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GANDHI

A Very Short Introduction

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Chapter 4

Satyāgraha

As someone whose entire life was taken up with fighting against such injustices as racial discrimination in South Africa, British rule in India, and ugly social practices in his own society, Gandhi wondered how a moral person should conduct such struggles. Traditionally people have relied on rational discussion and violence, appealing respectively to reason and the 'body-force'. He found both methods unsatisfactory in varying degrees, and explored one that relied on the hitherto untapped 'soul-force' or 'truth-force'.

The limits of rationality and violence

For Gandhi, rational discussion or persuasion was the best way to resolve conflict. In his view rational discussion worked under two conditions. First, since human beings are fallible and partial, each should make a sincere effort to look at the disputed subject from the other's point of view. If either party were to be dogmatic, self-righteous, or obstinate, it would not be willing to question its view of the matter in dispute, put itself into the shoes of the other, and appreciate why the latter saw things differently.

Secondly, human reason did not operate in a psychological and moral vacuum. Human beings were complex creatures full of prejudices, sympathies, and antipathies, all of which distorted and circumscribed

the power of reason. If a person did not care for others, had no fellow-feeling for them, or thought them subhuman, he would not take their interests into account and would find all kinds of reasons to ignore those interests. Even if he rationally appreciated the equal claims of their interests, he would lack the motive to respect and promote them. Gandhi appealed to his own experiences. He had tried to convince white South Africans that blacks and Asians were entitled to equal rights; the British rulers that Indians should be free to govern their own affairs; the high-caste Hindus that untouchability was an abominable practice; and in each case his opponents either failed to see the force of his arguments, or dismissed them by specious counter-arguments, or conceded them but refused or failed to act on them. In Gandhi's view this was because their range of sympathy was too narrow to include their victims. In his favourite language, the head and the heart formed a unity, and if the heart rejected someone, the head tended to do so too. The rationalist belief that human beings were guided and motivated solely by the 'weight' of the argument was false, a 'piece of idolatry', an act of 'blind faith'. Thanks to selfishness, failure of moral imagination, hatred, ill-will, and deep prejudices, human beings did not often have either an open mind or an open heart. Although desirable in principle, rational discussion was of limited value in practice. 'To men steeped in prejudice, an appeal to reason is worse than useless' (iv. 237).

Realizing the limits of rational discussion, many turned to violence as the only effective method of securing justice. Some took a purely instrumental view of it, and thought it fully justified if it produced the desired results. Others agreed it was morally undesirable, but justified it when it was likely to result in the elimination of a greater evil. Gandhi was particularly disturbed by the ease with which violence had been rationalized and used throughout history. He appreciated that it was often born out of frustration, that many who used it hated it and resorted to it only because they saw no other way to fight entrenched injustices, and that much of the blame for its use had to be laid at the doors of morally blind and narrow-minded dominant groups. While he

was therefore prepared to condone spontaneous violence under unbearable conditions or grave provocation, he was totally opposed to it as a deliberate method of social change (M ii. 264-87; xxvi. 486-92).

The use of violence denied the ontological facts that all human beings had souls, that they were capable of appreciating and pursuing good, and that no one was so degenerate that he could not be won over by appealing to his fellow-feeling and humanity. Furthermore human beings sincerely disagreed about what was the right thing to do, 'saw truth in fragment and from different angles of vision', and all their beliefs were fallible and corrigible. In Gandhi's view the use of violence denied this. In order to be justified in taking the extreme step of harming or killing someone, one had to assume that one was *absolutely* right, the opponent *totally* wrong, and that violence would *definitely* achieve the desired result. The consequences of violence were irreversible in the sense that a life once terminated or damaged could never be revived or easily put together. And irreversible deeds required infallible knowledge to justify them, which was obviously beyond human reach. Gandhi acknowledged that, taken to its logical extreme, his theory of 'relative truth' undermined the very basis of action, for no man could ever act if he constantly entertained the nagging doubt that he might be wholly mistaken. However, he thought that one should at least acknowledge one's fallibility and leave room for reflection and reconsideration, and that, being irreversible and emotionally charged, violence did not allow this.

