



An Overview of Gandhi's Techniques of Morality

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Abstract

Philosophers, since time immemorial, have devoted their thoughtful attention to the concept of morality. Morality is an informal public system primarily concerned with the behavior of people in so far as that behavior affect others. It includes what are commonly known as the moral rules, ideals, and virtues and has the lessening of evil or harm as its goal; it prohibits the kind of conduct that harm others and encourages the kind of conduct that benefit others. In the words of Hobbes, the province of morality is limited to "those qualities of mankind that concern their living together in peace and unity". In the present paper, a modest attempt is being made to relate the term morality in the context of Mahatma Gandhi – one of the greatest humanists of all times. Gandhi was not a scholar or an academician in the conventional sense of these terms. He confessed that he was not built for academic writings. As a man of action, he practiced what is moral, truthful and non-violent after a thorough examination with great insight. His famous saying "My life is my message" establishes his adherence to moral values. The whole gamut of Gandhi's ideas and activities – whether it be economic, political, religious, individual or social relations – is laid down firmly on two immutable moral maxims of Truth and Non-Violence. It was his firm conviction that the effective remedy to all problems was to be found in the moral regeneration of human beings rather than in any institutional arrangements. This paper attempts to analyze and recapture the moral aspect of Gandhi's philosophy in five different sections: The first section deals with Gandhi's interpretation of the concept of morality as the very basis of human life. The second section presents the essential unity between morality, religion and politics in Gandhi's thought. In the third section Gandhi's emphasis on the necessity of vows to observe the moral rules have been dealt. The fourth section focuses on Gandhi's insistence on purity of means and end. The fifth and the concluding

section throws a positive light on Gandhi's relevance as he laid more stress on the basic values of human life, viz, Truth and Non-violence – the "Law for human beings".

Keywords: Morality, Religion, Truth, Non - Violence, Peace.

Section - I

For Gandhi, morality is the very basis of human life. The existence and progress of individuals and society depends on morality. Negatively, it involves restricting the passions and impulses that ruin human progress and lead to tension, discord, discontentment and strife. Positively, it promotes the other-regarding feelings that creates an atmosphere of peace, happiness and progress. For Gandhi, the highest form of morality consists in working unremittingly for the good of mankind. Self-transcendence or love thus becomes the essence of morality. Love, according to Gandhi, is the Divine Law or God inherent in man. All duties towards one's fellow beings follow from this love. However, Gandhi was also aware that love without the guidance of this Divine Impulse or the "dictates of reason" could degenerate into a blind and narrow passion centered mostly in the body. So long as a man does not believe, and experience the belief, that God within him, the God of all, is the ever-present witness to all his acts, he is moved by the cravings of the flesh with which he completely identifies himself. But when he realizes his underlying Reality and through it his inseparable relations with the rest of existence his love extends beyond his body and its immediate interests. Thus, the knowledge of Truth breaks the bonds and barriers of Love. Gandhi, therefore, places great emphasis on the necessity of knowledge for morality. Morality for him does not consist in loving blindly. It is loving with full consciousness and knowledge of love.

Gandhi regarded only voluntary actions as moral. By a voluntary action is meant an action performed by a rational agent, not through any



blind impulse, but knowingly and intelligently in order to realize some foreseen ends. Gandhi clearly says that any action which is not voluntary cannot be called moral. He points out that as long as we act like machines there cannot be any question of morality. If we call an action moral, it means that it has been done consciously and as a matter of duty. Any action that is dictated by fear and compulsion cannot be called moral. For example, when the peasants rose in revolt and demanded their rights from King Richard II of England, he granted them the rights under his own seal and signature. But when the danger was over, he forced them to surrender the letters. Now, it should not be said that the first act of King Richard was moral and the second immoral. For his first act was done only out of fear and has no moral content in it. Again, an action that is done with some selfish end is immoral. Two men may have done exactly the same thing but the act of one may be moral and that of the other immoral. For example, the action of a man who out of great pity feeds the poor is moral while the act of a man who does the same with the end of winning prestige is immoral. Moreover, just as an act prompted by the desire of material gains here on earth is immoral, so also all good deeds that are prompted by the hope of happiness in the next world ceases to be moral. For Gandhi, in the path of morality there is no such thing as reward for moral behavior. If a man does some good deed, he does not do it to gain some merit, but he does it because he must. For Gandhi, that action is moral which is done only for the sake of doing good to others. ¹ Gandhi thus emphasizes the performance of duties for the sake of duty. Duty for duty's sake without an eye to reward or punishment is the moral ideal advocated by Gandhi. So far Gandhi resembles Kant. The main tenet of Kant's moral philosophy is "duty for duty's sake". We ought to do our duty for the sake of duty, irrespective of consequences, out of pure respect for the moral law.

