

# Some Introductory Notes on Gandhi's Concept of Truth

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Gandhi's concept of truth is a splendid topic – and so much so that I would never presume to say I can tell you all about it. In a way it was, like a big banyan tree, always spreading and becoming more grand. The best I can do is to share some thoughts about it. They are in 13 mini-chapters.

I am a Westerner and a lot of my thinking reflects this fact.

(1)

*“Truthfulness” as the most essential feature of Gandhian thought and behaviour*

Although Gandhi is often called “the apostle of *nonviolence*”, he himself said (in 1936): “By instinct I have been truthful, but not nonviolent. A Jain *muni* once rightly said that I was not so much a votary of *ahimsa* as I was of truth, and I put the latter in the first place and the former in the second. ... It was in the course of my pursuit of truth that I discovered nonviolence.” (*Harijan*, 28/iii/1936, p.49) And, on other occasions he made various other remarks conditioning his advocacy of nonviolence – for instance that anyone who *feels humiliated* by a bully's insults should hit the bully to vindicate his self-respect. (*Harijan*, 9/iii/1940, p.3) But, I am not aware of his having ever advocated any deliberate resort to untruthfulness.

It is also notable that he said (in 1925) that it would be sheer self-deception to imagine oneself wholly nonviolent while benefitting from, say, a farmer's killing of pests during a famine. And he added:

“I have not the capacity for preaching universal nonviolence. I preach ... non-violence restricted strictly to the purpose of winning our freedom [from the Raj] and, therefore, perhaps for preaching the regulation of international relations by nonviolent means.” (*CWMMG*, XXVII, 51f)

(I do think he ought to have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.)

There is a clear (IMHO) connection between nonviolence and *scientific* regard for truth. If two participants in a symposium disagree about how something should be explained scientifically, and if one of them threatens some kind of violence against the other one because of this difference of ostensibly genuine scientific opinion, the one who has made the threat loses immediately his or her status as a scientist.

(2)

*Truth as a possible characteristic of statements of intention*

Many Western scientists and philosophers subscribe to a “correspondence-theory of truth” whereby the word “true” is applied, not to *behaviour*, but only to explicit *statements* (or implicit suppositions) that correspond to – i.e. match, fit correctly – the relevant objective reality.

It is clear, however, that Gandhi had a broader notion of truth. Evidence of it developing already in his childhood is his deeply felt admiration of the play, *Harishchandra*. (“I literally believed in the story... The thought of it all often made me weep... One thing took deep root in me – the conviction that morality is the basis of things, and that truth is the substance of all morality. Truth became my sole objective....”)

The story of Harishchandra focuses on a *certain kind of statement* ☐ a statement of intention (in this case a particularly intense kind of such a statement: a vow).

The word “fact” is derived from the past participle, “*factus*”, of the Latin verb “*facere*” meaning “to do” or “make”.

Let us agree, however, that it can refer also to *present* and not just past reality.

(When Bertrand Russell’s brilliant disciple Ludwig Wittgenstein doubted whether would-be-factual statements about the present could ever be correctly regarded (philosophically) as being really factual, Russell argued that the truth of the statement, “There is no hippopotamus in this [class]room at present”, could be established by looking under all the desks in the room without finding one – which Russell proceeded to do in order to make his point.)

A brilliant Indian logician who is a friend of mine has argued that all facts are *past or present*, there can be no such thing as a *future* fact. Yet it seems to me

that a statement of intention, such as, “I will bring a hippopotamus here next Sunday”, will be *rendered* true or untrue – i.e. either corresponding or not corresponding to the reality of that Sunday – in large part by the behaviour of the person who has made the statement (although other facts may be contingent: perhaps, for instance, the hippo (s)he has in mind might abscond). The outcome will show that (s)he made a true or untrue statement, just as if (s)he had said “A hippo was here last night.” In either case we may correctly describe the statement as true or untrue according to how well it corresponds to reality; the only difference is that in the case of the promise, we can’t possibly know until Monday. In such cases, there is inherently a close connection between truth and behavior. The truth of the matter is not just a matter of depersonalized statements floating around out there.

Rabindranath Tagore was of the opinion that if you take a vow and then find out that it was a mistake to take it, you should “[throw it away](#)”. Amartya Sen has agreed explicitly with Tagore; and, it is well known that Gandhi fudged with regard to his vow never again to drink milk. He let his wife persuade him that it had been just a vow not to drink cow or buffalo milk, he could resume drinking goat milk without actually breaking the vow.

Dr John Chelladurai, the Dean of Studies at the Gandhi Research Foundation, has pointed out, in fairness to Gandhi, that he had heard that dairy farmers would sometimes prick the cow’s udder with sharp pins while milking her (if she withheld some of her milk) in order to increase the economic yield to *them*, whereas he believed that goats when milked were *not* treated violently: he had, when taking the vow, been so preoccupied with the premise about cows that the one about goats hadn’t occurred to him.