Gandhi

Gandhi also rejected violence on moral grounds. Morality consisted in doing what was right because one *believed* it to be right, and required unity of belief and conduct. Since the use of violence did not change the opponent's perception of truth, it compelled him to behave in a manner contrary to his sincerely held beliefs, and violated his moral integrity. Gandhi further argued that violence rarely achieved lasting results. An act of violence was deemed to be successful when it achieved its immediate objectives. However, if it were to be judged by its long-term

consequences, our conclusion would have to be very different. Every apparently successful act of violence encouraged the belief that it was the only effective way to achieve the desired goal, and developed the habit of turning to violence every time one ran into opposition. Society thus became used to it and never felt compelled to explore an alternative. Violence also tended to generate an inflationary spiral. Every successful use blunted the community's moral sensibility and raised its threshold of violence, so that over time an increasingly larger amount became necessary to achieve the same results. In Gandhi's view the facts that almost every revolution so far had led to terror, devoured its children, and failed to create a better society were a proof that the traditional theory of revolution was fatally flawed.

Finally, for Gandhi the means-end dichotomy lying at the heart of most theories of violence was false. In human life the so-called means consisted not of implements and inanimate tools but of human actions, and by definition these could not fall outside the jurisdiction of morality. The method of fighting for an objective was not external to but an integral part of it. Every step towards a desired goal shaped its character, and utmost care had to be taken lest it should distort or damage the goal. The goal did not exist *at the end* of a series of actions designed to achieve it; it shadowed them from the very beginning. The so-called means were really the ends in an embryonic form, seeds of which the so-called ends were a natural flowering. Since this was so, the fight for a just society could not be conducted by unjust means.

A non-violent revolution is not a programme of seizure of power. It is a programme of transformation of relationships, ending in a peaceful transfer of power.

Soul-force

Gandhi concluded that, since the two methods of fighting against injustice were inadequate or deeply flawed, we needed a new method. It should activate the soul, mobilize the individual's latent moral energies, appeal to both the head and the heart, and create a climate conducive to peaceful resolution of conflict conducted in a spirit of mutual goodwill. Gandhi thought that his method of *satyāgraha* met this requirement. He first discovered and tried it out during his campaigns against racial discrimination in South Africa, and kept perfecting it in the course of his struggles against British rule in India and the unjust practices of his own society.

Gandhi

For Gandhi *satyāgraha*, meaning civil insistence on or tenacity in the pursuit of truth, aimed to penetrate the barriers of prejudice, ill-will, dogmatism, self-righteousness, and selfishness, and to reach out to and activate the soul of the opponent. However degenerate or dogmatic a human being might be, he had a soul, and hence the capacity to feel for other human beings and acknowledge their common humanity. Even a Hitler or Mussolini was not beyond redemption. They too loved their parents, wives, children, friends, and pet animals, thereby displaying the basic human capacity for fellow-feeling. Their problem was not that they lacked that capacity but rather that it was limited to a few, and our task was to find ways of expanding it. *Satyāgraha* was a 'surgery of the soul', a way of activating 'soul-force'. For Gandhi 'suffering love' was the best way to do this, and formed the inspiring principle of his new method. As he put it:

I have come to this fundamental conclusion that if you want something really important to be done, you must not merely satisfy the reason, you must move the heart also. The appeal of reason is more to the head, but the penetration of the heart comes from suffering. It opens up the inner understanding in man. Suffering is the badge of the human race, not the sword.

(xlviii. 189)

Confronted with an injustice, the *satyāgrahi* sought a dialogue with his opponent. He did not confront the latter with a dogmatic insistence on the justice of his demands. He knew he could be partial and biased, and invited his opponent to join him in cooperatively searching for the 'truth' or the most just course of action concerning the matter in dispute. As Gandhi put it, 'I am essentially a man of compromise because I am never sure that I am right.' When the dialogue was denied or reduced to an insincere exercise in public relations, the *satyāgrahi* took a principled stand on what he sincerely believed to be his just demands, and patiently and uncomplainingly suffered whatever violence was done to him. His opponent saw him as an enemy or a troublemaker. He refused to reciprocate, and saw him instead as a fellow human being whose temporarily eclipsed sense of humanity it was his duty to restore. Since his sole concern was to evoke a moral response in his opponent, he did everything possible to put him at ease and nothing to harass, embarrass, anger, or frighten him, hoping thereby to trigger in him a slow, intensely personal, and highly complex process of self-examination. The moment his opponent showed willingness to talk in a spirit of genuine goodwill, he suspended the struggle and gave reason a chance to work in a more hospitable climate.

