



TRUTH, NON-VIOLENCE, AND REASON: AN ANALYTICAL EXPLORATION OF MAHATMA GANDHI'S PHILOSOPHY

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

This paper presents an analytical exploration of Mahatma Gandhi's philosophical framework, focusing on the interrelation of truth (satya), non-violence (ahimsa), and reason as the cornerstones of his ethical and political thought. It argues that Gandhi's philosophy is not merely a collection of moral ideals but a cohesive system aimed at personal transformation and social reform. Truth, for Gandhi, is both the ontological basis of reality and the epistemic guide for ethical living. He viewed it as the ultimate goal and the guiding force behind all action. Non-violence, similarly, is positioned not just as a tactic of resistance but as a fundamental moral law that expresses the unity of life and the dignity of all beings. Gandhi's satyagraha exemplifies this ethic in action, offering a method of confronting injustice with moral courage and self-discipline. Equally vital is Gandhi's use of reason, which he employed as a tool for self-examination, public discourse, and ethical consistency. Unlike the abstract rationalism of Western thought, Gandhi's reason was dialogical, experiential, and deeply intertwined with spiritual insight. The paper also explores Gandhi's reconciliation of faith and rationality, showing how his worldview harmonized religious conviction with critical inquiry. Finally, the paper critically assesses the contemporary relevance of Gandhi's thought, acknowledging its limitations while highlighting its enduring value in addressing global challenges such as violence, inequality, and ecological degradation. Gandhi's integration of moral principles with practical strategies offers a model of ethical leadership and civic responsibility that continues to inspire. His legacy lies not only in his achievements but in his insistence that truth, compassion, and reason are inseparable in the pursuit of justice.

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1.Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi remains one of the most influential figures of the 20th century, revered not only as a political leader but also as a moral philosopher whose principles have shaped global movements for justice and peace. His philosophy, deeply rooted in the ideals of truth (satya), non-violence (ahimsa), and reason, transcends the boundaries of political activism and enters the domain of ethical inquiry and spiritual conviction. This paper seeks to analytically explore the core tenets of Gandhi's thought, focusing particularly on how he interwove truth, non-violence, and rational deliberation into a cohesive framework for both personal transformation and societal change. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Gandhi did not view truth and non-violence merely as abstract ideals but as practical instruments for engaging with injustice and conflict. He regarded truth as the ultimate reality and moral compass of human life, and non-violence as its necessary expression in action. Equally important was his reliance on reason, not in the detached sense of Western rationalism, but as a disciplined method of inquiry grounded in dialogue, introspection, and ethical consistency. This introduction sets the stage for a deeper analytical engagement with Gandhi's ideas—examining their philosophical underpinnings, practical applications, and enduring relevance in contemporary social and political discourse. By doing so, the paper aims to clarify not only what Gandhi believed but also how he believed, highlighting the intellectual rigor and ethical depth of his approach.

2.Truth (Satya) as Ontological and Epistemic Foundation

For Mahatma Gandhi, truth (satya) was not merely a moral ideal but the very foundation of reality and human understanding. He famously declared, "*Truth is God*," reversing the conventional theological dictum to emphasize the primacy of truth in his worldview. In doing so, Gandhi established truth as both an ontological principle—the nature of what *is*—and an epistemic guide—the means by which we come to know and engage with reality.

Ontologically, Gandhi viewed truth as the ultimate reality that underpins the cosmos. It was not a relative or culturally contingent concept but a universal presence that governs existence. He believed that all beings are expressions of this underlying truth, and that the human journey is essentially a quest to live in harmony with it. This metaphysical commitment provided a spiritual dimension to his ethics, situating the pursuit of truth within a sacred and all-encompassing order.

Epistemically, Gandhi held that the pursuit of truth requires deep humility, constant self-examination, and an openness to revision. He acknowledged the limits of human perception and reason, emphasizing that no individual possesses the whole truth. Therefore, dialogue, non-violence, and tolerance of dissent become necessary methods of approaching truth. This aspect of his thought resonates with pluralism and anticipates later philosophical trends in epistemology, such as fallibilism and intersubjectivity.

In Gandhi's practice, truth was not static but dynamic, realized through action (satyagraha) and experience. His insistence on truthfulness in word, thought, and deed demanded integrity at every level of life, bridging the gap between philosophical reflection and moral conduct. Thus, truth for Gandhi was both the goal and the path, shaping his ethics, politics, and pedagogy in a unified manner.

3.Non-Violence (Ahimsa) as Ethical Imperative and Methodology

At the heart of Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy lies the principle of non-violence (ahimsa), which he regarded not merely as a political tactic but as a fundamental ethical imperative and a comprehensive method of action. For Gandhi, ahimsa was both a personal moral duty and a strategic approach to social and political transformation. It was rooted in the belief that all life is sacred and interconnected, and therefore, any form of harm—physical, emotional, or structural—undermines the moral fabric of both the individual and society.

