



gandhian nonviolence and passive resistance

by Geoffrey Ostergaard

This previously unpublished text was written by Geoffrey Ostergaard (1926-90) in 1974 as a presentation to the Muirhead society. It is presented here as a clear and illuminating explanation of Gandhi's attitudes to nonviolent action and their philosophical roots, in particular what Gandhi consider 'truth-oriented' nonviolence (including *satyagraha*) and 'power-oriented', coercive nonviolent action (as he viewed 'passive resistance and *duragraha*'). The text has been lightly edited, especially to be gender-inclusive (in line with Geoffrey's later publications).

Discussions of nonviolence tend, not unnaturally, to focus on the issue of the supposed merits, efficacy and justification of nonviolence when contrasted with violence. In this paper, however, I propose to pursue a different tack and I shall have little to say directly about the main issue. My object is to explicate the Gandhian concept of nonviolence and I think that this can best be done, not by contrasting nonviolence with violence but distinguishing two kinds of nonviolence. My thesis, in short, is that nonviolence presents to the world two faces which are often confused with each other but which need to be distinguished if we are to appraise correctly Gandhi's contribution to the subject.

Gandhi is sometimes credited with being, if not the inventor of nonviolence, then the person who first employed it, successfully and on a mass scale, for political purposes. But, although we do owe the term with its present connotations to Gandhi, nothing could be further from the truth. Nonviolent action as a political technique is very old, dating back at least to ancient times. One of the first recorded uses of it occurred in 494 BC when the plebeians of Rome withdrew en masse to the Sacred Mount as a way of seeking redress of their grievances. Subsequently the technique has been employed by all kinds of people, in various circumstances, and on both a small and a large scale. A significant expansion of its use occurred in the late 18th and in the 19th centuries and is associated with the development of the labour and socialist movement and with movements for national independence. In the movement which led to 'the first new nation', the United States of America, a variety of methods of nonviolent action, including tax refusal, were employed by the rebel colonialists before they eventually turned to military struggle. And it was the Hungarian nationalists who, in a protracted campaign lasting from 1850-67, provided one of the clearest examples of successful nonviolent action, the campaign resulting in the recognition of Hungary as an independent state within the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Other pre-Gandhian examples are provided by the Finnish and the Irish nationalists – the latter using, among others, the method of the boycott, named after a landlord against whom it was originally directed. One particular method of nonviolent action – the strike, in all its many varieties – has been the classic weapon of labour and socialist movements. Typically, of course, the strike has been used against employers for economic ends, but overtly political strikes have a long history. And one particular school of socialism, syndicalism, developed the notion that socialism would be achieved by a general strike, in the course of which the workers would take over the factories, mines and workshops, dispossessing the capitalists. The essentially nonviolent character of this notion is conveyed by the syndicalist symbol of the study proletarian standing upright but with folded arms; and also by the name originally given to the general strike by its Owenite inventor, William Benbow, 'The Grand National Holiday'.

It is only in very recent years, however, that academic researchers have begun to make a serious study of nonviolent action as an unconventional political technique intermediate between constitutional action, on the one hand, and violent revolutionary action, on the other. The person who has done most in this respect is Gene Sharp whose book, , published last year [1973], provides the most comprehensive analysis of its theory and practice. Cataloguing with historical examples of their use, no less than two hundred distinct methods of nonviolent action, Sharp classifies them in three broad categories:

- (i) nonviolent protest and persuasion
- (ii) nonviolent noncooperation, and
- (iii) nonviolent intervention.



The first includes actions which are mainly symbolic in character, such as mass demonstrations, marches, vigils, and teach-ins. The second includes actions which involve the withdrawal of particular types of cooperation with the opponent. Examples, in addition to strikes and boycotts, are mass voluntary emigration, tax refusal, and abstention from elections. In the third category fall those methods which intervene in the situation either, negatively, by disrupting established patterns of behaviour or, positively, by creating new ones. Actions of this kind are the most radical of all and are exemplified by fasts, sit-ins, work-ins, and the establishment of alternative or parallel governments.

