Chapter 12

The Primacy of Intention and the Duty to Truth:

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

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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. This makes it harder to convincingly characterize people and actions as “nonviolent.” New terminology 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: ahimsa, beneficence, Gandhi, himsa, maleficence, nonviolence, violence

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. 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 SNCC (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 chapter, I will be drawing on the work of scholars much more learned than I am on these topics, as well as on writings by Gandhi himself, together with some linguistic data. My method in writing this essay has been to focus on two Sanskrit words --*hiṃsā* and *ahiṃsā* -- to which Gandhi constantly referred. 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.)

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. 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," and the other "pragmatic." I will say more about this division in section 7.

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. However, there have been 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 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). During this period, nonviolent approaches have also been staunchly and ably defended against these critiques (see e.g. Chenoweth; Deming, 1968; King, 2018; Lakey, 2001; 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 (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" (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* ("full of force"-- 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).

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. Secondly, because their shared root 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."

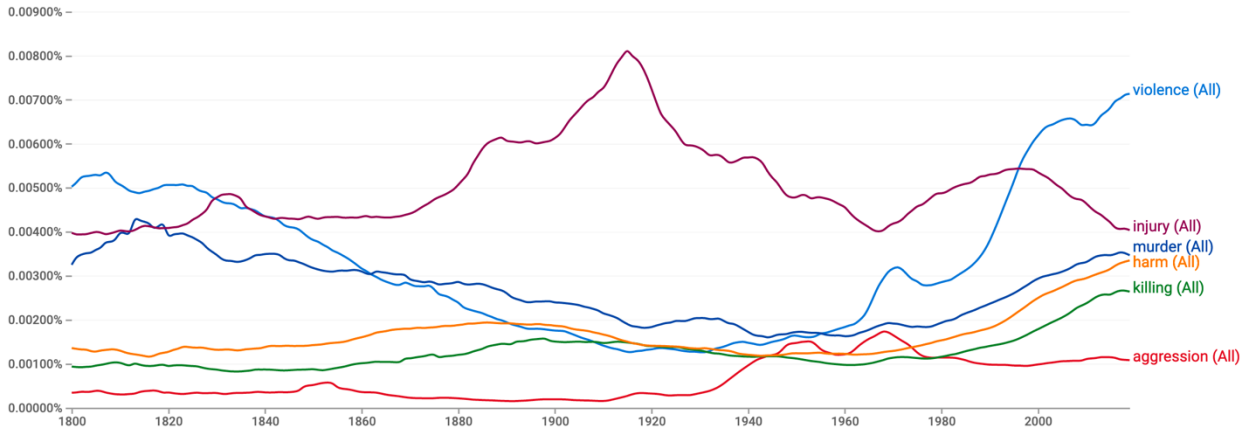
Peace & justice scholars have, in recent decades, embraced definitions of "violence" that make it unnecessary-- e.g. Michael Nagler (2001) who calls violence "an unnecessary evil" (p. 49). Attendees at a talk I gave at the Peace and Justice Studies Association's 2016 Annual Conference appeared to agree. 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." However, Gandhi did not share the belief that violence is unnecessary. On the contrary, he wrote, "There is violence at the root of every act of living" (quoted in Rajmohan, 1996, p. 27).

Figure 12.1 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. 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 12.1

Ngram plot for "violence" and five other related words



Note. The Ngram plots in this chapter 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 include "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" (quoted in Rajmohan, 1996, p. 28).

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;” and he also saw mercy killing as consistent with nonviolence (Gandhi, 2001, pp. 83-84).

“Nonviolence” is an antonym of “violence.” In English usage, the two words appear to function as *ungraded* antonyms (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). 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 saying it is graded. Further support for this difference is found in Google Ngram data for the same pairs of words. Occurrences were found for both “somewhat just” and “somewhat unjust” between the years 1800 and 2019. But while there were many occurrences of “somewhat violent,” there were none

for “somewhat nonviolent” (https://books.google.com/ngrams). Similar results occur for the modifiers “partially,” “a bit of,” and “a lot of,” *mutatis mutandis*.

Gandhi did not appear to regard *ahiṃsā* as ungraded, as he wrote “Perfect nonviolence is impossible...” (Gandhi, 2001, p. 83). *Ahiṃsā*, according to Nagler (2001), differs from the most common 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, 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).

5. Words as windows into moral accountability

As the preceding sections argue, contemporary 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. Moral accountability has been studied by psychologists, religious studies scholars, and ethicists, among others (e.g., Bersoff & Miller, 1993; Bird, 1979; Oshana, 2004).

