

Philosophical Contributions of Gandhi's Ideas on Non-Violence

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Abstract

The issue of non-violence considered as a philosophical and educational concept is under-explored. An interdisciplinary and multiperspectival foundation to peace and non-violence is needed in academic research. This paper explores the philosophical underpinnings of Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of ahimsa (to do no harm) and its implications on his conception of praxis.

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Introduction

A lack of an interdisciplinary approach to peace and non-violence that fails to include philosophy and education exists in part because the issue of non-violence considered as a philosophical and educational concept is under-explored. Ideas of non-violence often emerge from action, and therefore it is often thought that non-violence demands a need for action- a demand that many believe is not met by philosophy. These explanations are insufficient when applied to philosophy of education. They fail to acknowledge the educational and philosophical importance of the praxis of non-violence. Philosophers of education, like Suzanne Rice, have shown that a study of the praxis of non-violence can indeed be discussed in philosophical contexts. In her paper entitled “Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘Ethic of Love’: Virtues Common and Rare” (2004), Rice problematizes philosophy’s lack of recognition of King’s work in character development and moral education programs. Rice argues that although King did not express character development and moral education in traditional philosophical forms, i.e. academic texts, he was indeed concerned “with questions about how one should act (conduct) and the kind of person one should strive to be (character)” (pp362).

In much the same way King “never himself claimed to articulate an ethic” (Rice 2004, 362), M.K. Gandhi never wrote a succinct, complete work of his own ethics. He did not sit in private and create a philosophy that was later to be distributed to the world. Rather, Gandhi used mass media, such as newspaper and radio, to appeal to his audience. His philosophy was created out of his actions in South Africa and subsequent actions in India, drawing on existing philosophies and religions to shape his expression of non-violence. He did not separate ideas of theory from practice; for him, theory and practice emerged out of one another. Hence, viewing Gandhi as solely a philosopher or a political actor creates an unnecessary tension and dichotomy.

For example, when Gandhi is represented by large-scale movies like Richard Attenborough’s 1982 film *Gandhi*, or by quick catch phrases like “there is more to life than increasing its speed,” Gandhi is easily interpreted as either a political actor, *or* a philosopher. Attenborough’s film depicts Gandhi’s lifelong struggle in a way only a

major motion picture can - big sound, big events, and big drama. Gandhi's political actions shine throughout the film, yet what the film is unable to capture is the essence of Gandhi's theory of non-violence as an overall way of life, and the pedagogical dynamic behind non-violent action. Similarly, Gandhi cannot be summed up in a catch phrase. While useful in the way they present Gandhi as philosophical, quick catch phrases can present him as overly proverbial.ⁱ As Dewey has noted, "...when [a social arrangement] becomes cast in a mould and runs in a routine way... it lose[s] its educative power" (Dewey 1966, pp6). For example, when Apple Computers uses his image to encourage us to "Think Different", Gandhi enters into the realm of popular culture and it becomes easy to forget what he has contributed to educational and philosophical discourse. Instead, summed up in a short quote, Gandhi's words can sell computers.

I will argue in this paper that Gandhi's philosophy, like King's, when understood holistically can contribute to character development and moral education in the same way as philosophy presented more traditionally. I will do this by examining the way Gandhi speaks about ahimsaⁱⁱ, loosely translated as non-violence, through a discussion of Absolute Truth, relative truth, and truth as means and ends.

Gandhi And Ahimsa

The clearest way to understand the connection of these forms of Truth to ahimsa is to examine Gandhi's use and understanding of the term "truth". To do this, however, we must first define what ahimsa means for Gandhi, as for him, ahimsa and truth are undeniably, and remarkably, interdependent. This interdependency will become transparent through the discussion of Absolute Truth, and relative truth.