Nevertheless, he did indeed depart in his behavior – for a vital self-nutritional reason – from the original *wording* of the vow, and that fact bothered him for many years. The self-nutritional reason was vital to him because some doctors who had (he believed) recently saved his life had meanwhile convinced him that in order to continue to survive, he must include in his diet a source of animal protein. And let me note, apropos Kasturba's role in the matter, that to help ensure that someone else is properly nourished is a splendidly womanly – as well as manly – thing to do.

Section 13 of this working paper will provide some additional information about this philosophically fascinating episode of Gandhi's life.

My own view is that a statement of intention which you have made to other people and which they then depend upon, is more important than a vow made to yourself only. To break a promise (explicit or implicit) made to other people is to destroy the fabric of social harmony in your part of society; and, the more you may persist in such behaviour, the more destructive the effect (unless you are merely dismissed as a crazy person of no consequence).

Here are some brief excerpts from a conversation on 30th March 1945 between Gandhi and an atheist to whom Gandhi would write, on 9th April 1946 (*CWMG*, vol.83, p.390), “Though there is a resemblance between your thought and practice and mine superficially, I must own that yours is far superior to mine”:

“He [Gandhi] inquired into my conception of morality. I replied, ‘I do what I say and I say what I do – that is my definition of moral behaviour...’

“‘Exactly’, said Bapuji...” (*Gora, An Atheist with Gandhi*, Navajivan 1958 and later editions)

It may be appropriate to mention here the reason stated by Gandhi in his autobiography (Part I, Chapter 4) for observing his marriage-vow to have a sexual

relation with no one other than his wife: “the passion for truth was innate in me, and to be false to her was therefore out of the question”.

In 1939, Ludwig Wittgenstein (whom I have mentioned as having studied with Bertrand Russell) became the Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge University, and in one of his lectures made the following remarks about supposed statements of intention:

“Well, how is one taught the meaning of the expression, 'I intend to play chess'? One sees that it is the sort of expression which people use when sitting down at a

chess board; but of course they sometimes say it when not sitting down at a chess board. Yet saying this generally goes with certain actions and not with certain other actions. (Suppose I say, 'I now intend to play chess' and then undress.) Similarly it often goes with having certain images; but of course one can have any images when intending to play chess.

“There are cases where we should say, 'I did intend to play chess when I said so, but a second later I didn't' – when, for example, I had walked out immediately after saying it. If someone asked me what I meant, this could be said – exceptionally. They might think me slightly queer, but that is all. For it might have been the case that I had suddenly thought of something else which had to be done. – But if that were the rule instead of the exception, if there were a race of men who always walked out of the room whenever they said ‘I intend to play chess’ – would we say that they used the phrase in the same way we do?”

This is part of Wittgenstein's famous "language-games" theory of the meanings of words and statements. In order to figure out those meanings correctly, we have to understand what the speaker or writer is up to.

And let us recall that when Ram Manohar Lohia met Gandhi and said to him, "Bapu, you are an old man, [and] your speeches are delivered in a monotonous, low-pitch, often inaudible voice, while we young socialists speak in a scholarly fashion or breathe fire in our speeches; and yet, the people of India follow you, not us. What is your magic?", Gandhi replied: "Son, I don't exactly know, but the only reason I can think of is that I have never asked people to do anything I first did not practice in my life – and the people of India seem to recognize the difference."

(3)

*Gandhi sifting for accuracy in the use of language  
when intention is not being stated*

The following recollection by Pyarelal (recounted in a book entitled *In Gandhiji's Mirror*) shows how sharply Gandhi could detect inaccuracy in factual arguments:

“Not a small part of my training [early on with Gandhi] consisted of unlearning what I had previously learnt at school or college.... [On one occasion] Gandhiji gave us a passage from [John] Milton's *Areopagetica* and asked us to point out a flaw which he had found in the writer's argument. The writer in that passage had argued that

the intellect is the mind's eye; to suppress a book is, therefore, worse than to kill the author; for death only puts out the light of the eye, but to suppress a book is to put out the light of the mind which is God's most precious gift to man. 'It is an overstatement of the case', he [Gandhi] explained.... 'The work suppressed may not be the writer's best or last. If he lives [after that particular work is suppressed], he may [yet] produce another and perhaps a better work. I had expected a writer of Milton's calibre to be more careful in his thinking.'"

So, Gandhi was perfectly alert to the usefulness of the "correspondence theory".

He stressed as follows its importance to journalists, while recommending also a non-strident tone in journalistic writing:

“Always insist on truth, and urge it with humility and grace. I am a journalist of long standing. In my own way I claim to know my art well. I would therefore ask such of you as are journalists and publicists to curb your pen and tongue. Exercise the strictest economy of words, but not of truth. Restrain your expression, but not the inner light which should burn brighter with increasing restraint.”

