

# Gandhi's Philosophy of Nonviolence

## Essential Selections

Compiled and Edited with Supplementary Material  
by  
Brian C. Barnett

DRAFT—Forthcoming (Rebus Press)



[Gandhi Leading the Salt March, India, 1930](#)

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*“The law of love will work, just as the law of gravitation will work.” ~ Gandhi*

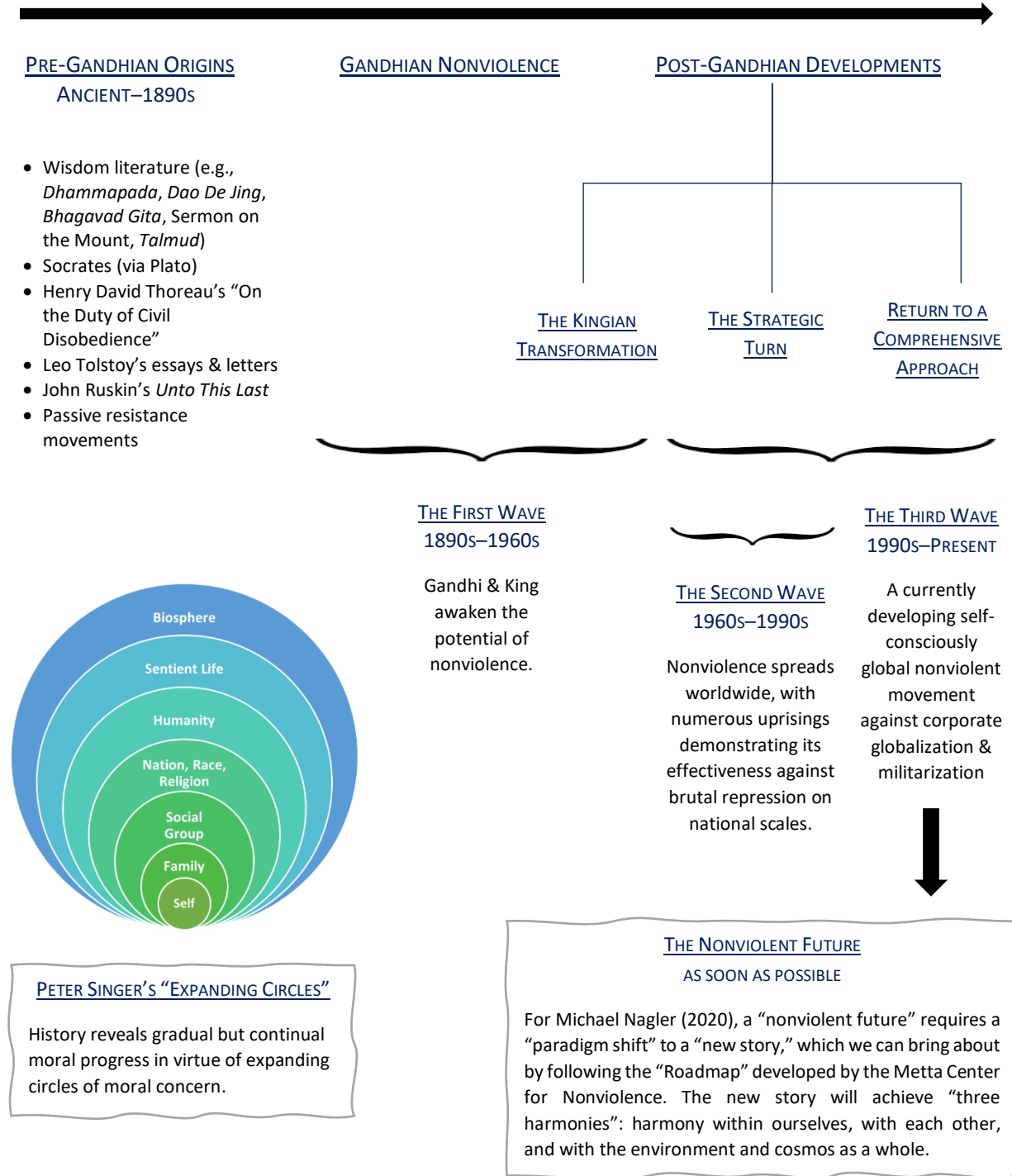
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# Nonviolence Timeline



The three waves in the timeline above are from Nagler (2013). I paraphrased his descriptions and added approximate date ranges. The other classifications are my own, which reflect major divisions within this book. The three subphases of post-Gandhian developments do not map neatly onto Nagler’s waves, but I interpret the third wave to include a mixture of supporters of strategic and comprehensive nonviolence.

# Recommended Resources

## PRIMARY SOURCES FOR GANDHI'S WRITINGS

- [\*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi\* \(CWMG\)](#)
- [GandhiServe Network](#)

## SOURCES FOR PHILOSOPHICAL MATERIAL

- [\*1000-Words Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology\*](#)
- [\*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\* \(SEP\)](#)
- [\*Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy\* \(IEP\)](#)
- [PhilPapers](#) (See in particular the [Peace & Nonviolence](#) category.)
- [\*The Acorn: Philosophical Studies in Pacifism and Nonviolence\*](#)

## NONVIOLENCE ORGANIZATIONS

- [Concerned Philosophers for Peace](#) (CPP)
- [Nonviolent Peaceforce](#) (NP)
- [International Center on Nonviolent Conflict](#) (ICNC)
- [Metta Center for Nonviolence](#)
- [M. K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence](#)
- [The King Center](#)
- [Albert Einstein Institution](#)

## TOOLS AND DATA

- Anti-Defamation League's ["Pyramid of Hate"](#)
- Southern Poverty Law Center's ["Hate Map"](#)
- UNESCO's [\*Seville Statement on Violence: Preparing the Ground for the Construction of Peace\*](#)
- [Global Peace Index](#) (GPI)
- Nonviolence International's ["Nonviolent Tactics Database"](#) [Nonviolence News](#)

## FILMS

- [\*Gandhi\*](#), directed by Richard Attenborough, starring Ben Kingsley (1982)
- [\*Mahatma: Life of Gandhi, 1869–1948\*](#), directed by Vithalbhai Jhaveri, produced by The Gandhi National Memorial Fund in cooperation with the Films Division of the Government of India (1968)
- [\*A Force More Powerful\*](#), directed by Steve York (1999), [Part I](#) and [Part II](#)

## Preface

**M**ohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948)—often addressed by the respectful “Gandhiji,” the reverential “Mahatma” (Sanskrit for “Great Soul”), or the affectionate “Bapu” (Gujarati for “father”)—is widely regarded as the “father of nonviolence.”<sup>1</sup> His birthday, October 2, is commemorated as the [International Day of Nonviolence](#).



[Non-Violence \(or The Knotted Gun\)](#) by Carl Fredrik Reuterswård at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City. Photo by [ZhengZhou](#) via Wikimedia Commons. License: CC BY-SA 3.0

Of course, Gandhi was not the first to advocate nonviolence as a form of resistance to injustice. He drew on an expansive range of earlier sources, most notably the Jain religion, his own Hinduism, Christianity, the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates (469/470–399 BCE), the ancient Greek and Roman Stoics, the American transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), the Russian novelist and essayist Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), and the English writer, philosopher, and art critic John Ruskin (1819–1900).

Gandhi’s significance lies partly in synthesizing and building on these sources, developing new methods of nonviolent resistance, advocating for and publicizing these ideas and methods in writings and speeches, and putting them into practice on a massive, coordinated scale in South Africa and India, thereby receiving global attention. But Gandhi was also a great philosopher.

### Box 1 – Gandhi as a Philosopher

What is philosophy? The answer is complex and controversial. But one approach is to begin with etymology (the study of word origins). The English word “**philosophy**” derives from the ancient Greek word (*philosophia*) for “love of wisdom.” Love (*philia*) is (plausibly) an emotion, and emotions have historically been called “**passions**.” Whatever precisely characterizes this particular passion, it follows that philosophy is, in some sense, the “passionate” pursuit of wisdom (*sophia*). **Wisdom** is the characteristic **virtue** of the wise person—one who **understands** how to live well. So, on the present approach, a **philosopher** is someone who passionately pursues the virtue that enables this understanding, which will presumably incline one to **live one’s philosophy**. A central tool for this pursuit is the careful, systematic use of **reason** to investigate the fundamental questions of reality and our place in it—the paradigm activity of the philosopher.

This brings us to our first question about Gandhi. Most people think of him as an activist, a politician, an ascetic spiritual figure. But “Was Gandhi a philosopher?” This is the question with which British philosopher Richard Sorabji begins his book, *Gandhi and the Stoics: Modern Experiments in Ancient Values*. Here is his first pass at an answer:

Yes. He was forever seeking a consistent rationale for all that he did, and, more than any philosophers I have encountered, he subjected his views to relentless criticism, sometimes his own, but more often that of other people, which he published voluminously in his weekly newspapers. He wrote daily letters and sought to answer criticisms and explain his ideas in relation to new situations. Moreover, he thought himself obliged to *live* by what he taught. Philosophy as a way of *life* was the main tradition of ancient and of much subsequent philosophy, and went hand in hand with the *thinking* to which philosophy has sometimes more recently been confined. Gandhi was indeed a thinker, and he offered philosophical *reasons* for what he thought. (2012, 1)

Two hundred pages later, Sorabji closes his remarkable study by considering “whether any other philosophers were like Gandhi” (202). As Sorabji concludes,

Gandhi, then, seems to have been offering something unique, and this confirms what might have been expected. In speaking of his “experiments on ancient values” and of the exceptional extent of his search for criticism, I was thinking of him as having something unusual to offer. It has now become clearer why and at what point he engaged in experiments, and why and at what point he invited public criticism, not only in order to teach, but also in order to refine the views he already had. (203)

Gandhi’s nonviolence campaigns—the public aspect of his philosophy-in-practice—are also notable for providing a template on which many future nonviolent activists would model their own campaigns. Most prominent among those he influenced was **Martin Luther King, Jr.** (1929–1968), a Baptist minister, activist, and spokesperson for the American civil rights movement during the 1950s–1960s. King studied philosophy, sociology, and theology as an undergraduate and in seminary, which prepared the way for his enthusiastic embrace of Gandhi’s ideas upon encountering them during doctoral studies. King then fervently absorbed Gandhi’s writings, traveled to India to pay homage, and imported the Gandhian philosophy into the American context, where he adapted it to his Christianity, systematized and refined it, presented it to the public in an eloquent, powerful new voice, and wielded it in his fight for justice and against what he termed “[the Triple Evils](#)” of poverty, racism, and militarism. Although Gandhi and King are no longer with us—both tragically lost via assassination—the Gandhi-King paradigm continues to thrive today among practitioners, students, and scholars of nonviolence all over the world.



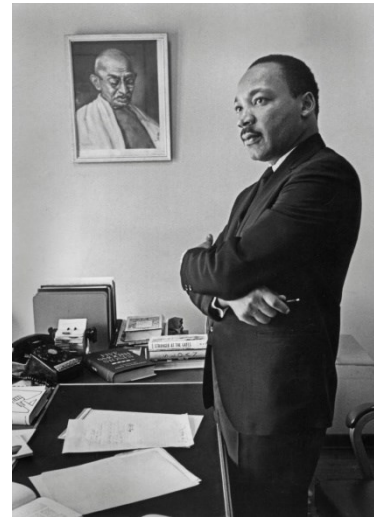
### Box 2 – King Explains Gandhi’s Influence

“Then one Sunday afternoon I traveled to Philadelphia to hear a sermon by Dr. Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University. He was there to preach for the Fellowship House of Philadelphia. Dr. Johnson had just returned from a trip to India, and, to my great interest, he spoke of the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. His message was so profound and electrifying that I left the meeting and bought a half-dozen books on Gandhi’s life and works.

Like most people, I had heard of Gandhi, but I had never studied him seriously. As I read I became deeply fascinated by his campaigns of nonviolent resistance. I was particularly moved by the Salt March to the Sea and his numerous fasts. The whole concept of ‘*Satyagraha*’ (*Satya* is truth which equals love, and *agraha* is force: ‘*Satyagraha*,’ therefore, means truth-force or love force) was profoundly significant to me. As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi my skepticism 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 relationship. The ‘turn the other cheek’ philosophy and the ‘love your enemies’ philosophy were only valid, I felt, when individuals were in conflict with other individuals; when racial groups and nations were in conflict a more realistic approach seemed necessary. 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. Love, for Gandhi, was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking for so many months.”

[“My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence”](#) (Excerpt)



Martin Luther King, Jr.  
Atlanta, Ga., 1966

[Bob Fitch photography archive](#), ©  
[Stanford University Libraries](#)

To properly evaluate today’s efforts in the struggle for justice (strategically, politically, ethically, philosophically)—what we are doing right, what we are doing wrong, what we can do better—requires adequate understanding. Given that we can trace much of the thinking in this area back to Gandhi, a full understanding requires careful study of his ideas. That is the main purpose of this book. Our focus will not be on Gandhi the man (his biography, his virtues and vices)—nor on his ascetic lifestyle, religion, the details of his campaigns, their historical and political contexts, etc. Our focus instead will be on *his philosophy*, and only that portion of his philosophy that is central to nonviolence.

Those seeking Gandhi’s original words on nonviolence face a daunting task. He was a prolific writer and speaker (despite the persistent challenge of his self-recognized extreme introversion). [The Collected Works of Gandhi](#) span roughly 50,000 pages in 100 volumes! What’s more, Gandhi’s recurrent and ever-evolving interrelated themes—love, Truth, morality, religion, nonviolence—are interspersed among numerous other topics in a variety of different contexts spanning several decades of his life. As far as I can tell, there exists no single, concise, systematic presentation of his original words specifically isolating his philosophy of nonviolence (much less a presentation which also provides helpful philosophical context alongside his words). For this reason, I have extracted the essential selections and arranged them in an orderly fashion under headings to make their progression conspicuous.

## Editor's Notes

The book is divided into two main parts. Part I contains excerpts from a range of Gandhi's publications. They are unedited except for minimal formatting adjustments, including added boldface for first usage of key terms/phrases/names, omissions for the sake of brevity (indicated by ellipses), and occasional clarifications in square brackets (with less important comments relegated to endnotes). Inconsistencies in spelling, hyphenation, and capitalization across sources are left in place to maintain textual integrity. The sources are identified along the way, which are freely available online—since Gandhi's entire corpus was released in 2009 by Navajivan Trust into the public domain, which was his original wish.

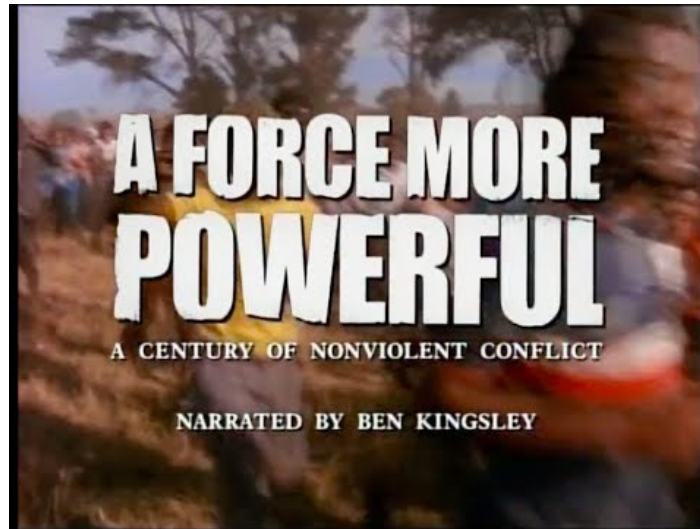
Part II is a three-part introduction to post-Gandhian developments in nonviolence, beginning with Kingian nonviolence, then turning to the blossoming of strategic nonviolence, and ending with a recent movement to renew comprehensive nonviolence (nonviolence as a way of life, as opposed to mere strategy). These post-Gandhian developments are reflected in the Nonviolence Timeline in the opening pages of the book. The purpose of Part II is to explore how Gandhi's legacy played out in the long scheme of nonviolence theory and practice. But since Gandhi's philosophy is the primary focus of the book, Part II is much briefer than Part I.

Both parts of the book include a generous portion of supplemental boxes containing summaries of pertinent philosophical background, excerpts from Gandhi's influences, excerpts from those he influenced, and other material intended to deepen understanding and provoke critical reflection. I have placed the boxes next to the text to which they are most relevant. However, some readers may prefer to skip over the boxes on a first reading to maintain flow, returning to the boxes afterward. Readers who wish to skip any of the boxes altogether should still be able to follow the material. However, many of the Questions for Reflection provided at the end of each chapter pertain to the box material. The questions also often pertain to items on the Suggested Reading/Listening/Viewing lists, which follow the questions.