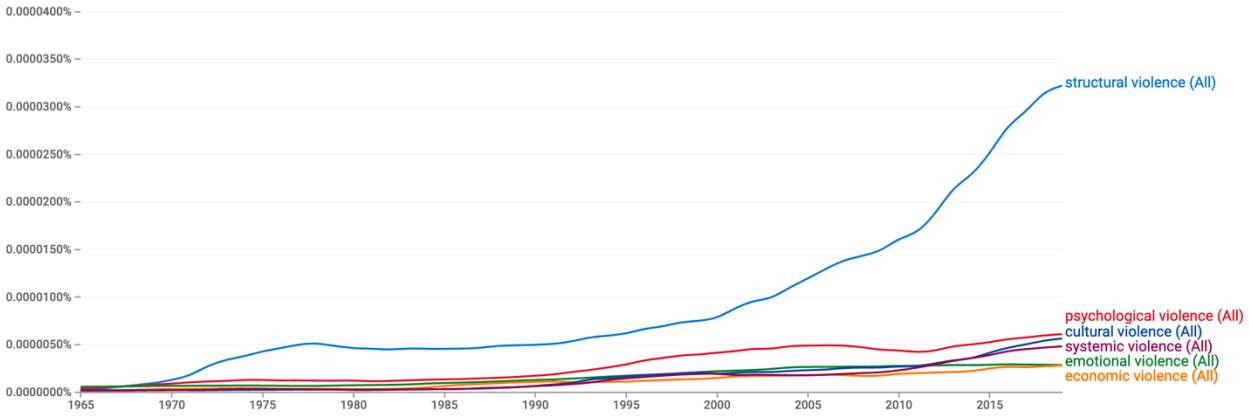
Section 3 ended with a paradox: Why has usage of the word “violence” (Fig. 12.1) increased so dramatically since its low point during the World Wars of the 20th Century -- the most violent period in

modern history? A full answer would require analysis beyond the scope of this chapter, 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 12.1 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 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 12.2 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. 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 (see Google Ngram for these comparisons).

Figure 12.2

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



An increase in the scope of the word "violence" has important consequences for moral accountability, if the standard is "nonviolence." What Galtung calls "structural violence" 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). 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.

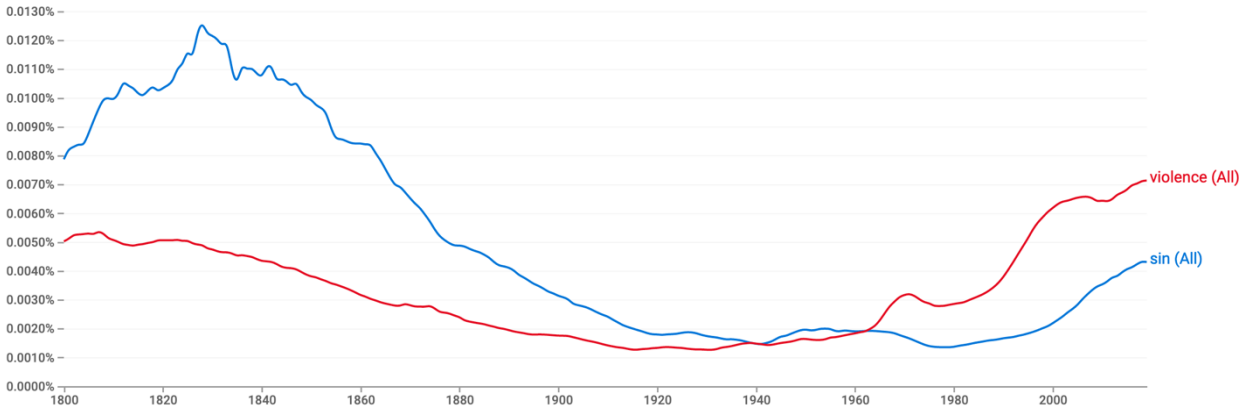
The problem, however, lies deep in the language we have inherited. People do seem to regard "nonviolence" as an all or nothing concept, based on the evidence presented above -- more than they do for other concepts like "justice." That may be why nonviolent approaches have lost some of their effectiveness 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.

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 underway 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.

One effect of this grand political turn is visible in the word usage patterns plotted in Figure 12.3. 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, 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.

Figure 12.3

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: "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" (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" (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."

