

# NARRATIVE, SPEECH, AND ACTION

## Gandhi's *Satyagraha* and the Constant Becoming of Truth

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### Abstract

In this paper, I explore Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence, specifically his articulation and understanding of the conception of truth. For Gandhi, truth in the political sphere is not merely a correspondence between a representation and external phenomena, but is constantly in the process of becoming as the political actor "experiments" with different notions of truth and the actions which are derived from them. I use the notion of a narrative as opposed to scientific mode of thought in order to highlight the open-ended, constant becoming nature of Gandhi's understanding of truth in political action. I conclude by arguing that Gandhi's notion of truth widens the sphere of political action to a plurality of individual contributions and voices towards a truly nonviolent and engaged society.

## I. Introduction

Narrative has never been merely entertainment for me. It is, I believe, one of the principal ways in which we absorb knowledge.

–Toni Morrison

It is through narrative, and not in language in and of itself (which nonetheless is the means and vehicle in play here), that essentially political thought is realized.

–Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative*

If I narrate [my experiments with truth] in a dispassionate and humble spirit, many other experimenters will find in them provision for their onward march. Far be it from me to claim any degree of perfection for these experiments. I claim for them nothing more than a scientist who, though conducts his experiments with the utmost accuracy, forethought and minuteness, never claims any finality about his conclusions, but keeps an open mind regarding them. I have gone through deep self-introspection, searched myself through and through, and examined and analysed every psychological situation. Yet I am far from claiming any finality or infallibility about my conclusions.

–Mohandas K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*

Mohandas Gandhi is quite explicit in his autobiography that the actions of his life were never meant to stand in as perfect testaments or manifestations of nonviolence, but were rather “experiments” based on his understanding of truth at a particular moment. Truth, for Gandhi, was open to transformation and widening through nonviolent action. He thus appropriately named his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* and called his nonviolent movement *Satyagraha*, which means literally “clinging to truth.” Therefore, we cannot discuss Gandhi’s nonviolent philosophy without first addressing the nature of truth. I will argue that his autobiography serves not just as an account of his life, but as a narrative through which his political thought, particularly his conception of truth, is realized.

What is it about the narrative form, or to use Jerome Bruner’s terminology, the “narrative mode of thought” as compared to a scientific mode,<sup>1</sup> that lends itself well to revealing political thought? Through an interpretation of Gandhi’s political thought through this narrative mode, I will explore the ethical implications of a politics predicated upon a narrative sensibility. If, for Gandhi, truth is the source of nonviolent action, then a thorough understanding of his conception of truth is central to an understanding of his philosophy of nonviolence. Through a narrative frame of his autobiographic writing Gandhi is able to convey a sense that truth does not consist in mere correctness or the establishing of a correspondence between a representation and external phenomena, but as a relative concept that is always in the process of becoming. In nonviolent politics, truth grows and widens in interaction and coordination with others to establish a *shared* objectivity. This conception of truth points away from violence and coercion and rather supports nonviolent action, communication, and co-production of truth. Gandhi’s autobiography, in this way, provides an essential articulation of nonviolent political thought, by way of its narrative form and not merely its content alone.

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<sup>1</sup> See Jerome S. Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986), p. 11-43. where Bruner establishes this binary as between the narrative and logico-scientific or paradigmatic modes of thought.

We can think of narratives in at least three senses—by senses I mean not so much what a narrative is in terms of its formal content and structure, but rather what narratives do, how they are engaged and what they achieve. Firstly, a narrative is not merely an account of what happened, but it is a way of establishing links and causality between events and thus imparting them with meaning. Like traditional histories, which are written in narrative form, we write our own stories to better understand the links between events, the depth of meaning of experiences, and the effects of our actions. In his autobiographic narrative, Gandhi was able to write his own history, his own exploration of the causality in his own life, and thus establish a coherence between his thought and its relationship to political action. Secondly, narratives can allow for a particular empathetic understanding or the ability to see oneself in the other. Seeing oneself as the other is central to Gandhi's conception of truth as a consensus, which is about actively coming to shared understanding rather than violently coercing "the other" into accepting one's own interpretation of truth. Noncoercion is intrinsically related to nonviolence, or *ahimsa*, as the active intent not to harm, "in word, thought, and deed." Lastly, narrative is an indeterminate, open-ended process, and an event of constant becoming, comprised of a multiplicity of interpretations, voices, and truths. Gandhi conceptualizes truth not as a static entity but as always in the process of becoming and widening through action. Gandhi's *satyagraha* is thus realized not within a formalized philosophical or scientific system but in the unfolding of a narrative. It is here that I will shift my focus to speech and language and bring Gandhi into conversation with Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of the discourse of the novel as well as Hannah Arendt's understanding of the relationship between narrative, speech, and political action.<sup>2</sup>

If Gandhi's political thought is read in a rigid, 'scientific' manner, his thoughts and actions can too easily be reduced to mere inconsistencies or contradictions, eliminating the potential for a more profound understanding of the way in which his actions in the world allowed him to refine and shift his political thought. Gandhi established a politics of nonviolence through a particular understanding of truth, speech, and action. For Gandhi, the politics of nonviolence was not pacifism, but embodied as *satyagraha*—an active, creative force which eschews violence as a means to an end. With this analysis of the narrative elements of Gandhi's thought, I will illuminate how he is in dialogue both with his own Eastern philosophical and religious traditions as well as more modern trends in Western political thought concerning language, political action, and the relationship between them.<sup>3</sup> I will use these more modern contemporary theories as a lens with which to view Gandhi's particular philosophy of nonviolence. The aim of this analytic lens is to provide a useful conceptual exegesis of Gandhi's political thought while hopefully not overwhelming the deeply spiritual and moral values with which he was concerned. I will be looking at how Gandhi's writings can be seen not as disparate elements which constitute a systematic political treatise but as a narrative through which his political thought unfolds. In short, a scientific analysis of his thought can potentially strike bare the worldly, human element of his thought, which is not merely a consequence of

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2 Richard Kearney also deals with three similar understandings of narrative. He discusses narratives as "the *testimonial* capacity to bear witness to a forgotten past...the *empathetic* capacity to identify with those different to us...[and] the *critical/utopian* capacity to challenge Official Stories with unofficial or dissenting ones which open up alternative ways of being." See "Narrative and Ethics" in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, Vol. 70 (1996): 45.