(4)

*Gandhi dissenting from Bertrand Russell's view that  
it can sometimes be moral to tell a lie*

Russell would deliberately lie if, after weighing pros and cons, lying seemed to him likely to lead to more good than bad outcome. He said, in *The Conquest of Happiness* (1930; Chapter 7, "The Sense of Sin", 4th paragraph): "I do not deny that there is a great deal too much lying in the world, ... but I do deny, as I think every rational person must, that lying is in no circumstances justified. I once in the course of a country walk saw a tired fox at the last stages of exhaustion still forcing himself to run. A few minutes afterwards I saw the hunt. They asked me if I had seen the fox, and I said I had. They asked me which way he had gone, and I lied to them. I do not think I should have been a better man if I had told the truth."

Gandhi, when told of this morally chosen lie by Bertrand Russell, commented as follows:

“Bertrand Russell is a great writer and philosopher. With all respect to him I must dissent from the view attributed to him. He made the initial mistake of admitting that he had seen the fox. He was not bound to answer the first question. He could even have refused to answer the second question.... I have always maintained that nobody is bound always to answer questions that may be put to him. Truth-telling admits of no exceptions.”

*(Harijan, 9/vi/1946, p.17)*

It seems to me that underlying Gandhi's comment was the thought that Russell had given up an opportunity to suggest personally and directly to the fox-hunters that what they were doing was wrong.

However, even to accept that Gandhi's insight about this particular case of the fox-hunters was deeper than Russell's would not *entirely*, IMHO, dispose of Russell's broader argument that to tell a deliberate lie may in some (exceptional) circumstances be the most moral thing to do.

Dr Chelladurai has mentioned to me that Russell's lie probably ensured that the fox would survive that day, whereas if he had simply told the hunters that what they were doing was wrong, there might well have been a nearly 50% chance that they would (1) ignore him and (2) head in the right direction to find and kill the innocent fox. Dr Chelladurai

has also mentioned to me, apropos, that according to a famous couplet by the celebrated ancient Tamil poet and philosopher Thiruvalluvar, a lie would be (paradoxically) accorded “the status of the Truth if it delivers unblemished good”. Yet it seems to me that Gandhi could respond that the resulting good cannot really be regarded as “unblemished” if it is based on a lie. Gandhi might say that on the one hand, the only thing we can be certain of is that *some* bad effect or other will result ensue from the evil means (i.e. the lie) and that on the other hand everything else about the outcome will be determined by God, not by us. That is what I think Gandhi might say. The only thing I would say for sure is that to start telling ‘white lies’ is to put yourself on a slippery slope. At the end of this text I will revert to this issue and will provide evidence that some doctors lovingly cured Gandhi of a grave illness in 1918 by deceiving him.

(5)

*Some relevant points about notions of science*

A first-rate 20th-century Western philosopher of science, Karl Popper, distinguished between “scientific” and “non-scientific” statements by saying that a non-scientific statement is one that could never finally be proved *untrue* by factual information, whereas a scientific statement is one from which a prediction can be derived that is vulnerable to the possibility that observable reality could contradict it (in which case it ought to be either modified suitably or else, if that kind of process turns into a quagmire, discarded altogether; if the latter is what happens, then a “scientific revolution” is, according to Thomas Kuhn, in the making).

It is notable, however, that Gandhi regarded the investigation of *ahimsa* as susceptible to scientific development. He said, in 1939, "*Ahimsa is a science. The word 'failure' has no place in the vocabulary of science. Failure to obtain the expected result is often the precursor to further discoveries.*" (CWMG, LXIX, 166) And in 1946 he said that the existence of violence "*can never mean that the creed of nonviolence has failed [altogether]. At best it may be said that I have not yet found the technique required for the conversion of the mass mind.*" (CWMG, LXXXVI, 134) (Elsewhere I have described him as a notable contributor to the science of crowd psychology.)

(6)

*Cultural milieu as an influence on attitudes toward truthfulness*

When the Viceroy in 1904 (Lord Curzon) stated publicly that “the highest ideal of truth is to a large extent a Western conception”, Gandhi published in *Indian Opinion* a collection of dozens of passages from Hindu scripture extolling truthfulness. The concept is, I think, clearly applicable on a global scale and not only in this or that culture. And yet it may be notably likely to be disregarded in this or that particular cultural niche. (*Hello Trump!*)

Here are, for instance, some excerpts from a newspaper report published in 2018: “The world of literature has its own level of phoniness, Salman Rushdie has admitted, but it is nothing compared with the wild insincerity levels of [the world of] film and television. ‘Believe nothing’, he said. In an entertaining interview at [a recent] ... literary festival..., Rushdie revealed the ... experience he had with the US TV company *Showtime*, which approached him seven years ago to write a series.... ‘Every time I sent them a draft, they would say: “This is the best thing we have ever seen, never in the history of television... .. It is original and startling and mind-blowing, we are so totally with it!” This happened for a year and at the end of the year I got a text message saying: “We’ve decided not to go with it.”””

