.6.2.12–13 the reason mentioned for letting the man free is that otherwise “man would eat man”: this looks like another example of an outside, not strictly ritual, way of reasoning applied to the ritual.

an internal development from within the domain of ritual thought and practice in the direction of the later generalized ideal of *āhiṃsā*, we see the impact on ritual thought and practice of outside, non-ritual considerations.

2.3.3. Are there other cases where the non-injury is desired on behalf of something or someone not directly connected with the sacrificer and his priestly team, and where the non-injury is actual rather than merely ritual? First of all, the wild animals mentioned in TB 3.8.19 were already actually set free in TB 3.9.3. This, too, was done *āhiṃsāyai*. It might seem natural to understand it in the same way as in the case of the human being in TB 3.9.8. Indeed, Dumont translates the expression, just as in the case of 3.9.8.3 sentence 24, as: “It is for *ahimsā* (i.e. in order to avoid doing harm) (that they release them).” And indeed, there is no direct indication for a “receptive” context, i.e., that the non-injury should pertain to the priest, the sacrificer, or to his cattle. Nor is there an “active” context in the sense that the concern is only with abstract, mythic, or ritual entities; or with entities or living beings which finally get hurt (from a daily, non-ritual perspective).

But then, why would the domestic animals be sacrificed and would only the wild animals be favoured with being treated according to the ideal of *ahimsā*? In fact, some statements in TB 3.9.1.2–4 (parallel with what is said in ŚB 13.2.4.2–3) can be cited to severely question the above-mentioned preliminary judgement (Dumont’s translation, 1948: 476–477, with minor adaptations):

- (2) If he (the Adhvaryu, acting for the Sacrificer,) were to perform (the sacrifice) with wild animals, father and son would part, the roads would run asunder, the village-boundaries of two villages would be far asunder,
- (3) and carnivorous beasts, man-tigers, thieves, murderers, and robbers would be born in the forests.

Concerning this they say: The wild animals (*āraṇyāḥ*) are not (sacrificial) animals (*apaśavaḥ*). If he (the Adhvaryu, acting for the Sacrificer,) were to perform (the sacrifice) with wild animals, they would soon carry away the Sacrificer dead to the forest, for the wild animals have the forest for their home. (But) if he were not to immolate animals, he would not obtain animals (i.e., cattle) for the Sacrificer; if he were to dismiss them after fire has been carried round them (read rather: *yád āparyagnikṛtān*, without fire having been carried around them?),

- (4) he would destroy the sacrifice. (On the contrary) if he (the Adhvaryu, acting for the Sacrificer,) does immolate (sacrificial) animals, he thereby obtains animals (i.e., cattle) for the Sacrificer; and, if he dismisses (the wild animals), after fire has been carried around them, this does not lead to the destruction of the sacrifice, he obtains animals (i.e., cattle) for the Sacrificer, and they will not carry away the Sacrificer dead to the forest.

He (the Adhvaryu, acting for the Sacrificer,) performs (the sacrifice) with tame animals. (For) these animals (*paśavaḥ*, esp. cattle) are indeed “economic security” (*kṣéma*). (And, if the Adhvaryu, acting for the Sacrificer, immolates them,) father and son settle together, the roads run together, the village-boundaries of two villages are contiguous, and no carnivorous beasts, man-tigers, thieves, murderers, robbers, are born in the forests.

This explanation is well rooted in the Brāhmaṇa literature, as it suits explanations elsewhere according to which only a limited number of “animals” – basically domestic animals including the “human animal” – are fit for sacrifice (as in AiB 2.1.8 referred to above). It also suits other passages in the Brāhmaṇa literature according to which “suffering” is transferred from domestic to wild animals.⁵ Against this background, it would be most natural to interpret the *āhiṃsā* for the sake of which the wild animals are set free as the *āhiṃsā* of the sacrificer. By letting free the wild animals, the sacrificer is prevented from being carried dead into the forest. In other words, the employment of *āhiṃsā* turns out to be fully in accordance with the frequent “receptive” category A: the non-injury should pertain to the priest, the sacrificer, or to his cattle. Instead of Dumont’s translation-cum-interpretative-additions of the expression *āhiṃsāyai*, the following can now be proposed: “It is for *āhiṃsā* (i.e. for the safety of the sacrificer) (that the Adhvaryu and his assistants release the wild animals).”

