

Gandhian Thoughts: Ethics, Morality and Interlink

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Abstract:

This paper critically examines the Gandhian philosophical triad of Satya (truth), Ahimsa (nonviolence), and Satyagraha, elucidating the intrinsic interrelation among these core concepts. For Mahatma Gandhi, these principles are not discrete but deeply intertwined; this study seeks to explore the nuanced interconnectivity that underpins his moral and political thought. Gandhi famously asserted that "Truth is God" and "God is Truth." While these statements are logically equivalent within the framework of the identity relation, Gandhi privileged the formulation "Truth is God" as ontologically and ethically more foundational. The implications of this prioritization are analysed in depth. Gandhi's conceptualization of nonviolence is inextricably linked with the quest for truth, to the extent that the two are practically inseparable. This paper engages with various dimensions of Gandhi's notion of nonviolence, delineating its ethical, spiritual, and socio-political facets. Satyagraha, a term coined by Gandhi himself, signifies a form of principled, nonviolent resistance aimed not at defeating the adversary but at transforming opposition by awakening the moral conscience of the opponent. The study further interrogates Gandhi's distinction between Satyagraha and Passive Resistance, clarifying the former's deeper philosophical and ethical commitments. Moreover, the paper explores the diverse modalities of Satyagraha endorsed by Gandhi, including non-cooperation, civil disobedience, and tax resistance. Special attention is paid to the stringent ethical prerequisites that Gandhi imposed upon the Satyagrahi, emphasizing moral discipline and spiritual integrity.

Keywords: Truth, Nonviolence, Satyagraha, Satyagraha, Satyagrahi, God, Gandhism, Brahmacharya, Love, Poverty, Passive Resistance, Non-possession

Introduction:

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948) evolved into the figure revered as Mahatma Gandhi through the articulation of profound ethical insights, his moral authority in the public sphere, and an unwavering commitment to spiritual inquiry. His pivotal role in India's struggle for independence from British colonial rule, as well as his earlier campaigns against racial discrimination and social injustice in South Africa, is widely acknowledged. However, it is essential to recognize that Gandhi's engagement in political and social movements—whether in India or abroad—was deeply rooted in a set of foundational principles to which he remained steadfastly committed throughout his life. This paper seeks to examine Gandhi's conceptual framework primarily regarding Satya (Truth), Ahimsa (Nonviolence), and Satyagraha (Truth-force or Soul-force). It is pertinent to note that Gandhi himself resisted the institutionalization of his ideas under the label of 'Gandhism'. In Harijan (March 28, 1936), he explicitly stated that he did not claim authorship of any novel doctrine, but rather sought to apply enduring, universal truths to the exigencies of

daily human existence. If his thought were to be described philosophically, Gandhi maintained that it should not be called 'Gandhism', as he rejected any formulation that suggested a rigid ideological system [1]. Although Gandhi did not identify as an academic philosopher in the conventional sense—one systematically developing doctrines in metaphysics, epistemology, or ethics—his writings and actions nonetheless reflect a deeply philosophical orientation. He was likely responding to those who, perhaps prematurely, attempted to codify his worldview as a formal philosophical system under the rubric of 'Gandhism.' Interestingly, Gandhi did occasionally invoke the term himself, as during his address at the Karachi Congress in 1931, when he declared, "Gandhi may be dead, but Gandhism is imperishable" [2]. This appears to reflect his conviction in the timeless relevance of core moral tenets such as truthfulness and nonviolence in the conduct of everyday life. In Harijan (March 2, 1940), Gandhi further clarified that if 'Gandhism' were ever to become synonymous with sectarianism or were reduced to a doctrine upheld by a loyal band of followers, it ought to be discarded. More pointedly, he asserted that if 'Gandhism' were ever equated with falsehood or misrepresentation, it should be abolished—while affirming that Satya (Truth) and Ahimsa (Nonviolence) themselves are indestructible [3]. Gandhi candidly admitted his own limitations in living up to the ideals he espoused, acknowledging the profound difficulty in adhering consistently to such a demanding ethical vision. For this reason, he discouraged the notion of personal discipleship, maintaining that following his ideals required extraordinary moral discipline and introspection.

