

Ethical Philosophy of Gandhi

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explain Gandhi's philosophical stance on morality, positing it as the foundational tenet of human existence. As a visionary moral thinker and revolutionary, Gandhi strived to construct a moral scaffold that could catalyze societal metamorphosis, underpinned by the conviction that moral rejuvenation is an essential prerequisite for the advancement of humanity. According to Gandhi, moral regeneration possesses the dual capacity to restrain mankind's destructive propensities and nurture an ethos of peace, harmony, and collective happiness. The Gandhian perspective posits the human conscience as an intrinsic navigator, steering individuals towards a loftier destiny, thereby emphasizing the pivotal role of morality in shaping personal and societal trajectories. This paper thus seeks to analyze Gandhi's moral philosophy, examining its far-reaching implications for the betterment of both the individual and society, and exploring the intricate dynamics that underlie his conceptualization of morality as the bedrock of human progress.

Key words

Gandhi, morality, philosophy.

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Introduction:

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that Mahatma Gandhi is widely regarded as a towering figure in modern history, renowned for his role as a leader, philosopher, and advocate for moral and social change. His philosophy centred on the importance of morality as a guiding principle for human life. Gandhi sought to establish a society based on moral values, which he referred to as “*Ramarajya*,” or a kingdom of God¹, through the practice of strict moral disciplines. According to him, moral regeneration is a necessary condition for human progress, as it helps to curb destructive tendencies and promote peace, harmony, and happiness. Gandhi said, “My own experience has led me to the humble conclusion that the simplest acts of life cannot be performed without some notion of religion.”² His philosophy emphasizes the role of conscience as a personal guide, directing individuals towards a higher purpose and highlighting the significance of morality in shaping individual and societal development.

Objectives: The main objectives of this paper are:

- (i) To explain Gandhi’s views on morality and its importance in human life.
- (ii) To examine how moral renewal contributes to a more peaceful and harmonious society.
- (iii) To investigate how Gandhi’s moral principles can shape individual and societal growth.

Methodology: This paper employs a qualitative methodology, drawing on secondary sources to explore Gandhi’s moral philosophy. It involves a critical review of Gandhi’s works and speeches, an analysis of existing scholarship on his thought, and an examination of how moral rejuvenation influences individual and societal development, assessing the lasting impact of his moral ideas.

Discussion and findings:

Before delving into the problem, it is necessary to understand what, according to Gandhi, moral philosophy is and what constitutes a moral action. It is important to note that understanding Gandhi’s moral philosophy requires grasping the basics of moral philosophy, which teaches us to differentiate right from wrong and guides us towards the highest good. A moral action, a key concept in this context, must be voluntary - done without fear, coercion, or expectation of reward. Essentially, moral philosophy helps distinguish good actions from bad ones, and Gandhi noted that moral support naturally flows to those who can accept and utilize it, highlighting the importance of being receptive to moral guidance.

Gandhi believed that knowledge and ethical virtues go hand-in-hand. He said, “Goodness must be joined with knowledge. Mere goodness is not of much use... One must know, in a crucial situation, when to speak and when to be silent,

when to act and when to refrain. Action and non-action in these circumstances become identical instead of being contradictory.”³ For Gandhi, knowledge boosts spiritual courage, shapes character, and helps steer us through life’s tough choices, enabling us to choose the right path. Thus, mere goodness isn’t enough; it is the blend of goodness and knowledge that makes a real difference.

It is interesting to note that Gandhi outlined key moral principles to foster ethical personality development. These guidelines are similar to what many major religions teach. These principles offer a humane approach to addressing injustice and promoting justice, as noted by Gandhi’s insight that he has found “for humanity a civilized way for righting wrongs and establishing justice.”⁴ The core principles include *non-violence*, *chastity*, *non-possession*, *fearlessness*, and *self-purification*, which are discussed below.

Non-violence: Non-violence is about recognizing life’s inherent strength. Despite destruction, life persists, revealing a deeper force at work – Gandhi’s “Law of Life.”⁵ This principle, rooted in love, is key to building harmony. Gandhi said, “If love were not the law of life, life would not have persisted in the midst of death. Life is a perpetual triumph over the grave.”⁶ Cultivating non-violence takes effort, making it a genuine part of who we are, not just a routine.