3 This argument can be seen as an extension of what Ashis Nandy calls Gandhi's "critical traditionality." See footnote 50.

his thought but was central to its understanding and articulation. Nonviolence is the intent to do no harm “in word, thought, and deed.” Words and thoughts are inseparable from the deeds that enact them. Therefore, I hope that a focus on the narrative elements of Gandhi’s language will not undo this crucial link but rather illuminate the interplay between language, thought, and action.

## II. Gandhi and the *Gita*<sup>4</sup>

It is impossible to fully understand Gandhi’s *satyagraha* without first addressing its religious foundation, keeping in mind that Gandhi’s sense of religion was defined more by morality rather than strict theology.<sup>5</sup> *The Bhagavad Gita* (a story contained within the larger Hindu epic *The Mahabharata*) was Gandhi’s self-proclaimed textbook on nonviolence. An analysis of this text sets the stage for my further discussions of truth, the concept of becoming, and the manifestation of these ideas in Gandhi’s movement of *satyagraha*.

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 his moral attachment to his family and his duty as a warrior. In the dialogue, Krishna convinces Arjuna of his individual duty, or *dharma*, as a warrior. While this summary might seem to suggest an ensuing story that is anything but nonviolent, to assume so would be a strongly literal misinterpretation.<sup>6</sup> Arjuna’s story is in fact an allegory of an inner struggle, a struggle that is not specific to him but is a universal human dilemma.<sup>7</sup> The battle against his family can be interpreted as a struggle with the part of oneself that, like family, seems essential to our very being. Krishna’s remarks therefore address not just Arjuna’s dilemma on the battlefield but encompass the vulnerabilities and dilemmas of every suffering individual.<sup>8</sup>

The dialogue discusses one’s specific duty in the context of a particular theory of action, which is the path of karma yoga. Karma yoga is the path of action where one is detached from the fruits of action. In acting, one is not moved or entangled in the ends of action. Through acting, one gains wisdom and knowing. It is not that this action lacks a purpose or goal, but rather that the means themselves, the action or performance, is an end in itself. Moreover, since it is the means at stake and not the unforeseeable and ultimately unknowable end, such action does not proclaim that only one who knows absolute truth is allowed to act. Rather truth is relative and particular to a perspective. It is thus through our actions, both individually and in concert with others, that we approach truth. This is the philosophic principle of *anekantavada*, according to which there is one absolute truth that is outside of time, yet in the phenomenal world, we are limited from our human perspective and thus can only grasp at relative truths within time.<sup>9</sup> Gandhi is not paralyzed by such a concept of relativity but recognizes that while absolute truth can never be completely

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4 This section, the later section on Bakhtin, as well as elements of my conclusion are drawn from a line of argument which I developed for the Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship Conference in Summer 2011 and which are published in an edition of the Berkeley Undergraduate Journal.

5 Bhiku Parekh, *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 42.

6 Eknath Easwaran, *The Bhagavad Gita*, (Canada: Nilgiri Press, 2007). Easwaran paraphrases Gandhi’s common response to this assertion, “...just base your life on the Gita sincerely and systematically and see if you find killing or even hurting others compatible with its teachings,” p. 20.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 20-21.

8 A special thank you to Michael Nagler at the Metta Center for Nonviolence Education for his conversation with me on the *Gita*.

9 Michael Sonnleitner, *Gandhian Nonviolence: Levels of Satyagraha*, (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1985), p. 17.

realized within human time, it “can be approached.”<sup>10</sup> Through action, through this reaching towards, this approaching, we can widen our understanding. Truth is therefore conceived as always in the process of becoming. From this background, Gandhi derives his project of *satyagraha*, which literally means “holding firm to truth” and is translated as “truth force” or “soul force.” *Satyagraha* requires being open to another’s truth, even that of one’s opponent, and through the performance of one’s own truth come to a new, better truth.<sup>11</sup>

While the *Gita* primarily discusses the path of karma yoga (as it is said to be the safest path), it by no means excludes discussion of the other three yogic paths. The other yogic paths (of devotion to God and of intuitive discrimination, for example) seem to contradict the path of pure detached action. Yet despite these apparent contradictions, “there is a thread of inner consistency”<sup>12</sup> which unites them all and illuminates the fact that they are not mutually exclusive but are all paths towards the same ultimate realization. Thus, the *Gita* is “not a book of commandments, but a book of choices.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, due to the nature of truth, the *Gita* would undermine its own philosophical underpinnings if it were to take the form of an absolute, dogmatic philosophy.<sup>14</sup> The *Gita* points towards a diversity on the surface of things, yet remains close to the understanding of the unity that pervades beneath. The *Gita* becomes largely a discussion of truth and how we come to know truth, one way being the path of detached action.<sup>15</sup>

### III. Narratives as History

Gandhi once said, “First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.”<sup>16</sup> While this short sentence may not constitute a narrative, it nonetheless performs what narratives do. Narratives in a simple sense have “the capacity to redescribe reality by combining elements dispersed in time and space into some kind of coherent pattern.”<sup>17</sup> Through these connections, Gandhi defines the significance of events and then establishes a sense of the relationship between these events. Gandhi accounts not merely what happened as though there is an objective reality which only he can describe; rather he ‘re-describes’ or re-presents events to impart a particular individual understanding to the relationship between them. Gandhi’s narrative strategy grasps that language, following from many theorists and philosophers of language, is not merely a reflection of the world as is, but is an active part of *creating* that very world through

10 Easwaran, p. 19.

11 Gandhi said, “With all sides reflecting upon the truth as they perceive it, the satyagrahi proceeds to do service until some side admits they are wrong or a new version of what is true comes into being.” Quoted in Sonnleitner, p. 52.

