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Author(s): N. A. Nikam

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GANDHI'S PHILOSOPHY

N. A. NIKAM

IN a book of four chapters, Dr. D. M. Datta expounds, with much insight, the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi.¹ His aim is to put the "scattered philosophical ideas" of Gandhi into a system to see "which of them could be traced back to ancient sources and which of them were his own." Dr. Datta's extensive knowledge of Indian philosophy enables him to perform his task very successfully. Besides professing philosophy, Datta professes non-violence: he was an inmate of Gandhi's *āshram*, and, later, did social work in the villages of East Bengal.

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy, which he called "an experiment with truth," was not a philosophy in which he merely *interpreted* or *analysed* things for himself. It was an experience, or experiment, in which he *changed* himself and his environment. In the process, Gandhi re-oriented many traditional ideas of Hindu thought and practice. He said: "I do not claim to have originated any new principle. I have simply tried in my own way to apply eternal truths to our daily life and problem." He was an ordinary man who became a *mahātmā*, "a man of great soul": indeed, "in a beggar's garb."

Gandhi said the "eternal truths" could be applied to daily life and problems. He said they were everywhere in history: in "unrecorded history" though not everywhere in "recorded history." This distinction was vital to Gandhi. He found the *proof* of non-violence in "unrecorded history": in the fact that life persists amidst death and that there is compassion and friendliness amidst bitterness and hatred and persecution and war.

Devotion to truth was the one characteristic of Gandhi. It was his greatest quality. Love of truth led him to all kinds of

¹ *The Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi* (The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1953). The titles of the chapters are: I. *Background of Gandhi's Philosophy*; II. *God, World and Man*; III. *Morals, Society and Politics*; and IV. *Moral Leadership of the World*.

disciplines and experiments. He always began with smaller problems and applied the success he achieved to greater problems. "One step is enough for me" was his motto and he progressed from one step to another. The "non-violent non-co-operation" movement which won India's freedom was the outcome of the smaller success of his *satyāgraha* or "passive resistance" in South Africa. India's freedom was, for him, a means to the larger problem of world peace.

2. In the application of the "eternal truths" to problems of daily life, Gandhi had his own logic or method. His logic was a re-orientation of the traditional method of *Syādvāda* and *anekāntavāda* of Jainism into which he was born. His *Syādvāda* was not that of the learned; it was peculiarly his own. It helped Gandhi to see "the manyness of reality," as he called it. *Syādvāda* is *epistemic*; it means that many apparently conflicting judgments are possible about any object or problem, if, or when, taken in its differing or different aspects. *Anekāntavāda* is *ontic*; it means that everything has multiple characteristics. Gandhi's love of truth led him to the twin doctrines of *syādvāda* and *anekāntavāda*; or, these two resulted from his twin doctrines of *Satya* (Truth) and *ahimsā* (non-injury or non-violence). His *Syādvāda* helped him to understand the other man's point of view and to attribute no motive to him; also, it helped him, as he said, to see himself as others saw him. In other words, he developed through these doctrines a love for others even when he differed from them. The love of neighbor, indeed, the love of his enemy, was part of his love of truth and his love of truth was his love for the neighbor. "If we have no love for our neighbor," he said, "no change, however revolutionary, can do us good."

3. God was the central fact of Gandhi's life. God was not a mere intellectual conception to him. "God to be God," he said, "must rule the heart and transform it." Gandhi's aspiration was to see God face to face. "To me God is Truth and Love, God is Ethics and morality. God is fearlessness He is even the atheism of the atheist. He is a personal God to those who need His touch He simply *is* to those who have faith He is

patient but also terrible." When Gandhi successfully came out of the ordeal of his fast unto death in protest against the British Cabinet's award of separate electorates for *Harijans* (untouchables), he wrote a note to the late Rev. C. F. Andrews at Cambridge, England, which I was privileged to read. It ran thus: "Dearest Charlie, God is both indulgent and exacting."

God and Truth are convertible terms to Gandhi. The progress of his spiritual experience was a transition from "God is Truth" to "Truth is God." Denial of God we have known; denial of Truth we have not known, he said. He saw that the atheist and the sceptic in their passion for truth denied God. His *āshram* or hermitage was an abode for atheists and sceptics too. He said nobody has denied truth or can deny it, for "Truth is God."

