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SYMPOSIUM

On Gandhian Epistemology

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Abstract
I develop in this paper some epistemological themes inspired by the writings of Mohandas K. Gandhi. Gandhi famously thought the method of nonviolence he'd pioneered—*satyagraha*, as he called it—a powerful means of effecting change in the political domain, but he also thought it a way of life, applicable in the warp and woof of everyday, interpersonal interactions. I will investigate here what it might look like to practice the way of Gandhian nonviolence in one's everyday epistemic interactions. There will be connections between this sort of epistemic practice and some main themes in contemporary work on intellectual humility.

Keywords: Gandhi; nonviolence; satyagraha; epistemology; intellectual humility

1. Introduction

I develop in this paper some epistemological themes inspired by the writings of Mohandas K. Gandhi. Gandhi famously thought the method of nonviolence he'd pioneered—*satyagraha*, as he called it—a powerful means of effecting change in the political domain, but he also thought it a way of life, applicable in the warp and woof of everyday, interpersonal interactions. I will investigate here what it might look like to practice the way of Gandhian nonviolence in one's everyday epistemic interactions. As we will see, there will be connections between this sort of epistemic practice and some main themes in contemporary work on intellectual humility.

2. Nonviolence and the Many-Sidedness of Truth

Gandhi subscribed to the Jaina doctrines of *anekāntavāda*, which holds that reality is multifaceted, comprising infinitely many sides or aspects, and its epistemic corollary, *syādvāda*, on which reality is so complex that any beliefs we humans are capable of forming about it are necessarily partial and incomplete, giving us a view of how things look from a certain perspective, but leaving out much that is true from other perspectives. (The idea is often illustrated by the ancient parable of the blind men and the elephant. For overview, see Koller (2000).)

An upshot, he thought, is that each of us has access to a side or aspect of reality that others lack. The idea often attributed to him (though as best I can tell, he never put it in quite these words) is that "each of us holds a piece of the truth," a piece that others lack. To the question, "How can I best engage others in such a way as to share the piece of truth I possess but they lack and apprehend the piece of truth they possess but I lack?" Gandhi's answer was *nonviolence*. The thought is that, by engaging another knower *satyagrahically*, à la the methods of Gandhian

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nonviolence, we each bring our piece of the truth into the interaction, and if things go well, emerge therefrom with a fuller, larger piece of the truth. Gandhi thought there would be non-epistemic benefits besides: we would each be ennobled by the interaction and drawn deeper into friendship.[1]

Such is the basic idea I shall explore in this paper: each of us has a piece of the truth the other lacks; our best hope for imparting that to one another is to engage each other with nonviolence, *satyagrahically*; done right, we will depart the interaction enwisened, morally ennobled, and deepened in friendship.

Our project is to spell all this out, to make it clearer and more explicit. I shall offer little by way of exegesis of the relevant Gandhian texts: as best I can tell, he nowhere developed these ideas in systematic form; his recorded comments on them are episodic and suggestive. Instead, I will develop a model of epistemic praxis that, while inspired by various of Gandhi's sayings (several of which I will quote below), does not purport to be exactly his view. The model in hand, we will investigate what it might look like to practice the model in everyday interactions and what sort of intellectual character one could reasonably expect to emerge therefrom.

3. Each of Us Has a Piece of the Truth

The Jaina doctrines of anekāntavāda and syādvāda are recondite and complex. You will not find in Gandhi's writings any very sophisticated, philosophical treatment of them, although you see their influence in comments of his like this:

> … we all have truth but not the complete truth. For God reveals His truth to instruments that are imperfect. Raindrops of purest distilled water become diluted or polluted as soon as they come in contact with Mother Earth. (Gandhi & Ellsberg, 1991, 64.)

He is making a couple claims here: first, that we all apprehend some of the truth (in context, truth about the religious and the moral), but second, that for each of us, our apprehension of the truth is incomplete and prone to error.

Note the deeply optimistic view of human nature suggested by the first claim. Gandhi seems to have in mind—in a Thomistic vein—that humans are so constructed that no normally functioning human intellect can fail to get into cognitive contact with important truths about the religious and the moral.[2] For both Aquinas and Gandhi, as I am reading him, though humans are capable of grave error, pernicious and thoroughgoing self-deception, and deep moral and religious confusion, no human (well, none with mature, normally functioning cognitive faculties) can be so sunk in error, so self-deceived, so epistemically debased as to fail to be in cognitive touch with important truths in their situation—truths about God and the good, but other important truths besides. Such, anyway, will be an assumption of our model.

On the second of his claims—that for each of us, our apprehension of the truth is incomplete and prone to error—the idea here, as we will of think of it, is the converse of the first: that humans are so constructed that no mature, normally functioning human intellect can fail, in any given situation, to be in error about deep moral, spiritual, and other important truths of the situation. It's an interesting question why that would be, a question we won't investigate. I will take it on board as the next assumption of our model.

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[1]For exposition of Gandhi in the vein suggested here, see Juergensmeyer (1989, 44–46), Bondurant (1965, 192–197), and Rynne (2008, 48–74). For relevant primary material in Gandhi, see e.g., Gandhi and Ellsberg (1991), which collects together a variety of Gandhi's writings on religion and interreligious dialogue. His writings on these themes are especially suggestive of an epistemic practice of the sort sketched here; it is his treatment of these topics that inspired the below-described model.

[2]For discussion of relevant material in Aquinas, see Stump (2012, 126ff).

4. To Arrive at a Fuller Picture of Truth, I Must Engage You with Nonviolence

> Truth is the end, ahimsa a means thereto. (Gandhi, M. K., 1992, 13.)

