**Ahimsic Communication: An Alternative to Civility[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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When it comes to contentious conversations, the call for civility is commonplace. Rarely do we hear a call fornonviolence in communication. This is unfortunate, since nonviolence is a better standard than civility (which I critiqued in [part one](https://blog.apaonline.org/2024/12/09/beyond-civility-incivility/) of this three-part series). Part of the problem is that a framework for communicative nonviolence has not (to my knowledge) been fully developed. Mohandas (“Mahatma”) Gandhi, the “father of nonviolence,” is widely known for nonviolence, but primarily in the realm of noncommunicative action. However, there is a natural line of development in that direction from elements in his thought: Gandhi derives his commitment to nonviolence (*ahimsa* in Sanskrit) from his [law of Truth](https://www.gandhiserve.net/gandhiserve-archives/online-books/from-yeravda-mandir/), which directs us to follow “Truth in thought, Truth in *speech*, and Truth in action” (my emphasis) (4). Inspired by Gandhi among others, Marshall B. Rosenberg developed what he termed [*Nonviolent Communication* (NVC)](https://nonviolentcommunication.com/). Valuable though NVC is, it is most applicable to particular conversational contexts. It is but one part of a broader nonviolent framework, which I’ll call *ahimsic communication* (AC) to distinguish it from NVC. In this second installment of the series, I develop a framework for AC. But I wish to emphasize upfront that it is a mere sketch. In the Gandhian spirit, I invite others to join in this [“experiment with truth”](https://www.gandhiserve.net/gandhiserve-archives/online-books/an-autobiography/) by proposing further refinements.

**Communicative Violence**

To understand nonviolence, we must first understand violence. Following [Barry L. Gan](https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442217607/Violence-and-Nonviolence-An-Introduction), I understand violence as acting with the intention, or reasonable foreseeability, of doing harm. While one might quibble with this definition (e.g., perhaps adding a clause exempting autonomously accepted harm), the details won’t matter for present purposes. What matters here is that: (1) any given type of harm corresponds to a type of violence (when an act stands in a certain relation to harm); (2) intending harm is sufficient to stand in that relation (actual harm need not occur); (3) intending harm is unnecessary for violence (reckless endangerment is sufficient); and (4) no-fault accidents (where harm results from neither intention nor reckless endangerment) do not qualify as violence.

Harm (hence violence) can be physical, emotional, epistemic, social, or systemic. Some harms are minor, such as snapping at someone at the end of a stressful day. Moreover, being harmed should be distinguished from getting hurt (a point I borrow from Robert L. Holmes in personal conversation). Medical procedures often hurt but do not necessarily harm (i.e., make the person worse off), if done competently with informed consent. They therefore do not count as violence. Nor does pushing someone out of the way of an approaching vehicle. Nor does a *reasonable* verbal reprimand to one’s child in response to their wrongdoing—one emerging out of love and the wish for them to become better. Finally, we should distinguish (a) doing harm (whether an act of commission or omission) from (b) simply failing to do good, and from (c) withdrawing a benefit. One can do harm via an act of omission by purposefully failing to hit the brakes when someone steps in front of the vehicle. But one does no harm, even by omission, by failing to jump in front of a vehicle to save another. While it is important to do good, it is not always required. In some cases, doing good is impermissible, namely when it requires doing harm. For example, one should not kill one person and harvest their organs, even if it is “necessary” to save five other lives. Doing so would be violent, whereas refusing to kill the one is nonviolent, even though more deaths result. Finally, it is sometimes permissible to withdraw a benefit, such as when one lends a book to a friend but asks that it be returned. We do not think of reacquiring the book as harm or violence.

These points matter because, in what follows, I will provide examples that I classify as violence or nonviolence. Due to space limitations, I will not explain each choice. When intuitions differ, it is worth revisiting the above.

