Gandhi, the Philosopher

1. I was once asked by a literary magazine to write a review essay on Nehru. Some weeks later, I was asked by the editor if I would throw in Gandhi as well. As it happened I never wrote the piece, but I remember thinking that it was like being asked while climbing the Western Ghats whether I would take a detour and climb Mount Everest as well. I am not now trying to scale any great peak or to give a defining interpretation to Gandhi. Its generally foolhardy to write about Gandhi, not only because you are never certain you've got him right, but because you are almost sure to have him wrong. There is a lack of plain argument in his writing and there is an insouciance about fundamental objections, which he himself raises, to his own intuitive ideas. The truth of his claims seem to him so instinctive and certain that mere arguments seem frivolous even to readers who disagree with them. Being trained in a discipline of Philosophy of a quite different temperament, I will try to not get distracted by the irritation I sometimes feel about this.

In reading Gandhi recently I have been struck by the integrity of his ideas. I don't mean simply that he was a man of integrity in the sense that he tried to make his actions live up to his ideals, though perhaps in fact he tried more than most to do so. I mean something

more abstract: that his thought itself was highly integrated, his ideas about very specific political strategies in specific contexts flowed (and in his mind necessarily flowed) from ideas that were very remote from politics. They flowed from the most abstract epistemological and methodological commitments. This quality of his thought sometimes gets lost because, on the one hand, the popular interest in him has been keen to find a man of great spirituality and uniqueness and, on the other, the social scientist's and historian's interest in him has sought out a nationalist leader with a strikingly effective method of non-violent political action. It has been common for some decades now to swing from a sentimental perception of him as a "Mahatma" to a cooler assessment of Gandhi as "the shrewd politician". I will steer past this oscillation because it hides the very qualities of his thought I want to uncover. The essay is not so much (in fact hardly at all) inspired by the plausibility of the philosophy that emerges as by the stunning intellectual ambition and originality that this 'integrity' displays.

2. Non-violence is a good place to get a *first* glimpse of what I have in mind.

Violence has many sides. It can be spontaneous or planned, it can be individual or institutional, it can be physical or psychological, it

can be delinquent or adult, it can be revolutionary or authoritarian. A great deal has been written on violence: on its psychology, on its possible philosophical justifications under certain circumstances, and of course on its long career in military history. *Non*-violence has no sides at all. Being negatively defined, it is indivisible. It began to be a subject of study much more recently and there is much less written on it, not merely because it is defined in negative terms but because until it became a self-conscious instrument in politics in this century, it was really constituted *as* or *in* something else. It was studied under different names, first usually as part of religious or contemplative ways of life remote from the public affairs of men and state, and later with the coming of romantic thought in Europe, under the rubric of critiques of industrial civilization.

For Gandhi, both these contexts were absolutely essential to his conception of non-violence. Non-violence was central in his nationalist mobilization against British rule in India. But the concept is also situated in an essentially religious temperament as well as in a through-going critique of ideas and ideologies of the Enlightenment and of an intellectual paradigm of perhaps a century earlier than the Enlightenment. This is a paradigm in which science became set on a path, which seemed destined to lead to *cumulative* results, building to a *progressively* complete

understanding of the world in which we lived, a world which we could as a result control. It is a familiar point that there is no understanding Gandhi, the anti-colonial nationalist, without situating him in these larger trajectories of his thought.

The strategy of non-violent resistance was first introduced by him so as to bring into the nationalist efforts against the British, an element beyond making only constitutional demands. On the face of it, for those reared on western political ideas, this seemed very odd. Constitutional demands, as they are understood in liberal political theory, are the essence of non-violent politics; as is well known the great early propounders of liberal democratic thought conceived and still conceive of constitutions and their constraints on human public action as a constraint against tendencies toward violence in the form of coercion of individuals by states and other collectivities, not to mention by other individuals. So why did Gandhi, the prophet of non-violence, think that the Indian people, in their demands for greater self-determination, needed more than constitutional demands? And why did he think that this is best called "non-violent" action? The obvious answer is the instrumental and strategic one: he knew that making demands for constitutional change had not been particularly effective or swift in the first two decades of this century, and that since the conventionally conceived alternative was violent revolutionary

action --which found advocates on the fringes of nationalist sentiment in India-- he instead introduced his own strategy of civil disobedience, at once a non-violent and yet a non- or extra-constitutional strategy. But, of course, he had more in mind than this obvious motive.