The next part of our model is the claim that, by engaging one another in epistemic interaction satyagrahically, we each bring our piece of the truth into the interaction and emerge therefrom with a fuller, larger piece of the truth.

To unpack this, we start with a brief account of Gandhian satyagraha. Gandhi expositors will divide things up differently,[3] but as I read him, satyagraha comprises five main parts or practices.

First, *adherence to Truth*. "Truth" (with a capital T), in Gandhi's Hindu context, refers to *Sat*, the One, God, the ground of all being, the source of the moral law, that which sustains and underlies all. To adhere to Truth, for Gandhi, is a matter of conforming the whole of one's life to Truth, which means *inter alia* conforming thought, speech, and action to the deep moral structure of the universe. As he thinks of things, this entails a total commitment to truthful thought and speech, as well as humility, tolerance, selfless service, solidarity with the lowly, loving kindness to all, the utter renunciation of all forms of guile, duplicity, fraud, and deceit, and the cultivation of the sort of detachment depicted in the Bhagavad Gita (2.47), wherein one strives to do one's duty without clinging to particular outcomes, remaining inwardly calm regardless of how things turn out.

Second, *noncooperation* with injustice and other kinds of evil. As Gandhi famously said, non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral duty as is cooperation with good. Much evil is allowed to fester in the world because of those who cooperate with evildoing in big and little ways. Noncooperation removes the props that support and enable the evildoer and undercuts his efficacy; enough noncooperation can unseat dictators, change unjust laws, and much else besides.[4]

Third, *self-suffering*: Noncooperation with injustice often entails suffering for the noncooperator: refusal to join in abusive treatment of members of an out-group can mean ostracization from in-groups; refusal to obey unjust laws can mean jail or worse; and so forth. On Gandhi's view, the suffering incurred by refusal to cooperate with injustice, willingly endured without anger or hatred, in a posture of ahimsa (to be explained shortly) can be powerfully transformative and over time, soften the heart of the oppressor, awaken their conscience, and inspire in them an inclination toward comity.

Fourth, *ahimsa*: This is a traditional Hindu, Jaina, and Buddhist term, which literally means *not-harm* (a- "not" + himsa "harm"), but came to be understood by these traditions as including both a negative side, doing no harm, and a positive side, heartfelt pursuit of the good of the other. It's similar to the idea of *agape* in the Christian tradition. On Gandhi's view, the combination of self-suffering and ahimsa—suffering the consequences of one's noncooperation with injustice in a posture of non-retaliation, respect, compassion, and goodwill for one's opponents—has enormous moral and spiritual power to transform enmity into friendship.

Fifth and finally, *self-purification*: Living in the above-described ways—adherence to Truth and its concomitant honesty, guilelessness, humility, and tolerance, refusal to cooperate with injustice, willingly accepting the suffering that results, in a posture of ahimsa and concomitant enemy love—can be difficult. Gandhi thought such praxis difficult or impossible absent rigorous ascetic and spiritual practice, including simple living, renunciation of private property, daily prayer and meditation, sexual chastity, manual labor, and more.

So far forth, some exposition of the general contours of Gandhian satyagraha. Next, there is the question what it would look like to apply this vision of nonviolence in epistemic contexts.

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[3]For overview, see Kumar (2022); for classic treatments, see Bondurant (1965), Gandhi (1950), Gandhi and Parel (2009), and Sharp and King (1979). Rynne (2008, 38–83) is compendious and clear.

[4]For excellent explanation of how this works, see Chenoweth and Stephan (2011).

4.1. Epistemic nonviolence

What would it be, then, to engage epistemic interactions with the methods of Gandhian nonviolence—adherence to Truth, noncooperation with injustice, self-suffering, ahimsa, and self-purification—where by talk of "epistemic interactions," I will have in mind any communicative interaction with other persons in which information is exchanged, verbally or otherwise, and credences updated in light of that exchange. (This could no doubt be put more carefully, but the basic idea is, I take it, serviceable.)

I shall distinguish between two sorts of epistemic nonviolence: second-personal and third-personal nonviolence. Second-personal nonviolence is application of the methods of nonviolence to your direct conversation partner, the one(s) with whom you are directly speaking, where the noncooperation you seek to practice is directed at harmful or potentially harmful epistemic dynamics between you and your conversation partner. Third-personal nonviolence is the application of the methods of nonviolence to resist epistemic injustices, imposed or threatened, against a third-party, who may or may not be party to the conversation. We'll treat these seriatim.

Ahimsa. Start with ahimsa (in the second-personal context until further notice), and begin by thinking about what it would be to engage epistemic interaction un-ahimsically: *himsically*, as it were. Well, a main kind of himsic interaction that comes ready to mind is the kind I have witnessed at philosophy conferences and seminar rooms, online chat boards, New York Times comments sections, and sorry to report, in words emanating from my own mouth: the kind of interaction aimed at rhetorical domination, *winning* the exchange, being *right*,[5] making the other see and admit that they are *wrong*. This kind of exchange is on offer most anytime one is having an argument with someone. Argument—in the having-an-argument sense, not the construction-of-a-sequence-of-premises-in-support-of-a-conclusion sense—is a paradigmatically himsic mode of dominative discourse, in which the primary goal is to *win* the exchange. In ahimsic interactions, as we'll think of things, there is no argument; winning and being right are not among the goals of these interactions.

Other main kinds of himsic epistemic interaction that come to mind are interactions in which one seeks

- to embarrass one's conversation partner—by sarcasm, ridicule, and the like,
- to criticize—to fault-find in a condemnatory way, and
- to retaliate—by returning insult for insult, harshness for harshness.