As an ethical imperative, ahimsa is grounded in the recognition of the inherent dignity and value of every living being. Gandhi saw non-violence as a proactive force of love and compassion rather than a passive state of inaction. It required the cultivation of virtues such as empathy, self-restraint, patience, and forgiveness. In his view, to practice non-violence was to align one's life with the deeper spiritual truth of unity and interdependence, making it an expression of moral courage rather than weakness.

As a methodology, non-violence found its most prominent application in Gandhi's doctrine of satyagraha, or "truth-force." Satyagraha involved resisting injustice not through retaliation or aggression, but through peaceful protest, civil disobedience, and self-sacrifice. Gandhi argued that responding to violence with violence only perpetuates a cycle of hatred and domination, whereas non-violent resistance transforms both the oppressor and the oppressed by appealing to the conscience of the adversary.

Gandhi's application of non-violence was not limited to political arenas but extended to economic, social, and even interpersonal spheres. He opposed structural violence embedded in systems of colonialism, caste, and economic exploitation, advocating for constructive programs that empowered communities through self-reliance, education, and ethical living. His conception of non-violence thus encompassed both negative non-violence (the absence of physical harm) and positive non-violence (the active promotion of justice, truth, and harmony).

Ultimately, Gandhi's ahimsa was a revolutionary force—a tool for resistance, a philosophy of life, and a universal ethic. It continues to inspire movements around the world, from the American Civil Rights Movement to contemporary struggles for environmental and social justice.

4.Reason in Gandhian Philosophy

While Mahatma Gandhi is often celebrated for his spiritual and moral vision, his use of reason as a philosophical and practical tool is equally vital to understanding his worldview. Gandhi did not see reason as opposed to faith or emotion; rather, he viewed it as an essential instrument for ethical living and social engagement. His concept of reason was not coldly analytical or detached, but deeply dialogical, experiential, and ethically grounded.

Gandhi's approach to reason was shaped by his legal training, exposure to Western liberal thought, and his study of religious texts. He believed that truth and non-violence could not be imposed or blindly followed—they had to be discovered and justified through rational inquiry and critical self-examination. In this sense, reason served as a bridge between moral conviction and practical application, allowing individuals to test their beliefs against the realities of lived experience.

Importantly, Gandhi emphasized the limits of reason. He acknowledged that human understanding is finite and fallible, which is why he advocated for humility, openness to dialogue, and a willingness to revise one's views. He often quoted the Bhagavad Gita and other spiritual texts not as unquestionable authorities, but as invitations to reflection, subject to rational interpretation. This balanced reliance on both reason and conscience allowed Gandhi to avoid dogmatism while remaining firmly rooted in his ethical principles.

In his public life, Gandhi used reason as a tool of persuasion and moral appeal. Whether negotiating with colonial authorities or engaging with his critics, he sought to argue from first principles, appeal to universal values, and maintain logical consistency.

He encouraged others to question injustice rationally, to critique tradition with discernment, and to shape policy and protest with thoughtful deliberation rather than reactionary zeal.

Thus, in Gandhian philosophy, reason is not an abstract ideal but a living practice—a disciplined commitment to clarity, coherence, and ethical responsibility. It complements his principles of truth and non-violence by providing a method of inquiry that is dialogical, self-critical, and rooted in the pursuit of moral coherence.

5.Reconciling Faith and Rationality

One of the most distinctive aspects of Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy is his ability to harmonize faith and rationality in a coherent and ethically grounded worldview. Unlike modernist frameworks that often place religion and reason in opposition, Gandhi viewed both as complementary dimensions of truth-seeking. His thought reflects a deep spiritual conviction, yet it is guided by a consistent appeal to reason, dialogue, and ethical scrutiny.

Gandhi's faith was not blind adherence to dogma but a profound trust in a higher moral order—what he called *Satya* or Truth, which he equated with God. This faith was experiential and inclusive, drawn from diverse traditions including Hinduism, Christianity, Jainism, and Islam. For Gandhi, religion was a deeply personal path to self-realization and service, not a rigid set of institutional beliefs. At the same time, he insisted that faith must stand the test of reason and morality. Any belief that justified violence, inequality, or untruth was, in his view, to be rejected—even if it came cloaked in religious authority.

Gandhi's ability to reconcile faith and reason can be seen in his principle of *sarva-dharma sambhava* (equal respect for all religions), which was not merely a sentiment of tolerance but a rational ethical stance. He argued that while individuals might believe in the superiority of their own faith, they must recognize that all religions are imperfect human attempts to grasp the divine. Therefore, reason must mediate religious practice to prevent fanaticism, superstition, or exclusion.

