The Primacy of Intention and the Duty to Truth:

A Gandhi-Inspired Argument for Retranslating *Hiṃsā* and *Ahiṃsā*,

with Connections to History, Ethics, and Civil Resistance

Todd Davies

Center for the Study of Language and Information, Stanford University

October 9, 2021

Abstract

The words "violence" and "nonviolence" are increasingly misleading translations for the Sanskrit words *hiṃsā* and *ahiṃsā* -- which were used by Gandhi as the basis for his philosophy of *satyāgraha*. I argue for re-reading *hiṃsā* as "maleficence" and *ahiṃsā* as "beneficence." These two more mind-referring English words – associated with religiously contextualized discourse of the past -- capture the primacy of intention implied by Gandhi's core principles, better than "violence" and "nonviolence" do. Reflecting a political turn in moral accountability detectable through linguistic data, both the scope and the usage of the word "violence" have expanded dramatically. The expanded scope of "violence" reflects greater consciousness of the various forms that serious harm can take, but also makes it harder to convincingly characterize people and actions as "nonviolent." New translations could clarify the distinction between *hiṃsā* and *ahiṃsā*, and thereby prevent some misunderstandings of Gandhi. Training in beneficence would reflect Gandhi's psychological path to reducing avoidable harm: detachment from the ego, learning to love universally, and seeking truth by experiment.

Keywords: himsa, ahimsa, violence, nonviolence, maleficence, beneficence, Gandhi

The Primacy of Intention and the Duty to Truth:

A Gandhi-Inspired Argument for Retranslating *Hiṃsā* and *Ahiṃsā*,

with Connections to History, Ethics, and Civil Resistance

1. Reading Gandhi: My context

I must begin with humility. I am a cognitive scientist by training, with research interests in digital technology and democratic communication. I am not a scholar of Gandhi, India, Sanskrit, nonviolence, or civil resistance. I do have a personal history, over the past three decades, of being trained for and participating in "nonviolent direct action" and other forms of civil resistance.

Since 1992, I have been an active participant in social movements for human rights -- antiwar, anti-oppression, and anti-displacement, focusing on campaigns for democratic, Indigenous, labor, environmental, prisoner, and lgbtq+ rights -- both within the United States and abroad. The activist tradition with which I am most familiar has its roots in the anti-nuclear movement in the U.S. during the 1970s and 80s, building on earlier work by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (Carson, 1995), the May Day Tribe (Kauffman, 2002), and the Movement for a New Society (Cornell, 2011), among many others.

I say the above both to acknowledge my limitations and to situate my interest in Gandhi. In this essay, I will be drawing on the work of scholars much more learned than I am in these topics, as well as on writings by Gandhi himself, together with some linguistic data. My aim is to understand better what has happened in my own time, and to offer a small contribution to answering the question posed by Martin Luther King, Jr.: Where do we go from here? (King, 1967). (See note 1.)

My method in writing this essay has been to focus on the two Sanskrit words *hiṃsā* and *ahiṃsā*, to which Gandhi constantly referred, and to study enough about them and about Gandhi's thinking so that, combined with my familiarity with contemporary social justice activism and social and cognitive science, I might be able to learn something useful about these two terms.

2. Twenty-First Century challenges for advocates of nonviolence

Among Gandhi's legacies is a vast number of people around the world who have adopted "nonviolent" methods of resistance to achieve social transformation. I write "nonviolent" (in quotes), because, even among adherents, there is broad disagreement about what this word means, who can claim it, the circumstances in which "nonviolent action" (or "civil resistance") is effective, and on what principles it depends. Although "nonviolent action" and "civil resistance" were used by Gandhi to refer to his Sanskrit neologism *satyāgraha* (roughly translated as truth-force or soul-force), later usage by Gene Sharp (1973) and others has altered the interpretation of these words away from Gandhi's original meaning. Thomas Weber (2003) wrote that this has resulted in "two approaches to nonviolence," one "principled" ("where emphasis is on human harmony and a moral rejection of violence and coercion"), and the other "pragmatic" ("where conflict is seen as normal and the rejection of violence as an effective way of challenging power"). I will say more about this division later in the essay.

In addition to the fissures between adherents, there have also been widespread and credible skepticism and critiques of nonviolent approaches, whether "principled" or "pragmatic." Among these I would include participants in, and scholars of, the Black civil rights movement in the U.S. up until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. They have pointed out how the presence of guns among Black civil rights activists (including Martin Luther King, Jr. himself) created a capacity

for self-defense, within which nonviolent action could take place (Umoja, 2013; Cobb, 2015). A civil rights movement veteran also mentioned to me that the Selma to Montgomery March in 1965 took place with armed State and Federal troops lining the highway. As another example, among Indigenous Mayan groups resisting the Mexican government after the Zapatista Rebellion began in 1994, it was the unarmed and pacifist *Las Abejas* community that was targeted in a massacre which killed 45 people on December 22, 1997, rather than their nearby allies in armed EZLN communities, whose resistance had been nonviolent after signing a peace treaty with the government, but who retained their weapons for self-defense (Ruiz García, 1997; Chabot & Vinthagen, 2020). For advocates of nonviolence, these are unsettling observations, because they suggest that what we call "nonviolent" resistance can sometimes be enhanced by, or even depend upon, the threat of violence – a form of coercion often taught to be antithetical to the principles of nonviolence.

Even more challenging to a nonviolent perspective are high-profile works of recent scholarship arguing, based on historical data over medium to long time scales, that nation-state monopolies on the legitimate use of force have made the world less violent overall (Pinker, 2011); that war in particular has made people safer and richer (Morris, 2014); and that violence is an unavoidable part of both maintaining social order and achieving social change (Ginsberg, 2013), has been the primary historical driver of reductions in inequality (Scheidel, 2017), and can be redemptive – helping to build democracy and solidarity among citizens (Duong, 2020). A more naturalistic view comes from the biologist Robert Sapolsky (2017), who argues that unlike other consensus evils of our time (deadly diseases, global warming, and comets hitting the earth), violence is not something most people think needs to be eradicated. What we hate, Sapolsky writes, are only certain kinds of violence, and not others. Violence in sports, for a just cause, or

when properly controlled, is widely seen as okay (p. 3). Of course, this is a central aspect of what nonviolence adherents want to challenge, but Sapolsky's point is that advocates for eradicating violence must convince the vast majority of humanity who are on the other side.

Gandhi's focus was on resistance by oppressed and colonized peoples, in the context of which he argued that nonviolence provided the most effective and long-lasting potential for true liberation. But evidence-based critiques like the ones mentioned above have been developed alongside persistent negative attitudes toward nonviolence among people in struggle -- ever since the legislative victories that were won by the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1960s. The kinds of principled nonviolence advocated by Gandhi and by Martin Luther King, Jr., as they are understood by most activists in the U.S., have not been the predominant tendencies within social movements since 1965. Beginning primarily with activists of color in the mid-60s, and extending to majority-white anarchist movements who imported the black bloc idea from Europe in the late 1980s, and also to prominent voices associated with the Black Lives Matter movement today, many of the most influential voices in North American protest movements have argued for a "diversity of tactics" that includes actions outside of those generally allowed under nonviolence guidelines (Malcolm X, 1964; Churchill, 1986; Gelderloos, 2013; Garza, 2015; Bray, 2017). It must be said also that during this period, nonviolent approaches have been staunchly and ably defended against these critiques (see e.g. Chenoweth, 2021; Deming, 1968; King, 2018; Lakey, 2001; and Wasow, 2020).

If we understand "violence" and "nonviolence" in conventional ways, my assessment is that strict nonviolence is harder to argue for today than is a more nuanced view, which

> (a) acknowledges the forms of social good achieved in the past through violent
> means and through mixed tactics;

(b) carefully studies both the success of civil resistance, especially for people

facing heavily armed, non-democratic governments (Chenoweth & Stephan,

2011; Chenoweth, 2021) and also the limitations of such analyses (Chabot &

Sharifi, 2013; Chabot & Vinthagen, 2015; Anisin, 2020); and

(c) acknowledges the apparent necessity of other factors -- including support

among elites and those with access to weapons, the potential for visible

oppression of nonviolent activists, and critical levels of popular support -- for

achieving nonviolent victories (Ginsberg, 2013, Feldstein, 2018).

The meanings we attach to the terms "violence" and "nonviolence" are crucial to arriving

at this conclusion, however. In what follows, I will argue that if we replace these words with

ones that come closer to the meanings that Gandhi attached to *hiṃsā* and *ahiṃsā*, we can recover

key insights in Gandhi's thinking that can be applied to contemporary debates about social

transformation -- without denying the advances in understanding that make a *simple* reading of

Gandhi's pronouncements on "violence" and "nonviolence" look somewhat outmoded in today's

world.

3. *Hiṃsā* and "violence"

According to multiple Sanskrit-English dictionaries, *hiṃsā* means injury, harm, hurt,

mischief, or wrong, and is "said to be of three kinds, 1. mental as 'bearing malice'; 2. verbal, as

'abusive language'; 3. personal, as 'acts of violence'" (Monier-Williams, 1899; see other entries

under "Sanskrit dictionary" at https://www.wisdomlib.org/definition/himsa). Gandhi primarily

translated *hiṃsā* as "violence," but wrote, "To say or write a distasteful word is surely not violent

especially when the speaker believes it to be true. The essence of violence is that there must be a

violent intention behind a thought, word, or act, i.e. an intention to do harm to the opponent, so-

called" (*Harijan*, 19 December 1936, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 91) Thus, for Gandhi, "violence" necessarily refers to a mental state, first and foremost.