Satyāgraha

Like Kant and John Rawls, Gandhi argued that every community required a widespread sense of justice to hold it together. But unlike them he argued that the sense of justice was highly cerebral and needed a deeper and emotionally charged sense of shared humanity to give it depth and energy. The sense of humanity consisted in the recognition of the fundamental ontological fact that human well-being was indivisible, that in degrading and brutalizing others human beings degraded and brutalized themselves, and that they could not sustain a shared collective life without a spirit of mutual concern. The sense of humanity constituted the community's vital moral capital, without which it had no defences against or resources to fight the forces of injustice, exploitation, and oppression. The slow and painful task of cultivating and consolidating the sense of humanity, and thereby laying

the foundations of a truly moral community, was a collective responsibility, which the *satyāgrahi* took it upon himself to discharge. He assumed the burden of the common evil, sought to liberate both himself and his opponent from its tyrannical automatism, and helped reduce the prevailing level of inhumanity. As Gandhi put it, the old sages 'returned good for evil and killed it'. The *satyāgrahi* took his stand on this 'fundamental moral truth'.

In all his *satyāgrahas* Gandhi observed certain basic principles. They were preceded by a careful study of the situation, patient gathering of facts, a reasoned defence of the objectives, a popular agitation to convince the opponent of the intensity of the *satyāgrahi's* feeling, and an ultimatum to give him a last chance for negotiation. Throughout the *satyāgraha*, the channels of communication with the opponent were kept open, the attitudes on either side were not allowed to harden, and intermediaries were encouraged. The *satyāgrahi* was required to take a pledge not to use violence or to resist arrest or confiscation of his property. Similar rules were laid down for the *satyāgrahi* prisoner, who was expected to be courteous, to ask for no special privileges, to do as he was ordered, and never to agitate for conveniences 'whose deprivation does not involve any injury to his self-respect'.

Gandhi explained the effectiveness of *satyāgraha* in terms of the spiritual impact of suffering love. The *satyāgrahi's* love of his opponent and moral nobility disarmed the latter, defused his feelings of anger and hatred, and mobilized his higher nature. And his uncomplaining suffering denied his opponent the pleasure of victory, mobilized neutral public opinion, and created in him a mood conducive to calm introspection. The two together triggered the complex process of critical self-examination on which a *satyāgraha* relied for its ultimate success. Love by itself was not enough, as otherwise the *satyāgrahi* could quietly expostulate with his opponent without launching a campaign, nor was suffering by itself enough, for it had no value and was even counterproductive if accompanied by hatred and anger. Love

spiritualized suffering, which in itself had only a psychological value; suffering gave love its psychological energy and moral power. In Gandhi's view, we knew so little about the operations of the human soul that it was not easy to explain rationally how non-violence worked. 'In violence there is nothing invisible. Non-violence, on the other hand, is three-fourths invisible', and it acted in such a 'silent and undermonstrative' manner that its working always retained an air of mystery.

Although Gandhi continued to maintain that suffering love was omnipotent and, when pure, capable of 'melting even the stoniest hearts', he knew that reality was quite different. Most *satyāgrahis* were ordinary human beings whose tolerance, love, determination, and ability to suffer had obvious limits, and their opponents were sometimes too prejudiced and callous to be swayed by their suffering. Not surprisingly, Gandhi was led to introduce such other forms of pressure as economic boycott, non-payment of taxes, non-cooperation, and *hartal* (cessation of work), none of which relied on the spiritual power of suffering love alone. His vocabulary too became increasingly aggressive. He began to talk of 'non-violent warfare', 'peaceful rebellion', a 'civilized form of warfare', a 'war bereft of every trace of violence', and 'weapons' in the 'armoury' of the *satyāgrahi*, all intended to 'compel' and 'force' the opponent to negotiate. As was to be expected, Gandhi's political realism triumphed over his moral idealism, and, despite his claims to the contrary, his *satyāgrahas* were not always purely spiritual in nature.

In addition to these and other methods, Gandhi introduced the highly controversial method of fasting. He knew that his fasts caused considerable unease among his critics and followers, and went to great lengths to defend them. He argued that his fast was a form of suffering love and had a fourfold purpose. First, it was his way of expressing his deep sense of sorrow and hurt at the way in which those he loved had degraded themselves and disappointed him. Second, as their leader he

felt responsible for them, and his fast was his way of atoning for their misdeeds. Third, it was his last desperate attempt, an 'intense spiritual effort', to stir their 'sluggish conscience', to 'sting them into action', and to mobilize their moral energies. For a variety of reasons his countrymen had temporarily lost their senses, as in the case of communal violence, or become insensitive to injustice and suffering, as in the case of untouchability, or had shown utter lack of self-discipline, as when a *satyāgraha* became violent. By suffering himself and inducing sympathetic suffering in them, he said he intended to persuade them to reassess their actions. Finally, the fast was intended to bring the quarrelling parties together and to get them to resolve their differences themselves, thereby both deepening their sense of community and developing their powers of self-determination and conflict-resolution.