Gandhi on Truth:

Gandhi's conception of truth was profoundly shaped by a confluence of religious and philosophical traditions. He drew inspiration not only from the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita, but also from the broader Hindu cultural ethos, as well as Jainism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and the writings of Leo Tolstoy. These diverse influences coalesced to form the distinctive moral and spiritual framework that undergirded Gandhi's worldview. It is important to remain cognizant of this eclectic background when engaging with his positions on various philosophical and ethical issues. To begin our exploration of Gandhi's understanding of truth, we may consider his foundational assertion: "Truth is God." Gandhi observes that throughout history, the invocation of God's name has frequently served to justify violence and cruelty. While he does not deny that similar atrocities have occasionally been committed in the name of truth—particularly in the context of scientific or ideological pursuits—his declaration that "Truth is God" functions as a corrective to the misuse of religious rhetoric. By privileging truth over theistic conceptions that can be manipulated, Gandhi aims to neutralize the critique that religion has often been a pretext for oppression and bloodshed [4]. Gandhi acknowledges the inherent limitations of human cognition in comprehending the divine, noting that the human mind is fundamentally incapable of fully grasping an entity that transcends its epistemic capacities. In this regard, he refers to the assertion in Hindu philosophy that only God truly exists, while all else is ultimately illusory. He draws parallels to Islamic theology, particularly the Kalema, which affirms divine unity. Additionally, Gandhi points out that the Sanskrit term for truth, Sat, literally denotes "that which exists." From this semantic and metaphysical standpoint, he concludes that "Truth is God," a formulation that locates truth within the domain of ultimate reality [5]. For Gandhi, this equation affirms that God alone is real and enduring, whereas all other phenomena are transient. Thus, the atrocities committed in the name of God do not, in his view, tarnish the divine essence, which remains unblemished. Gandhi also offers a reciprocal formulation: "God is Truth." However, he makes clear that while these statements may appear logically equivalent, he places

greater philosophical and ethical emphasis on the former— “Truth is God.” In elaborating “God is Truth,” Gandhi references Hindu scriptures, which attribute to God innumerable names and forms. Precisely because of this multiplicity, Gandhi argues, God is ultimately nameless and formless; similarly, though God speaks in many tongues, He is essentially beyond speech. His study of Islam reinforced this perception, as he found a parallel abundance of divine appellations in Islamic theology. While some equate God with love, Gandhi problematizes this notion by observing that in English, “love” is semantically ambiguous and often associated with sensual desire—a connotation he finds morally degrading. He expresses disappointment that few share his view equating love with Ahimsa (nonviolence). In contrast, he observes that the concept of truth carries no such ambiguity; even atheists—who reject the existence of a deity—nonetheless affirm the value and necessity of truth in their pursuit of knowledge. This universality further led Gandhi to favour “Truth is God” as a more inclusive and unassailable formulation [6]. But what precisely does Gandhi mean by truth? Clearly, he is not concerned with truth as a semantic property of propositional statements—e.g., “Grass is green”—but rather with a deeper, spiritual conception of truth as apprehended through personal experience and moral striving. For Gandhi, truth is intimately tied to the individual’s conscience and moral intuition. In response to the question “What is truth?” Gandhi replied, “...it is what the voice within tells you” [7]. However, Gandhi was acutely aware of the potential for self-deception in appeals to one’s “inner voice.” He cautioned that, just as scientific inquiry requires the rigorous application of method and discipline, the pursuit of spiritual truth necessitates a comparable ethical discipline. He maintained that only those who undergo a strict regimen of moral and spiritual self-discipline can discern the voice of truth from within. To this end, Gandhi prescribed the observance of several vows as prerequisites for engaging in the spiritual experiment of realizing Truth as God. Among these, he emphasized five cardinal vows: Satya (truthfulness), Brahmacharya (celibacy), Ahimsa (nonviolence), Aparigraha (non-possession), and Asteya (poverty or non-stealing). These virtues are not merely ancillary but are central to the ethical foundation necessary for authentic spiritual inquiry [8]. Gandhi viewed these as essential disciplines for anyone who sincerely seeks to align their life with truth in its highest, divine sense.

