

Naturalism, Pragmatism & Non-Violence Bringing Ahimsa Down to Earth

By
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Like many Unitarian Universalists throughout our history, I have long valued and strived to practice the principles of nonviolence. In fact I've believed in nonviolence since I was a teenager, ever since I saw Richard Attenborough's film, *Gandhi*, years before I'd ever heard of Unitarian Universalism. In college, while preparing for the Southern Baptist ministry, mine was the lone voice on campus that did not cheer President Ronald Reagan's decision in 1986 to begin bombing targets in Libya in retaliation against Moammar Kadafi. My fellow ministerial students often argued against me, despite the fact that I had the teachings of Jesus on my side, by asking the question, "What would you do if someone was harming an innocent child or someone you love? Wouldn't you use force if necessary to protect them?" If I answered "yes," which would have been the most honest response—I would use violence, if necessary, to protect the people I love—they would say, "What's the difference in using violence in this way, and using it to protect thousands or millions against an evil dictator or tyrant?"

This argument seemed pretty persuasive and was hard to argue against, even though I now realize the analogy is weak. For even though I would admittedly succumb to my purest instinct and use violence if absolutely necessary to protect the people I love, if not innocent people I don't even know, I would do so, only to protect someone in immediate danger. And though I might use my fists or even a weapon against a dangerous individual in the act of a violent crime, I would not drop a bomb on that person that also ends up killing everyone in the neighborhood! Nor could I ever conceive of preempting the potential threat of such a thug by dropping bombs on his various hangouts in populated areas, then try to justify my own violence and indiscriminate killing of innocent people by saying I was trying to protect other innocent people—perhaps appealing to a Utilitarian ethic, or referring to my own victims as "collateral damage."

So, for me, my instinct to protect innocent people and my loved ones from harm and violence is not at all the same as going to war. The analogy is nothing but a red herring. But what has been most troubling to me over the years, and what has been difficult for me to admit until now, is that there are circumstances, right or wrong, in which I would use violence against another person. For how can I reconcile this knowledge about myself with my long held belief in nonviolence?

Moreover, in addition to my belief in *ahimsa*, I am a naturalist. I believe that one of the greatest sources of human suffering and psychosis is the repression of our basic instincts, and the instinct to protect ourselves from harm is wired into the most vital part of our brain, the reptilian brain that moves us toward fight or flight; and our instinct to protect our loved ones is deeply imbedded in that part of the brain we share with all warm blooded creatures. Protecting those we love is part of what it means to be a mammal. To repress this instinct, then, seems unnatural to me, and creates inner conflict between my naturalistic philosophy and my nonviolent philosophy.

Fortunately, I am not alone in this struggle. Gandhi himself struggled over the necessity of violence in our lives. “In life, it is impossible to eschew violence completely,” he said, “Now the question arises, where is one to draw the line?”¹ Gandhi, a devout vegetarian, struggled, in particular, over what to do about the insects and animals that threatened his community’s food supply, “If I wish to be an agriculturalist and stay in the jungle,” he lamented, “I will have to use the minimum unavoidable violence, in order to protect my fields. I will have to kill monkeys, birds, and insects, which eat up my crops.”² Oddly enough, Gandhi, who could be extremely puritanical, wasn’t as extreme about nonviolence as you might think. “Evil and good are relative terms,” he said, and, “to allow crops to be eaten up by animals, in the name of *ahimsa*, while there is a famine in the land, is certainly a sin.”³

More importantly, he struggled over the question with which we began, are we obligated to protect others from violence even if it means using violence ourselves? “My nonviolence does not admit running away from danger and leaving dear ones unprotected,” he wrote, “Between violence and cowardly flight, I can only prefer violence to cowardice.”⁴ Elsewhere he said, “Even manslaughter may be necessary in certain cases. Suppose a man runs amuck and goes furiously about, sword in hand, and killing anyone that comes in his way, and no one dares to capture him alive. Anyone who dispatches this lunatic will earn the gratitude of the community and be regarded as a benevolent man.”⁵ And once, while discussing a failed assassination attempt with his son, Gandhi said, “I told him that it was his duty to defend me even by using violence.”⁶

The point here for me is that our devotion to any of our values must be based in reality, and reality is always relational. If we adhere to our values and principles without considering their real-life consequences, then, I agree with Gandhi, we sin against others. And by the way, I think it is only possible to sin against others, never against God. God is but another name for our principles, and if our actions are meant only to prop up our own principles, at all costs, even at the expense of others, then our principles are meaningless and, potentially, destructive. That’s really why people need gods, so they can justify harming others. This is true, even of nonviolence. If we idolatryze it, making a God of it, without considering its consequences to others, then even *ahimsa* becomes a source of evil in the world, not good.

Oddly enough, however, it has not been my study of Gandhi that has awakened me to my own idolatryzing of nonviolence, but a recent reading of Sigmund Freud’s, *Society and its Discontents*, in which he questions the morality of another of my most cherished principles, the Golden Rule. “The command is impossible to fulfill,” he wrote,

¹ Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers*, Kripalani, Krishna, ed., Continuum, New York, NY, 1982, p. 91.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. p. 93.

⁵ Ibid. p. 84.

⁶ Ibid. p. 94.