6. Alternative translations

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... 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*." (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), "beneficence" captures both the 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. "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 above. Figure 12.4 shows the historical relationship between "beneficent" and "nonviolent," and Figure 12.5 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 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 12.4

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

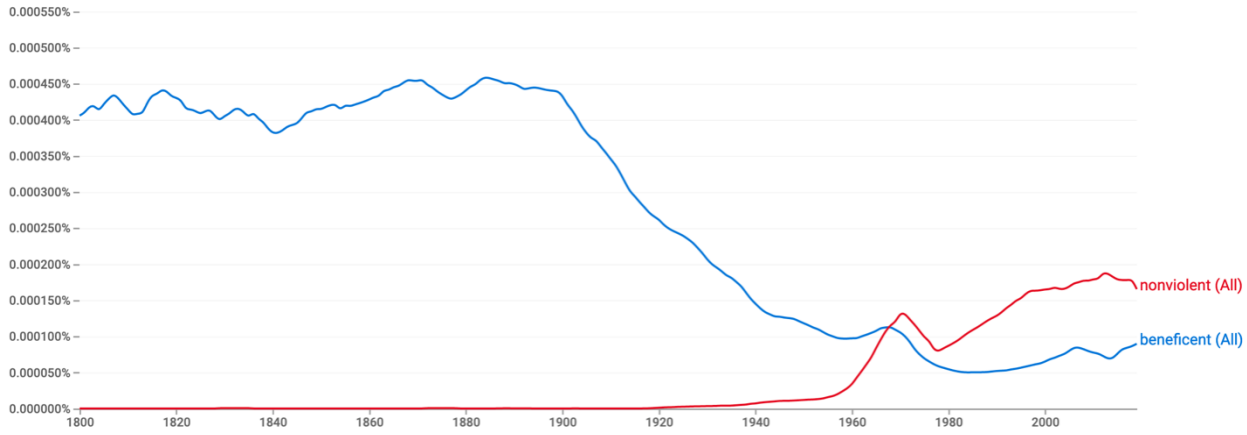
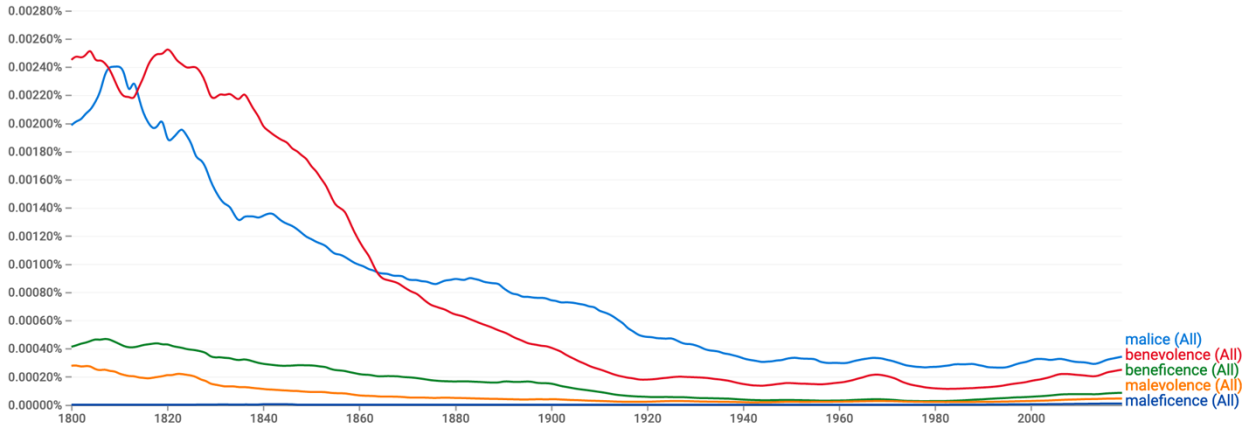


Figure 12.5

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.

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 split between advocates of "principled" and "pragmatic" (or "strategic") nonviolence that was mentioned in section 2. 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."

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).

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" (Gandhi, 2001, p. 42).

The above statement poses a challenge for understanding strong positions expressed by Gandhi that have led some scholars to conclude he was an "absolutist" (Bauer, 2013). 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. 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.

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.

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.

Beneficence training would, as Gandhi said of nonviolence, "begin with the mind" (Gandhi, 2001, p. 86). It would teach us how to become detached from our egos, and 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" (quoted in Rajmohan, 1996, p. 33). In teaching about beneficence, 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 wrote: "I was capable of sacrificing nonviolence for the sake of the truth," but also that it was through "pursuit of truth that I discovered nonviolence" (Gandhi, 2001, p. 43). 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 Prof. Kool for inviting this chapter, having hosted and learned from him as a speaker at the 2016 conference at Stanford titled "Ways to Justice: Perspectives on Nonviolence, Civil Resistance, and Self-Defense." I am grateful also to Dr. Linda Hess 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.

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