Scattered throughout are ample media (images and embedded videos). Most images are from [Wikimedia Commons](#) and all embedded videos are from YouTube. All media reproduced in the book have suitable [Creative Commons](#) (CC) licenses, which will be indicated. Images, diagrams, and tables lacking attribution are my own work. Finally, I have made every effort to ensure that all book contents are screen-reader friendly.

## Preparatory Viewing

To better grasp Gandhi's ideas, it would be immensely helpful before proceeding to have basic familiarity with a range of concrete examples of nonviolence in practice. To this end, I highly recommend watching at minimum the India segment (Part I, Episode 1) of Steve York's 1999 two-part documentary film [A Force More Powerful](#), ideally along with the Nashville segment (Part I, Episode 2). Part I continues with Episode 3 on South Africa. Part II includes another three episodes: Denmark, Poland, and Chile.



*[A Force More Powerful, Part I: India / Nashville / South Africa](#)*

Richard Attenborough's 1982 film *Gandhi*, despite the relatively minor factual discrepancies typical of dramatizations, is also very helpful for grasping Gandhian nonviolence. For greater historical detail, the Gandhi National Memorial Fund in cooperation with the Films Division of the Government of India produced a long-form documentary in 1968: [Mahatma: Life of Gandhi, 1869–1948](#).

### Suggested Reading

Metcalf, Thomas. 2020. "What Is Philosophy?" *1000-Word Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology*. <https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2020/10/10/philosophy/>.

Sorabji, Richard. 2017. "Gandhi the Philosopher." *Aeon*. <https://aeon.co/essays/gandhi-was-a-subtle-surprising-philosopher-in-the-stoic-style>.

Gandhi, M. K. 1968. *An Autobiography, or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Translated by Mahadev Desai. Edited by Shriman Narayan. Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan Mudranalaya. <https://www.mkgandhi.org/autobio/autobio.htm>.

Bhavsar, Kirit K., Mark Lindley, and Purnima Upadhyay. "Bibliography of Books Read by Gandhi." <https://www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/bibliography-of-books-read-by-Mahatma-Gandhi.pdf>.

Rautela, Vikram. 2009. "Now, Copyright of Mahatma Gandhi's Writings Belongs to People." *The Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/ahmedabad/now-copyright-of-mahatma-gandhis-writings-belongs-to-people/>.

Kurlansky, Mark. 2008. *Non-Violence: The History of a Dangerous Idea*. New York: Modern Library Paperback Edition.

Nagler, Michael N. 2013. "The Time for Nonviolence Has Come." *Yes!* "Finding Courage" issue. <https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/courage/opinion/2004/05/21/the-time-for-nonviolence-has-come>.

## **PART I. SELECTIONS FROM GANDHI**

## Chapter 1. Gandhi's Concept of Nonviolence: *Satyagraha*

For the past thirty years I have been preaching and practising *Satyagraha*. The principles of *Satyagraha* as I know it today, constitute a gradual evolution.

*Satyagraha* differs from **Passive Resistance** as the North Pole from the South. The latter has been conceived as a weapon of the weak and does not exclude the use of physical force or violence for the purpose of gaining one's end, whereas the former has been conceived as a weapon of the strongest and excludes the use of violence in any shape or form.

### Box 3 – The Two Hands of Nonviolence

Gandhi intends *Satyagraha* to be a “weapon of the strongest” against injustice yet, at the same time, nonviolent. American feminist, author, and nonviolence advocate **Barbara Deming** (1917–1984) captured this dual aspect in her 1971 book, *Revolution and Equilibrium*:

With one hand we say to one who is angry, or to an oppressor, or to an unjust system, “Stop what you are doing. I refuse to honor the role you are choosing to play. I refuse to obey you. I refuse to cooperate with your demands. I refuse to build the walls and the bombs. I refuse to pay for the guns. With this hand I will even interfere with the wrong you are doing. I want to disrupt the easy pattern of your life.”

But then the advocate of nonviolence raises the other hand. It is raised outstretched—maybe with love and sympathy, maybe not—but always outstretched... With this hand we say, “I won't let go of you or cast you out of the human race. I have faith that you can make a better choice than you are making now, and I'll be here when you are ready. Like it or not, we are part of one another.”

Active nonviolence is a process that holds these two realities—of noncooperation with violence but open to the humanity of the violator—in tension. It is like saying to our opponent:

“*On the one hand* (symbolized by a hand firmly stretched out and signaling, ‘Stop!’) I will not cooperate with your violence or injustice; I will resist it with every fiber of my being. And, *on the other hand* (symbolized by the hand with its palm turned open and stretched toward the other) I am open to you as a human being.” (16)

Deming's “two hands of nonviolence” (as they have come to be called), reminiscent of Buddhist *mudras* (symbolic hand gestures), has become a popular symbol in nonviolence education.



*Barbara Deming* by Consuelo Kanaga (American, 1894-1978). Gelatin silver photograph, 9 5/16 x 7 5/8 in. (23.6 x 19.4 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Wallace B. Putnam from the Estate of Consuelo Kanaga, 82.65.454 (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, 82.65.454\_PS2.jpg)



[Tian Tan Buddha](#) in Hong Kong.  
Photo by SK via Flickr.  
License: CC BY-ND 2.0

The term *Satyagraha* was coined by me in South Africa to express the force that the Indian there used for full eight years and it was coined in order to distinguish it from the movement then going on in the United Kingdom and South Africa under the name of Passive Resistance.<sup>2</sup>

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.

But on the political field the struggle on behalf of the people mostly consists in opposing error in the shape of unjust laws. When you have failed to bring the error home to the lawgiver by way of petitions and the like, the only remedy open to you, if you do not wish to submit to error, is to compel him by physical force to yield to you or by suffering in your own person by inviting the penalty for the breach of the law. Hence *Satyagraha* largely appears to the public as **Civil Disobedience** or **Civil Resistance**. It is civil in the sense that it is not criminal.

The lawbreaker breaks the law surreptitiously and tries to avoid the penalty, not so the civil resister. He ever obeys the laws of the State to which he belongs, not out of fear of the sanctions but because he considers them to be good for the welfare of society. But there come occasions, generally, rare, when he considers certain laws to be so unjust as to render obedience to them a dishonor. He then openly and civilly breaks them and quietly suffers the penalty for their breach. And in order to register his protest against the action of the lawgivers, it is open to him to withdraw his co-operation from the State by disobeying such other laws whose breach does not involve moral turpitude.

In my opinion, the beauty and efficacy of *Satyagraha* are so great and the doctrine so simple that it can be preached even to children. It was preached by me to thousands of men, women and children commonly called indentured Indians with excellent results.

*Young India*, 14 January 1920

#### Box 4 – Thoreau on Civil Disobedience



[Henry David Thoreau, 1856](#) via Wikimedia Commons. This image is in the public domain.

One early source for Gandhi’s ideas about breaking unjust laws was the American naturalist and transcendentalist **Henry David Thoreau** (1817–1862), who coined the term “civil disobedience” in his 1849 essay “[On the Duty of Civil Disobedience](#)”—a defense of the act for which he was arrested: refusal to pay taxes as a protest against slavery. In this essay, Thoreau insists:

If it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn. As for adopting the ways which the State has provided for remedying the evil, I know not of such ways. They take too much time, and a man’s life will be gone.

Thoreau continues by articulating the potential power of his method:

I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name—if ten *honest* men only—ay, if *one* HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts, *ceasing to hold slaves*, were actually to withdraw from this copartnership, and be locked up in the county jail therefore, it would be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done forever.

Of course, Thoreau must contend with the popular objection that the laws (or morality) of a society are determined by a “**social contract**” to which the members of society have agreed. In virtue of this agreement, an individual is obligated to abide by the contract regardless of their personal views on the matter. This is a sketch of the [social contract theory](#). To this Thoreau responds: “If I had known how to name them, I should then have signed off in detail from all the societies which I never signed on to; but I did not know where to find such a complete list.”

### Suggested Reading

Thoreau, Henry David. 1993 [1849]. “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience.” *Project Gutenberg*.  
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/71/71-h/71-h.htm>.

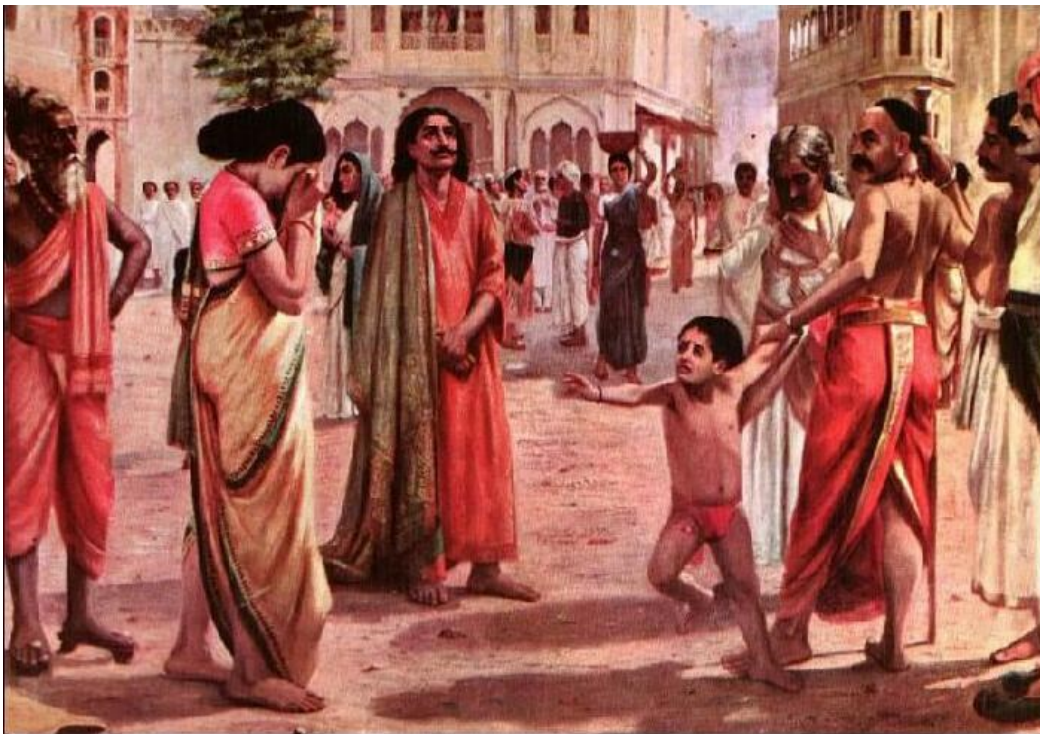
Antonini, David. 2018. “Social Contract Theory.” *1000-Word Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology*.  
<https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2018/10/03/social-contract-theory/>.

## Chapter 2. The Goal of *Satyagraha*: Truth

The word *Satya* (Truth) is derived from *Sat*, which means “being.” Nothing is or exists in reality except Truth. That is why *Sat* or Truth is perhaps the most important name of **God**.<sup>3</sup> In fact it is more correct to say that Truth is God, than to say that God is Truth. . . .

Devotion to this Truth is the sole justification for our existence. All our activities should be centered in Truth. Truth should be the very breath of our life. When once this stage in the pilgrim's progress<sup>4</sup> is reached, all other rules of correct living will come without effort, and obedience to them will be instinctive. But without Truth it is impossible to observe any principles or rules in life.

### Box 5 – King Harishchandra: A Source of Gandhi's Devotion to Truth



[Harishchandra in Distress](#) via Wikimedia Commons. This image is in the public domain.

Harishchandra, a legendary king of India, suffered enormous grief yet retained his commitment to Truth. From childhood, Gandhi admired this deeply, and it was an inspiration for his lifelong devotion to truth:

Just about this time, I had secured my father's permission to see a play performed by a certain dramatic company. This play—Harishchandra—captured my heart. I could never be tired of seeing it. But how often should I be permitted to go? It haunted me and I must have acted Harishchandra to myself times without number. “Why should not all be truthful like Harishchandra?” was the question I asked myself day and night. To follow truth and to go through all the ordeals Harishchandra went through was the one ideal it inspired in me. I literally believed in the story of Harishchandra. The thought of it all often made me weep. My commonsense tells me today that Harishchandra could not have been a historical character. Still both Harishchandra and Shravana [a mythological being famed for his devotion to his elderly blind parents] are living realities for me, and I am sure I should be moved as before if I were to read those plays again today.



Generally speaking, observation of the **law of Truth** is understood merely to mean that we must speak the truth. But we in the Ashram [spiritual community] should understand the word *Satya* or Truth in a much wider sense. There should be Truth in thought, Truth in speech, and Truth in action. To the man who has realized this Truth in its fullness, nothing else remains to be known, because all knowledge is necessarily included in it. What is not included in it is not Truth, and so not true knowledge; and there can be no inward peace without true knowledge. If we once learn how to apply this never-failing test of Truth, we will at once be able to find out what is worth doing, what is worth seeing, what is worth reading. . . .

[W]hat may appear as truth<sup>5</sup> to one person will often appear as untruth to another person. But that need not worry the seeker. Where there is honest effort, it will be realized that what appear to be different truths are like the countless and apparently different leaves of the same tree. Does not God Himself appear to different individuals in different aspects? Yet we know that He is one.

#### Box 6 – The Jain Doctrine of *Anekāntavāda*

Gandhi here alludes to *Anekāntavāda*—the doctrine of the “many-sidedness” of existence, developed by the Jain school of Indian philosophy founded by **Mahavira** in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. According to this doctrine, there is an ultimate, unchanging, objective reality—yet it is far too complex to be fully grasped by ordinary human knowledge. At best, we can grasp tentative, partial truths given our limited perspectives. These perspectives differ from person to person, yielding claims that appear to conflict and give rise to disagreement. In actuality, however, they may simply capture equally legitimate aspects of reality. The idea is popularly illustrated by the Jain story of **the blind men and the elephant**:

A king once brought five blind men into his courtyard where he had fastened a large elephant and asked them to tell him what it was. Each man touched the elephant, and on the basis of his perceptions, told the king what he knew this thing to be. The first felt the trunk and declared that it was a huge snake. The second touched the tail and said that it was a rope. The third felt the leg and called it a tree trunk. The fourth took hold of an ear and called it a winnowing fan, whereas the fifth felt the side of the elephant and declared it to be a wall. Because each insisted that his claim was correct and truly described the object in question, the five men were soon in the middle of a heated argument, unable to resolve the dispute because they failed to recognize that each of their claims was true only from a limited perspective. (Koller 39)<sup>6</sup>



[Blindenbrunnen by Horus Engels, Bonn, Germany](#)

Photo by ToLo46 via Wikimedia Commons. License: CC BY-SA 4.0

But Truth is the right designation of God. Hence there is nothing wrong in every man following Truth according to his lights. Indeed it is his duty to do so. Then if there is a mistake on the part of any one so following Truth, it will be automatically set right. For the quest of Truth involves *tapas*—self-suffering, sometimes even unto death. There can be no place in it for even a trace of self-interest. In such selfless search for Truth nobody can lose his bearings for long. Directly he takes to the wrong path he stumbles, and is thus redirected to the right path. Therefore the pursuit of Truth is true *bhakti* (devotion). It is the path that leads to God. There is no place in it for cowardice, no place for defeat.

*From Yeravda Mandir—Ashram Observances, Chapter 1*

**Box 7 – Philosopher Barry Gan Illustrates the Role of Truth in *Satyagraha***

“His term for the pursuit of Truth is *satyagraha*. Literally, *satyagraha* means *holding onto truth*. *Satya* means *Truth*, and *graha* means *grasping*. Here is an illustrative story. Early on in the 1982 film *Gandhi* is a scene that shows Gandhi being unceremoniously thrown from a train in Maritzburg, South Africa. Gandhi had refused to move from his first-class seat, for which he had purchased a ticket, and as an Indian in 1890s South Africa, he was not allowed to sit there. Gandhi later described this event as the turning point in his life, when he ceased being a shy and ineffectual attorney and turned his attention to bringing himself and others closer to Truth.

But what the 1982 film doesn’t show is what happened the following day. Gandhi had to take a stagecoach to continue his journey. 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. . . .

Gandhi agreed with Jesus’s dictum, ‘Physician, heal thyself.’ A story is told about Gandhi. It may be true; it may not be true, but it illustrates well his approach to life. A woman and her son once walked for a day to see Gandhi. When he met with them, the woman asked Gandhi to tell her son how bad it was for him to keep eating sweets. She said that the son would listen to Gandhi, but not to her. Gandhi asked them to return in two weeks. So they spent another day walking home, and in two weeks they spent still another day returning. When they met with Gandhi, Gandhi told the son how bad it was for him to keep eating sweets. The mother exclaimed, ‘Why couldn’t you tell him this two weeks ago?!’ Gandhi answered, ‘I had first to stop eating sweets myself.’

