

II

The Metaphysics of *Satyāgraha*

Truth

Absence of Theology: Pragmatic and Agnostic Leanings

Any adequate account of Gandhi's ethics and strategy of group conflict must take account not only his most general and abstract metaphysical ideas, but also the religious content of his sermons. His basic ideas and attitudes influenced his concrete norms and hypotheses and his conflict *praxis*. His numerous public prayers were part of his political campaigns, his political campaigns part of his dealings with God.

As mentioned, Gandhi considered himself a Hindu. He gives a condensed characterization of his belief in Hinduism and his relations to other religions in his article "Hinduism" (*Young India* 6.10.1921). Yet, Gandhi found Truth in many religions and faiths, and this explains why his teaching on group conflicts has no definite theological premises. The passage quoted earlier elaborates: "You believe in some principle, clothe it with life, and say it is your God, and you believe in it. . . . I should think it is enough" (*Harijan* 17.6.1939).

Gandhi's view is well within the wide perspective of modern theological movements. According to the religious thinker Paul Tillich, there is a dimension of depth in being¹:

That depth is what the word *God* means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. Perhaps, in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself.

(Tillich 1948: 63 f.)

Militant atheism in the traditional sense is thus fully compatible with theism in Tillich's sense, perhaps even a necessary condition. Gandhi refused to call the atheist social workers of India "godless." Tillich refuses to call militant traditional atheists "atheists." "He who knows about depth knows about God" (Tillich 1948: 63 f.). Hence, militant atheists know about God; hence, they are not atheists.

Many Hindus denied that Gandhi was an orthodox Hindu and rejected his interpretations of the sacred texts, but he did not give up his universalist tendency for that reason. "If I am a Hindu, I cannot cease to be one even though I may be disowned by the whole of the Hindu population" (*Young India* 29.5.1924: 175; quoted in Prabhu and Rao 1967: 116).

His discussion with the atheist social worker G. Ramachandra Rao ("Gora") gave Gandhi the opportunity to stress the distinction between accepting God in theory and accepting God in practice: "You may call yourself an atheist, but so long as you feel akin with mankind you accept God in practice."²

For Gandhi, it is a necessary and sufficient condition for the truth of the sentences "N. N. believes in God," "N. N. accepts God," "N. N. believes in the existence of God," and "N. N. is not godless" that N. N. lives and acts in certain ways. N. N. may never have used the term *God*, or N. N. may be a militant atheist — these characteristics are not among the decisive ones.

Holding that belief or disbelief in God could only be shown and tested in practice, Gandhi did not take Rao's professed atheism as proof of disbelief in God. Nor would he take professed theism as proof of belief in God.

One may say that Gandhi accepted a pragmatic criterion, an action-oriented criterion, of truth for sentences like "God exists." He has no ontological conception of God such that those who believe that God has or does not have certain properties believe in God and those who believe he has or does not have certain other properties do not believe in God.

As to the certainty of our (intercultural) knowledge about God, Gandhi was largely an agnostic and stressed our limited powers of understanding. "God is the undefinable 'something' that we shall follow but do not know" (*Young India* 5.3.1925). He makes a distinction between God as worshiped and sought and God as the object of our thoughts and reflections. It is the former that counts.

*Multiple Use of Language: To Inform,
Convince, Preach, Agitate*

Gandhi was a great religious preacher, but in his sermons he combined preaching with ordinary factual information and political debate. There is no way of clearly separating the various uses of language. It is not possible, for instance, to separate performative uses of various kinds from cognitive uses. The term *God* mostly occurs in sentences that clearly exemplify performative religious uses, but it also occurs in sentences or is connected with sentences of ordinary cognitive use.

Religious uses are exemplified by passages like the following: “God is conscience. He is even the atheism of the atheist. For in His boundless love God permits the atheist to live. He is the searcher of hearts. He transcends speech and reason . . .” (*Young India* 5.3.1925: 81; quoted in Prabhu and Rao 1967: 49).

If one lists together some of the vast number of sentences of the kind “God is such and such,” it seems clear that it would be misleading to apply the principle of contradiction and other rules covering ordinary cognitive speech. In what follows, we shall quote and use religious sentences without any attempt to clarify to what extent they are intended to have a cognitive function. They may have none.

The latter solution is compatible with the trend to separate holy texts, such as the Bhagavad Gita and the New Testament, from organized religion.³ It elaborates and makes cognitive, whereas inspiration from the writings may be acognitive and noninstitutional.

The use of the terms *truth*, *Truth*, *truthful*, and so on, is bewildering in Gandhi’s speeches and writings, but this has to be expected considering the incompatibility of his aims both to be understandable to everybody and to convey deep thoughts inspired by complex metaphysical views. He studied Hindu philosophical works throughout his life, and his terminology in part reflects that reading. We cannot, however, expect a high level of doctrinal consistency. He was not a professional philosopher and claimed no profound erudition. Further, he tried in his speeches to be at once a preacher, an agitator, a politician, and also a reliable informer of facts. This furnishes one more reason for not worrying too much about inconsistencies on the purely verbal, cognitive plane. In what follows, we shall present the reader

with some of Gandhi's most important sayings relating to truth (in various meanings), starting with the relation between God and Truth.

Vast metaphysical or theological jungles may grow from words uttered without the slightest attention to meaning, whether metaphysical, philosophical, or scientific. To educate oneself in nonviolence, one must keep this in mind when reading Gandhi's exhortations. Consider these two pieces of autobiography touching the key terms *God* and *Truth*:

When a child, my nurse taught me to repeat Ramanama whenever I felt afraid or miserable, and it has been second nature with me with growing knowledge and advancing years.

(*Harijan* 17.8.1934: 231; quoted in Prabhu and Rao 1967: 80)

Though my reason and heart long ago realized the highest attribute and name of God as Truth, I recognize Truth by the name of Rama. In the darkest hour of my trial, that one name has saved me and is still saving me.

(*Harijan* 18.3.1933: 6; quoted in Prabhu and Rao 1967: 80)

The use of language exemplified by the repetition of *Rāmanāma* is central in religious incantations. Incidentally, *Rāma* was the only word Gandhi uttered when he was assassinated. To say it means or names God, a metaphysical entity, or that it signifies Truth, is misleading.

Truth and God

I claim to know millions. All the 24 hours of the day I am with them. They are my first care and last, because I recognize no God except the God that is to be found in the hearts of the dumb millions. They do not recognize His presence; I do. And I worship the God that is Truth or Truth which is God through the service of these millions. (Quoted in *Harijan* 11.3.1939: 44)

We believe—and I think it is the truth—that God has as many names as there are creatures and, therefore, we also say that God is nameless and since God has many forms we also consider him formless, and since He speaks to us through many tongues we consider Him to be speechless and so on. . . . I would say with those who say God is Love, God is Love. But deep down in me I used to say that though God may be Love, God is Truth, above all. . . . But two years ago I went a step further and said that Truth is God. You will see the fine distinction between the two statements, viz. that God is Truth and Truth is God. (Quoted in Gandhi 1961, vol. 1: 10–11)⁴

The meaning of these statements becomes clearer if we compare them with the following passage, in which Gandhi says that he *worships* God as Truth only. Insofar as God is proclaimed to be something beyond or apart from Truth, Gandhi does not worship God:

There are innumerable definitions of God, because His manifestations are innumerable. They overwhelm me with wonder and awe and for a moment stun me. But I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found Him, but I am seeking after Him. I am prepared to sacrifice the things dearest to me in pursuit of this quest. (Gandhi 1948: 6)

Philosophically, Gandhi here may be said to illustrate a conception of an immanent, not transcendent, God. There are as many definitions of God as there are manifestations. God is nothing apart from the particular creations, so he has “as many names as there are creatures” (*Young India* 31.12.1931; quoted in Prabhu and Rao 1967: 51). These are “his” manifestations, but not manifestations of something beyond or behind the creatures themselves. We may compare these formulations with Spinoza’s saying that individual beings are varieties of expressions of (the immanent) God. However, one should refrain from trying to pin down Gandhi’s utterances concerning God to any definite theological or philosophical conception.

Five Components of Gandhi’s Use of the Term Truth

Gandhi’s conception of Truth—with a capital *T*—may be said to have as many as five components, at least one of which is alive or operative in any definite occurrence of the term. Only in rare cases are all five components operative.

The first component is *ontological* and stems from the metaphysical identification of *truth* with “what really is,” “what can be said really to be, in the most exacting sense of being.” Gandhi refers in this connection to the meaning of the Sanskrit word *sat*,⁵ and he subscribes to the view that what undergoes change and has a component of passivity (being acted upon) has an inferior way of being.

A second component is *epistemological*. We all speak about beliefs and assertions being true if and only if they correspond with reality or the facts. *Factual correctness* is another term for truth in this sense. We may also use a

formula: “*S*” is true if and only if *S*, where “*S*” stands for a verbal expression of a belief or assertion.