12 Easwaran, p. 50. While each path has different means, the “thread of inner consistency” between them is that they all lead one towards selfrealization. For example, karma yoga is the path of action without attachment to the results of such action. Bhakti yoga, on the other hand, is the path of complete devotion to God through devoted service. While they are different life practices, the “inner consistency” between them is that they are different facets of the same different means towards the same goal.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 23-4. Of the Upanishads (of which the *Gita* is part), Easwaran writes, “If they seem to embrace contradictions, that is because they do not try to smooth over the seams of these experiences.”

15 As Gandhi put it, nonviolence and truth are the “twin principles,” which is why it seems he was able to derive so much about nonviolence from its pages.

16 While not well-sourced, this is a commonly attributed quotation to Gandhi. For example, prominent Gandhian nonviolence scholar Michael N. Nagler references it in “Gandhi Needs No Defense We Do.” 30 March 2011. <http://mettacenter.org/blog/gandhi-needs-no-defense-we-do/>. Accessed 25 November 2012.

17 Kearney, p. 30.

the words that we speak; it then follows that the particular use of language can also influence the possibilities for future action.<sup>18</sup>

Gandhi begins his autobiography by questioning what it means to write an autobiography, initially supposing autobiographic writing to be a practice specific to the West and inherently limited in its ability to fully represent his life and thought. He was greatly affected by a friend of his arguing:

Supposing you reject tomorrow the things you hold as principles today, or supposing you revise in the future your plans of today, is it not likely that the men who shape their conduct on the authority of your word, spoken or written, may be misled? Don't you think it would be better not to write anything like an autobiography, at any rate just yet?<sup>19</sup>

Gandhi deals with this argument by countering that "it 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."<sup>20</sup>

Thus, while Gandhi realizes the limitations of writing an autobiography, he nonetheless finds it to be a suitable form for relaying his "experiments with truth," his particular understanding of truth at a given time and how each experiment gave way to and influenced each subsequent experiment. In writing about his life, Gandhi was able to look back on his experiences and illuminate the connections between these thoughts and actions and the experiments which composed them. These narrative connections happen on many levels, some of which are relatively less significant to his understanding of truth and nonviolence,<sup>21</sup> and others which are foundational to the emergence of his political and spiritual thought.

Many of Gandhi's experiments were focused on his own personal development, such as his experiments with fasting, holistic remedies, and with dress. 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. While many of the experiments recounted in his autobiography appear to be more personal than directly political, for Gandhi the personal and political were not as distinctly separate as they are often in Western political language. Gandhi's personal experiments were a means with which to further cultivate his understanding of truth and its manifestation in the political sphere. His personal experiments allowed him to recognize his own fallibility and to cultivate an understanding of truth as a widening or constant becoming. As an aspirant towards truth, Gandhi felt obligated to become involved in politics and his personal experiments were not separate from his political involvement.

For Gandhi, such a notion of truth meant pronouncing his own fallibility and refining his understanding through experimentation. In 1906, Gandhi took the vow of *brahmacharya*,

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18 I am thinking here particularly of George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language" when he says, "If thought can corrupt language, language can also corrupt thought." This has an interesting, though not equivalent, connection to Gandhi's words, "A man is but a product of his thoughts. What he thinks, he becomes."

19 Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), p. xxv.

20 *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.

21 Such as his retrospective realization that his lack of participation in gym class in his formative years was wrong; he says, "I then had the false notion that gymnastics had nothing to do with education. Today I know that physical training should have as much place in the curriculum as mental training." *Ibid.*, p. 14.

which does not simply mean “celibacy” but also encompasses a greater range of behaviors for the purpose of spiritual and physical self-control. Gandhi describes it as the “control of senses in word, thought and deed,”<sup>22</sup> clearly paralleling his definition of nonviolence as the intent to do no harm, “in word, thought, and deed.” Only later is Gandhi able to see how taking this spiritual vow of *brahmacharya* laid the foundation for *satyagraha*.<sup>23</sup> Through this understanding of the connection between his vow of *brahmacharya* and *satyagraha*, Gandhi is able to understand the source of his actions and usher in a sense of a beginning, of a new creation.

Gandhi explains that “an aspirant after *brahmacharya* will always be conscious of his shortcomings,”<sup>24</sup> an understanding which finds fuller realization in his conception of truth as one’s will is subject to change and widen through action. Thus a *Satyagrahi*, or one who holds firm to truth, must always be willing to admit fallibility, to refine or reject earlier understandings of truth and the actions which follow, yet still understand that such previous understandings are part of the history and events which propel one into the refined action of the present.<sup>25</sup> Gandhi was raised a strict vegetarian, avoiding meat and animal products. Even though he took the vow of *brahmacharya* and ate a very simple diet, even he needed to refine this vow at certain moments. Gandhi became severely ill a few times over the course of his life, often from these limited diets or from his experiments in fasting for political purposes. The doctors recommended milk for him to regain his strength, and while he initially eschewed the possibility, he eventually gave in and decided to drink goat’s milk.<sup>26</sup> This recognition of fallibility was central to his political action, showing how *different moments merit different responses*, and how one must always keep an eye open to our own shortcomings.