Gandhi on Non-Violence:

Gandhi’s unwavering commitment to Ahimsa (non-violence) is among the most well-documented and defining features of his ethical and political thought. Far from being a novel principle, Gandhi himself acknowledged the ancient lineage of non-violence, remarking that it is “as old as the hills.” He made a similar assertion concerning Satya (Truth), thus situating both concepts within a timeless spiritual tradition. The primacy of Ahimsa in the moral and spiritual evolution of humanity was emphasized in Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism in ancient India. Gandhi, in his characteristic humility, repeatedly claimed that he had “nothing new to teach the world” in this respect. He maintained that the doctrine of Ahimsa had always been advocated by Prophets and Avatar, none of whom had ever endorsed violence or cruelty. According to Gandhi, the animalistic nature of humans inclines them toward violence, but the divine spirit within them inclines toward peace. The awakening of this spirit, he believed, propels the individual towards non-violence. Hence, humanity must either embark on the path of spiritual progress or remain mired in its baser instincts. Prophets and divine incarnations, Gandhi observed, have historically urged individuals to cultivate truth, harmony, fraternity, and justice—all of which are intrinsic to the practice of Ahimsa [9]. What distinguishes Gandhi’s approach, however, is not merely a theoretical articulation of Ahimsa or Satya, but their practical implementation through sustained ethical

experimentation. Gandhi's writings, speeches, and political actions exemplify what he termed his "experiments with truth." For him, Truth was the supreme ideal—the goal—while non-violence was the indispensable means of realizing it. He recounts an incident involving a Jain Muni who remarked that Gandhi was not so much a devout adherent of Ahimsa as he was a seeker of Satya, suggesting that Gandhi prioritized truth above non-violence. Gandhi endorsed this characterization, explaining: "In fact, it was in the course of my pursuit of truth that I discovered non-violence" [10]. Gandhi consistently affirmed that truth and non-violence are inextricably intertwined—so intimately connected that it is "practically impossible to disentangle and separate them." He likened their relationship to the two indistinguishable sides of a smooth, unstamped metallic disc. As previously noted, for Gandhi, truth is the end, and non-violence the means. He elaborated further: "Means, to be means, must always be within our reach, and so Ahimsa is our supreme duty." He was convinced that if the means—non-violence—were rightly chosen and consistently upheld, the end—truth—would inevitably be realized, regardless of temporary setbacks. Therefore, Gandhi concluded that the relentless pursuit of truth, which is synonymous with God, must be sustained without compromise [11]. This raises a critical question: How does one attain a state of non-violence? According to Gandhi, non-violence is "the finest quality of the heart," and cannot be achieved through mere mechanical or performative acts. It demands rigorous, continuous training—a strenuous moral and spiritual discipline integrated into everyday life. Gandhi acknowledged that such a regimen may appear demanding or unappealing, yet he emphasized the necessity of sustained mental and emotional effort. One must labour to harmonize thought, speech, and action to attain a genuine internal disposition of non-violence. He cautioned that the superficial or insincere performance of non-violent acts—without the corresponding inner conviction—was not only ineffective but potentially harmful to both the individual and society [12]. Gandhi did not confine the application of Satya and Ahimsa to individual morality alone. His overarching vision was to extend these principles to collective entities—groups, communities, and entire nations. He believed that his personal conviction, fortified by faith, revealed new ethical insights in daily life. Gandhi asserted that non-violence is an attribute of the soul, and as such, should permeate all aspects of practical life. He declared emphatically, "If it cannot be practiced in all departments, it has no practical value" [13]. For Gandhi, Ahimsa is a universal principle—applicable in every context, even in the face of hostility or adversity. Its true efficacy, he argued, is revealed precisely when it is tested by resistance or opposition. Importantly, Gandhi emphasized that the success of non-violence does not depend solely on the goodwill of the adversary; its potency lies in the moral force it exerts [14].