The English word "violence," on the other hand, is rooted not in human motivation, but rather in observable effects. It derives from the Latin *violentus*, which combines *vīs* (force), shortened before a vowel, with *-olentus*, a variant (after a vowel) of *–ulentus* ("full of") (see "Origin of violence" at https://www.dictionary.com/browse/violence, and "Origin of violent" at https://www.dictionary.com/browse/violent), and specifically from *violentia* ("vehemence, impetuosity") (Online Etymology Dictionary, https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=violence). While "violence" *can* refer to a "deliberate exercise of physical force against a person, property, etc.; physically violent behaviour or treatment," it can also refer to "great strength or power of a natural force or physical action, esp. when destructive or damaging; violent motion or effect" (Definitions 1 and 2, Oxford English Dictionary, https://www.oed.com/).

Many scholars of peace & justice studies and social justice activists have more recently adopted usages of the word "violence" that appear to make it synonymous with "harm" or "injustice." The East Point Peace Academy of Oakland, California – an organization dedicated to Kingian nonviolence – defines "violence" as "physical or emotional harm" ("Violence," https://www.eastpointpeace.org/knvviolence). Peace studies founder Johan Galtung has written, "violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations" (Galtung 1969).

These definitions represent a shift away from the historical meaning of "violence" in at least two senses. First, the association of "violence" with sudden and destructive force gives it an emotional power that "harm" and "injustice" lack. "Violence" is frightening and commands attention -- and its linguistic closeness to "violation" may stir anger as well, in a way that "harm"

and "injustice" are less apt to do. Secondly, because their shared root meaning refers to intense force, "violence" and "violent" can refer to events that do not result in harm to anyone, e.g. "the violence of a storm" or "violent thrashing of the arms." So, while "violence" can be used as a substitute for "harm" or "injustice," both the range of possible meanings and the rhetorical impact of "violence" are distinctly more sensory and emotional.

Peace & justice scholars have, in recent decades, embraced definitions of "violence" that make it (a) uniquely human, and (b) unnecessary. Michael Nagler (2001) has written, "Violence as we mean it is a human phenomenon." Emphasizing its shared root with the Latin *violare* (to treat with violence, violate), Nagler uses the word "violence" in a way that does not apply to the actions of animals (pp. 46-47). Later, Nagler concludes that this type of violence is "an unnecessary evil" (p. 49). Attendees at a talk I gave at the Peace and Justice Studies Association's 2016 Annual Conference appeared to agree. Twelve out of 13 (I did not participate) said they agreed with the statement, "We are never going to live in a conflict free world. But it is possible to live in a violence free world."

Academics often define terms in specialized ways that would be unfamiliar to outsiders. But in this case, we appear to be swimming against a strong current. The above understandings of "violence" are at odds with both dictionary definitions and widespread usage. It is not hard to find references online to "violence" among animals, and even in the inanimate world, as well as in events that involve no intention ("a violent car crash," "violent earthquake" etc.). Seeing violence as uniquely human does fit with Gandhi's view that it requires deliberate intention. However, Gandhi did not share the belief of many peace scholars that violence is unnecessary. On the contrary, he wrote, "There is violence at the root of every act of living" ("Ahimsa v. Compassion," *Navajivan*, 31 March 1929, quoted in Rajmohan, 1996, p. 27). He later explained:

"If I wish to be an agriculturist and stay in the jungle, I will have to use the

minimum unavoidable violence in order to protect my fields. I will have to kill

monkeys, birds and insects which eat up my crops. If I do not wish to do so

myself, I will have to engage someone to do it for me. There is not much

difference between the two. To allow crops to be eaten up by animals in the name

of a*hiṃsā* while there is a famine in the land is certainly a sin. Evil and good are

relative terms. What is good under certain conditions can become an evil or sin

under a different set of conditions" ("Religion v. No Religion," *Harijan*, 9 June

1946, quoted in Rajmohan, 1996, p. 30).

The above passage is representative of many in Gandhi's writing.

Gandhi wrote during a time when use of the word "violence" in English was in a

historical trough -- relative to both earlier and later periods over the past 220 years. Figure 1

shows occurrences of "violence" in English-language books published from 1800 through 2019,

plotted with various synonyms and related words for comparison, using the Google Ngram tool.

In the period since World War I, when all of the words except "aggression" were more common

than "violence," occurrences of the latter have skyrocketed to make it the easy winner for

mentions among this group. Gandhi himself may have helped launch "violence" into its current

usage popularity, but its continued rise probably owes something to shifts in the application of

the word "violence." I will have more to say about this in section 5, based on further data, but for

now I just want to note that the visceral impact of "violence," in contrast to "harm", makes it a

powerful substitute for the latter, if "violence" is accepted as a synonym for "harm." When we

further consider that the term "violence" was at its low ebb (among all words – not just this

group) during and between the two World Wars of the 20th Century, there seems to be a paradox

in word usage that calls for an explanation. The psychologist Steven Pinker (2011) may be right

that violence has declined since WWII. But "violence," it appears, has not.

Figure 1

Ngram plot for "violence" and five other related words
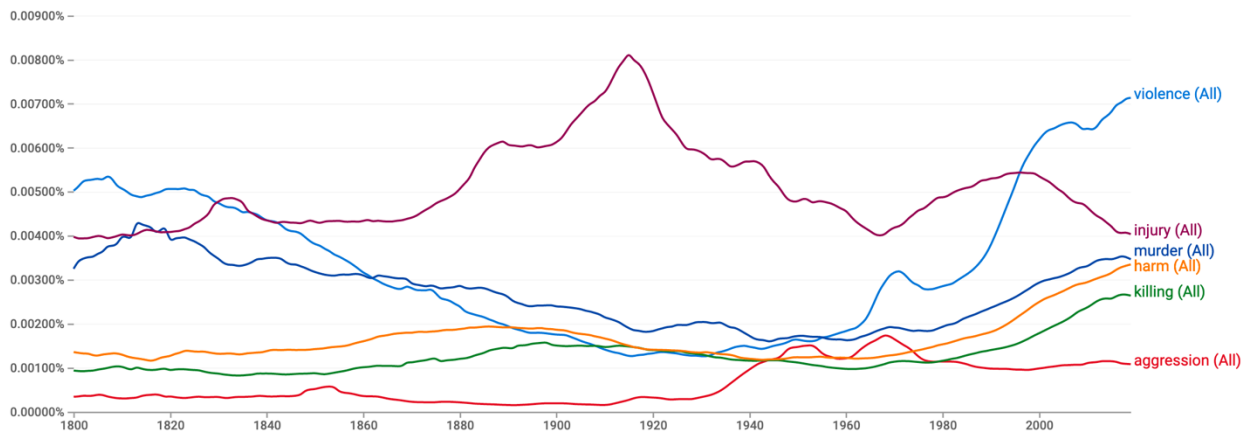
Note. The Ngram plots in this essay are each for case-insensitive queries of all English language

books, with smoothing level 3 applied.

(More info at https://books.google.com/ngrams.)

4. *Ahiṃsā* and **"nonviolence"**

The opposite of *hiṃsā* in Sanskrit is *ahiṃsā*, whose dictionary translation is "not injuring

anything, harmlessness" or "security, safeness" (Monier-Williams, 1899). Other translations are

offered, including "benevolence" (see section 6 below). Gandhi's main translation was

"nonviolence," and, as with "violence," he described it as a "mental attitude," concerning "the

feelings in our heart" ("Letter to Bhogilal," 22 September 1928, in Gandhi, 1999, p. 44, quoted

in Rajmohan, 1996, p. 28). Gandhi wrote, "Perfect nonviolence is impossible so long as we exist

physically, for we would want some space at least to occupy." For Gandhi, the votaries of

nonviolence must "endeavor every moment of our lives" against the violence that is required for

one's existence (*Harijian*, 21 July 1940, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 83). But nonviolence, for

Gandhi, did not entail renouncing all killing. He wrote of a situation in which a mad man is on a

killing spree: "Anyone who despatches this lunatic will earn the gratitude of the community and

be regarded as a benevolent man" (*Young India*, 4 November 1926, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001*,*

pp. 83-84). Gandhi also saw mercy killing as consistent with nonviolence (*Young India*, 18

November 1926, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 84). Additionally, the English word

"nonviolence" implies merely the absence of violence, but *ahiṃsā* is a much more positive

concept than that. Gandhi wrote: "In its positive form, *ahiṃsā* means the largest love, greatest

charity" (*Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, no date given, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001,

p. 84).

"Nonviolence" is an antonym of "violence." In English usage, the two words appear to

function as *ungraded* antonyms. Schmitt & Schmitt (2020) explain: "Ungraded antonyms are

exclusively opposite, either one or the other (dead/alive, pass/fail). Graded antonyms convey

oppositeness on a continuum (hot/warm/ cool/cold)." To test this, I asked attendees of PJSA

2016, "Does this sentence make sense, or is it odd?" for the following four sentences:

    (1)   The protest was somewhat violent. [8 – 3]

    (2)   The protest was somewhat nonviolent. [0 – 13]

    (3)   The verdict was somewhat unjust. [6 – 9]

    (4)   The verdict was somewhat just. [6 – 8]

The numbers in brackets at the end of each sentence are those among the varying numbers of attendees who raised their hands to say that the sentence made sense, followed by a dash and then the number who said it is odd.

Those who responded to (2) unanimously thought the phrase "somewhat nonviolent" is odd, which shows that while a majority thought that "violent" is a graded concept, all apparently thought that "nonviolent" is not. Situations appear to be judged as either nonviolent or violent, but not both. "Just" and "unjust," by contrast, were judged by at least some as graded antonyms, with 6 respondents for each word treating it as graded. Further support for this difference is found in Google Ngram data for the same pairs of words. Occurrences are found in English-language books for both "somewhat just" and "somewhat unjust" between the years 1800 and 2019 (Fig. 2). But while there are many occurrences of "somewhat violent," there are none for "somewhat nonviolent" (Fig. 3). As the reader can verify by going to https://books.google.com/ngrams, similar results occur for the modifiers "partially," "a bit of," and "a lot of," *mutatis mutandis*.