In Gandhi’s conception, the nonviolent political actor is involved in the process of re-inventing him or herself, of refining one’s own understanding, one’s own particular truth. A more directly political manifestation of Gandhi’s admission of fallibility occurred when he confesses to have made a “Himalayan miscalculation” by encouraging a poor peasant community to engage in nonviolent action early in his work as an activist for Indian Independence. However, when met with violent police forces, the peasants responded violently. Gandhi admitted that he had asked them to act prematurely, before they fully understood the concept of nonviolence: “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.”<sup>27</sup> This confession of fallibility does not constitute a blind spot in Gandhi’s political strategy but is in fact central to his understanding of what politics is and should be. Gandhi is humbled by his own history, by his own human infallibility. Through a narrative account of an action that he himself considers it a “Himalayan miscalculation,” Gandhi is able to see how it this error was the seed of greater, future manifestations of *satyagraha*. This pronouncement cannot be read as an inconsistency on Gandhi’s part, but is a shift and change of action dependent on specific circumstances and also on the recognition of his own fallibility when he does act.

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22 *Ibid.*, p. 210.

23 Gandhi says that the vow “prepared me for [Satyagraha]. Satyagraha had not been a preconceived plan. It came on spontaneously, without my having willed it. But I could see that all my previous steps led up to that goal,” p. 208.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 211.

25 Erik Erikson refers to Gandhi’s political and personal practices as “experiential existentialism”. Quoted in Sonnleitner, p. 17.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 273.

27 *Autobiography*, p. 469.

In his article “Two Modes of Thought” Bruner contrasts the narrative from the scientific mode of thought; the narrative mode is multi-dimensional and concerned with the depths of the human experience, as opposed to the scientific mode which is one-dimensional and concerned with establishing universal truth.<sup>28</sup> The narrative mode, then, is better suited for articulating the twists and turns of the individual, subjective human experience, complete with certain apparent contradictions and inconsistencies which do not follow a strict logical or scientific mode of thought. Through its focus on the “singularity of human experience”<sup>29</sup> the narrative form elucidates a connection between past and present, allows us to examine the results of our actions, and illuminates the possibilities for the future. Such a realization thus allows us to “inaugurate new beginnings.”<sup>30</sup> Through narrative, which connects past and present events, we can create ethically responsible self-identities that have some sense of coherence and “self-constancy” despite the changes over time.<sup>31</sup>

#### IV. Narratives and Otherness

Our paths may be different. If our destination is the same, we shall meet there. What would I matter if we follow contrary paths? I am not so arrogant to believe that I am wholly right and others wrong.

—M.K. Gandhi<sup>32</sup>

Through his autobiographic narrative, Gandhi is able to become other to himself. In this ability to see oneself as the other lies the potential for us to understand each other and to see oneself in another person. The relation of oneself to the other is central to Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence, which rests on the understanding that in doing violence to another being, we are doing violence to ourselves. The reciprocal nature of violence is reflected in Gandhi’s view of language, for he believed that language does not merely represent or mimic violence but can itself be violent. Of his experiment of writing and journalism, Gandhi 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.<sup>33</sup>

Discursive practice both expresses and constitutes the speaker. Thus, the journalist has a responsibility in writing. Writing, as Gandhi says, is actively involved in nonviolent action.<sup>34</sup>

28 Bruner, “Two Modes of Thought” in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, p. 11-43.

29 Kearney, p. 30.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

32 Quoted in Sonnleitner, p. 36.

33 Mohandas Gandhi in “My Incapacity,” *Young India* (2 July 1925): 78.

34 Gandhi was quite explicit in the relationship between writing and nonviolence. In his autobiography, he wrote, “Writing is itself one of the experiments with truth,” p. 208.

Language must be carefully chosen for it shapes our thoughts and thus our actions.<sup>35</sup> Journalism in this sense is seen as a process, a conversation that is open to rebuttal and changes in point of view, but is not a place for hatred, anger and retaliation.

At the heart of Gandhi's *satyagraha* then is the idea that violent means can only bring violent ends. Thus, we must practice nonviolence in our words, our thoughts and our actions, which are ends in themselves. To this end, Gandhi made sure that in both his written and spoken words, never attacked specific individuals but rather critiqued their system and its foundation. He wrote that India's "Non-cooperation is neither with the English nor with the West. Our Non-cooperation is with the system the English have established."<sup>36</sup> While this may seem like quite a simplistic, perhaps even overly sentimental point, we cannot deny that, to be frank, it worked. The British left not by violent coercion but by the active force of *satyagraha*, which Gandhi termed the "weapon of the brave."<sup>37</sup> Through his experiments, Gandhi does not only see himself in the other but also sees himself as other. By seeing oneself as other to ourselves, we can better understand the various stories, truths, and identities of others.

Speaking with others is the first step to illuminating one's own truth and thereby engendering a dialogue. It is only when we understand another as ourselves that we are able to fully grasp the futility of violence and the need for a nonviolent action and communication in the hopes of reaching a common, shared truth. Gandhi coined the term "heart unity" to express the fact that while we are externally diverse in terms of religion, ethnicity, culture or otherwise, we are all united "beneath the surface."<sup>38</sup> If through speaking with others, we are able to understand another, then there are greater prospects for a kind of empathy, for the ability for "each one of us to relate to the other as another self and to oneself as another."<sup>39</sup> Such empathy could not be as easily managed, and perhaps may not even be possible, if one were to convey their theoretical and political ideals within a formalized system. On the other hand, if conveyed through narrative, through *speaking with*, political theory is humanized. It is this faculty of narratives that allow us to "inaugurate new beginnings"—new, *shared* beginnings.

