

Self and Its Relation to the Others: Gandhian Thinking in the 21st Century

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Abstract

The present paper examines Gandhi's philosophy in response to the critical issue of the 21st century, i.e. the relation between self and the other. First, it explores the basis on which self is related to the other in Gandhi's worldview. Arguing that in Gandhi's worldview self and other are related to each other with the notion of responsibility, the study aims to discuss the nature of responsibility in Gandhi's worldview and examine on what ground Gandhi determines the responsibility of self to the other. In addition, it addresses the basic issue of the 21st century as to how to act responsibly in our social and political life from Gandhian point of view. The paper also explains the relationship between freedom and responsibility in Gandhi's paradigm and demonstrates that in his worldview freedom does not only mean freedom from outside coercion and domination, but also self-regulation through self-restraint. The study aims to highlight that in Gandhi's worldview the self and the other are not two different categories, but the other is one's extended self.

The paper seeks to examine these issues by investigating Gandhi's original writings as primary sources. It uses the unconventional "inside-out" approach, i.e. studying Gandhi in his own terms as a method to deal with the topic at hand. In my view, this is the most appropriate method for the aforementioned topic as it allows to unpack Gandhi's apparently unconventional ideology.

Keywords: self, other, responsibility, freedom

Living in the globalised and multicultural world of the twenty-first century is both an opportunity and a challenge. It is an opportunity as it exposes us to knowing and understanding different shades of people, cultures or communities through direct and indirect means of contact; at the same time, it is a challenge as we have to confront the individuals, groups or communities at different levels, because we think that they are not like us. Knowingly or unknowingly, a social phenomenon lies in the practice that creates social disharmony at a different level by making a binary opposition of us/them in the society in terms of race, ethnicity, faith, and religion. This social phenomenon takes place in a process which is called "Othering" in contemporary social science literature. The process of otherness has created conflicts and violence at many levels – from local to global – and there are many sites of it spanning from personal to public life. Thus, there is a problem of "relation between self and the other".

The problem of “relation between self and the other” has been addressed in many ways by the thinkers/philosophers of both Indian and western traditions. Gandhi also faced the issue of “self” (from the individual self to the national self) and its relation to “other” (from outside him as an individual to British nation and rule). He addressed this issue both in theory and practice. The focus of the present paper is the theoretical part of his views on the relationship between self and others.

I.

How does Gandhi view the relationship between self and other? To explore the basis of the relation between self and other in Gandhi’s worldview, first of all, we may recall Gandhi’s concept of *moksha*. Gandhi argued that the main objective of the individual is to attain *moksha*, i.e. liberation.¹ His notion of *moksha* is both philosophical and pragmatic. Being a man of action, he had a more profound and practical understanding of *moksha*. Thus, he defined his concept of *moksha* in very active and practical terms. He argues that one can attain *moksha* only through engaging with others. Thus, for Gandhi, if attaining *moksha* is the chief objective of life, then considering others is part and parcel of attaining *moksha*. One cannot ignore others as *moksha* is not something outside the realm of other. Concerning the relation between self and other from the point of view of Gandhi’s notion of *moksha*, Parekh observes, “Since self and Other were interdependent polarities, each creating and being in turn created by the other, *moksha* involved the complementary processes of dissolving the ‘Other’ by attaining total identification with all creation. Hindu religious tradition had stressed the former and Gandhi did not add much to it. The way he defined the latter and related the two contained novel insights and represented his great contribution”.²

Second, the basis of the relation between self and others in Gandhi’s paradigm can also be explored in his analysis of human nature and the individual’s place and role in this universe. For Gandhi, the human being is a trinity of animality, humanity, and divinity. He argues that human behaviour is regulated by many factors, such as moral standards, the sense of shame, conscience, and duty. For him, the basic manifestations of ethical life are the sense of social and personal responsibility and the awareness that one is part of the whole and linked with others.

Third, the basis of the relation between self and others in Gandhi’s worldview can also be explored in his view on *purushartha*. He does not accept the view that an individual is essentially helpless in the face of the forces that affect him/her from within

1 Gandhi, *An Autobiography. The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, xii.

2 Parekh, *Gandhi’s Political Philosophy*, 95.

and from without. By invoking *purushartha*, he argues that the responsibility one feels is not merely an illusion. It is real and the choice one determines through consciousness is substantial and profound.

Yet, one may raise the issue: what is the defining feature of responsibility in Gandhi's worldview? Gandhi seems to argue that responsibility is a state of conscious feeling of duty towards oneself and the other/society. Furthermore, for him, responsibility is not only a theoretical construct for philosophising the role of the individual in this living world, but it also involves an active awareness of the purpose of the actions performed and their corresponding consequences. Gandhi's notion of responsibility deconstructs the binary of responsibility to oneself and responsibility to others. The reason behind is that the individual is not separate from others. He/she is the same as the others. In Gandhi's worldview, there are no others, there is only the self, or versions thereof. Gandhi's belief in our "oneness with others" was fundamentally based on his perception of the divinity of humanity, as he claimed that an individual is "part and parcel of the whole" and "cannot find [God] apart from the rest of humanity".³ This intersubjective definition of the ground of being is the foundation of Gandhi's notion of responsibility.