In Sharp's terminology, 'nonviolent action' is a generic term for a political technique adopted by those who seek to achieve their objects without the infliction, or threat of infliction, of physical injury on opponents. Defined in this way nonviolent action is not synonymous with pacifism or identical with religious or philosophical systems emphasizing nonviolence as a moral principle. Some notable campaigns using methods of nonviolent action have been led by pacifists, but many have not. And, further, there are some forms of pacifism which look askance at all or many of the more popular actions of nonviolent action. For example, the form of pacifism held by some Christian sects, such as the Mennonites and the Amish, leads them to adopt a posture of non-resistance rather than nonviolent resistance. They refuse to participate in war or to hold public office, but they do what else the state demands, as long as it is not inconsistent with what they see as their duty to God. For them, evil is not to be resisted even by nonviolent methods: it is to be ignored as much as possible. Historically, the technique of nonviolent action has been used as much, if not more so, by non-pacifists as by pacifists, and, when used by the former, it is often combined with, or is the prelude to, the use of other techniques which involve violence. It is partly for this reason that historians and political scientists have been slow in recognizing nonviolent action as a distinctive, if unconventional, political technique.

Means and ends

In the West, the interest of political scientists and political activists in Gandhi has centred largely on his use of various methods of nonviolent action. It is assumed that it is possible to abstract from Gandhi his technique and to ignore his philosophy and metaphysics and also his peculiar social ideas, such as 'the fad' of reviving the khadi industry by means of the charkha, or spinning wheel. This assumption rests, in turn, on more general assumptions: that techniques are merely techniques, neutral between various social philosophies, and that means are clearly separable from ends in the sphere of human action.

To make explicit these assumptions is to indicate the risk involved in treating Gandhi in this way. For it is an essential element in Gandhi's thought that, in human action, means are not separable from ends. Means precede ends temporally, but the two are morally indistinguishable, and, in the last analysis, are convertible terms. Or, to put it another way, means, according to Gandhi, are never merely instrumental: they are always end-creating and part of a continuous chain of events infused with value. And, because means and ends are convertible terms, one can, in a sense, forget about the ends and concentrate on the means – which are ends-in-view – sure in the knowledge that, if means are pure, the ends also will be pure. More concretely, this view implies that if one has as one's end the achievement of, say, the brotherhood of humanity – a society reflecting concern and respect for others as equals – then the means to it are actions in the here and now which treat all people as brothers and sisters. To act otherwise is, in effect, to abandon one's end which then becomes a mere utopia and worse – a mental construct by which one rationalizes actions which are in fact inconsistent with it.

For Gandhi, utopias should be for today, not for tomorrow – after the revolution. The real revolution is now. Referring to violent revolutionaries whose ultimate ideals he shared, Gandhi rejected their means as self-defeating. 'I would use', he said, 'the most deadly weapons if I believe they would destroy the system. I refrain only because the use of such weapons would only perpetuate the system.'

Truth, Nonviolence and Self-suffering - Sat, Ahimsa and Tapasya

For Gandhi, then, nonviolence is both an end and a means. But, to appreciate the full significance of treating nonviolence in this way, it is necessary to look more closely at his philosophy of action. This philosophy is composed of the three main elements: Truth, Nonviolence, and Self-suffering. The three are inextricably fused together, but, if one can be considered more basic than the others, then that one would be, not nonviolence but truth. This much is suggested by the term Gandhi coined to describe his philosophy: satyagraha, meaning literally



'the firm grasping or holding on to truth'. But, in Gandhi's usage, 'truth' has a wider connotation than it has in English. 'Satya' derives from the Sanskrit 'Sat' which means being and, also, abiding, actual, right, wise, self-existent essence, as anything really is, as anything ought to be. In the Indian tradition of thought, Sat in its highest sense stands for the absolute, archetypal Truth. For Gandhi, therefore, satya embraces not only factual and logical truth but also moral truth and metaphysical truth. The standard Sanskrit-English dictionary gives the following equivalents of satya as an adjective: 'true, real, actual, genuine, sincere, honest, truthful, faithful, pure, virtuous, successful, effectual, valid'; and satya as a noun has even a wider range.