Figure 2

Ngram plot showing that "just" and "unjust" are graded antonyms
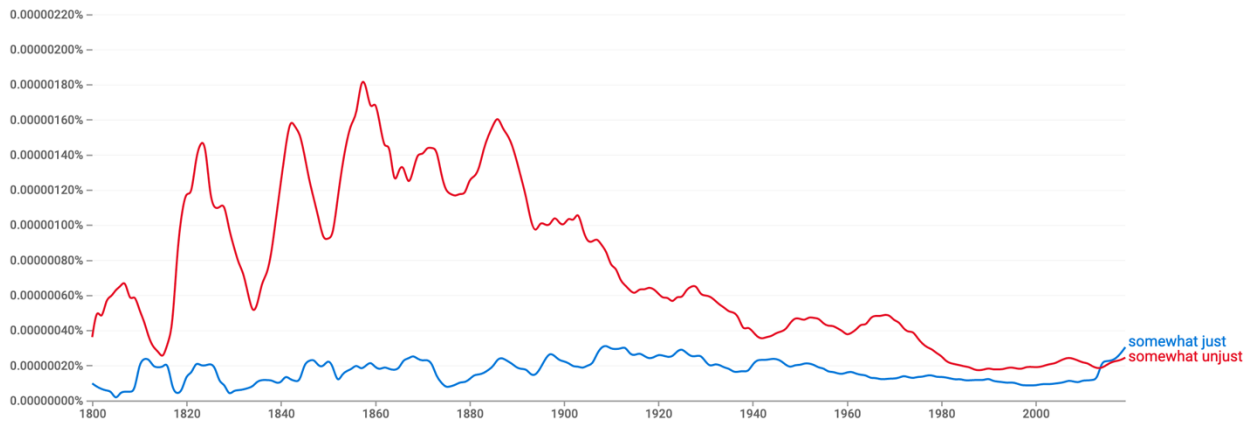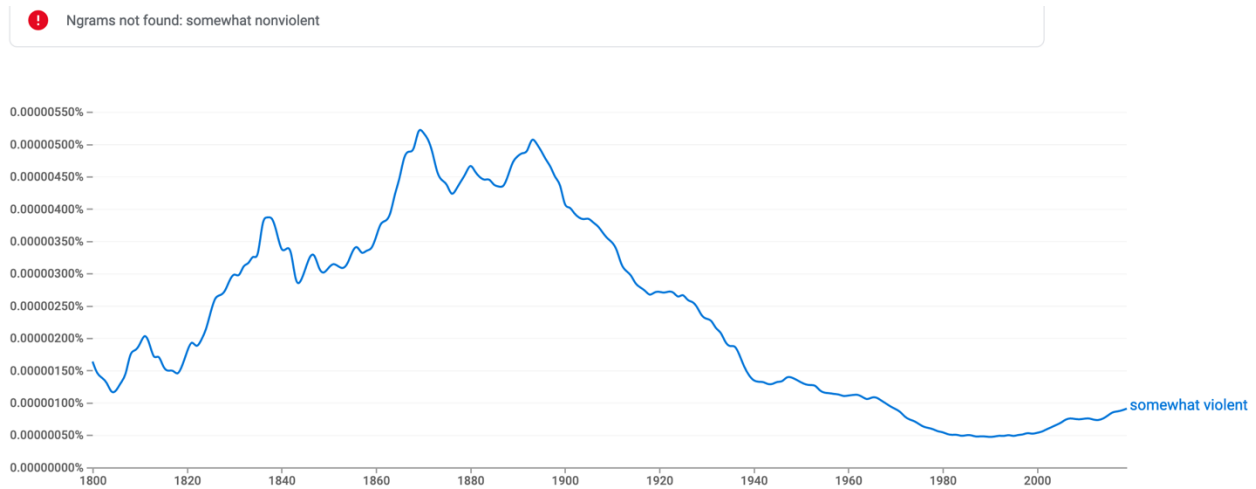
Figure 3

*Ngram plot showing that "violent" and "nonviolent" are ungraded antonyms*

While we have usage evidence that "nonviolence" in English is an ungraded concept,

Gandhi did not appear to see *ahiṃsā* in that way. Recall his statement, quoted above in this

section, that "perfect nonviolence" is impossible. *Ahiṃsā*, according to Nagler (2001), differs

from the most common English-language understanding of "nonviolence" in two other ways.

First, *ahiṃsā* prioritizes "the mental dimension" in a way that "nonviolence" (like "violence")

does not. If "nonviolence" is taken to imply "not violent," then it can simply mean

"harmlessness," with no requirement on intentions. But if, as Gandhi states, *hiṃsā* must involve

intention, then *ahiṃsā*, as Nagler writes, would mean "the absence of the desire, or intention, to

harm." Even this is an inadequate translation, for as Nagler writes, there is a second way in

which *ahiṃsā* differs from the straightforward understanding of "nonviolence," namely, that it is

not merely a negation, or absence, but "is a positive force that holds the solution to most of our

personal, social, and global problems." Nagler concludes that "nonviolence" is a "misleading"

translation of *ahiṃsā* (Nagler, 2001, pp. 59-60). Several alternatives have been offered, including

"charity" (Bondurant 1965, p. 24), "inner moral power" (attributed to Alain Richard in Nagler

2001, p. 58) and the Ancient Greek word *agape* (Kool 2008, p. 9). I believe it is useful to explore

alternative translations for both *hiṃsā* and *ahiṃsā*, and will say more about this in section 6.

     While "nonviolence" may not be the ideal translation for *ahiṃsā*, it has, like the word

"violence," risen dramatically in usage since the time of Gandhi (who coined the term). Judging

from book occurrences, "nonviolence" is now more popular than "civil disobedience,"

"pacifism," and "civil resistance" (Fig. 4), although it is below its peak from over a decade ago.

To put this in perspective, in 2019, occurrences of "violence" outnumbered those of

"nonviolence" in English language books by a ratio of 85:1. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that

the most popular English term associated with Gandhi's philosophy has been characterized as a

misleading one.

Figure 4

Ngram showing changes in usage of "nonviolence" and three related words
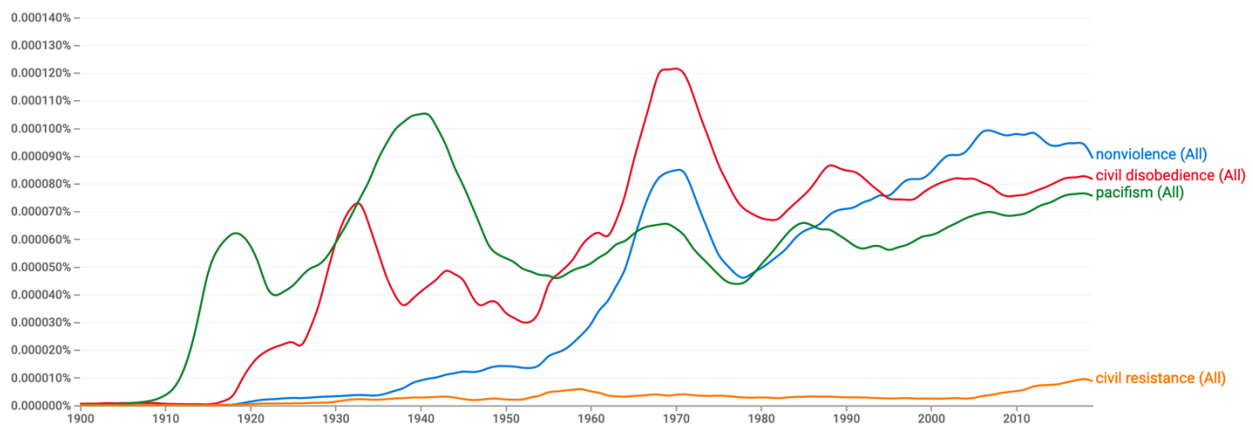
5. Words as windows into moral accountability

As the preceding sections argue, the English-language meanings of "violence" and "nonviolence" do not really parallel Gandhi's *hiṃsā* and *ahiṃsā*. But in the English-speaking world, it is the English terms that are mostly used. In this section, I consider both the consequences of our use of the terms "violence" and "nonviolence," and what their popularity relative to other, related words reveals about moral accountability. Standards of moral accountability are those by which a person is judged, or judges themself, as being or acting in a way that is worthy. Accountability of this kind has been studied by psychologists, religious studies scholars, and ethicists, among others (e.g., Bersoff & Miller, 1993; Bird, 1979; Oshana, 2004).

Section 3 ended with a paradox: Why has usage of the word "violence" (Fig. 1) increased so dramatically since its low point during the World Wars of the 20th Century -- the most violent period in modern history? A full answer would require analysis beyond the scope of this essay, but we can begin by looking at the usage of other words in the same conceptual space. Part of the explanation may be that more specific words, such as "injury," were used instead of the more generic "violence" during that period. Indeed, "injury" peaked during WWI, not surprisingly. "Killing" also ebbed during the wars, however, and it would be difficult to produce a plausible theory that would predict both what we see in Figure 1 and the results of queries yet to be done.

Whatever the explanation for the low usage of "violence' during Gandhi's time, we still need to account for the steep rise in its occurrences, particularly since about 1980. One possibility is that there has been a change in scope, with "violence" now referring to a much wider range of phenomena than it did before. We noted above how contemporary justice discourse treats "violence" as synonymous with "injustice" and "harm." The term "structural

violence" (Galtung, 1969) modifies "violence" in a way consistent with the definition we saw in

section 3, as well as a later one: "avoidable insults to basic human needs" (Galtung 1990, p.

292). Figure 5 shows usage growth among a set of modifiers for "violence," including

"structural," "cultural," and "psychological," which mirror the general increase in the word

"violence" during this period, up to recent peaks for each. Some evidence that this expanded

scope is responsible for the steep rise in usage for "violence" comes from comparisons with the

word "violent," which does not exhibit such a dramatic increase (Fig. 6). An Ngram query of

"structural violence" and "structurally violent" shows very little relative usage for the latter,

suggesting that the noun form "violence" has become a popular term for system-level injustice

that requires political and cultural remedies.

