

Gandhian Nonviolent Verbal Communication: The Necessity of Training

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The combination of *humility* and *militancy* in emotionally charged social conflicts has always been rare. It is easy to succumb either to passivity or to verbal or nonverbal violence. Humility in confronting a human being, respect *for the status of being a human being*, whether that being is a torturer or a holy person, is essential.

People may be trained in non-violent communication through sessions where they confront others with different attitudes and opinions. In schools and universities such sessions in the form of seminars, or otherwise, are easy to arrange. At the university level, proposals of norms or principles of non-violent communication help students to master conflict situations. The set of principles formulated in this article has been used by about 90,000 students since 1941 in small groups at the universities of Norway. An emotionally coloured topic is often selected and the students are asked to discuss. Or they receive a written dialogue and are asked to analyze violations of the principles.

Gandhi, the man, his deeds, and his writings, have made such a profound impact on millions of people that it is felt all their lives, even if it does not always show up in social conflict activism. Their veneration is serious and honest, but few have, or even try to get, training to face opponents and 'antagonists' in a Gandhian way.

The way Gandhi at times described the views of people who opposed him and his influence has made a lasting impression. One deed that struck me as glorious belongs to the area of practice of communication. Instead of giving a broad historical account I shall describe one series of communications.

Gandhi fought a state of injustice in South Africa, but a group misunderstood his intentions, and saw him as a traitor. So two members of the group told him that if he continued the next day, they would kill him. Gandhi continued the next day and they proceeded to try to kill him. But some people intervened and Gandhi was carried to the hospital. In spite of his serious condition, he used his energy to insist that the two people who attacked him were not to be prosecuted and imprisoned. The arguments and reasons: 1) It was understandable that the assassins viewed him as a traitor. 2) His own actions and his explanation of their motives had not been clear enough. 3) The group to which the attackers belonged wished as a whole that he should be killed, but only the two attackers were *brave enough* and proceeded to try to kill. 4) The killing of traitors is a duty according to the culture and ethics of the attackers. 5) It could not be expected of the attackers that they should try to reform the ethics of their own culture. 6) Courage is a supreme virtue. The two were courageous.

As soon as Gandhi recovered he continued to fight non-violently the *views* of his opponents, *not the persons* opposing him—even if they used every trick to misrepresent what he was fighting for. He was militant, in a way that promoted contact. He converted thousands who started as violent antagonists.

The speech Gandhi gave at the hospital is a small part of the data available for a description of a Gandhian ethics of *verbal communication in conflicts*, social, political, and personal. The term ‘verbal communication’ may be misunderstood. No communication is only by the contact of words. The interpretation of the text of a letter is influenced by the sort of envelope, paper, style of writing, relation to the sender. Young professors learn, sometimes to their dismay, that body language and a host of other externals are decisive whether the students grasp what he tries to convey. The *way* a quantum physicist (Harald Wergeland) looked at a famous equation on the blackboard and his melodious, slightly trembling, voice when talking about it vitalized new energy and sheer joy in the students: “Yes, I’ll go with *you* all the way, whatever the difficulties!” In the ecological crisis every communication with people not seriously engaged, or with fellow activists with different priorities and views, depends on all aspects of communication. But this does not make the narrowly verbal aspect unimportant.

If we attempt to systematize the norms and the hypotheses implicit in Gandhi’s work for freedom we must note that freedom in his sense of

the word *svaraj* has to do with freeing oneself from the fetters of disruptive emotions and narrowness of scope. Political freedom is a necessary, not a sufficient condition of *svaraj*. Therefore, communication with the opponents (not enemies—they do not exist) is part of the content of *Satyagraha*. A systematization, such as my attempt in *Gandhi and Group Conflict* (now SWAN 5), requires at least five norms and five hypotheses explicitly devoted to the topic of verbal communication. For example: “Distorted description of your and your opponents’ case reduces the chance to reach your goal.” Perhaps it should be added “in the long run.” In the short run caricatures of the opponents’ views may work.