From the perspective of social relationships, it is the moral aspects of satya which are the more important. Satya then stands for the eternal moral order which is a constituent of the cosmic order, the ultimate reality. In its moral sense, Truth for Gandhi approximates to the concept of Justice in the natural law tradition of Western thought. But in its fullest sense Truth is more than Justice: it is truth in the realm of knowledge and righteousness in the realm of conduct, as well as justice in social relations. It is not surprising, therefore, to find Gandhi asserting the familiar religious equation: 'God is Truth'. But, since truth can also be expressed by a sincere atheist, Gandhi goes further and reverses the equation: 'Truth is God', adding that this is the most perfect definition of God.

Given this definition, 'Devotion to Truth', says Gandhi, 'is the sole justification of our existence'. Life is seen as a search for self-realisation, a striving to achieve identification with the absolute which is at once both immanent and transcendent. Truth as the ground of being and as 'the substance of all morality', exists as an absolute and merits a capital T. But one important aspect of Truth is that, in life at least, it is given to men – even to those considered Mahatmas – to glimpse only faintly this absolute. The truth that men actually express, therefore, is always relative, never absolute. This limitation is inherent in the nature of life and it is because of this limitation that the search for Truth must proceed by the way of nonviolence.

The Indian term of nonviolence is ahimsa, meaning literally 'non-injury or non-harm to all sentient beings'. The concept, like satya, has roots in ancient Vedic religious thought. But, in this case, Gandhi invests the traditional concept with new meaning. His usage differs from the orthodox concept of ahimsa in conceiving it in a positive, not merely negative way. Conceived positively, ahimsa would be more fittingly translated into English as the simple four letter word: 'love' – except that 'love' is not a simple word. The Christian concept of agapaic love, signifying good will rather than good feeling towards other persons, comes perhaps nearest to Gandhi's meaning. 'Ahimsa and love are one and the same thing', said Gandhi: and, again, 'In its positive form Ahimsa means the largest love, the greatest charity.'

Thought of in this positive way, nonviolence is not to be identified non-killing. Indeed, as a votary of nonviolence, Gandhi explicitly justified some types of killing of sentient creatures. Men are justified in killing when it is necessary to sustain their bodies; for example, killing monkeys which destroy food crops. They are justified in killing when it is necessary to protect those under their care. On this ground, Gandhi provides a sharp answer to the class question posed by tribunals to the conscientious objector: 'He who refrains from killing a murderer who is about to kill his ward (when he cannot prevent him otherwise) earns no merit but commits a sin; he practises no ahimsa but himsa out of a fatuous sense of ahimsa.' And, finally, killing may be satisfied for the sake of those whose life is taken. On this ground, Gandhi once caused grave offence to orthodox Hindus by sanctioning the killing of a suffering calf. Gandhi regarded such killing as an expression of ahimsa, not himsa. The motive behind the act was for him a basic consideration in deciding whether a particular act of killing amounted to violence or not.

The same consideration led him to insist that nonviolence born of cowardice was not genuine ahimsa. He who has not overcome all fear, including the fear of death, cannot, in his view, practise ahimsa to perfection. If the choice was between cowardice and violence, then the latter was always to be preferred. To practise nonviolence, in his sense, requires the possession of several positive qualities. These include: courage in the face of violence, truthfulness of thought and word, adherence to the ideal of non-possession, and the qualities of the brahmacharya, meaning by that not celibacy but control of all the senses. Above all, the practice of nonviolence requires the presence of love and the total absence of hatred or any other form of ill-will to others, including one's adversaries. But love for one's adversaries does not imply acquiescence in the act of a wrong-doer. In Gandhi's words:

Ahimsa is not merely a negative state of harmlessness but it is a positive state of love, of doing good even to the evil-doer to continue the wrong or tolerating it by passive acquiescence. On the contrary, love, the active state of Ahimsa, requires you to resist the wrong-doer by dissociating yourself from him even though it may offend him or injure him physically.