Though this paper does not allow for an exhaustive examination of all Gandhi's reflections on non-violence, we may conclude with several of the core insights he advanced:

- Non-violence, by implication, constitutes a process of self-purification—as comprehensive as humanly possible.
- The moral strength of non-violence in an individual is directly proportional to their capacity, not merely the will, to commit violence.
- The superiority of non-violence over violence is categorical; a non-violent person possesses greater strength than one who resorts to violence.
- Non-violence admits of no defeat: "The end of violence is surest defeat."
- The ultimate outcome of non-violence is certain victory—if such a term can be appropriately applied—since in a realm devoid of the concept of defeat, the notion of victory becomes transcendent [15].

Gandhi on Satyagraha:

Gandhi coined the term Satyagraha by fusing the Sanskrit words sat (truth) and agraha (firmness or insistence), originally to denote the Indians' non-violent resistance movement against systemic injustice in South Africa under European colonial rule. Initially, Gandhi had proposed the term Sadāgraha—meaning "firmness in truth"—but Gandhi modified it to Satyagraha to emphasize its moral and spiritual depth [16]. As Gandhi explains, "The world rests upon the bedrock of Satya or truth. Asatya, meaning untruth, also means non-existent, and Satya or Truth also means that which is. If untruth does not so much as exist, its victory is out of the question. And truth, being that which is, can never be destroyed. This is the doctrine of Satyagraha in a nutshell" [17]. This core idea—of the indestructibility and moral supremacy of truth—underpins the practical application of Satyagraha as a strategy of non-violent resistance against injustice. Gandhi's conceptual development of Satyagraha was influenced by diverse philosophical and spiritual sources. He recalls being deeply moved by a verse from a Gujarati poem he encountered in his school days, which emphasized the virtue of repaying cruelty with kindness. The poem instilled in him the conviction that true nobility lies in resisting evil with goodness, rather than retaliating in kind. He later encountered a similar message in the Sermon on the Mount from the New Testament [18]. Gandhi remarks that the teachings of Jesus "went straight to his heart" and left a lasting impression. While studying in England, Gandhi's ethical and spiritual imagination was shaped by his reading of the Bhagavad Gita, Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*, Helena Blavatsky's *Key to Theosophy*, and various portions of the Bible. In his Autobiography, Gandhi notes that verses such as, "But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also..." brought him immense delight and reinforced his resolve. He actively sought to synthesize the teachings of the Gita, the Sermon on the Mount, and *The Light of Asia*, leading him to the conclusion that renunciation is the highest form of religious practice [19]. These intellectual and spiritual explorations greatly contributed to Gandhi's formulation of the doctrine of Satyagraha. Satyagraha is a multidimensional concept, but at its core, it entails the pursuit of truth through non-violent means. Its purpose is not to defeat the opponent, but to appeal to their conscience and awaken the moral sense within them. In an article in *Harijan* (April 29, 1939), Gandhi elaborates on the non-cooperation aspect of Satyagraha, asserting: "...it should not be forgotten that it is after all only a means to secure the cooperation of the opponent consistently with truth and justice. The essence of nonviolent technique is that it seeks to liquidate antagonisms but not the antagonists" [20]. A defining feature of Satyagraha is its complete rejection of coercion or harassment, whether physical or psychological. This distinguishes it sharply from passive resistance, which, while also rejecting aggression, may still permit the use of force in certain circumstances. Gandhi emphasized that Satyagraha entails no intention to harm the adversary. In contrast to passive resistance, which may tolerate resentment and retaliation, Satyagraha insists upon love and compassion, even toward one's opponent [21]. As Gandhi succinctly states, there is no place for hatred in Satyagraha; it is a movement rooted in love [22]. Gandhi also enumerates several rigorous conditions that a Satyagrahi must fulfil. They must possess unwavering honesty and discipline, and they must obey their leader without mental reservation. Furthermore, they must be prepared to sacrifice everything—their property, their liberty, and even their lives, including the well-being of their families. A Satyagrahi must be willing to face violence without retaliation, endure torture without resentment, and exhibit complete non-violence in thought, word, and deed—toward both self and adversary [23]. Trust in the opponent is essential, as is the observance of Brahmacharya (celibacy), which Gandhi saw as a foundation of self-discipline and spiritual clarity [24]. The methodology of Satyagraha takes various forms depending on the context and nature of the injustice