In practice, Gandhi engaged in constant self-inquiry and public reasoning. He welcomed debate, encouraged dissent, and often revised his own positions when they no longer aligned with reasoned ethical reflection. His correspondence, speeches, and writings show a thinker striving to align his spiritual beliefs with rational consistency and public accountability. For example, his campaigns against untouchability were grounded in both religious reform and ethical reasoning, challenging orthodox Hindu practices through a rational, justice-oriented lens.

In Gandhi's view, faith without reason becomes blind, and reason without faith becomes hollow. True wisdom, he believed, lies in the integration of both—faith giving direction and purpose, and reason ensuring clarity and ethical integrity. This synthesis forms a central pillar of his philosophy and offers a compelling model for navigating the tensions between tradition and modernity, spirituality and secularism.

6.Critical Evaluation and Contemporary Relevance

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy, though rooted in the specific historical and cultural context of colonial India, continues to provoke critical reflection and global relevance in the 21st century. His emphasis on truth, non-violence, and reason as foundational principles for both personal conduct and political struggle has inspired generations of thinkers, activists, and reformers. However, Gandhi's ideas are not without controversy, and a nuanced evaluation reveals both the strengths and limitations of his philosophical legacy.

Critically, Gandhi has been both admired and critiqued for the idealism embedded in his approach. His concept of non-violence, while morally compelling, has been questioned for its practical limitations in situations involving systemic oppression or violent authoritarian regimes. Critics argue that non-violence may not always be an effective strategy where power dynamics are severely imbalanced and where moral appeals fall on deaf ears. Similarly, Gandhi's deep-rooted spiritualism and reliance on inner moral transformation have been critiqued by some as insufficient for addressing structural injustices, such as economic inequality or caste discrimination, which require more than personal reform.

Gandhi's views on modernity, technology, and industrial civilization, particularly as expressed in *Hind Swaraj*, have also drawn mixed responses. While he prophetically critiqued the alienating effects of industrialization and materialism, his advocacy of village-based self-reliance is often seen as utopian or incompatible with globalized economic realities. Furthermore, his positions on gender roles, sexuality, and caste, though evolving over time, have faced scrutiny for containing elements that appear conservative or ambiguous by contemporary standards.

Despite these critiques, the contemporary relevance of Gandhi's philosophy remains striking. In an age marked by increasing political polarization, violence, ecological degradation, and moral crisis, Gandhi's principles offer ethical clarity and moral resilience. Non-violence, as both a strategy and a value system, continues to inform movements for justice—ranging from climate activism and racial equality to indigenous rights and anti-authoritarian resistance. His insistence on means being as important as ends remains a vital counterpoint to utilitarian or power-centric politics.

Moreover, Gandhi's integration of reason with faith, and of spiritual discipline with social engagement, speaks to current efforts to bridge divisions between secular and religious worldviews. His emphasis on self-discipline, ethical leadership, and civic responsibility resonates in discussions about leadership crises, public ethics, and global citizenship.

In sum, while Gandhi's philosophy is not immune to critique and must be interpreted in light of its historical limitations, it offers enduring tools for moral inquiry and action. His legacy challenges us to envision a world governed not by dominance and fear, but by truth, compassion, and reasoned dialogue—a vision that remains as urgent today as it was in his time.

7. Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy presents a remarkable synthesis of ethical vision, spiritual depth, and rational inquiry. Rooted in the triadic principles of truth (satya), non-violence (ahimsa), and reason, his thought transcends the boundaries of historical circumstance to offer a timeless framework for individual and collective transformation. Gandhi did not merely advocate these principles abstractly—he lived them with profound consistency, weaving them into his political activism, social reform, and personal discipline.

Through our analytical exploration, it becomes clear that truth for Gandhi was both the highest ideal and the ontological foundation of reality, accessible through humility, introspection, and moral action. Non-violence was not simply a strategy of resistance but an active force of love and justice, capable of reshaping society without recourse to hatred or domination. And reason, as Gandhi employed it, was a method of ethical clarity—always open to dialogue, grounded in experience, and tempered by the limits of human understanding.

What makes Gandhi's philosophy especially relevant today is its integrative power. In a world fragmented by ideological polarization, ecological crisis, and social unrest, his vision calls for a renewed commitment to ethical coherence, compassionate engagement, and principled action. At the same time, critical evaluation reminds us that Gandhi was a man of his time, and that his ideas—while profound—must be adapted thoughtfully to contemporary challenges.

Ultimately, Gandhi's legacy lies not in the perfection of his prescriptions, but in the moral courage and intellectual integrity with which he pursued them. He invites us not merely to follow him, but to think with him—to live truthfully, act non-violently, and reason ethically in pursuit of a more just and humane world.

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