First, Gandhi wanted all of India to be involved in the movement, in particular the vast mass of its peasant population. He did not want the nationalist achievement to be the effort of a group of elite, legally and constitutionally trained, upper-middle class Indian men ("Macaulay's bastards"), who argued in assemblies and round-table conferences. He almost single-handedly transformed a movement conceived and promoted along those lines by the Congress party into a mass movement of enormous scale, and he did so within a few years of arriving from South Africa on Indian soil. Non-violent action was the central idea of this vast mobilization. Second, he knew that violent revolutionary action could not possibly carry the mass of people with it. Revolutionary action was mostly conceived hugger-mugger in underground cells and took the form of isolated subversive terrorist action against key focal points of government power and interest, it was not conceived as a mass movement. He was not unaware that there existed in the West ideologies of revolutionary violence which were geared to mass movements, but he was not unaware either,

that these were conceived in terms of middle-class leadership *vanguards* that were the fonts of authority. Peasant consciousness mattered very little to them. In Gandhi there was not a trace of this vanguard mentality of a Lenin. He did indeed think that his 'satyagrahis' -- the non-violent activists whom he described, with that term, as 'seekers of truth'-- would provide leadership which the masses would follow, but it was absolutely crucial to him that these were not to be the vanguard of a revolutionary party along Leninist lines. They were to be thought of along entirely different lines, they were to be *moral exemplars*, not ideologues who claimed to know history and its forward movement better than the peasants to whom they were giving the lead. Third, Gandhi chose his version of non-violent civil disobedience instead of the constitutional demands of the Congress leadership because he thought that the Indian people should not merely ask the British to leave their soil. It was important that they should do so by means that were not dependent and derivative of ideas and institutions that the British had imposed on them. Otherwise, even if the British left, the Indian populations would remain a subject people. This went very deep in Gandhi and his book Hind Swaraj, is full of a detailed anxiety about the *cognitive* enslavement even of the nationalist and anti-colonial Indian mind, which might, even after independence, never recover from that enslavement.

These points are well known, and they raise the roughly political considerations which underlie his commitment to non-violence. As I said, they give only a *first* glimpse of the integrity of his ideas. There are deeper and more ambitious underlying grounds than these in his writing.

3. The idea that non-violence was of a piece with the search for truth was central to what I have called his 'integrity' and to these more ambitious and abstract considerations than the ones I have just discussed. Gandhi was explicit about this, even in the terminology he adopted, linking *ahimsa* (non-violence) with *satyagraha* (literally, 'truth-force', or more liberally, a tenacity in the pursuit of truth). There is a standard and entrenched reading of Gandhi which understands the link as follows (and I am quoting from what is perhaps the most widely read textbook of modern Indian history, Sumit Sarkar's, Modern India): "Non-violence or ahimsa and satyagraha to Gandhi personally constituted a deeply-felt and worked-out philosophy owing something to Emerson, Thoreau and Tolstoy but also revealing considerable originality. *The search for truth was the goal of human life, and as no one could ever be sure of having attained the truth, use of violence to enforce one's own view of it was sinful.*" (p. 179; the emphasis is mine)

I have no doubt that Gandhi says things that could lead to such a reading, and for years, I assumed that it was more or less uncontroversially, what he had in mind. After scrutiny of his writings however, especially his many dispatches to Young India, it seems to me now a spectacular misreading. It fails to cohere with his most fundamental thinking.

Notice that according to this reading, or misreading, his view is no different from one of the most celebrated liberal arguments for tolerance --the meta-inductive argument of Mill's On Liberty. Mill contends that since much that we have thought to be true in the past has turned out to be wrong, this in itself suggests that what we presently think true might also be wrong. We should therefore tolerate not repress dissent from our present convictions just in case they are not true. According to Mill, and according to Gandhi on this widespread misreading of him, truth is never something we are sure we have attained. We must therefore be *made modest* in the way we hold our present opinions, and we must not impose our own conceptions of the truth on others. To do so would be a form of violence, especially if it was enforced by the apparatus of the state.

The modesty would appeal to Gandhi, but he would find something very alien in Mill's argument for it. There is no echo in Gandhi of the idea that the source of this modesty is that however much we

seek truth, we cannot attain it, which is what Sarkar contends is the ground of his non-violence. In fact, it makes little sense to say that truth (or anything else) is something we should *seek*, even if we can never attain it. How can we intend to attain what we know we cannot attain? It would be bootless to protest that Gandhi and Mill are not saying that we can never attain the truth, only that we cannot know if we have attained it --- so there is still point in the search for truth. That does little to improve matters. What sort of a goal or search is that? On this epistemological view, our inquiry and search for truth would be analogous to sending a message in a bottle out to sea, a search that is blinded about its own possible success, making all success a sort of bonus or fluke.