One may not have the optimism about antagonists that is implicit and sometimes explicit in Gandhi’s approach. A hypothesis such as this seem to be made by Gandhi: “There is a disposition in every opponent such that whole-hearted, well informed, strong, and persistent appeal in favour of a good cause is able ultimately to convince him.” If one does not believe in this, there is less optimistic hypotheses of high relevance, namely that the tendency to give up appeals to certain wide group of opponents characterized as ‘hopeless’ is unwarranted and counter-effective. Gandhi did not believe that he could convince everybody, but that massive manifestation of *Satyagraha* in wide groups of the population would undermine and ultimately ruin the support for any tyrant, including Hitler. Nonviolent verbal communication constitutes one necessary component of the *Satyagraha*. Vicious verbal attacks, including distortion of one’s position in the conflict, should never disturb one’s equimindedness, but strengthen one’s own non-violent approach. Don’t defend your own person, but your own views.

The highly emotional atmosphere in group conflicts may lead to wild accusations, irresponsible outbursts, which the “sender” regrets. Few are able to retract in public, but try out some kind of excuse: “What I really wanted to say was so and so.” Not very convincing! Better to retract, and make a new start.

Conflicts often motivate clever manipulation, for instance, by conscious exploitation of misunderstandings. In what follows, rules are formulated which are offered as guidelines in serious discussions, whether emotionally loaded or not. They seem to me to be derivable from the principles of Gandhian *Satyagraha*.

In this article, not any communication by means of words is considered, but only those in which questions are posed in a serious way and where *plain serious answers* are expected. I shall refer to this kind of

communication simply as a *discussion*. It excludes pleasantries, witty stories and other kinds of utterances that make up a considerable, indispensable part of the total verbal communication. Gandhi also made extensive use of such utterances, but in a way that facilitates rather than obstructs the serious exchange of views. Meeting his chief opponents in the morning, he often made a simple joke.

Exclamation marks are used in what follows to indicate the normative or rule-giving character of a sentence. The formulations are fairly short and need 'precization' and comments in order to make them clear and unambiguous enough to be applicable fairly consistently in practice. Such sets of more precise formulations and of clarifications and explanation will never be definitive.¹ We have always to return to the more vague and ambiguous, trying new avenues of clarification.

First Principle: Avoid Evasion!

Preliminary formulation: keep to the point even if, in some cases, it may harm one's own position and clever evasion would strengthen it!

As a primitive example, consider the following verbal exchange in a discussion which has been announced to be "for or against competitive sport."

- 1) A: Competitive sports help to destroy a man's intelligence and spirit of co-operation.
- 2) B: A can only say that because he isn't a sportsman himself.
- 3) A: The last remark doesn't affect my argument, it only shows that I was right in saying sports help to destroy a man's intelligence.
- 4) B: You are a typical culture snob carping at sports whenever you can.

At stage two B does not answer, but offers the hypothesis that A can only say what he says because of a personal trait he has. B does not answer or maintain that to answer is impossible. He *evades* the point.

At stage three, assuming or knowing that B is engaged in competitive sport, A not only expresses a denial of the *relevance* of B's utterance, but seems to offer a hypothesis that to utter such an irrelevant thing supports his view expressed at stage one. This hypothesis is not, or only marginally, relevant.²

Another form of irrelevant argument occurs when unnecessary emphasis is laid on some quite generally accepted viewpoint which even one's opponent would agree to. It can reinforce one's own position to subscribe to some sentiment that no one will criticize, but which does not contribute materially to the discussion. By ignoring such banalities an opponent, by his very silence on the point, may appear to others to be opposing them. In this way he loses his credibility and the other gains through cheating.

Accusations that the opponent violates norms of communication lead away from the core of the discussion. They demand answers, and cannot contribute to solutions. The non-violent participant ignores the personal accusations and continues to focus on the most relevant and weighty arguments.

Second Principle: Avoid tendentious renderings of other people's views

Preliminary formulation: an utterance about something in a discussion that aims at *reporting* a point of view should be neutral in relation to all points of view represented in that discussion.