There is also a *personological* component, *true* being another word for truthful, honest, genuine, and faithful as predicated of persons. The term *personological* is used instead of the more usual *psychological*, because the question “What is a person?” should be taken as a question more comprehensive than any question subsumable under a science of psychology. Truthfulness, genuineness, authenticity, and openness are today terms of psychological *and* metaphysical import. Gandhi sometimes uses *true* for a rather general concept of genuine, for example, “That economics is untrue which ignores or disregards moral values” (*Young India* 26.10.1924: 421; quoted in Prabhu and Rao 1967: 263).

A fourth component is *pragmatic*. Here Truth is identified with consistently acting selflessly (and therefore with consistent *ahimsā*). Finally, there is a *religious* component, in which “the Truth” is used in the sense of the true Faith. These components are interwoven in many and sometimes obscure ways. Here we shall limit ourselves to a recommendation to remember the five ingredients when interpreting the expressions *true*, *truth*, *Truth*, and so on in Gandhi’s writings.⁶

In Gandhi’s terminology, it is perfectly justifiable to ask whether it is true or not true that such-and-such things ought to or should be done. What we often formulate as questions about what is right, good, or correct, Gandhi mostly discussed in terms of what is true. Thus if he says that what is true for one person may not be true for another, we might rather say that what is right for one person to do may not be right for another.

Being an objectivist in ethics, Gandhi also applies the epistemological truth concept in reference to norms, prescriptions, and imperatives. They too may be true or false. This objectivism is well exemplified in quotations below. Gandhi has much to say on the criterion of truth, that is, on how we get to know the truth, stressing this question when it applies to prescriptions.

Truth “is what the voice within tells you” (*Young India* 31.12.1931: 427), but this formulation of the criterion is a crude simplification. The voice within must be cultivated by training of various sorts. However, even then, in spite of earnest, prolonged seeking, different individuals’ inner voices may be in conflict.

How do we decide then? Do we, notwithstanding this situation, have a single criterion? Gandhi at this point, like the Sceptics in their argumenta-

tion against the Stoics, argues against the existence of infallible criteria. There is no guarantee that we find the truth in any matter. However, continued selfless devotion in search of truth will make the seeker aware of errors and thus lead him toward truth.

Fallibility, Pluralism, and Scepticism (Zeteticism)

Terrifying internal conflicts in India culminated in 1947 with the creation of two hostile states threatening each other with military invasion. The tragedy has as its metaphysical background the rejection of Gandhi's insistence on fallibility of judgment, the belief in historical necessity, and the deadly grip of a self-righteous refusal to reexamine conclusions.

Some quotations will make Gandhi's thinking on these issues clearer:

Sacrifice of the lives of others cannot be justified on grounds of necessity, for it is impossible to prove necessity. . . . One good reason for non-violence is our fallible judgment. The inquisitors implicitly believed in the righteousness of their deeds, but we now know that they were wholly wrong.

(*Young India* 21.5.1925)

It [*satyāgraha*] excludes the use of violence because man is not capable of knowing the absolute truth and, therefore, not competent to punish.

(*Young India* 23.3.1921)

The golden rule of conduct . . . is mutual toleration, seeing that we will never all think alike and we shall always see Truth in fragment and from different angles of vision. Conscience is not the same thing for all. Whilst, therefore, it is a good guide for individual conduct, imposition of that conduct upon all will be an insufferable interference with everybody's freedom of conscience.

(*Young India* 23.9.1926; quoted in Prabhu and Rao 1967: 420)⁷

Gandhi believes in the plurality, not the relativity, of conscience. The difference is fundamental. If some say "There is but one color, red," and I oppose this dictum by saying that there are a variety of widely different colors, I am not submitting to a "relativism of color perception." I have asserted plurality, not relativity. Similarly, in an ethically relevant situation, the dictum of conscience is not one in content, but a spectrum of distinct, often opposite, dicta. What a person asserts to be the only correct way of acting according to conscience Gandhi takes to be an expression of opinion. The truth of an as-

sertion of the kind “The only correct way to act is so and so” may be untestable from a practical standpoint, because my conscience dictates to me as an individual, not to mankind in general.

What . . . is Truth?

A difficult question . . . but I have solved it for myself by saying that it is what the voice within tells you. How, then, you ask, [do] different people think of different and contrary truths? Well, seeing that the human mind works through innumerable media and that the evolution of the human mind is not the same for all, it follows that what may be truth for one may be untruth for another, and hence those who have made these experiments have come to the conclusion that there are certain conditions to be observed in making those experiments. Just as for conducting scientific experiments there is an indispensable scientific course of instruction, in the same way strict preliminary discipline is necessary to qualify a person to make experiments in the spiritual realm. Everyone should, therefore, realize his limitations before he speaks of his inner voice. (Young India 31.12.1931: 428)

The inner voice is supreme as source, but the need for its purification (*brahmacarya*) is unlimited. The direction of its impulses may differ radically according to differences in past experiences and the internal and external situation. Gandhi thus has a short but forceful formula for explaining the source of an inescapable pluralism of views in ethics, politics, and all other realms in which human minds turn against each other. It is clear that Gandhi’s conception of antagonisms as springing from plural, contradictory views is radically different from a conception in which different views stem from faults, negligence of clear truth, evil intentions, and so forth. Consequently, efforts to eliminate antagonisms will also differ from those conceived as crusades against wicked people. What may be truth for one may be untruth for another.

The mind of the social reformer or revolutionary has, of course, also gone through a definite evolution and works through definite media; there is therefore need for preliminary investigations and soul searchings before entering a conflict. This in turn presupposes mental discipline.

But how is one to realize this Truth, which may be likened to the philosopher’s stone or the cow of plenty? By single-minded devotion [*abhyasa*] and indifference to all other interests in life [*vairagya*]—replies the Bhagavadgita. In spite, however, of such devotion, what may appear as truth to one person will often appear as untruth to another person. But that need not worry the

seeker. Where there is honest effort, it will be realized that what appear to be different truths are like the countless and apparently different leaves of the same tree. Does not God Himself appear to different individuals in different aspects? Yet we know that He is one. But Truth is the right designation of God. Hence there is nothing wrong in everyone following Truth according to his lights. Indeed it is a duty to do so. . . . (Gandhi 1957: chap. 1)

In such selfless search for Truth nobody can lose his bearings for long. Directly he takes to the wrong path, he stumbles and is thus redirected to the right path. Therefore the pursuit of Truth is true *bhakti* [devotion]. It is the path that leads to God. (Ibid.)

According to the Bhagavad Gita, each person has a definite path to pursue (*svadharma, svamārga*). It may eventually lead two persons or groups to kill each other. The main thing is to follow or express what one is convinced is the truth. Loss of bearings is not loss of insight in one truth common to all, but a person's insincerity or weakness in pursuing the truth according to "his lights." The disagreement with others need not worry the seeker.

Disagreement may persist, and has persisted, in spite of immense efforts to reach agreement. If, therefore, a successful search for Truth implied arriving at one opinion — one ethical, political, or religious conception — there would be few examples of success. If, however, it means searching for and following one's own light, the inner voice, success according to Gandhi is normal, provided the search is intense and persistent.

God is, because Truth is. We embark upon the search because we believe that there is Truth and that it can be found by diligent search and meticulous observance of the well-known and well-tried rules of the search. There is no record in history of the failure of such search. (*Harijan* 21.9.1934)

In order to be consistent with the frequent sayings of Gandhi that he is always on the way to and has never entirely reached Truth, the above use of *Truth* may be interpreted in the direction of truthful, trusting action in accordance with one's conscience or, in Kierkegaard's terms, as subjective truth, truth for me. "[M]an, a finite being, cannot know absolute truth" (*Harijan* 7.4.1946: 70; quoted in Prabhu and Rao 1967: 45). "Relative truth is all we know. Therefore we can only follow the truth as we see it" (*Harijan* 2.6.1946: 167; quoted in Prabhu and Rao 1967: 45).

What is true to me, my path, is not invariable, and fallibility also covers personal truth. Therefore your opponent is not only a potential follower of you, but you are also a potential follower of your opponent. There is no ending to this except death. The Gandhi scholar has expressed this point very well:

Never once, during my lifelong association with him did I hear from his lips an uncharitable expression or a harsh judgment about any of his opponents, critics or even maligners. It was not forgiveness but whole-hearted acceptance on his part of their standpoint as *their* truth, which might one day become also *his* truth.⁸ (Pyarelal 1956, vol 1: 10)

Gandhi sometimes accepts the norm “Forgive!” but strictly speaking, his theory of fallibility is such that one cannot know who ultimately should forgive whom.

It has sometimes been maintained that Gandhi held his own judgment to be infallible. On many occasions, certainly, he was stubborn, and even to very devout students he seemed not always to have admitted errors or inconsistencies. (He once paradoxically even made a virtue of inconsistency, but he was then clearly thinking of “inconsistency” in the sense of maintaining one conclusion at a certain date and a different conclusion on the same subject at an earlier or later date. This is, however, merely change of opinion and not inconsistency in the usual logical sense.)