Gandhi

Gandhi agreed that his fast exerted considerable pressure on his intended target, but thought it on balance fully justified. Evil had occurred and needed to be fought. Moral appeals had failed. He could therefore either acquiesce in the evil, which was immoral, or use the only means available to a man of non-violence. The fast did exert moral pressure, but there was nothing improper in it. And it was not coercion or blackmail because it did not threaten others with personal harm. Obviously they did not want him to die, but that was because they loved him, and there was nothing immoral in appealing to their love in this way, especially when its purpose was to make them better human beings.

Since the fast could easily be misused for selfish purposes and even degenerate into blackmail, Gandhi imposed strict limits on it. First, it could only be undertaken against those with whom one was bound by the ties of love and never against strangers, which was why his fasts were directed against his countrymen and rarely against the colonial government. Secondly, the fast must have a concrete and clearly specified purpose, which its addressee can easily understand and respond to. Thirdly, the purpose must be morally defensible especially

in the eyes of its intended target. Fourthly, it should not in any way be designed to serve one's personal interests. Fifthly, it should not ask people to do what they are incapable of doing, or involve great sacrifices. And finally, it should only be undertaken by one who is an acknowledged moral leader of his people, has a long record of working for their welfare, and an unblemished moral character (xxiv. 95-9; xxv. 199-202).

The limits of *satyāgraha*

Gandhi's theory of *satyāgraha*, which goes right to the heart of his theory of human nature, was a highly original and creative contribution to theories of social change and political action. He was right to stress the limits of rational discussion and the dangers of violence, and explore new forms of political praxis that broke through the narrow straitjacket of the reason-violence dichotomy. *Satyāgraha* took full account of the rational and moral nature of human beings and stressed the value of rational discussion and moral persuasion. And it was also sensitive to the human capacities for intransigence and moral blindness and sought to overcome these by awakening the shared humanity of the parties involved and transforming their mutual perceptions and relationships. *Satyāgraha* aimed not just to resolve existing disagreements but to build deeper moral and emotional bonds, and thus both give the compromise reached a firmer foundation and make future conflicts less likely and less intractable.

Satyāgraha

While the moral and political significance of Gandhi's *satyāgraha* is beyond doubt, it is not the panacea he thought it was. Although he was right to stress the unity of reason and morality, or the head and the heart as he called it, he was wrong to think that all or even most social conflicts could be resolved by touching the opponent's heart. They sometimes occur because persons of goodwill take very different views of what constitutes human well-being. On the basis of the principle of the sanctity of human life, some find abortion, euthanasia, and war

morally unacceptable while others reach the opposite conclusion. It is difficult to see how Gandhi's method can resolve these differences and the consequent conflicts.

Gandhi was probably right to argue that human beings are generally affected by the suffering of others and regret that suffering even if they are unable or unwilling to do anything about it. However, he overlooked the fact that, if they thought the suffering deserved, their reaction would be different. Not the suffering *per se* but one's judgement of it determines one's response to it, and that in turn depends on one's beliefs about which individuals may deeply disagree. The Sharpeville massacre left many a white South African unmoved, the pictures of the Vietnamese victims of American napalm bombs did not disturb the consciences of many Americans, and the brutal Nazi treatment of the Jews had no effect on many a German.

Gandhi was wrong to argue that *satyāgraha* never failed and that it was effective under all conditions. If he had said that it was a self-chosen way of being in the world and that one would die rather than kill irrespective of the outcome, his view would have made moral though not political sense. To his credit he insisted that *satyāgraha* was meant to succeed and achieve practical results. And that subjected his claim to a different kind of scrutiny. It was an article of faith for him that all human beings had souls, which could be 'touched' and 'activated'. As a result he did not and could not acknowledge that some human beings might be profoundly distorted and beyond hope. *Satyāgraha* presupposes a sense of decency on the part of the opponent, an open society in which his brutality can be exposed, and a neutral body of opinion that can be mobilized against him. It also presupposes that the parties involved are interdependent, as otherwise non-cooperation by the victims cannot affect the vital interests of their opponents, and that the victims have both sufficient self-confidence and a reasonably effective organization to fight against injustices. Human skeletons in the Nazi concentration camps could hardly have launched a *satyāgraha*, nor would it have

