GANDHI’S METAPHYSICAL
PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION
AND MORALITY

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In Gandhian philosophy of religion and morality are so intertwined that one cannot be disentangled from the other. It is in this sense that one has to understand Gandhi’s belief that no work done by any man, no matter how great he is, will really prosper unless he has religious backing. He had a strong faith in the psychological factor of the transcendentality of human nature. He believes:

“Human nature attains full satisfaction only by eternal communion with its Maker. The craving for communion is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself known its Maker.”

By taking religion and philosophy in the same sense, by viewing religious principles and metaphysical concepts identical, Gandhi makes his ethical and metaphysical positions so near to each other as to say, ‘truth is the substance of morality’.

As Truth cannot be attained without strict adherence to non-violence, it becomes clear that the metaphysical and the religious ideal of Truth is essentially related to non-violent way of life, which is the practical expression of morality. The relationship is very clearly brought out by Gandhi in the following statement:
Gandhi’s Metaphysical Philosophy of Religion and Morality

“To me God is Truth and love; God is ethics and morality. God is fearlessness. God is the source of Light and Life and yet he is above and beyond all these.”

Truth, the supreme value, cannot be achieved through any means other than non-violence. Hence the inevitability of morality in self-realisation or realisation of Truth. Gandhi emphatically asserts:

“Truth is my religion and ahimsa is the only way of its realisation. I have rejected once and for all the doctrine of the sword.”

The character of Reality is Truth. Thus God can be experienced only through Truth. Hence, according to Gandhi, whenever a true word is uttered, whenever a true action is done and whenever a true feeling is felt, we feel the existence of God. Truthful conduct alone can lead one to Truth. Non-violent way alone is the truthful way, for violence is untruth. It is the denial of satya (that which is existent) or truth, for violence is coercion, and change brought about by coercion is not change from within and thus does not last.

The recognition of the universality of Truth, the presence of that Truth in each and every individual, and the possibility of reawakening it through spiritual discipline, have been the keynote of Indian Philosophy right from the Vedic times to the contemporary period. And self-discipline has been systematically and elaborately explained and practised in India. Gandhi simply adopted it to demonstrate its power. He spared no aspect of life from its application, and no individual from its practice. Thus he has proved himself to be the best believer in the principle of Truth. For a principle to be so called should admit the least number of exceptions, factual and personal. Gandhi’s life is fully in agreement with what he says:

“I do not claim to have originated any new principle or doctrine. I have simply tried in my own way to apply the eternal truths to our own daily life and problems.”

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And applying eternal truths into practical life is nothing but living a moral life.

Gandhi views life as a synthetic whole. Life cannot be taken in abstraction. Though life has so many functional aspects, all these aspects are knit together in a single person. Thus we have harmony in personality. Abstraction has meaning and validity, but only logical; ontologically what exists is a comprehensive and synthetic unity of human being. Therefore, the ultimate aspiration of man, viz., self-realisation, cannot mean the emancipation of the spirit alone. It has to pass through all the functions and departments of life. Thus morality, as a value leading to spiritual plenitude, pervades all departments of life.

As for Gandhi, therefore, whether he engaged in tackling a political question or a social or an economic one, the moral side of it always obtrudes itself and pervades his whole attitude. And his faith in this all-embracing character of morality is so strong that he would even “reject any religious doctrine that does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality.”7 He tolerated unreasonable religious sentiments only when they were not immoral. This disgust has its basis in his belief that without moral life one cannot be spiritual. Religious or metaphysical ideal of self-realisation is impossible without the moral basis. In other words, religion finds its practical expression in a life directed by morality. For a man “cannot be untruthful, cruel and incontinent and claim to have God on his side.”8

Religion which takes no account of practical affairs and does not help to solve them is no religion. And the solutions, to be lasting should be truthful; truthful solutions are but moral solutions. Moral life, according to Gandhi, cannot be expressed unless through the practice of non-violence in its positive sense. Non-violence, the practical expression of morality, draws its validity and strength from a living faith in God which is the object of

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religion. Thus religion or the belief in God is the justification for moral behaviour. In other words, morality flows from religion. As Gandhi holds,

“a living faith in non-violence is impossible without a living faith in God. A non-violent man can do nothing save by the power and grace of God. Without it he won’t have the courage to die without anger, without fear and without retaliation.”9

Thus the love for Truth, which is the religious ideal, is the source of inspiration and the ultimate provocation for a moral life.