In any case, there is something rather odd in Mill's argument for tolerance. There is an unsettling tension between the argument's first two premises. The first premise is that our past beliefs have often turned out to be wrong. The second is that this is grounds for thinking that our present opinions might be wrong. And the conclusion is that we should therefore be tolerant of dissent from current opinion. But the fact is that when past opinions are said to be wrong, that is a judgement made from the *present* point of view, and we cannot make that judgement unless we have the conviction in the present opinions which Mill is asking us not to have. It is all right to be asked to be diffident about our present opinions, but

then we should, at least to that extent, be diffident about our judgement made on their basis, viz., that our past opinions are wrong. And if so, the first premise is shakier than he presents it as being.

The pervasive diffidence and lack of conviction in our opinions which is the character of the epistemology that Mill's argument presupposes, is entirely alien to Gandhi; and though he is all in favour of the modesty with which we should be holding our opinions, that modesty does not have its source in such an epistemology and such a conception of unattainable truth. What, then, is its source?

It is quite elsewhere than where Sarkar and everybody else who has written on Gandhi has located it; its source is to be found in his conception of the very nature of moral response and moral judgement. The 'satyagrahi' or non-violent activist has to show a certain kind of self-restraint, in which it was not enough simply not to commit violence. It is equally important not to bear hostility to others or even to criticize them; it is only required that one not follow these others, if conscience doesn't permit it. To show hostility and contempt, to speak or even to think negatively and critically, would be to give in to the spiritual flaws that underlie violence, to have the wrong conception of moral judgement. For it is not the point of moral judgment to criticize. (In the section

called "Ashram Vows" of his book Hindu Dharma, he says, "Ahimsa is not the crude thing it has been made to appear. Not to hurt any living thing is no doubt part of ahimsa. But it is its least expression. It is hurt by hatred of any kind, by wishing ill of anybody, by making negative criticisms of others.") This entails the modesty with which one must hold one's moral opinions, and which Mill sought in a quite different source: in a notion of truth which we are never sure we have attained and therefore (from Gandhi's point of view) in a quite untenable epistemology. The alternative source of the modesty in Gandhi has less to do with issues about truth, and more to do with the way we must hold our moral values.

Despite the modesty, one could, of course, *resist* those with whom one disagrees, and Gandhi made an art out of refusal and resistance and disobedience. But resistance is not the same as criticism. It can be done with a 'pure heart'. Criticism reflects an impurity of heart, and is easily corrupted to breed hostility and, eventually, violence. With an impure heart you could still indulge in non-violent political activism, but that activism would be strategic, merely a means to a political end. In the long run it would, just as surely as violence, land you in a midden. Even the following sensible sounding argument for his own conclusion, often given by many of his political colleagues who found his moral attitudes

obscure, did not satisfy Gandhi: "Let us adopt non-violent and passive resistance instead of criticizing the British colonial government. Because to assert a criticism of one's oppressor would usually have the effect of getting his back up, or of making him defensive, it would end up making things harder for oneself." Gandhi himself did occasionally say things of that sort, but he thought that colleagues who wanted to *rest* with such arguments as the foundation of non-violence were viewing it too much as an instrument and they were not going deep enough into the spiritual nature of the moral sense required of the satyagrahi. One did not go deep enough until one severed the *assumed theoretical connection* between moral judgement and moral criticism, the connection which, in our analytical terms, we would describe by saying that if one judges that "x is good", then we are obliged to find morally wrong those who in relevant circumstances, judge otherwise or fail to act on x. For Gandhi this does not follow. The right moral sense, the morally pure-hearted satyagrahi, sees no such connection between moral judgement and moral criticism. Of course, we cannot and must not cease to be moral subjects; we cannot stop judging morally about what is and is not worthy, cannot fail to have moral values. But none of that requires us to be critical of others who disagree with our values or who fail to act in accord with them. *That* is the relevant modesty that Mill sought to justify by a different argument.

This view of the moral sense might well seem frustratingly namby-pamby now as it certainly did to those around him at the time. Can't it be argued, then, that Gandhi is shrewdly placing a screen of piety around the highly creative political instrument he is creating, both to confuse his colonial masters and to tap the religious emotions of the Indian masses? This is the oscillating interpretation I have been inveighing against, which, finding his religiosity too remote from politics, then fails to take his philosophical ideas as being intended seriously and views him only as a crafty and effective nationalist politician. It sells short both his moral philosophy and his politics. The fact is that his view of moral sense is of considerable philosophical interest, and is intended entirely earnestly by its author. It is given a fascinating theoretical consolidation in his writing, which may be lost on his readers because it is buried in a porridge of saintly rhetoric, of 'purity of heart'.

4. What is the assumed theoretical connection between moral judgement and moral criticism, which Gandhi seems to be denying? It has a long history in the Western tradition of moral philosophy. Our moral judgements or values are the basis of our moral choices and actions. Unlike judgements of taste that are the basis, say, for choosing a flavour of ice cream, *moral* judgements

have a certain feature which is often called 'universalizability'. To chose an action on moral grounds under certain circumstances is to generate a principle which we think applies as an 'ought' or an imperative to all others faced with relevantly similar circumstances.