The main features of ahimsic, not-harming discourse, on our model, will be discourse that eschews each of the above, discourse characterized by thoroughgoing practice of non-argument, non-embarrassment, non-criticism,[6] and non-retaliation.

The practice of ahimsa, we saw above, has both a negative and a positive side: not doing harm but also doing good. We have just been noting the negative side of ahimsic epistemic interaction: non-argument, and so forth. How about the positive side? What goods does one seek to effect in ahimsic discourse? These three, I suggest, would be central:

First, *understanding*: The main good pursued in ahimsic (second-personal) discourse is understanding.

There is the good of my understanding my interlocutor's position. As I shall think of things, to understand someone's position is to attain a detailed grasp of not only the specific claim they are

[5]There is an important moral difference, I take it, between, on the one hand, aiming at being right—at being the one with the correct view of things, the one to best their opponent in dialectical interchange—and on the other, aiming at getting to the truth of the matter, regardless who got there first, regardless whose arguments got the better of the exchange. Epistemic interaction in which the former sort of aim predominates is, I am assuming, generally *himsic*, generally harmful.

[6]Non-criticism is of central importance in Gandhi's program. See Bilgrami (2003) for discussion.

defending or the arguments they are putting forward in defense of that claim, but their entire *position*, which following Gilbert (2013, 105), I think of as the large web of beliefs, emotions, affections, feelings, and values subtending their discourse. The goal in ahimsic discourse is to deeply understand not just the claim and the arguments put forward in its defense, but the noetic structure in which it is situated.

This, I say, is a good. A good for whom? It is a great good for my interlocutor. I do not know how to argue for this with any precision, but I take it to be a great good to be *known*, to be *seen*, to be *understood* by others. I have friends for whom this is a value, who take time and make effort to understand me, who take an interest in who I am, what I value, what I think, feel, and need. This practice of theirs does me enormous good.

I say it is a great good for my interlocutor to be deeply understood by me. It is also a great good for *me* to understand my interlocutor. If the bits of our model to the effect that every human (with mature and well-functioning faculties) is so constructed as to be in touch with important truths in their situation—moral, spiritual, aesthetic—and that every human is in the grip of important errors about the good, true, and beautiful in their situation, then it is very likely, a certainty I would say, that in understanding my interlocutor's position, I will come into contact with pieces of the truth I had previously overlooked, paid insufficient attention to, forgotten, or ignored. This is a good for me.

Next, there is the good of my coming to understand my own position more deeply. (I will comment below on how ahimsic discourse might be expected to effect this and the other goods of understanding discussed here; for now I am just describing the goods.) This is a good for me because it is good to be psychically integrated, to be such that one's beliefs and desires regarding the good, the true, and the beautiful are not in conflict with one another. Disintegration of the intellect and will around the good, true, and beautiful can inhibit one's ability to share oneself with others and thus hinder one of the greatest goods of human life, loving communion with others.[7] In coming to more deeply understand one's own position, one becomes aware of areas of discord in one's belief-desire structures. That can facilitate psychic integration and is thereby a good.

And finally, there is the good of my interlocutor's coming to understand her own position more deeply, which is a good for her for the same reasons understanding my position is a good for me.

So far forth, the goods of understanding sought by ahimsic discourse. The primary method for pursuing these goods of understanding, on our model, is *deep listening*, which I think of as a two-fold practice comprising *paying attention* to what the other is saying and posing *exploratory questions* aimed at deepening understanding of what's being said.

Paying attention, in the operative sense here, is a matter of focused, non-interruptive, fully engaged, curious uptake of what is being said. It means full presence in the moment, affection for one's conversation partner, trying to know them without your mind pressing up against theirs, without arguing with them, or changing the subject.[8] It does enormous good to someone to pay attention to them in this way.

The posing of exploratory questions is a kind of art form: it requires life experience, wisdom. The main forms of exploratory question, I think, are these:

- questions that check for understanding: is this the view?
- questions that probe for grounds: is x your reason for y?
- questions that investigate resources in the view for handling objections: how does your view handle the worry that x?
- questions aimed at strengthening: would it strengthen the view to include x?

[7]It would take us too far afield to explore in any detail why such psychic disintegration inhibits closeness with others, but roughly, we tend to seek to present ourselves to others in coherent ways, but when I am internally conflicted about what I think and want regarding the good, true, and so forth, that will mean omitting certain parts of myself from my self-presentation and thus that those parts of myself will go unshared. See Stump (2012, 124ff.) for insightful discussion.

[8]My way of putting this is indebted to Ueland (1993).

The art here is knowing how to intersperse such questions with periods of paying attention, knowing when it's right to ask them or better to be silent, and knowing how to ask them in accordance with the negative practices of ahimsic discourse: non-argument, non-embarrassment, non-criticism, and non-retaliation. It's all too easy for questioning to transmute into thinly disguised argumentation, sarcasm, ridicule, and so forth. Ahimsic questioning avoids this.

The practice of deep listening—paying sustained attention, posing exploratory questions—facilitates the types of understanding mentioned above. It means your and my coming to deepened understanding of your position, and if things go well, your and my coming to deepened understanding of my position. (I will say more below about how this might work.)

I'd said that ahimsic (second-personal) discourse aims at three goods, the first, understanding. The second is *empathy*.