Truth and Nonviolence are, in Gandhi's philosophy, intimately related. In one sense, Truth has primacy because Truth may be thought of as the end and Nonviolence, or Love, the means. And if ever one found oneself in a situation where there appeared to be a conflict between Truth and Nonviolence, one would have to place Truth first. But, since ends and means are not in fact separable, Truth and Nonviolence may be thought of as two sides of a single coin. In the search for Truth in action, one turns up the nonviolent side of the coin. Nonviolence is essential because absolute Truth is unknowable to humans: to use violence is to make the unwarranted assumption that one has achieved the absolute Truth. Joan Bondurant in *The Conquest of Violence* expresses the relationship thus:

To proceed towards the goal of Truth – truth in the absolute sense – the way must lead through the testing of relative truths as they appear to the individual performer. The testing of truth can be performed only by strict adherence to ahimsa – action based on refusal to do harm, or more accurately, upon love. For truth, judged in terms of human needs, would be destroyed on whichever side it lay, by the use of violence. Nonviolence or ahimsa becomes the supreme value, the one cognisable standard by which true action can be determined.

The third element in Gandhi's philosophy of action, self-suffering, is the one that, perhaps, presents most difficulty for the Western, despite (or is it because of?) the example of Jesus. Like the concept of ahimsa, Gandhi's notion of it is rooted in an ancient Indian concept: tapasya, suffering or sacrifice voluntarily undergone as a means to individual self-realisation. In this sense, it forms the basis of the ascetic practices we associate with yogis – fasts, strict bodily discipline, vows of chastity, and other measures of self-restraint. To many Westerners, such practices smack of masochism, but their object is not perverted pleasure but self-mastery as a step towards self-realisation. The person who undertakes tapasya seeks self-purification by purging away the dross of life, the material things which distract from life's real purpose.

For Gandhi, tapasya retains this original meaning, so that Churchill's description of him as 'the half-naked fakir' is not altogether inapt. But it also has a larger meaning and purpose which are related to nonviolence in action. In this larger sense, it links up with the Socratic idea that it is always better to suffer evil than to inflict it. As Gandhi saw it, 'Suffering injury in one's own person is ... of the essence of nonviolence and is the chosen substitute for violence to others.'

Tapasya plays an important role in the mechanism of satyagraha. First, it demonstrates to the opponent one's seriousness of purpose, indicating that one's opposition is not frivolous, and constituting a guarantee of one's sincerity. Secondly, it shows the opponent that one is completely fearless. Since the satyagrahi is prepared to suffer even unto death, this nonviolence cannot be dismissed as the act of a weak and cowardly person. In this way, the opponent is reluctantly compelled to respect the person. And, thirdly, in Gandhi's words, 'it open the eyes of understanding'. It constitutes a way of reaching the opponent's heart when appeals to his head (rational argument) have failed. It is an element in what Gregg has called 'moral jiu-jitsu'. The act of not striking back, turning the other cheek, accepting injury without retaliation, has the effect – so it is claimed – of pulling up the opponent sharply in his tracks, leading him to reconsider his position as a prelude to joining the satyagrahi in a common pursuit of truth. By a kind of shock treatment dramatising the position of the satyagrahi, writes Bondurant, 'suffering operates ... as a tactic for cutting through the rational defences which the opponent may have built'.

In this aspect of tapasya, there is, one may observe, a large element of faith which shows that satyagraha, in the last analysis, is a closed system, incapable of disproof. The presupposition is that 'no soul is beyond redemption', that the heart of even the most wicked opponent will eventually be touched. And if the satyagrahi fails to achieve this, the fault with the satyagrahi: the nonviolence he or she has been practising has not been sufficiently pure. By definition, satyagraha, rooted in the Truth, must succeed: the failure is that of the satyagrahi, not of satyagraha.

The three elements of Gandhi's philosophy of action - Truth, Nonviolence and Self-suffering – enable us to pinpoint his contribution to nonviolent action considered as a political technique. This contribution may be expressed as the clarification of the two types of nonviolent action which I mentioned at the outset. For convenience, I shall refer to them as 'satyagraha' and 'passive resistance' – the latter a term commonly used to describe technique and used by Gandhi himself in his early days before he had established the use of his own term. In outward appearance, the two forms of nonviolent action have much in common and may involve the use of similar methods, as listed by Sharp. But they differ in their inward character, and in their styles and manner of action.