Universalizability is not to be confused with universality. Universality suggests that a moral value, whether or not someone in particular holds it, applies to all persons. Universalizability suggests merely that if someone in particular holds a moral value, then he must think that it applies to all others (in relevantly similar situations). Yet despite the fact that it is much weaker than universality in this sense, it still generates the critical power that Gandhi finds disquieting. If moral judgements are universalizable, one cannot make a judgement that something is morally worthy and then shrug off the fact that others similarly situated might not think so. They (unlike those who might differ with one on the flavour of ice cream) must be deemed wrong not to think so.

Gandhi repudiates this entire tradition. His integrating thought is that violence owes to something as seemingly remote from it as this assumed theoretical connection between values and criticism. Take the wrong view of moral value and judgement, and you will inevitably encourage violence in society. There is no other way to understand his insistence that the satyagrahi has not eschewed

violence until he has removed criticism from his lips and heart and mind.

But there is an interpretative challenge hidden here. If the idea of a moral value or judgement has no implication that one find those who disagree with one's moral judgements, to be wrong, then that suggests that one's moral choices and moral values are rather like one's choice of a flavour of ice cream, rather like one's judgements of taste. In other words, the worry is that these Gandhian ideas suggest that one need not find one's moral choices and the values they reflect relevant to others at all, that one's moral thinking is closed off from others. But Gandhi was avowedly a humanist, and repeatedly said things reminiscent of humanist slogans along the order of 'Nothing human is alien to me'. Far from encouraging self-enclosed moral subjects, he thought it the essence of a moral attitude that it take in all within its concern and its relevance. How, then, to reconcile the rejection of universalizability and of a value's potential for being wielded in criticism of others with this yearning for the significance of one's choices to others? That is among the hardest questions in understanding the philosophy behind his politics, and there are some very original and striking remarks in his writing which hint at a reconciliation.

So far, I have presented the challenge of providing such reconciliation as a philosophically motivated task. But it is more

than that. It is part of the 'integrity' that I am pursuing in my interpretation of Gandhi that it also had a practical urgency in the political and cultural circumstances in which he found himself. We know very well that it was close to this man's heart to improve India in two ways which, on the face of it, were pointing in somewhat opposite directions. On the one hand there was the violence of religious intolerance, found most vividly in the relations between Hindus and Muslims. This especially wounded him. Religious intolerance is the attitude that the other must not remain other, he must become like one in belief and in way of life. It is an *inclusionary*, homogenizing attitude, usually pursued with physical and psychological violence toward the other. On the other hand, for all his traditionalism about caste, there was something offensive to Gandhi within Hinduism itself. The social psychology of the Hindu caste system consists of an *exclusionary* attitude. For each caste, there was a lower caste which constituted the other and which was to be *excluded* from one's way of life, again by the most brutal physical and psychological violence. When I think sometimes about caste in India --without a doubt the most resilient form of exclusionary social inegalitarianism in the history of the world-- it's hard to avoid the conclusion that even the most alarming aspects of religious intolerance is preferable to it. To say, "You *must* be my brother", however wrong, is better than saying, "You will *never* be my brother." In religious

intolerance there is at least a small core that is highly attractive. The intolerant person cares enough about the truth as he sees it, to want to share it with others. Of course, that he should want to use force and violence in order to make the other share in it, spoils what is attractive about this core. It was Gandhi's humanistic mission to retain the core for it showed that one's conception of the truth was not self-enclosed, that it spoke with a relevance to all others, even others who differed from one. How to prevent this relevance to others from degenerating into criticism of others who differed from one and eventually violence towards them, is just the reconciliation we are seeking.

In the philosophical tradition Gandhi is opposing, others are potential objects of criticism in the sense that one's particular choices, one's acts of moral conscience, generate moral principles or imperatives, which others can potentially disobey. For him, conscience and its deliverances, though relevant to others, are not the wellspring of principles. Morals is only about conscience, not at all about principles.