It is a great good to be the subject of empathic attention—for someone to rejoice and sorrow with you about that for which you rejoice and sorrow. In ahimsic discourse, one seeks not merely to form true beliefs about the position of the other, but to cultivate an empathic connection with them: to feel some of the joy, pain, awe, delight, and sorrow in their position, and to feel compassionate nonjudgment at the wicked or otherwise wrongheaded in their position. (This last element, a form of compassion—pity or pain at your or another's plight—is not strictly speaking the same thing as empathy, the mirroring of the feelings of another. What I am calling empathic connection is a blend of empathy and compassion.)

The sort of understanding of your conversation partner's position facilitated by deep listening well positions one for empathic engagement with her. As you come to understand not only the claims she is defending and arguments therefor, but the large, underlying structure of beliefs, affects, experiences, and values in which those claims are situated, there will be much there to engage the affections of a sensitive listener.

Third and finally, there is the good I will call *mutuality*. It is a great good to be mutually helpful to another: to share with them what of one's own is a good for them and for them to do the same for you. By listening well and deeply to you and asking careful exploratory questions, as per our model, I grow in understanding and empathic engagement with your position; thereby I provide you a great good. And because I have approached you in a nonviolent posture, listening and questioning from a place of generosity, warmth, and genuine desire for your good, this can trigger a reciprocity psychology in you, with the result that you might well find it attractive to return the favor of deep listening to me, thereby offering me the good of understanding and empathic engagement. In successful ahimsic discourse, I and my conversation partner bestow these goods on one another, and thereby participate in the good of mutuality.

Such are three main goods sought by ahimsic, second-personal discourse and its constitutive practices of deep listening, non-argument, nonembarrassment, noncriticism, and nonretaliation: understanding, empathy, and mutuality. To reiterate, among the goals *not* pursued in such discourse is winning an argument, being right, or even, I would say, persuading the other. The goal here is not to cause one's conversation partner to change his views about anything. It is more invitational: the things at which I directly aim are deep, empathic listening and practice of nonargument, nonembarrassment, noncriticism, and nonretaliation. I do these in order that I might invite my conversation partner into practice of the same, recognizing that a happy outcome would be his taking up my invitation and movement for each of us into deeper apprehension of important truths. But, importantly, that is not my *aim*; it is a welcome side effect of my aim, which is ahimsic listening and invitation to the same. (Why abjure the goal of changing my conversation partner's view? What could be wrong with that? More on this shortly.)

For many of us, adopting as a matter of deep-seated habit the posture I describe above would mean dramatic changes in epistemic business as usual. In my experience anyway, it is a matter of deep-seated habit that discourse veers into the dominative. There is that hard-to-describe sense of *panic*, *rage*, *indignance* when I know that I am right and that my conversation partner is badly and stubbornly confused, which is often followed by that hard-to-describe switch into fight mode, with

its attendant anger and desire to win the exchange, both of which are often dramatically out of proportion to the importance of what's under dispute. For I and many I know, this is the stuff of deep habit. Rehabituation unto nonviolent modes of interaction, in which apparent wrongheadedness is met with compassionate curiosity, deep listening, and the energy of ahimsa, requires deep spiritual formation, more on which below.

First though, some commentary on the other parts of satyagraha in the epistemic domain. I've been discussing ahimsa, but there's also noncooperation, self-suffering, self-purification, and adherence to Truth.

Noncooperation. Noncooperation in the second-personal context will mainly take the form of not cooperating with a conversation partner's attempts to practice himsic discourse—not cooperating with his attempts to dominate, belittle, win, embarrass, ridicule, and criticize. To withdraw cooperation from these conversational moves is to refuse to be drawn into himsic exchange by them—to refuse to shift into fight mode, to refuse to return dominative for dominative discourse, insult for insult, tit for tat. It's to stay focused on deep listening—to keep paying attention, posing expositive questions, seeking empathic connection to the other's position. Thereby one noncooperates with the conversation partner's attempt to steer conversation in himsic directions.

Self-suffering. A basic dynamic of nonviolent resistance is that noncooperation brings suffering for the noncooperator. In political contexts, noncooperation with unjust laws brings suffering in the form of arrest, imprisonment, state and non-state partisan violence, and the like. The courting and willing endurance of suffering is a crucial component of the process of Gandhian, nonviolent political resistance; done correctly, in a spirit of ahimsa, thought Gandhi, it can soften hearts and bring comity into situations of conflict.

So too in the epistemic domain. Noncooperation with a conversation partner's forays into himsic discourse—his pursuit of rhetorical domination over you, uncharitable, straw-man characterizations of your position, interruptions and speaking over you, failure to hear you out, and the like—entails an unwillingness on your part to follow him into that style of discourse and dogged stubbornness in staying with your practice of ahimsic discourse, deep listening, charitable, exploratory questions, empathy, and so forth. This can hurt: it's painful to be interrupted, mischaracterized, talked over, all the while denying oneself the satisfaction of retaliatory verbal attack, proving your point, showing your opponent wrong.

But as in the political context, self-suffering, born in a posture of ahimsa, of genuine good-will and non-anger toward your attacker, can be transformative. When your opponent senses your ahimsic energy and receives no fighting energy in return for their fighting energy, this will very often deactivate their fight psychology and open them to the possibility of non-defensive interchange, in which they are able to hear you and to speak honestly about the contours of their own position (so, e.g., Itzchakov et al., 2023). Suffering, endured ahimsically, can be a doorway to this.