But what is the meaning of being responsible, in a practical sense, in Gandhi's worldview? In Gandhi's sense, to say that a person is responsible means that he/she is capable of correctly understanding the question of what is true/right in the political and social field. This correct understanding of true/right and acting accordingly forms the relative truth. In Gandhi's worldview, it must be pointed out that only knowing the responsibility is not enough, one also has *to act* accordingly. Furthermore, any responsibility, in his framework, is based on "knowledge" and "will to act", which are to be directed towards Absolute Truth. Gandhi's writings point out that every human being holds responsibility to both himself and others or society.

Thus, in Gandhi's worldview self and other are related to each other with the notion of responsibility.

II.

Let us examine on *what ground* Gandhi fixes the responsibility of self towards others. There are no systematic writings by Gandhi on this subject, yet we may trace some philosophical concepts in his writings that provide us with sufficient clues to reconstruct the basis of responsibility of self to others within his worldview.

In this context, one may refer to his notion of "mutual love" in his writings by which he seems to argue that every human being is responsible to others. He argues that not

3 CWMG:63:240.

only our own social life but even nature cannot survive without mutual love. To quote him: "Though there is repulsion enough in Nature, she lives by attraction. Mutual love enables Nature to persist. Man does not live by destruction. Self-love compels regard for others. Nations cohere because there is mutual regard among individuals composing them. Someday we must extend the national law to the universe, even as we have extended the family law to form nations – a larger family."⁴

Similarly, in Gandhi's writings, one may observe his repeated notion that humanity is an "undividable whole". This "undividable" humanity is the philosophical basis on which Gandhi fixes individual responsibility. In order to recognise Gandhi's notion of "undividable whole", we may make use of a metaphor that Gandhi had used to describe the paradigm of "undividable whole". The metaphor is about the relation between the "drop of water and the ocean".⁵ Another metaphor is about the "chain and the link". He mentioned: "[...] there is no distinction between individual growth (read self) and corporate growth (other), the corporate growth is therefore entirely dependent upon individual growth and hence that beautiful proverb in the English language that a chain is no stronger than the weakest link".⁶

Similar to the notion of undividable humanity, one may find the repeated expressions of "oneness of mankind" in Gandhi's writings. Although this notion was explained by him in different contexts, it can be interpreted in terms of why one should be responsible to others. Once he wrote: "Mankind is one, seeing that all are equally subject to the moral law. All men are equal in God's eyes. There are, of course, differences of race and status and the like, but the higher the status of a man, the greater is his responsibility."⁷ Thus, Gandhi accepts different kinds of differences among human beings, but despite those differences, in his view, there is an underlying unity, because they all are subject to the same moral law. Furthermore, as noted previously, in his view, the higher status of men brings greater responsibility.

Similarly, he describes the idea of "kinship with all" in his writings. This "kinship with all" extends not only to human beings, but the animals too. He argues that his kinship extends to "horse and sheep, the lion and leopard, the snake and the scorpion".⁸ The logic of "brotherhood and identity with all forms of life" and "kinship with all" is that, as Gandhi notes, "every man and woman has unilateral obligation" as "man is made in the image of God".⁹

4 Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers*, 118.

5 Qtd. in Roy, *Self and Society: A study in Gandhian Thought*, 103.

6 *CWMG*:34:505.

7 Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers*, 118.

8 Prabhu, Rao, *The Mind of Mahatma*, 424.

9 *Ibid.*

His writings also mention the notion of “identification with others” which implies interdependence. Thus, he does not see that duty to self is separate from other spheres of society. He claims: “Duties [responsibility] to self, to the family, to the country and to the world are not independent of one another. One cannot do good to the country by injuring himself or his family. Similarly, one cannot serve the country injuring the world at large.”¹⁰ Again in Gandhi’s writings, we perceive the “idea of self-sacrifice” by which we may deduce the basis of responsibility of self to others. This is best illustrated by his notion and practice of *satyagraha*. As a “practical idealist”, Gandhi knew that an individual can take some action, unknowingly or unwillingly, concerning others in such a way that may harm others. He also argues that if a person gets engaged in an unjust cause by mistake, he cannot escape from the responsibility. To safeguard it, Gandhi argues that one must be ready to sacrifice oneself rather than sacrifice others. In his words, “sacrifice of self is infinitely superior to sacrifice of others.”¹¹

Gandhi’s notion of responsibility is not confined only to structural analysis and intervention, but equally offers a philosophy of self-transformation. Thus, for him, the individual’s task is to make a sincere attempt to live in compliance with the principles of truth and nonviolence. Its fundamental tenets are therefore personal and moral, but Gandhi cuts the binary of personal and public morality as well as of responsibility and offers a whole set of responsibilities that involve: resisting injustice, developing a spirit of service, selflessness, and sacrifice, emphasising one’s responsibilities rather than rights, self-discipline, simplicity of lifestyle, and attempt to maintain truthful and non-violent relations with others. Thus Gandhi’s notion of responsibilities embodies a multi-dimensional responsibility with multiple others.