There is an amusing story about two Oxford Philosophers, which makes this distinction vivid. In a seminar, the formidable J. L Austin having become exasperated with Richard Hare's huffing on about how moral choices reveal principles, decided to set him up with a question. "Hare", he asked, "if a student came to you after

an examination and offered you five pounds in return for the mark alpha, what would you say?" Predictably, Hare replied, "I would tell him that I do not take bribes, on principle!" Austin's acid response was, "Really? I think I would myself say, 'No Thanks.' " Austin was being merely deflationary in denying that an act of conscience had to have a principle underlying it. Gandhi erects the denial into a radical alternative to a (western) tradition of moral thinking. An honoured slogan of that tradition says, "When one chooses for oneself, one chooses for everyone". The first half of the slogan describes a particular person's act of conscience. The second half of the slogan transforms the act of conscience to a universalized principle, an imperative that others must follow or be criticized. Gandhi embraces the slogan too, but he understands the second half of it differently. He too wants one's acts of conscience to have a universal relevance, so he too thinks one chooses for everyone, but he does not see that as meaning that one generates a principle or imperative for everyone. What other interpretation can be given to the words "One chooses for everyone" in the slogan, except the principled one?

In Gandhi's writing there is an implicit but bold proposal: "When one chooses for oneself*, one sets an example to everyone*." That is the role of the satyagrahi. To lead exemplary lives, to set examples to everyone by their actions. And the concept of the exemplar is

intended to provide a wholesale alternative to the concept of principle in moral philosophy. It retains what is right in Mill (the importance of being modest in one's moral opinions) while rejecting what is unsatisfactory (any compromise in our conviction in them). There is no Millian diffidence conveyed by the idea that one is only setting an example by one's choices, as opposed to laying down principles. One is fully confident in the choices one wants to set up as exemplars, and in the moral values they exemplify. On the other hand, because no principle is generated, the conviction and confidence in one's opinions does not arrogate, it puts us in no position to be critical of others because there is no *generality* in their truth, of which others may fall *afoul.* Others may not follow. Our example may not set. But that is not the same as disobeying an imperative, violating a principle. As a result, the entire moral psychology of our response to others who depart from us is necessarily much weaker. At most we may be disappointed in others that they will not follow our example, and at least part of the disappointment is in ourselves that our example has not taken hold. And the crucial point is that disappointment is measurably weaker than criticism, it is not the paler shade of contempt, hostility, and eventual violence.

This is a subtle distinction, perhaps too subtle to do all the work we want from morals. But that there is a real distinction here is

undeniable as is its theoretical power to claim an alternative way of thinking about morals. It is a commonplace in our understanding of the western moral tradition to think of Kant's moral philosophy as the full and *philosophical* flowering of a core of Christian thought. But Gandhi fractures that historical understanding. By stressing the deep incompatibility between categorical imperatives and universalizable maxims on the one hand, and Christian humility on the other, he makes two moral doctrines and methods out of what the tradition represents as a single historically consolidated one. And discarding one of them as lending itself ultimately to violence, he fashions a remarkable political philosophy and national movement out of the other.

I want to stress how original Gandhi is here as a philosopher and theoretician. The point is not that the idea of the 'exemplary' is missing in the intellectual history of morals before Gandhi. What is missing, and what he first brings to our attention, is how much theoretical possibility there is in that idea. It can be wielded to make the *psychology* surrounding our morals a more tolerant one. If exemplars replace principles, then it cannot any longer be the business of morals to put us in the position of moral*izing* against others in forms of behaviour (criticism) that have in them the potential to generate other psychological attitudes (resentment, hostility) which underlie inter-personal violence. Opposition to

moralizing is not what is original in Gandhi either. There are many in the tradition Gandhi is opposing who recoiled from it; but if my interpretation is right, his distinction between principle and exemplar and the use he puts it to, provides a theoretical basis for that recoil, which otherwise would simply be the expression of a distaste. That distaste is a distaste for something that is itself entailed by a moral theory deeply entrenched in a tradition, and Gandhi is confronting that *theory* with a wholesale alternative.

This conception of moral judgement puzzles me, even while I find it of great interest. It has puzzled me for a long time. Before I became a teenager (when I began to find it insufferably uncool) I would sometimes go on long walks with my father in the early mornings. One day, walking on a path alongside a beach we came across a wallet with some rupees sticking visibly out of it. With a certain amount of drama, my father said: "Akeel, why should we not take that?" Flustered at first, I then said something like, "Gee (actually I am sure I didn't say 'gee'), I think we should take it." My father looked most irritated, and asked, "Why?" And I am pretty sure I remember saying words more or less amounting to the classic response: "Because if we don't take it then I suppose someone else will." My father, looking as if he were going to mount to great heights of denunciation, suddenly changed his expression, and he said magnificently, but without logic (or so it

seemed to me then): "If *we* don't take it, *nobody* else will." As a boy of twelve, I thought this was a non sequitur designed to end the conversation. In fact I had no idea what he meant, and was too nervous to ask him to explain himself. Only much later, in fact only while thinking about how to fit together the various elements in Gandhi's thought, did I see in his remark, the claims for a moral ideal of exemplary action. But notice how puzzling the idea is. Here is a wallet, abandoned, and we should not take it. This would set an example to others, though no one is around to witness it. The romance in this morality is radiant. Somehow goodness, good acts, enter the world and affect everyone else. To ask how exactly they do that is to be vulgar, to spoil the romance. Goodness is a sort of mysterious contagion.

