

Gandhi's Philosophy as Truth Lived Experientially

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Abstract

The focus of the present paper is to discuss some segments of Mahatma Gandhi's philosophical path. It begins by shedding light on what the phrase "Gandhi's philosophy" denotes; Mahatma was not a philosopher in the classical meaning of the word; however, in his quest and endeavour for internal and external fulfilment in attaining the Truth, he did conceive of a unique philosophy, for which he drew from a variety of ideas and doctrines within the rich Indian philosophical and religious tradition and often made use of dialogue with Western philosophical thought. Therefore, it is impossible to reduce Gandhi's philosophy to a system of coherent and consistent teachings; this is not a weakness of his philosophising, but rather the result of a world view that, among other things, was based on Jaina doctrines of *anekantavada* (doctrine of the many-sidedness of the world) and *syadvada* (doctrine of the relative nature of knowledge), according to which the entities and attitudes of the world are not based on ontologically or epistemically privileged ideas. The latter reveals Gandhi's attempt to understand all multifaceted aspects of reality and views on the Truth, *satya* and nonviolence, *ahimsa*. But harmonious congruity flows through the inconsistencies in his thought, as highlighted by Mahatma himself – the same way that unity flows through infinite multiplicity – which gives vitality and dynamics to his philosophy. The following section shows Gandhi's understanding of Truth, God and nonviolence, which stems from his unique association of ideas serving as inspiration and motivation for his inner and outer social transformation. It shows how they are situated in the unpredictable field of his constant testing in practice, where Gandhi's philosophy attains its most authentic expression. Gandhi's ideals of knowledge and behaviour, which he supported with the doctrine of *karmayoga* from the *Bhagavad-Gita* went beyond the margins of the discourse and lead Mahatma on one path of intimate, inner-outer revolution, and another of application of this experience on outer, complex social reality.

Although Gandhi's philosophy is not static, but rather evolutionary, dynamic, creative, experiential, experimental and lived, it is characterised by universality, timelessness and constant relevance that go beyond the borders of India.

Keywords: Gandhi's philosophy, Truth, experience, inner-outer revolution

Introduction: Gandhi, a Philosopher "without a Portfolio"

The phrase "Gandhi's philosophy" would be contested by many, since he was not an academically-educated philosopher and did not create a coherent philosophical system, but rather built a dynamic, multifaceted thought that was firmly rooted in practice. The label of "philosopher" was often refuted by Mahatma himself:

Well, all my philosophy, if it may be called by that pretentious name, is contained in what I have said. But, you will not call it “Gandhism”; there is no “ism” about it. And no elaborate literature or propaganda is needed about it. The scriptures have been quoted against my position, but I have held faster than ever to the position that truth may not be sacrificed for anything whatsoever. Those who believe in the simple truths I have laid down can propagate them only by living them. [...] My life alone can demonstrate it.¹

He defined his life as an “experiment with truth”, which could also be said of his philosophical path, paved with elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism; however, he did not focus solely on multiple expressions of his own culture, but rather contemplated all other traditions from within, including ideas from numerous Western thinkers. Each exploration of various doctrines in changing circumstances defined the fundamental character of his philosophy as constant revelation, which required breaking away from all dogmas, ideologies and authorities. Namely, “the Ocean of Truth” is characterised by constant becoming, it is beyond the strategies of reason, as it embraces the totality and the diverse multiplicity of being, which cannot be caught in any single rigid proposition. Thus, Gandhi exposed the gaps in sophisticated and elaborate argumentative approaches, since the spiritual experience that provides the framework of his social and political action cannot be captured and is not constrained by any doctrine. Outside theoretical philosophical speculation, life is constantly changing and, thus, evades ultimate conclusions; for this reason, Mahatma never declared any doctrine to be absolutely valid, but rather held that no one can get to absolute certainty.

He conceived his dynamic, flexible philosophising, characterised by change, becoming and openness to the unknown and managed to build upon it during his life with new experiences gained in practice and through inner “revolution”, i.e. spiritual endeavours and self-exploration, without which, he claimed, life was not worth living. In discovering the Truth, the process of constant self-exploration and self-purification, Mahatma directly confronted his faults and fears, and with each failed attempt, he was closer to the goal that he tirelessly sought – the Truth. However, it is worth highlighting that he did not see his goal as an end point, but rather as a journey with many paths that brought him closer to, but never fully reaching, his goal. This is because his ultimate goal, i.e. the Truth, is beyond us, and the very effort involved in getting closer to it is, according to Gandhi, the realisation of the goal itself, or the goal itself.