However, the first time I visited Sevagram (this was in 1995) I saw, posted on the wall in Gandhi's own room – and I was told that Gandhi himself had had it put there – a warning, attributed to John Ruskin, not to indulge in the practice of misleading people while steering clear of an explicit lie:

“The essence of lying is in deception and not in words; a lie may be told by silence, by equivocation, by the accent on a syllable, by the glance of the eye attaching a particular significance to a sentence; and all these kinds of lies are worse and baser by many degrees than a lie plainly worded.”

(7)

*Gandhi's notion of "truth in thought"*

Gandhi said in 1930 that “Generally speaking, [observance of] truth is understood merely to mean that we must speak the truth. But we in the ashram should understand the word 'satya' or 'Truth' in a much wider sense. There should be truth in thought, truth in speech and truth in action.” (CWMG, vol.44, pp.40-41) I think the implicit concept here of “untruth in thought” was broader than that of self-delusion, and would include entertaining hateful thoughts and all thoughts likely to interfere with some of the more difficult aspirations (of members of Gandhi’s ashram) such as to practice *bramacharya* and to eschew ownership of property. It is a tough ideal.

(8)

*Gandhi's distinction between "relative truth" and "Absolute Truth"*

A former Director of the National Gandhi Museum, Dr Y. P. Anand, has kindly (in response to my request for a critique of this working paper) called my attention to Gandhi's explicit distinction between "relative truth", which we can discern and which ought to guide us, and an "Absolute Truth" which we can seek and can worship but cannot comprehend. Here are some relevant excerpts from Mahadev Desai's translation of the Introduction (1925) to Gandhi's *Autobiography*:

"[I]t is not my purpose to attempt a real autobiography. I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth, and as my life consists of nothing but those experiments, it is true that the story will take the shape of an autobiography. But I shall not mind, if [i.e. provided that] every page of it speaks only of my experiments.... These will of course include experiments with non-violence,

celibacy and other principles of conduct believed [by many people] to be distinct from truth. But for me, truth is the sovereign principle, which includes numerous other principles. This truth is not only truthfulness in word, but truthfulness in thought also, and not only the relative truth of our conception, but the Absolute Truth, the Eternal Principle, that is God. There are innumerable definitions [of God]. ... But I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found Him, but I am seeking after Him.... [A]s long as I have not realized this Absolute Truth, so long must I hold by the relative truth as I have conceived it. That relative truth must, meanwhile, be my beacon.... If anything that I write in these pages should strike the reader as being touched with pride, then he must take it that there is something wrong with my quest, and that my glimpses are no more than a mirage.... I hope and pray that no one will regard the advice interspersed in the following chapters as authoritative.”

It seems clear to me that in order to understand Gandhi's sense of Absolute Truth well enough to comment on it, I would have to know Hindi and Sanskrit and to study carefully the history of the concepts of सत्य, of सत्, of सत्त्व etc. It is beyond my capacities. I have read with interest the article accessible on the Web at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satya>. It is for some of you, please, to enlighten me about this matter.

But in regard to Gandhi's sense of what he called the various *relative* truths which we can all hope to learn, let me point out that under conditions of epidemic and extreme hunger in India in the mid-1940s, he approved wholeheartedly of exceptions to his favoured precept of vegetarianism. In 1944 he told a health-care worker in a village stricken by an epidemic:

“To meat-eaters you may unhesitatingly give meat-soup. [Meat-]Soup means water in which meat has been boiled. These things should be served hot after boiling them. This is not the time for doing our religious duty of propagating vegetarianism. Soup is bound to be useful where milk is not available.”

And in 1946 he said: “Fish abound in the seas around the coast of India. The war is over; there are innumerable small and medium-size vessels which were used for doing patrol and guard duties along our shores for the last five years. The R[oyal] I[ndian] N[avy] could arrange about staffing these, with the Department of Fisheries giving all assistance. Dry fish does even now form part of the normal diet of a great number of people who are very poor – that is, when it is available and they can afford to buy it.”

And although one section of his book *Key to Health* (dictated to Sushila while they were interned in Pune during World War II) dwells at length on his premise that chastity as an aspect of *brahmacharya* is essential to good health even within marriage – with section-headings like

“The effort for brahmacharya a joy in itself”,

“Contraceptives kill the desire for self-restraining”,

and

“Avoid contraceptives as poison”,

when Gandhi learned in 1946 that the effects of a vow of chastity taken by a married couple at Sevagram were endangering the young wife's mental health, he told the husband, on the one hand, that since she “certainly desires conjugal pleasure and to bear children”, this “wish on her part cannot be despised. You are a married man. No one can find fault with you if you beget progeny”

– and, on the other hand, that

“[some] people [do] adopt artificial methods of birth-control. I don't think ... that your craving for indulgence is so strong as to make that necessary. But if it is, you should humbly admit the fact.”