Gandhi insists there are negative and positive elements of ahimsa. While his definition includes both elements, the distinction is important. The negative elements are defined as merely non-injury or absence of physical violence. The positive elements embrace much more than this: "In its positive form, ahimsa means the largest love, the greatest charity. If I am a follower of ahimsa, I must love my enemy" (Gandhi 1996, pp 40). Ahimsa in its negative form involves only the individual. Love and charity are not extended when one

refrains from injuring another, as love and charity are retained for the individual refraining from violence. Ahimsa in its purist and most positive form is a mental behaviour, a consciousness; therefore, the way one knows and carries out relationships is what is essentially important. In this form, ahimsa engages the other and extends oneself to the other. What results from this is peace with the other, and a spiritual freedom for oneself. The logic used here requires certain elements to be accepted axiomatically, most notably that we are all social agents, and a part of the larger community. At the same time, the logic also demands that we see ourselves as individuals:

Individuality is and is not even as each drop in the ocean is an individual and is not. It is not because apart from the ocean it has no existence. It is because the ocean has no existence, if the drop has not, i.e. has no individuality. They are beautifully interdependent. And if this is true of the physical, how much more so of the spiritual world. (Gandhi 2000, pp174).

The relationship of individuality and community is not one that is mutually exclusive, nor does it demand a sacrifice of oneself. It demands engagement of oneself with oneself and the other.

While ahimsa by definition denotes activity and action, it is the way Gandhi develops his philosophy of temporal action, namely through an examination of truth, which makes his philosophical contribution decisive. As a result, my discussion becomes an exploration of Gandhi's truth and its role in both the spiritual and temporal world. Studying Gandhi's emphasis on worldly existence is significant insofar as his philosophy is one that engages action. It is through the practice of ahimsa in both its negative and positive forms - the practice of Truth - that one realises Truth.

Gandhi's Truth

Gandhi uses the term truth in two ways, namely truth as Absolute Truth, and truth as relative truth. While the significance of Gandhi's use of the term Truth reflects the

importance of the term in many Indian philosophical and religious traditions, the distinction between Absolute Truth and relative truths is most succinctly described through the Buddhist paradigm of truth.

Generally speaking, the Buddhist understanding of truth differentiates between the Absolute Truth that is the transcendent truth, and the conditional truth that relies on the Absolute Truth (Zimmer 1974, pp250). Both of these forms of truth include factual and scientific truths; however, Gandhi's understanding and application of truth in formulating his philosophy is primarily concerned with morality and social relations.

Absolute Truth

Absolute Truth is characterised by its fixed and unalterable nature. For Gandhi, Absolute Truth (hereafter Truth) is the only fundamental truth. He uses the term interchangeably with God and maintains "beyond truths there is one absolute Truth which is total and all embracing. But it is indescribable because it is God. Or say, rather, God is Truth" (Gandhi 2000, pp35). He later updated this idea, arguing "... it is more correct to say that Truth is God than to say that God is Truth" (Gandhi 2000, pp 35). Truth understood as God is in some ways a pragmatic word choice for Gandhi. This pragmatism comes from the need to effectively communicate in a language that is understood by the many. I argue this because although Gandhi uses the pronoun "Him" in reference to God, in this context God cannot be comprehended in his/her/its entirety if viewed solely anthropomorphically. "... [A]s we cannot do without a ruler or general, the name God is and will remain more current" (Gandhi 1996, pp 231).

Gandhi did not simply use the term God for pragmatic purposes. His faith and devotion to his religion, together with the religions he studied, informed his interpretation of Truth to an overwhelming degree. Gandhi went so far to insist "I can live only by having faith in God. My definition of God must always be kept in mind. For me there is no other God than Truth; Truth is God" (Gandhi 1996, pp156). As a term, then, God becomes an embodiment of the idea of Truth. If God is accepted as an external force/agent, with an omniscient role in the entire cosmos, the use of the title is effective. If, however, God is

understood in a physical form or even as the divine creator of destinies, the descriptor does not capture that which Gandhi is attempting to illustrate.

Yet God is not the only characteristic Gandhi assigns to Truth. Gandhi also equates Love to Truth. Truth and Love intertwined describe Truth as an emotion, an expression, and an act, yet also leaves much to interpretation. Love is also understood as Truth itself.

That is to say, in describing Love, Gandhi combines the working definitions of love with the negative and positive elements of ahimsa insofar as integration of the responsibility of self- and communal realisation is necessary for the realisation of Truth. Love for the self is as significant as love for the other and for the community as a whole. Indeed the realisation of Truth demands the realisation of all three entities (assuming that the self, the other, and the community can be seen as distinct entities).