Through a different understanding of universal philosophical concepts, which, in their multifaceted nature, cannot be fully grasped in theory, but only in their

1 *Mahatma, Vol. IV, Meeting of the Gandhi Seva Sangh*, February 29th to March 6th 1936; in: Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers*, 120, 121.

implementation in practice, he stirred rigidly entrenched social structures and political ideologies. This made him, among other things, the first non-Western thinker of the modern era to base his political theories on living experience. In doing so, he constantly asked questions of himself, of society and of politics that still resonate now, not only in the socio-political climate of his own country, but in the world at large. And yet, due to the everlasting relevance of his insights, which stem from his dynamic, practical process of philosophising and to the rebellious thought that evades all certainty and conformity, Gandhi remains an irreplaceable example of goodness and humanity.

The Dynamic Character of Gandhi's Philosophy

But where is the need for books?
Mahatma Gandhi²

Although *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, which comprise thousands of pages of treatise, including a wide range of philosophical topics, such as metaphysics and ethics, suggest a prolific production of diverse texts, Mahatma's seemingly provocative thought written at the very beginning of this section, reflects the nature of his real life. It reflects his philosophical and socio-political attitude, particularly in relation to India's exceptionally rich and multifaceted philosophical-religious and literary heritage, which dates back to the Vedic period of 1500 BC. Namely, Gandhi proclaimed himself a practical thinker who lacked time to write any substantial and coherent philosophical work, as is manifested, for instance, in the highly appraised work *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* (ed. Radhakrishnan and Muirhead, 1936), for which a range of eminent Indian thinkers contributed a "hefty" twenty to thirty pages, while Mahatma contributed less than one page. The real Gandhi, therefore, is first and foremost a dynamic practical thinker who reinterpreted ideas from various streams of philosophy, his own and Western traditions, in compliance with his own beliefs and immortalised them on paper in the form of short essays; yet, and this is the very core of his attitude, he managed to successfully rip them from the grip of the book covers and place them in the unpredictable sphere of the turbulent circumstances of his own life and larger social realities. Thus, Gandhi's path overlaps with two dimensions of philosophy, the textual and the experiential, the latter being essential for his personal and social progress. Namely, Gandhi's philosophy encompassed his personal struggle, which, for him didn't mean wrestling with difficult philosophical texts from his armchair, but

2 CWMG:62:225.

rather, involved his inner struggles in the context of socio-political developments. Many other Indian thinkers argued that if philosophy lacks the dimension of effort of practical examination, it is not true philosophy, but rather hypocrisy, to say the least. However, it is worth highlighting that Gandhi did not deny the enormous value and relevance of philosophy that came forth in various spiritual and cultural environments, but harshly criticised the theoretical debate on philosophical ideas without testing how they manifested in the unpredictable circumstances of everyday human life and the wider social reality. In fact, Gandhi's opening thought calls for the application of complex philosophical doctrines into practice, which he himself did for a good part of his life, and which gives his thought a particular inner dynamism and everlasting relevance. Many segments of his ideas still provide indispensable inspiration and give examples on how to resolve the pressing problems of humanity that are embedded in a series of perplexities of the contemporary world.

However, what essentially characterises Gandhi's system of thought and action is the idea of constant becoming as a fundamental feature of reality; the latter does not result in certainty and is not realised in a rigid and final propositional truth, but rather constantly transforms itself and questions the established conceptual horizons, while aiming for new solutions beyond the integrity and entrenchment of individual concepts. His approach thus shook up the old consolidated structures and thwarted the ladder leading to the untouchable One or God, and questioned the Supreme in the order of immanence and constant process of becoming. Namely, Gandhi's system is not metaphysical, but rather hypophysical. In some segments it is similar to Bergson's *élan vital*;³ it is a system characterised by speed⁴ as an elementary characteristic of unbridled change that places each firmly established piece of knowledge in continuous movement, and criss-crosses, undermines and rebuilds its various segments. Namely, the real knowledge is formed only at the level of immanence, circumscribed by a horizon of events of each particular sociohistorical situation. The ideas of speed, change and thought that claim their true place only in the order of constant becoming, have become topical also in contemporary Western philosophy, for instance in Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of immanence. Immanence as a plane where ideas become new and different for everyone again and again, a place that is the intersection of events and standpoints in each concrete situation only makes the concrete application of thought possible, and challenges one to find a way in one's thinking and to test one's own knowledge in the area of inevitable, constant change. However, in the world of becoming, as Gandhi himself experienced many times, no solution is finite – often, when he was convinced that he had found the solution, suddenly a new, unknown,