On the whole, Gandhi showed a willingness to learn and to change his opinion when evidence seemed to him to require it. There is a wealth of interesting material supporting this in the annals of arbitration and, of course, also in the history of campaigns. Thus he first concluded that students should leave colleges to join campaigns of liberation, then later concluded that they should stay (being of more help when properly educated).

Another example: In May 1942, Gandhi announced that the British must go, must withdraw their troops from India immediately. However, in June, he changed his fallible opinion.

Abrupt withdrawals of the Allied troops might result in Japan’s occupation of India and China’s sure fall. I had not the remotest idea of any such catastrophe resulting from my action. Therefore, I feel that if, in spite of the acceptance of my proposal [to liberate India] it is deemed necessary by the Allies to remain in India to prevent Japanese occupation, they should do so. . . .

(Fischer 1943: 114–15)

In this instance Gandhi admitted his weak judgment, his failure to consider possible consequences of an action, and he reversed his opinion. More famous is the mistake he called his “Himalayan miscalculation”:

I am a humble but very earnest seeker after Truth. And in my search, I take all fellow-seekers in uttermost confidence so that I may know my mistakes and correct them. I confess that I have often erred in my estimates and judgments. As for instance, whereas I thought from insufficient data that the people of Kheda were ready for civil disobedience, I suddenly discovered that I had committed a Himalayan miscalculation and saw that they could not offer civil disobedience inasmuch as they had not known what it was to tender willing obedience to laws which might be even considered irksome but not immoral. Immediately I made the discovery, I retraced my steps. A similar error of judgment was committed by me when I represented what has been described as the Bardoli ultimatum. . . .

(*Young India* 21.4.1927; quoted in Gandhi 1961, vol. 2: 13)

But I am not aware of having changed my opinion about the necessity of killing certain dangerous animals in certain circumstances specifically mentioned in my articles. So far as I am aware of my own opinions, I have ever held the opinion expressed by me in those articles. That however does not mean that the opinion is unchangeable. I claim to have no infallible guidance or inspiration.

(Ibid.)

These quotations from Gandhi’s own writings and speeches might be summed up in the following way: it is ethically unjustifiable to injure an opponent if it is not verified that he is wrong and you are right. Now, it is always more or less unverifiable that he is wrong and you are right. Therefore, it is always unjustifiable to injure an opponent.

The carrying out of *satyāgraha* sometimes led to the injury of opponents. Even if this injury was unintentional, the *satyāgrahin* would, according to the above view, incur guilt. Gandhi did indeed feel that guilt.

The fallibility arguments quoted from Gandhi suggest that an agent might be justified in using violent means in a struggle, namely, when the agent knows with absolute certainty that he is right in both the norms and the hypotheses that form the basis of his decision to commit violence. It so happens, however, that all human beings are, and perhaps must be, incapable of *knowing* with perfect certainty. Nonetheless, Gandhi does seem to acknowledge that if knowing with perfect certainty were possible, then violence would in some cases be ethically justifiable.

These reflections show clearly that scepticism of the kind expressed by Gandhi is not sufficient to derive norms of nonviolence. Something must be added—for instance, the position that ultimately all life is one—so that the injury of one’s opponent becomes also an injury to oneself. Nothing would then be gained by violence even if one had the means to ascertain facts and justice absolutely.

The most highly developed philosophical scepticism is not that which denies the possibility of arriving at truth or knowledge, but the scepticism of Pyrrho, which requires the maintaining of a basic attitude of abstinence from final theoretical judgment (Zeteticism, zetetic Pyrrhonism). This *epoché*, or suspension of judgment, is consistent with action because theoretical certainty is not a necessary condition of action, even of forceful action. For Gandhi, similar views play a fundamental role in the ethical justification of nonviolence: how can we justify killing if, perhaps, our antagonist is nearer the truth than we are, or if there are two ways of seeing the matter?

Only God knows the whole truth, but since God is Truth, we arrive at the somewhat strange formulation “Only Truth knows the whole truth.” Gandhi comes close to such forms of expression:

The whole truth is only embodied within the heart of that Great Power—Truth. I was taught from my early days to regard Truth as un-approachable—something that one cannot reach. A great Englishman taught me to believe that God is unknowable. He is knowable, but knowable only to the extent that our limited intellect allows.

(*Harijan* 7.4.1947: 109; quoted in Prabhu and Rao 1967: 73)

In the light of the foregoing, it is not surprising that Gandhi characterized himself as a sceptic, an *anekāntavādīn* (*Young India* 21.1.1926: 30). This complex term may be analysed into *an-eka-anta-vad-in*, a person who holds that there is more than one end, that is, more than one conclusion. It is an apt term for the ultimate pluralism of religious, moral, and political views compatible with human experience and reflection. Any human view is fragmentary and uncertain.

Gandhi read the Bhagavad Gita constantly and found in it the best support for nonviolence. He was also quite aware that opposite interpretations were possible. He recognized that he might well be killed by people who found it their duty, based on faith in the teachings of the same holy poem,

to kill a traitor. And to certain sects of Hinduism, because of his support of the Muslim minority, Gandhi was indeed the great traitor.

One of the two men sentenced to death in connection with Gandhi's murder in January 1948 was Nathuram Godse. "Godse had made a study of Bhagavadgita and knew most of its verses by heart. He liked to quote them to justify acts of violence in pursuing a righteous aim" (Khosla 1963: 218). Gandhi was in touch with these people and supported their claim to follow their conscience and their honest interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita.

After the first unsuccessful attempt on his life, Gandhi said at his prayer meeting:

[N]o one should look down upon the misguided youth who had thrown the bomb. [The youth] probably looked upon the speaker as an enemy of Hinduism. After all, had not the Gita said that whenever there was an evil-minded person damaging religion, God sent some one to put an end to his life?

(Tendulkar 1951–54, vol. 8: 331)

This is one of the clearest examples of Gandhi's belief in the plurality of incompatible views based on the voice of conscience. He would insist both that Truth was one and that men would never see it in the same way; and that we must accordingly live with irremediable conflicts and not take for granted that some dominant view comes nearer to the Truth than a minority view.

Truth, God, and Self-Realization

The Trinity of Realizations

We have started with an elucidation of Gandhi's use of the term *truth* and related terms. Search for Truth may be viewed as a fundamental principle or prescription in Gandhi's ethics. It is, however, inseparably connected with his conception of God, self-realization, and a variety of other central terms in Indian thought. Being a man of action and no great admirer of purely speculative thought, Gandhi introduces a simplification into traditional Indian metaphysics that is well worth mentioning. The way in which he does this shows a firm grasp of pragmatic thinking: "*To realize God,*" "*to realize the Self,*" and "*to realize Truth*" are three expressions for the same

development. “To realize God” is another expression for “to become like God” and “to face God.” The identification of this development with that of self-realization is clearly stated in, for instance, Gandhi’s highly interesting and original interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita:

Man is not at peace with himself till he has become like unto God. The endeavour to reach this state is the supreme, the only ambition worth having. And this is self-realization. This self-realization is the subject of the *Gita*, as it is of all scriptures. But its author surely did not write it to establish that doctrine. The object of the *Gita* appears to one to be that of showing the most excellent way to attain self-realization. That which is to be found, more or less clearly, spread out here and there in Hindu religious books, has been brought out in the clearest possible language in the *Gita* even at the risk of repetition.

(Desai 1946: 128–29)

The following excerpts support the same identification, and also simplify matters by adding the link to “liberation” (*mokṣa*, *mukṭi*).

What I want to achieve,— what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years,— is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain *Mokṣa*. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of that goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field, are directed to this same end!

(Gandhi 1927, vol. 1: xiv)

The denotational or extensional (not necessarily intentional or connotational) identity of “to find Truth”—if this is the same as “to realize Truth”—and “to become perfect” is plain from the following famous passage:

I am but a seeker after Truth. I claim to have found a way to it. I claim to be making a ceaseless effort to find it. But I admit that I have not yet found it. To find Truth completely is to realize oneself and one’s destiny, oneself to become perfect. I am painfully conscious of my imperfections, and therein lies all the strength I possess, because it is a rare thing for a man to know his own limitations.

(*Young India* 17.11.1921)

The Devotion of a Karmayogin

The practical aspect of the development is seen from Gandhi’s stress on action, his life as a *karmayogin*, a yogi of social action:

I do not know whether I am a Karmayogi or any other Yogi. I know that I cannot live without work. I crave to die with my hand at the spinning wheel. If one has to establish communion with God through some means, why not through the spinning wheel? "Him who worships me," says the Lord in the Gita, "I guide along the right path and see to his needs." My god is myriad-formed, and while sometimes I see Him in the spinning wheel, at other times I see Him in communal unity, then again in removal of untouchability, and that is how I establish communion with Him according as the Spirit moves me.