A common bad habit is to generalize an opponent's view, substituting "all x are y" for A's "this x is y" or "some x are y" etc. Suppose a participant A in a debate says: "Men are better suited than women to be bishops." If B reports this as follows: "Every man is better than any woman to be a bishop," it makes a tendentious rendering of A's view which sounds extremist, but need not be. The choice of the example may awaken suspicion of antifeminism.

Precization of the preliminary formulation: an utterance in a serious discussion which purports to give an account of A's viewpoint should be such that if we let the report stand in place of his own formulation as an expression of the issue in a *proet-contra* survey, the force of his view (tenability and relevance) is not lost.

Occasionally a report has to be made substantially shorter than the original. In that case it must inevitably diverge from the original in respect of some reasonable interpretations. The divergence, however, should not be biased. Distorting quotations is a familiar enough

phenomenon. A sentence quoted without reference to context may make quite misleading and unfair sets of interpretations become ‘reasonable.’

It is often helpful to introduce counterarguments through if-so sentences: If A means so and so (T_1), then I agree. But if he means so and so, (T_2), I disagree, because . . .”

Third Principle: Avoid tendentious ambiguity

Preliminary formulation: resist the temptation to strengthen your case by the use of ambiguities that mislead the opponent.

A general proposes a truce to the enemy. They agree to a 30-day truce. The same night the general makes an attack and wins an easy victory. Afterwards he says they agreed only to a daytime truce. Their answer accepting 30 *days* was intentionally ambiguous.

This is a crude example because the common convention that “30 days” in the relevant kind of context includes nights. It is not a clear case of ambiguity.

A more elaborate formulation of the principle: an utterance in a serious discussion violates Principle Three if and only if (1) it is not unlikely that it will be interpreted in a way by the listener that is incompatible with the way intended by the sender, and (2) that way is apt to put the utterance in a more favourable light. Furthermore, (3), the sender should be aware that such a misunderstanding is not unlikely to occur.

An example:

- 1) A: I have nothing against sport, but according to the view we Christians hold, I must say that . . .
- 2) B: “We Christians”, who are they?
- 3) A: People like me who actively subscribe to Christian beliefs.
- 4) B: But think of all the people who call themselves Christian, do you speak for all of them?
- 5) A: Of course not, actually I meant members of the Christian People’s party.

We will now analyze this fragment of discussion in terms of relevance.

Let us note the following interpretations:

- a₀) We Christians
- a₁) We who actively subscribe to Christian beliefs
- a_{1.1}) We who actively subscribe to Christian fundamental beliefs
- a_{1.2}) We who actively subscribe to Christian beliefs politically and otherwise
- a₂) We members of the Christian People's party
- a₃) We who adopt the Christian faith and morality

A uses a₀, a_{1.1} and a₂ as if they were cognitively equivalent. Probably a_{1.2} and a₃ are reasonable interpretations, and A can be presumed to be aware of this. But A employs a special usage. If in this context, by a₀ he means a₂, his hearer will tend to confuse the reasonable interpretations which thus lead to a quantitative and evaluative overrating of the group that A represents. Members of the Christian People's party make up only a small part of those normally referred to as Christians, in the sense understood by a_{1.2} or a₃. If A did represent the whole spectrum, his standpoint would not be politically coloured and would therefore acquire a greater authority. But then he would succeed in arousing the opposition of Christians in senses other than a_{1.2} and a₃. By adopting sense a₀, A might find it easy to influence his hearers into accepting his own standpoint. A's use of a₀ is therefore a sign of small relevance.

In regard to the relevance of A's argument it is also in A's favour that at stage (5) he recognizes his special usage instead of attempting to cover up with some irrelevant remark. If A had deliberately produced an irrelevant argument, there would be, psychologically, less likelihood of his uttering (5), since this utterance clearly confirms one's suspicion about irrelevance.

A tendency to irrelevant argument can perhaps be detected at (3). Quite likely A understands what B hints at when he utters (2), but does not manage immediately to resist the temptation to offer the ambiguous expression a₁ instead of the more precise a₂.