Figure 5

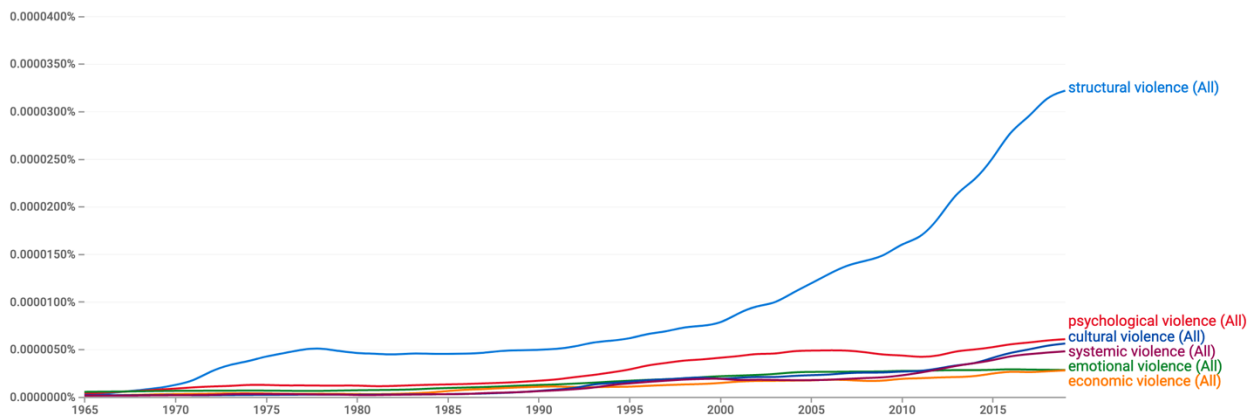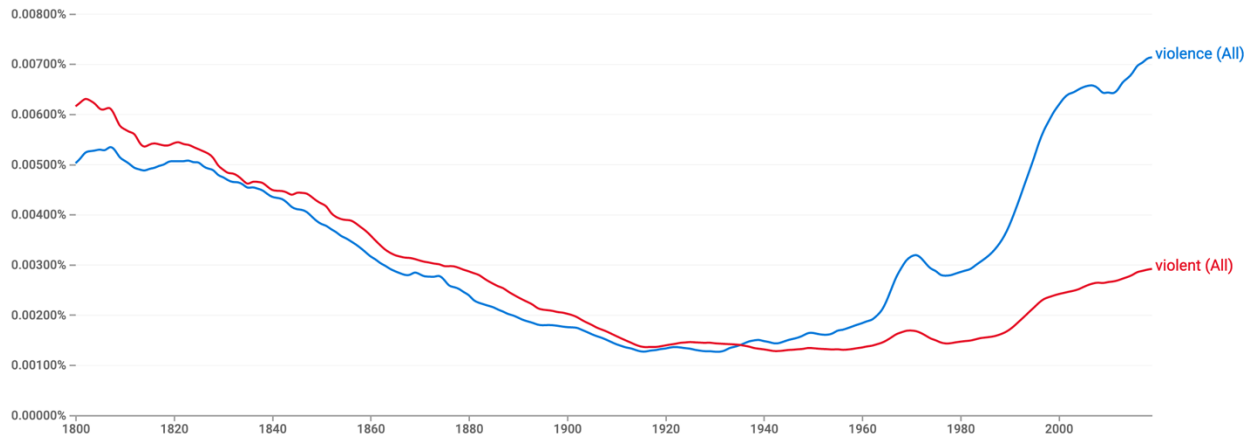*Ngram for modifiers of the word "violence" in use since the late 1960s*

Figure 6

Ngram plot for "violence" versus "violent"

An increase in the scope of the word "violence" has important consequences for moral accountability, if the standard is "nonviolence." Nagler (2001) writes,

> "a lot of what we'd have to call violence today arises not from any felt hostility but through passive or even unconscious willingness to take advantage of others. Does the nice shirt that I am wearing come from a comfortable factory in Wisconsin, or a sweat shop in Thailand? Is that homeless man the price of my company's success or my country's defense spending? Was a rainforest razed somewhere to bring the food I am looking at now on my plate?" (p. 48).

Indeed, this is what Galtung calls "structural violence," and it becomes personal in slogans like "Silence is violence" which make individuals accountable for acts of omission as well as commission ("Silence is Violence," https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/silence-is-violence).

The expanded scope of "violence" appears to reflect growing awareness of the many forms that harm can take, and I see this as a positive development in that sense. Adapting the

term "violence" to conceptualize harm in new ways may help empower and promote sensitivity to those who experience suffering and deprivation. A recent paper, for instance, groups the use of "words, images, and even body language—to injure, discipline, and subjugate women" under the term "semiotic violence" (Krook 2020, ch. 16). But if we view violence as any kind of harm, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that we have moved from a belief that we are being nonviolent most of the time (Kool 2008, p. 1) to an understanding that virtually *everything* we do or do not do is, in some way, violent.

We saw in section 4 that "nonviolence" functions as an ungraded antonym of "violence" for English speakers. Nagler (2020) goes a step further by offering what he calls "Nagler's Law," the whimsical formula: V + NV = V. Admitting that the math is "illogical," Nagler explains it as an attempt to convey how "even a small amount of violence vitiates the effect of a nonviolent action" (p. 154). If we take the formula literally, it implies the unhappy conclusion that NV = 0, i.e. nonviolence doesn't exist. That idea seems consistent with the conclusion reached above that "everything is violence," since everything leaves nothing for its complement. But even if we take Nagler's Law in its intended spirit, the implication is that a nonviolent protest action, for example, can only succeed if participants maintain perfect nonviolent discipline. Anyone who has spent time in contemporary protest movements knows this is often impossible to maintain if a movement gets significant attention, if for no other reason than the ability of officials to provoke or implant violence among those perceived to be protesting. On that basis, I find Steve Chase's (2019) argument against a "100% nonviolent" standard for movements -- in a critique of ideas similar to Nagler's that were put forward in Moyer *et al.* (2001) – to be quite cogent.

The problem, however, lies deep in the language we have inherited. People do seem to regard "nonviolence" as an all or nothing concept, based on the evidence presented above --

more than they do for other concepts like "justice." In that sense, Nagler's Law is descriptive

rather than just ideological. But embracing a goal concept that holds out perfection as its

standard strikes me as excessively self-handicapping. That may be why nonviolent approaches

have lost some of their effectiveness in recent years (Feldstein, 2018), as authorities have

become more sophisticated about combating them and exploiting their vulnerabilities -- in

particular by making it more difficult for movements to remain nonviolent *and* to be perceived as

such.

The expanded scope of the word "violence" has made us more aware of issues with

which Gandhi was quite familiar, but which were not as prominent in the era of Martin Luther

King, Jr. -- perhaps the high point of success for nonviolent resistance in North America. As

described above, Gandhi understood the pervasiveness and necessity of violence for life, and saw

perfect nonviolence as impossible. Yet he was not trapped by this logic in the way that

contemporary movements appear to be. This may be because Gandhi's standard for moral

accountability was profoundly spiritual and internal. He lived in a time when religion and the

authority it commanded over moral choices was greater than it is today. The change has been

especially noticeable in the western world.

Today, with omnipresent recording and the Internet, our daily actions are much more

observable than ever before. This has amplified a longer-term trend, away from religious

authority exerted on individuals, and toward secular authority -- a version of which has been

called "neosecularization" (Yamane 1997). The combination of turns toward the secular and the

observable I would like to call the *political turn* in moral accountability (see note 2). This turn

has been under way for well over a century, but in our time it manifests in standards that are (a)

almost exclusively based on what can be observed by others, and (b) constantly being negotiated

publicly through communication media. In this reality, what an individual has in their heart --

what they intend -- is increasingly irrelevant. What matters is the effect our actions have on

others, and everyone's ability to monitor those actions. Interestingly, Bird (1979) found that

adherents of a diverse set of new religious movements were drawn to them in part because the

movements reduced adherents' feelings of moral accountability. This provides some evidence

that neosecularization is increasing people's awareness of their accountability to others, and that

religion is seen as an escape from the political turn that makes many Christians, among others,

uncomfortable. The political turn replaces the interior dialogue between a faithful Christian and

their God -- an intimate, one-on-one relationship -- with a many-to-many relationship between

heterogeneous human beings who disagree deeply in their beliefs, values, and judgments (see

note 3).

One effect of this grand political turn is visible in the word usage patterns plotted in

Figure 7. Over the past 200 years, "violence" has become a more widely used word than "sin."

We discussed in section 3 how "violence" in English is a highly visual, actional concept. Sharp

(2012) emphasized this when he wrote that "nonviolent action" is defined "on the basis of

observed behavior, not on the basis of belief, motive, attitude, or self-description" (p. 193).

"Sin," on the other hand – although the term was often used by Gandhi -- has little place in

contemporary social justice movements. It is a matter between an individual and their God --

knowable to the priest mostly by confession, and to the sinner by introspection. The graph for

"sin" makes a case for neosecularization, but also shows its limits. The rise for "sin" since 1980

is entirely due to the religious revival in North America, and disappears if the query is restricted

to British English. The rise for "violence," on the other hand, appears equally for both American

and British English, and more likely reflects contemporary biases toward what is visual and/or emotionally impactful.