With all this in mind, note that many forms of communication, whether via words or nonverbal symbols, are violent. Nonverbal communicative violence potentially includes:

* Giving someone the middle finger
* Angrily honking while tailgating someone for driving the speed limit
* Displaying the confederate flag or swastika
* Defacing photos with Nazi imagery
* Promoting images portraying false stereotypes

Verbal violence includes:

* Terroristic threats
* Orders to harm
* Racial epithets, sexist language, or gay and trans slurs
* Victim-blaming
* Silencing outcries against injustice
* Testimonial injustice (dismissing others’ claims due to their membership in a marginalized group)
* Gaslighting
* Cyberbullying
* Body-shaming
* Ad hominem attacks
* Tongue-lashings
* Intentionally or negligently spreading misinformation

These examples are overtly violent. Rosenberg identifies many ordinary forms of communication as subtle forms of violence. They alienate interlocutors, stimulate defensiveness, and block progress, thereby doing harm. We will look at examples when we introduce NVC below.

It is tempting to characterize the above examples of violence as “uncivil” due to the common tendency to equate incivility with violence and civility with nonviolence, These are false equivalences. As argued in part one of this series, both civility and incivility can, but need not, do harm. Hence, in addition to *nonviolent civility* and *violent incivility*, there can be *violent civility* and *nonviolent incivility*, at least in some senses of the word “civil.” At root, it’s neither civility nor incivility that we want. What we want is nonviolence.

**Communicative Nonviolence**

One of the problems for civility (hence incivility) that I identified in part one of the series is that the term is radically ambiguous. This does not apply to the term “nonviolent,” which is also ambiguous, but not radically so. It is clear that nonviolentists oppose harm, and from there we can debate details (by careful attention to a range of examples). There emerge different camps within nonviolence, but there are a few main traditions within which there is significant agreement. In the case of “civility,” there isn’t anything close to a shared basic sense of the term, and each definition differs wildly from the next.

In my previous piece, I also argued that “civility” carries too much historical baggage. Again, that does not apply here. “Nonviolence” does carry baggage, but not enough to warrant its abandonment. In his illuminating historical account, [*Nonviolence Before King: The Politics of Being and the Black Freedom Struggle*](https://uncpress.org/book/9781469663005/nonviolence-before-king/), Anthony C. Siracusa narrates how nonviolence developed during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. In the hands of white antebellum slavery abolitionists, “pacifism” was understood largely in a negative fashion (the avoidance of violence) or as a weak form of action (just talk). Understandably, many African Americans had a strong negative reaction to “pacifism,” which carried over to the term “non-violent” during the early stages of the Civil Rights Movement. However, African American scholars and activists such as Howard Thurman, Bayard Rustin, Pauli Murray, James Lawson, and Martin Luther King reappropriated the term, restoring its positive and active meaning. Retaining the term “nonviolence” thus has the advantage of connecting to a rich tradition going back to these figures and ultimately to Gandhi before them—figures who were themselves victims of oppression and made great advances against it. There is no parallel development with the term “civil.”

The positive, active sense of the term “non-violence” (originally hyphenated) is reflected in its etymology. It is a translation of *ahimsa*, the negation of *himsa*. The suffix *-sa* indicates a [desiderative](https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA20171087&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=02756935&p=AONE&sw=w&userGroupName=nysl_oweb&aty=ip)—a verb form expressing the *desire* for the action indicated by the root verb. Thus, himsa is the desire to harm. Gandhi understood ahimsa as (a) rooting out this desire, which already goes beyond merely refraining from action, and (b) replacing that desire with [love](https://www.mkgandhi.org/voiceoftruth/voiceoftruth.php): “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” (126–7). Similarly, many nonviolentists today mean something positive by nonviolence, and therefore drop the hyphen to deemphasize the appearance of a mere negation—a source of one of the most common misunderstandings of nonviolence. After all, Gandhi and King among other nonviolent activists did far from nothing; they did quite a lot of something. Inspired by Gandhi and King, [Gene Sharp](https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/resource/from-dictatorship-to-democracy-a-conceptual-framework-for-liberation/)’s work on strategic nonviolence has even helped oppressed peoples around the world to nonviolently overthrow dictators and establish democracies, such as the [Serbian *Otpor!* movement](https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/bringing-dictator-english/) against Slobodan Milošević, “the butcher of the Balkans.”

**The AC Landscape**

Ahimsic communication (AC) takes many forms. The purpose here is not to catalogue every possible form, but rather to make broad distinctions, clarify common confusions, highlight particular forms that are especially noteworthy, provide examples, and give readers a sense of what AC is like. At the broadest level is a tripartite distinction between preventive, restorative, and interventional AC.