So Gandhi in his day told his fellow Indians that if they wished to cease being subjects of the British, they must first cease their own subjection of the Dalits, the Untouchables. Similarly, he argued that if Indians desired *genuine* independence, then they must not merely trade British imperialists and industrialists for Indian imperialists and industrialists.”

“Seeds of Duty: Holding to Nonviolence in Being and Truth” (Excerpt)  
Keynote Address delivered October 2, 2016

United Nations Celebration of the U.N. International Day of Nonviolence  
Printed in the Fall/Winter 2016–2017 issue of *The Acorn* 16 (1–2), pp. 37–40.

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## Chapter 3. The Means of *Satyagraha*: *Ahimsa*

**A** *himsa* is not merely a negative state of harmlessness, but it is a positive state of love, of doing good even to the evil-doer.

### Box 8 – Origins of *Ahimsa*

“*Ahimsa*” usually translated “non-harming” or “nonviolence.” But “-*sa*” is a suffix that indicates a desiderative—a verb form expressing the *desire* for the action indicated by the root verb). The prefix “*a-*” indicates negation. And “*himsa*” is harm. So, *ahimsa* is the rooting out of a desire to harm—not merely the refraining from harm. Nonetheless, this definition is negative, whereas Gandhi interprets it as having a more positive meaning (love and doing good). Regardless of the precise interpretation, it is a principle held in many philosophical schools of ancient India, including Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

*Ahimsa* takes its strongest form in **Jainism** (see Box 6 in the previous chapter). **Jains** (followers of Jainism) maintain that (a) all things in existence have souls (with differing degrees of consciousness) and (b) *ahimsa* applies to all things that have souls. The consequence is that the principle becomes universalized. Jains recognize that this yields a nearly impossible ethic, since the continuance of life inevitably involves some harm (e.g., to plants and insects). But it remains the **ethical ideal** toward which one must nevertheless strive. This led devout Jains to **asceticism** (self-denial of many of the ordinary comforts and pleasures of life). Although Gandhi adhered to Hinduism, he admired many aspects of Jainism. This partly explains his own ascetic tendencies, such as vegetarianism and other diet restrictions, minimal clothing, minimal possessions, and voluntary poverty.

Although not to the Jainist extreme, *ahimsa* is also central to Hinduism and Buddhism. Its centrality is enshrined in a Sanskrit phrase common to all three, which was popularized by Gandhi but which appears in many ancient Indian texts, including the great epic tale, the *Mahabharata*:

**“*Ahimsa paramo dharma.*”**  
(Nonviolence is the highest law.)



The Hand with the Wheel Is the Jain Symbol for *Ahimsa*.

But it does not mean helping the evil-doer to continue the wrong or tolerating it by passive acquiescence. On the contrary, love—the active state of *ahimsa*—requires you to resist the wrong-doer by dissociating yourself from him, even though it may offend him or injure him physically. Thus if my son lives a life of shame, I may not help him to do so by continuing to support him; on the contrary, my love for him requires me to withdraw all support from him although it may mean even his death. And the same love imposes on

me the obligation of welcoming him to my bosom when he repents. But I may not by physical force compel my son to become good. That, in my opinion, is the moral of the story of the Prodigal Son [a Biblical parable in [Luke 15: 11–32](#)].

*Young India*, 25 August 1920

### Box 9 – Tolstoy & the “Sermon on the Mount”

Gandhi maintained a brief letter correspondence with the Russian novelist and essayist **Leo Tolstoy** (1828–1910). Tolstoy expressed admiration for Gandhi’s reform efforts, which he saw as proof of the practicality of his (Tolstoy’s) ideas about nonviolence. So, the influence went in both directions. While Gandhi disavowed Tolstoy’s anarchism (rejection of government), Gandhi was heavily influenced by Tolstoy’s [theory of “nonresistance to evil.”](#)

This theory was based on Christian ethics, especially Jesus’s example of self-sacrifice for the good of others (suffering and death on the cross) and his message in the [“Sermon on the Mount”](#) (Matthew 5–7). In this Sermon, we find the Biblical version of

The **Golden Rule**: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 7:12)

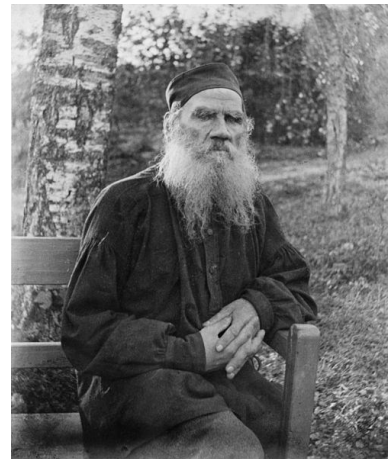
Along with an injunction against judging others:

Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, “Let me take the speck out of your eye,” while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye. (Matthew 7:1–5)

And a series of sayings in favor of loving and helping enemies rather than retaliating against them:

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:38–48)

Gandhi, however, gradually came to recognize that the term “nonresistance,” and related terms such as “passive resistance,” misleadingly suggest inaction or passivity. To avoid misinterpretation, he therefore eventually came to prefer more positive, active terms, such as “nonviolent resistance,” “direct action” —or “*Satyagraha*.”



[Leo Tolstoy, 1897](#) via Wikimedia Commons. This image is in the public domain.

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## Chapter 4. How to View an Opponent

**E**ven whilst you are suffering you may have no bitterness—no trace of it—against your opponents. And I tell you it is not a mechanical act at all. On the contrary I want you to feel like loving your opponents, and the way to do it is to give them the same credit for honesty of purpose which you would claim for yourself. I know that it is a difficult task. . . . consider their condition of mind from their point of view. . . . begin to think of things as our opponents think of them. . . . Three-fourths of the miseries and misunderstandings in the world will disappear, if we step into the shoes of our adversaries and understand their standpoint. We will then agree with our adversaries or think of them charitably. In our case there is no question of our agreeing with them quickly as our ideals are radically different. But we may be charitable to them and believe that they actually mean what they say. They do not want to open the roads to the “unapproachables.”<sup>7</sup> Now whether it is their self-interest or ignorance that tells them to say so, we really believe it is wrong of them to say so. Our business, therefore is to show them that they are in the wrong and we should do so by *our* suffering.

*Young India*, 19 March 1925

## Box 10 – Philosopher Robert L. Holmes on Understanding Evil

Why seek the perspective of those who are blatantly “evil”? How can good people entertain such a perspective?

Step 1: Remember that for both Gandhi and Tolstoy, all misdeeds are forms of error—deviations from or distortions of the Truth, whether minor or grave. As philosopher Robert L. Holmes’s explains in his analysis of evil,

most of the unnecessary suffering, death and destruction in the world.... consists of the acts of basically good people operating with various admixtures of false beliefs, misperceptions, biases, bad judgments and outright ignorance. They are governed for the most part not by malice but by fear. By fear, I include insecurity, apprehension, anxiety, worry, suspicion and a host of related notions, at one end, through outright terror at the other extreme.... Fear can lead people to do terrible things. But it is a different motive from malice. Fear is always of loss of some sort, whether personal, social, or political. It is self-referential.... Malice is a desire to cause suffering for its own sake. It is other directed. (2010, 12)

For these reasons, “Moral evil is essentially inward and subjective, as Augustine saw” (11).

Step 2: Notice the consequence of this “inward and subjective” nature of evil: “even where it [moral evil] exists, it is almost certainly difficult to identify with any confidence because it requires knowledge of motivation of a sort we rarely have” (11). This fits with Gandhi’s recognition of the limits of our access to absolute Truth, and with Tolstoy’s conviction, rooted in the “Sermon on the Mount,” that human beings are in no position to serve as judge and jury of others.

Step 3: This is an **epistemic** limitation [limitation pertaining to knowledge]. Holmes ties the epistemic conclusion to a moral conclusion: “Both [Gandhi and Tolstoy] were making an epistemological point, that we lack the requisite knowledge to be justified in resorting to violence” (5). One might here appeal to a **moral caution principle**: “if you should believe or suspend judgment that doing an action is a serious moral wrong, while knowing that not doing that action is not morally wrong, then you should not do that action” (Matheson 2016, 120). Imagine, for example, that you are on a game show with a sadistic host. You are given the option to press a button to win a \$1 million prize. But the downside is that the button will ignite a bomb in 1 of 10 rooms, 3 of which contain an innocent person. As a matter of stipulation, those are the only consequences. Moral caution says you should play it safe: don’t press that button.

Gandhi would add that, while these points preclude judging the *doer*, they do not preclude judging the *deed*:

Man and his deed are two distinct things. Whereas a good deed should call forth approbation and a wicked deed disapprobation, the doer of the deed, whether good or wicked, always deserves respect or pity as the case may be. ‘Hate the sin and not the sinner’ is a precept which, though easy enough to understand, is rarely practised, and that is why the poison of hatred spreads in the world.... It is quite proper to resist and attack a system, but to resist and attack its author is tantamount to resisting and attacking oneself. For we are all tarred with the same brush, and are children of one and the same Creator.... (*Autobiography*, Chapter 9)

Of course, just as it is possible to misjudge the doer, one might also misjudge the deed. But the difference is that by resisting the deed nonviolently, any resultant suffering is willingly taken upon oneself. Since it is within one’s purview to willingly accept suffering—but outside of one’s purview to cause undeserved suffering to another—the nonviolent route is morally cautious. It ensures that one will bear the burden of one’s own mistake, which potentially also functions to correct course and strengthen character (recall Chapter 2). If, on the other hand, the error does belong to the opponent, then, as we are about to see, Gandhi maintains that self-suffering is the most effective method to “wean them from error” (recall Chapter 1).



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## Chapter 5. The Key to Changing Hearts: The Law of Suffering

The conviction has been growing upon me, that things of fundamental importance to the people are not secured by reason alone but have to be purchased with their suffering. Suffering is the law of human beings; war is the law of the jungle. But suffering is infinitely more powerful than the law of the jungle for converting the opponent and opening his ears, which are otherwise shut, to the voice of reason. Nobody has probably drawn up more petitions or espoused more forlorn causes than I and 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.

*Young India*, 11 May 1931

### Box 11 – Heart, Mind, and Heart-Mind

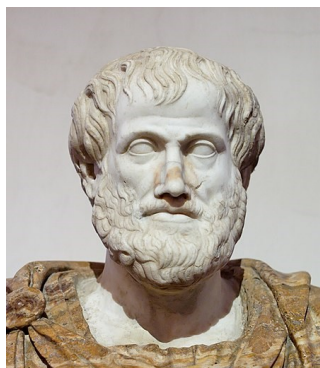
The view Gandhi expresses here is reminiscent of a central concept in Chinese philosophy: *xin*, or **heart-mind**. The idea here is that the heart and the mind are a unit. By contrast, many Western philosophers elevate either the heart or the mind over the other. A long tradition tracing to **Plato** (ca. 428–347 BCE) maintains that reason should be in charge, whereas Scottish philosopher **David Hume** (1711–1776) held the reverse: “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions.”

However, using the examples of the Holocaust architect Heinrich Himmler, the “fire and brimstone” theologian Jonathan Edwards, and Mark Twain’s character Huck Finn (regarding his temptation to betray his escaped slave friend Jim), the New Zealand philosopher Jonathan Bennett (1974) vividly portrays how subjugating the heart or the mind to the other can wreak moral havoc *either way*. Perhaps the basic lesson to draw is that, whenever we are internally divided, it is a warning sign that something is amiss.



*Taiji*, the Yin-Yang Symbol

One solution takes its cue from the American philosopher **John Rawls** (1821–2002), whose method of **reflective equilibrium** advises us to take all conflicting beliefs/intuitions—and we might add emotions—into equal consideration, aiming to achieve a balance among them. This is one way to apply another central Chinese philosophical concept, *yin-yang*: a complementary balance of opposites forming a whole.



[Bust of Aristotle](#) via Wikimedia Commons. This image is in the public domain.

Of course, this approaches the issue from a first-person perspective (how *I* should make up my mind), whereas Gandhi approaches the issue from a third-person perspective (what will persuade an opponent). Plato’s student **Aristotle** (384–322 BCE) argued that effective persuasion depends upon one’s *logos* (reason/evidence), one’s *ethos* (character/credibility), and the other’s *pathos* (frame of mind, including emotions). These are his famous **three modes of persuasion**. Aristotle was thinking of speech (which easily extends to writing). But words often fail, and sometimes there’s no time for words at all. One must simply act. And in that case, Gandhi went further than Aristotle: one ought to willingly accept suffering to move another’s heart.

That brings us to our next question: how does suffering accomplish this?

### Box 12 – The Logic of the Gandhian Dilemma



[James Lawson, 2005](#)  
 Photo by [Joon Powell](#)  
 via Wikimedia Commons.  
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The law of suffering operates in conjunction with what I call the **principle of morally weighted choice**. In his interview for the Nashville segment of York's 1999 documentary film *A Force More Powerful*, the American minister, professor, nonviolence tactician, and civil rights leader **James Lawson** explained that, for those employing the method of violence, the proffered choice is this: *Do as I wish, or "I will make you suffer until you cry 'uncle.'"* But, as philosopher Barry Gan explains in his book *Violence and Nonviolence: An Introduction*, those employing the method of nonviolence offer an alternative choice: *"Do as I wish, or make me suffer"* (2013, 87). After examining three examples of successful nonviolent action, Gan observes a general feature in how this choice is typically constructed:

.... what the activists desired to achieve was something relatively small .... But the alternatives .... were far more harsh in the eyes of most people standing on the sidelines. And the choice about which to allow was up to the authorities, the adversaries of the nonviolent activists. So in the end, either the nonviolent activists get their way, or the authorities and others perceive the response as an extreme measure to put a halt to behaviors that, on the face of it, are relatively innocuous, though their long-term ramifications are more serious. (2013, 89)

Presenting such a choice creates a perception in your favor, a strong incentive for adversaries to make the small concession. It is thus weighted in the moral direction. But if adversaries lack the wisdom to concede—if they choose to make you suffer instead—then your courageous and unflinching endurance may re-humanize you in their eyes, provoking **cognitive dissonance**, the potential resolution of which is a shift in moral perspective—a common phenomenon termed **moral jiu-jitsu** by the American social philosopher and reformer **Richard Gregg** (1885–1974) in his *The Power of Nonviolence*, the first book-length effort to systematize Gandhi's philosophy (1935, chapter 2).<sup>8</sup>



[Gene Sharp, 2012](#)  
 Photo by [Kristna Fredsrörelsen](#) via Flickr.  
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Whether or not this moral shift occurs in the opponent, an extreme response on their part will garner sympathy for you from the sidelines, creating greater opposition for your adversaries—a common backlash effect termed **political jiu-jitsu** by the renowned American nonviolence tactician and Gandhi scholar **Gene Sharp** (1928–2018) in his three-volume strategic study *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (1973, Part III, chapter 12).

Those are the two main possibilities, and either outcome is a win for the nonviolent side. Call this **the Gandhian dilemma**, since it was Gandhi's innovation, which he used repeatedly and to great effect (consider, for example, the choice he offered in his letter to the British announcing the Salt March, as retold in the India segment of York's *A Force More Powerful*). The resulting victory may be small. But Gandhi drew a **gradual progression corollary**: however small, take the win, proceed with another step, and continue piecemeal until reaching the cumulative effect of a full victory. Too much too fast will shift your adversary's incentive back in their favor, rendering the principle of morally weight choice inapplicable, thereby undermining the logic of the Gandhian dilemma.

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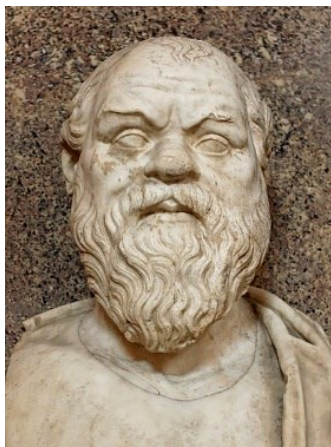
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## Chapter 6. The Source of True Strength: An Indomitable Will

In this age of the rule of brute force, it is almost impossible for anyone to believe that anyone else could possibly reject the law of the final supremacy of brute force. . . . Such being the hold that the **doctrine of the sword** has on the majority of mankind. . . . But I believe that non-violence is infinitely superior to violence, forgiveness is more manly than punishment. . . . Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will. . . . Non-violence is the **law of our species** as violence is the **law of the brute**. The spirit lies dormant in the brute, and he knows no law but that of physical might. The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law, to the strength of the spirit.

*Young India*, 11 August 1920

### Box 13 – Greek Philosophical Influence on Gandhi



[Bust of Socrates](#) via Wikimedia Commons. This image is in the public domain.

Refusal to compromise one’s character or cooperate with evil, combined with an endless capacity to courageously endure any amount of suffering inflicted by an enemy, yields an unconquerable spirit. This is why Gandhi quipped in 1926 that

“No power on Earth can make a person do a thing against his will.”

When such an attitude is put into practice, it tends to have a powerful, transformative effect on others.