The idea is as attractive as it is romantic. The question is, how attractive? I will leave the question hanging since all I want to do in this short essay is to present Gandhi's highly 'integrating' suggestion that there is no true non-violence until criticism is removed from the scope of morals. This is to see the ideal of non-violence as being part of a moral position in which moral principles, by the lights of which we criticize, are eschewed. Exemplary action takes the place of principles. If someone fails to follow your example, you may be disappointed but you would no longer have the conceptual basis to see them as transgressive and

wrong and subject to criticism. So the integration Gandhi wishes to achieve (the integration of non-violence with total non-criticism) is as plausible as is the moral position stressing exemplars. The plausibility of the moral position depends a great deal on the degree to which the moral action and judgement is made visible. How else would an example be set except through public visibility? Gandhi was of course fully aware of this as a political thinker and leader, which is why it is even possible to integrate the detail of his political ideas with the moral philosophy I have been sketching. He was fully aware that the smaller the community of individuals, the more likelihood there is of setting examples. In the context of family life, for example, one might see how parents by their actions may think or hope that they are setting examples to their children. Gandhi's ideal of peasant communities organized in small *panchayat* or village units could perhaps at least approximate the family, where examples could be visibly set. That is, in part, why Gandhi strenuously argued that flows of populations to metropoles where there was far less scope for public perception of individual action, was destructive of the moral life. Indeed, once such metropolitan tendencies had been unleashed, it is easy to understand his habit of going on publicized fasts. It was a way of making visible some moral stance that could reach a larger public in the form of example rather than principles.

5. I have been arguing that the standard view, which presents Gandhi as essentially applying Mill's argument for tolerance to an argument for non-violence, is very wide of the mark. They exhibit diverging attitudes towards the concept of truth, and the epistemology it entails. Gandhi, like Mill, wants our own opinions to be held with modesty, but, unlike him, with an accompanying epistemology that does not discourage conviction or confidence. To that end, Gandhi rejects the notion of truth that Mill seems to presuppose in his argument for tolerance. He replaces the entire argument, as I have been indicating, with another that seems to have less to do with the notion of truth per se than with the nature of moral judgement.

But now a question arises. How can this argument have less to do with truth and one's search for it, when the term 'satyagraha' with which 'ahimsa' is constantly linked in his thinking, has truth as its target?

It is in answer to this question that his final and most audacious step of theoretical integration takes place. For him, truth is a moral notion, and it is *exclusively* a moral notion. So there is no possibility of having misrepresented his argument in the way that I am worrying. The worry I have just expressed is that once Gandhi repudiates Mill's basis for tolerance and non-violence (that we may

never be confident that we have arrived at the truth in our search for it) and once he replaces it with his own basis (the separability of moral value and judgement from moral principle and moral criticism), truth then drops out of the Gandhian picture in a way that seems un-Gandhian. It in fact does not drop out since truth in the first place is not, for Gandhi, a notion independent of what his argument rests on, the nature of our own experience of moral value.

What this means is that truth for Gandhi is not a *cognitive* notion at all. It is an experiential notion. It is not propositions purporting to describe the world of which truth is predicated, it is only our own moral experience which is capable of being true. This was of the utmost importance for him. It is what in the end underlies his opposition to the Enlightenment, despite the undeniably Enlightenment elements in his thought including his humanism and the concern that our moral judgements be relevant to *all* people. Those who have seen him as an anti-Enlightenment thinker usually point to the fact that he is opposed to the political and technological developments which, he insists, issue inevitably from the very conception of Reason as it is understood in scientific terms. So understood, some time in the seventeenth century, with the rise of the scientific method in Europe, all the *pre*dispositions to modern government and technology came into place. All that

was needed for those predispositions to be triggered in our sustained efforts to organize and control our physical and social environment, was for the Enlightenment to articulate the idea of Reason as it affects social life and the polity. But this familiar understanding of his view of the Enlightenment does not take in what I have called his 'final and audacious integrating' philosophical move. This conception which set in sometime in the seventeenth century *itself* owes much to a more abstract element in our thinking, which is that truth is a cognitive notion, not a moral one. Only if truth is so conceived can science become the paradigmatic pursuit of our culture, without it the scientific outlook lacks its deepest theoretical source. And it is a mark of his intellectual ambition that by making it an exclusively and exhaustively moral and experiential notion instead, Gandhi was attempting to repudiate the paradigm at the deepest possible conceptual level.