3 Mohan, Dwivedi, *Gandhi and Philosophy*, 3.

4 *Ibid.*

previously unnoticed horizon opened up before him, “a new curve of the plane, which [...] starts it all off again, posing new problems, a new batch of problems, advancing by successive surges and seeking concepts to come, concepts yet to be created”.⁵ Gandhi's insight, however, most successfully contributed to the immense flexibility of his system, which is why he did not bother much with theoretical or sophisticated argumentation or with the aporias of his own thinking and the inconsistencies of his own ideas, for which many, mainly academic philosophers, often reproached him. The mapping of philosophical ideas onto the unpredictable world of becoming always requires at least a partial “sacrifice” of the laws of coherent philosophical discourse, which constitutes, as Gandhi showed with his vital, dynamic philosophising, a supreme challenge to any philosophy. In fact, the inconsistency of his ideas is not due to a flaw in his approach, but rather to the ambivalences in theory that are inevitable and basically the only possible outcome of the application of complex concepts on a more complex reality, which is the fundamental characteristic of the process of practical philosophy. Gandhi understood his endeavour, i.e. placing universal concepts into layers of the changing world, and the dynamic context of lived Hinduism, imbued with boundless diversity, in terms of a never ending process, a constant journey to get closer to the truth, the continuous creation of a better future and a new history, with the aim of overcoming the repetition of the old history: “I have never made a fetish of consistency. I am a votary of Truth, and I must say I feel and think at a given moment on the question, without regard to what I may have said before on it. [...] As my vision gets clearer, my views must grow clearer with daily practice.”⁶ With his method of constantly getting closer, that is, in fact, a method beyond any definitely refined and airtight method, he often highlighted that he was not the author of any new concept, but merely attempted to apply the eternal truths to everyday life; in this sense, Gandhian knowledge has no real authorship, since it is impossible to define it as such, because of the very way in which it is researched. His knowledge is knowledge that is constantly in motion, constantly opening and resisting, and undermining itself. He was constantly learning along the way and saw his past positions as mistaken: “My aim is not to be consistent with my previous statements on a given question, but to be consistent with truth as it may present itself to me at a given moment. The result has been that I have grown from truth to truth.”⁷

5 Deleuze, Guattari, *What is philosophy?*, 82. Deleuze and Guattari also based their idea of political activism on the fact that it had to be rooted in becoming, considering the multiplicities beyond firmly fixed concepts and preconceived knowledge.

6 *Harijan*, 28th September 1934; in: Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers*, 398.

7 *Mabatma*, V, 25th September 1939; in: Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers*, 399.

The Many Facets of Truth

In his understanding of Truth, Gandhi drew on the idea of the Supreme One, *Brahman* that forms the bulk of the treatise of the Vedic philosophical scriptures, the *Upanishads* and constitutes the central field of interest of the Hindu school of *Advaita Vedanta*. Influenced by these systems of thought, Gandhi equated the Truth with the concept of One or God, and gave two eminent formulations in his works, namely “Truth is God” and “God is Truth”.⁸ As far as the last proposition is concerned, Gandhi highlighted that Truth is not an attribute of God, since the verb *is* is to be understood as absolute identity, for “God alone is, and nothing else exists. In fact, the Sanskrit word for truth is a word which literally means *that which exists, sat*.”⁹ The identity established at the level of theoretical discourse was enhanced in his own manner with a concrete aspect, namely, “you want to find Truth as God, the only inevitable means is love, that is, nonviolence”.¹⁰ Therefore, he understood Truth or God manifested as love and nonviolence in terms of an all-encompassing force that pervades all things. At the level of linguistic expression, he mainly made use of impersonal names of the Supreme, which points at the influence of *Advaita Vedanta*, but still, in spite of being favourable to this school, he radically moved away from its monistic idealism in some segments. For Gandhi did not conceive of the One, the unified Union as something accomplished from within, with no trace of particularity, but rather as a set of multiplicities that do not dissolve in the One but are essentially constituted by it. Reducing the existing multiplicity to the self-sufficient One and the simultaneous definition of this plurality as an illusion, *maya*, which is one of the fundamental principles of the system of *Advaita Vedanta*, according to Gandhi, eliminates the core of Truth, and thus being itself. The Truth is not a rigid, static reality, but a dynamic whole of many particularities; with this idea, Mahatma transformed the monistic plane of *Advaita Vedanta* into a place of utterance of all possible and ever-changing segments of life. Many have pointed to Gandhi’s inconsistencies, saying that on the one hand he argues for pluralism, and on the other for the idea of a formless One. The inconsistencies that stem from Gandhi’s “rehabilitation” of difference are only apparent because he overcame them through the idea of harmonious congruity, the Union, a tremendous force that is immanent in the world and flows through its infinite diversity, while at the same time encompassing it in all its totality. Thus, for Gandhi, the union of the One and the Many represents coherence and consistency.