(2) is in the form of a question, but presumably B is aware that by a₀ A probably means a₂ and that A does not imagine that all persons subsumable under a_{1.2} or a₃ are in favour of his own standpoint. Perhaps B thinks the rest of his hearers are aware of this. Under these assumptions B *interprets* A with (2), and draws the attention of possible

opponents to A within group $a_{1,2}$, and at the same time deals A a blow. According to the above assumptions the interruption cannot be justified as a technique in discussion, and is definitely misleading.

Fourth Principle: Avoid tendentious argument from alleged implication

Suppose someone, B, argues as follows: “My opponent A says that he accepts T. But from T follows U and U is untenable. Therefore T is untenable.” Here it is important to know whether the opponent does in fact *accept that the clearly untenable U follows from T*. If he does not and yet we proceed under the *assumption* that he does, then we have broken an elementary rule for relevant argument. And quite apart from this, of course, it can be quite tendentious for us to bring in U at all before we have discussed whether U does or does not follow from T.

A rather common way of proceeding is first to impute a consequence U of the acceptance of T that the sender of T rejects *is* a consequence, then, without taking notice of the arguments against U being a consequence, the opponent imputes a new assertion V as a consequence. Both U and V express more or less stupid or strange assertions, and the audience may start to feel that there is something wrong about T, even if it is open to doubt whether U and V are consequences.

When I say “Every living being has intrinsic value” (T), it is sometimes said that from it follows that it is ethically unjustifiable to kill any of them (U). But if this were a consequence how could I really accept T? It is impossible not to kill if we want to stay alive, and to stay alive must be justifiable, therefore T is untenable, if U follows. My view is that we are justified in trying to satisfy our vital needs, and that requires killing. But I also ask how U could follow from T. That is, what additional premises are used, or whether the implication is considered completely self evident. I do not at all find it irrelevant to discuss whether U follows from T. What is important here is to acknowledge that what according to some people is a consequence may not be a consequence according to others. If one is willing to *use a lot of time and effort* to clear up questions of implications, one is generally led into specifying *different sets* of premises, from some of them U follows from T, from others not. We are led to consider *systems*, not isolated sentences.

No philosopher that I know of has offered ‘precizations’ of “x has intrinsic value,” “x has inherent value” or “it makes sense to do things strictly for x’s own sake,” which (1) are fairly easy to understand and (2) are acceptable for most people who are interested in the use of the terms.

Fifth Principle: Avoid tendentious first-hand reports

Preliminary formulation: an account violates Principle Five if it leaves something out and lays emphasis on other things, or in some other way conveys a distorted and unfavourable impression to the hearer, or else gives a directly false impression that serves the interests of the speaker.

An illustration:

A: Now we must go and catch the train, it’s just 9 o’clock.

B: No, I’ll change my clothes first; it’s only a quarter to.

In fact, A’s watch shows 8:55 and B’s 8:50.

Analysis: A gives a false impression of what he has observed. So does B. A’s tendentious report of what he sees supports his wish to be getting on his way, while B’s account is designed to cater to B’s inclination to linger a while.

An analysis of this kind will be less sure the closer A’s and B’s accounts come to that of some independent witness, and the less anything depends upon easy observations.

Precization: An utterance T in a serious discussion violates Principle Five if, and only if 1) a) T provides an account of observations (or of the relation between observations) which is incorrect or incomplete, or b) T holds back information which must be considered relevant in judging the validity or relevance of an argument, and 2) deviations that occur are intended to strengthen the speaker’s position in the debate.

For example:

Suppose a correspondent of a foreign newspaper reports the result of a parliamentary election in a telegram as “Party A increased its vote.” A more neutral and comprehensive account might show, however, that although the A Party did indeed increase its vote, its proportion of the total votes decreased. The telegram presents Party A, which the

correspondent favours, in a favourable light at the cost of the others. We conclude that the correspondent has violated Principle Five.

Sixth Principle: Avoid tendentious use of contexts

This principle concerns the context (or conditions) in which the matter is brought forward. In this category we include in the context non-cognitive as well as cognitive components in, or accessories to, the argument, that is, expressions of the following kind: “When a hypocrite like Mr H starts saying what he feels, one knows that . . .” Any use of terminology of a scornful, abusive, or otherwise non-argumentative nature, can get into what we call the “context” of the discussion. In addition, there are properties of the broader context in which the discussion is presented, for example, the use of music, pageantry, serving of expensive food and drink, and any other accessories of persuasion and suggestion. In the case of newspaper articles, for instance, it can be a question of the selection of types, photographs, and so on.