What I mean by truth as a cognitive notion is that it is a property of sentences or propositions that describe the world. Thus when we have reason to think that the sentences to which we give assent exhibit this property, then we have knowledge of the world, a knowledge that can then be progressively accumulated and put to use through continuing inquiry building on past knowledge. His recoil from such a notion of truth, which intellectualizes our

relations to the world, is that it views the world as the object of study, study that makes it alien to our moral experience of it, to our most everyday practical relations to it. He symbolically conveyed this by his own daily act of spinning cotton. This idea of truth, unlike our quotidian practical relations to nature, makes nature out to be the sort of distant thing to be studied by scientific methods. Reality will then not be the reality of moral experience. It will become something alien to that experience, wholly external and objectified. It is no surprise then that we will look upon reality as something to be mastered and conquered, an attitude that leads directly to the technological frame of mind that governs modern societies, and which in turn takes us *away* from our communal localities where moral experience and our practical relations to the world flourish. It takes us *towards* increasingly abstract places and structures such as nations and eventually global economies. In such places and such forms of life, there is no scope for exemplary action to take hold, and no basis possible for a moral vision in which value is not linked to 'imperative' and 'principle', and then, inevitably, to the attitudes of criticism and the entire moral psychology which ultimately underlies violence in our social relations. To find a basis for tolerance and non-violence under circumstances such as these, we are compelled to turn to arguments of the sort Mill tried to provide in which modesty and tolerance are supposed to derive from a notion of truth (cognitively understood)

which is always elusive, never something which we can be confident of having achieved because it is not given in our moral experience, but is predicated of propositions that purport to describe a reality which is distant from our own practical and moral experience of it.

All these various elements of his opposition to Mill and his own alternative conception of tolerance and non-violence were laid open by Gandhi and systematically integrated by these arguments implicit in his many scattered writings. The only other philosopher who came close to such a sustained integration of political, moral, and epistemological themes was Heidegger, whatever the fundamental differences between them, not least of which is that Gandhi presents his ideas in clear, civil and bracing prose.

There remains the question whether such an integrated position is at all plausible. It should be a matter of some intellectual urgency to ask whether our interests in politics, moral philosophy, and notions of truth and epistemology, are not more fragmented or more miscellaneous than his integrations propose. Is it not a wiser and more illuminating methodological stance sometimes to recognize that there is often a *lack* of connection in our ideas and our interests and that to register that lack is sometimes more important and revealing than to seek a strained connection?

I will resist answering these questions, except to say that Gandhi's idea --the idea that it is a matter of great moment, both for epistemology and for society and politics and morals, that truth is not a cognitive notion-- is impeached by the worst aspects of our intellectual culture.

If Gandhi is right and if truth is an exclusively moral notion, then when we *seek* truth, we are pursuing *only a moral value.* This leaves a great deal out of our normative interest in truth, which, as we have seen, Gandhi is perfectly willing to do. He is quite happy to discard as illusory our tendency to think that apart from the moral virtues involving truth (such as that of *telling* the truth, and living by and exemplifying our moral values) there is also in some sense *a value or virtue* in getting things right about the world and discovering the general principles that explain its varied phenomena. This latter is not a moral virtue, it is a cognitive virtue, and for Gandhi, cognitive virtues are a chimera. For him truth's relationship to virtue cannot consist at all in the supposed virtue of acquiring truths of this kind; it is instead entirely to be understood in how truth surfaces in our practical and moral relations. That is why truth itself will have no value for us *other* than the value of such things as truth-*telling*, which *does* involve our practical and moral relations. To tell the truth is among other things (such as, say, generosity or kindness or considerateness) a

way of being moral, and it was an aspect of morals that Gandhi himself was keen to stress. But the point is that truth being *only* a moral notion, there is no *other* value to truth than the value of such things as *telling* the truth, no more *abstract* value that it has.

There is a palpable mistake in collapsing the cognitive value of truth into the moral value of truth-telling, a mistake evident in the fact that somebody who *fails* to *tell* the truth can, in doing so, still value *truth*. That is to say, the liar often values truth and often values it greatly, and precisely because he does so, he wants to conceal it or invent it. The liar indeed has a *moral* failing in that he disvalues truth-telling, but he still values truth, and what he values in doing so therefore cannot be a moral value. It cannot be what Gandhi (and more recently Richard Rorty) insist is the only value that attaches to truth. To put it very schematically and crudely, truth has to be a more abstract value than a moral value because both the (moral) truth-teller *and* the (immoral) liar share it.

So what is this more abstract value of truth, which even the liar shares? If there is this abstract value to truth, and if *even* the liar values it, someone must surely in principle be able to *fail* to value it, else how can it be a value? How can there be a value if no one can fail to value it?

This is indeed a good question and only by answering it can we come close to grasping the value of truth that is not a moral value.