Figure 7

Ngram comparison for "violence" versus "sin," showing the impact of the political turn in moral accountability
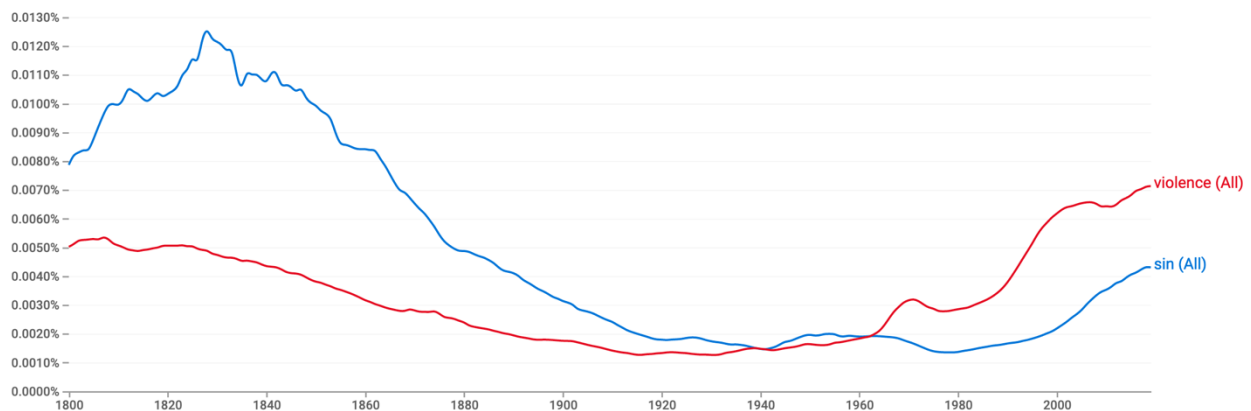
Sharp's decision to define "nonviolent action" solely on the basis of observable behavior is perhaps his most important departure from Gandhi, who wrote the following:

> "Nonviolence of the mere body without the cooperation of the mind is nonviolence of the weak or the cowardly, and has therefore no potency. If we bear malice and hatred in our bosoms and pretend not to retaliate, it must recoil upon us and lead to our destruction. For abstention from mere bodily violence not to be injurious, it is at least necessary not to entertain hatred if we cannot generate active love" (*Young India*, 2 April 1931, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 86).

The importance Gandhi placed on intention is explained by his view of the goal: "It is the acid test of nonviolence that in a nonviolent conflict there is no rancour left behind, and in the end the enemies are converted into friends" (*Harijan*, 12 November 1938, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 88).

As we saw in section 4, Gandhi saw violence and nonviolence as "mental attitudes." That indicates that he understood *hiṃsā* as a linguistic desiderative, which "means not the act but the *desire* or intention to do the act, in this case, injure" (Nagler, 2001, p. 47). Gandhi's use of phrases like "mere bodily violence," on the other hand, shows that he understood the word "violence" (and, by extension, "nonviolence") as not necessarily implying a mental state. So, when Gandhi wrote, "The essence of violence is that there must be a violent intention..." (quoted in section 3), he was, I think, attempting to import the intention implied by *hiṃsā* into "violence." But even Gandhi cannot change how English speakers understand such a well-established word. Sharp's rejection of intention as a component of "nonviolent action" is therefore both defensible given the traditional meanings of "violence," and important for understanding how contemporary usage of "violence" and of "nonviolence" differ from Gandhi's.

Our current *Zeitgeist* combines an increasing emphasis on violence as observable harm for which people and systems should be held accountable, on one hand, with the realization that violence cannot be completely avoided. The result is a relabeling of traditional questions about justice and values that inherently involve tradeoffs. "Violence" has become a more compelling way to say "harm" or "injustice," and its expanded scope and our increasing awareness have destroyed the illusion that we can live in a violence-free world. This, in turn, has made it harder to credibly characterize people and actions as truly "nonviolent."

Wanting to do the best we can, we might imagine, in the future, using a tool like a Violence Minimizer app, which would tell the user, for any given choice they face, which option would result in the least violence by some algorithmic measure. Barcodes for the products we buy could carry information about the amount of harm caused in the making of the product. Navigation could provide the least violent routes -- perhaps urging us to stay home or walk, and linguistic advice could tell us which phrasings would be the least likely to cause distress or anger. The app's builders might realize that even more violence could be prevented through centralized coordination, so that each person's actions and the organization of society overall are calculated to cause the least harm.

This would be an interesting 21st Century twist on utility maximization, which would no doubt be based on massive amounts of data. But is it really the future that we want? Our obsession with violence owes a lot to Gandhi, but the Violence Minimizer is not what he had in mind (see note 4).

6. Alternative translations

I have so far argued the following:

1. "Violence" and "nonviolence" are poor translations of *hiṃsā* and *ahiṃsā*, respectively, because they lack the Sanskrit words' implications about the primacy of mental states, and because "nonviolence" fails to convey the positive (love) implications of *ahiṃsā*.

2. "Nonviolence" is an ungraded concept, which makes it unsuitable as an antonym for "violence" if we understand "violence" as graded and always present.

3. "Violence" has become a more emotionally compelling way to refer to harm or injustice.

4. Therefore, English-language talk about "violence" and "nonviolence" is reduced to a utilitarian calculation based on what observable data say will minimize harm.

In this section, I want to add a fifth point, which is that minimizing observable violence, while there is much to be said for it, misses one of Gandhi's most important insights about *ahiṃsā*, embodied in *satyāgraha*: The calculative approach to minimizing violence treats each of us as a cog in a machine, trying to achieve one goal. And it tells us what to do based on pre-existing data, taking away our agency. But Gandhi understood that *satyāgraha* is not just about pursuing an empirically based objective function. It is about deciding for ourselves what kind of people we want to be and what kind of world we want to live in, and acting accordingly. Gandhi wrote: "*Ahiṃsā* is not a mechanical matter, it is personal to everyone" ("Letter to a Friend," 1 August 1925, in Gandhi, 1987, p. 266, quoted in Rajmohan, 1996, p. 31).

The Violence Minimizer might be very good at predicting what will happen. It might save us -- or it might destroy us to achieve its goal (see note 5). But each human being, indeed each volitional organism, remains the ultimate authority for what we want, even -- as Gandhi pointed out -- if that entails self-sacrifice (*Young India*, 9 December 1926, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 81). An algorithm cannot, by definition, do better than and almost surely cannot do as well as we can at assessing our conscious reactions to our experiences -- although the algorithm might on average become more reliable than we are at predicting those reactions in advance. Refusing to surrender control to the app might result in violence that would not otherwise happen. But it might also lead to new kinds of experiences that transform the world, in ways that could not have been predicted from prior data – to new forms of joy and bliss, new ways of living for oneself or others, and even new forms of life. That is the freedom that built the world, in all its ugliness and glory.

To revive this vision for the 21st Century, we must look at what has gone wrong. Our current discourse around "violence" and "nonviolence" is Gandhi's legacy, but it does not represent what Gandhi thought. Grasping Gandhi's message requires understanding his core concepts, which are obscured rather than revealed in contemporary times by the English words he chose as their translations.

Can we improve on "nonviolence" as a translation of *ahiṃsā*? After reading many definitions of *ahiṃsā*, as well as what Gandhi and other scholars have written about it, I propose the English word "beneficence" ("Doing good, the manifestation of benevolence or kindly feeling, active kindness" – OED def. 1) as a strong candidate. "Benevolence" is sometimes listed as a translation in Sanskrit-English dictionaries. But "benevolence" also corresponds to other words in Sanskrit. And while "benevolence" conveys the intention to do good, it lacks the sense of manifestation that "beneficence" implies. There appears to be no closer word to "beneficence" in Sanskrit than *ahiṃsā*.

Gandhi wrote the following, which provides some guidance:

> "whilst it is true that mental attitude is the crucial test of *ahiṃsā*, it is not the sole test. To kill any living being or thing save for his or its own interest is *hiṃsā* however noble the motive may otherwise be. And a man who harbours ill-will towards another is no less guilty of *hiṃsā* because for fear of society or want of opportunity, he is unable to translate his ill-will into action. A reference to both intent and deed is thus necessary in order finally to decide whether a particular act of abstention can be classed as *ahiṃsā*. After all, intent has to be inferred from a bunch of correlated acts" ("A Conundrum," *Young India*, 18 October 1928, in Gandhi, 1999, pp. 109-110).

Unlike "benevolence," which means "Disposition to do good, desire to promote the happiness of others, kindness, generosity, charitable feeling (as a general state or disposition towards mankind at large)" (OED – def. 1) -- and can therefore describe an intention without good effects, "beneficence" captures both the requirement of intent *and* its manifestation in action that corresponds with Gandhi's understanding of *ahiṃsā*.

With this choice, a natural translation of *hiṃsā* is "maleficence." "Malice" is sometimes mentioned in definitions, but, like "benevolence," it lacks the clear implication that action (even if it is a deed of thought) is involved. Action of some sort is implied in most scholarly definitions of *hiṃsā*, even though Gandhi, as seen in the quote immediately above, felt that harmful intention was sufficient to establish *hiṃsā*. "Malice" also has many other translations in Sanskrit ("Sanskrit Dictionary," https://sanskritdictionary.com). "Maleficence" has an archaic meaning related to "evildoing" (OED – def. 1), but its contemporary meaning is "harmful maliciousness" (see "maleficence" and "maleficent" at https://www.dictionary.com). There appears to be no closer word in Sanskrit to "maleficence" than *hiṃsā*.

"Maleficence" (particularly) and "beneficence" are not widely used in English, although they were more common before the political turn described in section 5 above. Figure 8 shows the historical relationship between "beneficent" and "nonviolent," and Figure 9 plots both "maleficence" and "beneficence," together with related words, since 1800. In recent times, one of the most important uses of "beneficence" was in the "Belmont Report" on the protection of human subjects in research (National Commission..., 1979), in which "beneficence" names the second of three principles. But I see the current unpopularity of these two words – they almost appear to be forgotten – as an attractive feature in this context. They are perfectly good

expressions, signifying concepts we appear to have lost sight of. I think they are ready to be

revived.