(*Harijan* 8.5.1937)⁹

In other words, the way of the Bhagavad Gita, the way of selfless action, is not a way leading up to a direct confrontation with God; it is itself the confrontation, provided the selflessness is consistent.

The same kind of pragmatic interpretation Gandhi attaches to the central notion of devotion:

A devotee may use, if he likes, rosaries, forehead marks, make offerings, but these things are no test for his devotion. He is the devotee who is jealous of none, who is a fount of mercy, who is without egotism, who is selfless. . . . We thus see that to be a real devotee is to realize oneself. Self-realization is not something apart.

(Desai 1946: 130)

In short, Gandhi identifies "to be maximally devoted" (or in his own words, "to be a real devotee")¹⁰ with "to live the life of selfless action," and as this is to face God, other pragmatic interpretations follow.

The expression "to be a real devotee," however, is apt to mislead a Western reader unfamiliar with Indian philosophy. The devotion is intimately connected with detachment. In most Western philosophy, the latter is associated with aloofness and indifference. The extreme detachment that Gandhi tried to develop throughout his life, however, is not aloofness. A central expression of this detachment is "indifference to the enjoyment of the fruits of action whether in this or in a future life" (Sanskrit: *ibāmutrārthabhālabhogavirāga*, here-and-yonder-action-fruit-enjoyment-indifference). We have a norm resembling this in Christianity, namely, "You shall not have regard for the fruits of your action." In Indian philosophy, detachment in this sense is intimately connected with political philosophy through the conception of active inaction. Perhaps the most important aspect of such detachment is a certain lack of regard for past failures that allows them to not

be viewed as determinants of future conduct or achievements. “Detachment enables one to overcome the effects of past faulty practice as well as handicaps of heredity and environment” (*Harijan* 7.4.1946: 72; quoted in Prabhu and Rao 1967: 463).

As Gandhi sees it, the importance of the combination of devotion and detachment is not to be underestimated: “A burning passion coupled with absolute detachment is the key to all success” (*Harijan* 29.9.1946: 336; quoted in Prabhu and Rao 1967: 464). Sometimes, however, Gandhi uses the term *passion* in such a way that every passion is by definition a passion *for the fruit of an action*. If passion is conceived in this way, then, detachment implies an absence of passion because the term *passion* includes passion for the fruit of an action.

To attain to perfect purity one has to become absolutely passion-free in thought, speech and action; to rise above the opposing currents of love and hatred, attachment and repulsion. (Gandhi 1948: 616)

The maximal development of detached passion and of devotion that springs from an identification with the universal Self is named *nirvāṇa* in some *ma-bhāyāna* Buddhist philosophies (Shcherbaskoi 1965). Although Gandhi was no philosopher, his thinking is nevertheless inspired by classical Indian philosophy.

From the above quotations and interpretations, it follows that according to Gandhi, the supreme intersubjective and intercultural goal of each individual is self-realization. Without some kind of concept of a self, however, the notion of a search for truth (in the epistemological and the ethical sense) becomes unintelligible. There must be someone who seeks and there must be something that he seeks.

The Self of Egotism and the Universal Self

Humility, Egotism, and Self-Realization

The term *humility* is used in many important connections in Gandhian writings, and not only to express “lack of arrogance or pride.” One sense seems relatively clear and acceptable to persons with different ideological backgrounds: a person lacks humility to the extent that he suffers from egotism (self-conceit). By “shedding the ego,” one then means shedding the

egotism. To reduce oneself to zero — a phrase often used by Gandhi — is accordingly to be understood as reducing the egotism-self to zero, that is, to eliminate it.

We prefer the expression “shedding the egotism” to “shedding the ego,” because the latter expression suggests a weakening of the resourcefulness or individuality of a person. The individual is “the supreme consideration” according to Gandhi, and certainly he should not be “shed.”

Egotism in the sense of self-conceit is present when, for instance, one is too proud and self-important to confess one’s errors, to retrace one’s steps. Without retracing steps, or learning from painful errors, however, one cannot find the truth, or at a minimum, the speed of the process is reduced indefinitely. It is understandable, therefore, that Gandhi maintains a good deal of humility (in the sense above).

One also has the duty to give advice or tell the truth even if it sounds arrogant, and therefore Gandhi frequently uses the phrase “in all humility.” It might mean something like “without pretending that I am more able than any other to tell what is true” or “without superiority or self-righteousness.”

The injunction to seek and follow truth results in fanaticism and violence only when the person who accepts the injunction has some form of superiority complex. One would not expect such a person, once he believes he has found the truth, to refrain from the oppression of deviants — for racial or other reasons. In fact, being nonviolent cannot really be regarded as an isolated trait, whether psychological or social. It must be studied as an aspect of a set of traits. This is clear from the way nonviolence is treated in the Bhagavad Gita; that is, as one virtue among others.

Gandhi finds support for his opinion that humility is necessary for truth-finding in the Bhagavad Gita, discourse 13, verse 7. He believes the virtues there listed to be conditions of insight, or even somehow aspects of it. He takes “freedom from pride and pretentiousness” to be equivalent to humility.

Here are two translations of verse 7:

Freedom from pride (*amānitva*) and pretentiousness, nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*), forgiveness, uprightness, service of the Master, purity, steadfastness, self-restraint (*ātma-vinigrāha*). (Translation by Gandhi)

Absence of pride and deceit, nonviolence, patience uprightness, service of a teacher, purity, steadfastness, self-control. (Mascaró 1962)

In his commentary, Nataraja Guru says that *amānitva* (freedom from conventional pride) belongs “to a source different from society.” “A man concerned with his emancipation or self-realization is hardly concerned with what society thinks of him” (Guru 1961: 545–46).

Radhakrishnan says in his commentary:

It is clear from this list of qualities that jñāna or knowledge includes the practice of the moral virtues. Mere theoretical learning will not do. By the development of moral qualities the light of the ever changeless Self witnessing all but attached to none is discriminated from the passing forms and is no more confused with them. *(Bhagavadgita 1956: 305)*

The gist of the matter is that there is something called “self” (*ātman*) that should be and can be reduced toward zero and something very different from this that should be and can be realized or cultivated maximally—and which is also called “self.” The latter, however, is mostly written with a capital *S*.

When the egotism-ego vanishes, something else grows, that ingredient of the person that tends to identify itself with God, with humanity, with all that lives. Therefore Gandhi may also say that once the reduction of one’s egotism-self is complete, one comes face to face with God, finds Truth, and realizes the universal self, the Self. The way of humility is essentially the way of reducing egotism.

There are other senses of *humility*, or other parts of a doctrine of humility. However, they seem more difficult to incorporate into a fairly generally acceptable ethics of group struggle. Thus, for Gandhi to have placed himself last among his fellow creatures would likely have taken unreasonable steps. Eating as little as the starving, or traveling as slow, would have rendered it impossible for Gandhi to fulfill his obligations. It was a duty, considering the importance of his work, to take care of himself more than many others and to enjoy many privileges. One may, of course, say that all this is consistent with placing oneself last among one’s fellow creatures—but only with considerable arbitrariness, it seems. Gandhi says that he will try to reach perfection even though he grants that no one has as yet reached it, and he thinks that he has practiced nonviolence more and longer than others just as he thinks he has a special or unique mission in India. In this and other respects, it is clear that Gandhi places himself before many others. However, we should not take this more or less realistic assessment of

the importance of his own personality to express a lack of humility. In what follows, therefore, we shall continue to interpret *humility* in the direction of “lack of self-conceit, egotism, or pride.”

Much of Gandhi’s activity, for instance in his campaigns in favor of higher wages for poor laborers, is directed toward a kind of egalitarian justice. It does not in any direct way aim at increasing the self-realization of the laborers in terms of their diminishing egotism. It must be taken for granted that what the poor laborers themselves, and other underdog groups, looked forward to reaching by victorious campaigns were goals acceptable to Gandhi, or at least not repugnant to him. Our conclusion, then, is that there are stages or phases on the way leading to maximal realization of the Self when it is justified or even necessary to fight against exploitation by others. Submission or self-extinction is no virtue. It is the submission and extinction of egotism that Gandhi proclaims.

What Gandhi accepted as goals for his campaigns can be subsumed under the heading of “self-realization,” in empirical, social scientific senses — and can include self-government in political science terminology. He wishes to contribute to *svarāj*, a set of conditions not directly defined by or correlated with absence of egotism. The modern Indian *svarāj* (anglicized to *swaraj*) derives from the Sanskrit *svarājan*, self-rule, self-command, lordship of the Self. Some of its connotations are not far from those of “self-realization.”