However, these new beginnings are not merely rooted in their affective or emotive quality, which can very likely result in dangerous, ungrounded irrational ends. Narrative empathy need not rest solely on emotive characteristics but can appeal to an intellectual rationality as well.<sup>40</sup> Gandhi makes frequent remarks that articulate the importance of satisfying not just his rationality or his emotions, but appeal to both the faculties of reason and emotion in order to both practically and effectively act.<sup>41</sup>

It is crucially important to note, in this regard, that Gandhi terms his action as the 'science' of *satyagraha*, describing *satyagraha* as a "science in the making." This is just one of the ways in which

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35 Michael Nagler writes, "The effect of each individual thought or word is very small, yes, but taken together, the effect of our thoughts and images is not at all small. When certain kinds of thought and image become a habit, they can become a worldview" in *The Search for a Nonviolent Future: a Promise of a Peace for Ourselves, Our Families, and Our World*, (Maui, Hawai'i: Inner Ocean Publishing, 2004), p. 218.

36 Quoted in Sabyasashi Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1997), p. 16. In another instance, Gandhi writes, "The extreme to which we may go is non-violent non-co-operation with [our opponents] even as with the Government. But we may not non-co-operate with them in private life, for we do not non-co-operate with the men composing the Government, we are non-co-operating with the system they administer. We decline to render official service Sir George Lloyd the Governor, we dare not withhold social service from Sir George Lloyd the Englishman." See "The Moral Issue" in *Young India* 3 (24 November 1921): 885.

37 Eknath Easwaran, *Gandhi the Man: The Story of his Transformation* (California: The Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, 2008), p. 87.

38 Nagler, p. 270.

39 Kearney, p. 33.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

41 See, for example, *Autobiography*, p. xxvii.

he illuminates his desire to appeal to both emotive and more scientific rationalities, and thereby grasp the benefits of them both. The narrative rationality allows for an empathic understanding and an openness to what is and what could be, while the scientific rationality grounds us in sound, principled judgments. Gandhi's understanding of truth as relative and in the process of becoming is not merely a way to get around his inevitable errors, but is expressively grounded in the principle of nonviolence which has foundational principles and judgments. Gandhi's narrative mode of political judgment embraces both foundational scientific judgments while opening them up for nonviolent deliberation and creation of new understandings of self, other, and truth.

Gandhi's discussions with the poet Rabindranath Tagore illuminate his particular mode of argumentation and how he is open to widening his conception of truth by attending to criticisms from the other. While Tagore and Gandhi shared many views on Indian independence, they often diverged in their views on how such independence was to be secured. Tagore found issue particularly with Gandhi's fasts (which could be seen as a "pressure tactic"),<sup>42</sup> his non-cooperation movement (which Tagore thought was merely "political asceticism" and detached from others in the world),<sup>43</sup> and his emphasis on the spinning wheel to make homespun clothes (at the expense of a larger vision and its potential "mindless uniformity").<sup>44</sup> However, as Ananta Kumar Giri argues, "their argument was not for the sake of winning any egoistic victory but for exploring truth," which laid the groundwork for "a new ethics of argumentation." "Both Tagore and Gandhi," she says, "were deeply concerned about the present and future of India, and they argued with each other with passion for the sake of clarifying an appropriate agenda of action and mode of being for India's *swaraj* [home rule] and for a better world."<sup>45</sup>

In one case, Gandhi eventually realized that the spinning wheel was not sufficient a method to secure India's independence if it were not strongly complemented by other programs such as those involving sanitation and agriculture.<sup>46</sup> Because of their profound respect and love for the other, both Gandhi and Tagore always invited criticism in their dialogue which allowed them to refine their own views. Thus, "their mutual criticism of the each other embodied a self-criticism."<sup>47</sup> Giri argues that their conversation "was not a debate, nor was it a parade of argument and counter-argument. It was a dialogue where there was not only a repetition and reiteration of one's starting point but an effort to understand the other point of view and overcome one's initial presuppositions."<sup>48</sup>

Giri links this "new ethics of argumentation" to Habermas' notion of communicative rationality. Habermas argues against a traditional positivist notion of truth as the correspondence between an assertion and the actual state of affairs. In Habermas' conception, truth is a shared objectivity built from a consensual, mutual development within a sphere of communication and dialogue. Truth, in this sense, is not grounded in its relation to external phenomena but is actively constituted through dialogue, thereby creating a common communicative platform that establishes new norms and builds shared identity across difference. Giri emphasizes the "performative" function of Habermas' "discourse ethics," where the realm of speaking with another is not merely about political action, but enacting that very political action in the speaking itself. Moreover, through this speaking with, there is the possibility of reflection and self-critique so

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42 Ananta Kumar Giri in "Gandhi, Tagore and a New Ethics of Argumentation," *Journal of Human Values*.7.1 (April 2001), p. 50.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 55-6.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

as to avoid “self-contradiction.”<sup>49</sup> Through engaged dialogue with oneself and with others is the opportunity to establish the self-constant identities of which Kearney speaks.<sup>50</sup>

## V. Narrative Becoming, Dialogism, and Action

Perhaps this is why tyrants so hate and fear poets and novelists and yes, historians. Even more than they fear and hate scientists, who though they create possible worlds, leave no place for possible alternative personal perspectives on these worlds.