However, in the conception of God, Truth, One and Union that are outlined above, Gandhi drew on two Jain doctrines, *anekantavada* and *syadvada*. *Anekantavada*

8 *Mahatma, III, Speech*, 1931; in: Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers*, 174.

9 *Ibid.*, 175.

10 *Ibid.*

(“non-one-sidedness”, “many-sidedness”) is based on the ontological assumption that the whole reality has multiple characters and constant change, while it is pervaded by a moment of unity and constancy. The ontology of the difference in one and change in constancy is essentially associated with the epistemic aspect of the doctrine of *syadvada* (from Skrt. *syāt*, e.g. “perhaps”, “may be”, “per chance”, “in some ways”), the core of which is rooted in the idea that the dynamic, plural reality can take on various standpoints that are equal, which means that none of them can become absolute or universally valid. Thus, the Jainists and Gandhi overcame the apparent inconsistencies among various perspectives and moved closer to the linking foundation of this diversity – the union of many-sidedness and constancy in change – the Truth. The aim of the philosophical exploration of reality, thus, is not a formulation of categorical propositions, since no standpoint can entirely adequately describe the complex character of reality. The idea that many contradicting statements can be formed on reality, since one sees it from various perspectives, is vividly portrayed in the parable of the blind man and the elephant from the Pali canon of the earliest Buddhist texts collection in the *Tiṭṭhaka*;¹¹ namely, when each of the blind men touched any of elephant’s body parts, he formulated his standpoint based on the unknown object before him. Similarly, people who are only acquainted with a single aspect of a particular segment of reality, formulate a standpoint on it and abide by it in terms of the only truth, and remain blind men, with no appreciation for the multifaceted character of being. Hence, the nature of each proposition is relative, valid only in a particular context and in particular life and historical circumstances, but it is also a relevant instance in a multi-layered mosaic of Truth. Truth as a domain of diversity and thus apparent inconsistencies is a non-exclusive creative force that covers all aspects of reality and in its limitless fullness cannot ever be neither fully grasped nor fully uttered. Gandhi, with his idea that even a thousand names of God cannot exhaust His nature and forms, since He has countless names and countless forms,¹² often resorted to the rhetorical recourse of particular ways of uttering the unutterable. In doing so, he relied, among other things, on the method akin to the Upanishadic double negation *neti neti* (“not this, not this”), which reflects the idea that one can never fully adequately describe the Ultimate Reality, nor, as Gandhi points out, the changing phenomenon that essentially constitutes the Ultimate. The power he calls either God or Truth is beyond any finite definition; it is uttered through numerous particularities in most various ways, but can never be fully uttered.

Thus, Gandhi defines himself as the seeker of the Truth, which he tirelessly seeks and occasionally gains insights into, but cannot grasp it in all its totality. With this attitude, he overcame the illusionary belief of the possibility of reaching total knowledge; the supreme

11 *Tiṭṭha sutta*, *Udāna* 6.4, *Khuddakanikāya*.

12 Richards, *The Philosophy of Gandhi*, 4.

achievement of knowledge lies, contrarily, in the awareness that there are many other, unknown aspects, which is of key relevance in understanding the nature of absolute Truth that transcends the concrete while being one.¹³ He highlighted that only understanding the relevant, historical and culturally conditioned truths can explain the universal, absolute ideals, such as Truth, God and Religion. Otherwise they remain dead dogmas.

Gandhi put his insights together into instances of absolute Truth through a series of insights into relative truth that characterised the times in which he lived and created, through his active participation in various layers of the social; only in this manner did the absolute ideals become a part of dynamic dialectics of the segments of the worldly, where they gain their true form. The relationship between the absolute and the relative also underpinned Gandhi's understanding of religion; he highlighted that there is one supreme Religion equal to Truth and God that consists of particular expressions of each individual religion. In addition, in the context of the religion he was born into, he recognised that the eternal Hindu *dharmā* (Skr. *sanātanadharmā*) acquires its facets through diverse manifestations in the area of the relative, changing world. According to him, Religion, Truth and God were seen as fixed and unalterable eternities, while at the same time they are constantly evolving. Thus, Gandhi also distinguished between the God of history and the living God of the present; once he said to the missionaries: "Do not preach the God of history, but show Him as He lives today through you."¹⁴

The heterogeneity of expression that characterises a single religious system, exists, of course, among various religions, while Gandhi highlighted the idea that all individual religions are a construct of humanity, but that as such contain one Truth at their core, which means that they are fundamentally alike. However, this uniform ground that unites the diversity of religious expressions and balances diversity, remains unaltered and unuttered as such. He understood religions in terms of various paths leading to one and the same goal, each individual religion being only one aspect, a concrete image of one universal Truth. Hence, he rejected the idea that Hinduism is polytheistic; namely, when the Hindu say that there are many gods, this is only a set of the dimensions of one, universal, uniform origin that unites not only the Hindu religious expressions, but also the aspects of all other religions.