*Preventive AC* aims to prevent violence in the first place. This requires identifying communicative causes of violence, such as the lack of communication, miscommunication, ineffective listening, aggressive nonverbal cues, hasty assumptions, poor evidence-gathering practices, logical fallacies, biases, microaggressions, mindlessness, etc. We must also develop positive alternatives to replace violent communication (VC), devise methods for learning AC, practice employing them, promote AC education, and build social structures among other resources to further the cause. Since language is central to everyday life, and AC involves radically altering our communication habits, it requires daily diligence. AC must become part of a *way of life*—not simply a tactic to be strategically employed on the rare occasion that it is needed. Otherwise, we will be unable to use it in the heat of the moment, when it is most needed.

*Restorative AC* aims to repair harm and address its causes. This requires AC with victims, perpetrators, and communities. Here we can use [restorative practices](https://www.iirp.edu/images/pdf/Defining-Restorative_Nov-2016.pdf) to promote restorative justice (an alternative to retributive justice). Since restorative practices have already been extensively developed by others, I do not explore them here.

*Interventional AC* responds to ongoing violence, including its earliest phase (a mere attempt or an act of negligence, not yet fully bloomed into action). Interventional AC is my focus hereafter, divided into two main categories following a distinction from [Robert L. Holmes](https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/ethics-of-nonviolence-9781623569624/) between *nonviolent resistance* and *nonviolent nonresistance* (155). Note, though, that the line between resistance and nonresistance can blur: *negotiation* or *compromise* are also possible, and they involve partial resistance—a give and take, push and pull. I will not take this up further here, except to emphasize that compromise is sometimes good, contrary to some opinions. It need not involve sacrificing one’s values or complicity in harm. It is often a necessary step toward achieving justice.

**AC Nonresistance**

*AC nonresistance* can take the form of *avoidance* (not “speaking out” against violence) or *compliance* (communicating acceptance or agreement). Both forms get short shrift, often viewed as complicity in violence and therefore deemed violent themselves. [As King maintained](https://omeka.drew.edu/exhibits/show/king/speeches), “noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good.” Echoing this, silence on social justice issues is often shunned on social media.

To see why, consider a military officer who fails to order the soldier under their command to halt from committing a war crime (communicative avoidance). Or consider someone who nods or verbally agrees to everything in a bigoted rant simply to avoid the discomfort of disagreeing (communicative compliance). Based on cases like these, there is a tendency to condemn all forms of nonresistance.

This is a hasty generalization. There also exist AC forms of nonresistance, and it is vital that we make space for them. First, resistance need not be communicative (in the sense of it being *intended* as communication). One might resist by silently laying down one’s weapon, taking the weapon from another, or walking away from the order to shoot.

Second, there are cases where complete nonresistance is morally permissible. For example, self-defense experts say it is safer to comply than to argue or fight with someone demanding your wallet at gunpoint. Compliance might be optional if you willingly put only yourself at risk. But, if resistance also puts your companion at risk, compliance is obligatory. In some cases, VC is merely an attempt to provoke a response, in which case resistance amounts to taking the bait, giving the attackers what they want.

Third, avoidance is often permissible because it is inevitable: one cannot fight every battle. We must choose our battles. And even when we take on a battle, there is a time and a place. We may temporarily forestall resistance to prepare to resist more effectively later.

Fourth, demanding that others resist is often impermissible. Consider a victim of oppression, who cannot emotionally bear a conversation with the oppressor. Pressuring such a person into resistance is violent. It is an assault on well-being. For this reason, we cannot force resistance onto those who fall into this group. Others who can take up the torch should do so.

**AC Resistance**

*AC resistance* comes in many forms. These include *nonverbal resistance*, sometimes as part of a *nonviolent protest*—e.g., silent marches and symbols. Protests often mix these nonverbal forms of AC with verbal forms and noncommunicative action. Here my focus is on four forms of *verbal AC resistance*.

***AC Force***

The first form of verbal AC resistance uses *ahimsic* *force*, which makes a direct demand of another. This is as close as AC gets to VC. Like VC, AC uses forceful language. But not all force or power is violent (Holmes 152), as suggested in the title of a documentary on nonviolent resistance: *A Force More Powerful*. The purpose of ahimsic force is to get an important message through, one that might not otherwise register or be heard, proceeding with caution to avoid harm. It must therefore avoid threats, public humiliation, gaslighting, etc.