This concern of Gandhi for self-realization in the mundane empirical sense does not contradict his concern for realizing the big or universal Self, that is, for Self-realization. He seems to believe that increases in self-realization (in the empirical senses), insofar as they do not involve an increase in egotism, are favorable to the condition of Self-realization in the ethico-metaphysical sense. Such increases are neither necessary conditions for Self-realization nor sufficient, but favorable for the development of a personality adapted to the task of reduction of egotism. Not all goals are subservient to the fight against egotism — Gandhi was a man of many joys.

The Universal Self

In order to understand nonviolence as perfected by Gandhi and others, it is imperative to understand how *selfless* action is compatible with complete *self*-realization of the individual person. How can Gandhi say that to make oneself a zero is to realize oneself completely?

The answer, as suggested in the previous section, is that self-realization is conceived by Gandhi, together with a whole tradition of thinkers in the West as well as the East, as realizing not “oneself,” but “the Self.” This makes it necessary for us to elaborate on the concept of Self with a capital *S*. Its position in metaphysics is described well by the Indologist H. Zimmer:

The supreme and characteristic achievement of the Brahman mind (and this has been decisive, not only for the course of Indian philosophy, but also for the history of Indian civilization) was its discovery of the Self (ātman) as an independent, imperishable entity, underlying the conscious personality and bodily frame. Everything that we normally know and express about ourselves belongs to the sphere of change, the sphere of time and space, but this Self (ātman) is forever changeless, beyond time, beyond space and the veiling net of causality, beyond measure, beyond the dominion of the eye. (Zimmer 1961: 3)

Gandhi’s thought when approaching philosophical questions is close to that of Advaita Vedānta. In this system, the word closest to the meaning of *self* (with a small *s*) is *jīva*; to that of *Self* (with a capital *S*) is *Ātman* (with a capital *A*); to *God* in the writings of Gandhi, *Brabman*.¹¹ In his monograph on conceptions of self, Troy W. Organ says:

Liberation or salvation in Advaita Vedānta is self-realization. The process of liberation will usually begin when a person becomes disgusted with worldly life. At last there dawns upon a person the conviction that in his egoistic restlessness and clinging passions he is not moving in the direction of his highest values. He follows the path of self-knowledge until he attains a direct grasp of the unreality of the qualities of finitude and separation of the *jīva* and of the reality of infinitude and unity of *Ātman*. (Organ 1964: 109)¹²

It is characteristic of Gandhi as a *karmayogin* that he conceives the path of self-knowledge as the path of selfless action. That is, the discrimination between self and Self is fostered by reducing egotism toward zero — serving the suffering masses or in other ways as required by the social conditions confronting the yogin.

This makes it important to know how the Self (*Ātman*) is related to God and Truth. At this point, Gandhi may safely adhere to tradition: the Self somehow reveals itself both as God (*Brabman* in the old Indian tradition) and as Truth (*Sat*). Thus, there is no need for subtle differentiations so long as we follow Gandhi’s thinking. Self as *Ātman* corresponds to the notion of

the Absolute in Western thinking — something completely beyond ordinary description but somehow basic both to God and the World.

The Supreme Conceptual Bridge: From “Truth,” “self,” “Self,” and “Egotism” over “Essential Unity of Humanity” to “Nonviolence”

In conclusion, we may say that the self referred to in Gandhi’s term *self-realization* is the *Ātman*, what might be termed “the universal Self,” or “the great Self.” The self as an object of study in psychology and social science we might, in contrast to *Ātman*, call “the small self.” For the purposes of our systematization, we shall distinguish two components, the egotism and the nonegotism component of the small self. When reducing the egotism component toward zero, the faculty of orientation in the empirical world is not adversely affected. On the contrary, its functioning is perfected because pride (the main part of egotism) is an obstacle to truth seeking. The egotism-ego is therefore not the whole empirical self, but that component Gandhi has in mind when he says that we must reduce “ourself” to zero.

The metaphysics of Gandhi is such that he might insist, as he certainly suggests, that the process of reducing egotism to zero involves in practice (if not in theory) a process of understanding oneself and that in completing the process, one reaches complete self-realization (and thus “sees God face to face”). Thus, according to this branch or part of Gandhi’s metaphysics, reducing one’s own egotism to zero is a sufficient condition for complete self-realization. Degrees of self-realization and degrees of reduction of egotism may accordingly be taken to be the same. The world as seen by the increasingly self-realized person will be the world as seen by the decreasingly egoistic person. In order not to get into unnecessary metaphysical controversies, one may hold these equivalences to be extensional, not conceptual.

With increasing power of discrimination between self and Self, the universality of the Self is discerned. This leads to the conception of the essential oneness of all humanity. “I believe in the essential unity of man and for that matter of all that lives” (*Young India* 4.12.1924: 398; quoted in Prabhu and Rao 1967: 439). One’s own self-realization must therefore somehow include that of others. The requirement of helping the self-realization of others, “service,” and hurting no one, follows without further assumptions. The central place of this unity is well described by Pyarelal:

The rockbottom foundation of the technique for achieving the power of non-violence is belief in the essential oneness of all life. . . . The achievement of soul force depends on re-establishing our unity consciously with all psyches which manifestly exist beneath the threshold of individual consciousness and communicating that experience to others. (Pyarelal 1956–58, vol. 2: 792)

From causes of a psychological, social, and other kinds that are as yet little known, not a few people, from their earliest youth, perceive, apperceive, or feel a basic unity with and of all the human beings they encounter, a unity that overrides all the differences and makes these appear superficial. Gandhi was one of these fortunate people:

I have known no distinction between relatives and strangers, countrymen and foreigners, white and coloured, Hindus and Indians of other faiths, whether Musalmans, Parsis, Christians or Jews. . . . I cannot claim this as a special virtue, as it is in my very nature, rather than a result of any effort on my part, whereas in the case of *ahimsā* (non-violence), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), *aparigraha* (non-possession) and other cardinal virtues, I am fully conscious of a continuous striving for their cultivation.

(Gandhi 1948: 338; quoted in Prabhu and Rao 1967: 419)

To this may be added that people who have been haunted in their youth by a perception of their difference from others, of the essential hostility of strangers, suffer a formidable handicap. Service to mankind, nondiscrimination, and acceptance of extreme forms of egalitarianism are difficult to undertake or to tolerate when the basic perception of humanity is that of diversity and discord.

To facilitate the development of the feeling of kinship and unity must, according to the above, be a major concern of social policy. Thieves, to mention one example, should not be punished, according to Gandhi.

But whilst we may bear with the thieves, we may not endure the infliction. That would only induce cowardice. So we realize a further duty. Since we regard the thieves as our kith and kin, they must be made to realize the kinship. And so we must take pains to devise ways and means of winning them over. This is the path of *Ahimsā*. It may entail continuous suffering and the cultivation of endless patience.

(Gandhi 1957: chap. 2; quoted in Gandhi 1961, vol. 2: 26)

Also, one might add, it entails a decentralized society composed of small units — we must be able to get to know the thieves.

Such terms as “the universal Self” can scarcely be given experiential meaning without recourse to psychological and social processes of intense identification. They can be facilitated by the practice of yoga, but also by various kinds of voluntary social work as these are now carried out by dedicated people in many countries. The recent development in psychiatry and psychology favoring reciprocity in the therapist-patient relationship helps to make the identification easier.

There is an intimate relation between a belief in the ultimate oneness of all that lives and the belief that one cannot reach one’s own complete freedom without bringing about the freedom of others or remove all feelings of pain without relieving the pain of others.¹³

I do not believe . . . that an individual may gain spiritually and those who surround him suffer. I believe in *advaita* (non-duality), I believe in the essential unity of man and, for that matter, of all that lives. Therefore I believe that if one man gains spiritually, the whole world gains with him and, if one man falls, the whole world falls to that extent.

(*Young India* 4.12.1924: 398; quoted in Prabhu and Rao 1967: 439)

Gandhi’s tendency toward collectivism and egalitarianism is beautifully expressed in the following words:

A drop torn from the ocean perishes without doing any good. If it remains a part of the ocean, it shares the glory of carrying on its bosom a fleet of mighty ships. (*Harijan* 23.3.1947: 78; quoted in Prabhu and Rao 1967: 440)

Synopsis

“To seek Truth” = to try to face God
= to try to realize the Self
= to try to reach salvation

Obstacle: Overpowering influence of sense impressions from which desires (infatuation) and egotisms arise. They hide the essential unity of one’s self with the universal Self and frustrate attempts at self-realization. Therefore:

“To try to realize the Self” = to try to act with detachment
= to try to act selflessly
= to act “without regard to the fruits of one’s action”

It involves trying to shed the egoistic component of the person.

On the other hand, the Self as “witness” in my person is the Self as “witness” in other persons. This is seen to the extent that the Self (i.e., its operation) is discriminated from the empirical self. The Self is seen as the essence of all persons, and self-realization, insofar as it involves the essence, involves self-realization of all. Therefore, a setback in self-realization or in the (material or spiritual) conditions of self-realization is a general setback for humanity. Hurting oneself is hurting others; hurting others is hurting oneself. Similarly, a gain is a general gain.