It is to be noted that the law of love operates whether we acknowledge it or not, but those who tap into it achieve remarkable things. Love is a more powerful force than nature itself. Gandhi highlighted this, saying, “The man who discovered the Law of Love was a greater scientist than any of our modern scientists.”⁷ He viewed non-violence as the most potent force, using it to convey the depth of *ahimsa*. *Ahimsa* isn’t just about avoiding harm; it is a superior force that transcends brutality. Gandhi explained, “It does not express a negative force, but a force superior to all the forces put together.”⁸ Thus, those who embody *ahimsa* can wield immense power. It is worth noting that the idea of non-violence, or *ahimsa*, has been around for ages, taught by prophets for humanity’s spiritual growth. Gandhi believed humans naturally lean towards violence, but tapping into their inner spirit shifts them towards non-violence. Practicing *ahimsa* isn’t easy - it means facing tough times, but it also frees you from negativity and helps you grow. For Gandhi, non-violence was about being innocent and kind to all living things. When things get tough, resisting the urge to lash out takes willpower, and it transforms you. To truly live nonviolence, you need to apply it in your thoughts, words, and actions. Gandhi saw it as a universal principle anyone can follow, making it a way of life that promotes goodness and peace.

Chastity: Chastity is a cornerstone of moral development, extending beyond physical restraint to encompass mental and emotional discipline. Gandhi’s perspective

on brahmacharya emphasizes mastery over one's senses, advocating for control in thought, word, and action, as reflected in his statement, "Brahmacharya means not suppression of one or more senses, but complete mastery over them all... control in thought, word and action, of all the senses at all times and in all places."⁹ This holistic approach facilitates inner growth, enabling individuals to tap into their inner selves and connect with the universal Brahman. Thus, it can be said that by cultivating self-awareness and discipline, one can realize one's full potential and achieve spiritual enlightenment.

Gandhiji emphasized that *brahmacharya* is essential for a fulfilling life. He says, "Life without brahmacharya is insipid and animal-like."¹⁰ He saw it as a means to harness self-control, setting humans apart from animals. *Brahmacharya* starts with physical self-discipline and evolves into mental mastery, governing thoughts and emotions. Gandhiji highlighted the difficulty of bodily restraint but emphasized that mental restraint is even more daunting. A true *brahmachari* nurtures a healthy body, echoing the notion that a healthy soul resides in a healthy body. They embody a robust physique and a mind cleansed of carnal desires. According to Gandhiji, such an individual remains unperturbed by lust, even in their subconscious, and is worthy of reverence. Mental purity is vital, as indulging in impure thoughts undermines true celibacy. While challenging, embracing *brahmacharya* liberates one from base desires, paving the way to spiritual enlightenment and self-discovery. Thus, in a nutshell, it can be said that Gandhiji's teachings hinge on the transformative power of *brahmacharya*, encompassing thought, speech, and action, as a path to transcend worldly desires. By attaining mastery over *brahmacharya*, an individual breaks free from the shackles of passion and draws nearer to the divine. Their mission becomes alleviating human suffering, eclipsing personal aspirations. Witness to the profound struggles of humanity, they remain unperturbed by base impulses, harnessing their inner resilience. This profound inner strength, recognized worldwide, bestows an influence that eclipses that of monarchs.

Non-possession: Gandhiji's philosophy of non-possession advocates simplicity and socio-economic equality. To him, possession means stockpiling for tomorrow, opposing truth and non-violence. He states, "Civilization, in the real sense of the term, consists not in the multiplication but in the deliberate and voluntary reduction of wants, which promotes real happiness and contentment and increases the capacity for service."¹¹ By embracing non-possession, the affluent can reduce their consumption, share their surplus, and bridge societal gaps. This mindset shift can cultivate contentment, inspire collective work, and progress human civilization through simplicity and service. Mental non-possession involves discarding unnecessary thoughts, focusing on truth-aligned activities, and nurturing detachment.

Thus, it can be said that this approach paves the way for a harmonious society where individuals lead purposeful lives.

Fearlessness: Fearlessness is a foundational trait that shapes ethical character, freeing individuals from external fears such as disease, injury, death, emotional detachment, loss, and reputational harm. This liberation allows people to make value-driven choices, fostering authenticity and integrity. It is important to note that fearlessness isn't about being fear-free, but about mustering the courage to confront fears, paving the way for a more genuine and principled life. By embracing fearlessness, individuals unlock their potential, pursue goals unencumbered by anxiety, and cultivate a sense of purpose. It empowers them to stand up for what is right, live authentically, and realize their aspirations, leading to a more empowered existence.