As British philosopher Richard Sorabji explains in his article [“Gandhi the Philosopher.”](#) this perspective is strikingly similar to that of the ancient Greek and Roman **Stoics**, whom Gandhi had read about and characterized as inspiring—but only well after his ideas had already taken shape. However, argues Sorabji, Gandhi was directly influence by the Stoics’ role model, **Socrates** (469/470–399 BCE), as depicted in the writings of his student, Plato. In Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates is on trial for allegedly corrupting the Athenian youth by practicing philosophy (alongside charges of religious unorthodoxy). In his defense, Socrates refuses to give up his quest for Truth even to save his life, fearlessly accepting the death penalty without anger, hatred, or ill-will against those who unjustly condemned him.

Gandhi had read Plato while under arrest in South Africa, described Socrates as a “soldier for truth,” and in 1908 composed a rendition of the *Apology* in Gujarati, his native tongue. The affinities speak for themselves:

- “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Socrates, *Plato’s Apology* (38a)
- “A good man cannot be harmed.” Socrates, *Plato’s Apology* (41d)
- “I say that the admirable and good person, man or woman, is happy, but that the one who’s unjust and wicked is miserable.” Socrates, *Plato’s Gorgias* (470e)
- “I would choose suffering over doing what’s unjust.” Socrates, *Plato’s Gorgias* (469c)
- “Doing what’s unjust is worse than suffering it.” Socrates, *Plato’s Gorgias* (473a)
- “No one does what’s unjust because he wants to.” Socrates, *Plato’s Gorgias* (509e)
- “It’s for the sake of what’s good that those who do all these things do them.... if a person who’s a tyrant or an orator puts somebody to death or exiles him or confiscates his property because he supposes that doing so is better for himself when actually it’s worse, this person, I take it, is doing what he sees fit.” Socrates, *Plato’s Gorgias* (468b–d)
- “Then we ought not to retaliate or render evil for evil to anyone, whatever evil we may have suffered from him.” Socrates, *Plato’s Crito* (49c)

## Suggested Reading

Sorabji, Richard. 2017. "Gandhi the Philosopher." *Aeon*. <https://aeon.co/essays/gandhi-was-a-subtle-surprising-philosopher-in-the-stoic-style>.

Plato. *Apology*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. *The Internet Classics Archive*. <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html>.

Plato. *Crito*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. *The Internet Classics Archive*. <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/crito.html>.

## Chapter 7. Coordinated Peacekeeping: A Nonviolent Army

**T**he Congress [of India] should be able to put forth a non-violent army of volunteers numbering not a few thousands but *lakhs* [1 *lakh* = 100,000] who would be equal to every occasion where the police and the military are required. Thus, instead of one brave Pashupatinath Gupta who died in the attempt to secure peace, we should be able to produce hundreds. And a **non-violent army** acts unlike armed men, as well in times of peace as of disturbances. They would be constantly engaged in constructive activities that make riots impossible. Theirs will be the duty of seeking occasions for bringing warring communities together, carrying on peace propaganda, engaging in activities that would bring and keep them in touch with every single person, male and female, adult and child, in their parish or division. Such an army should be ready to cope with any emergency, and in order to still the frenzy of mobs should risk their lives in numbers sufficient for the purpose. A few hundred, may be a few thousand, such spotless deaths will once for all put an end to the riots. Surely a few hundred young men and women giving themselves deliberately to mob fury will be any day a cheap and braver method of dealing with such madness than the display and use of the police and the military.

*Harijan*, 26 March 1938

### Box 14 – The Nonviolent Peaceforce

Could Gandhi’s vision of a peace army (*Shanti Sena*) become reality? How effective could such an “army” be? To answer these questions, consider the **Nonviolent Peaceforce**:

NP (Nonviolent Peaceforce) reimagines security and civilian protection in areas most impacted by conflict by working alongside communities to interrupt and prevent violence. Our evidence-based, civilian-led approaches have protected tens of thousands of people around the world since our launch in 2002— impacting millions more and helping communities live free from fear and become equipped to protect themselves and create sustainable peace.

<https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/>

NP’s website summarizes their 2020 accomplishments as follows:

- 29,269 people protected at food distribution sites
- 1,575+ people trained in unarmed civilian protection
- 2,500+ women trained to be peace leaders so far

As an example of how NP handles threats of violence without arms, here’s an excerpt from an interview conducted by Michael Nagler (founder of the Metta Center for Nonviolence) and Mel Duncan, one of NP’s co-founders:

**Michael:** ... I have occupied your time for a long while. So, by way of just wrapping up, if you could just tell us briefly so folks have a feeling for what unarmed protection can do, tell us what did happen in that camp, that U.N. IDP camp in Bor with Derek and Andres.

**Mel:** In Bor. You remembered it was Bor. Well, that happened a few months after the civil war reignited. So, it was like April of 2014. And they were in this – they were really makeshift camps that sprung up around U.N. conclaves. And a number of rebels came over the berm and came into the camp and started shooting people point-blank.

Derek and Andres were with 14 women and children. And so, they went to a hut-like structure and stood in the doorway as the women and children were inside. And on three occasions, young rebels came up to them and screamed profanities and, “You have no business being here. We want those people.” And on and on, pointing AK-47s at their heads. And on three occasions, Derek and Andreas held up their Nonviolent Peaceforce identity card and said, “We are unarmed, we are here to protect civilians and we will not leave.”

After the third time, these young rebels left. And Derek and Andres could hear them as they went back to join the group say, “Stay away from up there. Leave those people alone.” In the debrief, Andres says very clearly, “If we would have a gun, we probably would have been shot.”

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/metta/podcast/unarmed-civilian-peacekeeping-nonviolent-peaceforce-mel-duncan/>

### Suggested Reading

Watrous, Matthew. 2020. “We Are Unarmed, We Are Here to Protect Civilians and We Will Not Leave’ —A Conversation with Mel Duncan of Nonviolent Peaceforce.” *Metta Center for Nonviolence*.

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/metta/podcast/unarmed-civilian-peacekeeping-nonviolent-peaceforce-mel-duncan/>.

Oldenhuis, Huibert, et al. 2021. *Unarmed Civilian Protection: Strengthening Civilian Capacities to Protect Civilians Against Violence*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. <https://nonviolentpeaceforce.org/ucp-manual/>.



## Chapter 8. An Objection & A Reply: The Relationship between Means & Ends

### Box 15 – Gandhi Receives An Objection from a Reader

Anonymous reader:

Why should we not obtain our goal [i.e., **end**], which is good, by any **means** whatsoever, even by using violence? Shall I think of the means when I have to deal with a thief in the house? My duty is to drive him out anyhow. You seem to admit that we have received nothing, and that we shall receive nothing by petitioning. Why then may we not do so by using brute force? And to retain what we may receive we shall keep up the fear by using the same force to the extent that it may be **necessary**.

*Hind Swaraj (Indian Home Rule), Chapter XVI*

**M**eans and end are convertible terms in my philosophy of life.

They say “means are after all means.” I would say “means are after all everything.” As the means so the end. There is no wall of separation between means and end. Indeed the Creator has given us control (and that too very limited) over means, none over the end. Realization of the goal is in exact proportion to that of the means. This is a proposition that admits of no exception.

*Ahimsa* and Truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them. They are like the two sides of a coin, or rather a smooth unstamped metallic disc. Who can say, which is the obverse, and which the reverse? Nevertheless, *ahimsa* is the means; Truth is the end. Means to be means must always be within our reach, and so *ahimsa* is our supreme duty. If we take care of the means, we are bound to reach the end sooner or later. When once we have grasped this point final victory is beyond question. Whatever difficulties we encounter, whatever apparent reverses we sustain, we may not give up the quest for Truth which alone is, being God Himself.

I do not believe in short-violent-cuts to success. . . . However much I may sympathize with and admire worthy motives, I am an uncompromising opponent of violent methods even to serve the noblest of causes. There is, therefore, really no meeting-ground between the school of violence and myself. But my creed of non-violence not only does not preclude me but compels me even to associate with anarchists and all those who believe in violence. But that association is always with the sole object of weaning them from what appears to me their error. For experience convinces me that permanent good can never be the outcome of untruth and violence. Even if my belief is a fond delusion, it will be admitted that it is a fascinating delusion.

Your belief that there is no connexion between the means and the end is a great mistake. Through that mistake even men who have been considered religious have committed grievous crimes. Your reasoning is the same as saying that we can get a rose through planting a noxious weed. If I want to cross the ocean, I can do so only by means of a vessel; if I were to use a cart for that purpose, both the cart and I would soon find the bottom. “As is the God, so is the votary” is a maxim worth considering. Its meaning has been distorted and men have gone astray. The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree; and there is just the same inviolable connexion between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree. I am not likely to obtain the result flowing from the worship of God by laying myself prostrate before

Satan. If, therefore, anyone were to say: “I want to worship God; it does not matter that I do so by means of Satan,” it would be set down as ignorant folly. We reap exactly as we sow<sup>9</sup>. . . .

**Box 16 – Reaping as We Sow: Gandhi’s Watch Example**

By contrast to Gandhi’s examples in this passage (crossing the ocean, planting a seed, prostration before Satan), Gandhi’s watch example (from another passage) more explicitly illustrates how the means infuses the corresponding end with a *moral* quality, which must be reflected in our description of the end:

If I want to deprive you of your watch, I shall certainly have to fight for it; if I want to buy your watch, I shall have to pay for it; and if I want a gift, I shall have to plead for it; and, according to the means I employ, the watch is stolen property, my own property, or a donation. Thus we see three different results from three different means. Will you still say that means do not matter?

*Hind Swaraj (Indian Home Rule), Chapter XVI*

The anonymous reader’s fundamental mistake, on this perspective, is a commonplace—yet overly narrow construal—of what the end actually is.

The spiritual weapon of self-purification, intangible as it seems, is the most potent means of revolutionizing one’s environment and loosening external shackles. It works subtly and invisibly; it is an intense process though it might often seem a weary and long-drawn process, it is the straightest way to liberation, the surest and quickest and no effort can be too great for it. What it requires is faith—an unshakable mountain-like faith that flinches from nothing.

I am more concerned in preventing the brutalization of human nature than in the prevention of the sufferings of my own people. I know that people who voluntarily undergo a course of suffering raise themselves and the whole of humanity; but I also know that people who become brutalized in their desperate efforts to get victory over their opponents or to exploit weaker nations or weaker men, not only drag down themselves but mankind also. And it cannot be a matter of pleasure to me or anyone else to see human nature dragged to the mire. If we are all sons of the same God and partake of the same divine essence, we must partake of the sin of every person whether he belongs to us or to another race. You can understand how repugnant it must be to invoke the beast in any human being, how much more so in Englishmen, among whom I count numerous friends.

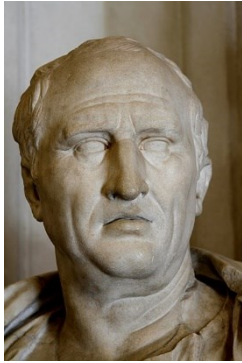
The method of passive resistance is the clearest and safest, because, if the cause is not true, it is the resisters, and they alone, who suffer.

*All Men Are Brothers, 81–107*

### Box 17 – Means & Ends: The Wider Debate

The debate over means and ends is rich and complex but has enormous ramifications for both practical rationality and morality. Gandhi took his starting point from his favorite book, the *Bhagavad Gita*, a Hindu sacred text on which Gandhi produced a book-length commentary (Desai 1946). Here’s a representative passage from the *Gita*:

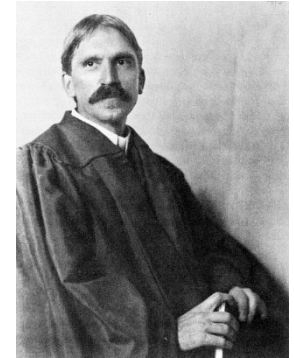
Be intent on action, not on the fruits of action; avoid attraction to the fruits and attachment to inaction! Perform actions, firm in discipline, relinquishing attachment; be impartial to failure and success—this equanimity is called discipline. (2.47–58)



[Cicero](#) by José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro.  
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One also encounters deemphasis on the attainment of ends in Stoic, Buddhist, and Daoist thought. To take the **Stoic archer example** from the Roman orator **Cicero** (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE), consider a skilled archer who misses the target due to an unforeseeable gust of wind. On the Stoic view, the miss does not reflect poorly on the archer since the wind is outside of her control. But supposing she still performs well (adequate training, focus, aim, release, and other manifestations of her skill), which *is* in her control, that’s what really matters and is the only thing she should be concerned with. So, the thought is that frustrations can be avoided and happiness obtained to the extent that we redirect our expectations and desires away from achieving ends and towards acting well and having a virtuous character. The Stoic, Buddhist, Daoist, and Hindu traditions developed methods, such as meditation and yoga, aimed at training oneself to accomplish this redirection.

**John Dewey** (1859–1952), the American pragmatist philosopher, developed an intricate philosophy of means and ends as inextricably bound up with one another. First, ends are themselves means in the sense that once obtained, they typically become starting points for a further end. More important, Dewey noted that one needs an “**end-in-view**” in order to choose a means in the first place. In this sense, the end is already *in* the means. Yet the means also affects the end in two ways: (a) while undertaking a means, one gains new information that often alters the end being pursued; (b) the value of the end depends on the costs and benefits of the means required to bring it about. The end is not an isolated point cut off from the means; rather, the end is an accumulation of the process leading up to it. Take a sports match for example. If one could simply skip the game and go straight to being declared victor, it would be pointless. What is desired isn’t just any victory, but a *deserved* victory, and whether it is deserved depends on the means by which the match is played. This is why playing well is **intrinsically valuable** despite a loss, unlike an undeserved win. In attributing some value to victory but with emphasis on the means, Dewey seems to be in partial agreement with the Stoics and the *Gita*, and consistent with Gandhi.



[John Dewey, 1902](#). This image is in the public domain.



[Martin Luther King & Malcolm X, 1964](#). This image is in the public domain.

Turning from practical action to morality, the disagreement between Gandhi and his reader is echoed by the disagreement between Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968) and fellow civil rights activist **Malcolm X** (1925–1965).

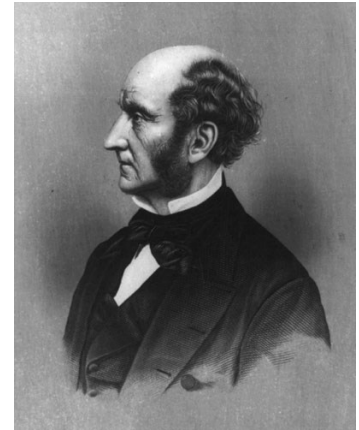
In his speeches, Malcolm firmly advocated fighting against injustice “*by any means necessary*” (1964).

King argued instead that “*Constructive ends can never give absolute moral justification to destructive means, because in the final analysis the end is preexistent in the mean*”—a very Deweyan/Gandhian point (1958).

The Malcolm-King dispute is related to a wider dispute between two major ethical theories. According to classical **utilitarians**, such as British philosophers **Jeremy Bentham** (1748–1832) and **John Stuart Mill** (1806–1873), moral action is governed by the **Greatest Happiness Principle**, whose slogan is:

“The greatest happiness for the greatest number.”

This is a **consequentialist** theory because it makes morality dependent *entirely* on whether the action has a certain consequence (i.e., result, outcome, fruit—or end), namely that the action produces maximal happiness. To use a popular phrase, consequentialism maintains that “**the ends justify the means.**”



[Jeremy Bentham \(Left\)](#) and [John Stuart Mill \(Right\)](#)

These images are in the public domain.



[Immanuel Kant](#)  
License: CC BY-SA 3.0

By contrast, **deontologists**, such as German philosopher **Immanuel Kant** (1724–1804), argued that there are certain moral duties determined independently of consequences. For example, Kant’s **Formula of Humanity** puts forward the requirement to

“Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.” (1998 [1785], 429)

To illustrate using the famous **organ harvesting case**, suppose you find yourself in the unfortunate situation in which the only way to save 7 people, each in immediate dire need of a different organ, would require harvesting organs from an unwilling healthy person who happens to be their only match. Assume all other relevant factors are on a par (all eight people are equal in every relevant sense, you know how to get away with it in secret so as to avoid negative consequences for yourself, etc.). What should you do? What if the one person were *you*? Or someone very dear to you, such as a family member, significant other, or close friend?

To go through with the killing would plausibly result in more total happiness: 7 lives saved for the cost of 1. Yet it would require treating that person as a mere means to someone else’s end, which is prohibited by the Formula of Humanity. Notice that few would object were the same results procured by better means (e.g., a willing donor who has already died). It is the means, so the argument goes, that makes all the moral difference, not the end result.

What do *you* think of this example?

What does it suggest about the correct moral theory?