It remains to characterize selfless action: selfless action, if consistent, *is* being face to face with God, *is* actualizing the full essential identity with the Self, and *is* finding or embodying Truth. There is no transcendent God, Self, or Truth; they are immanent in the action. Furthermore, selfless action is action, intended to increase the general self-realization without special regard for any definite self, but starting with those who are worst off—the starving, exploited, subjected, and depressed.

Nonviolence

Himsā and Ahimsā: Broad and Narrow Concepts

The Sanskrit word *ahimsā* as applied in Indian philosophy has many meanings related in different ways to absence of violence, suppression, exploitation, and malevolence.

Occurrences of *ahimsā* in the Bhagavad Gita point to rather narrow concepts because the term is used for one single characteristic among a series of others. Compare, for instance, the enumeration of good qualities in discourse 13, verse 7, quoted on page 31. In this list, *ahimsā* occurs as one single good quality. It is not inappropriately rendered by “nonhurting,” “noninjuring,” “nonharming,” or “nonviolence,” but it requires a more specific meaning in relation to the other qualities. If a wider concept were intended, some of these others would only be parts or aspects of *ahimsā*, and it would be unnecessary or misleading to mention them on a par with it. Gandhi’s terminology is such that some of the other qualities listed would make up part of the connotation (intension) of *ahimsā*, while most of the others would be covered in its extension.

The general tendency in Gandhi's writings is toward equating *abhiṃsā* with all good qualities put together and *hiṃsā* with all bad ones. For example: because stealing is bad and nonstealing good, stealing tends to be taken to exemplify *hiṃsā* and nonstealing (as a principle), *abhiṃsā* (cf. p. 40). Several meanings may occur in the same paragraph: "It is not enough that there is no violence. A violent speech is often as injurious as a violent deed" (Tendulkar 1951–54, vol. 1: 331). In the first sentence, a narrow, physical concept is intended, a concept narrower than "injurious"—there are instances of injurious acts that are not violent. However, the adjective *violent* in "violent speech" has a different meaning. A violent speech is *not* taken to be a species of violence.

A taste of philology: *A-bhiṃsā* is Sanskrit for absence of *hiṃsā*. The latter is correctly written *hiṃsā* or *hinsā* (harming, hurting, injuring) from the root *hiṃs* (harm, hurt, injure, slay). The word *hiṃ* may, in turn, have been a form of the verbal root *han*, which has a large number of meanings: strike, smite, slay, kill, destroy, dispel (darkness), and so forth. These meanings seem on the whole to be more predominantly physical than those of *hiṃs*.

Gandhi, in his application of the term, makes use of several of the meanings of *abhiṃsā*, and he adds at least two others: (1) *abhiṃsā* as a designation of his ethics of group struggle—in this sense, the term is a proper name for a doctrine or a closely related set of prescriptions and descriptions; (2) as a designation of actions or practice in accordance with *abhiṃsā* in the first sense.

Let us see what he himself says about the term:

Ahiṃsā means avoiding injury to anything on earth in thought, word, or deed.
(*Harijan* 7.9.1935: 234)

Adopting a wide interpretation of *injury*, the quotation exemplifies a very wide concept of *hiṃsā*: not avoiding injury to *at least one thing* on earth in thought, word, or deed. "Things" would include all living beings and perhaps also a selection of nonliving things. Destruction as part of sabotage is sometimes referred to as *hiṃsā* even if the things destroyed are not the property of anyone. To keep things we do not need, but which others might need is "injuring," that is, reducing certain chances that others may have for self-realization.

Non-stealing does not mean merely not to steal. To keep or take what one does not need is also stealing. And, of course, stealing is fraught with violence.

(Hingorani 1968: 5)

Under mental forms of injury, the wide interpretations include hurting people's feelings, hurting their dignity, and hurting relations between others or between others and oneself. The feelings and relations referred to must be positively valued. It would not be *himsā* if person *A* hurts the feelings of hatred harbored by person *B* or his own feelings of hatred toward *B*. Thus, the wide conception of *himsā* presupposes an ethics. Consequently, an adequate account of the notion of *himsā* implies an account of the ethics in which *himsā* is just one of many notions. As is usually the case in philosophical inquiry, we are led from consideration of a part to that of a total view.

As an example of a broad use of *himsā* (violence), the following is well known:

I cultivate the courage to die without killing, but for the man who does not have this courage I would wish him to cultivate the art of killing and being killed, rather than flee shamefully from danger. For he who runs away is guilty of mental violence: he flees because he has not the courage to be killed in killing.

(*Young India* 2.11.1920)

What the coward violates may be said to be a relation to himself, that of striving for self-realization. A more specific interpretation of the violence of the coward may be given, but our point here is mainly to establish that, used in the wide senses discussed here, the assertion "This is *himsā*!" does not say much more than "This is ethically bad!"

The concept of *abhimsā* made by negating the wide concept of *himsā* is correspondingly narrow. This has the important consequence that much is required of a struggle in order to be in accordance with *abhimsā*. The wider the concept of *himsā*, the narrower, of course, will be the corresponding concept of *abhimsā*. Considering the need for degrees of *abhimsā*, the narrow concept might be expressed by the term "perfect *abhimsā*." Such a grading is applied rather often by Gandhi. If we take "violence" and "non-violence" as conventional renderings of *himsā* and *abhimsā*, we will find that corresponding relations between the English words hold. In order to avoid misunderstanding, one might prefer to use the terms *nonviolence* and *nonviolent* without a hyphen to express high degrees of *abhimsā*—degrees required according

to the doctrine of *ahimsā*. The unhyphenated term *nonviolence* would then have a positive quality that is not well expressed by the simple negation, non-violence. Because this distinction would often not be noticed and because, unlike in Gandhi's era, contemporary usage eliminates the hyphen, even when communicating the simple negation, we shall not attempt to use the hyphen (or its absence) to make such distinctions.

It is sometimes useful to point out an ideal limit, however great or small the chances of reaching it. Gandhi may be said to refer to a "zero degree" of *himsā* and a "maximum degree" of *ahimsā*. Yet, he has made it amply clear that no one on this planet can help transgressing a norm expressible by "Avoid doing injury to anything in thought, word, or deed." The extension of the narrow concept as applied to persons is therefore strictly speaking zero — like the concept of an ideal gas or of "the economic man." As Gandhi points out:

Ahimsā means not to hurt any living creature by thought, word, or deed, even for the supposed benefit of that creature. To observe this principle fully is impossible for men, who kill a number of living beings large and small as they breathe or blink or till the land. (Gandhi 1961, vol. 2: 28)

It is not difficult to find instances in which Gandhi explicitly repudiates what he says here about *himsā* in relation to benefit. The following is a defense of euthanasia:

Non-violence sometimes calls upon us to put an end to the life of a living being. For instance a calf in the Ashram dairy was lame and had developed terrible sores; it could not eat and breathed with difficulty. After three days' argument with myself and my co-workers I had poison injected into its body and thus put an end to its life. That action was non-violent, because it was wholly unselfish inasmuch as the sole purpose was to achieve the calf's relief from pain. It was a surgical operation, and I should do exactly the same thing with my child, if he were in the same predicament. (Gandhi 1959: 44)

Much terrorism has perhaps been performed "wholly unselfishly," for instance, terrorism perpetrated by religious movements. Gandhi would not likely accept the postulate of unselfishness as sufficient for the qualification of nonviolence. Gandhi also subscribes to a graduated norm of minimizing *himsā*: to avoid as much as possible, and as often as possible, the injury of beings. Mostly, or perhaps always, he has living beings in mind, but recent

development of the movement against injury to nature may well find it adequate to subsume its basic norms under the above very general principle of *ahiṃsā*, either read as an imperative or as a valuation: it is of negative value to injure anything. This formulation conveniently points to the near vacuity of the principle as long as we do not explain how we define or would exemplify injury.

Another, still more severe conception:

[E]very act of injury to a living creature and endorsement of such an act by refraining from non-violent effort, whenever possible, to prevent it, is a breach of *ahiṃsā*.
(*Young India* 30.8.1928: 294)

This declaration so widens the concept as to make it an act of violence to *abstain* from efforts to prevent injurious acts, for instance, suppression, manipulation, and exploitation. Unjust societies are violent in this sense. Retreat to the dead regions of the Himalayas or the Antarctic does not avail: sitting there, you are violent if some preventable violence of the active or passive kind is taking place somewhere else. The width of the above conception depends on how widely we conceive the “possible”: you are violent if you do not prevent violence that it is possible for you to prevent. Taking “possible” in a wide sense, we get another zero-degree of *hiṃsā* and a maximum of *ahiṃsā*, useful as an indication of an ideal limit, but otherwise inapplicable.