Although Gandhi did not use the names of concrete gods to name the Supreme Ultimate, but, as mentioned above, made use of impersonal terms, he strongly rejected mainly the established positions of *Advaita Vedānta*, i.e. that ideas of a personal god only belong to the intellectually poor masses that are not capable of deeper spiritual insights. In doing so, influenced by the philosophical-religious poem the *Bhagavad-Gīta*, a fragment of the voluminous epic poem the *Mahābhārata*, which he considered the book of all books, his

13 *Ibid.*, 17.

14 *Young India*, 11th August 1927; in: Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers*, 151.

mother and eternal companion, he moved away from *Advaita Vedanta* and the contemplation of the remote, impersonal absolute, and exposed the key relevance of the idea of the direct presence of the Supreme in the world and in *bhakti*, i.e. devoted, genuine affinity between God and man. He denied the superiority of one or the other aspect and highlighted the equality of contemplation of the formless and worship of a personal God. For the sake of the idea of existence of the formless God, he did not deny God who incarnates in various forms and provides closeness to man; what he found particularly relevant in worldly worshipping of God in a concrete, tangible image, is the overcoming of the idea of the Supreme in terms of an intellectual concept. Namely, Gandhi understood God as an inherent force in the hearts of everyone, as the closest friend who loves everyone equally: "To me, God is Truth and Love; God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness. God is the source of Light and Life and yet He is above and beyond all these. God is conscience. He is even the atheism of the atheist. [...] He transcends speech and reason. [...] He is a personal God to those who need His personal presence. He is embodied to those who need His touch. He is the purest essence. He simply is to those who have faith. He is all things to all men. He is in us and yet above and beyond us."¹⁵ Through the influence of the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the vision of God, Truth, Religion as the all-pervading totality, immanent to the world and at the same time transcendental, he highlighted the equality of all dimensions of understanding the Supreme, while recognising the possibility of India and the world progressing towards greater humanity.

That one can think differently, either in the religious or any other context is, at the same time, essential to preserve constructive thinking and reflection,¹⁶ or as Foucault put it: "There are times in life when the question of knowing one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting all."¹⁷ The key to the existence of a variety of perspectives and accepting diversity are central elements of Gandhi's idea of dialogue as a fruitful form of conceptual and experiential exchange. As one of the relevant prerequisites for constructive dialogue between diversities, Gandhi, however, identified the bridging of ego – in yogic philosophy, defined as the anchor of all human hardship –, the elimination of his selfish endeavours which is also a necessary foundation of a peaceful inner life and aspiration for the welfare of the world through action, based on nonviolence. He relied his idea of nonviolence as the supreme ethical and religious ideal that begins "at a fundamental level with the diminution of the 'I' in the mind".¹⁸ He also based it on the doctrine of *syadvada*, which brought him insight into the necessary understanding

15 *Young India*, 5th March 1925; in: Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers*, 145, 146.

16 Puri, *The Tagore-Gandhi Debate on Matters of Truth and Untruth*, 1.

17 Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. II: The Use of Pleasure*, 8.

18 Puri, *The Tagore-Gandhi Debate on Matters of Truth and Untruth*, 4.

of other positions that were contrary to his own. From this, he built his affinity with everything, including everything that was alien to him, and thus the Gandhian love is not only love of one's neighbour, but also of one's enemy. The ideal of all-pervading and non-exclusive love is the basis of any change and gradual realisation of *sarvodaya* the welfare of the whole world and service to everything, which is, nevertheless, also the most telling expression of understanding of the nature of Truth. Gandhi as an "integral pluralist",¹⁹ as he sometimes referred to himself, drew from the idea of the absence of absolute certainty regarding what Truth is, while through various aspects of truth, he grounded his philosophy of nonviolence or *ahimsa* that bridged the gap between his own spiritual development and the pursuit of the common good. He transformed his understanding of nonviolence into moral practice, into an affirmative political attitude that was favourable to the world, while highlighting that if any individual, politics and religion follow the principle of respect and nonviolence, they move closer to the absolute ideal of Truth itself. As it has already been highlighted at the beginning of this section, love and nonviolence are the manifestations of Truth in the world *par excellence*.