Self-purification. Ahimsic discourse is difficult and does not come naturally to most of us. Deep-seated habit unto this style of communication requires spiritual formation. It would take us too far afield to explore in any detail the sorts of formation one could pursue to cultivate these habits, but I'll mention one practice I suspect to be of central importance: meditation. There are a variety forms of meditation, some versions of prayer, others not, but the key thing is the regular practice of mindfulness—the cultivation of awareness of one's current experience in a posture of curiosity, openness, acceptance, and nonjudgment. Such a practice, with consistency and over long periods of time, can rewire the brain, leading to calm in the face of antagonism and ability to forestall the onset of fight psychology.[9] Learning to defuse the emotions contributory to the onset of fight psychology is key to staying ahimsic in the face of himsic discourse.

Adherence to Truth. A few comments finally about adherence to Truth in the epistemic context. I'd said that adherence to Truth, for Gandhi, was a matter of conforming the whole of one's life to the moral grain of reality, to Truth, God, the One, the source of the moral law. This meant, for him,

[9]There is a huge literature on this. See Kim, Gentile, Anderson, and Barlett (2022) for entry points.

total commitment to truthful thought and speech, as well as humility, tolerance, and solidarity with the lowly.

To be a votary of Truth in the context of our model, on which, recall, (a) *everyone* has a piece of the truth—every human with mature and well-functioning faculties, anyway, is so constructed as to be in touch with important truths in their situation, moral, religious, aesthetic, and otherwise, and (b) *everyone* is in the grip of important errors about deep and important facts of their situation, would imply earnest commitment to the project of ahimsic listening to anyone willing and able to put up with one's attempts at ahimsic discourse. Given our model, no matter who you are, it is highly likely that you have an important piece of the truth that I lack, and vice versa. If you are willing to share your piece of the truth, I am eager to listen. The votary of Truth on our model, therefore, will be a kind of Socratic gadfly, ready to engage anyone—not just intellectual elites, but anyone—who will put up with it, convinced that most any human engagement is an opportunity for growth in understanding.[10] Such, I suggest, is what the Gandhian themes of commitment to truthful thought, humility, and solidarity with the margins would look like in epistemic contexts.

5. On the Fruits of Successful Nonviolent Epistemic Interaction

5.1. Each comes away with a larger piece of the truth

> Whenever I talk with someone I learn from him. I take from him more than I give him. (Gandhi & Rajput, 1998, 156.)

If things go well, says our model, a main fruit of the above practice will be that each party to an ahimsic epistemic interaction comes away from the interaction with a fuller piece of the truth than they entered with. A few words about how that might work.

A key point about our approach is that, by my listening and question asking in the posture of a learner rather than someone intent on dialectical dominance, I thereby make less likely the activation of your fight-flight psychological scripts, rendering you more likely to honestly engage my exploratory questions and freely develop your thoughts without fear of being shamed or judged. Under these conditions, you are positioned to share a much larger part of your mind, a much larger part of your position, than had I provoked a defensive response in you. And because I am postured as a learner, convinced that you possess important parts of the truth that I lack, I am positioned to hear you and to take on board what you had seen but I had not.

Relatedly, because I have engaged you in a way less likely to trigger defensive response, you are more likely to be able to hear and honestly engage my exploratory questions—questions that, if well posed, will lead you into consideration of objections, new ways of framing things, connections between parts of your position you had not previously considered. You will thereby be helped into deeper understanding of your position, provided opportunity to make adjustments thereto, and can thereby emerge from our encounter with more of the truth than you had started with.[11]

Finally, there's the above point that listening and questioning in an ahimsic posture—with generosity, warmth, and genuine desire for the good of my conversation partner—can trigger a reciprocity psychology in my conversation partner, with the result that she might well find it attractive to return the favor I have done her and engage me with ahimsic listening and questioning, helping me into nondefensive understanding and reconsideration of my own position and thereby an enlarged apprehension of the truth. If things go well, her listening and question asking will

[10]Mention of Socrates here suggests the question what connections there are between Socrates's dialogical methods and the Gandhian method depicted above. It's a larger question than we have space for. I will just say this: though both involve careful listening and question asking, the Socrates of Plato's dialogues is *much* more interested in refuting his opponent's views than is our Gandhian, who aims to understand and learn from the opponent's position, but has no interest in refutation.

[11]See, e.g., Itzchakov, Kluger, and Castro (2017) and Itzchakov et al. (2023); also McGrath (2025).

emanate from a nondefensive psychology, the upshot of which will be her arriving at a deepened understanding of my position and the parts of the truth therein she had previously overlooked, underappreciated, ignored, and so forth, thereby enlarging her apprehension of the truth.

So far forth, the ways we might expect nonviolence to yield a fuller picture of truth for participants in nonviolent epistemic exchange. The two final pieces: I say that, by way of such exchange, if things go well, participants emerge morally ennobled and deepened in friendship.

5.2. Morally ennobled

> No power on earth can subjugate you when you are armed with the sword of Ahimsa. It ennobles both the victor and the vanquished. (Gandhi, Desai, & Nayyar, 1949, 2:38.)

Why moral ennoblement? How does that work exactly? A few thoughts. First, the act of submitting oneself to another, letting them speak, shining the light of consciousness on their mind, staying quiet before them as they develop their thoughts, trying hard to understand their story, empathically engage their position, curb one's desire to argue, be right, dominate, seeking thereby to do good to one's neighbor: all of this confirms in one habits of ahimsa, habits of self-sacrificing other-regard, habits of love. Each ahimsic interaction in which I and my conversation partner have opportunity to do these things for one another confirms in us these habits. Thereby we are ennobled.