When Gandhi, in his life as politician, declared that this or that was violence, he mostly had such narrower concepts of violence in mind. They must be placed somewhere between “crude malevolent physical violence” and “physical or mental injury, temporary or permanent.” What he had in mind in each instance cannot be found by looking at any definition or at general accounts of his views.

The study of the etymology or the various usages of *ahiṃsā* and the various concepts of *ahiṃsā* that Gandhi may have had in mind is of limited usefulness. It should not be neglected, but neither should it be taken to offer any key to the understanding of the immense complexity of Gandhi’s thought and action.

One may justifiably talk about “the political ethics of nonviolence (as conceived by Gandhi).” However, since Gandhi never attempted any systematization himself, his ethics can only be explicated in the form of a *hypothetical reconstruction*. If we consider the vast area of activity to which Gandhi

applied ethical valuations, it is not surprising that his ethics, if at all systematizable, must be immensely complex. There are no easy ways of deriving fairly concrete policies of action from the general and abstract, and often noncognitively expressed, basic rules or maxims of “nonviolence” as applied to political life. Gandhi himself clearly realized this difficulty:

There are problems of Truth, but it is not very hard to understand what Truth is. But in understanding Ahimsā we every now and then find ourselves out of our depth. Ahimsā was discussed in the Ashram at greater length than any other subject. Even now the question often arises whether a particular act is violent or non-violent. (Harijan 27.11.1949)

Some admirers of Gandhi insist that his ethics should not be systematized because no living ethics can be and because such an effect is foreign to his spirit. However, the intense and protracted discussion, favored by Gandhi himself, regarding whether this or that act is consistent with *ahimsā* furnishes a convincing refutation of the “irrationalists.” The important thing is to keep the pretensions of any rational reconstruction realistic, that is, at a rather modest level.

Gandhi on Nonviolence

After so much conceptual gymnastics, the reader ought to be rewarded by enlightening quotations from the Mahatma himself.¹⁴ They show the intended universal applicability, active character, and multifarious forms of nonviolence:

Ahimsā is not the crude thing it has been made to appear. Not to hurt any living thing is no doubt part of Ahimsā. But it is its least expression. The principle of Ahimsā is hurt by every evil thought, by undue haste, by lying, by hatred, by wishing ill to anybody. . . .

In its negative form, it means not injuring any living being whether by body or mind. I may not, therefore, hurt the person of any wrong-doer or bear any ill-will to him and so cause him mental suffering. This statement does not cover suffering caused to the wrong-doer by natural acts of mine which do not proceed from ill-will. It, therefore, does not prevent me from withdrawing from his presence a child whom he, we shall imagine, is about to strike. Indeed, the proper practise of Ahimsā requires me to withdraw the intended victim from the wrong-doer, if I am in any way whatsoever the guardian of such a child. . . .

Ahiṃsā really means that you may not offend anybody, you may not harbour an uncharitable thought even in connection with one who may consider himself to be your enemy. . . .

If we resent a friend's action or the so-called enemy's action, we still fall short of this doctrine. . . . If we harbour even this thought, we depart from this doctrine of ahiṃsā. Those who join the ashram have to literally accept that meaning. That does not mean that we practise that doctrine in its entirety. Far from it. It is an ideal which we have to reach, and it is an ideal to be reached even at this very moment, if we are capable of doing so. . . .

In its positive form, Ahiṃsā means the largest love, the greatest charity. If I am a follower of Ahiṃsā I must love my enemy. I must apply the same rules to the wrong-doer who is my enemy or a stranger to me as I would to my wrong-doing father or son. This active Ahiṃsā necessarily includes truth and fearlessness. As man cannot deceive the loved one, he does not fear or frighten him or her. Gift of life is the greatest of all gifts; a man who gives it in reality, disarms all hostility. He has paved the way for an honourable understanding. And none who is himself subject to fear can bestow that gift. He must therefore be himself fearless. A man cannot then practise Ahiṃsā and be a coward at the same time. The practise of Ahiṃsā calls forth the greatest courage. . . .

My reverent study of the scriptures of the world has led me to the belief that all register emphatic and unequivocal testimony in favour of non-violence being practised by all, not merely singly but collectively as well. In all humility I have often felt that having no axes to grind and having by nature a detached mind, I give a truer interpretation of the Hindu, Islamic or other scriptures. For this humble claim I anticipate the forgiveness of Sanatanists, Christians and Mussalmans. . . .¹⁵

Gandhi on Truth

Even at the cost of some repetition, we shall stress the relation between a nonviolent ethics of struggles and persistent disagreements and an honest unrelenting search for Truth.

The most famous dialogue on the relation between Truth and nonviolence is that between the Hunter Committee's council and Gandhi in 1919. Since the details of the dialogue, however well known, have still not sufficiently impressed all students of Gandhi, we find it justifiable to quote from it:

Council: However honestly a man may strive in his search for truth, his notions of truth may be different from the notions of others. Who then is to determine the truth?

- Accused: The individual himself would determine that.
- Council: Different individuals would have different views as to truth. Would that not lead to confusion?
- Accused: I do not think so.
- Council: Honestly striving after truth differs in every case.
- Accused: That is why the nonviolence part was a necessary corollary. Without that there would be confusion and worse.

The most crucial point is perhaps Gandhi's admission that "honestly striving after truth differs in every case." Such an admission makes it altogether natural to look at violent opponents, even terrorists, without moral indignation insofar as they are honest strivers after truth. Further, who is able to judge the degree of honesty of others? Gandhi's line of information and persuasion is firmly based on the admission of honestly held opposite views and of our high degree of ignorance concerning the efforts made by different people to arrive at facts or plausible hypotheses.

Highly significant are the following three central passages concerning the relation of *abimsā* to truth:

The more I search after Truth the more I feel it is all-inclusive. Truth is not covered by non-violence. But I often experience that non-violence is included in truth. What a pure heart feels at a particular time is Truth; by remaining firm on that, undiluted Truth can be attained. This does not involve any conflict of duty or conscience either. But difficulties often arise in determining what non-violence is. The use of bacteria-destroying liquid is also violence. It is only by firm adherence to truth that one can live non-violently in a world which is full of violence. I can, therefore, derive non-violence out of truth.

(*Harijan* 27.11.1949)

In this quotation, the personological and pragmatic component of Gandhi's use of the term *truth* has gained the upper hand. The epistemological component has been submerged, and it is only this that makes it not too unlikely that nonviolence can be derived from truth. Mostly, Gandhi—as shown above—stresses the difficulty of finding truth and the inevitability of conflicting views. If there are opposite views about what is happening in a conflict, one may unintentionally injure one or both sides. A "pure heart" is not enough, as Gandhi often shows; one must try to reach a true opinion about what is going on.

It is perhaps clear from the foregoing, that without Ahimsā it is not possible to seek and find Truth. Ahimsā and Truth are so intertwined, that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them. They are like the two sides of a coin, or rather of a smooth unstamped metallic disc. Who can say, which is the obverse, and which is the reverse? Nevertheless Ahimsā is the means; Truth is the end. Means to be means must always be within our reach, and so Ahimsā is our supreme duty. (Gandhi 1961, vol. 2: 27)

Most of the components of the Truth concept are manifest in the following elucidation of the relation of Truth to nonviolence:

But it is impossible for us to realize perfect Truth so long as we are imprisoned in this mortal frame. We can only visualize it in our imagination. We cannot, through the instrumentality of this ephemeral body, see face to face Truth which is eternal. That is why in the last resort one must depend on faith.

It appears that the impossibility of full realization of Truth in this mortal body led some ancient seeker after Truth to the appreciation of Ahimsā. The question which confronted him was: "Shall I bear with those who create difficulties for me, or shall I destroy them?" The seeker realized that he who went on destroying others did not make headway but simply stayed where he was, while the man who suffered those who created difficulties marched ahead, and at times even took others with him. (Ibid., p. 25)

In short, the seeker after Truth understands that it never will be within reach, that he always will be more or less in untruth and error. This makes him nonviolent.

In our attempt to condense and systematize Gandhi's teaching on group conflicts, it has been necessary to cut out some of these themes relating to Truth and nonviolence. We have adopted the subordination of nonviolence to Truth, the latter notion split into two: truth with a small *t* and self-realization.

A Conceptual Reconstruction

Gandhi often speaks about realizing Truth and realizing God;¹⁶ he speaks somewhat more rarely of realizing self.¹⁷ He nevertheless maintains, as has already been mentioned, that "self-realization is the subject of the Bhagavad Gita as it is of all scriptures" (Desai 1946: 1). In order to condense the teaching and make it more universally understandable, the aspects of realization may be reduced to two: the search for self-realization or God or Truth with a capital *T* and the search for truth (with a small *t*).

From truth with a small t , or from the ontological or epistemological concept of truth, no *ahimsā* principle can be derived. One may, however, construct a derivation by taking “search for God or Truth” to be, in the main, other names for the more understandable self-realization and adding a metaphysical postulate announcing the essential or ultimate oneness of all living beings. From the premises that one should realize one’s self and that all (living) selves are ultimately one, the necessity of both truth seeking and *ahimsā* may be derived.