*Negative ahimsic force* conveys a negative emotion or attitude. This includes *nonviolent reprimands* (recall the earlier example from Gandhi). Another example includes Rosenberg’s *nonviolent screaming*: when one uses a loud volume to let everyone know, for your sake as well as theirs, that you are not in a position to have the current conversation (103). However, there is a fine line between violence and negative force. So, it should be exercised rarely, as a last resort.

*Positive ahimsic force* conveys a positive emotion or attitude. For example, *calling people up* by appealing to their conscience rather than *calling people out* in an effort to shame them into compliance. King, for example, was a master at calling people up by speaking to their conscience in a powerful way. Just consider his [“I Have a Dream” speech](https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety) or [“Letter from Birmingham Jail.”](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)

The effectiveness of ahimsic force, whether positive or negative, is limited to specific audiences, namely those which share, perhaps subconsciously, similar values and who look up to the speaker, especially a charismatic speaker. These conditions are absent for many audiences we wish to reach, especially in today’s polarized political climate. We need other options.

***AC Distraction***

*AC distraction* is a gentler approach. It averts violence by disrupting an attack via verbal distraction.

“Distract” is one of the [5Ds of bystander intervention](https://righttobe.org/guides/bystander-intervention-training/) developed by the Right to Be organization. To illustrate the idea, suppose you encounter a person who looks like they’re being harassed. You might disrupt the conflict by pretending to be lost and asking the person for directions, perhaps leading them away from the situation to walk you to your destination.

In other cases, it is possible to distract the attacker directly. Consider the example of civil rights leader [Reverend James Lawson](https://uncpress.org/book/9781469663005/nonviolence-before-king/), who during a march approached an angry white motorcyclist to ask him to stop beating his friends (141–2). After the biker spit in his face, Lawson asked to borrow the biker’s handkerchief, wiped his face, then handed it back as he seamlessly proceeded to ask questions about the bike. By engaging the biker on a topic of common interest, Lawson was *rehumanized* in the eyes of the biker, diverting further violence.

In the above examples, distraction temporarily interrupts violence. In other cases, verbal distraction is sufficiently sustained to address the underlying cause of conflict. Consider [Derek Black](https://www.npr.org/2018/09/24/651052970/how-a-rising-star-of-white-nationalism-broke-free-from-the-movement), who was raised as a white nationalist. In college, Jewish classmates began befriending him, eventually inviting him to dinner, all the while avoiding the topic of contention. Other topics served as a distraction. By consistently *demonstrating* friendliness, trustworthiness, and goodwill, these students initiated cracks in Black’s worldview, sparking self-doubt that eventually led to Black’s denouncement of his former beliefs. Black is now a committed activist against white nationalism.

***Ahimsic Argumentation***

Sustained distraction can work when the display of character reveals to another their mistaken beliefs. But it will not be enough in other cases. This leads us to the third form of nonviolent communicative resistance: *ahimsic argumentation*. This will appear to be a contradiction in terms if we think of arguments as verbal fights. By “argument,” I simply mean a set of reasons in support of a view, which can—but need not—involve hostility.

We are at the least risk of hostility in solo contexts, where one is considering arguments for oneself (e.g., to decide what to believe). When engaged in argumentation with others, hostility can arise from either side. After studying what he terms [“supercommunicators,”](https://www.charlesduhigg.com/supercommunicators) Charles Duhigg discovered two things they share in common. First, their conversations are “learning conversations”: their goal is *not* to deliver a message, defend themselves, win the argument, or defeat the opponent, but simply to *learn* something from the conversation (xviii). As John Stuart Mill argued in his classic essay [“On Liberty,”](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/34901/34901-h/34901-h.htm) no matter how absurd or offensive we find another view, we can always learn something. Regardless of our confidence level, we might learn that we’re wrong, or that we are missing a piece of the truth. At the very least, we can learn how the other person thinks, how they see the world, and specifically why they hold the beliefs they do. Our fundamental attitude becomes inquisitiveness over defensiveness, which mitigates our feelings of hostility. This will get reflected in our tone, facial expressions, and body language, thereby communicating to others that we’re interested in what they have to say, inclining them to reciprocate.