Preliminary formulation: A matter should be presented in a neutral way, in a neutral setting.

Precization: A matter in a serious discussion violates Principle Six if and only if the context in a wide as well as a narrow sense serves to strengthen the position of the speaker without its influence being attributable to the cognitive context of the matter. Evidently, there can be no clear border between acceptable and unacceptable contextual favours.

Discussion, Within the ecology movement

There are disagreements between supporters of the ecology movement reflecting different views on all issues related to the ecological crisis. It is important that the real agreements and disagreements are made clear and misunderstandings eliminated. Otherwise common policies are more difficult to implement than necessary.

Mutual *accusations* of violating norms of public debate, whether Gandhian or otherwise, are generally ineffective. Substantial

clarification can be brought about without any accusations, and without much publicity.

An example: Suppose somebody says or writes: “We must take more care of the nonhuman environment.” Call the formulation T_0 . There are among the interesting interpretations of T_0 , two I wish to mention:

T_1 : “We should distribute our present total care in such a way that nonhumans get relatively more of it”

T_2 : “We should enlarge our total care in such a way that there will be more care for nonhumans”

If a person A, who is an author of articles or books, engages in humanitarian work in Africa hears or reads T_0 , it may be tempting to choose T_1 and not T_2 . Let me make the unlikely assumption that A rejects T_0 insisting in his articles that humans should *not* get less care than the little they get. The vital needs of people living in an area with protected animals must be taken more care of, *not less*. Those who accept T_0 are heartless and irresponsible. But why should T_0 imply *less* care of the animals? Why choose T_1 rather than T_2 ? If a person B tries to apply Gandhian guidelines in communication, B will try out T_2 before T_1 . If there is no conclusive evidence that the user of T_0 means T_1 rather than T_2 , why bother with T_1 ? If B accepts T_2 as an ethical norm, B will *join A*, support A, because it is *important to encourage and support each other* in social conflicts.

Sentences are never unambiguous in a very strict sense. T_2 may be misunderstood. There are two interpretations of interest in present conflicts.

T_{21} : “We should enlarge our total care only in such a way that there will be more for nonhumans.”

T_{22} : “We should enlarge our total care also in such a way that there will be more for nonhumans.”

It may sometimes be important to use T_{22} because those engaged very actively in the care for nonhumans are often suspected of not esteeming people who are very active in promoting better care for destitute humans.

Perhaps most people do not need to study norms of non-violent verbal communication in social conflicts: they have ‘internalized’ the norms, and formalities only confuse them. Or they are firm adherents of confrontational styles. They may hold that sometimes violating all such

norms in flagrant ways may awaken people and lead faster to desired ends. That may be so, but I am convinced that power obtained through violent means tends to corrupt more than power obtained without, and in the very long run, that is the only way to go.

¹Revision will always be required in part because of the unending change of background, linguistic and otherwise, of the participants. This 'revisability' has made some people with certain backgrounds propose that the term 'norm,' sounding 'absolutistic' should be dropped and 'guideline' be adopted. Due to my background in methodology and logic, I do not find 'norm' absolutistic. Nor does the exclamation mark '!' remind me too much of authoritarianism or giving orders.

The formulations are in part translations from my book *Elements of Applied Semantics*, Oslo: University of Oslo Press, London: Allan and Unwin Ltd., 1966. (Now *SWAN* 7.)

²Perhaps we should write "This hypothesis is hardly relevant"? 'Hardly' might be inserted because, looking at the matter from an extremely formal point of view, a tendency to utter irrelevant things in a discussion might be seen as a sign of a man's lack of spirit of co-operation, a lack that might be seen in this situation to be a result of too strong an engagement in competitive sports. This is so farfetched, however, that the insertion of 'hardly' may properly be seen as an instance of sophistry.