The love for Truth, Gandhi’s ultimate metaphysical position, cannot be achieved without the full development of the moral sense. Truth is achieved only by truthful life. God and truth are convertible terms; and only truthful means can lead one to the realisation of God. Thus it follows from Gandhi’s premise that only through a continuous and deliberately conscious moral life one can attain self-realisation. Hence, to be religious simultaneously means to be moral. Gandhi holds:

“For me God and Truth are convertible terms, and if anyone told me that God was a god of untruth or god of torture, I would decline to worship Him.”10

True religion and true morality are inseparably bound up with each other. Some people regard religion as more than morality. This attitude is justified by an example drawn from Jesus on the Cross forgiving the contrite thief who was hanged to death at Jesus’ right side with his heart full of remorse prayed to Jesus:

“Lord remember me when thou comest into thy Kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.”11

Some others think that where there is morality, there is no need for religion. They justify their claim by pointing to the
atrocities and immoralities of the so-called religiously minded people. Thus there is the view that there may be morality without religion and religion without morality. The picture becomes different in Gandhi’s philosophy. Once the ultimate metaphysical or religious position is taken as Truth, morality or truthful living becomes impossible without religion, and religion becomes impossible without morality. The meaning of morality entails the meaning of religion. As Gandhi himself contends:

“True or ideal morality ought to include true religion. To put the same thought differently, morality cannot be observed without religion. That is to say morality should be observed as a religion”

To view morality from a different angle, it is the pursuit of the right thing. But then how does one know what is right? Gandhi answers in terms of the ‘inner voice’ or conscience or still broadly, reason, the voice of Truth that is abiding in each and every individual. Gandhi knew fully well that there is a possibility of doing evil or untruthful actions in the name of ‘inner voice.’ So Gandhi holds:

“When we all care only for what our conscience says, then alone can we regarded to have stepped on to the moral world. We shall not reach this stage, as long as we do not believe—and experience the belief—that God within us, the God of all, is the ever present witness to all our acts.”

Thus one does find it difficult to mark the difference between moral and immoral actions. This riddle is solved by him rather squarely: Anyone who acts according to his ‘inner voice’ for the love of his neighbour, and not for self-love can be rightly called moral. True altruism is considered as the touch-stone of true morality. When we know a particular path to be true, in this sense, we should traverse through it without fear and prejudice. For this, we need the grace of God. It is clear, therefore, that moral life presupposes faith in and assistance of God.
The metaphysical basis of the concept of the rightness of inner voice is the belief in the oneness of all that is living. Gandhi, like the ancient seers of India, believes in the absolute oneness of God, and also of humanity. What though we have many bodies? We have but one soul. Gandhi further states:

“The chief value of Hinduism lies in holding the actual belief that all life (not only human beings, but all sentient beings) is one, i.e., all life coming from the one universal source, call it Allah, God or Parameshwara.”

This belief is the source of his faith in the essential goodness of even the wickedest human being. A deep faith in this original Hindu concept supplies a social content for his experiments with morality. For him, morality is not merely a personal endeavour, it has to penetrate into every walk of social life, for all are God as expressed in the form of anoraniyan or mahitomahiyan.

“The Self smaller than the small, greater than the great, is hidden in the hearts or creatures. The wise, by the grace of the Creator, behold the Lord, majestic and desireless and become free from grief.”

The second part of the verse is specially noteworthy as it implies suggestions about a personal God, bhakti as a means for liberation and the necessity of grace of God for ultimate liberation. We may, therefore, rightly hold it to mean that grace of God is essential for following the dictates of the inner voice, and thus walk along the-path of morality. Once we realise this, truth, charity, justice, forbearance and forgiveness will naturally follow.

Though an idealist given to referring all conduct to certain eternal and basic formulae, Gandhi is essentially a lover of man and not of mere ideas. This love for man was always behind the personal experiments he conducted in his life before requesting his fellowmen to do the same. This may be likened unto a mother who tastes doubtful food stuff before giving it to her child. Thus
if he proposes an experiment for society, say for instance, *satyagraha*, he must first subject himself to its ordeal. If he calls for a sacrifice, he must first pay its price himself. While many socialists wait for all to be deprived of their privileges before they would part with theirs, Gandhi first renounces before he ventures to make any claims on the renunciation of others. This is a lesson for the leaders who are anxiously waiting for the socialistic order.