The question whether Gandhi is atheist or a pantheist, absolutist, etc., is an academic one. "Truth is God," he said and added: "I am being daily led nearer to It by constant prayer." Gandhi's spiritual experience cannot be limited by a formula. His *Syādvāda* and *anekāntāvāda* could not bind him to this or that doctrine. He applied in his own way, the Upanisadic, *neti, neti*, "not this," "not this," i.e., "not this—e.g. only."

For Gandhi, all religions have the same truth, or elements of the same truth, and so he did not accept conversion. "Our prayer for others must be," he said, "*not* give him the light thou has given me, *but* Give him all the light and truth he needs for his development."

Gandhi called the creation of the world God's play or *māya*, but did not dismiss the world as an illusion or appearance. He did not believe that the world "is hopeless and cannot be saved."

God is, to Gandhi, the all-pervasive Reality, immanent in man and in the world (but also transcendent). If God's creation hides Him it is for man to reveal Him or discover Him by his actions, by *ahimsā* or non-injury. "To find Truth as God, the only means is *ahimsā*." God is not "was" but "is." He distinguished between "the God of history" and "the God of life" or "the living God." He said to the missionaries: "do not then preach the God of history, but show Him as He lives today through you." This would, of course, apply to everybody who goes by mere tradition or history.

Gandhi called his religion the Religion of Truth. This is the same as *ahimsā* or non-violence. "The bearing of this religion," he said, "is, or has to be seen, in one's daily social contact. To be true to such religion one has to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service of all life."

4. In his experiments with truth and non-violence, the traditional cardinal virtues of Hindu thought underwent a re-orientation. This re-orientation is the central part of Gandhi's ethico-social philosophy. Dr. Datta's treatment of this topic in his book is very instructive and I shall confine myself to a review of it to the exclusion of the other parts of the book, useful as the other parts are (indeed, the rest of what Datta says follows from this part). The traditional cardinal virtues are: *satya* (truthfulness), *ahimsā* (non-injury), *āsteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharyā* (continence or chastity), and *aprighraha* (non-possession of unnecessary things). Gandhi added *abhaya* (fearlessness) to the list. All these were the rules of his *āshram* (hermitage) discipline. Minor things, such as manual labor, spinning, etc., were also part of the *āshram* life. Gandhi's *āshram* was sired to non-violence; without it, his non-violent campaigns would not have been possible. In his *āshram*, the individual underwent a transformation and became a social force. He developed a soul-force.

I shall now briefly comment upon the cardinal virtues, which may be described as the "primitive propositions" of Gandhi's *Principia Ethica*.

Satya (truth, truthfulness): The Upanisads say, *Satyam eva jayate*: "truth alone prevails." Truth alone prevails because truth alone *is*. Truth is *being*: it is *the same* in thought, word, and deed. But truth is not mere formal consistency or coherence of thought, word, and deed. The devil, perhaps, has both consistency and coherence in a sense too, but he has no truth and so will not prevail. Truth, according to Gandhi, is "discovery"; it is discovery of facts in an objective way. This is essential because discovery is related to decision. According to the *Vedānta*, ignorance is the root cause of bondage; to Gandhi, ignorance is the root cause of failure. He was always at pains to discover facts and to study them. Discovery also implies or entails freedom to

discover. It requires freedom of mind or reason from dogma and authority. "I do not advocate surrender of God-given reason in the face of tradition." This freedom enables Gandhi to experiment and to bring the ancient tradition, *sanātana dharma*, on which Hinduism is based, in line with reason, and so reform Hinduism from within. The freedom which Gandhi sought was also freedom from vested interests. He always retired into himself when he was to make a momentous decision, and he frequently examined himself and his motives. "An unexamined life is not worth living." Thus, discovery of truth meant, to Gandhi, *self-discovery*, *self-analysis* and *self-purification*. This enabled Gandhi to confess his own errors. Confession of his own errors was his "fearlessness" and his fear of God. While the British government laughed at his errors and his confessions, his failures lead him to greater successes. Self-analysis, self-purification, confession of his errors, and unceasing continuation of his solitary experiments with non-violence—these were part of Gandhi's love of truth; indeed, it dominated all that he did. Dr. Datta well remarks, "Gandhi as a lawyer saved both *his* soul and that of his clients."