'Nonviolence of the strong' / 'nonviolence of the weak'

To be specific, in the first place satyagraha is principled nonviolence. Passive resistance, in contrast, is adopted, not on grounds of principle but because one is weak – lacks the means of violence to secure one's objective – or because one recognises that, in some particular situation, the use of violent means is inexpedient, ie it will not be the most efficient way of achieving one's objective, and may even be counter-productive. It was this distinction which Gandhi had in mind when he contrasted nonviolence as a creed with nonviolence as a policy, and 'the nonviolence of the strong' with 'the nonviolence of the weak'.

Leading on from this distinction is a difference about the scope of nonviolence. Because the nonviolence of the satyagrahi is principled, for satyagrahis – but not for passive resisters – it is something which they seek to apply to all social relationships, not merely selected relationships. For passive resisters, nonviolence is like a raincoat to be worn or not worn according to the state of the weather. For satyagrahis, it is like their skin, something which is perpetually renewed but never worn out or cast off. Seeking to apply nonviolence to all social relationships, satyagrahis, unlike passive resisters, strongly emphasise what Gandhi called his 'constructive programme' – measures or actions of social reform, such as the promotion of khadi and the uplift of the outcastes in India, which, on the face of it, have no connection with the confrontation of the principal opponent.

A third difference may be expressed by saying that satyagraha is truth-oriented, whereas passive resistance is power-oriented. Passive resistance, although an unconventional political technique, belongs squarely in the realm of power politics. It is an attempt to use force, albeit nonviolently, to achieve one's end. The idea is to direct the power at one's disposal at the weak points in the opponent's defences, and to use it with sufficient skill to overcome him, so that he is compelled to stand down, or at least to make concessions. Passive resisters are not concerned with truth: they know, or think they know, that truth is on their side. They assume that error is all on the side of the opponent: the opponent is wrong and must therefore be compelled to acknowledge the right. The desired outcome of the conflict is, consequently, prejudged. Passive resisters struggle against their opponent, seek a victory over their opponent; and see the end result as a change of relations which will benefit their cause and discredit their opponent. Because power and not truth is central to this orientation, passive resisters are likely to be careless of truth in the limited factual sense. They may exaggerate the fault of their opponent and wilfully misinterpret their opponent's statements and actions; and, as a way of improving their bargaining position in the final negotiated settlement, they may state their own claims at a point higher than they are really prepared to settle for. Again, fearful of giving anything away to the opponent, passive resisters are likely to be secretive in planning and in carrying out a action. If they can catch the opponent unawares, so much the better, and so much nearer the 'victory'. In short, passive resistance shares many of the characteristics we associate with conventional politics when we call it 'a dirty game'.

In contrast, satyagraha is always practised with the opponent, not against him. The opponent may experience and define the action of the satyagrahi as a form of coercion, but coercion is not the essence of the situation. The struggle belongs essentially to the realm of moral values, not power politics. The satyagrahi seeks to transcend conventional power politics in an effort to establish a new kind of politics. No victory is sought over the opponent, but rather a resolution of the conflict will be of real benefit to both sides. Naturally satyagrahis believe that they are right and their opponent wrong, but they do not assume truth is all on one side. Recognising that people can achieve only relative not absolute truth, satyagrahis maintain an open mind which is prepared to admit the valid claims of the opponent. And, although they are always ready to negotiate and to reach an honourable settlement, their posture is not that of a bargainer. They put forward proposals that they genuinely believe in and stick to them or modify them in the light of their understanding of what truth and love demand in the developing situation. Hopefully, what they seek through the conflict is a deeper realisation of the truth, a new level of understanding, by both parties. Since truth is at the forefront of his mind, the satyagrahi scorns secrecy and manoeuvring in their actions, and they refuse to take unfair advantage of any weaknesses they may discern in their opponent's defences.