confronted. Common techniques include non-cooperation, economic boycotts, strikes, picketing, peaceful marches, civil disobedience, and fasting [25]. However, Gandhi insists that Satyagraha must be invoked only as a last resort. One must first attempt to resolve conflicts through dialogue, negotiation, or third-party arbitration. Only when such avenues have been exhausted does Satyagraha become a legitimate and necessary course of action.

Conclusion:

From the foregoing discussion, it becomes evident that for Gandhi, the three core concepts of Truth, Non-violence (Ahimsa), and Satyagraha are deeply interrelated and mutually reinforcing. For Gandhi, Truth is God and God is Truth. The “is” here signifies identity—not merely a grammatical connector, but a metaphysical equivalence. According to the logic of identity, statements like “a is identical with b” and “b is identical with a” are interchangeable and equally valid. Gandhi, however, moves beyond abstract logic to assert that the formulation “Truth is God” is not only logically true, but spiritually fundamental. It lies at the core of his philosophy because it is grounded in his personal experiences, struggles, and what he often described as his “experiments with truth.” For Gandhi, the pursuit of truth is not merely an intellectual or philosophical endeavour; it is a spiritual journey. To be truthful in every aspect of life is, in Gandhi's view, to pursue the Divine. Through his own life experiences, Gandhi came to realize that this pursuit of truth is inseparable from the rigorous practice of Ahimsa. One cannot strive toward truth while harbouring violence in thought, speech, or action. Non-violence, therefore, becomes not only the ethical means but also the necessary condition for achieving truthful ends. Gandhi's originality lies in the way he operationalized these principles in the field of political action, particularly in the service of social and political justice. His non-violent campaigns in South Africa and later in India's struggle for independence from British rule serve as significant examples of how moral principles can be applied to large-scale socio-political movements. It was in this context that he coined the term Satyagraha—a unique method of non-violent resistance aimed at confronting injustice while remaining firmly rooted in truth and love. Importantly, Gandhi placed very high ethical demands on a Satyagrahi. He even suggested that a Satyagrahi should aspire to be a Sthit Prajna, a term drawn from the Bhagavad Gita, denoting a person of steady wisdom and spiritual composure. Gandhi often cited the final eighteen verses of the second chapter of the Gita, recited regularly at his prayer meetings, which he claimed encapsulated the art of living [26]. According to the Gita, a Sthit Prajna is an individual who has transcended ego and desire, remaining equanimous in pleasure and pain, success and failure. Gandhi believed this ideal was essential for anyone engaging in Satyagraha. However, it is a matter of legitimate inquiry how many of Gandhi's followers in the various movements truly lived up to such a high spiritual standard. Gandhi's vision extended beyond individuals to include communities, societies, and even nations. He envisioned a world in which non-violence could guide national conduct. Yet he was also realistic. He recognized the practical challenges of applying non-violence in the domain of international politics. For instance, he conceded that even a non-violent nation would require a defence mechanism—such as an army—to protect itself from foreign invasion, and a police force to maintain internal order and address crime. Gandhi acknowledged these limitations, admitting that the absolute application of non-violence might not always be feasible in the geopolitical realm.

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