The following remarks by Gandhi refer clearly to his quest for “relative truths” (rather than to his yearning for “Absolute Truth”):

“I am a votary of truth and I must say what I feel and think at a given moment on the question, without regard to what I may have said before on it. As my vision gets clearer, my views must grow clearer with daily practice. Where I have deliberately altered an opinion, the change should be obvious.”

(9)

*An American psychologist's account (1969) of "Gandhi's Truth"*

Freudian psychology was practically the only kind taught at medical schools in the USA in the 1950s and '60s, and psychoanalysts were, in those days, the most eminent kind of psychiatrists there. (But then the development of pharmaceutical treatments for various kinds of emotional illness ushered in a decline of prestige for psychoanalysis, as it is an expensive and yet not reliably effective kind of treatment.) The last of the prestigious Freudian psychologists in American culture was Erik Erikson (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erik\\_Erikson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erik_Erikson)), the author of *Childhood and Society* (1950; see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erikson%27s\\_stages\\_of\\_psychosocial\\_development](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erikson%27s_stages_of_psychosocial_development)) and of *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (1969), which includes a diligently researched account of the first six decades of Gandhi's life.

The book's main purpose is to elucidate how Gandhi became an ardent pursuer of moral truth and how that personal pursuit of his affected the development of his political expertise in establishing and leading *satyagrahas*. For instance, according to Erikson, "Gandhi knew that a Satyagraha campaign, in order to exert its full momentum, must be clearly defined, step by step. The Satyagrahi, ready to die if necessary, must first define, for himself and his opponent, the irreducible minimum for which he will offer his life in any one campaign. If, instead, he intends to raise his demands every time he has gained a little ground, he gives his adversaries a chance to obscure the truly elemental nature of the struggle and demeans the spirit of self-suffering. Nothing less than the very nature of the instrument [i.e. as a means of awakening the antagonists' capacity to recognize the moral truth of the matter and to free themselves from the shame of trampling on that Truth, rather than as a bid for political power] is at stake here...."

(Erikson cited Gandhi apropos as having said, in *Satyagraha in South Africa* (p.209), that “in Satyagraha the minimum [political goal announced] is also the maximum [immediate goal explicitly sought], and as it is the irreducible minimum, there is no question of retreat, and the only movement possible is an advance.... [And yet even so:] No matter how strong we were, the present struggle must close when the demands for which it was commenced were accepted.”)

(10)

*Discussion of a few other points from a lecture on this topic  
by the Director of the National Gandhi Museum (Shri Annamalai)*

Shri Annamalai pointed out that Western philosophers have expounded, with regard to would-be-factual statements and statements of belief, not only a “correspondence theory” of truth, but also a “coherence theory” (to the effect that there ought to be no contradictions between one’s various beliefs) and a “pragmatist theory” to the effect that when it comes to religious would-be-truths, the final test of the validity of a belief is the quality of life which it enables you to live: that is, how *satisfactory* it is, in that sense of the word and for the long run of your life, to believe.

It is (I think) a professional philosopher's duty to promulgate a set of precepts satisfying the coherence criterion. But Gandhi was not a professional philosopher (he was a karma yogi, a seeker after truth via deeds) and he could make fun of himself for not letting the coherence criterion play a major role in his truth-seeking: "I must admit my many inconsistencies. But since I am called 'Mahatma' [*great soul*], I might well endorse [Ralph Waldo] Emerson's saying that 'Foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of *little* minds.'" [CWMG, vol.42, p.469; my italics]

It is clear to me, from the following citations, that Gandhi believed there was greater pragmatic strength in his theism than in atheism:

“Did I not place my worries at the feet of God, I should have gone mad by this time.”  
(1924; CWMG, vol.23, p.267)

“So long as the satyagrahi is not convinced that there is some great Power that would give him strength in all situations, he cannot face tyranny, strife and humiliations and sustain his nonviolence. ... This power that thus sustains us is God. Not to bear any malice to towards the tyrant even on such occasions is another name of faith in God.”  
(1939; CWMG, vol.69, pp.231-232)

“My walking pilgrimage [in Bengal] gives me immense peace of mind. The upshot [of the pilgrimage] I do not know nor do I care to know. Man has no control over results. That is the sole prerogative of God. Hence I can sing with Cardinal Newman: 'I do not ask to see / The distant scene: one step enough for me.'” (1947; Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi: The Last Phase*, vol.1, p.567)

(The “pragmatist theory” of religious truth was the brainchild of William James (who founded the Psychology Department at Harvard University) in his famous book *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1913). I have been told a nice story about a bright first-year undergraduate student of his back in 1893, Gertrude Stein (who later became, as a poet, somewhat famous for the line, “A rose is a rose is a rose”). She took his course entitled “Introduction to Philosophy”. For the final exam, in the first week of June (a notably pleasant time of year in that part of the world), he put a single question to each student, “What is the meaning of life?”. She wrote a few words only: “It is a beautiful day and my friends are having a picnic down by the river. I am not going to sit in this room for two hours. Goodbye.” A day or two later, she went to his office to request permission to write an academically appropriate essay, but he said she had already answered the question cogently (by demonstrating her belief that life is most meaningful with good friendships) and so he had graded her “A”.)