The only means for the realisation of Truth is *ahimsa*. But complete realisation of *ahimsa* is possible only for the one who has a perfect vision of Truth. But it is not given to man to know the whole Truth. His duty, therefore, lies in living up to the truth as he sees it, and in doing so, to resort to the purest means, *i.e.*, non-violence. That the whole truth is not given to man follows from the limited nature of man. It will be a contradiction in terms for the limited human nature to know the whole Truth. The possession of absolute Truth is an attribute peculiar to God alone. Relative truth is all what we know. Therefore, we can only follow the truth as we see it.

Universal non-violence is the religious and metaphysical ideal, the achievement of which is the life-mission of man. But insofar as man is in the earthen case, Gandhi knows that he cannot achieve the ideal fully. Hence he advises the practice of relative *ahimsa* which is the path of morality. One of the fields in which the relative truth and *ahimsa* can be practised is the field of freedom struggle. In principle, moral ideals like truth and *ahimsa* are eternal and absolute and here they coincide with metaphysical values of Truth and *Ahimsa*. But the absoluteness skips away in ordinary human life. Hence we shall practise the absolute moral principles in their relative forms. These relative forms of practice furnish the scope for the division between metaphysics or religion and morality as it is commonly understood.
That the practice of moral life is in consonance with the nature of man cannot be disputed, because “ahimsa is the attribute of the soul, and therefore, to be practised by everybody in all the affairs of life. Ahimsa is the attribute of the soul because (1) it is the law of our species and hence applicable to all human beings without exception. That it is the law of our species cannot be disputed, for if violence were the law, humanity would have come to extinction long before. The fact that humanity is in sound shape proves that healthy co-operation with love and mutual trust and consideration at its basis is the law of our species, (2) human soul is but another form of Divinity. Love or ahimsa is but another name for Divine Life. Thus at least latently every man is non-violent. Leadership in moral life is to evoke this latent aspect of the nobility in man’s nature. Ahimsa, here, is used for moral life, for moral life is made impossible without the practice of non-violence or love. If it cannot be practised in all departments, it has no practical value.”

Gandhi finds meaning in life by identifying himself with everything that lives through loving service. God can be realised only through service to humanity. He felt that only by identifying himself with the sufferings of the people he could some day ‘see God, Truth, face-to-face.’ The same idea is seen repeatedly expressed by Gandhi in various places. To cite a few:

“I am endeavouring to see God through service to humanity, for I know that God is neither in heaven, nor down below, but in everyone.”

“I am part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity.”

“I recognise no God except that is to be found in the hearts of the dumb millions... And I worship the God that is Truth or Truth which is God through service of these millions.”

Finding or realising God in humanity, in Gandhian terminology, means realising God through service to humanity in
truth and love which is the real expression of a truly moral life. Self-realisation, in his view, is to be achieved by loving even the meanest of creation. An aspirant of Truth cannot afford to keep out of any field of life to which any class or section of people are related. His devotion to Truth has drawn him into all fields of human endeavour.

Gandhi’s philosophy thus assumes the form of ‘spiritual humanism.’ No doubt, he was a humanist, for his primary concern was man. A survey of his public life from South Africa till the end of his work in India in 1948 brings out this human concern. The great and unique place he gave to humanity to the extent of identifying it with Godhead, and his stress on love or ahimsa as the species-character of man, expresses his great human concern. And from the point of view of the end he was aiming at, one may call him a spiritual humanist.

All the efforts he made in terms of non-violence in private life and satyagraha in public life were meant for lifting himself and humanity as a whole to the spiritual plane, to God-realisation. In other words, moral living was not an end in itself, rather a means for self-realisation. He wanted the entire human family, which according to him, is one in ontological relationship, could practise the kind of moral life he practised. In this sense, one might rightly call Gandhi’s approach spiritual humanism. This humanism includes within it a host of values and doctrines which are conducive to the upliftment of human soul to the plane of divinity. As I.C. Sharma contends:

“... it projects an ethico-metaphysical attitude towards life which supports and encourages all doctrines and denominations dedicated to the development of human spirit.”

Thus love, ahimsa, satyagraha and its off-shoots, non-cooperation and civil resistance, the law of suffering and other related values
are all incorporated in the concept of morality. The practice of these values enhances the development of human spirit.