Gandhi's choice of the term "Love" is interesting because of its intensity. Rather than discuss care or responsibility, which are open to interpretation of scope and passion, Love denotes a very particular, albeit indefinite, depth and zeal that incorporates near extreme elements of care and responsibility. Nonetheless, its definition is not limited to these elements. As Kierkegaard describes from the Christian tradition, in his *Works of Love*:

There is no word in human language, not one single one, not the most sacred one, about which we are able to say: If a person uses this word, it is unconditionally demonstrated that there is love in that person. On the contrary, it is even true that a word from one person can convince us that there is love in him (*sic*), and the opposite word from another can convince us that there is love in him also. It is true that one and the same word can convince us that love abides in the one who said it and does not in the other, who nevertheless said the same word. (Kierkegaard 1995, pp13).

Kierkegaard insists that the emotion of love is best expressed through action, yet he does so without ever providing a steadfast definition of love. Combine the indescribable yet

value-laden emotion love with Gandhi's ideas of God and Truth, and the use of the term love to describe Truth in action becomes apparent. Truth as Love underscores the all-embracing nature of Absolute Truth.

Hence, Gandhi does not define Truth. The terms God and Love are too broad to be seen as "defining" terms. In part Gandhi uses these terms to ensure there are no boundaries to Truth. That is he does not consign limits to Truth, and therefore he does not claim to have discovered a universal absolute.

As a result, Gandhi further argues that Truth can never be realised. After all, if we do not know what it looks like how can we say we have achieved it? At the same time, Gandhi has provided us with the qualities of Truth and, therefore, a path for its achievement. Given Gandhi's belief in the Indian conception of *moksha*, the spiritual release as the supreme end of life, and in the relationship of Truth to God, the realisation of Truth is a significant piece of Gandhi's puzzle. He supports the claim that Truth is unattainable partially through his religious beliefs. Because Gandhi insists that there cannot be a complete transcendence of desires and pleasures as long as we are in our physical form, it becomes impossible to understand Truth completely. The limitations of the physical form denote the importance of *moksha*. Gandhi insists that a person comes closer to Truth as s/he controls her/his passions. Yet the limitations of the physical form deny a person complete transcendence from violence. While confined to our physical form and living in the elements of existence it is impossible for us to follow Truth fully. The implication of the inattainability of Truth is that ahimsa also becomes impossible to practice in its entirety, as complete transcendence of desires and pleasures is impossible.

Hence, Gandhi establishes Truth as a guiding principle in our existence as it provides principles to spiritual, emotional and active elements of "this-worldly" life. Truth's all-embracing nature is best articulated through an understanding of the use of Truth in Indian languages. "The word *satya* (truth) comes from *sat* which means "to be" or "to exist"" (Gandhi 2000, pp 36). To live through Truth is "to be" or "to exist" in wholeness.

Relative Truth

The inattainability of Truth does not diminish its importance. Instead, Gandhi stresses the need for the use of relative truths to strive for Truth. Relative truths are those definitive ideas that provide guidance to our thoughts and actions, yet are not static. They change and morph to provide guidance in versatile situations. These truths maintain as their guiding principle the idea of Absolute Truth and, therefore, ahimsa.

Relative truths are describable and definable. It is the relationship of relative truth to Absolute Truth that is at the core of Gandhi's argument. Relative truth becomes the form of truth that is attainable in the human condition (Khanna 1985, pp41) or the temporal world. Relative truth is that which is defined by Absolute Truth: it is this relationship that will acquire *moksha*. Truth characterised by God, Love, and ahimsa must be manifested through action in order to attain *moksha*. "He (*sic*)... who understands truth follows nothing but truth in thought, speech, and action, comes to know God and gains the seers vision of the past, present, and future" (Gandhi 1996, pp35).