Figure 8

Ngram showing that usage of "beneficent" and "nonviolent" mirrors the political turn described
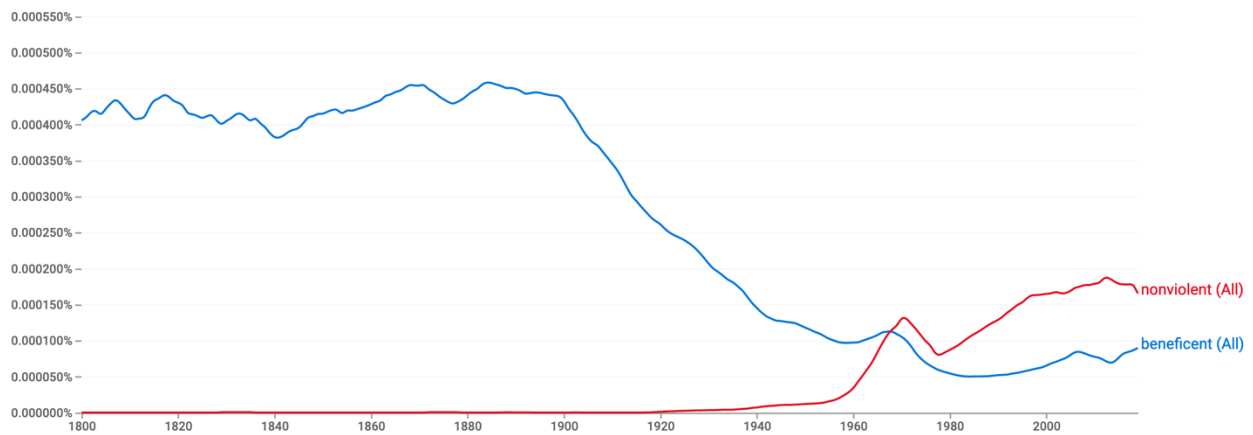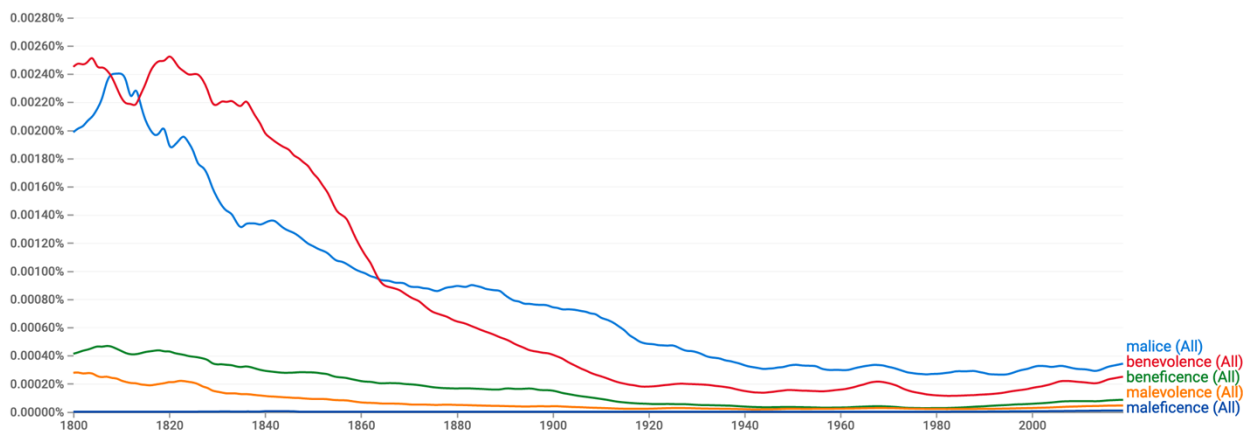
in section 5

Figure 9

Ngram showing the decline in usage of "maleficence," "beneficence," and related words since

1800

With these translations, we can remedy the three main problems with "violence" and "nonviolence" identified above. "Maleficence" and "beneficence" are graded antonyms, capable of being used in combination to describe mixed motives. Both words depend on and describe mental dispositions -- for ill or good, respectively. And the two words are symmetric – neither is defined as just the negation of the other, with "beneficence" carrying a clear, positive meaning. I would not claim they are perfect, but the case seems strong that "maleficence" and "beneficence" are superior alternatives to "violence" and "nonviolence" as translations of *hiṃsā* and *ahiṃsā*, at least as we understand "violence" and "nonviolence" today. One potential source of ambiguity for "beneficence" is whether it is universal or particular, i.e. directed at specific individuals, groups, or situations. Gandhi emphasized the universal aspect of *ahiṃsā*. One can say "universal beneficence" in order to make this clear, but as a stand-in for *ahiṃsā*, I think "beneficence" should be read as universal unless otherwise stated.

7. Where does this leave us?

What would happen if we could effect a word usage shift from "violence" to "maleficence," and from "nonviolence" to "beneficence"? And would such a shift better reflect Gandhi's overall vision? Let's consider the challenges facing 21st Century nonviolence advocates that were mentioned in section 2.

The first challenge was the split between advocates of "principled" and "pragmatic" (or "strategic") nonviolence. If we replace "nonviolence" with "beneficence," the debate no longer makes sense. Beneficence can be fleeting or permanent, universal or particular, but it cannot be just pragmatic. To suit the name "beneficence," action must be motivated by good will, period. A group of people blocking a bridge might be described as engaged in "nonviolent action," depending on one's definition and the circumstances, but it is their intentions, not just the effects

of their actions, that define it as beneficent or not. So, in this case, the word shift removes a

conflict. The two sides in the debate need not fight over words, because they would not, I think,

disagree about the meaning of "beneficent" as they do about "nonviolent."

The second challenge concerned evidence of the dependence of some "nonviolent"

campaigns on the presence of weapons for defending those who are otherwise acting

nonviolently. In this case, based on my reading, I think one could argue with Gandhi over

whether the beneficence (or lack thereof) of activists using civil resistance is affected by whether

or not they are made safer by weapons that could be used to protect them. What matters, from the

point of view of beneficence, is whether the resisters view everyone with charity in their hearts

(see section 4), and they can do so regardless of whether they or those on their side are carrying

weapons. Even Martin Luther King, Jr. used guns for protection (Cobb, 2015). Although his

rules for a "non-violent volunteer corps" forbade carrying weapons ("Non-Violent Volunteer

Corps," 26 April 1946, in Gandhi, 2011, p. 163), Gandhi's writings provide a justification for

those who would carry guns in some situations without using them, even though Gandhi himself

would likely reject the argument. He wrote: "Nonviolence presupposes ability to strike. It is a

conscious, deliberate restraint put upon one's desire for vengeance" (*Young India*, 12 August

1926, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 92). Gandhi recruited many Indians to fight on the British

side in WWI, and he justified this on practical grounds even more remote from strict nonviolence

than self-defense (Ghose 1991).

The idea that carrying weapons for self-defense is consistent with *ahiṃsā* is difficult to

accept if we translate *ahiṃsā* as "nonviolence," because we think of guns as necessarily violent

by their presence. Although the data are mixed, guns appear to result in more violence on

average across cultures (see note 6). Applying Gandhi's thinking, however, I see no

contradiction between rightfully believing that others might harm you and wanting only the best

for them. The Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico, are among the gentlest, most kind-hearted people I

have ever met. They do carry guns sometimes, but only to defend themselves – *por si acaso*.

That doesn't make them any less beneficent, and as others have noted, they appear to have

created a new way to be "nonviolent" for the 21st Century (Chabot & Vinthagen 2020).

The third challenge from section 2 concerned the effectiveness, under some

circumstances, of violent action itself. As I have already mentioned, Gandhi agreed that there are

circumstances when violence is called for – when dealing with a madman or a carnivorous beast,

in mercy killing, or when one lacks the strength or know-how for *satyāgraha*; and -- more

troublingly for modern readers -- to (hypothetically) save his daughter from a violation by killing

her ("The Fiery Ordeal," *Young India*, 6 August 1928, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 38). But the

more important point is that one who believes in the necessity of violence in a given situation

might nonetheless adopt a beneficent stance. All this requires is genuinely wanting the best for

everyone, *and* acting accordingly. That is the primacy of intention in Gandhi's understanding of

ahiṃsā.

Merely claiming to have benevolent aims is not, of course, a moral license to commit

violence. For we also have a duty to the truth (*satyā*) -- which Gandhi saw as "the end" to which

ahiṃsā is "the means" (*Yeranda Mandir*, 1935, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 74). But the

primacy of intention in the definition of *ahiṃsā* does make moral accountability internal to the

individual. Gandhi made this clear: "I have all along held that one is bound to act according to

what to one appears to be right, though it may appear wrong to others" ("The Fiery Ordeal,"

excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 39). This criterion finds its rationale in Gandhi's theory of social

change:

"We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be

found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in

the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the

attitude of the world change towards him. This is the divine mystery supreme"

(*Indian Opinion*, 8 September 1913, in Gandhi, 1964, p. 158 -- see note 7).

If the above arguments seem shocking in what they permit, I think that is a measure of

how much our sensibilities have diverged from Gandhi's. We have developed a flat

understanding of violence and nonviolence that places everything associated with harm in the

category of "violence." That makes perfect sense given what the word "violence" has come to

mean in English. But Gandhi placed great importance on our motivations. In this way, his

thinking is an antidote for the excesses of what I have called the "political turn." Gandhi should

be understood, in our time, as a voice for the importance of intention in a world that is

increasingly telling people their intentions do not matter (Bloom 2021).

We are, of course, more apt to think of Gandhi as the vegetarian who willingly lived in

poverty and simplicity, who suffered for the good of all and urged others to do so, who reminded

us to do our best to avoid harming even the smallest creatures, and who gave his life for what he

believed. The example of Gandhi's personal trajectory is so impressive that it has subsumed both

his written philosophy and the many contradictions in Gandhi's actions to which he himself

readily admitted, such as his participation in, and recruitment for, British war efforts (see note 8).