Second, there is the point noted by psychologists that "empathy gaps"—gaps in our ability to empathize with moral reactions and emotions that differ from ours—often lead us to attribute to our interlocutors less-than-charitable explanations for our disagreements with them, to see in our interlocutors' disagreement evidence of subpar intellectual skill or malevolent intent (Ditto & Koleva, 2011). Ahimsic discourse, insofar as it enables us to cultivate empathetic engagement with the position of the other, helping us to mirror the feelings and emotions in her position, can undermine and deactivate the tendency to respond to empathy gaps with uncharitableness.[12] Thereby it ennobles us.

A worry, though. Imagine long, engaged, patient, ahimsic listening, empathic engagement, expository questions—the whole package—with someone deeply indoctrinated in the mindset of Nazism. One can well imagine an ahimsic listener's being traumatized by such interaction or sustaining moral injury (the psychological injury, common in war, befalling those who engage in or witness acts or states of affairs deeply repugnant to their moral code). There is darkness in the minds of some such that shining the sustained light of consciousness on that darkness might well be injurious. Ahimsic discourse with such a person perhaps would not ennoble; it might well do the opposite: it could damage or degrade one's moral self.

What to say? Here, I would reiterate my above point that ahimsic discourse requires spiritual formation, which if sufficiently advanced could, I conjecture, enable one to confront profound moral darkness ahimsically without being traumatized by it. Perhaps the thing to say, though, is that ahimsic discourse can be ennobling *if things go well*—if you have the requisite spiritual formation or your interlocutor is like the vast majority of people, basically decent—but that this feature of the model is not guaranteed.

5.3. Deepened in friendship

> In a nonviolent conflict, there is no rancour left behind, and in the end the enemies are converted into friends. (Gandhi, 1977, 69:30.)

Finally, there is the above point about ahimsic discourse and the deepening of friendship. Why think friendship a byproduct of the sort of discourse we have been discussing?

[12]See Itzchakov et al. (2023) for relevant discussion.

This is a big question, but roughly, if you think of friendship as something like mutual benevolence—pursuit of the other's good for its own sake—conjoined with mutual attachment (emotional bonding due to the sharing of significant experiences), closeness, and attraction, then it is not hard to see why ahimsic discourse would tend toward the formation and deepening of friendship.

It is such a great and rare good to be deeply, patiently, earnestly, joyously listened to that one can't help but feel drawn toward the one who bestows this good. The sense of having been the recipient of a deep good tends to create in us a desire to return good for good. And to the extent that the process of ahimsic listening is allowed to run its course, which can sometimes take a good while, there is the sharing of significant experience: to share with someone the details of one's inner life—the web of beliefs, desires, feelings, and values that comprise one's position—is to share in something that many experience as deeply meaningful. And insofar as an ahimsic listener does this with earnest joy and well-wishing and not coldly or clinically, closeness can quickly arise. We have all the makings here of friendship: mutual benevolence, attraction, attachment, and closeness.

I have relevant, first-hand experience of this. For several years, I was on the leadership team of a scholarly center at my university that hosted semester-long, residential fellowships. At the start of each year, we would retreat together in a mountain cabin, twelve or so of us, and spend several hours sharing at length our intellectual and spiritual stories. A person's story could sometimes go on for hours, with others almost always listening in rapt attention, often in tears. The point of this exercise was to build community, on the hypothesis that round-table discussions of one another's work over the course of the coming term would go better in a context of personal and intellectual friendship. (They did.) Of interest for present purposes is the extent and speed with which friendships formed in those story-sharing sessions. Year after year, it was our experience that we'd arrive at the retreat with a group of strangers, who in many cases were somewhat reluctant to be there, then leave three days later in the beginnings of real friendships. As the listening we did for one another resembled in many respects the model of ahimsic listening I have described above, I take my experience at these retreats over the years to be confirmatory of my Gandhian hypothesis that nonviolent epistemic interaction, done well, breeds friendship.

Pulling things together, here is what we have got to. The Gandhi-inspired idea we are exploring is that each of us has a piece of the truth that others lack, and that by nonviolent epistemic engagement with other knowers, parties to such engagement can come away with a larger piece of the truth, morally ennobled and deepened in friendship. The mode of nonviolent engagement claimed to produce this felicific outcome is satyagraha—adherence to Truth, noncooperation, self-suffering, ahimsa, and self-purification—applied to the epistemic domain. We have been exploring what it might look to practice epistemic satyagraha in second-personal contexts (contexts involving you and your conversation partner) and looking into reasons for thinking it would have the sorts of just-described benefits.[13]

6. Third-Personal Epistemic Nonviolence

We turn to brief investigation of the bearing of satyagrahic modes of discourse on third-personal, epistemic contexts, in which one seeks to deploy the methods of nonviolence to resist epistemic

[13]An anonymous reviewer points out similarities between our focal model of epistemic satyagraha and Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication (Rosenberg, 2003). Both eschew the above-mentioned himsic modes of discourse—argument, embarrassment, criticism, retaliation; both aim to foster empathic connection by deep listening. A crucial difference, however, is that Rosenberg's method is not intended as an epistemic practice: its ultimate goal is not alethic—attaining a fuller picture of the truth—but compassionate connection with the other. In his practice, the primary thing one seeks to learn about the other is what their feelings and needs are in the situation so as to enhance one's quality of connection with them. One is not so concerned, as on our model, with probing for important truths about the wider world that one has overlooked. In a word, the main goal of our praxis is alethic, the main goal of Rosenberg's, compassionate connection.

injustices, imposed or threatened, against a third-party, who may or may not be party to the conversation.[14]

By talk of "epistemic injustices," I have in mind the widely discussed work on epistemic injustice by Miranda Fricker (2007) and her discussion of so-called testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker's testimony is accorded less credibility than it otherwise would be owing to the prejudice of her conversation partners, who accord her diminished credibility because of her sex, skin color, or whatever. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when someone's ability to make sense of their social experience—experience it would be very much in their interest to understand—is handicapped by gaps in the collective interpretive resources available to them in their social setting, gaps that owe to the relative powerlessness of the social groups to which they belong and prejudice against those groups. An obvious example of the latter is a woman's inability to classify unwanted sexual advances as sexual harassment, owing to the fact that the concept of sexual harassment is not yet part of the social vocabulary of her setting.