Strategies for Global Action

Mahatma based his constant, never ending method of getting closer to the Truth through practice, with the doctrine of *karmayoga* from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which calls for a departure from Upanishadic asceticism and preaches necessary active engagement in the area of the worldly, which is a prerequisite for attaining the supreme spiritual ideal of *moksha*, i.e. the final liberation from the cycle of rebirth and death, *sansara*. At the same time, and this was essential for Gandhi, *moksha* is the foundation that preserves the welfare of the whole world, *lokasangraha*. However, active engagement in the worldly, as taught by the poem, must result from preliminary personal transformation that leads to the annihilation of the endeavours of the ego and thus the attitude of acting unselfishly, *nishkamakarma*, without any particular motives. A human with such an attitude becomes simple, and out of simplicity arises a peace of mind²⁰ that enables one to see the true character of Truth more clearly.

Gandhi, therefore, understood *karmayoga* as a way of global action, devoted to seeking Truth and to enable seeing it, but also as a way of getting closer to the ideal of non-violent being. Nevertheless, since the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which is structured as a dialogue between god Krishna and warrior Arjuna, is integrated into a broader context of warfare

19 Jahanbegloo, *The Global Gandhi*, 38.

20 Petek, *Bhagavadgita. Onstran vezi, tostran svobode (The Bhagavad-Gita. On the Farther Side of Ties, on the Inside of Freedom)*, 207.

in the *Mahabharata*, numerous debates have arisen throughout history on the issue of whether it holds the possibility of nonviolent action at all. The most pressing issue is raised on the surface of the doctrine of *varnadharma*, the duties of social classes that are not attributed to a human from the outside, either on behalf of a family or of social institutions, but are in the epic poem attributed as characteristics of the material existence one was born with and thus should be respected unconditionally; otherwise there is an unreasonable and fruitless resistance against one's own identity. On the basis of this premise, god Krishna commands warrior Arjuna to fight, as this is his unconditional duty and needs to be fulfilled; however, this duty inevitably involves violence, which, particularly in the context of Gandhi's interpretation, questions the reasonableness of his insisting on the idea of the possibility of action without violence. Here, it has to be highlighted that Mahatma himself was aware of numerous dilemmas stemming from this complex issue, not only in the case of the warrior's social class, but also in the context of any global action: "Perfect nonviolence is impossible so long as we exist physically, for we would want some space at least to occupy. Perfect nonviolence whilst you are inhabiting the body is only a theory like Euclid's point or straight line, but we have to endeavour every moment of our lives."²¹ He therefore denied the possibility of total absence of violence by drawing from the Jaina idea that a human with primal physiological processes puts an end to beings – unintentionally, of course, but according to the laws of their nature. For instance, by breathing, we absorb a multitude of microscopically small beings. At the same time, he highlighted the possibility of consciously cultivating nonviolence that may be attained through dedicated effort and gradual spiritual progress. He believed that a human's eternal spirit, *atman*, holds incredible power that leads to putting nonviolence into action and insisted on the idea that a human's fundamental mission is to preach *ahimsa* to the world, while adding that this mission stems from human nature, to which nonviolence is inherent: "Nonviolence is the law of our species."²² Of course, this does not mean that the ideal of such action is easily put into practice,²³ but rather requires incredible discipline, dedicated psycho-physical training and giving up one's egocentric aspirations, *anasaktiyoga*.

Moreover, Gandhi's understanding of the *Bhagavad-Gita* was influenced by theosophic interpretations of the poem that highlighted its allegorical character, in compliance with the understanding of theosophists through whom in 1888/1889 Mahatma first became acquainted with the poem,²⁴ and who highlighted that wars are not to be

21 *Harijan*, 21st July 1940; in: Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers*, 223, 224.

22 "Introduction"; in: Gandhi: *All Men Are Brothers*, 12.

23 Richards, *The Philosophy of Gandhi*, 35.

24 "Introduction"; in: *Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi*, xv. Mahatma first read *The Bhagavad-Gita* in the translation by Sir Edwin Arnold titled *The Song Celestial* from 1885 that stands as the first English translation of the poem.

seen as concrete fighting, but rather as a spiritual allegory.²⁵ The field of Kuru, Kurukshetra, where the feuding families of Kuru and Pandu are confronted, represents a symbol of constant inner struggle between the good and the evil within a human, a symbol of overcoming the desires through cultivation of detachment that cannot be attained through “intellectual feat”, but only through “heart-churn”,²⁶ which leads to disinterested action that eliminates egocentric ways of living in the world, directed only towards attaining one’s own goals. Gandhi understood the latter in terms of an elementary basis of humanity and serving other people, and in this context defined *karmayoga* as a way of global action that leads to *ahimsa* and thus to getting closer to Truth.