But those who want to remain true to Gandhi's legacy also face a bit of a contradiction, because

Gandhi urged everyone to think for themselves and not to become followers. For example, he

wrote in his later years:

"Meat-eating is a sin for me. Yet, for another person, who has always lived on

meat and never seen anything wrong in it, to give it up simply in order to copy me

will be a sin" (*Mahatma, VII,* 1941, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 91).

Following Gandhi's ways of living at least in part is compelling for many adherents of

nonviolence, and may inspire others to try to live in less destructive ways. But insisting on

particular behaviors beyond what Gandhi required from his own volunteers cannot be justified in

Gandhian terms, when it conflicts with the principle that each person should be guided by their

own conscience.

Another issue that was discussed in section 2 is the rejection of "nonviolence," as that

term has come to be understood, by many activists in North America since the victories of the

civil rights movement of the early 1960s. My interpretation of this rejection is, in part, that the

ungraded antonymy and lack of focus on the mental dimension in the words "violence" and

"nonviolence," as documented in sections 3 and 4, have pushed many activists to a standard for

nonviolence that demands perfection. This is a logical consequence of the ungradedness of

"nonviolence," which was demonstrated through linguistic data in section 4. The expectation of

perfection is reinforced in concepts such as "Nagler's Law," which argues that "even a small

amount of violence vitiates the effect of a nonviolent action" (Nagler, 2020, p. 154), and in

similar arguments made by Moyer *et al.* (2001). Section 5 ended with the conclusion that it has

become harder over time to convincingly characterize people and actions as "nonviolent,"

because the scope of what is meant by "violence" has expanded through concepts such as

"structural violence," and because the word "violence" facilitates a focus on what can be

observed, independent of what is knowingly intended. The political turn in moral accountability

has exacerbated these tendencies.

As quoted in section 4, Gandhi regarded "perfect nonviolence" as impossible. This view is compatible with an understanding of *ahiṃsā* and of "beneficence" as concepts that admit imperfection, but is counteracted by the ungraded nature of "nonviolence" as it appears to be used by contemporary English speakers. The word "nonviolence," as Nagler (2001) has acknowledged in calling it "misleading," has therefore become an unfortunate obstacle to understanding Gandhi's wisdom.

Much in Gandhi's writing resonates with me as a social scientist, for it is clear that he had a scientific outlook. In a passage declaring "There is no such thing as Gandhism," he wrote:

> "The opinions I have formed and the conclusions I have arrived at are not final. I may change them tomorrow. I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and nonviolence are as old as the hills. All I have done is to try experiments in both, on as vast a scale as I could do. In doing so, I have sometimes erred, and learnt by my errors. Life and its problems have thus become to me so many experiments in truth and nonviolence. By instinct, I have been truthful, but not nonviolent" (*Mahatma, Vol. IV, Meeting of the Gandhi Seva Sangh,* 29 February to 6 March 1936, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 42).

Elsewhere, Gandhi wrote: "I am not a visionary," but rather "a practical idealist" (*Mahatma, II, Young India*, 11 August 1920, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 95).

The above statements pose a challenge for understanding strong positions expressed by Gandhi that have led some scholars to conclude he was an "absolutist" (Bauer, 2013) -- a term which Gandhi himself used to distinguish his philosophy from utilitarianism (*Young India*, 9 December 1926, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 81). For example, while he regarded intention as essential to the definition of *ahiṃsā*, Gandhi also wrote:

> "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... 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." (*Young India,* 11 December 1924,
> excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 74).

The passage above represents both a personal and a provisional commitment. It is written as a statement of Gandhi's personal stance, rather than as a universal claim that all must adopt. Moreover, Gandhi's recognition that his belief might be a "delusion" indicates that it was provisional. Gandhi's supreme devotion to truth made him open to changing his mind about the effectiveness of methods, and his willingness to embrace violence in certain situations somewhat contradicts the passage above. It is clear that Gandhi believed a votary of *ahiṃsā* and *satyā* cannot willfully and avoidably cause harm. The difficulties lie in knowing all the effects of one's actions, and just when harm is truly (un)avoidable. But the presumption against violence creates a strong burden of proof for anyone who claims that beneficence and violence are compatible in a given situation.

Building on Gandhi's legacy means learning both from our mistakes, and from the ones Gandhi may have made. We must avoid the tendency to idealize even his words. As alluded to above, Gandhi sometimes contradicted himself. For example, Joan Bondurant quoted him as writing both that "*Ahiṃsā*, requires you to resist the wrong-doer by dissociating yourself from him even though it may offend him or injure him physically," and that "*Ahiṃsā* really means that you may not offend anybody, you may not harbor an uncharitable thought even in connection with one who may consider himself to be your enemy" (Bondurant, 1965, pp. 24-26).

Having spent significant time within activist circles descended from Gandhi, I know that we owe him a huge debt, which can only be repaid by spreading truth and *ahiṃsā*. But a painful truth is that principled adherence to "nonviolence" is being rejected -- more today than in my youth -- by a majority of today's most thoughtful and committed activists. We need new approaches -- ones that go beyond what Gandhi himself provided -- if we are to recover his wisdom and achieve the rightful measure of influence for his ideas that our times deserve.

What I have proposed is one small idea that may be useful -- a simple relabeling to help clarify Gandhi's thinking for a contemporary audience. I am neither qualified nor disposed to say that Gandhi made a mistake in choosing to translate *hiṃsā* and *ahiṃsā* as he did. What I can say is that I believe the Dandi marchers of 1930 acted with extraordinary *beneficence*, and that I would much prefer to say this to a contemporary English speaker than that the Salt *Satyāgraha* was a "nonviolent action."

Gandhi's perspective offers much wisdom for clarifying and moving beyond current debates. A greater understanding of what Gandhi actually did, thought, and wrote, can dispel counterproductive myths that both divide activists and get in the way of effective long-term strategizing. It also gives us a shared base of principles – the primacy of intention and the responsibility to form our intentions based on truth as best we can -- that may help us as we seek to expand democracy, human rights, peace, and justice.

8. Postscript: training in beneficence

For the word "beneficence" to become useful as a translation of *ahiṃsā*, we will need a way to put it into practice. What would training in beneficence look like? I can only begin to sketch an answer here, but I hope to pursue these ideas more with like-minded people in the years ahead.

Nonviolence training for activists in North America tends to focus on techniques of resistance and other behaviors designed to achieve practical goals (see, e.g. "Tools," https://www.trainingforchange.org/tools/). This is undoubtedly useful, and often personally transformative. But I am struck by its lack of emphasis on what Gandhi considered most important for aligning oneself with *ahiṃsā*: changing how one *thinks* about oneself and about other people. Even Marshall Rosenberg's "nonviolent communication" approach, which is aimed at creating mutually beneficial dialogue, focuses on our behaviors -- especially linguistic ones (Rosenberg, 2015). Rosenberg's writing contains many elements of a beneficence approach, but it is presented in an instrumental way that focuses on how to achieve positive outcomes in social situations. Training in beneficence might best be thought of as complementing, rather than replacing, the types of training most often done under the heading of "nonviolence."

Beneficence training would, as Gandhi said of nonviolence, "begin with the mind" (*Young India*, 2 April 1931, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 86). It would teach us how to become detached from our egos, as well as what it means to love universally. Gandhi wrote, "When doing anything, one must ask oneself this question: 'Is my action inspired by egoistic attachment?' If there is no such attachment, then there is no violence [*hiṃsā*, maleficence]" ("Problem of Nonviolence," *Navajivan*, 6 June 1926, quoted in Rajmohan, 1996, p. 33). Beneficence training would take an *active* approach, but the *goal* would be a lifelong mental shift. Gandhi also wrote, "When nonviolence is accepted as the law of life, it must pervade the whole being and not be applied to isolated acts" (*Harijan*, 5 September 1936, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 83). Accepting "nonviolence" in this way might be read just as consistently avoiding harm. But as we have seen, that is not really what Gandhi meant, nor was it a standard he claimed to live up to. He meant that love must pervade our consciousness, and become our

habit. To achieve this, we can apply lessons from the psychology of human motivation, and from the personal qualities of beneficent heroes (Kool, 2008, ch. 4-5).

Finally, training in beneficence would be rooted in what is true, honest, and genuine (*satyā*). Gandhi regarded truth as "the substance of all morality" (*An Autobiography, or The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, 1927, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 9) and as "God Himself" (*Yeranda Mandir*, 1935, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 74). Gandhi wrote: "I was capable of sacrificing nonviolence [*ahiṃsā*, beneficence] for the sake of the truth," but also that it was through "pursuit of truth that I discovered nonviolence [*ahiṃsā*, beneficence]." This was in the context of his rejection of "Gandhism," quoted in section 7 (*Mahatma, Vol. IV, Meeting of.the Gandhi Seva Sangh,* 29 February to 6 March 1936, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, pp. 42-43). I read these statements as an openness to discovery, in the spirt of the Zapatista phrase *preguntando caminamos* ("asking questions while we walk," Holloway, 2011). Truth is revealed along the way, if we keep inquiring and experimenting. Gandhi-inspired "experiments with truth" are the corrective to our good intentions becoming disconnected from reality. The beneficent must be devoted to truth.

Notes

1. I thank Profs. Kool and Agrawal for inviting me to write a chapter for their forthcoming book – on which this essay expands, having hosted and learned from Vinod as a speaker at the 2016 conference I helped to organize at Stanford University, titled "Ways to Justice: Perspectives on Nonviolence, Civil Resistance, and Self-Defense." That conference, and other activities of the Peace+Justice Studies Initiative in which I participated between 2013 and 2017, were supported by Stanford's Hoagland Award Fund for Innovations in Undergraduate Education under a grant to a student-faculty group, led by Dr. Linda Hess. I am grateful to Linda for inspiring me to explore this topic, and for sharing her thoughts on a draft of this essay. The views expressed herein are mine, however, and the flaws that remain are entirely my responsibility.