Second, supercommunicators follow “the matching principle”: at any given stage of discussion, the type of conversation they are having matches the type of conversation the other person is having (27). Conversations can be *practical* (about what to do), *emotional* (about how we feel), or *social* (about who we are). In argumentation, the surface-level purpose is practical (since deciding what to believe is a decision about what to do). Beneath the surface, the purpose might be emotional or social. This occurs when the topic is important to us. It also occurs on mundane topics, such as household chores—conflicts over which are ultimately about fairness, respect, and autonomy.

In the philosophy seminar room or journal exchanges, participants are often happy to “go at it” without any semblance of hostility, and this is because their purposes match. Even there, this is not always the case. But if we exit these contexts and take the same approach to others who are trying to have a very different conversation, it will not go well. So, a prerequisite to ahimsic argumentation is to apply the matching principle by considering what kind of conversation the other person is trying to have, and whether argumentation is therefore appropriate or harmful.

Of course, there are cases in which we need to have a practical conversation with others who are reluctant to engage. We may therefore need to facilitate a receptive frame of mind. This leads to another method essential to ahimsic communication: [Rapoport’s Rules](https://bigthink.com/the-learning-curve/rapoports-rules-arguments/) (from [Daniel Dennett](https://wwnorton.com/books/Intuition-Pumps-And-Other-Tools-for-Thinking/) based on the work of Anatol Rapoport).

The first step is to listen carefully to the interlocutor’s position and reflect it back to them. Here we operate on Donald Davidson’s [principle of charity](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3129898), interpreting others in the most charitable way possible. The goal is to *steelman* (put their best case forward) rather than *strawman* (misrepresent them). Give this your best shot, then ask for confirmation, correction, or clarification.

The second step is to acknowledge common ground. This is difficult when differences are great. But if you look carefully, you can find agreement. The agreement might directly pertain to the topic (e.g., a shared premise or shared critique of another position), or it might be about the nature of the topic or conversation itself. Perhaps you agree that it is an important issue to discuss. Perhaps you both value that the other is willing to engage on this issue and hear each other out.

The third step is to mention what you learned. Again, you can always learn something, as noted earlier.

The order of the second and third steps does not matter. What matters is that the first step remains first and the fourth step—rebuttal—remains last. At the rebuttal stage, you may offer a critique of their argument and/or your own positive perspective. Most people skip straight to the rebuttal stage, increasing the chances of a defensive reaction. The first three stages can prevent this because they help one build rapport, establish trust and goodwill, and incline the other person to become more receptive to hearing your side. In Aristotelian terms, the first three steps establish ethos and pathos.

Consider Daryl Davis, the African American musician who decided to approach local KKK members. As documented in his film [*Accidental Courtesy*](https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/documentaries/accidental-courtesy/), he began by asking them if they would be willing to share their views with him. They obliged. Listening to such offensive views must have been difficult in a way that I could not fathom. But he managed to do it with patience and decorum. Rather than firing back immediately, he reflected their views back to them, asked for clarifications, lightened the mood with a bit of humor, and asked follow-up questions. Intentionally or not, he was following Rapoport’s rules. Like Derek Black, Davis’s interlocutors began to see that their worldviews didn’t jibe with what they were witnessing. Finding this technique effective, Davis continued his efforts. To date, he has converted hundreds of KKK members, including some grand wizards. Similar methods are recommended by social epistemologist C. Thi Nguyen for [combating echo chambers](https://aeon.co/essays/why-its-as-hard-to-escape-an-echo-chamber-as-it-is-to-flee-a-cult), where *fact-checking* and *evidential bombardment* fail, and by one of the world’s leading experts Steven Hassan, a former cult member himself, for [deprogramming cult members](https://freedomofmind.com/combating-cult-mind-control/).

However, even if one follows the first three of Rapoport’s rules, there is a danger of losing ground at the rebuttal stage. A useful principle for ahimsic argumentation is the *Golden Rule of Argumentation*: in giving and receiving arguments, treat others the way you wish to be treated. When arguments follow this principle, we might call it *Golden Argumentation*.

Golden Argumentation requires that we avoid logical fallacies, cognitive biases, lies, bullshit, misleading contextualization, withholding evidence, sophistry, etc. Instead, we must employ good epistemic practices (e.g., evidence-gathering and fact-checking) and exhibit epistemic virtues, such as honesty, humility, and open-mindedness.