What bearing, if any, would your conclusion have on the Malcolm-King debate?

Which moral theory, if either, better fits Gandhi’s claims about means and ends?

## Suggested Viewing

Malcolm X. 1964. "By Any Means Necessary." Oxford Union Debate. <https://youtu.be/auWA7hMh5hc>.

## Suggested Reading

*The Bhagavad-Gita*. 1900. Translated by Sir Edwin Arnold. *Project Gutenberg*.  
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2388/2388-h/2388-h.htm>.

Waks, Leonard J. "The Means-Ends Continuum and the Reconciliation of Science and Art in the Later Works of John Dewey." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Summer 1999), 595–611.

Gronholz, Shane. 2014. "Consequentialism." *1000-Word Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology*.  
<https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2014/05/15/introduction-to-consequentialism/>.

Chapman, Andrew. 2014. "Deontology: Kantian Ethics." *1000-Word Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology*.  
<https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2014/06/09/introduction-to-deontology-kantian-ethics/>.

## Chapter 9. Admitting & Learning from Mistakes: A “Himalayan Miscalculation”

**A**lmost immediately after the Ahmedabad meeting I went to Nadiad. It was here that I first used the expression “**Himalayan miscalculation**,” which obtained such a wide currency afterwards. Even at Ahmedabad I had begun to have a dim perception of my mistake. But when I reached Nadiad and saw the actual state of things there, and heard reports about a large number of people from Kheda district having been arrested, it suddenly dawned upon me that I had committed a grave error in calling upon the people in the Kheda district and elsewhere to launch upon civil disobedience prematurely, as it now seemed to me. I was addressing a public meeting. My confession brought down upon me no small amount of ridicule. But I have never regretted having made that confession. For I have always held that it is only when one sees one's own mistakes with a convex lens, and does just the reverse in the case of others, that one is able to arrive at a just relative estimate of the two. I further believe that a scrupulous and conscientious observance of this rule is necessary for one who wants to be a *Satyagrahi* [a committed practitioner of *Satyagraha*].

Let us now see what the Himalayan miscalculation was. Before one can be fit for the practice of civil disobedience, one must have rendered a willing and respectful obedience to the state laws. For the most part we obey such laws out of fear of the penalty for their breach, and this holds good particularly in respect of such laws as do not involve a moral principal. For instance, an honest, respectable man will not suddenly take to stealing, whether there is a law against stealing or not, but this very man will not feel any remorse for failure to observe the rule about carrying head-lights on bicycles after dark. Indeed it is doubtful whether he would even accept advice kindly about being more careful in this respect. But he would observe any obligatory rule of this kind, if only to escape the inconvenience of facing a prosecution for a breach of the rule. Such compliance is not, however, the willing and spontaneous obedience that is required of a *Satyagrahi*. A *Satyagrahi* obeys the laws of society intelligently and of his own free will, because he considers it to be his sacred duty to do so. It is only when a person has thus obeyed the laws of society scrupulously that he is in a position to judge as to which particular rules are good and just, and which are unjust and iniquitous. Only then does the right accrue to him of the civil disobedience of certain laws in well-defined circumstances. My error lay in my failure to observe this necessary limitation. I had called on the people to launch upon civil disobedience before they had thus qualified themselves for it, and this mistake seemed to me of Himalayan magnitude. As soon as I entered the Kheda district, all the old recollections of the Kheda *Satyagraha* struggle came back to me, and I wondered how I could have failed to perceive what was so obvious. I realized that before a people could be fit for offering civil disobedience, they should thoroughly understand its deeper implications. That being so, before re-starting civil disobedience on a mass scale, it would be necessary to create a band of well-trying, pure-hearted volunteers who thoroughly understood the strict conditions of *Satyagraha*. They could explain these to the people, and by sleepless vigilance keep them on the right path.

### Box 18 – The Classic Rawlsian Conditions on Civil Disobedience



[John Rawls in 1971](#) by Alec Rawls. This image is in the public domain.

In his landmark 1971 book, *A Theory of Justice*, American moral and political philosopher **John Rawls** (1921–2002), provided what is now viewed as the classic requirements for morally acceptable civil disobedience. In their *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on “Civil Disobedience,” philosophers Candice Delmas and Kimberley Brownlee summarize Rawls’s conditions as follows:

On the most widely accepted account, civil disobedience is a public, non-violent and conscientious breach of law undertaken with the aim of bringing about a change in laws or government policies (Rawls 1999, 320). On this account, people who engage in civil disobedience operate at the boundary of fidelity to law, have general respect for their regime, and are willing to accept the legal consequences of their actions, as evidence of their fidelity to the rule of law. Civil disobedience, given its place at the boundary of fidelity to law, is said on this view to fall between legal protest, on the one hand, and conscientious refusal, uncivil disobedience, militant protest, organized forcible resistance, and revolutionary action, on the other hand. (2021)

Notice the similarities to Gandhi’s position on civil disobedience Gandhi’s opposition to Tolstoy’s anarchism, as well as the contrast between civil disobedience and other forms of resistance.

With these thoughts filling my mind I reached Bombay, raised a corps of *Satyagrahi* volunteers through the *Satyagraha* Sabha there, and with their help commenced the work of educating the people with regard to the meaning and inner significance of *Satyagraha*. This was principally done by issuing leaflets of an educative character bearing on the subject.

But whilst this work was going on, I could see that it was a difficult task to interest the people in the peaceful side of *Satyagraha*. The volunteers too failed to enlist themselves in large numbers. Nor did all those who actually enlisted take anything like a regular systematic training, and as the days passed by, the number of fresh recruits began gradually to dwindle instead of to grow. I realized that the progress of the training in civil disobedience was not going to be as rapid as I had at first expected.

*Autobiography*, Chapter 33

### Suggested Reading

Delmas, Candice, and Kimberley Brownlee. 2021. “Civil Disobedience.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/civil-disobedience/>.

### Suggested Listening

Killoren, David, and Richard Rowland, producers. 2019. “Uncivil Disobedience.” *Hi-Phi Nation*, Season 3, Episode 8. <https://hiphination.org/season-3-episodes/s3-episode-8-uncivil-disobedience/>.

## Chapter 10. A Proactive Approach: From Obstructive to Constructive Program

This is a thoroughly revised edition of the *Constructive Programme* which I first wrote in 1941 [while on a train to deliver it to the Indian National Congress]. The items included in it have not been arranged in any order, certainly not in the order of their importance. When the reader discovers that a particular subject though important in itself in terms of Independence does not find place in the programme, he should know that the omission is not intentional. He should unhesitatingly add to my list and let me know. My list does not pretend to be exhaustive; it is merely illustrative. The reader will see several new and important additions.

Readers, whether workers and volunteers or not, should definitely realize that the constructive programme is the truthful and non-violent way of winning *Poorna Swaraj* [complete independence]. Its wholesale fulfilment is complete Independence. Imagine all the forty crores [1 crore = 10 million] of people busying themselves with the whole of the **constructive programme** which is designed to build up the nation from the very bottom upward. Can anybody dispute the proposition that it must mean complete Independence in every sense of the expression, including the ousting of foreign domination? When the critics laugh at the proposition, what they mean is that forty crores of people will never co-operate in the effort to fulfil the programme. No doubt, there is considerable truth in the scoff. My answer is, it is still worth the attempt. Given an indomitable will on the part of a band of earnest workers, the programme is as workable as any other and more so than most. Anyway, I have no substitute for it, if it is to be based on non-violence.

Civil Disobedience, mass or individual, is an aid to constructive effort and is a full substitute for armed revolt. Training is necessary as well for civil disobedience as for armed revolt. Only the ways are different. Action in either case takes place only when occasion demands. Training for military revolt means learning the use of arms ending perhaps in the atomic bomb. For civil disobedience it means the constructive programme.

Therefore, workers will never be on the look-out for civil resistance. They will hold themselves in readiness, if the constructive effort is sought to be defeated. From one or two illustrations it will be seen where it can be, and where it cannot be, offered. Political pacts we know have been and can be, but personal friendship with individuals cannot be, prevented. Such friendships, selfless and genuine, must be the basis for political pacts. Similarly, centralized *khadi* [hand-spun cloth] can be defeated by the Government, but no power can defeat individual manufacture and use of *khadi*. The manufacture and use of *khadi* must not be imposed upon the people, but it must be intelligently and willingly accepted by them as one of the items of the freedom movement. This can be done only from the villages as units. Pioneers even in such programmes can be obstructed. They have had to go through the fire of suffering throughout the world. There is no **Swaraj** [independence] without suffering. In violence, truth is the first and the greatest sufferer; in non-violence it is ever triumphant. Moreover, men composing the Government are not to be regarded as enemies. To regard them as such will be contrary to the non-violent spirit. Part we must, but as friends.



### Box 19 – A Conceptual Chain:

#### *Dharma → Svadharma → Swadeshi → Swaraj → Constructive Program via Khadi*

A family of concepts come into play at this juncture. Begin with the Hindu concept of **dharma**, one meaning of which is moral duty. Gandhi accepts that an individual's duty depends on one's situation (time, situation, and place in society). **Svadharma** (or *swadharna*) refers to the duties specific to an individual person (as opposed to **paradharna**, someone else's duty). Here Gandhi quotes the *Gita*: "It is best to die performing one's own duty or *svadharna*; *paradharna* or another's duty is fraught with danger" (*From Yeravda Mandir*).

Two sentences later, Gandhi characterizes **swadeshi** as "*svadharna* applied to one's immediate environment." Elsewhere he is more explicit: "*Swadeshi* is that spirit in us which restricts us to the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote" (*The Gospel of Swadeshi*). This is an injunction to **localism**, the political and economic principle which prioritizes local resources and work with a fourfold justification:

1. Avoidance of intrusive interference upon other communities or nations.
2. A more efficient use of resources (since transportation of people and goods is costly).
3. Fulfilment of one's duties to fellow members of one's community or nation with the goal of making it self-sufficient or independent (*swaraj*).
4. Economic non-cooperation with oppressors who are relying upon local industry to serve their own interests (e.g., British cloth shops and factories in India).

We can now complete the conceptual circle: *swadeshi* identifies the optimal place to focus constructive program so as to best promote *swaraj*, which for India means *khadi*, since it is central to the Indian economy. Hence the **spinning wheel** becomes a symbol for Gandhi's movement and *khadi* becomes the movement's uniform. This explains the many photos of Gandhi wearing *khadi* himself (after abandoning his British suits, worn during his early years as a law student and practicing lawyer), often working at the spinning wheel even while giving interviews.



[Photo](#) via Wikimedia Commons. This image is in the public domain.

If this preliminary observation has gone home to the reader, he will find the constructive programme to be full of deep interest. It should prove as absorbing as politics so-called and platform oratory, and certainly more important and useful.... Let us now examine the items.

“Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place,” Forward and Introductory

#### Box 20 – The 18-Point Constructive Program

Gandhi contrasts constructive program (CP) with **obstructive program** (civil disobedience, passive resistance, and other forms of noncooperation). Many today neglect the constructive aspect of his philosophy despite his frank and emphatic warning against this: “It should be clear to the reader that Civil Disobedience in terms of Independence without the co-operation of the millions by way of constructive effort is mere bravado and worse than useless.” In fact, his pamphlet ends by reinforcing this sentiment: “For my handling of Civil Disobedience without the constructive programme will be like a paralyzed hand attempting to lift a spoon.”

In view of this, it is no surprise that Gandhi’s original four-point CP gradually grew over the decades into a list of eighteen. The items on the list are areas which, by Gandhi’s lights, the Indian socioeconomic structure was in dire need of improvement. Gandhi gives his perspective on each in the remainder of the pamphlet as an appeal to Congress. While there’s no space here to discuss them individually, the list itself will give you an idea:

1. Communal Unity
2. Removal of Untouchability
3. Prohibition
4. *Khadi*
5. Other Village Industries
6. Village Sanitation
7. New or Basic Education
8. Adult Education
9. Women
10. Education in Health and Hygiene
11. Provincial languages
12. National Languages
13. Economic Inequality
14. *Kisans* [agricultural workers or peasants]
15. Labour
16. *Adivasis* [a tribe thought to be indigenous to India]
17. Lepers
18. Students

### Suggested Reading

Gandhi, M. K. 1945 [1941]. “Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place.” The Navajivan Trust.  
[https://www.jmu.edu/gandhicenter/wm\\_library/gandhiana-constprog.pdf](https://www.jmu.edu/gandhicenter/wm_library/gandhiana-constprog.pdf).

Gandhi, M. K. 1932. “Swadeshi.” Chapter 16 in *From Yeravda Mandir: Ashram Observances*. Trans. Valji Govindji Desai. The Navajivan Trust.

## Chapter 11. A Reason for Optimism: The Law of Love

I have found that life persists in the midst of destruction and, therefore, there must be a higher law than that of destruction. Only under that law would a well-ordered society be intelligible and life worth living. And if that is the **law of life**, we have to work it out in daily life. Wherever there are jars, wherever you are confronted with an opponent, conquer him with love. In a crude manner I have worked it out in my life. That does not mean that all my difficulties are solved. I have found, however, that this **law of love** has answered as the **law of destruction** has never done. In India we have had an ocular demonstration of the operation of this law on the widest scale possible. I do not claim therefore that nonviolence has necessarily penetrated the 300 million, but I do claim that it has penetrated deeper than any other message, and in an incredibly short time. We have not been all uniformly nonviolent; and with the vast majority, nonviolence has been a matter of policy. Even so, I want you to find out if the country has not made phenomenal progress under the protecting power of nonviolence.

It takes a fairly strenuous course of training to attain to a mental state of nonviolence. In daily life it has to be a course of discipline though one may not like it, like, for instance, the life of a soldier. But I agree that, unless there is a hearty cooperation of the mind, the mere outward observance will be simply a mask, harmful both to the man himself and to others. The perfect state is reached only when mind and body and speech are in proper coordination. But it is always a case of intense mental struggle. It is not that I am incapable of anger, for instance, but I succeed on almost all occasions to keep my feelings under control.

### Box 21 – The Parable of the Wind & the Sun: Nelson Mandela on Anger

Upon being asked about anger, **Nelson Mandela** (1918–2013), who became the first President of South Africa in 1994 after helping end apartheid in 1990, often gave the following parable (as retold in dialogue form by <https://www.advance-africa.com/the-wind-and-the-sun.html>).

It was an autumn day. The wind and the sun had an argument.

The wind boasted, "I am stronger than you."

The sun mildly said, "No. you are not."

Just then, they saw a traveler wrapped in a blanket passing by. The wind said, "Whoever separates the blanket from traveler is the stronger. Do you agree?"

The sun replied, "OK. First you try."

The wind started blowing. The traveler wrapped his blanket around him. He blew harder. The traveler held his blanket firmer. He blew still harder.

The traveler held his blanket still tighter. The harder the wind blew the tighter and firmer the traveler held his blanket. The wind failed.

It was the sun's turn. The sun smiled gently at the traveler. The traveler loosened his grip on the blanket.

The sun smiled warmly. The traveler felt the warmth and soon took off the blanket.

The sun was declared stronger.



[Mandela in Washington, D.C., 1994.](#)

By John Mathew Smith, 2001, via  
Wikimedia Commons.

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Whatever may be the result, there is always in me a conscious struggle for following the law of nonviolence deliberately and ceaselessly. Such a struggle leaves one stronger for it. Nonviolence is a weapon of the strong. With the weak it might easily be hypocrisy. Fear and love are contradictory terms. Love is reckless in giving away, oblivious as to what it gets in return. Love wrestles with the world as with the self and ultimately gains mastery over all other feelings. My daily experience, as of those who are working with me, is that every problem lends itself to solution if we are determined to make the law of truth and nonviolence the law of life. For truth and nonviolence are, to me, faces of the same coin.

The law of love will work, just as the law of gravitation will work, whether we accept it or not. Just as a scientist will work wonders out of various applications of the law of nature, even so a man who applies the law of love with scientific precision can work greater wonders. For the force of nonviolence is infinitely more wonderful and subtle than the material forces of nature, like, for instance, electricity. The men who discovered for us the law of love were greater scientists than any of our modern scientists. Only our explorations have not gone far enough and so it is not possible for everyone to see all its workings. Such, at any rate, is the hallucination, if it is one, under which I am laboring. The more I work at this law the more I feel the delight in life, the delight in the scheme of this universe. It gives me a peace and a meaning of the mysteries of nature that I have no power to describe.

*The Nation's Voice, Part II*

### Box 22 – Love at the Barrel of a Gun?

Is the appeal to love mere idealistic naïveté when confronted with hatred and violence? Perhaps. But perhaps not.

Nonviolence theorists are accustomed to the challenge that nonviolence would not work in certain kinds of cases in which violence was successfully used. One response is that a rare exception doesn't refute the general rule, and we should not focus on rare exceptions (Fiala 2014). A second response is to insist upon nonviolent means regardless of the end result (recall the previous means-ends debate). A third response will try to defend the effectiveness of violence in even the more extreme cases.