The distinction between being power-oriented and being truth-oriented leads to other important differences. Passive resistance is a form of nonviolent coercion: it seeks to compel the opponent to do something against his will. Satyagraha, in contrast, is not intentionally coercive: it seeks always to convert the opponent, to persuade him voluntarily and willingly to do what is right. Since conversion and not coercion is the aim, satyagrahis are careful to choose methods which are appropriate to this aim. Methods which humiliate and harass an opponent are not conducive to his conversion. They are more likely to generate fear, hatred and continued resistance. And even if they appear to succeed, they may well embitter subsequent relations between the parties and lay the seeds of future conflicts. Respect for the person of the opponent is essential to satyagraha, and this involves keeping clearly



in mind the distinction between a person and the evil he represents. Satyagrahis seek to separate the opponent from his evil and to treat him as a person, as a brother. The refusal of satyagrahis to inflict physical injury on the opponent but willingness to accept such injury themselves is their signal to the opponent that they think of themselves as the opponent's fearless brother or sister and wish the opponent to think likewise of him or her.

In short, passive resistance is a power struggle in which nonviolence figures as a tactic and presents a negative face. Satyagraha, although it too involves struggle, is above all a search for truth in which nonviolence, adopted as a principled way of life, appears as a positive, moral force – the force of truth and love. Passive resistance, when practised skilfully, may produce favourable results, but these are likely to be limited and temporary gains, setting the stage for future conflict. When practised unskilfully, it may, like violent action, serve simply to exacerbate the situation. Satyagraha, on the other hand, with truth as its lodestar, never fails: it is creative nonviolence leading to a constructive transforming of relationships. This transformation not only effects a change of policy but also ensures a basic re-structuring of the situation which led to the conflict. Conducted in a way that is fundamentally supportive of and reassuring to the opponent, the outcome of the struggle is always educative to both sides, and it leaves no legacy of bitterness behind.

Satyagraha and passive resistance, as I have outlined them, may best be seen as 'ideal types' of nonviolence, or perhaps better, as two models of nonviolent action at opposite ends of a continuum, like the economists' models of perfect competition and monopoly. Any concrete instance of nonviolent action will, almost certainly, contain elements of both but with leanings towards one rather than the other. Even the Gandhian campaigns in India bear this out, as Gandhi came to appreciate towards the end of his life. Most of those who joined him in the struggle for independence, especially the bulk of politicians in the Indian National Congress, were passive resisters rather than satyagrahis. It is not surprising, therefore, that Congress leaders ignored what is called Gandhi's Last Will and Testament, written on the eve of his assassination. In this remarkable document, Gandhi urged Congress to disband as a political party and to transform itself into Lok Seva Sangh – an association for the service of the people: a constructive work organisation which would undertake the task of completing a nonviolent revolution, bringing real independence to the masses of India. Power-oriented rather than truth-oriented, the politicians retained Congress and proceeded to build up a conventional nation-state relying for its defence on military force. Gandhi is still hailed as the Father of the Indian Nation, but the central message of his life has been largely ignored by most of those who have given him this label.

One final point. From the perspective of political thought, Gandhi may be seen as the polar opposite of Machiavelli, the thinker who ushers in the period of modern politics. With his conception of real politik and his notion of *raison d'état*, with the end justifying the means, Machiavelli insisted that the realm of politics must be separated from the realm of ethics. Ethics has its rules, but politics too has its rules, and they are very different. Princes must bear this in mind and, as politicians, give precedence to the rules of politics where they conflict with the rules of ethics. Gandhi explicitly refused to make such a separation, insisting that there is only one realm of reality, and that 'what is morally right cannot be pragmatically wrong or politically wrong or invalidated on grounds of apparent futility' (Ronald Sampson, *Equality and Power*). But it is a feeble interpretation of Gandhi to see him as trying simply to put together again what Machiavelli had torn asunder.

Beneath the stark difference in the thinking of the two men, there is an underlying common thought: the practice of power politics cannot by any logic be reconciled with the precepts of ethics. To this Machiavelli responds: So much for the ethics! But Gandhi responds: So much the worse for power politics! And he proceeds to attempt to transcend power politics and to pioneer a new kind of politics – the politics of truth and love. To tough-minded politicians, Gandhi's attempt appears absurd, an impossible enterprise. But to such people Gandhi had an answer which may contain more insight than the trite formula 'politics is the art of the possible'. 'Our task', he said, 'is to make the impossible possible by an ocular demonstration in our own conduct'.

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Paper presented to the Muirhead Society, Birmingham, 25 October 1974