Suman Khanna provides a helpful exegetical analysis of Gandhi's use of relative truth. She outlines two applications of relative truth, the first being the common meaning of truth as a characteristic of speech, which is to say, "to tell the truth". The second application of relative truth is the moral ideal where truth is a characteristic of conduct for life overall. While Gandhi acknowledges the importance of the former, it is with the latter that he spends a considerable amount of time. With its all-encompassing nature, Absolute Truth cannot partially inform relative truths. Gandhi insists that there is no part of our lives that Truth cannot guide. Ahimsa being a characteristic of Truth implies that ahimsa is also total and all-embracing: "Non-violence to be a creed has to be all-pervasive. I cannot be non-violent about one activity of mine and violent about others. That would be a policy, not a life-force" (Gandhi 2000, pp 245). The situation is best described by Khanna, who explains that relative truth as a way of life implies an "ought" or a moral ideal (Khanna 1985, pp20) because it is guided by the idea of Absolute Truth.ⁱⁱⁱ The nature of Gandhi's relative truth, which is characterised by ahimsa, demands

that ahimsa become all that we are. Ahimsa becomes our very identity (Khanna 1985, pp 40).

Truth as the Ends and the Means

The discussion of Absolute Truth, and relative truth can also be seen as a discussion of means and ends insofar as relative truth is the means and Absolute Truth is the end. This logic, however, confronts yet another form of dichotomy whereby a mean cannot be an end in itself. Gandhi insists that this is not the case. The relationship of means and ends in Gandhi's thought is most apparent through his insistence on characterising Absolute Truth rather than defining it. His characterisation is a means to the achievement of the end and an end in itself. Kotturan explains this phenomenon accurately when he writes: "Truth cannot be realised without non-violence. Means and ends being convertible terms, Truth and non-violence become part of the spiritual make up of Gandhian ahimsa" (Kotturan 1973, pp189).

Hence, to make reference to means and ends as two distinct entities is somewhat incorrect. Truth understood solely as a means **or** as an end leaves the breadth of Gandhi's ahimsa at the surface. The benefit of acting through ahimsa is retained for oneself. The existence of a better community/society and the realisation of *moksha* are not engaged. That is to say, one's social responsibility is denied if Truth is treated as a means only. Truth understood as a means **and** an end implies that Truth is the means to defining relative truths and is also the ultimate end. Using the end as a guide for the means without diminishing its role as the ultimate end is the truest expression of ahimsa. As a means and an end, Truth engages the individual and the community insofar as it defines the individual and the community as a whole: it is that which allows one to see her/his community as an extension of her/himself.

Furthermore, it is no mere coincidence that Gandhi uses the same term, namely truth, for what I have interpreted as the means **and** the end. Gandhi's two uses of the term truth express both means and ends exclusively, and means and ends conterminously. "Ahimsa is the means and Truth is the end. Ahimsa and Truth are so intertwined that is practically

impossible to disentangle them” (Gandhi 1996, pp45). Means and ends work together in Gandhi’s paradigm for the realisation of Truth.

Truth as Theory and Practice

In like manner, Gandhi did indeed use a philosophical approach that lent itself to the creation of an identity for oneself and^{iv} one’s community. At the same time, however, his philosophical approach and his personal and community’s identity are not mutually exclusive. Gandhi’s philosophical approach relied on these factors. I do not think that this is a phenomenon unique to Gandhi; however, the extent of his reliance on these factors is another component that makes his ideas distinctive. He could not have formed his theory of ahimsa without his practices in South Africa and India as his ideas rely on his own and others’ participation in the community. As a result, Gandhi’s theory is more accurately described by the term praxis.

The most poignant example of such praxis is Gandhi’s establishment of ashrams in both South Africa and India. Ashrams provided a space where caste, class, race, gender etc., had no place. These communal spaces were comprised of a “community of men, women, and children bound together by common vows and common work and a common purpose” (Alexander 1984, pp25). These commitments were derivatives of *ahimsa*; they fostered a “life of mutual observation and intricate discipline and hard to grasp and harder to condone for the uninitiated” (Ericson 1969, pp106). It is in this atmosphere that Gandhi’s belief in *ahimsa* was nourished and promoted. In an effort to put the existing understandings of Truth into action, Gandhi worked to create a community that would embrace and adopt the principles of ahimsa. At the same time, he used these communities to create his own working definition of ahimsa in an effort to expand the ideology of the ashrams to the nation as a whole. The experiences of Gandhi’s South African ashrams informed not only the ashrams he established in India but, also, the overall plan of what a free, independent India should look like. Gandhi had case studies in the ashrams that proved that such a society could indeed exist given the right structure and the right educational context.