Again, Gandhi holds that freedom of will is a necessary postulate or condition of morality. He recognized the fact that man is not absolutely free. His freedom has limits. It is limited by the laws of nature, social conditions, traditions and human tendencies. But in spite of all these limiting influences man has ample scope to exert his will and mould his environment morally. Kant also holds that the freedom of will is a necessary condition of morality. He has said that "thou oughtest; therefore, thou canst". A man ought to do what is right implies that a man is free to do what is right. If a man's will be absolutely determined by

external circumstances, he would have no moral obligation or any feeling of ought. The terms "duty", "obligation" etc. would thus become meaningless. Morality, therefore, presupposes the freedom of the will.

Gandhi says that a moral act must be our own act, it must spring from our own will. If we act mechanically, there is no moral content in our act. However, according to Gandhi, such actions would be moral, if we think it proper to act like a machine and do so. For in doing so, we use our discrimination. We should bear in mind the distinction between acting mechanically and acting intentionally. For example, it may be moral of a king to pardon a culprit. The messenger bearing the order of pardon plays only a mechanical part in the King's moral act. But if the messenger were to bear the King's order considering it to be his duty, his action would be a moral one.

Thus, following Gandhi, it can be stated that human beings can be said to be infused with true morality only when they tread the path of morality consciously, deliberately with a determined will, regardless of gain or loss, of life or death, without turning to look back, ready to sacrifice themselves.

Section - II

This section endeavors to study Gandhi's view that religion understood properly is inseparable from morality which in its turn must dictate all of man's political activities.

Gandhi was essentially a man of religion, a Hindu in the truest sense of the term and yet his conception of religion was undogmatic and anti-ritualistic. He made a study of many great religious scriptures of the world and he came under the influence of a number of saints and religious teachers. All these led him to the conclusion that there is an essential unity in all religions. According to him, while religions might differ widely in their theologies, they are strikingly alike in their moral teachings. This essential unity, however, is unfortunately overshadowed by their theological disunity that does much to render ineffective their moral teachings. The experience of communal riots in India strengthened his belief. Gandhi stressed on the essentially moral "humanist aspect" of the great religions. He believed that beneath all faiths there is a common ethical basis – a universal religion. It means, as he said, a belief in the ordered moral government of the universe. This (universal) religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity etc. It changes one's nature and binds



one indissolubly to the Truth (or God) which, according to Gandhi, is a permanent element present in human nature.

Gandhi, like the theosophists, thus advocates the view that just as a tree has a single trunk but many branches and leaves, so there is one, true and perfect religion which becomes many when it passes through the human medium. For Gandhi, true religion is identical with morality. There is no religion higher than Truth and Righteousness. He declined to be bound by any religious interpretation though it is scholarly, if it is in conflict with reason and morality. On the other hand, he was prepared to accept even unreasonable religious sentiment if it is not immoral. He says that, as soon as we lose the moral basis, we cease to be religious. There is no such thing as religion over-riding morality. Man for instance cannot be untruthful, cruel and incontinent and claim to have God on his side.

According to Gandhi, true religion and true morality are inseparably bound up with each other. Religion is to morality what water is to the seed that is sown in the soil. Just as water causes the seed to sprout and grow so religion causes moral sense to grow and develop. For Gandhi the religious ideal or the ideal of life is the realization of Truth (or God). God is the essential unity of everything. Now, if this unity is to be realized, one must go beyond one's selfish considerations and love others. God can be discovered by trying to find Him in His creation and that would be possible only through non-violence or ahimsa, that is by loving all and by serving all. This is morality. As D.M. Datta aptly puts it: 'The path to the realization of the True Self or God, therefore, lies through the love of others and the performance of duties towards others Morality thus becomes the "essence of religion"' (Datta, 1968, p.83).

In his *Autobiography* Gandhi says, one thing was deep rooted in me that is the conviction that morality is the basis of things, and that truth is the substance of all morality (Gandhi, 1945, p.33).