(There is also an American pragmatic theory of *scientific* truth, applicable in cases where two contrary hypotheses can each be used to explain the facts, but thinking in terms of one of the hypotheses is sterile experiment-wise whereas the other one yields informative experiments.)

Shri Annamalai's lecture included a useful description of "post-truth", a set of techniques for creating deceptive perceptions and demonstrating that objective facts [Mumbai is flooded; Chennai is parched; California is burning] may be less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals based on emotion and personality.

He mentioned Gandhi's views that pursuit of truth can be a kind of *bhakti* (devotion to God) whereby "I must reduce myself to zero"; that an arrogant person cannot engage in truth-seeking, but an innocent child can; and that to the extent that truth is present, there is no need for secrecy: belief and action become unified, and likewise the "inner" with the "outer" personality. In this last regard, he mentioned that in England in 1931, the government's two detectives assigned to report on Gandhi's activities and contacts invited him, after they got to know him, to visit their families at home, which he did with pleasure. (And then they kindly gave him of a new pocket-watch when he left England.)

Shri Annamalai pointed out that candour is a quality which we tend to appreciate highly in our best friends (and they in us: if we deceive them we are likely to lose them as such) and he cited emphatically Gandhi's precept that "Truth has to be practiced in every practical aspect of life."

(Gandhi's challenge to "practice truth in every practical aspect of life" reminds me of an interesting fact about the recent history of market-economic theory. The old, early-19th-century "classical" economic theory had posited that everyone in the market knows what everyone else is doing in the market; and this postulate was maintained in academic market-economic theory during much of the 20th century;

but then the Royal Bank of Sweden awarded in 2001 its annual “Prize in Economics in Honour of Alfred Nobel” (not a real Nobel Prize, but artfully labelled to seem like one) to three economists (one of whom, Joseph Stiglitz, is so famous that you may have heard of him even if you’re not an economist) for their “[analyses of markets with asymmetric information](#)”. The Prize Committee explained that “[Many markets are characterized by asymmetric information: actors on one side of the market have much better information than those on the other. Borrowers know more than lenders about their repayment prospects, managers and boards know more than share-holders about the firm’s profitability, and prospective clients know more than insurance companies about their accident risk. During the 1970s, this year’s Laureates laid the foundation for a general theory of markets with asymmetric information.](#)” In other words, some truth-seeking academic theorists have shown that deception permeates economic practice under modern capitalism.)

(11)

*Vinoba's concept of truth as a likely reflection of Gandhi's*

Here is some historical background for those of you who are college students: During the Telangana Liberation Movement of 1947-48 (for liberation from rule by the Nizam of Hyderabad), Communist cadres hoarded arms which they then used in 1949-51 in a militant land-reform movement by which they hoped to make that part of India serve the role which Yunan had served in the Chinese Communist revolution. (Mao didn't approve; he thought the Communists in India should first see whether a coalition with other progressive forces in India might be worthwhile.) Nehru, however, sent the army to protect the land owners and their property. So, Vinoba decided to come out of his semi-retirement (after the death of Gandhi) and tour the area – this was in April 1951 – preaching non-violence, somewhat as Gandhi had toured various parts of India to quell religious violence. But then as Vinoba approached one of the villages, the way was blocked by eighty Untouchables who said they wouldn't let him pass if he were

just going to preach nonviolence without doing something about the fact that they had no land. They wanted an acre each. He agreed to take up the issue, and at the meeting the next day in the village, the largest local landowner offered to donate a hundred acres to a hundred landless peasants. That night, Vinoba reckoned that an equivalent rate of donations throughout India would come to some a certain number of acres, and he decided to dedicate himself to that end: “God appeared before me and we had a dialogue. I wanted to go to [other] landlords ... and ask for more land but I was hesitating when God intervened and said, ‘Keep faith in me and go, ask for more land.’” Thus began the Bhoodan (“land-gift”) Movement in which Vinoba walked some 65,000 kilometres (between 1951 and 1964) from village to village in various parts of India, appealing for donations of land.

During Vinoba’s main tour of Andhra, which was in 1955, a 24-year-old atheist Gandhian social-worker, whose father, Gora, had named him “Lavanam” in honour of the Salt March, translated Vinoba’s talks from Hindi to Telugu, but declined, because of

his atheism, to join in the prayers. In response to this, Vinoba, who was steeped in many kinds of religious scriptures and thus knew of course that Jesus had forbidden praying in public (the evidence is in *The Gospel According to St Matthew*, Chapter 6, Verse 5), proposed to Lavanam that instead of having public prayers, they have five minutes of silent group contemplation. Lavanam, who was sometimes a rather cheeky young man, said, “What are you going to suggest people think about during the five minutes?”; Vinoba said, “Truth, nonviolence and altruistic love”; and Lavanam approved. I think this indicates that they regarded non-violence *and altruistic love* as part of truth as conceived by Gandhi, and they hoped that groups of people might, with a bit of guidance, seek out that kind of truth in five minutes of silence better than could be done with the language of prayers.