Ahimsā: This literally means non-injury or non-killing. It *seems* to be a negative virtue but is not. The man who *does* nothing is not necessarily a non-violent person. *Ahimsā* is a "total" virtue. It enjoins harmlessness in thought, word, and deed. You have no right to *think* of a dagger even though you may use none; and a "cold" war that has not yet become "hot" is contrary to the principle of *ahimsā*. Freedom from anger, hatred, etc.,² is the positive content of *ahimsā*, and the love that follows, or ought to follow, is the motive of all action based on *ahimsā*. So, *ahimsā* is more an inner feeling of the heart; what it is and what it accomplishes is a "change of heart." *Ahimsā* is a reverence for all life. As such, it is the basis of all other cardinal virtues. *Ahimsā paramo dharmah*: "non-violence is the highest law," says the epic of the *Mahābhārata*; *ahimsā* is the basis of all

² The *Gītā* says, and asks: "Know then that the soul is unborn and is indestructible; and he who knows this, how could he slay or be slain?" (II. 21.) Even so, in Gandhi's philosophy, *ahimsā* or non-violence is freedom from anger, hatred etc.; if so, how could such a man cause (deliberate) injury to any living being?

duties. Yet Gandhi did not advocate the mere exaltation of life as an end in itself; nor did he believe in martyrdom. He said about a follower of his, who was threatening to fast unto death to gain his interest and was on the point of death: "I would rather that he lost his life than that untruth succeeded." And he shocked some of his more orthodox and literal interpreters of *ahimsā*, when he permitted the doctor to put to sleep, by an injection, a calf in his *ashrām* which was in excruciating pain. While Gandhi stuck to the absolute ideal of *ahimsā*, he realized that man "cannot for a moment live without consciously or unconsciously committing outward *himsā* (injury)." But he did not draw from this the inference that violence was the *rule* of action. The *Gītā*, which was Gandhi's inspiration and companion, says: *śvalpampi asya dharmaḥ trāyate mahatō bhayāt*: "even a little of this righteousness (*dharma*) saves us from imminent danger." Gandhi's experiment was a progressive enlargement of the sphere and context of the operation of the "even a little" of the *dharma* of non-violence. "When you want to find Truth as God," he said, "the only inevitable means is *ahimsā*."

In a non-violent fight, there is no bitterness; in a non-violent victory, there is no humiliation of the vanquished; in a non-violent struggle, both the victor and the vanquished are exalted.

Asteya (non-stealing) and *aparigraha* (non-acceptance): It is better to take these two together as they are elements in a Gandhian socialism or social justice. In Gandhian social-ethics, *asteya* has undergone considerable re-orientation. From being merely a moral quality of the individual it has become a moral quality of the social order. The *Gītā* says: "he who cooks for himself without giving is a *thief*" (III. 12.). But he who *takes* without being given is also a "thief." *Asteya* means not taking away the property of another unless it is given by him. If *ahimsā* is right to life, *asteya* is right to property. It is easy to see how *asteya* follows from *ahimsā*. The good life is, ultimately,

* Both of these are forms of "covetousness," and both may be traced to the rule of conduct expressed in the *Isa* Upanisad: *ma grāhaḥ kasyaś-vidhanam*: "covet not another's wealth."

non-possession (at least, it is not calling anything your *own*); but, it is also right possession. Right possession is social order. Everyone has a right to right possession; therefore, to rob another man of his right possession is doing injury. *Asteya* is a duty not merely of the poor but of the rich, and “exploitation” is a form of “robbery.” No class in a social order should think of the other as rich only because it is not robbed; and no class should become rich by robbing others of what is due to them.