A stumbling block for this third response is that if violence was actually used in a given case, it is merely speculative what would or would not have worked had some alternative method been tried. This is what philosophers call a **counterfactual** situation (a situation that is contrary to what happened in fact). Assessing the counterfactual is far from trivial, since no method—violent or nonviolent—can be guaranteed to work in every case. However, in his 1978 book, *Stable Peace*, Kenneth E. Boulding proposed a principle to get around this problem (93).

#### Boulding's First Law

"Anything that exists is possible."

The idea is to find real-life cases similar to the challenge case, ones in which nonviolence succeeded. It would then follow from Boulding's First Law, that since nonviolence actually succeeded in a similar case, it is possible for nonviolence to succeed in the challenge case as well. If so, then the task for the nonviolentist becomes simple, since history is replete with examples in which love stopped violence in its tracks when most would least expect:

- Take the story of Antoinette Tuff, who prevented a mass school shooting with an "I love you": <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/love-at-barrel-of-gun/>.
- Or take the story of how Linda and Peter Biehl, whose daughter Amy was brutally murdered in 1993 in South Africa during apartheid, utterly transformed the lives Amy's murderers through a radical act of forgiveness: <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories-library/linda-biehl-easy-nofemela/>.
- Or the story of Derek Black, former neo-Nazi turned anti-Nazi activist after being converted through kindness and goodwill by Jewish acquaintances: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae_story.html).
- Or Daryl Davis, the African-American musician who has converted over two hundred KKK members by starting up conversations and befriending them: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/mar/18/daryl-davis-black-musician-who-converts-ku-klux-klan-members>.
- Or the forgotten stories of successful nonviolence against Nazis, including the Danish resistance to Nazi occupation (see *A Force More Powerful*, Part I, Episode 3) and the Rosenstrasse Prison Demonstration of 1943 (see Stoltzfus's *Resistance of the Heart: Intermarriage and the Rosenstrasse Protest in Nazi Germany*).

Of course, most human beings would resort to the "**fight or flight**" instinct in such cases—most likely with very different results. But consider a **thought experiment** (an experiment in the laboratory of the mind):

What if we, as a society, began conversations about these kinds of stories as a standard component of public education? What if [Nonviolence News](#) became mainstream media? What if we systematically implemented these lessons on a mass scale?

## Suggested Viewing

Ornstein, Matthew, dir. 2016. *Accidental Courtesy: Daryl Davis, Race & America*.

York, Steve, director. 1999. *A Force More Powerful, Part II: Denmark / Poland / Chile*.  
<https://youtu.be/cM695veBSUU>.

## Suggested Reading

Nussbaum, Martha C. 2016. "Beyond Anger." *Aeon*. <https://aeon.co/essays/there-s-no-emotion-we-ought-to-think-harder-about-than-anger>.

Nagler, Michael N. 2013. "Love at the Barrel of a Gun." *openDemocracy*.  
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/love-at-barrel-of-gun/>.

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Saslow, Eli. 2016. "The White Flight of Derek Black." *The Washington Post*.  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae_story.html).

"Linda Biehl and Easy Nofemela." *The Forgiveness Project*. <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories-library/linda-biehl-easy-nofemela/>.

## Chapter 12. The State of the Technique & Its Future: An Experiment

have not mastered the whole technique of non-violence. The **experiment**<sup>10</sup> is still in the making. It is not even in its advanced stage. The nature of the experiment requires one to be satisfied with one step at a time. The distant scene is not for him to see. Therefore, my answers can only be speculative. . . .

### Box 23 – Experiments & Laws

By using “experiment” to characterize his technique of nonviolence (as well as his personal lifestyle practices), we see an important connection to Gandhi’s tendency to characterize his main principles as “laws”:<sup>11</sup> experiments are means by which to test principles, confirming or disconfirming their status as laws. However, many different kinds of things have been candidates for laws: the laws of nature, laws of society, laws of logic and mathematics, the moral law, and God’s law. And these are crucially different from one another. To better understand what Gandhi has in mind, let’s consider a framework for thinking about laws in general.

A **law** is (roughly) an exceptionless fundamental generalization. A *generalization* captures a pattern or regularity exhibited by all of the particular instances of the phenomenon in question. In some cases, this generalization holds *relative* only to a specific domain (e.g., the laws of a particular society apply only to that society). Still, to count as a law, it must be *exceptionless* in the relevant domain (at least when the law is spelled out in full detail). Moreover, to count as a law, an exceptionless generalization must capture something *fundamental* in the relevant domain. This means that it isn’t mere one instance of a broader exceptionless generalization in the same domain. That is why the prohibition against *my* stealing *your* property is not itself a law; rather, there is a law against stealing *in general*, which my stealing would break.

Four distinctions yield a useful taxonomy of laws:

1. Laws are either descriptive or normative. **Descriptive** laws state how things *are* (a matter of fact). They cannot be violated or broken. **Normative** laws state how things *ought* to be (or what one *should* do). They can but should not be broken, and when they are, there are usually negative repercussions.
2. Laws are either universal or relative. **Universal** laws hold for all domains (no exceptions anywhere). **Relative** laws hold only with respect to some domains (exceptionless within the range being considered).
3. Laws are either created or discovered. A **created** law is one that exists only because of the will of an agent or group of agents (whether human, extraterrestrial, or supernatural). As **discovered** law is uncreated (one that exists independently of the will of any agents).
4. Laws are either learned *a priori* or *a posteriori*. A truth is learned ***a priori*** when it is learned by reason alone. A truth is learned ***a posteriori*** when it is learned by experiencing/observing the world.

For example, the laws of physics are usually thought to be descriptive universal generalizations about nature that are discovered *a posteriori*. The laws of logic and mathematics are often thought to be descriptive universal generalizations about abstract objects/properties that are discovered *a priori*. Immanuel Kant argued that the moral law is a normative universal generalization that is discovered *a priori*. And the laws of society are normative relative generalizations that are created but learned *a posteriori* (by reading or hearing or studying the law).

Given the above definition of laws along with the fourfold taxonomy:

- Which kinds of laws are suited to experiments?
- Which kinds have predictive power for the future?
- Given what Gandhi says about laws in this chapter and throughout the rest of the book, what do you think Gandhi means by “law”?
- Do you think he right that his principles qualify as laws? Why or why not?
- Assuming that they qualify as laws, what are the implications?

But I may state my own individual view of the potency of non-violence. . . . Practically speaking there will be probably no greater loss in men than if forcible resistance was offered; there will be no expenditure in armaments and fortifications. The nonviolent training received by the people will add inconceivably to their moral height. Such men and women will have shown personal bravery of a type far superior to that shown in armed warfare. In each case the bravery consists in dying, not in killing. Lastly, there is no such thing as defeat in nonviolent resistance. That such a thing has not happened before is no answer to my speculation. I have drawn no impossible picture. History is replete with instances of individual nonviolence of the type I have mentioned. There is no warrant for saying or thinking that a group of men and women cannot by sufficient training act nonviolently as a group or nation. Indeed the sum total of the experience of mankind is that men somehow or other live on. From which fact I infer that it is the law of love that rules mankind. Had violence, i.e., hate, ruled us, we should have become extinct long ago. And yet the tragedy of it is that the so-called civilized men and nations conduct themselves as if the basis of society was violence. It gives me ineffable joy to make experiments proving that love is the supreme and only law of life.

*Harijan*, 13 April 1940



### Box 24 – Bringing Gandhi’s Experiment to Fruition: A Nonviolent Revolution

“It is as though the state were a speeding car, and a violent revolution simply puts a different person in the driver’s seat....

By nonviolent revolution I mean one that brings about a pervasive transformation of society, one that alters the basic assumptions, practices, and values that typically characterize modern nation-states; that, if you like, brings into being a different social mindset about the use of violence, and more fundamentally, about the potential of human beings to relate to one another—and not only to one another, but to animals and the environment as well—in ways that are compassionate and respectful....

No one person can provide a blueprint of how nonviolent revolution should proceed over the many years it would take it to unfold. The plan cannot be set down in advance; not in the detail one might hope for if one were undertaking such a grand experiment in a perfect world. It must grow out of the process itself, each step of which must have its own particular manageable objective, which, once attained, provides a stepping-stone to the projection of the next objective. In this way, an interconnected network of means and ends can unfold through a process of trial and error, always subject to critical revision.

But three general aims can be cited as commanding attention: the need for nonviolent social defense, the need to develop an economy of nonviolence, and the need for education in nonviolence....

Most important of all, however, is education. Nonviolent education is the prerequisite to security and a nonviolent economy. For the hope, not only for a realistic transition to a culture of nonviolence, but for humankind in general, whatever the culture, lies with children and young people. For humankind is in a constant process of renewal. Newborns don’t come into the world eager to kill and exploit. They learn to do that.... The transition to a culture of nonviolence must be grounded in education about nonviolence, its values, practice, and potential, from the earliest ages through college. Young people must be given the opportunity to open their minds to a different way of thinking about their world and their relations to others in it by being given the opportunity to explore the rich and complex issues of nonviolence. They must be given the opportunity fully to appreciate the fact that some of the most revered figures in history, from the Buddha, Socrates, Jesus, Thoreau, Tolstoy, Gandhi, Schweitzer, Einstein, and King have in their various ways, and to various degrees, exemplified the philosophy of nonviolence. Reverence for them at the very least calls for exploring what it is that they perceived, trying to understand and to build upon their examples and teachings. All of this involves trying to change the way we think—our collective mindset. For this is where a culture of nonviolence must be situated and nurtured.”

Robert L. Holmes, “Toward a Nonviolent American Revolution” (Excerpt)

### Suggested Reading

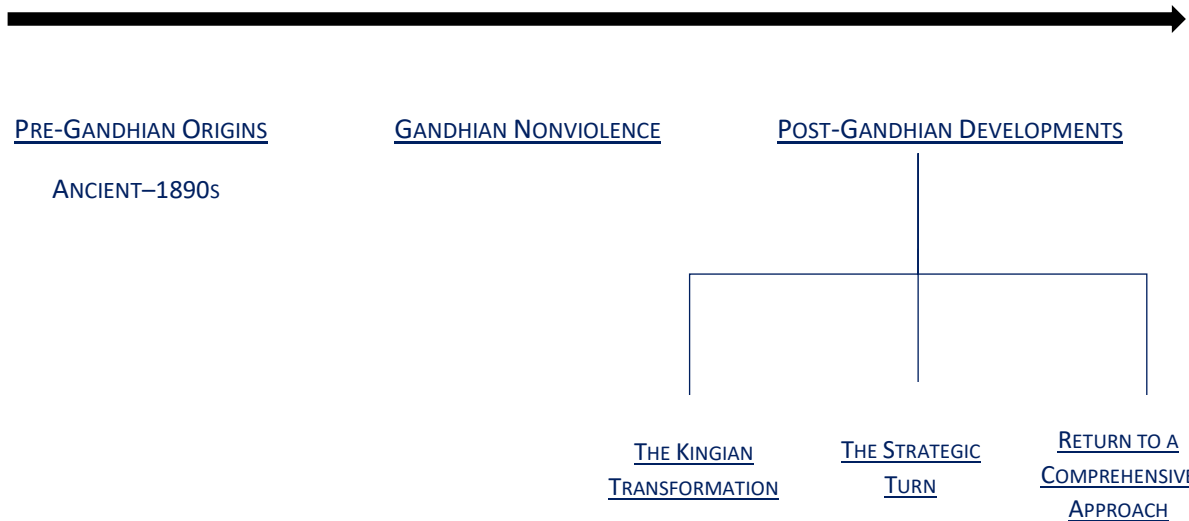
Holmes, Robert L. “Toward a Nonviolent American Revolution.” *Acorn: Journal of the Gandhi-King Society* 15 (2), Fall-Winter 2011–2012, 5–14.

Zerella, Michael. 2014. “Laws of Nature.” *1000-Word Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology*.

<https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2014/02/17/laws-of-nature/>.

## PART II. POST-GANDHIAN DEVELOPMENTS

Any study of the philosophy of Gandhi would be incomplete without examining where it was taken in the hands of successors. That is the focus of Part II. For organizational purposes, recall from the Nonviolence Timeline (presented in the opening pages), that we may divide post-Gandhian developments into three (chronological but overlapping) phases: the Kingian Transformation, the Strategic Turn, and the Return to a Comprehensive Approach. The remaining three chapters focus on these phases respectively.



## Chapter 13. The Kingian Transformation

**T**he decade following [Gandhi's 1948 assassination](#), King became the most prominent bearer of the nonviolence torch in the West. But as noted in the preface, he did not simply preserve Gandhi's philosophy in its original form; he transformed it in a number of important respects. In his 1964 ["American Dream"](#) speech, King summarizes his philosophy of nonviolence. The excerpt that follows includes the relevant portion of the speech. As you read, try to isolate the Gandhian strands from the King's unique contributions.

### Box 25 – King’s Philosophy of Nonviolence

“Now I would like to take a few minutes to say something about this method or this philosophy of nonviolence, because it has played such a prominent role in our struggle over the last few years, both north and south. First I should say that I am still convinced that the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom and human dignity is nonviolent resistance. I am convinced that this is a powerful method. It disarms the opponent, it exposes his moral defenses, it weakens his morale and at the same time it works on his conscience, and he just doesn’t know how to deal with it. If he doesn’t beat you, wonderful. If he beats you, you develop the courage of accepting blows without retaliating. If he doesn’t put you in jail, wonderful; nobody with any sense loves to go to jail. But if he puts you in jail, you go in that jail and transform it from a dungeon of shame to a haven of freedom and human dignity. Even if he tries to kill you, you develop the inner conviction that there are some things so precious, some things so dear, some things so eternally true that they are worth dying for. And in a sense, if an individual has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn’t fit to live. This is what the nonviolent discipline says. And there is something about this that disarms the opponent and he doesn’t know how to deal with it.

Another thing about this method is that it makes it possible for individuals to struggle to secure moral ends through moral means. One of the great debates of history has been over this whole question of ends and means. There have been those individuals who have argued that the end justifies the means. Sometimes the whole systems of government have gone down this path. I think this is one of the great weaknesses and tragedies of Communism; it is right here, that often the attitude that any method, any means can be used to bring about the goal of the classless society. This is where the nonviolent philosophy would break from Communism or any other system that argues that the end justifies the means, because in a real sense the end is pre-existent in the means. And the means represent the ideal in the making and the end in process. And somehow in the long run of history, immoral means cannot bring about moral ends. And so the nonviolent philosophy makes it possible for individuals to work to secure moral ends through moral means.

Now, there is another thing about this philosophy—I guess it’s one of the most misunderstood aspects. It says that it is possible to struggle passionately and unrelentingly against an unjust system and yet not stoop to hatred in the process. The love ethic can stand at the center of a nonviolent movement. And people always ask me, ‘What in the world do you mean by this? How can you love people who are bombing your home, and people who are threatening your children, and people who are using violence against your every move?’ I guess they have a point. I’m not talking about emotional bosh at this point. It is nonsense to urge oppressed people to love their oppressor in an affectionate sense. This isn’t what we are talking about.

Fortunately the Greek language comes to our aid in trying to discover the meaning of love in this context. There are three words in the Greek language for love. One is the word ‘*eros*.’ **Eros** is a sort of aesthetic love. . . . Then there is ‘*philia*.’ The Greek language talks about this kind of reciprocal love, a sort of... a love that develops out of the fact that you, you like the person. You love because you are loved. This is friendship. There is another word in the Greek language. It is the word ‘*agape*.’ **Agape** is more than friendship, *agape* is more than aesthetic or romantic love. *Agape* is understanding, creative, redemptive good will for all men. It is an overflowing love that seeks nothing in return. Theologians would say that it is the love of God operating in the human heart. And when one rises to love on this level, he loves every man, not because he likes him but because God loves him. And he rises to the level of loving the person who does the evil deed while hating the deed that the person does.

And I think that this is the kind of love that can guide us through the days and weeks and years ahead. This is the kind of love that can help us achieve and create **the beloved community**. I think this is what Jesus meant when he said, ‘Love your enemies,’ and I’m so happy he didn’t say, ‘Like your enemies,’ it’s pretty difficult to like some people. Like is an affection. It has sentimental qualities and, frankly, it is difficult to like, I find it very difficult to like Senator Thurmond and Senator Eastland and the things

that they are doing on this Civil Rights issue and the way they are voting, I really don't like it. But Jesus says, 'Love them' and love is greater than like. Love is understanding, creative, redemptive good will for all men. And I seriously say that I think this can stand at the center of the nonviolent movement and help bring about the new America, the great America.