Gandhi singles himself out with his philosophy of life. Man’s ultimate aim, he holds, is the realisation of God, and all his activities, social, political and religious, have to be guided by this ultimate aim, for he accepts the metaphysical position of the identity of God and the self. The immediate service of all human beings becomes a necessary part of the endeavour simply because the only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and become one with it. This can be done only by service to all. Being part and parcel of the whole, one cannot find Him apart from Humanity. And Gandhi’s God is myriad-formed; he never fails to see God in any situation in which man places himself. He saw Him in the people around the spinning-wheel, in communal unity, in the removal of untouchability. All departments of life, all walks of life are filled with His presence. No part of life is devoid of relevance for redemption, no compartment purely profane.

It is this profound conviction that moved Gandhi into the application of satyagraha to all fields of public life. Satyagraha is the technique of the application of the virtue of love or non-violence. But then the application of the technique of satyagraha is not an original contribution of Gandhi. It was being practised by many even from the ancient times in India. The originality of Gandhi lies in making satyagraha an art. He has applied it to all affairs, individual or domestic, national or international. All fields of human behaviour—religion, politics, sociology, family and education—come under its scope. In satyagraha he found an eternal creed which can triumph over all evils and lead mankind to salvation. But has he led mankind to salvation? The answer is an emphatic ‘no’.
“Gandhi has not been able to wean mankind from violence. But his triumph lies in drawing the attention of the mass-mind to the wonders of non-violence.”

He was able to convince the world that non-violence is not a pious wish but a dialectical necessity, a necessity in the context of a social evolution guided by the principle of violence.

In his book *A Study of History* Toynbee wonders why Gandhi has applied the weapon of *satyagraha* to objects and aims that are mundane. Mahadev Desai replies: Prof. Toynbee does not quite see the reason why Gandhiji has dared to experiment the method of non-violence on the mundane plane. It is precisely because Gandhiji refuses to make any distinction between the mundane and the other worldly plane so far as the moral and the physical laws which govern them are concerned. For him the outside universe is but a reflection of the inside universe, and he repeats time and again that the universe is compressed in the atom.

Here Desai points to Gandhi’s unflinching faith in the undivided nature of human life. No line can be drawn between its different compartments, nor between ethics and politics. To explicate his view, he brings in a simple and yet forceful analogy from social life:

“A trader who earns his wealth by deception thinks that his sins can be washed away by spending some amount of his ill-gotten gains for religious and charitable purposes. This is only self-deception. As long as he does not abandon the root-cause, greed, he cannot be pardoned. One’s everyday life is never capable of being separated from one’s spiritual being. Both act and react upon each other.”

In another context Gandhi observes:

“... human mind or human society is not divided into watertight compartments called social, political and religious. All act and react upon one another.”

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Desai’s remark reflects one of the very important metaphysical positions Gandhi has accepted for application in individual and social life, viz., the identification of the universe with the self. As the stand one takes in morality must depend upon one’s metaphysical position, the dimensions of Gandhi’s conception of morality, for example, ahimsa, cannot be understood without reference to his metaphysical position. In other words, ahimsa and such other moral positions of Gandhi receive justification from the metaphysical position of the identity of the universe and the self. Once this metaphysical position is accepted, the ethical corollary of ‘loving thy neighbour as thyself’ has to follow by necessity.

The best field for the practice of morality is the field of social work. And social work could in no way be done during Gandhi’s time apart from politics. Thus Gandhi has taken up politics willingly as a medium for the moral experiments. As he confesses, “I felt compelled into the political field because I found I could not do even social work without touching politics.” He further suggests that “political work must be looked upon in terms of social and moral progress.” The main reason who he wanted to fight against the British Rule was that the system they introduced did not take note of the millions of Indian villagers who constituted the main bulk of India’s population. He believed that a government must be patterned after the genius of the people, and their historical evolution. It must be based upon institutions familiar to the people. India through the ages has lived and even now lives in the villages. And the panchayat or the village institution is familiar to them. These communities were economically self-sufficient. Gandhi wanted the government of India to rest on the foundation of the revived and revitalised village republics.

The moral basis for this choice was distribution of justice to the masses. Concentration of power is likely to set in decay. That
was the case with Nazi Germany, Czar’s Russia and even the British Colonialism which Gandhi was fighting against. He had genuine fear of concentration of power. Power must be diffused through many centres for the distribution of justice and spread of humanism. Also, such a society is free from coercion, and the decisions gather the charm of personal decisions as they were previously discussed and assimilated by most people of the group. Socialisation process becomes speedier and vital social problems will be tackled with greater ease and success. For Gandhi, thus, political life cannot be pursued without moral consciousness.