Accumulation is having more than you want; having more than you want is a form of “stealing” and so is a form of injury. But supposing you give away what you have accumulated, how, or on what motive, are you giving it away? This question is part of the ethics of *ahimsā* and is more fully developed by Gandhi’s disciple, Ācharya Vinobā Bhave in his social conception of *bhoodān yajna*: “the-free-gift-of-land-as-sacrifice” (and not as mere charity). In a gift that is charity, the recipient is obliged to the giver and so there is no equality between the two; whereas, in a gift that is a “sacrifice” there is true relationship of equality, for what is given away belongs to all and he who gives has been until now only a “trustee.” From this idea is developed the Gandhian notion of the rich as the “trustees” of the poor. This is very important for the Gandhian social revolution, as it does not accept class struggle as the basic truth of history and does not, therefore, advocate class hatred and the overthrow of capitalism by force. (What “right possession” is, I suppose, is dependent upon the context and situation in a social process, e.g., to buy foreign made cloth at the expense of indigenous industry is not “right possession,” since it perpetuates economic and political bondage.)

Brahmacharyā (*celibacy or continence*): This literally means “conduct which puts us in touch with God.” Gandhi does not mean that marriage is unnatural and celibacy the natural state. He means marriage is the natural state and continence in the married state is, or ought to be, natural also. Marriage aims at a spiritual union through the physical. Gandhi had special faith in the capacity of woman to resist man’s lust and to turn his lust and relation of flesh to a spiritual partnership and union.

Brahmacharyā ordinarily means control of the sex-impulse. Gandhi understands by the practice of *brahmacharyā* the control

of *all* the senses including the mind. In Indian thought, the lower aspect of mind is included in the senses. Sense control is impossible without mind control. The *Gītā* speaks of the man who outwardly abstains from sensual pleasure but keeps thinking about sensual objects as a “hypocrite” given to “false conduct” (*mithyāchara*). To escape being a “hypocrite” is not to make an all out effort to lead a life of sensual abandonment. A dedicated life is impossible without continence. Furthermore, we do not yet know the effect of food and diet on sex impulse and birth-control is not the only means available. Gandhi continually experimented with the effect of diet on the sex-impulse. Control of the “palate” was one of the means to sense and sex control. Exploitation of the sex-impulse by literature is as bad as any other form of exploitation and inconsistent with the dignity of man and a social order based on non-violence.

Abhaya (fearlessness): Gandhi added this to the list of cardinal virtues, or, perhaps, it is better to say that he included it. The Upanisads say: “Brahman is fearlessness,” *abhayam hi vai Brahma*. Gandhi would say: “Truth is fearlessness.” It is easy to see why Gandhi added *abhaya* to the list. Non-violence is not for the coward or the weakling. The practice of non-violence requires moral strength which comes from fearlessness and the greatest of all fears is the fear of death. The votary of *ahimsā* must be a stranger to it. He is not so cowardly or violent as to take another man’s life, yet he is not fearful of laying down his own in the cause of truth. The only weapon with which he fights evil is his life. Fearlessness is not taking foolish risks but rather preparing to meet cheerfully the challenging situations in life as they come and sacrificing, if need be, one’s life for the cause of truth. Many are the moving tales which I have heard from those who walked with Gandhi on his barefoot pilgrimage of peace and love to Noakhalli, where communal massacre had broken out. A votary of *ahimsā*, or non-violence, even if he can never be sure of success in his experiments with it, must at least be free from the fear of disappointment or failure.

These five-fold moral ideals assure the progress of the individual and the evolution of ideal democracy. “I hold,” said Gandhi, “that democracy cannot be evolved by forcible methods.

The spirit of democracy cannot be imposed from without. It has to come from within." Gandhi's conception of an ideal social order is a de-centralised, co-operative commonwealth based on the rights, dignity and freedom of the individual. The law of non-violence rules the individual and his government, for the individual is the architect of his own government.

5. Minor Gandhian maxims: Besides the cardinal virtues, there were certain typical maxims which Gandhi observed in practice. It is a merit of Dr. Datta that he has an eye for them. His relevant exposition of these maxims enhances the value of the book. All of them are important and practical. They are: (a) "The means as well as the end must be right." Gandhi was not a revolutionary who believed that the end justifies the means. Also, it seemed to Gandhi that in our civilization means have become ends. (b) "One step is enough for me." Gandhi called himself a "practical idealist." This was his realism. His realism looked to the present, made good use of it, and he was particular in taking well the present step and then leaving the rest. This is not opportunism. (c) The utilitarian maxim, "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" had no place in Gandhi's conception of democracy or humanism. To him "number" was not very important, and for two reasons. A true humanism must aim at the greatest good of *all*;⁴ therefore, number is irrelevant. Secondly, the success or failure of non-violence is not dependent upon the success or failure of numbers. That there are no "numbers" yet ready for it is no disproof of the truth or validity of non-violence. "The valiant in spirit glory in fighting alone." (d) "The true source of right is duty." In his letter in *Unesco's* book on *Human Rights*, Gandhi said: "A duty well done is the condition of rights." He put duty first and rights afterwards.

