

# Narratives and the Social Imagination: Lessons in Reading for Gandhi's Theory of Action

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Mohandas Gandhi was once at a news conference when someone called out to him. “Mr. Gandhi! Last week you said this, and this week you say something completely different. Where *do* you stand?” Gandhi did not shudder but said, “I stand here. I have learned something new from last week.” Today, we may simply call this political flip-flopping, but I will argue that there is something much more profound at work here.

My overall project is an analysis of what I am calling the narrative dimension of political action, focusing on how Gandhi conceptualizes nonviolent political action as a process or experiment and what this says about the goals, methods, and philosophies of political action today. In this talk, I will argue that Gandhi's conceptualization of truth as a constant becoming widens the scope of political action.

I will support this argument by first looking at *The Bhagavad Gita*, which is a foundational text for Gandhi's theory of nonviolence, and I will analyze its discussion of truth. Secondly, I will look at how Gandhi described his participation in nonviolence as composed of “experiments with truth.” And lastly, I will analyze Gandhi's language and journalism and think about how his language too was a reflection of this “becoming of truth.” My method is a study of *The Bhagavad Gita*, Gandhi's journalism, and his autobiography. I also received guidance from the Metta Center for Nonviolence Education, which was co-founded by the former chair of the Peace and Conflict Studies Department here at UC Berkeley.

My conceptual frame is Bakhtin's notion that language is always in the process of becoming and responding to itself. While his work was centered on the language of the novel, I am not the first to take from Bakhtin the more philosophical notions of his work and to see how they apply to language and discourse in the world. He describes the novel as a living entity, one that embraces dialogism, or a multiplicity of voices and languages. He talks of the centripetal force of language, which attempts to collapse language, pin down meaning to one

never-changing, authoritative interpretation, and the centrifugal force, which is forever open to the heteroglossic or multi-voiced nature of the world, extending meaning outwards and indefinitely. The opposing forces are both present in each utterance, but instead of taking this to mean that we cannot say anything truly unique, it rather opens up language to eternal rebirth. As Bakhtin says, “one’s own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate itself from the authority of another’s discourse” [1, p. 348]. Of all forms, the novel not only represents but *embraces* heteroglossia. Bakhtin argues, “languages of heteroglossia, like mirrors, each reflecting in its own way a piece, a tiny corner of the world, force us to guess at and grasp for a world behind their mutually reflecting aspects that is broader, more multi-leveled, containing more and varied horizons than would be available to a single language or a single mirror” [1, p. 415]. Thus, the philosophical implications of this idea is that dialogic discourse does not attempt to *displace* experience or truth, but rather seeks to represent a particular *aspect* of truth and be open to its eventual transformation. In essence, Bakhtin does not propose a view of language that erases any potential for shared meaning, nor does he assert a kind of nihilism that leaves us forever trapped by our words. For Bakhtin, language is living, creative and open-ended.

I am also drawing from Jerome Bruner’s conceptualization of a “narrative mode of thought” as contrasted with a “logico-scientific” mode [2, p. 12]. Narratives unfold towards an end that is ultimately unknowable, limited in perspective, and open to the world of various interpretations and re-creations. From Bakhtin and Bruner, I derived the idea of a *narrative becoming*.

It is important to my discussion to first place Gandhi within his own religious and philosophical context. It is impossible to fully understand Gandhi’s theory of nonviolence without first addressing its religious foundation, keeping in mind that Gandhi held a broad view of religion as simply the path towards “self-realization.” *The Bhagavad Gita*, a story contained within the larger Hindu epic *The Mahabharata*, was Gandhi’s textbook on nonviolence. The *Gita* is a dialogue between a pupil, Arjuna, and his teacher, Krishna. Arjuna is a warrior who is asked to fight in a battle against members of his family. He is torn between fulfilling his duty as a warrior and his moral attachment to his family. The following dialogue is a conversation whereby Krishna convinces Arjuna of his duty as a warrior. While this mere summary suggests an ensuing story that is anything but nonviolent, to assume so would be a strong misinterpretation. As soon becomes clear, Arjuna’s story is an allegory of an inner struggle, a struggle that is not specific to him but is a universal human dilemma [7, p. 20–21].