–Jerome Bruner<sup>51</sup>

### i. Mikhail Bakhtin: Dialogic Discourse

If truth is something co-constituted, through our interaction with the world and with others, then it is not something closed off to the world. Instead, truth is open to interpretation and re-interpretation. This leads me to my final, and perhaps most crucial point (since it entails the first two), on the importance of speech and narrative in the realm of political action. Kearney argues that “narrative responsibility requires more than constancy (promise-keeping); it also requires flexibility. A fundamental fluidity and openness pertains to narrative identity once we are prepared to recognize that it is always something made and remade.”<sup>52</sup>

Mikhail M. Bakhtin proposes the idea that language is always in the process of becoming and responding to itself. While his work was centered around the language of the novel, I am not the first to take from Bakhtin the more philosophical notions of his work and see how it applies to the interpretation of political discourse. Bakhtin 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

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49 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

50 Giri does draw some disjunctures between Habermas’ discourse ethics and Gandhi’s *satyagraha*. For one, she argues that Gandhi’s *satyagraha* emphasizes love and self-suffering, which is absent from Habermas’ discourse ethics. And secondly, that Habermas privileges speaking over listening. See also Bhiku Parekh and Thomas Pantham eds., *Political Discourse: Explorations in Indian and Western Political Thought* (New Delhi, Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1987) for differing perspectives on the relationship between Gandhi and Habermas. Raghuvver critiques both Habermas’ notion of communicative rationality in favor of the more emancipatory frame provided by traditional Indian thought in *The Bhagavad Gita*. Thomas Pantham argues that while there are some similarities between Habermas and Gandhi, Habermas’ communicative rationality is more of a rational “thought-experiment”, which lacks the unity of theory and practice inherent in *satyagraha*. Ashis Nandy argues that Gandhi draws from both traditional sources as well as modern thought in a kind of “critical traditionality.” Bhiku Parekh also argues that Gandhi critically reinterprets *both* traditional Indian and modern Western thought. In the same volume, Ernst Vollrath claims that Arendt’s notion of associational rationality is a more emancipatory model than communicative rationality. Since I will be discussing the relationship between Arendt and Gandhi in the next section, I only briefly mention Habermas here and will return to Vollrath and Pantham’s discussion in my section on Arendt.

51 Bruner, p. 54.

52 Kearney, p. 38.

up language to eternal rebirth.<sup>53</sup>

Bakhtin argues, “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.”<sup>54</sup> Of all written forms, the novel not only represents but embraces heteroglossia. As Bakhtin says, “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.”<sup>55</sup> The philosophical implications of Bakhtin’s argument 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 proposes a view of language that does not erase any potential for shared meaning, nor does he assert a kind of nihilism that leaves us forever trapped by our words without access to truth. For Bakhtin, language is living, creative, and open-ended, through which one reaches towards truth.

For Bakhtin, a mere stylistic analysis of the novel will not suffice. Rather, the novel requires “a profound understanding of each language’s socio-ideological meaning.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, different languages inherently reflect world views. And it is only through “alien languages” that we come to understand our own. If language continues to live and change, it follows that the dialogism of yesterday may eventually collapse into the stilted monologic discourse of authority, and therefore a new dialogic response would be needed. The novel for Bakhtin is a kind of “verbal and semantic decentering of the ideological world” and promotes a “loss of feeling for language as myth.”<sup>57</sup> The novel does not pretend to be the final word on any one meaning. It is limited by its bounds within a particular time and space, which is why Bakhtin aptly describes the novel as “a unitary event of the world’s heteroglot becoming.”<sup>58</sup> In this sense it a cohesive united whole bounded by a particular time and space and yet aware of its multiplicity. It is fully aware of its performance as a narrative that does not attempt to fully encapsulate truth, thus shedding the potentially dangerous manifestations of a particular myth, or what Bruce Lincoln calls, “ideology in narrative form.”<sup>59</sup> In this sense, we can think of how Bakhtin articulates a particular notion of a novelistic, or *narrative, becoming*.

Bakhtin’s notion of authoritative discourse is particularly important for the purpose of reading political thought. Again, he talks of the centripetal force of language, which attempts to collapse language to one authoritative interpretation which may sway the masses but is lacks richness of meaning. He contrasts this with the centrifugal force of language, which is composed of a multiplicity of voices and reflects multi-layered levels of meaning. Bakhtin’s conception of language parallels Gandhi’s understanding of truth as constantly in the process of becoming. We cannot help

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53 M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas, 2008). This monologism/dialogism distinction is layered with many other terms such as heteroglossia (multiple tongues or multi-voicedness), centrifugal/centripetal (outwards and many voiced vs. to a point or single-voiced). While there is some distinction between these various layers of terminology, they will often be used interchangeably to allow for more simple clarity of terminology. I hope that in doing so, I will not be collapsing into a kind of single-voicedness myself!

54 *Ibid.*, p. 348.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 415.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 417.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 367. Myth in this case denotes a case where there is an “absolute fusion of word with concrete ideological meaning,” p. 369.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 331.

59 Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007), p.xii.

but respond to the voices, the languages, thoughts and actions which have come before us. For example, even in rejecting something, we are taking that principle as our foundations. Yet despite the fact that it is impossible to completely circumvent the words and principles which preceded us, this does not mean that our words and actions must be stagnant or that it is impossible to create anything truly new. Rather through our responses to authoritative discourse and *also* to our *own* language, 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. Gandhi portrays science as an inherently experimental process which is never entirely finalized.