And so, as Dr. Oxnam said earlier, we can stand before our violent, most violent opponents and say in substance, we will match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we will still love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. And so throw us in jail and we will still love you. Burn our homes and threaten our children, and as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hours and beat us and drag us out on some wayside road and leave us half dead and, as difficult as it is, we will still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom. We will so appeal to your heart and your conscience that we will win you in the process. And our victory will be a double victory.

This is the nonviolent message."

"The American Dream" (Excerpt)  
Speech delivered at Drew University  
February 5, 1964

Like Gandhi, King was a prolific author and speaker—with an [estimated 14 volumes of collected works](#). But King was also a particularly gifted speaker and a much more systematic writer. [The King Center](#), established in 1968 by **Coretta Scott King** (1927–2006) after her husband's assassination, extracted [the King Philosophy](#) from King's writings and organized this philosophy into four main components:

- **The Triple Evils** (three main forms of violence)
- **The Six Principles of Nonviolence** (the fundamental philosophical tenets)
- **The Six Steps of Nonviolence** (how to conduct a campaign from start to finish)
- **The Beloved Community** (the ultimate goal)

It is easy enough to read the very brief and clear descriptions of these components directly from the King Center's site (and I encourage doing so). However, the Six Steps are worth emphasizing here, since they are the key to effective action:

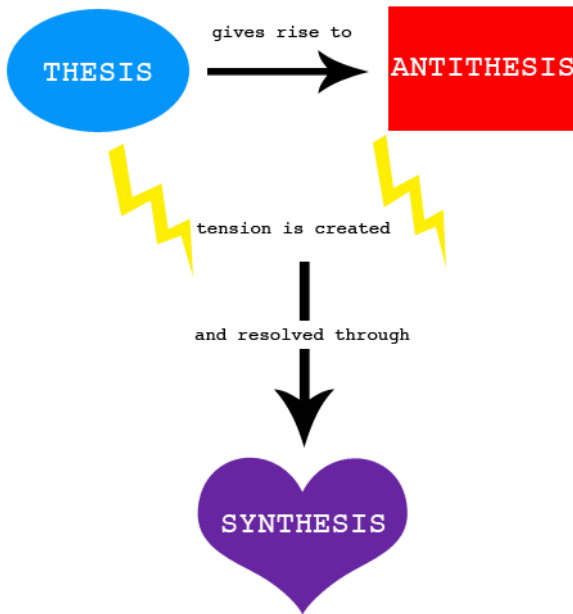
1. **Information Gathering**
2. **Education**
3. **Personal Commitment**
4. **Negotiation**
5. **Direct Action**
6. **Reconciliation**



[Coretta Scott King receiving the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding](#) for 1966 on behalf of her husband, from Dr. Zakir Hussain, President of India, in 1969.

From the [U.S. Embassy New Delhi](#) via Flickr.  
License: CC BY-ND 2.0

Each of the six is a step toward **conflict reconciliation**. Regarding the general approach at any of these stages, King described himself as “Hegelian,” taking inspiration from the German philosopher **Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel** (1770–1831). According to (a popular but possibly inaccurate understanding of) the so-called **Hegelian dialectic**, the putting forward of any **thesis** (claim) gives rise to an **antithesis** (opposing claim), creating a tension between the two (conflict), the adequate resolution of which is a **synthesis** (claim taking into account both the thesis and its antithesis). The synthesis then becomes the new thesis, which receives its own antithesis, yielding a further synthesis—and so on. This is the Hegelian explanation of progress.



[The Structure of Hegelian Dialectic](#)  
Image by [Essieruth](#) via Wikimedia Commons  
License: CC BY-SA 3.0

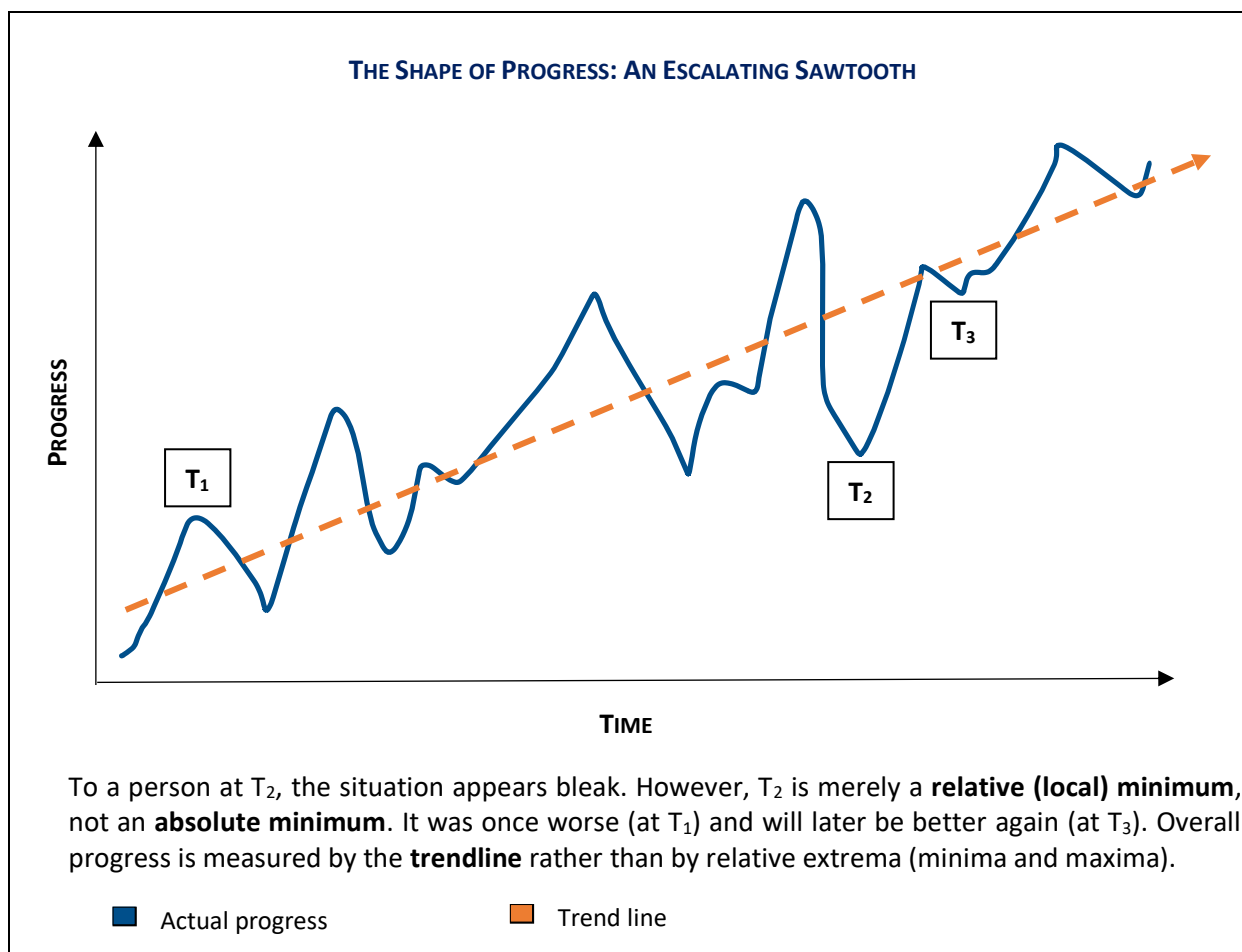


[Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel 1842 Sketch](#)  
This image is in the public domain.

King’s insight was to apply the Hegelian framework to explain nonviolent social change. He treated violence as a thesis, apathy/complacency as its antithesis, and nonviolent resistance as a synthesis. Nonviolent resistance *qua* (as) nonviolence sees the wisdom inherent in the antithesis (apathy/complacency), namely that we ought to avoid the error made by the thesis (violence). Nonviolent resistance *qua* resistance sees the wisdom inherent in the thesis (violence), namely that we ought to avoid the error of the antithesis (apathy/complacency). So, nonviolent resistance incorporates both truths but avoids both errors, accomplishing what neither the thesis nor the antithesis does alone. Applying this overarching theoretical idea to specific real-world conflicts, King sought to analyze all sides of a given conflict with an eye toward distilling some truth in each perspective, then melding those truths together to move the conflict gradually toward reconciliation.

But it is important to recognize that progress does not proceed linearly. We can expect that there will steps forward along with some backtracking. But King’s oft-quoted conviction is that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (toward the Beloved Community).<sup>12</sup> Or better yet, to reflect the downturns, one might envision moral progress with “hills” (peaks) and “valleys” (troughs), as an escalating spiral, or as an **escalating sawtooth**. This yields what the 20<sup>th</sup>-century’s **New Sciences** termed a **process-structure**: something which inherently changes (hence a process) yet which has some degree of

stability giving it a definable trajectory (hence a structure).<sup>13</sup> Without this recognition, it is easy to lose hope when one inevitably encounters setbacks, which in turn leads to defeat—what sociologist **Thomas K. Merton** (1910–2003) called a **self-fulfilling prophecy**.



Return now to the Six Steps, which tell us how to bring about progress. During the Nashville desegregation movement, James Lawson (whom we encountered in Chapter 5) was sent by King to lead nonviolence workshops. As part of these workshops, Lawson taught the steps which the movement would soon carry out. More generally, he helped participants learn about nonviolence, plan, strategize, roleplay potential scenarios, and prepare themselves mentally and spiritually for seeing the action through and handling its likely consequences. Such careful preparation was key to the movement’s success. Advocates of this approach say that the absence of a similar method, organization, planning, training, and discipline in many other nonviolence campaigns is a common reason for failure. And when they fail for that reason, it also gives onlookers the misimpression that nonviolence is weak and ineffective.

Fortunately, the workshops did not stop in Nashville. One of the Nashville leaders, **Bernard Lafayette, Jr.**, later recalled King’s last words to him just hours before the assassination—“Now, Bernard, the next movement we’re going to have is to institutionalize and internationalize nonviolence”—which he took as his “final marching orders” (Haga 2013). In partnership with fellow civil rights activist David Jehnsen, those orders were fulfilled. Trainings in “Kingian Nonviolence Conflict Reconciliation” are now offered in schools

and prisons, to activists, educators, social workers, and community organizers, and to other institutions and groups all over the world.

## Suggested Reading

King, Martin Luther King, Jr. 1958. "My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence."

[http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document\\_images/Vol04Scans/473\\_1-Sept-1958\\_My%20Pilgrimage%20to%20Nonviolence.pdf](http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/Vol04Scans/473_1-Sept-1958_My%20Pilgrimage%20to%20Nonviolence.pdf).

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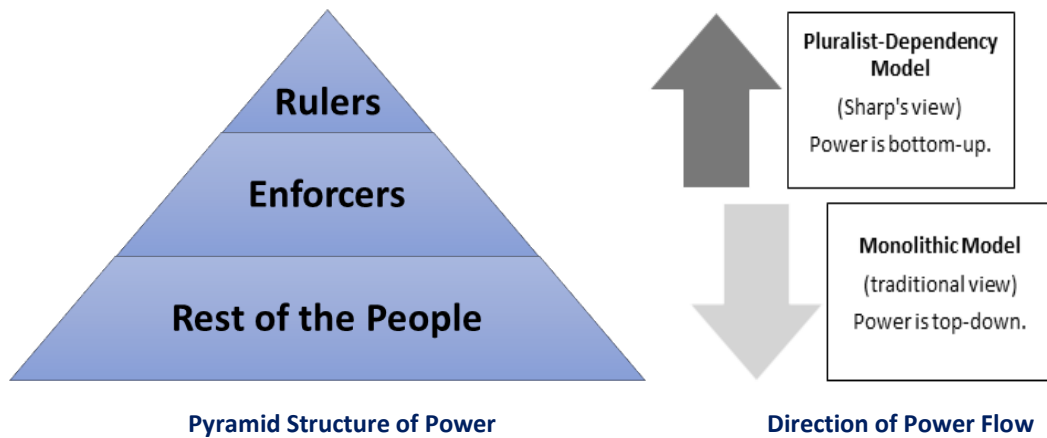
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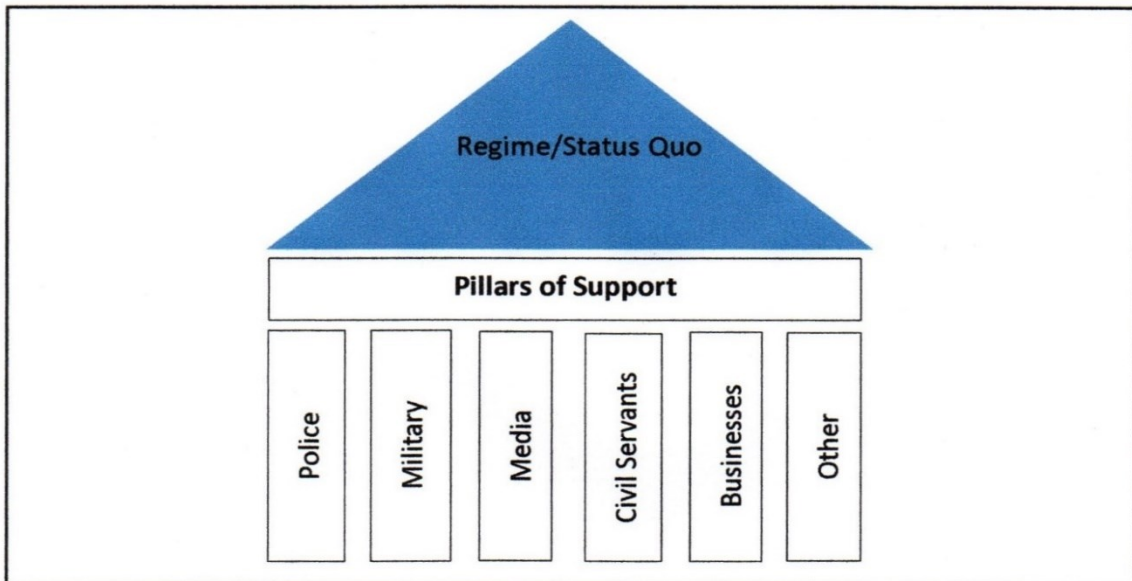
### Chapter 14. The Strategic Turn

Like Gandhi, King’s nonviolence was rooted in moral and religious principles, even though both men also provided a wealth of astute insights into strategy. But our next major figure, **Gene Sharp** (1928–2018), who began as a Gandhi scholar, eventually came to prefer to ground his theory in strategy alone, intentionally uprooting nonviolence from its moral and religious origins—origins which he viewed as potential weaknesses (notwithstanding his Quaker upbringing).

In 1973, nonviolent strategy was given a new depth of analysis with the publication of Sharp’s three-volume *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. In Part I, Sharp developed his influential theory of power. On this theory, socio-political power stems from a variety of sources (capital, means of production, means of transportation, natural resources, humans, etc.) but has certain general structural aspects:



More specifically, a regime or status quo receives its power from various **pillars of support**—the institutions on which it relies for its perceived legitimacy, resources, operations, etc.:



To defeat an unjust regime or status quo, one first needs to identify the pillars, then develop nonviolent strategies to undermine each of them, ideally by co-opting people from the pillars, bringing opponents over to the resistance movement. Once the pillars are sufficiently weak, the regime or status quo will fall. With the pillars intact rather than destroyed, the result is a transfer of power to the resistance (rather than an anarchic vacuum). Since the transfer is voluntary and cooperative (not achieved by threat or force), and involves agents below the top tiers of power, the seeds of democracy are planted.

But how can the resistance movement undermine the pillars? In Part II of his trilogy, Sharp identifies three progressively demanding categories of nonviolent methods, each serving its own specific functions:

METHODS	CATEGORY	TACTICS WITHIN CATEGORY	FUNCTIONS OF CATEGORY	DIFFICULTY/RISK
First 54	<b>Protest &amp; persuasion</b>	Use of symbols, slogans, pamphleteering, marches, negotiations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishes unity by overcoming <b>atomization</b> (isolated individuals acting independently).</li> <li>Grows the movement.</li> <li>Gets participants' feet wet—a first step in overcoming fear and building confidence for riskier steps.</li> <li>Sends message to the opponent and public.</li> </ul>	Low
Next 104	<b>Noncooperation</b> (social, economic, political)	Boycotts and strikes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Weakens opponent's power.</li> <li>Provokes a response (but might be ignored).</li> <li>Difficult to stop.</li> </ul>	Low–Medium
Final 40	<b>Intervention</b> (directly inserting oneself between an authority and its power source)	Sit-ins, nonviolent invasions, creation of parallel institutions or governments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Removes opponent's power.</li> <li>Raises the stakes.</li> <li>Forces a Gandhian dilemma.</li> <li>Poor response by opponents activates political jiu-jitsu.</li> </ul>	High



These three categories contain the specific tactics enumerated in Sharp's famous list of "[198 Methods of Nonviolent Action](#)" (the basis for Nonviolence International's expanded [Nonviolent Tactics Database](#), which now includes over 300 methods and counting).