The dialogue centers around a particular theory of action, which is the path of karma yoga, the path of action where one is detached from the fruits of such action; in acting, one is not moved or entangled in the ends of action-thus, there is “action in the midst of inaction” [7, p. 118]. Through acting, one gains wisdom and knowing. In essence then, this theory of action says something very profound about truth. It does not proclaim that *only* one who knows absolute truth is allowed to act, but rather that truth is relative and particular to a perspective.

This is the philosophic principle of *anekantavada*, which explains that there is one absolute Truth, yet in the phenomenal world, we are limited from our human perspective and thus can only grasp at relative truths. Yet this understanding need not lead to stagnation, where we are paralyzed by our inherent inability to reach this absolute Truth. Rather through action, through this *reaching towards*, this *approaching*, we can widen our understanding. From this background, Gandhi derives his project of Satyagraha, which literally means “holding firm to truth” and is translated as “truth force,” a performance of truth. Satyagraha requires being open to another’s truth, even one’s opponent, and through the performance of one’s own truth come to a new, better truth.

While the *Gita* describes the path of *action* most vividly, it is open to other paths. Due to the nature of truth, the *Gita* would undermine its own project if it were to take the form of an authoritative, dogmatic vision [7, p. 48]. If we think of narratives in a broad sense as a kind of unfolding *towards* an end that is ultimately limited in perspective and open to the world of various interpretations and re-creations, narratives too are composed of multiple voices, multiple truths. They are inevitably limited by their bounds within a particular time and space but their language is open to the *process* of becoming. In other words, they are aware of their inherent limitation to capture every possible voice and thus function as a process, or what I term a *narrative becoming*.

Next, I want to draw upon Gandhi’s nonviolent movement. In his autobiography, Gandhi describes his life as composed of “experiments with truth.” Satyagraha is not just a method or technique, but is a lifestyle. Not just political action but the political actor too is involved in the process of becoming, of re-inventing him or herself; thus, it follows that one must always be willing to admit fallibility. Many of Gandhi’s experiments were focused on himself: his experiments with fasting, with holistic remedies, with dress among many other things. He approached these new ideas and challenges as ways to deepen his understanding of truth and often found that what he once thought to be the best solution later proved to be insufficient.

Given that I cannot focus on each of his “experiments” in detail I will choose just one example. Early in Gandhi’s movement in India, he confesses to have made a “Himalayan miscalculation” by encouraging a poor peasant community to engage in nonviolent action. However, when met with violent police forces, the peasants responded violently. Gandhi admits that he asked them to act prematurely before they fully understood the concept of nonviolence. Gandhi says, “My confession brought me no small amount of ridicule. But I have never regretted having made that confession. For I have always held that it is only when one sees one’s own mistakes with a convex lens, and does just the reverse in the case of others, that one is able to arrive at a just relative estimate of the two” [3, p. 469].

This may seem merely like a person who wishes to save their reputation by admitting their mistake. Yet Gandhi did not merely use this idea of truth to save face. He admitted that he was no perfect example of the principle he espoused. While Satyagraha is in the process of becoming, of approaching truth, it is nonetheless guided by an underlying consistent thread of ahimsa or

nonviolence, which is not merely passive resistance but is the active intent not to do harm in word, thought, or deed. Gandhi's nonviolent philosophy then is not merely indifferent to the results of action. While the nonviolent actor is aware of his or her own limitations and their process of approaching truth, they are also grounded in the conviction to do no harm.

Lastly, I want to discuss more specifically Gandhi's language. Language does not merely describe the world as it is but also shapes that very world in its saying. Gandhi too recognized this reciprocal nature of language, how discursive practice both expresses and constitutes the speaker. Thus, language too can do violence. Gandhi served as editor and writer of a few journals throughout his life and held that "the sole aim of journalism should be service." He wrote:

To be true to my faith. . . I may not write in anger or malice. I may not write idly. I may not write merely to excite passion. . . It is a training for me. It enables me to peep into myself and to make discoveries of my weaknesses. Often my vanity dictates a smart expression or my anger a harsh objective. It is a terrible ordeal but a fine exercise to remove these weeds. [6, p. 232]

Thus, the journalist has a responsibility in writing. Writing is actively involved in nonviolent action. Language must be carefully chosen for it in turn shapes our thoughts and thus our actions. Bakhtin's notion of authoritative discourse becomes important here. Again, he talks of the centripetal force of language, which attempts to collapse language to one authoritative interpretation, and which may sway the masses but lacks richness of meaning. He contrasts this with the centrifugal force of language, which is composed of a multiplicity of voices, reflects multi-layered meaning, and ensures that language continues to live.