In the introduction to his autobiography, Gandhi expresses:

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 mirage. Let hundreds like me perish, but let truth prevail...*I hope and pray that no one will regard the advice interspersed in the following chapters as authoritative. The experiments narrated should be regarded as illustrations, in the light of which every one may carry on his own experiments according to his own inclinations and capacity.* I trust that to this limited extent the illustrations will be really helpful; because I am not going either to conceal or understate any ugly things that must be told. I hope to acquaint the reader fully with all my faults and errors. My purpose is to describe experiments in the science of Satyagraha, not to say how good I am [my emphasis].<sup>60</sup>

The portrayal of his life as experiments affords Gandhi to the capacity get around the dangerous pitfalls of an authoritative discourse. Gandhi represents his personal and political experiences in their multi-layered entirety, with all their various nuances, complexities, and faults and but not being dissuaded by this reality. Rather this reality compelled him into action despite these limitations. It is not just in spite of these limitations that Gandhi bases his actions, but rather because of them that he is able to fully and freely act in the world. His approaching towards truth is never meant to be finalized or decisive but is rather defined by its very nature as a process, as a becoming. Truth, for Gandhi, is a "sovereign principle."<sup>61</sup> It grounds his action as it is realized through nonviolence. And yet, he is invariably limited as a human within time and thus, can only construct and act upon his own truths as he recognizes them at each particular moment. Thus, as others interpreting his actions, we need not agree with each of his experiments (we need not also take the vow of *brahmacharya*, or undergo fasts, for example) in order to realize his more profound implications of truth and nonviolence.

## ii. Hannah Arendt: Speech, Narrative, and Action

Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.

—Hannah Arendt<sup>62</sup>

60 Autobiography, p. xxviii-xxix.

61 *Ibid*, p. xxvii.

62 Quoted in Leslie Paul Thiele. "The Ontology of Action: Arendt and the Role of Narrative." *Theory and Event* 12.4 (2009). *Project Muse*. <[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory\\_and\\_event/summary/v012/12.4.thiele.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/summary/v012/12.4.thiele.html)> Accessed 26 April 2011.

Hannah Arendt often wrote on political action, which for her stood above even the contemplative life of the philosopher (despite her own inclinations towards the latter). For Arendt, speech was central, if not entirely equivalent, to political action. Speech for Arendt is not just speaking about something but speaking with others as a way of engendering or disclosing the sphere of political action. Leslie Paul Thiele further argues that she grounds her study of political action on narrative themes. This is not to say that Arendt was a storyteller in her own right but rather that she was a “theorist of action who understood its intrinsically narrative nature.”<sup>63</sup> For Arendt, the political actor is not in complete control of the ends of her own actions. Rather, her action marks particular beginnings, the ends of which the political actor cannot definitely know and are rather open-ended, uncertain and left up to the plurality of responses and interpretations of others.

Arendt, perhaps in different ways, works with all three of the conceptions of narrative which I have outlined. For one, Arendt argues that what distinguishes the human being from the animal is the ability to tell stories, to narrate one’s life and in doing so impart a moment with meaning.<sup>64</sup> Secondly, she focuses on the ability of narratives to allow for an imagining of finding the self in the other and the other in the self.<sup>65</sup> Finally, she conceptualizes political action as a narrative which is open-ended and engages a plurality of interpretations and responses. The point is not that political narratives are exactly akin to literary narratives, but that they are alike in that they “[b]oth lack sovereign authors.” Sovereignty, in this sense, is antithetical to freedom. Political freedom is not freedom from uncertainty, for a history written by causality and necessity, but rather freedom for uncertainty, for the unwritten, open-ended, undefined story, where there is always the possibility of emergence of something entirely new, and where the means (the performance) are the end in themselves.<sup>66</sup>

Thus, it is important to make a contrast between, to use Bakhtin’s term, authoritative, sovereign, and monologic narratives and the plural, unfolding narratives with which I am concerned. Authoritative narratives attempt to ascertain complete control and reinforce traditional positions of power and subordination. Sovereignty is the domain of tyrants who “operate in a linear and instrumental fashion” and “seek to control the effects of their deeds.”<sup>67</sup> Totalitarianism, for Arendt, does not just deny freedom, but rather founds itself on “the notion that human freedom must be sacrificed to historical development... The model for this concept of freedom is a river flowing freely, in which every attempt to block its flow is an arbitrary impediment.”<sup>68</sup> In other words, totalitarianism reduces politics to the necessity of history, depriving human beings not only of their free will (i.e. their mere desire to do what they want) but more importantly of their freedom to do something completely spontaneous and new, breaking off from the simple causality or “flow of history” that reduces the plurality of human beings to a singular humanity.<sup>69</sup> Or as Jussi Backman puts it more forcefully, “totalitarianism is no longer content with simply dismissing the plurality of opinions and the unpredictability involved in political action, but, in fact, seeks to *destroy* this plurality, spontaneity, and

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63 *Ibid.*

64 See Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

65 See Kearney, p. 34.

66 *Ibid.*

67 *Ibid.*

68 Hannah Arendt, “Introduction *into* Politics” from *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), p. 120.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 121.

political newness, to *make* politics into the smooth, secure, and efficient administrative process of implementing a social ideal.”<sup>70</sup>

Un-authoritative or dialogic narratives respond to and undo authoritative narratives. Thiele argues, “unlike principles and maxims, narratives do not issue imperatives; they invite interpretation...Narratives cannot be reduced to imitations or representations of some ultimate (or even mundane) reality. They do not impart truths. Rather, they entice the discovery of meaning.”<sup>71</sup> Narratives of this sort eschew any attempt at total sovereignty and do not present a well-defined final answer. Rather, they give us questions which guide us *towards* meaning, a meaning which is never intended to be fully exhausted. Such narratives do not smooth over the plurality of individuals, forcing human beings into the smooth and determined narrative of history. A more extensive quotation from Thiele may be helpful:

Action differs from fabrication [tyrannical administration] in the same way that a story differs from a technical manual. The former is multi-dimensional, hermeneutically interactive, and (self) transformative; the latter is one-dimensional, univocal, and instrumental...Speech becomes political, whatever its substantive focus, when it serves as an invitation for others to become participating subjects rather than administrative objects. Political freedom, for Arendt, is the freedom to participate in co-creation...[This freedom] arises in the midst of plurality, whenever one acts neither tyrannically nor criminally but as a summons to a community of responders.<sup>72</sup>

Arendt’s conceptualization of action does not exclude the possibility of universal morality, rather it reaches this universality through the engagement of difference.