We now introduce the concept of an individual P ’s self-realization as realization of P ’s potential for complete expression. The actual level of self-realization attained may show variation and can never reach the theoretical maximum. There are different kinds of measures of level of self-realization. Therefore, when applied in the following, Gandhi’s criteria are presupposed. According to Gandhi, the path toward an individual’s maximum self-realization does not necessarily obstruct the paths of others; on the contrary, mutual aid is possible and desirable.

For the sake of our condensed conceptual reconstruction we shall now introduce a general concept of nonviolence:

Himsā (violence) is avoidable direct influence in the direction of a lower level of self-realization. *Ahimsā* (nonviolence) is direct influence in the direction of a higher level of self-realization.

According to Gandhi, a decrease or increase of self-realization in one individual involves a decrease or increase (not necessarily of the equal magnitude) of the self-realization of others.¹⁸ Thus, *himsā* by anyone against anyone is also *himsā* against me.

The main motive for introducing this broad concept of violence, and the corresponding narrow concept of nonviolence, is to allow us to subsume under this broad concept of violence all those phenomena that Gandhi actually does subsume. To put it more directly, we wish to subsume exploitation, suppression, and other phenomena that are best defined without reference to any person’s acting with manifest physical violence against another. Impersonal, structural, sociological phenomena that in an avoidable way decrease or obstruct the increase of self-realization are all subsumable under this broad concept of violence.

How Gandhi himself made such subsumptions will be clear later. Here we shall only recall his dictum that the essence of violence is exploitation and that an unjust law “is itself a species of violence” (Gandhi 1944, vol. 1: 150).

*Graphic Presentation of Principles and Norms:
Systematizations *E and *F*

In what follows, those principles and norms from which the norms and hypotheses of Gandhi's teaching on group struggle are explicitly derived are, first of all, made explicit and then fitted into a graphical presentation. There are, of course, many ways to present such derivations. The one offered here is called Systematization *E for easy reference.

SYSTEMATIZATION *E

- *N₁ ≡ Seek complete self-realization.
- *H₁ ≡ Complete self-realization requires seeking truth.
- *N₂ ≡ Seek truth (from *N₁ and *H₁).
- *H₂ ≡ All living beings are ultimately one.
- *H₃ ≡ Violence against yourself precludes realizing your self.
- *H₄ ≡ Violence against any living being is violence against your self (from *H₂ and *H₃).
- *H₅ ≡ Violence by anyone against anyone precludes complete self-realization of anyone (from *H₃ and *H₄).
- *N₃ ≡ Act so as to reduce and eliminate violence (from *N₁ and *H₅).
- *H₆ ≡ Your complete self-realization involves that of others (from *H₂ and *H₅).
- *N₄ ≡ Act so as to help others in their quest for self-realization (from *N₁ and *H₆).
- *N₅ ≡ Act so as to help others in their quest for truth (from *N₁, *H₁, and *H₆).

The immense weight Gandhi attached to the term *Truth* in his speeches and prayers makes it important to try out a systematization with “realize Truth” as the formulation of the top norm. Systematization *F is such an attempt. It is clear, I think, that the systematization is unduly complicated and the derivations not as obvious, on average, as those of Systematization *E.

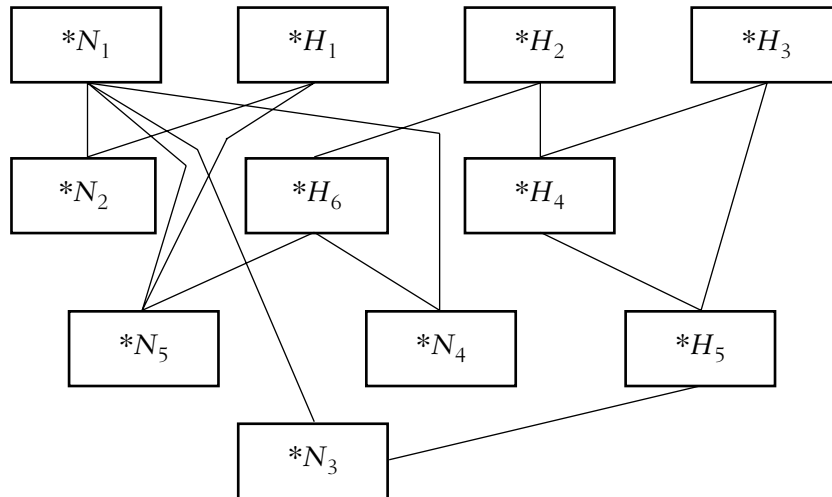


Figure 1. Graphic presentation of the norms and hypotheses of Systematization *E.

The reason for the shortcomings is to be found in Gandhi's multiple use of the word *Truth*.

The basic sentences "Seek complete self-realization," "Realize Truth," "Realize God," and "All are ultimately one" are intended to convey something that is prior to the distinction between an injunction and a description. The True and the Real in much philosophy from Rigveda to Bradley are not adequately thought of as a world or cosmos or anything existing here and there. There is a basic positive valuation of some sort that makes it not quite adequate to formulate the basic "norms" as prescriptions rather than descriptions. On the other hand, the formulation "All living beings are ultimately one," grammatically a description, has a prescriptive component. The oneness is something to be realized; it is not, rather, merely a fact.

The combined descriptive and prescriptive function of basic metaphysical utterances makes it unwarranted to accuse Gandhi of making the naturalistic fallacy. He does not, to take one instance, derive a norm ("Act non-violently") from a description ("All life is ultimately one"). The latter is a component of the metaphysical utterance concerning the universal Self, neither a prescription nor a description.

There are many ways in which Gandhi's ethics and principles of group struggle can be derived from his metaphysics. However, certain positions

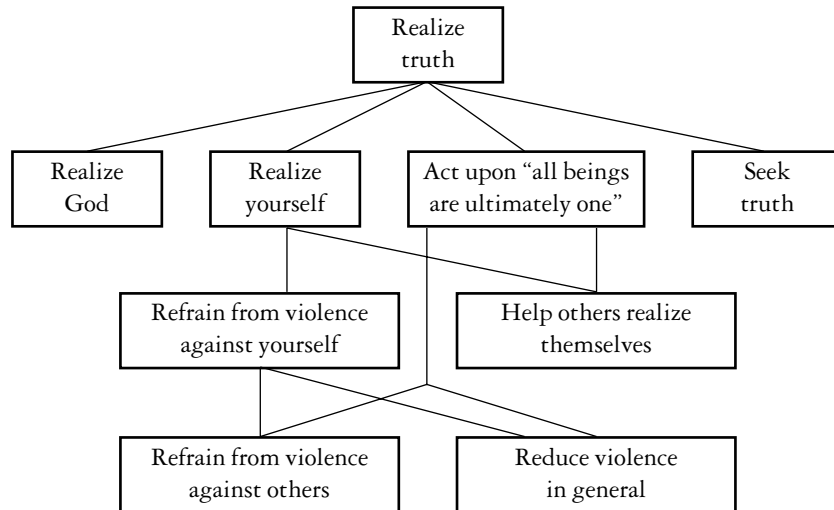


Figure 2. Graphic presentation of Gandhi's norms as depicted in Systematization *F.

must be considered central in any derivation: the ultimate unity of all life, the inescapable fallibility of ethical as well as factual judgments, and the close dependence of what can be achieved (the goals) on how we proceed to achieve it.

From the point of view of analytically oriented philosophy, the wording of Systematizations *E and *F is inordinately vague and ambiguous. Nevertheless, to take this as an objection suggests a misconception of the role of analysis. That role is eminently that of explication and making precise, taking the spontaneous and intuitive metaphysical utterances as initial formulations or starting points.

The formulations *E and *F are starting points for interpretations articulated with a higher degree of preciseness. Thus, "oneness of all living beings" might be made more precise by dynamic interpretations using the process of identification rather than the status of identity. Identification, again, might be considered as a psychological, a sociological, or a biological term, or it might be substituted by a combination of these aspects plus an ethical and political norm. Such substitutions are clearly made by Gandhi. In *Yeravda Mandir*, for example, the religious concept of sacrifice is identified by an ethico-political concept of work:

A Conceptual Reconstruction

The divine law, that man must earn his bread by labouring with his own hands, was first stressed by a Russian writer named T. M. Bondaref. Tolstoy advertised it and gave it wider publicity. In my view, the same principle has been set forth in the third chapter of the *Gita* where we are told, that he who eats without offering sacrifice eats stolen food. Sacrifice here can only mean Bread labour.—Reason too leads us to an identical conclusion.

(Gandhi 1957: 35)

The background of Gandhi's thinking is such that theology, metaphysics, and politics simply cannot be separated—neither in life nor in semantics!