Therefore, the famous story of the foaming milky ocean from the *Bhagavata Purana* that recounts the battle between gods and demons, but at the same time symbolises a struggle between good and evil and the nature of the created world where there is a battle between right and wrong, order and chaos,²⁷ could be defined, according to Gandhi’s understanding, as the allegory of an inner struggle in a human, the constant “foaming” or “heart-churn” and the image of concrete struggles in the world, which are overcome with nonviolent action through prior victory of good within a human.

The personal, human transformation – the inner “revolution” is also Gandhi’s fundamental argument for the possibility of nonviolent transformation – the outer “revolution” in line with the highest possible good. In light of the latter, Mahatma, in spite of many objections that wars are often necessary in order to eliminate evil in the world, insisted that the violent struggle is always wrong and never justified. Hence, his position could be compared to the steadfast position of Yudhishtira, a Pandava warrior who, according to the duties of his class and thus the law of his own material existence, had to be involved in a battle, but up until his last breath, stood by the idea that the duties of warriors, i.e. *kshatriyadharma*, which involve violent action, are unpardonable sin. Unconditionally, Yudhishtira bet on the possibility of nonviolent action in the world and never let his identity of *kshatriya* overcome *ahimsa*.²⁸ Similar to Yudhishtira, Gandhi radically re-interpreted the established concept of *kshatriyadharma*, did not deny the duties of social classes, in this case the warriors, but rather insisted on the idea that *kshatriyas* should think of other, alternative ways of nonviolence that is always an option.²⁹ Thus Gandhi transformed the warrior Arjuna’s existential crisis and dilemma in the *Bhagavad-Gita* about fulfilling a warrior’s duty to kill or abandon it into an effort to choose between violence or nonviolence.

25 Petek, *Bhagavadgita. Onstran vezi, tostran svobode (The Bhagavad-Gita. On the Farther Side of Ties, on the Inside of Freedom)*, 67.

26 “Introduction”; in: *Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi*, xix.

27 Petek, “Iz purán”; in: *Razgledi po staroindijski književnosti*, 418.

28 Petek, *Bhagavadgita. Onstran vezi, tostran svobode (The Bhagavad-Gita. On the Farther Side of Ties, on the Inside of freedom)*, 99.

29 Richards, *The Philosophy of Gandhi*, 40.

Therefore, Gandhi understood that abiding in the faith of the power of nonviolence meant getting closer to Truth as well as providing a choice leading to individual and collective freedom.³⁰ He felt that the decision to act violently is mostly driven by human fear and moral weakness, which leads to even greater loss of freedom; in the latter he saw this as the reason for Indian subjugation to the coloniser. The weakness of will that is the inability to engage in nonviolence is related to Aristotle's *akrasia* (Gr. *âkrasia*), the lack of self-governance that makes one turn away from doing what one knows one ought to do. According to Gandhi, this powerlessness may be overcome through gradual cultivation of detachment and personal transformation.³¹

However, to shed more light on Gandhi's approach, the distinction between active and passive power is of crucial relevance. Active force refers to physical force and is, according to Mahatma, that which alienates one from one's true nature and from other entities in the world, while passive force pervades everything with virtue and thus brings closer.³² Namely, the passive force of nonviolence in the force of love, *satyagraha*; passive resistance is a method of the soul-force that is "infinitely superior to body-force. If people in order to secure redress of wrongs resort to soul-force, much of the present suffering will be avoided."³³ Thus, he defined nonviolence as the most powerful force in the world; the "science" of passive force, hypophysics³⁴ has the power of cohesion, but if the latter is exhausted and active force prevails, the collapse of civilisation will take place.

Gandhi's endeavour to put nonviolence into action in the world on all levels was also influenced by Buddhist and Jaina ideals of nonviolence, stemming from the all-pervading love of everything living, including the smallest, insignificant being, while his understanding of *ahimsa* was influenced by the streams of Indian philosophy and religion and, for instance, by Thoreau, Tolstoy, Ruskin and Emerson. His concept of the relationship between truth and nonviolence was elaborated by Tolstoy's novel *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, which he read at a time when he was completely lost in doubt and full of scepticism about the meaningfulness of his endeavours. Ultimately, Tolstoy "cured" him of scepticism³⁵ and restored his faith in the power of nonviolence; for this reason, he was one of the fundamental inspirations for Gandhi; Gandhi referred to him as the great apostle of nonviolence, who not only preached nonviolence, but lived it.³⁶ He also took from Tolstoy the idea of the double nature of nonviolence, along with the

30 Puri, *The Tagore-Gandhi Debate on Matters of Truth and Untruth*, 144.

31 *Ibid.*

32 Mohan, Dwivedi, *Gandhi and Philosophy*, 99, 100.

33 *Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*; in: Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers*, 240.