That is the kind of breadth which we all sense was somehow there in Gandhi's notion of truth. (In his autobiography he said his definition of it had been "ever widening".) According to Dr Shreekumar, a Gandhian chemical engineer and organic farmer and educator at his *Sangatya* commune in Karnakata near Udupi, "Gandhi regarded truth as 'God' and believed that God is good. So it was a matter of faith for him that truth is good and is thus not a set of empirically verifiable value-neutral facts as it is for rationalists." Dr Shreekumar is an example of a genuine Gandhian, i.e. for whom (as for Gandhi) "consistency between thought and action" is "an essential part of the meaning of truth".

Let me mention here, apropos truthfulness in statements of intention, that when Vinoba went on to Tamil Nadu, and some of his assistants said that now that they were rid of the atheist they should revert to having public prayers, Vinoba insisted on continuing to do what he had said he would do (it could hardly be the case that what was morally right for Andhra was morally wrong for Tamil Nadu; such a premise would be sleazy) and he never again in his life conducted a public prayer.

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*Appendix on Harvard University's Latin motto, **Veritas***

Harvard's motto, "*Veritas*", is the Latin word for truth. There's a proverb, about Harvard, that "**You can always tell a Harvard man, but you can't tell him much**"; yet even so, a lot of people there understand that truth is something you seek without claiming to have got it all (a kind of claim characteristic of the newspaper Правда (*Pravda*), which was from 1918 to 1991 an official organ of the Communist Party of the USSR; "Правда" is the Russian word for "truth").

Harvard has a school song, "**Fair Harvard**", composed in 1935 for the third centenary of its founding as a college. The words at the beginning are "**Fair Harvard, thy sons to thy jubilee throng**"; the words at the end are shown on the next slide. They imply that *veritas* as conceived at Harvard consists in a combination of head and heart:

**VERITAS**

**Be the herald  
of light and the  
bearer of love till  
the stars in the  
firmament die.**

**Pursuing Excellence on a  
Foundation of Inclusion**

**ACTIVATE VERITAS**



**HARVARD  
UNIVERSITY**

The head of Harvard's Department of Sociology in 1935 was Pitirim Sorokin, who had been invited in 1930 by the president of the university to join it and to found that department. Sorokin was a Russian émigré who had in 1922 founded the sociology department of the University of St Petersburg. (Lenin had hoped he would support the Bolsheviks, but he didn't.) Some of Sorokin's distinctive interests in his sociological research were in shared values as an important kind of social glue, and in the social value of altruistic love. In the wake of World War II, he founded in 1949 the Harvard Center for Research in Creative Altruism. People ridiculed his research into the lives of more than 4500 Christian saints and 500 living American altruists, his descriptions of "five-dimensional love", and his study of Raja-Yoga. But he said that "Since governments, big foundations, and better brains seem to be absorbed mainly in the promotion of wars and in the invention of increasingly destructive means for the extermination of man by man, someone somehow and sometime

had to engage in the study of the phenomena of unselfish love, no matter how inadequate were his capabilities or how low the esteem of his colleagues for his engaging in such a 'foolish enterprise'." Working in collaboration with other expert scholars, he produced a dozen widely respected books on altruism; a visiting colleague from the USSR said that he was regarded there as the most eminent non-Marxian sociologist in the world; and in 1963 he was elected President of the American Sociological Association.

(By the way: It is conceivable, as a matter of historical speculation, that the invitation to Sorokin from Harvard in 1930, though due mainly to the quality and quantity of his academic work in the '20s, had been due also to an indirect influence from Gandhi via Sarojini Naidu, who had lectured at Harvard in late December 1928 or early January 1929.)

(Also by the way: I don't mean that everyone at Harvard has lived up to the challenge of truth-seeking. But let me not get derailed into an account of some unsavoury Harvard men.)