Gandhiji emphasized that truth and love demand fearlessness. He considered it a fundamental requirement for achieving truth and non-violence, encouraging truth seekers to courageously overcome fears, including those of poverty and mortality. Fearlessness brings inner calm and peace, making other virtues meaningful. A deep faith in God is central to cultivating this fearlessness. As he noted, "One who depends on God will never be afraid of anybody, not even of the most despotic government on earth or its officers. For, he will have as his protector the King of kings, from whose eye nothing is hid."¹² This reveals that by prioritizing divine trust over earthly fears, one can attain true freedom and peace of mind.

Self-purification: Gandhiji believed in certain practices, in addition to *ahimsa*, *brahmacharya*, *non-possession*, and *fearlessness*, for spiritual growth. These include *humility*, *fasting*, and *silence*, which help purify the soul, as discussed below.

For Gandhiji, self-purification was about cleansing every aspect of life, as inner purity was key to practicing *ahimsa* and achieving spiritual growth. This purification involved letting go of negative thoughts, emotions, and actions, transcending attachment, anger, and bias in every thought, word, and deed. A life of service, he believed, demanded humility, not as a practice, but as a natural outcome of embracing *ahimsa*. It fueled tireless efforts to uplift others, rooted in compassion and non-violence. Humility wasn't something to be cultivated; it emerged organically when *ahimsa* was genuine. Gandhiji saw humility as a crucial test of *ahimsa* and a catalyst for moral growth, prompting individuals to overcome limitations. True humility, he showed, wasn't passivity, but a driving force for self-improvement and progress. Gandhiji lived this, striving to shed ego, believing true salvation lay in selfless service – with *ahimsa* as its pinnacle.

It is notable that the Mahatma saw fasting as a powerful tool, not just for personal purification, but also for influencing humanity's moral trajectory. As a devout Hindu, he drew from the faith's traditions, using fasting to sharpen his resolve

and advance his goals. “A genuine fast cleanses body, mind, and soul,” he said, “It crucifies the flesh and to that extent sets the soul free.”¹³ For Gandhiji, a true fast required determination and pure thoughts, resisting tempting distractions. While acknowledging its potential misuse by those with selfish motives, he believed that fasting was too valuable a *satyagraha* tool to abandon. As he wrote, “...as a great weapon in the armoury of *Satyagraha*, it cannot be given up because of its possible abuse... I cannot give up any of its uses without forfeiting my claim to handle it in the spirit of a humble seeker,”¹⁴ affirming its place in his pursuit of truth and non-violent resistance.

Gandhiji believed true fasting required mental and physical harmony. The mind had to align with the body’s sacrifice, cultivating aversion to denied pleasures. He emphasized, “if physical fasting is not accompanied by mental fasting, it is bound to end in hypocrisy and disaster.”¹⁵ It is worth mentioning that fasting was a last resort for Gandhiji, employed when his cause was right and all else had failed. A *Satyagrahi* exhausted all options before fasting, seeking inner purification and a deeper connection with the divine. In his words, fasting was “a yearning of the soul to merge in the divine essence”¹⁶ – a potent symbol of conviction and non-violent protest.

Furthermore, Gandhiji saw silence as a way to connect with God, saying, “I feel life more in tune with the Infinite when I am silent.”¹⁷ He believed humans tend to exaggerate or hide the truth, and silence helps overcome this weakness. For him, silence was a spiritual practice, part of seeking truth. Gandhiji said, “Experience has taught me that silence is part of the spiritual discipline of a votary of truth. Proneness to exaggerate, to suppress or modify the truth, wittingly or unwittingly, is a natural weakness of man, and silence is necessary in order to surmount it.”¹⁸

Thus, Gandhiji advised seekers of truth to use silence when needed, as a way to grow spiritually.

Conclusion:

In view of the above, it can be said that Gandhiji’s ethical philosophy remains a beacon of hope in the 21st century, illuminating a path to a more harmonious and sustainable existence. His principles of non-violence, simplicity, and self-discipline offer a much-needed counterbalance to the chaos and consumerism that define modern life. As the world grapples with environmental degradation, social inequality, and mental health crises, Gandhiji’s emphasis on non-possession, fearlessness, and self-purification provides a timely remedy. His message of non-violence and compassion is more crucial than ever, as conflicts and violence continue to plague humanity. Through silence and self-reflection, Gandhiji’s approach to truth-seeking offers a powerful antidote to the noise and distractions of the digital age. By

highlighting the importance of individual moral agency and personal transformation, his philosophy provides a roadmap for building a more equitable and just society. As the world navigates complex global challenges, Gandhiji's emphasis on simplicity, sustainability, and service to others inspires individuals to become agents of positive change, making his ethical philosophy a living and breathing guide for the 21st century. Thus, in a nutshell, it can be said that its timeless wisdom offers a path to personal and societal transformation to a great extent.

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