Because our world often interprets theory and practice as two separate entities, Gandhi's use of ahimsa as both the means and the ends appears overly complex. bell hooks' discussion of theory and practice is useful to help clarify things:

When our lived experience of theorising is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two - that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other. (hooks 1994, pp61).

hooks, writing from a black feminist perspective, actively uses her institutional and non-institutional educational experiences to underline the correlation between theory and practice. Daisaku Ikeda, peace activist and president of Soka Gakkai International, expressed this best using Plato's allegory of the cave as a reference point: "while his days were devoted to efforts to attain the spiritual liberation of enlightenment, he felt no need to enter a cave for that purpose... the cave was something he carried around with him" (Ikeda 1994, pp117).

The practice of carrying his ethic around with him initially allows for an approach to his work through a lens of political science, sociology, or economics, however this paper demonstrates that there is a philosophical and educational dynamic behind Gandhi's ahimsa. Although established through praxis, Gandhi presents a moral ethic that can address the concerns of philosophers of education. For example, a common concern among philosophers of education is autonomy. While Gandhi does not refer to the interpretation of Absolute Truth as autonomy, it is evident that this is indeed what individuals, defined by their membership in community, engage in when making moral judgements that are relative to Absolute Truth. Relative truth, in this respect, provides the space for autonomous decisions. These relative truths, however, are determined within a definition of the individual that includes the individual's membership in the community.

Gandhi's ideas on Truth allow people to interpret moral principles in a way that preserves the individual and embodies an understanding of the individual as a member of the community. Accepting this as Gandhi's understanding of the individual, Gandhi's Truth allows the individual to find the "best reasons" for acting in moral situations. As a result of Gandhi's understanding of the individual as embedded in community, autonomy is value-laden whereby both individuals and the community have the goal of realising Truth. It is not merely individual autonomy. The concept of autonomy must incorporate an idea of communal autonomy as it relates to individual autonomy when making moral judgements.

This nuanced version of autonomy, which includes a characteristic of social responsibility, is not the only way in which Gandhi incorporates autonomy as a way of making moral judgements. As outlined above, Gandhi also ensures that individuals have the right to interpret, and act upon moral principles as they see fit. Truth without definition leaves itself without boundaries, open to inquiry, and encourages personal assessment. Even though Gandhi puts forth a notion of Truth that is to guide moral judgements, he does not confine the notion to how we *must* make judgements. Instead his notion of Truth seeks to provide a method for allowing his conception of the individual in a community, rather than an individual that stands alone, for determining his moral judgements.

Gandhi's method of philosophical inquiry, namely praxis, inadvertently incorporates moral judgments. In fact, for Gandhi it is through actions in the public sphere that moral judgments manifest themselves. The deduction of moral judgments rests with an individual who is defined through her or his membership in the community, and underscores the social responsibility Gandhi's praxis demands.

ⁱThe same criticism can be made of the medium of this paper, where the attempt to write and perform "Gandhian" ethics on this page, and in this format, denies the praxis Gandhi insists upon. Much like the movie depends on images and sound, I'm left with only words, the presentation of groups of words, and the creation of a concise-as-possible piece on Gandhi's ideas.

ⁱⁱ Ahimsa is not a word I wish to put into italics. Its importance to the English language, and the lack of this language to aptly describe it requires its adoption into common use. Non-violence does not capture the essence of all that ahimsa denotes.

ⁱⁱⁱ Khanna's analysis becomes problematic when she insists that Gandhi's perceptions of Truth and God must be accepted axiomatically in order to be the definers of relative truth. Clearly Gandhi has made direct parallels to Indian traditions and reason in his formulations of Truth and God. It may be safe to imply that the existing and prevalent beliefs in ahimsa that are embedded in the faiths that I examined above must be understood axiomatically, however, Gandhi need not be understood in this light.

^{iv} The use of the word “and” here becomes problematic, as these two ideas are not distinct from one another. A person’s moral identity comes from their community, and vice versa. The “and” implies a separation.

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