Both sorts of injustice, I want to suggest, can be effectively resisted by Gandhian methods. One thinks here of the work of Daryl Davis, the Black blues musician who has for years practiced a style of discourse quite similar to the ahimsic discourse depicted above with Ku Klux Klan members, the result of which has been the formation of numerous friendships with Klan members and their eventual renunciation of their supremacist convictions and affiliation with the Klan.[15] Many have given him their robes, which he hangs as trophies of a sort in his basement. His method, as with ahimsic discourse, consists primarily of deep listening—of paying attention and asking good questions, without confrontation or denunciation. Eventually, he finds, walls come down, defensive mechanisms are deactivated, there are the beginnings of friendship, and seeds of doubt about supremacist convictions are planted.

We see in Davis, I think, a Gandhian response to both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. In ahimsic discourse with an interlocutor prone to deflate his judgment of the credibility of testifiers because of their skin color, there is deep listening—paying attention to his position, gently probing with expositive questions among which are questions about the strength of his grounds for deflating the credibility of those testifiers—all the while practicing nonargument, nonembarrassment, noncriticism, and nonretaliation. If things go well, your nondominative posture deactivates your conversation partner's fight-flight psychology, and there is openness to genuine listening for your position. You have now the chance to describe your position, your grounds for affording credibility to the testifiers in question, your values and experiences regarding members of the relevant community. If things go well, as they have many times for Davis, your conversation partner may well adjust his credibility credences. If so, you have successfully deployed Gandhian nonviolence to resist testimonial injustice.

Imagine furthermore that within your position are conceptual resources that, if more broadly known, would afford members of marginalized groups interpretive resources for making sense of aspects of their experience which are presently difficult for them and others to make sense of. Insofar as your interaction with your conversation partner has led him to shine the light of consciousness on your position and to hear you nondefensively, thereby his stock of conceptual resources has been enhanced. He now possesses new categories with which to think about the issues facing the marginalized, new categories he will carry into conversations and shared life with members of his social circles. By practice of ahimsic discourse, you have planted seeds of dissent that can sprout invasive shoots and spread. Thereby you have deployed Gandhian nonviolence in resistance to hermeneutical injustice.

All of the pieces of satyagrahic discourse are in play here: ahimsa—ahimsic listening and questioning, nonargument, noncriticism, nonembarrassment, and so forth—adherence to Truth,

[14]My discussion in the paragraphs to follow owes an obvious debt to Green (2020).

[15]For a nice overview of Davis's story and methods, see Kristoff (2021). For Davis's telling of his story, see Davis (1997).

with its concomitant tolerance and willingness to epistemically fraternize with the unlovely, noncooperation, with antagonistic overtures from your conversation partner but also with the darker parts of your partner's position, refusing to pass over or stay silent when confronted by them, shining the light of consciousness on them by judicious use of expositive questioning, self-suffering in your restraint from lashing out at the toxic in your interlocutor's position, and the self-purification requisite to being a Daryl Davis.

A quick comment before moving on about a point I'd made earlier, where I'd said that the goal of this sort of satyagrahic discourse is not to change the views of your conversation partner. But in nonviolent discourse aimed at resistance of testimonial, hermeneutical, and other epistemic injustices, wouldn't your goal be just that, to change the views of your interlocutor, to get him to update his credences, for example, about the reliability of the testifiers in this or that marginalized group?

It shouldn't be, I think, not in the typical case. This is because, were that among your goals, you would be less likely to bring about change in your interlocutor's views (cf. Kalla & Broockman, 2020). Where your goals are to change the mind or behavior of another, it is very difficult to hide that: it seeps out in your body language, facial expressions, and the subtexts of what you say. And when, inevitably I think, someone gets a whiff of that in you, their defenses go up: they switch into fight-flight mode. And insofar as that is true, it is much more difficult to persuade them to change their mind.

Says the model, then: changing views, even noxious views, isn't the goal. It is more invitational: inviting your opponent into a process such that, if things go well, each of you will have an opportunity to reflect on and perhaps change your views, perhaps thereby leaving the interaction with a fuller picture of the truth. Your goal is to do the process well; the results you leave to the universe, God, both.[16]

7. Nonviolent Epistemology and Intellectual Humility

There's been lively debate in the last couple decades among philosophers and psychologists about intellectual humility, what it is, how to measure it, what influences it, its benefits and liabilities, and more.

I should like in the closing paragraphs of this paper to raise a conjecture about connections between the sort of Gandhian epistemic praxis I have been adumbrating and some main approaches to intellectual humility in the contemporary literature. The approaches I have in mind are the three main accounts discussed by Whitcomb et al in their widely discussed paper, "Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations" (Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, & Howard-Snyder, 2017). The views in question go as follows (2017, 6–12):

> *Proper Beliefs: Intellectual humility [IH] consists in a disposition to form proper beliefs about the epistemic statuses of one's beliefs.*
>
> *Low Concern: IH consists in a disposition to an unusually low concern for one's own intellectual status and entitlements.*
>
> *Limitations Owning: IH consists in proper attentiveness to and owning of one's intellectual limitations.*

Suppose now that you are a committed practitioner of ahimsic discourse of the kind I have described. You have come to sincerely believe that everyone has a piece of the truth, that anyone

[16]This way of viewing things fits well the Gandhian-cum-Baghavad-Gita idea that one is to act in accordance with duty but practice total detachment from the fruits thereof.

with whom you enter into dialogue knows important things about the situation that you do not, that the best hope for helping one another into a larger picture of the truth than either of you presently possess is deep listening, expositive questioning, and empathic engagement. You consistently behave accordingly.