The gains of the life, to be personal, must be hard-earned. And in the endeavour each and everyone should participate. Taken in this sense, satyagraha gains richer meaning. The collective endeavour for the spiritual development of humanity is expressed not only by social service done within one’s own community or country, but in terms of fighting against values and institutions that are detrimental to the total renovation of the people. The political revolution Gandhi started in India can be appreciated only if we approve this second sense of social service. Gandhi’s distinction lies in the introduction of mass political revolution against the British expression of culture and their political institutions.

Here Gandhi strikes his difference from the earlier movements for independence of India. In the profound words of Bimla Prasad:

“What distinguished Gandhi from the earlier leaders of Congress was not his method of non-violence, but his message of non-violent mass action or struggle involving open defiance of the established authority and violation of its laws.”

He had to undertake the non-violent mass struggle against the British for the creation of a new moral order, through which alone, Gandhi believed, Indians could achieve self-realisation or Truth.
This attempt may be analysed in terms of his repudiation of the English civilisation. For brevity we shall concentrate here only on one aspect of the English civilisation, viz., the institution of law-court. This aspect is the most appropriate one as Gandhi himself was a barrister. The institution of law-court apparently presupposes the principle of equal distribution of justice. Justice must be given to all because all men are embodiments of God. Two men approaching a court of law after a quarrel is astonishing to Gandhi. While discussing the Hindu-Muslim dissensions, Gandhi places on record his strong dissatisfaction with the institution of law-court and professional lawyers. The lawyers, as a whole, aggravate quarrels instead of repressing them.

Moreover, people take up that profession, not in order to help others out of their miseries, but to make themselves rich. Gandhi contends further that those who know anything of the Hindu-Muslim quarrels know that they have been often due to the work of lawyers. They have made brothers enemies. Yet he does not lose sight of a few great lawyers like Manmohan Ghose, who took up the profession with a view to help the poor and the helpless. According to Gandhi, by and large, the profession abounds in immorality.

“To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves”. 32

The suggestion is that any institution which stands as an agency for perpetuation of immorality, though by its exercise some may be benefited occasionally, is to be condemned. Any action which is moral _suo moto_ produces good results. Only by observing morality one gains mastery over oneself which in turn opens the way for self-knowledge.33 Knowing oneself, in other words, is self-realisation, the highest goal in human life which in Gandhian terms is equivalent to God-realisation. Thus, for Gandhi, morality is the ground or the basis by which his metaphysical ideal-God-is to be realised.
Gandhi is so adamant about the creed of non-violent revolution as an instrument for the spiritual upliftment of humanity that he is never prepared to part with it. His strong faith in this creed as a moral weapon is derived partly from his faith in the universal oneness of all that lives, and partly from the inspiration drawn from the lives of the great men of the past. Non-violence presupposes a change in human nature. The change mentioned is not change in human nature as such, rather a change by discovering the true human nature which becomes ready to view the fellow-human beings as complementary to itself. In other words, non-violence as a creed presupposes the unity and interdependence of all human beings or the essential oneness of all human beings.

But does history at any time record such a change? Emphatically it does. Many an individual has turned from the mean, personal, acquisitive point of view to one that sees society as a whole for its benefit. To substantiate this claim we have the great Vaishnava saint Chaitanya who while struck by a ruffian exclaimed “... but I shall offer you my love.” The Buddha faced sufferings and evils by a solemn equanimity of mind, and millions in India and abroad were attracted to this doctrine of non-violence.

Again, if we trace the history of Christianity, we find that it conquered the violence of the early Roman Empire by love and self-suffering. The significance of the Cross has been patient suffering and meeting evil by good. Christianity was saved from the violence of Huns by the ness of its followers. Pope Leo the great went out to meet the ‘barbarians and his loving appeal and appearance were sufficient to persuade them to go back. If there has been such a change in one man, Gandhi would argue, there can be the same change in many.

Gandhi did not believe that the imperial authorities of Britain alone were responsible for our slavery. He believed further that a reformed India alone would be a free India. It is towards the
achievement of this that Gandhi worked for the removal of untouchability which, as a cruel and inhuman institution, violates the human dignity and ridicules the great traditional Indian belief in the oneness, and for that matter, sacredness of all that is living. Even politically it is abhorring, for it is against the spirit of democracy which makes no distinction among citizens. Campaign against untouchability is not altogether a new innovation. It may be said to have begun in India with the Buddha. Guru Nanak and his nine successors accepted the untouchables into the Sikh religion. Kabir and other religious sects of Sant Mata of Middle Ages freely allowed the untouchables to join their brotherhood. For Gandhi untouchability was not a separate problem. It was simply part and parcel of his love for humanity as a whole. As Gandhi himself testifies,

“Love of people brought the problem of untouchability early into my life. My mother said ‘you must not touch.’ ‘Why not?’ I questioned back, and from that day on revolt began.”