succeeded in a closed and ruthless totalitarian system. As Martin Buber wrote to Gandhi, where there is no witness, there can be no martyrdom, and without the latter *satyāgraha* loses its moral force. Hayim Greenberg, editor of *The Jewish Frontier* and an admirer of Gandhi, wrote to him, 'a Jewish Gandhi in Germany, should one arise, could function for about five minutes and would be promptly taken to the guillotine'. Gandhi replied that Hitler too was a human being, that the Jews, who were going to be slaughtered anyway, should have asserted their dignity and freely chosen their way of death, and that such an action was bound to have an effect on ordinary Germans, if not immediately at least a little later (lxviii. 137-41). His reply had a point, but it rested on an uncritical faith in the power of non-violence, and showed little understanding of the complex ways in which totalitarian systems brutalized the community, demoralized the victims, distorted public discourse, and undermined the basic preconditions of *satyāgraha*.

Gandhi's *satyāgraha* has much to be said for it, but it cannot be a catholicicon. Although Gandhi insisted otherwise, violence need not be accompanied by hatred and ill-will or be uncontrolled. Like non-violence it too can be restrained, measured, born out of love for both the victims and the perpetrators of injustice, and used to arrest human degradation. Gandhi would have been wiser to insist not on one 'sovereign' method of action but on a plurality of methods to be used singly or in combination with others as the situation required. Since different circumstances require different responses, violence might sometimes achieve results that non-violence either cannot or do so only at an unacceptably high price in human suffering.

Although Gandhi's *satyāgraha* had its limitations and he was wrong to claim 'sovereign efficacy' for it, it is a powerful, novel, and predominantly moral method of social change. Not surprisingly, it has been borrowed and tried out in different countries with suitable adjustments to local circumstances. The United States is an excellent

example of this. Many black American leaders had gone to India from the early 1930s onwards to seek his advice and study his method. He was so impressed with their commitment that he remarked that 'it may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of non-violence will be delivered to the world' (xii, 202). The American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s under the leadership of Martin Luther King confirmed Gandhi's hope. Embarking on 'a serious intellectual quest for a method to eliminate social evil', King turned to a number of writers including Marx, and found them all unhelpful. A sermon by Mordecai Johnson, the then President of Howard University, in 1950 alerted him to the importance of Gandhi's *satyāgraha*. King read Gandhi closely, found 'intellectual and moral satisfaction' in his writings, and wrote (K 73):

As I read I became deeply fascinated by [Gandhi's] campaigns of non-violent resistance . . . The whole concept of '*Satyāgraha*' . . . was profoundly significant to me. As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi my scepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform. Prior to reading Gandhi, I had about concluded that the ethics of Jesus were only effective in individual relationships . . . But after reading Gandhi, I saw how utterly mistaken I was. Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale . . . It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and non-violence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking for so many months.

King shared Gandhi's belief in the power of suffering love, his abhorrence of violence, emphasis on both the head and the heart, concern to raise the consciousness and build up the self-confidence of the victims of injustice, and stress on the crucial role of effective organization and an inspiring leader. King, however, could not apply Gandhi's method to the American situation without suitably revising it.

Gandhi

He was a Christian, and hence Gandhi's metaphysics had only a limited appeal to him. As he put it, 'Christ furnished the spirit and motivation [for non-violent resistance], while Gandhi furnished the method' (K 67). Gandhi's fasts, his belief in the spiritual power of personal purity, and the concomitant emphasis on simple living and the conquest of the senses had no attraction for King. This is puzzling for Christ's crucifixion is the central motif of Christianity, and one would have expected King to explore ways of reaffirming and re-enacting it and mobilizing its immense symbolic potential in his repertoire of political action, as Gandhi did with his fasts. Again, given the fact that King was operating within a largely democratic context and wanted black integration into American society, Gandhi's method of non-cooperation with the established legal, political, and cultural institutions was of little relevance to him. In some respects King seems to have been more acutely aware than Gandhi of the power of evil (an awareness reinforced by the intellectual influence of the American Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who both admired and stressed the limits of Gandhi's non-violence), and guarded himself and his followers against the 'illusions of a superficial optimism concerning human nature and the dangers of a false idealism' (K 81). King's civil rights movement showed both the universal relevance of Gandhi's *satyāgraha* and the need for its creative adaptation and development.

Satyāgraha