The answer is: yes, someone does indeed fail to value truth in this more abstract sense. But it is not the liar. It is the equally common sort of person in our midst, what Harry Frankfurt has called, the 'bullshitter'. This is the person who merely sounds off on public occasions or who gets published in some academic journals simply because he is prepared to speak or write in the requisite jargon, *without any goal of getting things right* nor even (like the liar) concealing the right things which he thinks he knows.

The so-called Sokal hoax[i] on which so much has been written, allows this lesson to be sharply drawn. I don't want to get into a long discussion about this incident both because it is remote from Gandhi's interests but also because I think that it has become a mildly distasteful site for people making careers out of its propagandist and polemical potential. Everything that I have read on the subject of this hoax, including Sokal's own contribution, takes up the issue of how Sokal exposed the rampant and uncritical relativism of post-modern literary disciplines. I don't doubt that literary people in the academy have recently shown a relativist tendency, and yet I wonder if that is really what is at stake. The point is analogous to the one I just made about the liar. The relativist also does value truth in the abstract sense I have in mind, even if he has a somewhat different gloss on it from his opponents. In fact it is because he does value truth in this sense that he wishes

to urgently put this different gloss on it. I believe it quite likely that the journal in which Sokal propagated his hoax would have been happy (at least before the controversy began) to publish a similarly dissimulating hoax reply to his paper in which all kinds of utterly ridiculous arguments were given, this time for an anti-relativist and objective notion of truth, so long as these arguments were presented in the glamorous jargon and with the familiar dialectical moves that command currency in the discipline. If so, the lesson to be learnt from the hoax is not that relativism is rampant in those disciplines but that very often bullshit is quite acceptable, if presented in the requisite way. To set oneself against that is to endorse the value of truth in our culture, truth *over and above* truth-telling, for a bullshitter is not a liar.

Living and working in the context in which I do --contemporary American academic culture-- I feel almost as strongly about the value of truth in this sense as I do about moral values surrounding truth, such as telling the truth or indeed many of the other moral values one can think of. That it might have mattered less to Gandhi is of course a matter of context, a matter of the quite different and much more impressive political concerns and interests of the Indian nationalist movement. But the philosophical lesson is a perfectly general one, and the very fact that he himself had gathered the strands of his political concerns and interests and

tied them into 'integral' relations with these more abstract issues about truth and epistemology, make it impossible for us to dismiss the lesson as being irrelevant to him. So I must conclude by saying that I don't think that Gandhi should have denied this cognitive value of truth. He should in fact have allowed that it defines the very possibility of his own philosophical undertakings and that it underlies his own yearning to find for his philosophical ideas the highest levels of what I have called 'integrity'. These undertakings and yearnings are all signs of a commitment to the very notion of truth that he wishes to repudiate. Whether allowing it will in the end have unraveled that integrity must remain a question for another occasion.

But I will end by saying that what that question will turn on is really the underlying question of this essay: How much integrity can these themes tolerate? It is Gandhi's essentially religious temperament that motivates the extraordinary ambitions of his integrations of these themes. What I mean here is that for all his romanticism about the power of exemplary actions to generate a moral community, Gandhi like many religious people is deeply pessimistic in one sense. He is convinced of the inherent corruptibility of our moral psyches. That is what lies behind his fear that criticism will descend inevitably into violence, and it is also what underlies his fear that the intellectualization of the notion

of truth to include a cognitive value, will descend inevitably into an elevation of science into the paradigmatic intellectual pursuit of our culture, and thus our alienation from nature with the wish to conquer and control it without forgiveness with the most destructive forms of technologies. The modern secular habits of thinking on these themes simply do not share this pessimism. Neither descent is inevitable, we will say. We can block the rise of bad technologies by good politics. There is no reason to see it as inevitable once we think of truth in cognitive terms, not even inevitable if we value scientific inquiry. So also we can block violence with good, constitutional politics and the rule of law, and there is no reason to think it inevitable just because we think of values as entailing the exercise of our critical capacities towards one another. The modernist faith in politics to control or at least to distract us from what might otherwise be seen as our corruptible nature is the real achievement, if that is what it is, of the Enlightenment. It is only this faith that can convince us that the integrations which Gandhi's pessimism force on him are not compulsory.

I have raised the issue at stake at the highest level of generality. It is in the details, however, that it will be decided, and those really must await another occasion.

Akeel Bilgrami

[i] This was a hoax perpetrated by Alan Sokal, who wrote a paper making the most deliberately incoherent and ridiculous arguments for the cultural relativity of certain mathematical notions, and submitted it to a well-known journal of literary and cultural studies. The paper was published, and then Sokal publicly announced that the paper was a hoax intended to expose the charlatanism of post-modern tendencies in literary and cultural studies.