It is this inseparable relationship between religion and morality that provided to Gandhi the basis for speaking of politics in religious terms. It was Gandhi's great mission in life to revolutionize politics by ethics. As the most important activity which is the condition of ensuring a civilized existence and the possibility for the good life to its citizens politics cannot be alienated from the moral enterprise. The good man makes politics a part of his moral life. It is the place where man can be of most service to his fellow men, where he has the greatest opportunity of moral growth. Gandhi's

political views, in this sense, differ fundamentally from other political theories in so far as he makes even politics subordinate to ethics. Generally, deception, dishonesty, telling lies etc. are considered to be political achievements if they are resorted to skillfully. But for Gandhi, politics unguarded by moral values has to be shunned as it is a disvalue. Those who repudiate moral values in actual political struggle can hardly advance the cause of mankind. Morality is the basis of what Gandhi calls "true politics" in contrast to "power politics" where the arrogant power politicians claim infallibility for their views and actions.

Now, since Gandhi based all political activities on morality and for him morality is a derivative from religion, the whole political enterprise can become a religious and moral one. Gandhi held an integrated view of life. To him the whole gamut of man's activities constitutes one indivisible whole. It is incorrect to divide social, economic, political and purely religious work into water-tight compartments. For him religion does not concern itself with a particular position or segment of life. It provides a moral basis to all other activities which they would otherwise lack, reducing life to a maze of "sound and fury signifying nothing". That is why Gandhi said that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means.

Bindu Puri, in her book *Gandhi and the Moral Life*, wrote that 'as long as religion is understood in terms of the moral vision, politics can be interpreted as a spiritual exercise for moral growth. This can be done by understanding politics in terms of service and social well-being.' 'This', according to Puri, 'is the "true politics" of Gandhi which is what he means by the Constructive Programme in politics, as in service-oriented politics. This is instantiated by the issues in his "Constructive Programme", i.e., issues like those of village upliftment, sanitation, education, removal of untouchability, khadi, and so on'(Puri, 2004, p.78).

Recapitulating the discussion on politics, basically what seems to have emerged is that the relationship between religion and politics is furnished by morality. The religious basis of Gandhi's politics means the supremacy of the concept of the moral right of conscience instead of the divine right of rulers. Basically, Gandhi felt that the ethics of forgiveness, humility and universal tolerance should guide the human action.

Finally, it can be said that the essential unity between morality, religion and politics in Gandhi is derived from the centrality of his moral vision. The



basic view of Gandhi is that there is a moral consciousness which is articulated in religious terminology and this type of moral consciousness is the root of "true politics". All of Gandhi's thinking is thus based on a fundamental moral sense of the world. For Gandhi, morality is the core of a good life and has to be reflected in the whole of life.

Section - III

It has been contended that morality is the bedrock of all of Gandhi's thinking and action. Now, to be moral or to pursue a moral life, Gandhi gave special emphasis on some of the virtues of life. It needs to be mentioned here that Gandhi's ultimate source of morality is from Indian scriptures. Indian scriptures have laid down certain rules as maxims of life and as axioms which we have to take for granted as self-demonstrated truths. These are harmlessness (ahimsa), truthfulness (satya), non-stealing (asteya), chastity (brahmacharya), and non-acceptance, that is, non-possession of unnecessary things (aparigraha). These five virtues or moral rules are recognized by the Upanishads, the Buddhists, the Jainas, the Yoga system, and most others, though they are interpreted more or less rigorously by the different thinkers. These virtues enable individuals to lead a righteous life.

Gandhi admitted all these virtues. However, he interpreted them in his own way – in the light of his own experiences and studies. 'Tolstoy's interpretation of the commandments of the Bible influenced and strengthened Gandhi's interpretation of the five vows to a great extent'.² According to Gandhi, these five traditional virtues must be interpreted in an up-to-date manner, so that they may be consistent with the need of the time and the conditions of existence prevalent at the time. In fact, Gandhi added some more virtues to these standard five. These are – fearlessness, control of the palate, bread labor, equal regard for all religions, economic self-sufficiency, removal of untouchability and social inequality.

Gandhi and the inmates of his Ashrama at Sabarmati preferred to take vows (vratas) for observing these virtues in their daily activities. For Gandhi, the essence of a vow consists in doing at any cost something that one ought to do. But the taking of a vow, according to Gandhi, does not mean that one is able to observe it completely from the very beginning. Rather it means constant and honest endeavor in thought, word and deed with a view to its fulfillment. It is certainly better not to take a vow than having taken it and break it. It is easy enough to take a vow under stimulating

influence. However, it is difficult to keep it, especially in the midst of temptation. According to Gandhi, our capacity to keep our vows will depend on the purity of our life. A gambler or a drunkard or a dissolute character can never keep a vow. Gandhi asserts that life without vows is like a ship without anchor. Vows impart stability and firmness to one's character. For Gandhi, a person unbounded by vows could never be relied upon.