This idea of language parallels Gandhi's understanding of truth as constantly in the process of becoming. It is through our responses to authoritative discourse and also to our own language that we come to re-create language and thereby redefine and re-approach truth. Gandhi's conception of Satyagraha as a "science in the making" and a "weapon of the brave" responds to conventional conceptions of science and weapons and redefines them on his own terms. For example, he attempts to reassert what science is meant to do. The language of science has arguably become a kind of authoritative discourse, a discourse and rationality that is, in Bakhtin's terminology, "internally persuasive" and need only to respond to itself. Gandhi brings back the idea of science as inherently a process of experimentation, which can never assert its own finality.

I want to end this analysis of Gandhi's language with a quotation. He says: "My language is aphoristic; it lacks precision. It is therefore open to several interpretations" [4, p. 485].

Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence can appeal to a logical framework. Yet he seems to be highlighting a different faculty of reason here, one that does not attempt to settle on final truths or single interpretations but is open to an active, plural unfolding. Jerome Bruner distinguishes the scientific mode of thought from the narrative mode. The scientific is one-dimensional and concerned with

establishing universal truth while the latter is multi-dimensional and concerned with understanding the depths of the human condition [2, p. 11]. This opens the scope of literary analysis to not merely the understanding of narratives, but of a faculty of thought that pervades our daily, and even our political lives. In order to ensure that the future is open, there must be a multiplicity of interpretations, a multiplicity of voices, of languages, of ideas, of experiments in the approach towards truth.

My conclusion is that by opening up the domain of truth, Gandhi's nonviolent philosophy also opens up the scope of political action and who constitutes the political actor. The individual too is in the process of re-inventing him or herself; thus, it is not just our actions in the political sphere, but our language, our thoughts and our moral experiments that influence and constitute our lives as political actors. Gandhi said that, "the way of violence is old and established. . . The science of nonviolence is yet taking shape. We are still not conversant with all its aspects. There is a wide scope for research and experiment in this field. You can apply your talents to it." You may ask: why apply such a concept as that of narrative becoming, driving across disciplines, to that of politics? What does an understanding of language add to Gandhi's understanding of nonviolence and truth? My intention was not to say that Gandhi was merely a story teller, or directly relied on narrative in his philosophy of nonviolence. Rather it was to express that political action founded upon this open narrative dimension shifts us away from an authoritative discourse that seeks to fix meaning and instead widens the how and what of action. Narratives are not about mastering truth but are about engaging a plurality of individuals, ideas and interpretations. In this unfolding of a narrative, there is an open invitation to continuing engagement and thus, a greater freedom.

This says something very profound about education, given that it is the basis to political action. Education is not about finding a particular all-knowing truth but about resting in the gray area of uncertainty and yet not being paralyzed into inaction. The greatest freedom in a narrative is this embrace of uncertainty and the constant becoming of meaning and truth. Gandhi said that the results of his experiments were in the "womb of the future," open to our actions, interpretations and re-creations. We may disagree with some of his "experiments" but still keep an eye to the larger understandings of truth and nonviolence and learn how to conduct such experiments ourselves. Moreover, since theory is intertwined with practice, my theoretical notion of a narrative becoming brings the domain of politics closer within our field of understanding. Language and narratives are not merely the domain of politicians or experts. We all actively use language. And we have a basic, perhaps visceral, understanding of what a narrative can achieve, how it unfolds, how it is open to the world of differing interpretations, how it represents something in human experience in a way that cannot be confined to the bounds of a mathematical system. Politics is not something *out there* to be done by others, but is within the field of our own understanding, our own truths, and our own language.

**References**

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