Gandhi’s revolt against untouchability was not merely sentimental or politically motivated, as many seem to think. In his concern for the untouchables, one could trace a few presuppositions of which the most important ones are (1) the basic belief in the oneness of all that is living, and (2) concern for the moral and spiritual life of the untouchables. In tackling the problem of untouchability, he was concerned not only with the economic, political and social emancipation of the untouchables, but also with their moral and spiritual life. His fight, therefore, against the social institution of untouchability was but part of his larger human concern.

His revolt against untouchability was so full that he even wanted to be reborn as an untouchable so that he may share the sorrows, sufferings and the affronts levelled at them in order that he may endeavour to free himself and them from that miserable
The intensity of his passion to ameliorate the social condition of the untouchables was so great that given the choice between working for the untouchables and remaining with his family, he would have preferred the former. But Kasturbai never created a crisis of this kind as she never prevented Gandhi from working for the untouchables; rather she co-operated with him in his attempt, and accepted with pleasure so many untouchables into the Ashram.

Another realm in which Gandhi’s moral sense is evidently manifest is that of his journalistic writings. Journalism is an art of recording and interpreting events for the benefit of the public. It is also an art of intelligent anticipation of events to educate the public, who take anything printed as gospel truth. Considering the appalling influence of the press upon the mass mind, one cannot ignore its importance in guiding a people in truthful or untruthful way. The content and style, therefore, of a newspaper or journal must be guided by the principles of truth, non-violence and love. It is this conviction that prompted him to write only what is true.

The British Government found it easy to tackle the freedom movement, because Gandhi’s programmes were published earlier in Harijan or Young India. While he was in South Africa, The Indian Opinion carried his programmes against the British well in advance. His life and programmes were never a secret, but rather an open book. And in all his writings he pleaded for justice and truth, and never for his own selfish ends. Thus through his writings, which never exhibited an iota of hatred against the English rulers, he brought home to them, the purity of his and his followers’ intentions and principles.

By life and by writings Gandhi was aiming to show only one thing: the matchless power of satyagraha which is a direct corollary of non-violence and truth. To achieve this end he had to
shun untruth and all elements of provocation for violence from his writings. To be true to his faith, therefore, he did not write in anger or malice: he did not write with hatred towards the opponent; he did not write merely to excite passion.37

Like the profession of lawyers, Journalism also is sometimes taken as a profession for making money. This motive turns the entire meaning of journalism topsy turvy. Very often newspapers cause communal troubles by gross misrepresentations of incidents and by incitement to political and social violence. Freedom of the Press is a precious privilege that no true democracy can forgo. But if freedom is found misused for spreading untruth, the State has the moral obligation to check it by legislation. The sole aim of journalism should be service. Its aim must be total development of the whole mankind.

“The sole aim of journalism should be service. The newspaper press is a great power, but just as an unchained torrent of water submerges whole countrysides and devastates crops, even so an uncontrolled pen serve but to destroy. If the control is from without, it proves more poisonous than want of control. It can be profitable only when exercised from within. If this line of reasoning is correct, how many of the journals in the world would stand the test?... The useful and the useless must, like good and evil generally, go on together, and man must make his choice.” 38

In Gandhi’s view of life there is no place for a separate economic man as held by classical economists. The economic man is mere abstraction. Moreover, he was against the Marxist idea that the whole of human history is a record of the conflict between economic classes.

“His economics has to be studied from the view point of his own moral and spiritual principles and ideals and also from the conditions that existed and still exist in India.”39

The economic activity of man is concerned with the production of material goods, their exchange, distribution and consumption.
All these activities concern not only the individuals, but also their social relations. These social relations, according to Gandhi, are to be guided by moral principles.

The moral principle applied by him in the economic life of man is the equal division of the profit among all those who are instrumental in producing it. If this were too high an ideal, at least no one should suffer from want of food, clothing and shelter. This much must be ensured from the part of the government. From the masses he wants practice of simplicity by limiting their wants. But under the foreign rule, Gandhi found India being exploited economically, and its wealth drained off. It was against such exploitation that he supported the strike of the textile workers against the mill owners in Ahmedabad, and started his campaign in Champaran against the indigo planters, and led the historic march to Dandi for salt satyagraha. Each of these incidents is worthy of detailed consideration. But as they are well-known even to an ordinary man in India, there is no need to expatiate on them.