⁴ This philosophy which has the good of all and not merely of "the greatest number" is more fully expressed by Ācharya Vinoba Bhāve. It is called *Sarvato bhadra*: "Good-on-all-sides-work." Gandhi was not in favour of the philosophy of "numbers," because "numbers" means "majority rule." He said: "it is slavery to be amenable to the majority, no matter what its decisions are What we want, I hope, is a government not based on coercion even of a minority but on its conversion."

(e) Success meant, to Gandhi, "the will-to-make-the-effort." "Satisfaction lies in the effort; full effort is full victory."

(f) Gandhi's largeheartedness and his sense of realism helped him to distinguish between men and their deeds; e.g., he said, "Hate not the British but the British system," and "Heal thyself." No upliftment or awakening which does not come from within a man or a group or a nation is successful or permanent.

The practice of these cardinal virtues and the moral maxims did not make Gandhi an ascetic, and his intention was not to turn society into a group of ascetics.

6. Gandhi's conception of the State and the individual and social order. Is Gandhi's conception of society a "classless" one? In one sense it is; in another sense, his conception of social order is of a "mobile" society based on the natural division of "classes." "Gandhi distinguishes between "caste" *Jāti*, and "close," *varna* (literally "colour"). Caste is the hereditary form of social hierarchy which Gandhi disliked. *Varna* is the natural division of society, everywhere, based upon a differentiation of function or occupation or labour. All kinds of labour are necessary for a social structure and they develop and are diversified in the social process. As all kinds of labour or work are equally necessary and socially valuable, there is no higher or lower labour or work. The *bhāngi* (sweeper) is as important as a viceroy. Gandhi called himself a *bhāngi*. The only way to give social mobility, according to Gandhi, is to institute equality of wages. Then, and only then, will each man choose the kind of work he likes or which he is fitted for. This is the Gandhian "equality of man."

Gandhi was bitterly conscious of the fact that a national government, like a foreign government, might become an obstacle to the free growth of the individual. So he was against the increase of the power of the State. He said: "I look upon an increase of the power of the State with the greatest fear, because, although while apparently doing good by minimizing exploitation, it does the greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality which lies at the root of all progress."

Gandhian "nationalism" is not the type of nationalism, known to history, which seeks to dominate others or its neigh-

bours. Nor was it an isolated nationalism, windowless and shut up in darkness behind a curtain. "My notion of *Purna Swaraj* (i.e., complete self-rule) is not isolated independence but healthy and dignified interdependence." Gandhian nationalism is the philosophy of a United Nations.

7. Behind all these maxims and practices of Gandhi are two sovereign principles which Dr. Datta does well to point out. (a) "The spiritual perception of every being as the manifestation of the self or God that is present in all." The *Isa* Upanisad, which Gandhi constantly used, says: "He who uniformly sees all beings even in his self and his own self in all beings, does not feel repelled therefrom" (i.e., from other beings) (VI. *Isa*). Gandhi's "practical idealism" was a constant effort toward a verification and full practice of this truth. Gandhi was not "repelled" by anyone. (b) The second was Gandhi's philosophy of work: not so much the desire to achieve success, as the readiness to make the effort. "Full effort is full victory." *Karmanyeva adhikāraṣṭhe*, says the *Gītā*: "to action, or work, alone hast thou a right." There is no failure in making the effort. If there is a failure, says the *Gītā*, again: "bring Me thy failure." As Dr. Datta says: "Like the Buddha he (Gandhi) believed that constant vigilance and effort were necessary for a good moral life" and social order. Yes, the aim of Gandhian philosophy is "to make new history and not repeat it."

I have said enough to indicate that Dr. Datta's book is extremely useful, for the wealth of information it contains as well as for the readable presentation of the ideas and ideals of Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy.

Mysore University.