One common mistake at the rebuttal stage that violates the Golden Rule of Argumentation is failure to genuinely consider the other person’s reasons in developing one’s own view. Merely listening and reflecting it back is insufficient. To avoid being challenged, some people resort to *relativism* here: the view that truth is relative, so that what’s “true for you” might not be “true for me.” However, as Richard Feldman argues, [relativism amounts to a disrespectful dismissal](https://academic.oup.com/book/49938/chapter-abstract/422026224?redirectedFrom=fulltext)—a refusal to take another’s reasons as a challenge to one’s own. Taking another’s reasons seriously means the willingness to recognize the possibility that one might be wrong; i.e., the possibility of a real disagreement. Refusing to do so amounts to a kind of intolerance. For Feldman, then, the appeal to relativism functions as an [argument stopper](https://www.amazon.com/Reason-Argument-2nd-Richard-Feldman/dp/0136246028)—a tactic for cutting off rational discussion to avoid challenges to one’s view. However, challenges shouldn’t be a problem if our goal is the truth. If they’re good challenges, they can help you correct an error. If they’re not very good, one can retain one’s position and strengthen it by learning how to respond to opposition. If you’re unsure whether they’re any good, you can acknowledge them as worth considering, then return to the conversation after you’ve had time to reflect.

No matter what one does, your interlocutor might not be receptive to direct rebuttal. In this case, an alternative is the *Socratic method* in which one steers the conversation with probative questions, allowing the answers to come voluntarily from within rather than forced from without. Still, the danger there is turning it into interrogation. One needs to approach questioning with caution. Again, it helps to be genuinely inquisitive and communicate this via nonverbal cues.

If continued argumentation will increase hostility, it is better to gently redirect or withdraw from the conversation. Or if we know our interlocutor isn’t willing to engage in the first place, we should respect that. Handling these situations with care can set the stage for better engagement in the future.

In the end, the effectiveness of ahimsic argument techniques depend on the ability to apply them in the heat of the moment. It is here that we need [mindful communication](https://www.orenjaysofer.com/book-audio). As Thich Nhat Hanh suggests in [*Being Peace*](https://plumvillage.shop/products/books/mindfulness-and-meditation/being-peace/), taking a brief pause to breathe three times can be an immediate calming counter to rising agitation (117). In the long term, we can develop a deeper level of mindfulness via regular mindfulness meditation, a practice originating from Buddhist philosophy. Similar meditative techniques for deep listening and managing negative emotions are practiced by the Quakers among others.

***Communicative Satyagraha***

The final and most interesting form of AC resistance is *communicative* *satyagraha*. [Satyagraha](https://www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/the-voice-of-truth.pdf) was Gandhi’s preferred form of nonviolence, and was later adopted by King. According to Gandhi, “Its root meaning is holding on to truth, hence Truth-force. I have also called it Love-force or Soul-force. In the application of *Satyagraha* I discovered in the earliest stages that pursuit of truth did not admit of violence being inflicted on one's opponent but he must be weaned from error by patience and sympathy. For what appears to be truth to the one may appear to be error to the other. And patience means self-suffering. So the doctrine came to mean vindication of Truth not by infliction of suffering on the opponent but on one's self” (149).

Gan illustrates the idea in his [keynote address](https://www.pdcnet.org/pdc/bvdb.nsf/citations?openform&fp=acorn&id=acorn_2016_0016_42737_0037_0040) during the 2016 United Nations Celebration of the [International Day of Nonviolence](https://www.un.org/en/observances/non-violence-day) (held annually on October 2 in honor of Gandhi’s birthday):

Literally, *satyagraha* means *holding onto truth. Satya* means *Truth*, and *graha* means *grasping*. Here is an illustrative story .… Gandhi had to take a stagecoach to continue his journey [from Maritzburg, South Africa]. The person in charge of the stagecoach, called the leader, refused to seat Gandhi inside the coach with the other, white passengers. As Gandhi puts it, he pocketed the insult and sat up top with the driver. But when the coach stopped for the afternoon, the leader wanted to smoke. So he left the coach to sit next to the driver and asked Gandhi to sit at his feet, on the rail. Gandhi at this point refused, and the leader began to beat him. But Gandhi clung to the rail and refused to be budged even as the leader attempted to pull him from his seat. Eventually the passengers themselves intervened and insisted that Gandhi be allowed to ride in the coach.