Still we may look into the details of at least one single incident of exploitation by the British in India. This will enable us to see if Gandhi was justified in his satyagraha campaign against the gross economic inequality. The following resolution, drawn up by Gandhi and approved by the Working Committee of the Indian National Congress, and read and passed by public meetings on January 26, 1930 brings out the colossal economic justice done to Indians by the British Government:

“We believe that it is the inalienable right of the Indian people, as of any other people, to have freedom and to enjoy the fruits of their toil and have the necessities of life so that they may have full opportunities of growth. We believe also that if any government deprives a people of these rights and oppresses them, the people have a further right to alter it or to abolish it....”

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“India has been ruined economically. The revenue derived from our people is out of all proportion to our income. Our average income is seven pice (less than two pence) per day, and of the heavy taxes we pay 20 per cent are raised from the peasantry and 3 per cent from the salt tax, which falls most heavily on the poor.”

“We hold it to be a crime against man and God to submit any longer, to a rule that has caused this four fold disaster” (Political, economic, cultural and spiritual) “to our country.” Gandhi further goes on to explain the nature of the means he would approve for the liberation of India: “We recognise, however, that the most effective way of gaining our freedom is not through violence. We will therefore prepare ourselves by withdrawing, as far as we can, all voluntary associations from the British Government, and will prepare for civil disobedience, including non-payment of taxes....”

But believing as he did in non-violence, he did not want the physical liquidation of the exploiters, rather by inflicting suffering on himself, he appealed to the best part of their nature.

The economic system of a country, Gandhi feels, must exhibit concern for the poor. In the Indian context his feeling gets more force as the vast majority of her population is below poverty line. An economy which does not take note of this, is exploitation. And any economy must eschew exploitation, for exploitation is violence. The only economy that eschews exploitation in the Indian context, according to Gandhi, is rural economy. Hence he advises rural economy for India. It is with this idea in mind that he advised spinning in each home. In his view, revival of hand-spinning alone could restore India’s economic stability. Gandhi says:

“I have compared the spinning-wheel to the central sun around which the solar system of our village economy revolves.”

The *charkha* or not, the motive behind industrialisation must be the economic upliftment of the poor. Industrialisation, and the
consequent mechanisation, should not deprive the poor of their work, and thus lead them to more poverty. The gap between the poor and the rich must be gradually reduced. He wants the mill industry to prosper, but it should not be at the expense of the country, the common man.  

It is this concern for the poor and the common man that provoked Gandhi to introduce the concept of *swadeshi* in Indian economic thought and life. His conviction in using goods produced in India is so strong that he considers it sinful to use foreign goods.

"I hold it to be sinful for me to refuse to buy the cloth spun and woven by the needy millions of India’s paupers and to buy foreign cloth although it may be superior in quality to the Indian hand-spun."  

The suggestion is that all Indians have to co-operate with the working class in their small industries by buying their products and thus contributing to their economic and social upliftment. *Swadeshi*, thus, is a relative value, and the moment the total economy of the country develops to a stage where the working class no more depends fully on their cottage industries, Indians may buy foreign goods.

It is evident from the argument of the foregoing pages that Gandhi’s attitude was synthetic. Synthesis implies union of opposites that could appear contradictory in formal logic. He made contradictory views more plausible in his thinking, as he was dealing with organic situations, for life which is growing through the flux of time and circumstances escapes strict analysis or rules of formal logic. Such an approach refuses to easily conform to a system. Judged by any other standard, it would present logical inconsistencies and contradictions. While dealing with life as it is presented before him, now he emphasises the material aspects, now the spiritual, but the basic value should not be lost sight of.

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Gandhi’s integral approach to life with belief in the unity of all life as its basis, could be considered as responsible for the introduction of moral values into ‘the purely profane planes of life’ such as politics and economics. His view of life as a single unit, as a pilgrimage to the realisation of the spiritual value of Truth and the consequent view that man as a whole is to be sanctified and elevated to the plane of spiritual perfection have been criticised both by the spiritualists and the materialists alike. The former accused him of lowering the purity of spiritual life by mixing it with economics and politics. The latter have often charged him with confusing economic and political views with his ideas of truth and non-violence and his philosophy of means and ends. They are inclined to think that the questions of political freedom, economic emancipation and social equality are the supreme issues and that people’s attention must not be diverted from these to moral problems as has been done by Gandhi.