2.3.4. We still have to address the other example mentioned by Schmidt (1997: 215) for his statement that “Frequently we hear that the sacrifices and creatures in general shall not be injured.” The first example, TS 5.2.8.7, has been dispensed with above (paragraph 2.3.1). In ŚB 2.5.1.14 it is said:

sá vá eṣá prajābhya evāhiṃsāyai kriyate

It is offered for the safety of the creatures (transl. Eggeling).

The context is a discussion of the Cāturmāsya or Seasonal Sacrifices, starting in ŚB 2.5.1.1; the outlines of this discussion may be indicated by the following selective citations from Eggeling’s translation:

Verily, in the beginning, Prajāpati alone existed here. He thought within himself, “How can I be propagated?” ... He who is desirous of offspring, sacrifices with that oblation, and thereby makes himself the sacrifice, which is Prajāpati. In the first place, there is a cake for Agni on eight potsherds. ... Then follows a potful of boiled rice (*caru*) for Soma. ... he (Agni) casts the seed Soma: thus there is at the outset a productive union. ... Then follows a potful of boiled rice for Sarasvatī; and another for Pūṣan. Sarasvatī doubtless is a woman, and Pūṣan is a man: thus there is again a productive union. Through that twofold productive union Prajāpati created the living beings ... The Maruts ... approached Prajāpati, when he was sacrificing ... : “We shall destroy those creatures of thine which thou art about to create by means of this offering”. Prajāpati ... accordingly set aside for them that share, the Maruts’ cake on seven potsherds ... Let him (the sacrificer) offer it to the “self-strong” (Maruts); ... It is offered for the safety of the creatures: hence it is offered to the Maruts.

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Cf. TS 5.2.9.5, transl. Keith: ‘from the cattle of the village he sends pain to those of the wild’ (the larger context, however, is the placing of the head of the human, the horse, cow, and other sacrificial animals); ŚB 12.7.3.20, transl. Eggeling: ‘on the wild beasts alone he thus directs Rudra’s shaft so as to insure safety to the domestic animals; and cattle are secured by him and he does not thrust the cattle into the mouth of Rudra.’

For anyone having a slight familiarity with the argumentative structure of the Brāhmaṇas it will be abundantly clear that the creatures for whose safety the sacrificer makes the offering are not the creatures in general, as Schmidt suggests. They are the creatures which “He who is desirous of offspring” hopes to obtain out of the sacrifice, which is intended to be analogous with the primeval and paradigmatic sacrifice performed by Prajāpati.

I found one other place in the ŚB which could be compared to 2.5.1.1, viz. ŚB 6.4.4.4:

*śivó bhava prajābhyo mānuṣībhyas tvám ...
śamáyaty évainām etad áhiṃsāyai,*

translated by Eggeling as:

“Be thou propitious unto human creatures”

... he thus appeases him with a view to his doing no injury.

This statement occurs in a discussion of the Agnicayana. The request to be propitious to human creatures is addressed to Agni, and though it could be seen as a very general request, the “human creatures” are no doubt first of all the human creatures that make this request to the god Agni, viz. the sacrificer and his sacrificial team. Other places in ŚB, as well as other places mentioned in Vishva Bandhu’s index (Saṃhitā, Brāhmaṇa-Āraṇyaka), are in my view even more clearly categorizable under the categories A or B1, B2 (mentioned above, paragraph 2.3.2), even if one may occasionally doubt which of these categories suits best.