“such an enormous inflation of love can only lower its value and not remedy the evil.”⁷ It’s taken me a long time to get over the shock of this statement and others he made like it. And unlike many, I am not willing to dismiss Freud simply because he’s Freud. I must honestly engage with his ideas in a logical manner, no matter how much I don’t like them or want to disagree with them. But the possibility he might be right, that it is possible to inflate the importance of love to the point that it lowers its value and love itself becomes a potential source of evil in the world, is extremely threatening to some of my most sacred beliefs.

At first I was only willing to admit that I disagreed with Freud because I needed to, and that this need might indeed be rooted in my own unconscious desires to feel good about myself by inflating goodness itself into a set of principles that cannot be practically live out. But as I’ve continued to wrestle with this question, I’ve come to believe that he was right in so much that love is meaningless if it cannot be lived out. Love, nonviolence, justice, equality—none of these principles mean anything if they cannot be put into practice, and mean even less if in putting them into practice we end up manifesting hatred, suffering, injustice, and oppression in the world. I have come to believe that principles should never be put before people, and that our values are not superior to our relationships. When our values and principles harm others, it’s time to change our values and principles. When obedience to God’s commandments harms others, we should disobey them! As Jesus said, “The [law] is made for humankind, not humankind for the [law].”⁸

The point is that, as a species that is extremely social and extremely dependent upon others, especially the first two decades of our lives, nonviolence, under most circumstances comes perfectly natural to us. If we mature in a healthy normal manner, we don’t want to see others harmed or mistreated because compassion is hardwired into us. But it is also out of compassion that we have an urge to protect others from harm, and why, as a society, we continue to struggle for equality and against oppression.

And it is in this struggle to fulfill our basic instincts, the care for others and ourselves, that nonviolence should be employed, not as a principle, but as an extremely practical tool for social change. “I am not a visionary,” Gandhi said, “I clam to be a practical idealist.”⁹ Gandhi understood that his ideals were only as good as their consequences. Another way to put is to say, we should not employ nonviolence because it is the right thing to do, but because it works! Nonviolence is the most practical method of resolving conflict because it is the least harmful and less costly way of doing so.

As Americans we are especially pragmatic. Indeed, pragmatism is the only major philosophical system that has ever come out of our country. But it might surprise you to learn that the use of nonviolence in the struggle for social justice is also American,

⁷ Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and its Discontents*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, NY, 1930, 1994 p. 68f.

⁸ Mark 2:27

⁹ Gandhi, *ibid.* p. 95.

beginning with Henry David Thoreau, not Gandhi. Thoreau, who wrote *Civil Disobedience*, and went to jail for refusing to pay war taxes, influenced the Russian author and pacifist, Leo Tolstoy, who, in turn, influenced Gandhi. In America we have used its techniques, including boycotts, sit-ins, marches, demonstrations, and non-cooperation in our collective efforts to abolish slavery, advance women's rights, workers' rights, and civil rights. And as a nation of pragmatists we continue to use nonviolence because it is practical—it works!

Just consider what people like Gandhi, as well as Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, and our own Martin Luther King, Jr., were able to accomplish using nonviolence. More recently, "In 1989 alone," as theologian Walter Wink reminds us, "thirteen nations comprising 1.7 billion people—over thirty-two percent of humanity—experienced nonviolent revolutions. They succeeded beyond anyone's wildest expectations in every case but China. And they were completely peaceful (on the part of the protesters) in every case but Romania and parts of the Southern U.S.S.R."¹⁰ He goes on to calculate that if we add up all the countries transformed by nonviolence in the 20th Century, "the figure reaches almost 3 billion—a staggering sixty-four percent of humanity!"¹¹ These accomplishments were much greater than anything ever accomplished by war. War, in fact, because of its extreme expense, both in terms of resources and lives lost, is incredibly impractical.

Again, according to Walter Wink's figures, during the past five hundred years alone we have only proven to become more efficient killers. In the 1500's 1.6 million were killed. In the 1600's the number was inverted to 6.1 million. In the 18th Century, 7 million were killed, a number that increased to 19.4 million just a hundred years later. During the 20th Century, 109 million people were killed in warfare. According to Wink the only number that has remained consistent over the centuries is that "Roughly half of those killed were civilians,"¹² a number, which does, however, seem to fluctuate from decade to decade. "In the 1980s," he writes, "the proportion of civilian deaths jumped to 74 percent, and in the 1990s it appears to have been close to 90 percent."¹³ And now, less than a decade into the 21st Century, we have already managed to get a good start on beating all our previous records.

So, yes, as a human being, and as a Unitarian Universalist in particular, I reject violence in most circumstances, and war in every circumstance because of its utter failure, and that it goes against my purest instinct to protect life and care for others. And I shall continue to devote myself to nonviolence as a way of living, but not because it is a principle that makes me feel good about myself, or because it's a Unitarian's version of God, but because it works and, in most circumstances, seems the most natural way to live and the best way of relating to others.

¹⁰ Wink, Walter, *The Powers that Be*, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1998, p. 57.

¹¹ Eisler, Riane, *The Chalice and the Blade*, HarperSan Francisco, 1987, 1995, p. 144.

¹² Wink, *Ibid.*, p. 42ff.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.