34 *Ibid.*, 109.

35 *Mahatma, II, Message on Tolstoy Centenary*, 1928; in: Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers*, 410.

36 *Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, 1933; in: Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers*, 240.

“negative” definition in terms of avoiding harmful acts, a “positive” dimension is also relevant and manifests in strengthening love and compassion.

Therefore, according to Gandhi, the endeavour to live nonviolently, in thoughts, words and deeds, meant getting closer to Truth and realising Truth, while violence leads far away from it; at the same time, he understood getting closer to Truth as realisation of nonviolence: “*Ahimsa* is my God, and Truth is my God. When I look for *ahimsa*, Truth says: ‘Find it through me.’ When I look for truth, *ahimsa* says: ‘Find it through me.’”³⁷ Truth and nonviolence, therefore, are mutually dependent, the realisation of one mutually supports the deepened realisation of the other; nonviolent action leads to an insight into Truth, but at the same time having an insight into multi-layered Truth leads to even more unwavering practice of nonviolence. Based on the latter, one may come to a conclusion that Truth and nonviolence are two sides of the same coin. According to Gandhi, nonviolence realised in practice is Truth itself.

Gandhi’s Rebellious and Non-Conformist Philosophy as an Art of Being

The philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi intertwines the teachings of Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina traditions and segments of Western philosophical thought, the ideas of One and Many, constancy and change, the universal and the particular, transcendence and immanence, the spiritual and the material, the impersonal absolute and the loving circle of closeness, philosophical contemplation and active involvement in the world. With a heterogenous intertwining of most various conceptual horizons, he managed to forge a unique vision of his mission and the world while stemming mostly from the idea that philosophy should first and foremost be a way of life. Gandhi’s attitude can be illuminated by Pierre Hadot’s reflections, i.e. that true philosophy is an art of being, a method of spiritual progress that demands a radical transformation of previous ways of life; it is an exercise in attaining wisdom, supported by constant effort, which does not mean only knowing something, but means *being* – in a different way. For Hadot, the example of philosophy that is not only a theoretical and conceptualising activity, but provides an answer to the question “How to live like a philosopher?”³⁸, is represented by Socrates who was also the only hero of Gandhi’s – in life and in death. Mahatma began to recognise Socrates’ attitude in himself when he lived in South Africa, most intensively in 1908 when he was imprisoned. That is when he read Plato’s Apology in English and then wrote his own Apology in Gujarati titled *Ek satyavirni katha* (*Story of a True Soldier* or *Story of a Soldier of Truth*) in which he wrote that one

37 *Young India*, 4th June 1925; in: Gandhi, *My God*, 18.

38 Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 286, 287.

must learn to live and die like Socrates. He named him great *satyagrahi*, who unwaveringly defies hatred and evil and is prepared to sacrifice himself any time, in any circumstances, and unconditionally defend his philosophy and stand firm when facing death. In one of his writings collected in *Young India*, he defined Socrates as someone who strives for Truth,³⁹ and along with Jesus Christ and Daniel, the prophet of the *Bible*, represented “the purest form of passive or soul-force”,⁴⁰ someone who knew all too well that any physical force is completely incomparable to its power.

Gandhi and Socrates distinguish in their non-conformist attitude, forged by their desire to shake the ivory towers of rigid untouchable beliefs and break away from the conventional; the rebellious wisdom and method of raising the issues as was the case of “renegades” or “lone riders”, and “marginality” of their peaceful dissident minds were able to re-evaluate the haughty ideals of the time they lived in.⁴¹ There is no doubt that Socrates had a great Indian successor. One can say without hesitation that when Mahatma followed Socrates in his endeavours, he actually surpassed his Greek role model. Namely, Gandhi proved the power of philosophy tested in practice, drawing from insights that the world, at its core, is marked by constant change. It is a wide-open field of possibilities for change – change taking place from the inside out.

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39 *Young India*, 13th November, 1925; in: Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers*, 184, 185.

40 *Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*; in: Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers*, 240.

41 Jahanbegloo, *The Global Gandhi*, 129.

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