The conjecture I wish to briefly explore is that long such practice can be expected over time to habituate you in the direction of intellectual humility of the sorts on display in the above three accounts.

Start with Proper Beliefs. Although it is hard to say with any certainty, it seems plausible that someone committed to running their epistemic establishment in the way we have been exploring would likely not be characterized by the sort of intellectual arrogance that goes with proneness to systematic overestimation of the epistemic statuses of one's beliefs. The person we describe, after all, thinks they are likely wrong about much of importance and makes it their life's project, Socrates style, to go around learning from whomever they can in hopes of correcting their many errors. Perhaps such a person might fall into the opposite error of intellectual servility, where this is a matter of systematically *underestimating* the epistemic statuses of one's beliefs. But our Gandhian cognizer also believes that she is right about much—that she has an important piece of the truth—and the more people she engages in ahimsic interactions, the more of their piece of the truth she takes on board, the more she will be inclined to think her apprehension of the truth has grown over time. Such a person does not seem plausibly describable as intellectually servile. It is hard to say with any certainty, but it seems plausible that a seasoned Gandhian cognizer of the kind I have described would fall somewhere in the middle of intellectual arrogance and servility, somewhere in that Aristotelian "golden mean" depicted by the proper beliefs account of intellectual humility.

Next, the Low Concern account. IH in this sense is a matter of being disposed to unusually low concern for one's intellectual status and entitlements, especially where this is because such concern is sidelined or pushed aside by concern for intrinsic epistemic goods—concern for knowledge, wisdom, and so forth: you are so busy and concerned with pursuit of these things, you have no space or time to worry about intellectual status.

What to say? Would our Gandhian dialogist display unusually low concern for intellectual status and entitlement? Yes, I think. This for a few reasons. Our Gandhian, recall, is an adherent of Truth, which Gandhi understood to entail lowliness, humility, selflessness in service, solidarity and shared life with the margins. Certainly, the tendency of these themes in his writings points away from pursuit of intellectual status and entitlements. There is also the point that a seasoned Gandhian practitioner would be convinced that she has but a piece of the truth and that in any given situation, she is bound to be in error about much of importance. There is tension, I suggest, between this sort of psychology and that of the intellectual glory hound. More, our Gandhian practitioner is decidedly non-elitist in her pursuit of truth: she is convinced that *anyone* she comes across has an important piece of the truth that she lacks; anyone warrants serious engagement and deep ahimsic listening. As Socrates was willing to engage anyone who'd put up with him, so too our Gandhian. It is said of Edmund Gettier that when famous speakers would visit the Wayne State University philosophy department and faculty and students would gather at after-talk meals, Gettier could consistently be counted on to be seated nowhere near the famous speaker but to instead be seated among the grad students, raucously philosophizing with them, oblivious to the presence of the famous so-and-so at the other end of the table.[17] Our Gandhian would, I think, operate in that vein. And though it could of course happen that, though she outwardly behaves thus, she's secretly, inwardly pining for intellectual status, hoping the "right" people will notice her rhetorical brilliance and the like, I'd think it more probable that her inner life would gradually conform to her outward nonchalance about association with the lowly.

[17]This was communicated to me by someone who had been a colleague of his at Wayne State.

Finally, the limitations owning approach to IH, on which IH is a matter of deep-seated disposition to be aware of one's intellectual limitations, to acknowledge their existence and accept responsibility for their consequences, to admit them to others in appropriate contexts and decline to try to hide or be defensive about them, to care about them, seeking to correct or ameliorate them when possible, to feel some degree of regret or dismay about them, but not to be *too* down on oneself about them. Such, in rough, is what Whitcomb et al have in mind by talk of *owning* one's limitations (see esp. Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, and Howard-Snyder (2017, 11); IH, on their approach, is the deep-seated disposition to thus own one's limitations.

What to say about our Gandhian practitioner and IH so construed? Would she own her limitations? Yes, I would say. Over time, she'd have explained her position to many a deep listener, fielded their questions about it, and compared and contrasted it with the positions of her interlocutors, all in the posture of a learner, hoping to acquire from her conversation partners the pieces of truth she'd overlooked. Because discussion of one's position with many others tends over time to expose its flaws, and because one can often see it in the facial expressions and body language of one's discussion partners when one's reasoning is plainly bad, when one is overlooking the obvious, and so forth, it seems likely that, over time, our practitioner will have become aware of many of her limitations. And because she is committed to truthful speech and non-deception, she will have powerful reason to admit to others her limitations. And because her goal is to engage other knowers so as to grow in her apprehension of important truths, she'll *care* about these limitations and seek to overcome them. And finally, because she practices renunciation of the fruits of her endeavors, à la the teaching of the Gita, she'll not be overly dismayed at her failures.

Though it is hard to know for sure, it is a reasonable conjecture, I think, that regular engagement of Gandhian epistemic practice of the sort I have been adumbrating would, over time, habituate one in the direction of intellectual humility in some main current senses of that phrase.

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