There is a significant place for vows in Gandhi's life and thought. When Gandhi was preparing to go to England for studying law in 1888 at the age of 19, his mother Putliben would not let him go as she could not trust him in a distant land. However, a Jain monk Becharji Swami came to his rescue. He asked Gandhi to take three vows of not eating meat, not to drink liquor, and not to make relation with woman. Gandhi took these three vows and Putliben consented. Gandhi has recorded in his *Autobiography* that these vows have saved him from falling a prey to the various temptations in England.³

The observance of vows for Gandhi was primarily and essentially a means of cultivating self-discipline and overcoming himself in the event of temptation and doubt. When Gandhi was in the Yeravda Central Prison in 1930, he used to write weekly letters to his Ashrama inmates containing a cursory examination of the Ashrama vows. Later on these letters were published in the form of a book titled *From Yeravda Mandir* (1932). This booklet is a masterpiece of Gandhi's views on the principles of morality and moral conducts. Thus, it can be said that the vows constitute a central theme in Gandhi's thought. They help in making of a moral man.

Section - IV

As pointed out previously, Gandhi greatly emphasized the importance of moral disciplines as the starting point of an individual's life. According to him, one who is not prepared to order his life in an unquestioning obedience to the laws of morality cannot be said to be man in the full sense of the word. Gandhi asserts, as the Indian Law of Karma, that the present action of man determines his future. If the present action is immoral, it will degrade the doer, spoil his habits, and he cannot therefore achieve a good and noble life. That is why Gandhi gave utmost importance to the purity of means and end. The "end" is the "goal" and "means" is the "way" of the realization of the goal. Gandhi says, "They say 'means are after all means'. I would say 'means are after all everything'. As the means so the end. There is no wall of separation



between means and end".⁴ Gandhi compared the "means" that is the "way" with the seed and the "end" that is the "goal" with the tree. According to him, the same unbreakable and inseparable relation exists between means and the end as between the seed and the tree. This simile, as Lal explains, suggests that the means implicitly contains in it the possibility of the end, just as the seed contains in it the energy that is expressed in the form of the tree (Lal, 2017, p.123).

Throughout the life of Gandhi, he struggled to demonstrate only the moral means as his primary consideration. If the means adopted is not moral, the end cannot be moral. History has recorded many politicians who gave undue importance only to the end, but this was not acceptable to Gandhi. According to him, means must be as moral as the end. He pointed out that bad means can never produce a really good end. It is very superficial to think, therefore, that a good end justifies bad means. In Gandhi's philosophy means and end are convertible terms. Gandhi stated that if the means are taken care of the goal could be reached sooner or later. When the means adopted are wrong, the goal that is the end even if it is pure, will not be reached. And even if it is reached, it cannot be realized as a pure end. Thus, Gandhi was almost convinced that the end does not justify the means and that purity of means is an essential condition of realizing a good end. "Two modern thinkers Aldous Huxley and Leo Tolstoy support Gandhi in his emphasis on the purity of means. According to Huxley a state of greatest possible unification of mankind can be achieved only through good means. Similarly, Tolstoy thought that "All that tend to unify mankind belong to the good and the beautiful. All that tend to disunite are evil and ugly".⁵

Gandhi was a staunch believer in the doctrine of the Gita. Like the Gita, he emphasized the fact that man can only strive for, but he cannot command results. We have always control over the means and never over the end. End is the ideal, and therefore, is not yet within our reach. What we have at our disposal is the means. We can change or adjust only means and never the end. The end is merely the result of a series of acts taken as means. So, it is only in the context of means that the end is relevant. Gandhi asserts that the end grows out of the means. Means thus come to acquire a greater significance in Gandhi's philosophy.

Gandhi's philosophy of "Means and End" has a direct relation with his doctrine of Truth and Non-Violence. For Gandhi, Truth is the ideal of life, it is the goal towards which we must strive.