Now this is the image of Gandhi I would like you all to remember: Gandhi clinging to the rail of the stagecoach, being pulled and beaten as he refuses to loosen his grip. Here is the man who believes he is grasping Truth and refusing to let go of it. But he does not harm others for the sake of his Truth. In fact, in refusing to cooperate, he endures harm himself. His commitment to Truth requires that he, not others, suffer for it. That is his duty…

We can break satyagraha into three components: (i) truth, (ii) ahimsa, and (iii) self-suffering. For Gandhi, holding to truth means telling the truth, thinking the truth, acting in accordance with truth, and sticking up for the truth against advocates of untruth (i.e., resistance). One might question whether or not telling the truth is always wrong. Regardless of what Gandhi would say about this, perhaps we can accommodate the occasional “noble lie” (e.g., lying to the murderer inquiring about the location of the desired victim) as a form of protecting the truth from those who would abuse it. In any case, Gandhi took truth to imply ahimsa, though we will not explore the connection here. Truth (which requires resistance) together with ahimsa imply nonviolent resistance. While these two elements are common to all forms of nonviolent resistance, Gandhi’s innovation is his emphasis on the role of self-suffering. In some cases of nonviolent resistance, self-suffering is unnecessary (e.g., when ahimsic force, distraction, or argumentation work right away). But if one remains committed to nonviolent resistance amidst being attacked, it entails the acceptance of self-suffering. Gandhi’s idea is that, when opponents see your courage, honesty, strength, and unwillingness to return violence in the face of suffering, it can move their hearts even when rational appeals to the mind cannot—a phenomenon that Richard Gregg terms [*moral jiu-jitsu*](https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/power-of-nonviolence/moral-jiujitsu/C1CD7EA4FA63FF41CC0231E28F16BFD2). Whether or not this occurs, if opponents react with violence against those who remain nonviolent, it often causes a backlash that Gene Sharp calls [*political jiu-jitsu*](https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/resource/the-politics-of-nonviolent-action-volume-2/): it exposes the brutality of opponents (amplified by the strategic use of media), costing them public support and mobilizing third parties into action.

Satyagraha

Thus, in Gan’s story above, Gandhi clung to the rail (holding onto truth) without harming his attacker (ahimsa), accepting the cost of nonviolent resistance (self-suffering), which moved the hearts of the onlookers who then spoke up in support of his cause (jiu-jitsu), thereby achieving his aim.

Is the call for self-suffering morally problematic? First, I should emphasize that Gandhi would have preferred there to be no suffering at all. We should prevent it where we can. But that is not always possible. Second, where there is injustice, there is already suffering. In the face of injustice, complacency results in suffering as does violent resistance. Third, Gandhi only asked the willing. Not everyone is prepared for satyagraha, and there are other roles to play. Fourth, willing acts of self-sacrifice in the service of a noble cause are acceptable, usually admired as acts of heroism while acknowledging the loss as a tragedy. In any case, satyagraha is rarely that extreme. It could amount to accepting a lesser form of harm than death.

Does satyagraha have a communicative parallel? This is the place to introduce Rosenberg’s NVC.

When strong negative emotions are in play, we usually communicate in ways that prevent us from getting through to interlocutors. Our language makes it such that others cannot emotionally connect with our feelings and needs. In particular, we judge or criticize, which stimulates a defensive response, an impenetrable defensive barrier, and therefore failure.

To circumvent this problem, Rosenberg has us analyze our judgments of others into smaller components that are not received as criticisms, thereby preventing a defensive reaction. The process consists of two “parts”—speaking honestly and listening empathetically (in either order)—each involving the same four “components”:

To begin, one person states what they are observing (e.g., their employer gave the promised raise to someone else), what one is feeling (in relation to the observation), the needs that are met or unmet (which stimulate the feeling), and what one would like from the other person (in order to meet one’s needs). Once all four components are clear, the same person empathetically listens to the other do the same.