An important form of responsibility in Gandhi’s worldview is responsibility for the future, both near and distant. The immediate and the near aspects of responsibility might again be noticed in his notion of *satyagraha*. On the other hand, for distant responsibility, that has to be borne out by the individual and take appropriate methods and steps, he presents the vision of *Ramrajya*, i.e. Kingdom of God. His vision of *Ramrajya* which means “perfect nonviolent society” is based on the “sovereignty of the people based on pure moral authority”.¹²

His argument for responsibility puts a heavy burden on human beings. From his perspective, “we are not responsible for what we do but also *what we tolerate*”.¹³ This Gandhian responsibility “implicates us in the actions of the institutions around us whether

10 Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers*, 120.

11 Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 54.

12 Prabhu, Rao, *The Mind of Mahatma*, 326.

13 Tercheak, *Gandhi Struggling for Autonomy*, 194.

or not we derive some benefit from them”.¹⁴ From his perspective anyone who tolerates injustice nourishes and exonerates it. Moreover, he/she is running away from his/her responsibility. For Gandhi, modern complexities confound the issue of responsibility by assigning it to impersonal institutions where no one seems accountable or by masking power and domination with the imperatives of efficiency or productivity. However, the complexities, Gandhi claims, can never repeal personal responsibilities, at least if we want to continue to govern ourselves.

III.

It might be argued: if self feels a responsibility towards others then what about individual freedom? This invites us to ponder on Gandhi’s idea of freedom and its relation to responsibility. Jahanbegloo argues: “Responsibility for Gandhi precedes freedom because it leads us towards a just treatment to others, the ideal presented by freedom should, in turn, re-inform one’s neighbourliness towards the individual other. Moreover, the process of facilitating contact between opponents and overcoming evil requires an appreciation of each other’s self – experience and experience of others.”¹⁵

Gandhi does not view freedom in an absolute way, but rather locates it in the context of others or society. He is not against individual freedom but wants to adjust it to the requirements of social progress. However, for him, to value human freedom only as the freedom to pursue one’s self-interest lacks moral and spiritual depth and creates a life devoid of meaning and truth. On the other hand, he criticised the unrestricted individualism and called it “the law of the beast of the jungle”. He wanted us to learn to strike the mean between individual freedom and social restraint. He wrote: “I value individual freedom, but you must not forget that man is essentially a social being. He has risen to his present status by learning to adjust his individualism to the requirements of social progress. Unrestricted individualism is the law of the beast of the jungle. We have to learn to strike the mean between individual freedom and social restraint. Willing submission to social restraint for the sake of the well-being of the whole society enriches both the individual and the society of which one is a member.”¹⁶

In his view, such a willing submission to social restraint for the sake of the well-being of the other or society enhances both the individual and the society of which one is a member. Thus, freedom for Gandhi was not merely a right but a responsibility and duty. True freedom is not merely the freedom to do what one desires, but also the ability

14 *Ibid.*, 195.

15 Jahanbegloo, *The Gandhian Moment*, 85.

16 Prabhu, Rao, *The Mind of Mahatma*, 312.

to ensure that what one chooses is the result of a sense of duty and self-knowledge. For him, this choice is not exercised as “freedom from restraints” but rather as “freedom through restraints”.

It is on this ground that Gandhi equates freedom with his notion of *Swaraj* or self-rule or self-constraint. In this regard, Iyer observes that “Gandhi equated freedom with self-rule because he wished to build into the concept of freedom the notion of obligation to others as well as to oneself while retaining the element of voluntariness that is the very basis of freedom. The notion of self-rule implies the voluntary internalisation of our obligation to others which will be obstructed by our placing ourselves at the mercy of our selfish desires.”¹⁷ This states precisely what Gandhi intended and achieved. Gandhi deliberately disassociated *Swaraj* from the mere transfer of power and political independence in the literal sense. To him, the moral claim to *rule* was nonsensical, even reckless, without a practical demonstration of *Swaraj*. He argued that *Swaraj* could come only through acceptance of considerable personal and political responsibility that involved enormous self-sacrifice and social service. Thus for him, freedom is not only freedom from coercion and domination, it is also self-regulation through self-restraint. Thus, freedom or *Swaraj* was understood by Gandhi both in the sense of personal and political responsibility. This is the lesson more relevant in the 21st century.

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17 Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, 349.

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