2. The phrase "political turn" has appeared in a number of articles, most often in relation to ethics and philosophy (e.g. Freeden, 2014). I just mean a shift toward grounding accountability in public/political processes as opposed to private and religious ones.

3. The claim I am making about the "political turn" is not that accountability to the judgments of others was absent in religious communities of the past, which have (of course) often been rife with opprobrium as a means of social control. Rather, the political turn as I see it has come about as a result of an expansion -- through more democratic access to media -- in the range of human behavior that is available to interpersonal judgments, and therefore subject to political and legal sanction.

4. The philosopher Akeel Bilgrami has written extensively about Gandhi's critique of Enlightenment rationality (e.g. Bilgrami 2009 & 2020).

5. See Bostrom (2014) for more on how pursuit of a goal that appears just could destroy humanity.

6. The relationship between domestic gun ownership and gun homicides is surprisingly weak across countries. Norway and Switzerland, for example, have much lower rates of gun homicide than

Northern Ireland, despite the latter having a much lower percentage of households with guns (Killias, 1993). Sutton (2018) suggests that cultural cognition – the meaning of guns in a society – differs greatly between the U.S. and Switzerland, accounting for different attitudes toward gun regulation.

7. This passage has been cited as the closest to a quote that is falsely attributed to Gandhi: Be the change you wish to see in the world." Citation from https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/10/23/be-change/.

8. See Fischer (1951) and Ghose (1991) for more on these and other details of Gandhi's life.

References

Anisin, A. (2020). Debunking the myths behind nonviolent civil resistance. *Critical Sociology*, *46*(7-8), 1121-1139.

Bauer, J.N. (2013). *The normative ethics of Gandhian nonviolence*. M.Hum. thesis. Wright State University.

Bersoff, D. M., & Miller, J. G. (1993). Culture, context, and the development of moral accountability judgments. *Developmental Psychology*, *29*(4), 664.

Bilgrami, A. (2009). Value, enchantment, and the mentality of democracy: Some distant perspectives from Gandhi. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44(51), 47-61.

Bilgrami, A. (2020). Rationality and alienation: Themes from Gandhi. In Akram, T., and Rashid, S., eds., *Faith, Finance, and Economy*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 53-73.

Bird, F. (1979). The pursuit of innocence: new religious movements and moral accountability. *Sociological Analysis*, *40*(4), 335-46.

Bloom, P. (2021). When intentions don't matter. *The Wall Street Journal*. March 12.

Bondurant, J. V. (1965). *Conquest of violence. The Gandhian philosophy of conflict, Revised Edition*. University of California Press.

Bostrom, N. (2014). *Superintelligence: Paths, dangers, strategies*. Oxford University Press.

Bray, M. (2017). *Antifa: The anti-fascist handbook*. Melville House.

Carson, C. (1995). *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black awakening of the 1960s, with a new introduction and epilogue by the author*. Harvard University Press.

Chabot, S., & Sharifi, M. (2013). The violence of nonviolence: problematizing nonviolent resistance in Iran and Egypt. *Societies Without Borders*, *8*(2), 205-232.

Chabot, S., & Vinthagen, S. (2015). Decolonizing civil resistance. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, *20*(4), 517-532.

Chabot, S., & Vinthagen, S. (2020). One no against violence, many yeses beyond violence: Zapatista dignity, autonomy, counter-conduct. In Jackson, R., Llewellyn, R., Leonard, G.M., Gnoth, A., & Karena, T., eds.. *Revolutionary nonviolence: Concepts, cases, and controversies*. Zed Books.

Chase, S. (2019). The problem with saying movements must be "totally nonviolent" to succeed. https://wagingnonviolence.org/2019/07/the-problem-with-saying-movements-must-be-totally-nonviolent-to-succeed/

Chenoweth, E. (2021). *Civil resistance: What everyone needs to know*. Oxford University Press.

Chenoweth, E. & Stephan, M. (2011). *Why civil resistance works: The strategic logic of nonviolent conflict*. Columbia University Press.

Churchill, W. (1986). Pacifism as pathology: Notes on an American pseudo-praxis: I. *Issues in Radical Therapy*.

Cobb, C. E. (2015). *This nonviolent stuff'll get you killed: How guns made the civil rights movement possible*. Duke University Press.

Cornell, A. (2011). *Oppose and propose! Lessons from Movement for a New Society*. AK Press.

Deming, B. (1968). On revolution and equilibrium. *Liberation*. February.

Duong, K. (2020). *The virtues of violence: Democracy against disintegration in modern France*. Oxford University Press.

Feldstein, S. (2018). Rethinking antifa. *The Blue Review*. March 12.

Fischer, L. (1951). *The life of Mahatma Gandhi*. Jonathan Cape Ltd.

Freeden, M. (2014). Editorial: The political turn in political theory. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 19(1), 1-14.

Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research. *Journal of Peace Research*, *6*(3), 167-191.

Galtung, J. (1990). Cultural violence. *Journal of Peace Research, 27*(3), 291-305.

Gandhi, M. (1964). *The collected works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume XII, April 1913 to December 1914*, The Publications Division, Government of India.

Gandhi, M. (1987). *The moral and political writings of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. II: Truth and nonviolence.* (R. Iyer, Ed.). Oxford University Press.

Gandhi, M. (1999). *The collected works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. 43 (electronic version).* Publications Division, Government of India. https://www.gandhiashramsevagram.org/gandhi-literature/collected-works-of-mahatma-gandhi-volume-1-to-98.php

Gandhi, M. (2001). *All men are brothers: Autobiographical reflections*. (K. Kripalani, Ed.). Continuum Publishing Company.

Gandhi, M.K. (2011). *The last eighteen years: A nonviolence and social change source book*. (S.P. Olmsted, M. Heller, & R. Olmsted, Eds.) Wilmington College Peace Resource Center.

Garza, A. (2015). Black love -- Resistance and liberation. *Race, Poverty & the Environment*, *20*(2), 21-25.

Gelderloos, P. (2015). *The failure of nonviolence*. Left Bank Books.

Ghose, S. (1991). *Mahatma Gandhi*. Allied Publishers.

Ginsberg, B. (2013). Why violence works. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 12.

Holloway, J. (2011). Zapatismo. July 30.

http://www.johnholloway.com.mx/2011/07/30/zapatismo/

Kauffman, L.A. (2002). Ending a war, inventing a movement: Mayday 1971. *Radical Society: A Review of Culture and Politics* 29 (December): 29–49.

Killias, M. (1993). International correlations between gun ownership and rates of homicide and suicide. *CMAJ: Canadian Medical Association Journal*, *148*(10), 1721-1725.

King Jr, M.L., Jr. (1967). *Where do we go from here: Chaos or community?*. Harper & Row.

King, M. E. (2018). The ethics and "realism" of nonviolent action. In Brown, C. & Eckersley, B., *The Oxford Handbook of International Political Theory*, pp. 273-288.

Kool, V.K. (2008). *The psychology of nonviolence and aggression*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Krook, M. L. (2020). *Violence against women in politics*. Oxford University Press.

Lakey, G. (2001). *The sword that heals: Challenging Ward Churchill's "Pacifism as pathology"*. Training for Change.

Malcolm X. (1964). Speech at the founding rally of the Organization of Afro-American Unity. *By any means necessary: Speeches, interviews, and a letter by Malcolm X*, pp. 33-67.

Monier-Williams, M. (1899). *A Sanskrit-English dictionary: Etymologically and philologically arranged with special reference to cognate Indo-European languages*. The Clarendon Press.

Morris, I. (2014). *War! What is it good for? Conflict and the progress of civilization from primates to robots*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Moyer, B., MacAllister, J., Finley, M.L., & Soifer, S. (2001). *Doing democracy: The MAP model for organizing social movements*. New Society Publishers.

Nagler, M.N. (2001). *Is there no other way? The search for a nonviolent future*. Berkeley Hills
     Books.

Nagler, M.N. (2020). *The third harmony: Nonviolence and the new story of human nature*.
     Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc.

National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral
     Research. (1979). Belmont report: Ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of
     human subjects of research. *Federal Register*. April 18.

Oshana, M. (2004). Moral accountability. *Philosophical Topics*, *32*(1/2), 255-274.

Pinker, S. (2011). *The better angels of our nature: Why violence has declined*. Viking.

Rajmohan, R. (1996). Gandhi on violence. *Peace Research*, 27-38.

Rosenberg, M.B. (2015). *Nonviolent communication: A language of life (3rd edition)*. Puddle
     Dancer Press.

Ruiz García, S. (1997). Comunicación, San Cristóbal de las Casas, December 23. In Womack, J.,
     Jr., *Rebellion in Chiapas: A historical reader*. The New Press, 1999, pp. 351-354.

Sapolsky, R. M. (2017). *Behave: The biology of humans at our best and worst*. Penguin.

Scheidel, W. (2018). *The great leveler: Violence and the history of inequality from the stone age
     to the twenty-first century*. Princeton University Press.

Schmitt, N., & Schmitt, D. (2020). *Vocabulary in language teaching*. Cambridge University
     Press.

Sharp, G. (1973). *The politics of nonviolent action.* Porter Sargent.

Sharp, G. (2012). *Sharp's dictionary of power and struggle*. (M. Finkelstein, Ed.). Oxford
     University Press.

Sutton, K. (2018). Ask not what guns may do for you, ask what guns may do for your country: A comparative investigation into cultural cognition's impact upon firearm regulation in Switzerland and the United States. *Bocconi Legal Papers*, *11*(135).

Umoja, A. O. (2013). *We will shoot back: Armed resistance in the Mississippi freedom movement*. New York University Press.

Wasow, O. (2020). Agenda seeding: How 1960s black protests moved elites, public opinion and voting. *American Political Science Review*, 114(3), 638-659.

Weber, T. (2003). Nonviolence is who? Gene Sharp and Gandhi. *Peace & Change*, *28*(2), 250-270.

Yamane, D. (1997). Secularization on trial: In defense of a neosecularization paradigm. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 109-122.