I have cited Western sages more than Indian ones, because I can't read Hindi or Sanskrit or Gujarati and so I know the Western ones better. I invite each reader please to enlighten some of the rest of us with information about ideas and activities of Indian sages that may be relevant to Gandhi's concepts of truth and truthfulness. But let me meanwhile conclude this text with a recent citation (May 11th, 2019) from a Gandhian Harvard graduate in theology, Chris Hedges. He is a journalist and he won, years ago, a Pulitzer Prize for his work as a war correspondent for *The New York Times*. A few years after that, he gave up his job there (and his pension) when the paper's manager prohibited him from speaking out against the USA's looming invasion of Iraq. He was later employed by a first-rate online journal based in California, *Truthdig.com*;

he lives, however, near the campus, in the eastern state of New Jersey, of an elite school with a good library, Princeton University (where Einstein and John Nash each taught). He teaches there a college course in modern literature, in which half of the students are Princeton undergrads and the other half are impoverished criminals, mostly Black, serving jail terms in a nearby state prison. He teaches them in a loving and diligent way, and in a recent college-graduation address delivered to some of the jailbirds, he said, “Integrity is not an inherited trait. It is not conferred by privilege or status or wealth. It cannot be bequeathed by elite schools or institutions. It is not a product of birth or race or gender. Integrity is not a pedigree or a brand. Integrity is earned.” By those words spoken in the context of his own deeds, he was invoking implicitly Gandhi’s concepts of truth and truthfulness. It is a radiant example of 21st-century Gandhian thought.

*Postscript to this praise for Chris Hedges:* I have been taking notice of him for several years now. A few months ago, I have learned, from *Truthdig.com* (see [www.truthdig.com/articles/the-greatest-threat-to-the-prison-industrial-complex](http://www.truthdig.com/articles/the-greatest-threat-to-the-prison-industrial-complex)), that the Princeton University programme which he initiated is not at all the only such undertaking in the USA. An innovative liberal-arts college in New York State, Bard College, initiated in 2001 an analogous undertaking, the “Bard Prison Initiative” (see <https://bpi.bard.edu>) in which more than 300 incarcerated students are currently (in 2020) enrolled in full-time undergraduate degree programmes.

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*A tough kind of problem which most parents and all experienced medical doctors are likely to face sooner or later*

Are there circumstances under which it is morally right to deceive someone you love because you have in mind a good end which would justify the use of that means? An anthology (edited in 1949 by Chandrashanker Shulka) of *Incidents of Gandhiji's Life* [reported] *by Fifty-Four Contributors* includes an account by a medical doctor, G.R. Talwalkar, of how he and a medical colleague (Dr. B.N. Kanuga) served Gandhi in 1918 by deceiving him (and how the M.D.s then proceeded to give him an invaluable lesson in nutrition):

“It was in about the middle of 1918 that I first came in personal contact with Mahatma Gandhi. He was then in a bad condition of health due to acute dysentery. Dr. B.N. Kanuga of Ahmedabad was treating him, and was feeling very puzzled as to how to persuade him to take a few injections of *emetine* which alone was the right remedy for Gandhii’s trouble. But Mahatmaji was firm that he would not allow his body to be injected with the medicine, and he asked for some nature-cure method of treatment.

“We, doctors, have not, I must admit, paid sufficient attention to nature-cure methods according to Mahatmaji's conception, but I must say that for acute amoebic dysentery there is no treatment so sure as a few injections of emetine hydrochloride. We were almost at our wit's end how to give Mahatmaji emetine. Suddenly it struck me that if we proposed to him an enema,

he would gladly allow us that procedure. So we proposed to him that we would only give him an enema. He at once agreed, and we added to the enema water a full dose of emetine and morphia [a pain-killer]. This little procedure had such marvelous effect on our patient within the next twenty-four hours that he voluntarily asked for a repetition of the same enema procedure for five successive days, with the result that his dysentery was cured and he was able to travel in a week's time.

“Soon, however, I discovered that he was taking no food and even no milk. He was under the impression that a dozen or two of oranges were enough for maintaining his nutrition; and when a doctor said that it could not support his body and strength for more than a few days, he challenged me to convince him about the fallacy of his fancy. So, we showed to him from a well-known authority

on dietetics that, if a man wished to live entirely on oranges, he would require about 50 to 75 oranges a day to give him enough nourishment, but that would more certainly produce diarrhea. Mahatmaji was at once convinced, and from that day he began to take rice and chapati in his daily diet, but he would not take a single drop of milk.

“We doctors believe that, for pure vegetarians as we Hindus are, milk is the most precious and indispensable animal protein diet. We tried our best to persuade Gandhiji to take milk, but he would not agree on this point. A few months later when he was in Bombay, the late Surgeon A.K. Dalal [who mended Gandhi’s fissures in an operation performed on 21st January 2019], with the help of Kasturba, was able to persuade Gandhiji to take goat’s milk.”

Here are some of the points I have suggested about Gandhi's notion of truthfulness:

- It was of deeper importance to him than nonviolence,
  - and yet nonviolence is indeed a handmaiden of truthfulness.
  - And so also is altruism.
- (• This latter point was seen by the founder of Harvard's Department of Sociology.)
- We should learn to detect mismatches between statements and the realities they refer to.
  - It is important to match what you try to do with what you have said you would do.
  - The best we can do is to seek truthfulness in our *behaviour*.  
(This is my definition of "Gandhian thought".)
  - We should, however, not let pride cause us to confuse our guiding, "relative" concept of truth (the best we can figure out) with a notion of "Absolute Truth".