The critics lose sight of Gandhi’s vision of human personality as an integral whole. They attack him from outside his own camp; once they are inside the camp, they will start appreciating his views. Further, it is historically proved that the moral decay of a people has always preceded their physical and material degeneration. Material progress divorced from moral and spiritual progress does not endure. His concern is not so much with the final form of salvation, but rather with the art of leading a good life.

“Not philosophy but ethics is the pivot of his teachings. He aspires after ethical excellence. Satyagraha aims at lifting men to the highest ethical plane. Above the ethical plane lie the religious and philosophical planes. Gandhiji’s aim is humble and his ideal is fixed only at the moral level.”

The concept of morally good life entails the concept of ahimsa. The flesh is a hindrance to the fullest practice of it. On
several occasions Gandhi admitted the limitations of the flesh. He who can go beyond the body alone can attain the ideal of *ahimsa*. To transcend the mortal coil, one has to pass from moral values to spirituality. On the moral plane, even in the highest moral excellence, the evils of the flesh cannot be completely got rid of. A *jivanmukta* (an individual who has attained salvation in this life) has transcended evil and good, suffering and pleasure. He alone is completely non-violent and completely moral. Gandhi is a *sadhaka* of (the moral plane). The absolute Truth is yet to be realised; what is at hand is a context where one can be moral. And the practice of morality admits of various qualifications and compromises. The rigour, in many places, is to be mollified owing to the exigencies of the circumstances which are beyond human control. But it is sufficiently clear that he lays emphasis on motive and not on action, so far as the evaluation of moral judgments are concerned. An action is truly and wholly moral when the motive, means adopted and preconceived results are all good.\(^{45}\)

The above mentioned attitude can be understood well only against the framework of Gandhi’s world-vision. He starts from his own religion, Hinduism, and the metaphysical solutions of eternal problems from a Hindu angle of vision form the bases of his philosophy. He has not sought to answer or solve the problems from an independent perspective of experience or reason. The Hindu Scriptures have created in him settled notions about Reality. In this connection it must be admitted that he neither accepted nor rejected the Hindu Scriptures in toto. That which is illogical or immoral was always repugnant to him. The *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Gita* and the *Puranas* were acceptable to him, provided they had appealed to his reason. In this respect he is both an orthodox and a heterodox. He would also accept teachings of religions other than Hinduism; of philosophies other than the ancient Indian ones—which were in accordance with his reason and moral sense.\(^{46}\)
Though he was experimenting with universal values which know no barriers of religions and cultures, the expression they have taken in his writings and personal life is of the ancient Indian style. This might have created a communication block with other cultural and political groups, despite the international relevance of his teachings. The new meanings he introduced into these concepts were not always readily made clear to the world at large. Thus, as J.B. Kripalani remarks, instead of using the terms ‘truth’ and ‘non-violence’ that have spiritual and moral associations, had he used the words ‘open-diplomacy’ and ‘disarmament,’ there was every chance of his being better understood and appreciated by the modern mind. Then even those who now consider him an idealist would consider him a rank practical politician. He might have even won the Nobel Peace Prize. Again, instead of ‘village and cottage industries,’ had he used the term ‘decentralisation of industry,’ he would have been perhaps better understood by the educated. Instead of using the term ‘Ramaraj,’ had he used the term ‘democracy,’ he would convey his message better and clearer to the educated the world over. Further, he does not use the terms communist and socialist school; rather he talks of the establishment of justice and equality. These have psychological implications too. To achieve the ends, Gandhi’s term demand a change of heart. But the term ‘Communist’ implies mechanical change. Once the theory of class-war is put into practice, everything goes by external arrangements and organisation.47

By this we are not to understand that Gandhi never used modern terms to convey his meaning. He used them also, but not so frequently as he used his cherished terms taken from the ancient scriptures. And his main interest was moral and spiritual regeneration of the society and not political. He took an active political life because he found that his religion cannot be lived apart from it. Whatever be the terms adopted for translating his
mind into language, he expressed the meaning of these terms through his very life. Thus with Gandhi, the content of these terms became richer. The concept of non-violence, for instance, cannot be understood now apart from the way it was practised by Gandhi. The vivid picture of a self-suffering Gandhi comes to the fore, when we consider the concept. Gandhi, the political emancipator, or the economic revivalist or the social reformer left but one message, that of personal and social liberation through morally good and, for that matter, truthful life, whatever be one’s walk of life.

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