The process is deceptively simple. Observations often get confused with evaluations (“He treated me *unfairly*”) as do feelings (“I *feel* that he treated me unfairly”). Often, no attempt is made to communicate one’s feelings. When an attempt is made, feelings are often confused with demands (“I feel like he *should* treat me better”) or are described with responsibility-denying language (“He *made* me feel like …”). Needs often get confused with demands (“I need him to *stop* treating me unfairly”). Lack of specificity is yet another pitfall (e.g., “I feel *good*,” “I feel *bad*,” “I need you to stop *what you are doing*”). People often have a hard time identifying specific feelings and needs in a way that doesn’t confuse them with other things, which is why the Center for Nonviolent Communication provides a [Feelings and Needs Inventory](https://www.cnvc.org/store/feelings-and-needs-inventory): a list of feelings and needs that most of us can relate to, grouped into various categories. Going through the inventory to identify one’s specific feelings and needs can be quite illuminating. As for requests, they are commonly confused with demands, such as when I ask for something but don’t permit the person to decline without retaliation. Sometimes no action is mentioned at all, leaving the other person confused about what to do.

These mistakes tend to result in defensiveness, as does communicating with *nonverbal condemnation* (e.g., a judgmental facial expression, tone of voice, or sigh) (29). And when others react poorly as a result, we might react poorly to their poor reaction, initiating a vicious cycle. By contrast, when one learns to be clear, honest, and specific about one’s observations, feelings, needs, and requests, and listens empathetically to others do the same, one mitigates defensiveness and maximizes the chance of connection. And this is because when we arrive at the level of basic feelings and needs that most people can relate to, most of us naturally feel empathy, which is otherwise blocked by defense mechanisms.

The parallel to satyagraha is this: The willingness to engage in an honest conversation is a way of holding to truth. NVC avoids the harmful elements in ordinary language, which corresponds to ahimsa. Having empathy for the negative feelings and unmet needs of one’s interlocuter, even as they employ VC rather than NVC, is difficult and can be painful. It is a way of taking suffering upon oneself. The effect of reopening their channels of empathy corresponds to moral jiu-jitsu.

How well does this work? While there is no space to explore examples here, Rosenberg’s corpus is filled with cases demonstrating the effectiveness of NVC in a diverse range of situations: intimate relationships, families, education, therapy and counseling, prison populations, business, and diplomacy, among others (9). One reason why it works is that NVC does not require the other person to know NVC (5). You can learn to listen for the observations, feelings, needs, and requests behind people’s criticisms and negative emotions, repeating them back and seeking confirmation. Or one might explicitly request that interlocutors share the four components.

Some forms of communicative satyagraha do not use the NVC formula but retain the same fundamental strategy of establishing honesty, trust, and goodwill, opening the channels of connection, allowing the other side to better appreciate how their behaviors contribute to suffering. Antoinette Tuff, for example, stopped an active shooter at the elementary school where she worked with [“Love at the Barrel of a Gun.”](https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/love-at-barrel-of-gun/) She was using the *consolatio*, an ancient Roman rhetorical method for talking people down. One first realizes that “hurt people hurt people.” So, one looks for the suffering underlying the action. This enables one to identify with them and their situation (“I know you must be going through a lot. I can relate.”). Then one puts their suffering into context (“this won’t last forever,” “things will get better”), and finally gives them agency by empowering them with a choice (offering a safe way out of the situation if they are willing). Ultimately, Tuff found herself saying “I love you.” And it worked.

**Conclusion**

Although the name “nonviolent communication” makes NVC sound as if it is the only nonviolent form of communication, we have seen that this is not the case. AC is more expansive. Nor is NVC always the most viable form of AC, as some NVC proponents seem to maintain. NVC is most suited for conversations in which (a) emotions are the driving force and (b) there is ample time to work through them together. In heat-of-the-moment situations, distraction is sometimes needed. Argumentation is more appropriate in situations in which all parties are fully open to pure rational inquiry. In other cases, ahimsic force or even nonresistance is ideal. In still other cases, no form of communication is enough; we may need a noncommunicative form of nonviolent resistance. But one question remains: Are there cases in which we should choose VC over AC? I will take this up in the third and final installment of the series.

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1. Please cite [the published version of this essay](https://blog.apaonline.org/2024/12/23/ahimsic-communication-an-alternative-to-civility/), which can be accessed at the *Blog of the APA*. It is part of the *Current Events in Public Philosophy* series. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)