



Satya and Ahimsa

'He whose faith is most assured, has the best reason for relying on persuasion, and the strongest motive to thrust from him all temptations to use angry force.

The substitution of force for persuasion, among its other disadvantages, has this further drawback ... that it lessens the conscience of a society and breeds hypocrisy ... a man who is so silly as to think himself incapable of going wrong, is very likely to be too silly to perceive that coercion may be one way of going wrong.' – Lord Morley

The birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi on October 2nd invites us to give fresh thought to his teachings about truth and nonviolence. The following excerpt from *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* by Raghavan Iyer, the co-founder of the Institute of World Culture, offers perspective on the deeper challenges of contemporary politics.

No political thinker, with the possible exception of Plato, has insisted as Gandhi did on truth as an absolute value, the sovereign in the kingdom of ends, the common concern of human society. No one, certainly, compares with him in his continual stress on the primacy of nonviolence as a political and social instrument, on the purity of means required for the pursuit of any worthy end. His originality, however, lay chiefly in his commendation of both satya and ahimsa and in his insight into the interdependence of truth and nonviolence, integrity and sensitivity, fidelity to oneself and respect for the rights of one's fellow men . Whereas most thinkers have concentrated on a single value to the exclusion of all others, and even thought that the pursuit of justice or equality or liberty or fraternity would automatically bring the others in its train, Gandhi pinned his political faith entirely on these two moral absolutes of truth and nonviolence and stressed their close connection with each other. He stretched the meanings of both satva and ahimsa far beyond the everyday connotations of "truth" and "nonviolence," but he also sharpened their use by distinguishing between their absolute and relative, positive and negative, genuine and spurious, forms. He regarded both satya and ahimsa as inherent in nature and in man, underlying the constant working of a cosmic law and constituting the only common basis of

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human aspiration and action in the midst of society. No society can survive without a measure of satya and ahimsa, but these were both minimal and maximal concepts for Gandhi . . . Gandhi used the argument from survival, but he also asserted his faith in the moral evolution of human society in accordance with Natural Law, signified for him by the comprehensive concepts of satya and ahimsa. The closest approach in the West to Gandhi's view was perhaps that of Vico, for whom the essence of Natural Law was contained in truth and nonviolence—*veritas dicti, veriloquim, veritas facti* and *gestio rei sine dolo*. It has often been said that attachment to absolute values is a flight from reality, that absolutists soon pass from refusal to condemnation, systematize their evasions in a myth of total purity, and thus disguise their desertion by idealization. Gandhi, however, was always concerned that the pursuit of purity should lead to a new political morality that men could feasibly adopt, and not to an apolitical perfectionism or an impasse of helpless good intentions.

His chief concern was not for a certain abstract honesty of concept or an ideal historical perfection, but for a consistent probity of attitude toward politics and action in the midst of society. He saw a vital connection between force and fraud, violence and deception in everyday life. This connection was sensed by Hobbes and seen more clearly by Sorel. Gandhi drew conclusions opposite to the theirs from his similar observations, in part because of his metaphysical presuppositions regarding Sat or Absolute Truth and Dharma or the Moral Law, and in part because of his psychological and ethical belief that fear is the common root of force and fraud and that the dignity of man as a truth-seeker enables him to be fearless enough to be nonviolent.

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Exerpt from *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*

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