Part III of Sharp's trilogy concludes the series with an examination of the major principles and factors that govern nonviolent dynamics, such as timing, numbers, leadership, psychology, and his concept of **political jiu-jitsu** (which we encountered in Chapter 5).

For Sharp, political jiu-jitsu is one of the primary reasons why nonviolent means must be maintained with scrupulous discipline: only nonviolence can avoid the backfire effect which characterizes political jiu-jitsu. Even a small amount of violence injected into an otherwise nonviolent protest can have a dramatic negative impact. Consider, for example, an individual participant in a peaceful march who bashes in a window during a heated moment. This person receives all the media attention, thereby polluting the moral character of

the entire group in the eyes of the public, causing the movement to lose support and face even greater opposition. This disproportionate pollution effect has ruined enough protests to earn a name of its own: “[Nagler’s Law](#),” coined “semi-facetiously” by **Michael Nagler**, a pioneer of peace studies at the University of California at Berkeley and founder of the [Metta Center for Nonviolence](#). Nagler sums up his “Law” in a formula (which, taken literally, is mathematical nonsense, as he recognizes):

**Box 26 – Nagler’s Law**

$$NV + V = V$$

When nonviolent demonstration (NV) includes even a small outbreak of violence (V), it often yields the impression that the entire movement is violent (V), thereby endangering its credibility and undercutting its effectiveness.

Sharp’s work isn’t mere armchair speculation. In 1993, he was asked by Burmese resistance to write an accessible generic summary of how an oppressed people could move *From Dictatorship to Democracy* using nonviolence. The manual quickly spread to resistance groups worldwide, who used it to successfully overthrow a wave of oppressive regimes—successful despite desperate attempts to blacklist Sharp’s work and discredit it through propaganda campaigns. A case in point is *Otpor!* (meaning “resistance”), the Serbian opposition movement, led by **Srja Popovic**, which overthrew **Slobodan Milosevic**, the “Butcher of the Balkans,” in 2000. For such contributions, Sharp was nominated on multiple occasions for the Nobel Peace Prize.



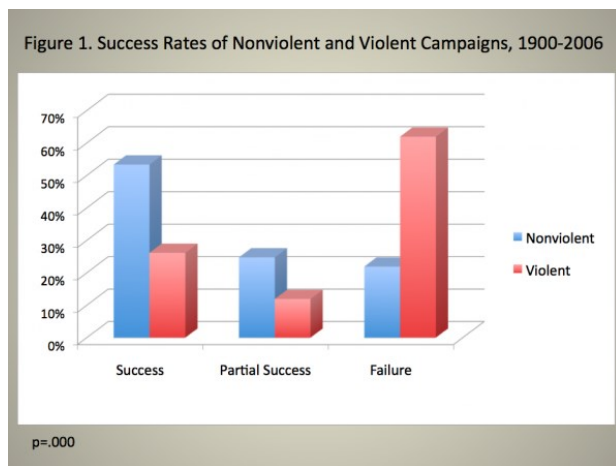
*[Bringing Down a Dictator](#), York’s 2002 Documentary on *Otpor!**

Barry Gan, though a critic of the focus on strategy over principles, characterizes Sharp's work as "powerful" and "masterful," concluding that "it is fair to say that virtually no one writing since the 1973 publication of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* has said anything about strategic nonviolent action that would contradict or refute Sharp in any serious way" (74). This is notwithstanding serious attempts to refute Sharp. Consider political scientist **Erica Chenoweth**, who was initially skeptical upon encountering such striking claims for nonviolence at a conference on the topic. Are the success stories, such as *Otpor!*, representative or mere selection bias? What would be the result of an empirical study of the comparative success rates of violent and nonviolent resistance against brutal regimes? Such studies had not been done at the time. So, Chenoweth and their fellow researcher and co-author Maria J. Stephan embarked on a multi-year project to create datasets, crunch the numbers, and analyze the results.



[Chenoweth, "The Success of Nonviolent Civil Resistance," TEDxBoulder Talk in 2013](#)

Despite their focus on the “hard cases” (i.e., cases where nonviolence would presumably be least effective), Chenoweth and Stephan concluded that nonviolence consistently has twice the success rate against oppressive regimes, fewer casualties, a lower probability of post-conflict civil war, and a higher probability of long-term post-conflict democracy.



Post-Conflict Regime Type

	Violent Campaigns	Nonviolent Campaigns
Probability of Being a Democracy Five Years after the Conflict Has Ended	4%	41%

P=.000

Source: <https://www.nakedcapitalism.com/2012/02/erica-chenoweth-confronting-the-myth-of-the-rational-insurgent-2.html>

For more data, the methodology, and explanations of the results, see their 2012 book *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. A brief overview is provided in Chenoweth’s TEDxBoulder talk (above). Several full-length lectures, which provide much more depth, are easily found on YouTube.

## Suggested Viewing

Chenoweth, Erica. 2013. “The Success of Nonviolent Civil Resistance.” TEDxBoulder.

<https://youtu.be/YJSehRIU34w>. (Slides from Chenoweth summarizing their findings:

<https://www.nakedcapitalism.com/2012/02/erica-chenoweth-confronting-the-myth-of-the-rational-insurgent-2.html>.)

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## Chapter 15. The Return to a Comprehensive Approach

Despite the burgeoning of strategic nonviolence and empirical work, Michael Nagler, whom we encountered in the previous chapter, argues that it's far from enough. **Strategic nonviolence** is a problem-solving approach based on cost-benefit analysis. It treats nonviolence as a tool reserved for occasions on which problems arise, and only for as long as it continues to be an effective tool for the job in question. Barry Gan calls it "**selective nonviolence**," adding that it operates on Tom Hasting's "**Kleenex Principle**": "use it when you need it, and throw it away when you're done with it" (2013, 69).

This selective use of nonviolence fails to address the ever-present underlying causes of violence. At best, nonviolence construed as a mere tactic temporarily pushes violence back beneath the surface, where it lies dormant but ready to erupt once re-activated by circumstance. Nagler's "**nonviolent future**" requires a more systematic, **principled nonviolence**, a form which uproots the seeds of violence before they can sprout.

On Nagler's analysis, the "dominant paradigm" of modern culture posits a purely material universe that inclines many, whether consciously or subconsciously, to view the world as one devoid of purpose, one in which selfishness, separateness, and the scarcity of resources inevitably reign—a package which fuels fear, unhealthy forms of competition, hatred, and ultimately violence. In his estimate, this is a "crisis." To find our way out of this crisis, we need nothing less than a cultural "paradigm shift" to a "**new story**" of how to conceive of ourselves as human beings and our relationships to each other, to (non-human) animals, to the environment, and to the cosmos as a whole ("**the three harmonies**").

### Box 27 – Kuhn on the Structure of Scientific Revolutions

Nagler (1983) draws on the philosopher and historian of science **Thomas S. Kuhn** (1922–1996). In his 1962 *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which sent shockwaves throughout academia, Kuhn maintained that science progresses normally most of the time by making small advances within the current **dominant paradigm**—until irresolvable tensions in the paradigm accumulate, become salient, and produce a **crisis** in the scientific community. During the crisis, someone not yet deeply embedded within the paradigm (e.g., a young, up-and-coming scientist) has a fundamentally new insight outside of the paradigm—an insight that would normally be dismissed as crazy, yet one capable of resolving the tensions at the root of the crisis. The resolution eventually catches on, becomes accepted, and instigates a **paradigm shift**, transforming the field. This marks the end of the crisis and the beginning of a **scientific revolution** operating with the new paradigm.



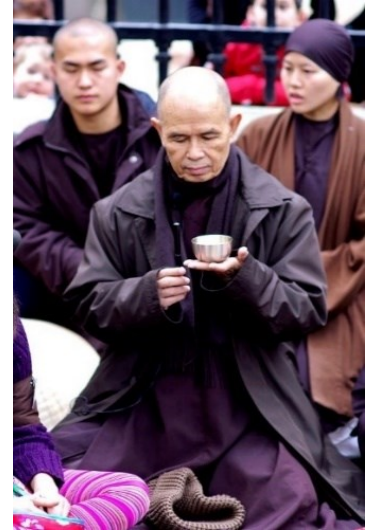
[Portrait of Thomas Samuel Kuhn](#)  
by Davi.trip via Wikimedia  
Commons. License: CC BY-SA 4

The new story must bring nonviolence into everyday mainstream consciousness. It must be comprehensive: individual and social; local and global; scientific and spiritual; applied to every domain, including the environment, mental health, social justice, the economy, government, and education. In short, nonviolence must become a "**way of life**" (a philosophy around which to organize one's everyday existence).

How can we bring this about? In Nagler’s latest book *The Third Harmony: Nonviolence and the New Story of Human Nature*, he lays out a comprehensive “[Roadmap](#)” to a nonviolent future. This Roadmap identifies goals in six main areas (each with smaller subgoals):

1. New Story Creation
2. Peace
3. Democracy and Social Justice
4. Vibrant and Need-Based Economies
5. Climate Protection
6. Environment

To make progress requires constructive program and *Satyagraha*. But first comes what he calls “Person Power,” which involves self-transformation to be deliberately cultivated through a variety of principles and practices drawn from science and the world’s contemplative traditions. The point here is, in the words of the Vietnamese monk, teacher, author, and peace activist **Thich Nhat Hanh** (1926–2022) from the opening chapter of his *Being Peace*—a pioneering text of **socially engaged Buddhism**—it is only by “being peace that we can make peace” (2005, 18).



[Thich Nhat Hanh in 2006](#)  
Photo by [Duc Truong](#) via Flickr.  
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## Box 28 – The Prospects for a Nonviolent Future

How far have we come so far? What are the prospects for a nonviolent future?

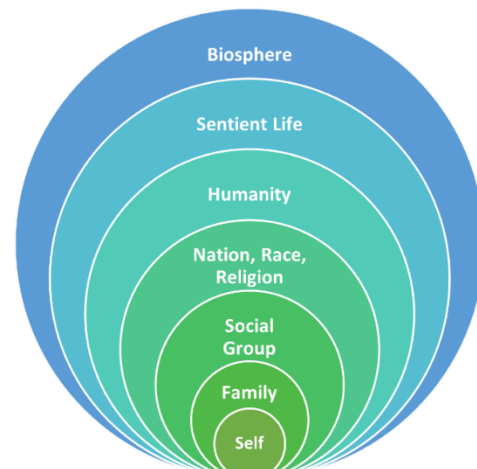
Consider Peter Brecke's "[Conflict Catalogue](#)," which collects data on every known conflict in which 32 or more people were killed from 1400 CE to the present, and an extended database for Europe that goes back to 900 CE. Merely by scrolling through the pages and pages of data, catching a glimpse of the mindboggling death tolls, it is easy to draw the conclusion that major conflict is an inevitable part of human nature. One might draw the same grim conclusion from the Southern Poverty Law Center's [Hate Map](#), which tracks hate groups and their activities across the U.S. There were 733 hate groups on the map for 2021 compared to 599 when it began in 2000.

The title of the Institute for Economics & Peace's [Global Peace Index](#) might sound as if it points in the opposite direction. However, according to its 2022 report:

*results show that the average level of global peacefulness deteriorated by 0.03%. Although slight, this is the eleventh deterioration in peacefulness in the last fourteen years, with 90 countries improving, 71 deteriorating and two remaining stable in peacefulness, highlighting that countries tend to deteriorate much faster than they improve.*

On a more hopeful note, the 1991 [Seville Statement on Violence](#), commissioned by the United Nations, offers a five-point scientific argument for the conclusion that violence is not inevitable for human beings.

But the *Seville Statement* points to a mere potentiality for human beings, not an actuality. For evidence of actual progress, we turn to the Australian ethicist Peter Singer, who argues that throughout human history we have continually expanded our circles of moral concern (2011 [1981]). Moreover, consider Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker's 700-plus page empirical study, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. Comparing global trends based on empirical data from prehistory to the present over a vast array of categories pertaining to violence and injustice, his overall thesis is that in the long scheme of things, violence has declined in nearly every category (with periodic temporary increases). The trendline is a downward-sloping sawtooth (a vertical-axis reflection of the escalating sawtooth of moral progress discussed earlier). Appearances to the contrary are due largely to our historical nearsightedness combined with the salience of violence attributable to the unbalanced attention it receives in the news and other media.



Singer's Expanding Circles of Moral Concern

What conclusions can we draw about the future? The key is **induction**: a form of reasoning that draws probable, though uncertain, conclusions from limited data. Induction is what allows us to use scientific data from the past and present to make tentative but reasonably reliable predictions about the future. While the Global Peace Index reports a recent increase in violence, by applying induction to Pinker's data one might draw the conclusion that the increase is temporary—like all such increases in the past. Perhaps Nagler's "Roadmap" can help us inch it further along in that direction until we reach the "paradigm shift" needed to achieve Holmes's "nonviolent revolution," ultimately leading to King's "Beloved Community."

Whether we get there or not, it is worth emphasizing that for Gandhi, as with the Jains, nonviolence is an **ethical ideal**: a bar we may always fall short of but toward which we should perpetually strive. The closer we come, the better. The path—the means—is what matters most, not reaching the destination—the end. As Holmes' puts it, "our obligation in particular situations is not to change the external world; it is rather, *to try* to do so, and to try as carefully and responsibly as possible; and to do so in ways that are morally best" (2007, 226).



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Those working in the Kingian tradition adopted the convention of using the hyphenated “non-violence” to refer to the negative, passive concept (the absence of violence), distinguishing it from the unhyphenated “nonviolence,” which refers to the positive, active concept they advocate. However, this is a post-Gandhian development. Hence, the presence or absence of a hyphen has no significance in translations of Gandhi. For passages included in this work, I have preserved hyphenation or lack thereof in the original sources.

<sup>2</sup> Confusingly, Gandhi elsewhere says “... it was decided to award a prize to anyone who could think of an appropriate term. A Gujarati-speaking gentleman submitted the word ‘*satyagraha*,’ and it was adjudged the best” (1986, 44). So, did Gandhi coin the word or not? Yes and no. The full story is recounted in his autobiography: “... I could not for the life of me find out a new name, and therefore offered a nominal prize through *Indian Opinion* to the reader who made the best suggestion on the subject. As a result Maganlal Gandhi [M. K. Gandhi’s follower and younger first cousin once removed] coined the word *Sadagraha* (*Sat*: truth, *Agraha*: firmness) and won the prize. But in order to make it clearer I changed the word to *Satyagraha* which has since become current in Gujarati as a designation for the struggle” (1968).

<sup>3</sup> Gandhi’s conception of Truth stems primarily from the *Advaita* tradition (within the *Vedanta* school of orthodox Hindu philosophy), although it borrows from various schools and is to some extent novel. For an exploration of this, see Richards (1986).

<sup>4</sup> A reference to John Bunyan’s 1678 Christian allegory *The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come*, which Gandhi had read in South Africa and explicitly mentioned in multiple speeches and writings.

<sup>5</sup> The capitalized “Truth” (which occurs in noun form only) refers to the absolute/universal/objective notion, whereas the lowercase “truth” refers to that which is partial/limited/incomplete/relative/perspective-dependent.

<sup>6</sup> In Koller’s retelling, there were five blind men. In the photo of the sculpture, there are only four. There are many variants of the story, among which the number of men varies widely.

<sup>7</sup> Or “untouchables,” referring to members of society who are regarded as belonging to the bottom of, or outside of, the hereditary caste system.

<sup>8</sup> Gandhi himself used the term “jiu-jitsu,” though not in quite the same way as Gregg (*Hind Swaraj*, Chapter XVII).

<sup>9</sup> A reference to [Galatians 6:7](#).

<sup>10</sup> Gandhi regularly described his various personal practices and commitments as “experiments”—a term aptly chosen as the title of his autobiography: *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Here he may have been influenced by Thoreau’s *Walden*, which Gandhi read in 1906. There Thoreau describes his time at Walden Pond as an “experiment of living.”

<sup>11</sup> There are several likely sources for Gandhi’s tendency to think in terms of laws:

- Hindu thought often refers to some of its principles as “laws,” such as the “law of *karma*.”
- Gandhi studied law in England and practiced law for some time afterward as an attorney in South Africa and India. So, his professional training would have made him accustomed to that language.
- Gandhi also studied science and mathematics with a particular knack for geometry. He clearly had scientific and mathematical laws in mind, since he explicitly compared his “laws” to Euclid’s propositions and to the “law of gravitation.”
- Gandhi borrowed the phrase “law of love” directly from one of his major influences, Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy’s use of the locution may have resonated with him because he was already primed for it for the above reasons.



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<sup>12</sup> “Where Do We Go From Here” speech, delivered August 16, 1967 to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta (<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/where-do-we-go-here>). However, King adapted the quote from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century theologian Theodore Parker (“Of Justice and the Conscience”).

<sup>13</sup> See Lederach (2003).