Now, the nature of this striving, or the way to approach Truth, according to Gandhi is Non-Violence. Therefore, for Gandhi, Truth is the end and Non-Violence is the means. Truth cannot be attained by any other way. This maxim was particularly adopted by Gandhi in avoiding all methods of political emancipation based on untruth and violence. He felt sure that such methods though temporarily successful would degrade the nation and involve it in a never-ending series of future bloodshed and ruin. Gandhi held that Swaraj, which according to him was the "end" of the Indian people, established by non-violent means will be different in kind from the Swaraj that can be established by armed rebellion. Violent means will always give violent Swaraj. That would be a menace to the world and to India herself. Gandhi thus embarked upon a revolutionary task of enunciating the principle of the integrity of means and end which presupposes Truth and Non-Violence as the foundation of human life and social relationships.

Section - V

The tumult of violence, the rivalry for power and unscrupulous pursuit of material welfare without heading ethical and human values, have revealed the brute in man and shaken all confidence in his inner goodness. Man attempts to achieve peace and prosperity through the medium of war and violence which in turn threatens the very existence of human race. The relevance of Gandhi's ideas and their universal applicability is precisely because of the fact that he presented the moral principles of Truth and Non-Violence to the human civilization to be observed in every walk of human life. Permanent and perfect peace, as Gandhi rightly observes, can never be attained through violence and nuclear weapons. This is primarily due to the reason that when violence appears to do good, the good is only temporary but the evil it does is permanent. Gandhi held that Truth and Non-violence constitute the greatest and the mightiest force at the human disposal. They are mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by man against mankind. It was a life-long conviction with Gandhi that the only way to avert violence, hatred and bloodshed and to establish the universal peace lies in cultivating the spirit of Truth and Non-Violence in the hearts of individuals. As the individuals are made, so the nations are made. And as the nations are made, so the world is made. An individual can adopt the way of Truth and Non-violence without having to wait for others to do so. Men often hesitate to make a beginning because



they feel that the objectives cannot be achieved in its entirety. This attitude is precisely the greatest obstacle to our progress. However, this obstacle can be removed by each man if and only if he wills it. As Gandhi says, the success of the application of Truth and Non-violence depends upon the conviction of the person which has to be gradual, with the attitude that "one step is enough for me". The beginning will be small and the rest will follow.

Gandhi's ideas are not outmoded and utopian as some may believe. On the contrary, they have been practiced and cherished worldwide because of the durable results that have been achieved. Leaders of various anti-colonialist and anti-racist movements took up the path of Gandhi. The two most remarkable cases are: The American Civil Rights Movement, under the leadership of Martin Luther King and anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa under the leadership of Nelson Mandela. Both – King and Mandela – acknowledged their debt to Gandhi. The Great 14th Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual leader, is one of the foremost disciples of Gandhi and a true Satyagrahi.

Gandhi has often been described as an apostle of peace. Certainly, he was. He strove and died for peace. For the accomplishment of liberty, justice and peace, he rediscovered the old techniques of Ahimsa and Satyagraha. He revealed to the masses a power not of atom bombs and machine guns, but the power which lies innate in each individual, a power of Truth (Satya) and Non-violence (Ahimsa), a power which this materialistic world can exploit fully in making violence and wars impossible. Today we, therefore, need leaders like Gandhi both at the national and the international levels having the spirit of universal love and brotherhood. These leaders through their personal example will arise and consolidate the moral forces of their people and will be a beacon for the generations to come.

End Notes

1) Although, in one sense, Gandhi's description of moral actions is quite close to the academic description of it, as when he says that no action which is not voluntary can be called moral. Yet in another sense, Gandhi's description of "morality" is not so close to its academic description. This is because while according to Gandhi, moral actions would include only good actions; academically even "bad actions" are moral because they are voluntary. The opposite of "moral" in the ethical philosophies of the academic type is "non-moral",

but in the philosophy of Gandhi the opposite of "moral" is "unmoral"[or "immoral"]. 'Whatever is good and virtuous is moral, a sense to the good and the bad is the moral sense, and trying to live in accordance with the dictates of this moral sense is Morality.' See, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, Basant Kumar Lal, (2017), p.133.

2) Dharendra Mohan Datta, *The Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*, (1968), p.96.

3) M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, translated from the original in Gujarati by Mahadev Desai, (1945), p.36.

4) Nirmal Kumar Bose (Ed.), *Selections from Gandhi*, (1972), p.36.

5) A.N. Kapoor, V.P. Gupta (Eds.), *A Dictionary of Gandhian Thought*, (1995), pp.94-95.

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