3.1. We have to conclude that the term *áhiṃsā* in TB 3.9.8.3, especially as far as it concerns the man who is included among the domestic Aśvamedha victims in TS 5.6.21, and who is generally regarded as a perfect sacrificial victim, is used in a unique way, distinct from all other uses of the term in Saṃhitās, Brāhmaṇas and Āraṇyakas (as far as this is covered in Vishva Bandhu’s word-concordance).⁶ It occurs in a small section (sentences 23–27) which suits neither its immediate nor its larger context very well. This section, sentences 23–27 (or minimally 23–24), is therefore most probably a later insertion or addition, added after the TB-chapters on the Aśvamedha had already been largely established. It may have been added quite a long time before the commentators Bhaṭṭa-Bhāskara-Miśra and Sāyaṇa.⁷ So far the case seems quite isolated, so for now there is no reason to see the place as part of a later layer in the text.

⁶ The distinction which we found does not pertain to the semantics or direct meaning of the term, but rather to its employment, context and intent.

⁷ In the three available editions of the Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa (two with Sāyaṇa’s commentary, one with Bhaṭṭa-Bhāskara-Miśra’s; see under TB), the mnemonic line at the end of TB 3.9.8 is *labhate – gām ālabhate – paramò ’ṣṭaú ca*, which presupposes the presence of all clauses.

3.2. This addition testifies to an outside influence on ritual thought and practice. Such outside influence is also evident in the ŚB passage on the Puruṣamedha, when suddenly a mysterious voice tells the sacrificer to set free the human victims bound at the sacrificial stake (ŚB 13.6.2.12–13). As far as the sacrificial killing of a human is concerned, it seems that this outside influence came relatively late in the production of the ritual texts, viz. at the end of the composition of the ŚB and that of the TB. This does not mean that ritual thought was more closed in earlier periods. The only thing we can say is that, whatever external influence there was in those earlier periods, it was not the insurmountable embarrassment of killing which invaded from outside into ritual thought and practice. In fact, it is the absence of any embarrassment of killing a human sacrificial victim as such which is striking in the well-known and probably rather early story of Śunaḥṣepa (AiB 7.3). As I pointed out elsewhere, it is presupposed throughout this story that “the ritual slaughter of a human” is “an extreme but acceptable option” (Houben 1999: 121, n. 30); what is embarrassing and unacceptable in this story is that a *father* offers *his own son* as sacrificial victim, and is later on even willing to slaughter his own son at the sacrifice. Finally, the son gets free from the sacrificial stake without being hurt on account of his knowledge of suitable verses; and the father is not praised for his belief and trust (*śraddhā*) in the ritual system, but he is forced to give up his parental relationship with his son, who is adopted by the seer Viśvāmitra (who taught the liberating verses to the boy). Hence, so far we see no basis to speak of an increased openness of the ritual system for outside considerations, but we do see that from a certain moment these outside considerations concerned the undesirability of killing a human sacrificial victim even at large royal rituals such as the Aśva-medha, which were performed by proud kings whom one may otherwise not expect to shrink back from killing condemned criminals or enemies in battle.

If one wishes to speak of some kind of early ritual *ahiṃsā* theory (Schmidt, Heesterman) – which is mainly concerned with the safety of the priest and the sacrificer, and which allows them to finally cut down the tree and kill the victim after preventing their injury with ritual means – preceding the general ethicized *ahiṃsā* of later times, the link between these two stages was not a matter of “orthogenetic” development, at least not at these stages. Rather, outside influences and considerations were in interaction with ritual thought and practice; these influences derived from developments, probably in ascetic circles, both Brahmanical and anti-Brahmanical (e.g., Buddhist, Jaina), which, as is clear from numerous other data as well (e.g., Mahābhārata passages dealing with the problem of killing, Dharma-Sūtra and Manu-Smṛti sections dealing with *ahiṃsā*, Buddhist and Jaina accounts), had a strong momentum of their own.⁸

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