Arendt’s conception of universality can thereby provide a much needed corrective to Habermas’ communicative rationality. Ernst Vollrath finds an issue with Habermas’ notion of communicative rationality because it is concerned with shared consensus and seeks to create a single, shared identity—a single “life-world.” This uniformity can become stagnant since it “only stresses the moment of identity and identification” and thus can exclude the possibility of communication between people with differing perspectives. Vollrath argues that Arendt’s position of what he calls “associational rationality” preserves the world of difference. Vollrath argues,

It is the task of political rationality to organize the difference and the space between people so that they can partake in it universally...[To do this] we need not and must not make their differentiability disappear into such a compact unity and identity as is assumed in the concept of communicative rationality...How do we organize our differences and differentialities politically? To this question there is no universal theoretical answer: we do it by doing it.<sup>73</sup>

This open-ended, interactive process of action in Arendt’s conception engages a plurality of interpretations in the world with others who are different from ourselves. Rather than attempt to smooth over differences and forge a potentially forced and nonconsensual unity, Arendt is

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70 Jussi Backman. “The End of Action: An Arendtian Critique of Aristotle’s Concept of Praxis.” Mika Ojakangas (ed). *Collegium: Studies Across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences* 8 (2010): 44.

71 Thiele.

72 *Ibid.*

73 Vollrath, p. 198

concerned with preserving this plurality, which does not hinder communication but is in fact essential for ongoing communication and action. Arendt says, “in man otherness, which he shares with everything alive, becomes uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings.”<sup>74</sup> Vollrath essentially argues that Arendt’s notion of associational rationality does not exclude universal morality or commonality. This notion approaches these by means of difference and plurality and not through a forced coherence of identity.

Gandhi embraced the difference between beings, but emphasized an underlying “heart unity,” which binds us together in common understanding. He did not want to eliminate difference but work through difference to unearth this common understanding. Gandhi is not interested in smoothing over difference, but suggests that it is through recognizing difference, both seeing oneself in the other, and also seeing one’s own self as the other through personal transformations, that we come to understand our own fallibility and limitations. Gandhi’s discourse does have parallels to Habermas’ notion of communicative rationality, but shares greater philosophical affinity with Arendt’s notion of associational rationality.<sup>75</sup>

Without appreciation for difference, political thought falls under the dangerous presumption that our views are inherently right rather than accept the inherent relativity of our own truths. Thomas Pantham connects Gandhi and Habermas in that they are both concerned with uniting the fields of politics and morality, as well as bringing opposing parties into communication with one another. However, Pantham argues that while Gandhi thinks a shared notion of truth is possible, he also asserts that in the short run “such a consensus may not *actually* be forthcoming even after a considerable amount of argumentative reasoning or discourse has been done.”<sup>76</sup> Habermas is more interested in the theoretical possibility of rational consensus but is unequipped to deal with what happens when such a consensus does not manifest in practice. I argue that both Gandhi and Arendt are interested in actively and practically engaging in the world of plurality, rather than waiting for an absolute consensus upon which to base such action.

As a summary of the arguments, Thiele argues that:

Freedom is expressed in the co-development of an ever-unfolding, and inherently unpredictable plot that solicits novel responses and judgments [...] Arendt observes that “No philosophy, no analysis, no aphorism, be it ever so profound, can compare in intensity and richness of meaning with a properly narrated story.” This is not to celebrate fiction over fact. Rather, Arendt is insisting that the facts of political life, its most fundamental elements, are made available for our understanding and our judgment primarily through their narrative disclosure.<sup>77</sup>

In essence, Arendt’s notion of politics is not founded on a static concept or ideal but rather on particular form or process, whereby a plurality of individuals, of authors in a sense, can act in entirely new, unpredictable ways which cannot be reduced to a mere causality of history. This narrative is not meant to reach a definitive end, but is always being rewritten and refashioned anew

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74 Arendt, quoted in Vollrath, p. 195.

75 I do not intend to map Gandhi and Arendt’s entirely views onto one another, but I do think they both share a common understanding of political action and the importance of language and speech to action. For one reading on the relationship between Arendt and Gandhi, see Uday Mehta, “A Discriminating Politics” in *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*, (New York: Fordham UP, 2010).

76 Pantham, p. 310.

77 Thiele.

through the process of exercising political freedom.<sup>78</sup> There are some clear connections between Bakhtin's notion of dialogism and Arendt's interest in the narrative dimension of political action. Both are concerned not with a fixed, one-dimensional plot, but with the open-ended nature of narratives, which allows for a constant becoming of the political actor and invites a plurality of voices, interpretations and responses. Both thinkers were interested in a particular kind of speaking which plays with experimentation and engages a multiplicity of responders. This kind of experimentation allows for a richer, more dynamic mode of political speech which is not dead and closed off but is alive, open to the present and the future.<sup>79</sup>

## VI. Gandhi as Narrator

"My language is aphoristic; it lacks precision. It is therefore open to several interpretations."

—M.K. Gandhi<sup>80</sup>

Gandhi was not just involved in nonviolent action, but was rather interested in a larger understanding of what it means to act, the connections between our thought and action, the potential future interpretations of our actions by others, and how our language is but a vehicle to the larger project of narrativity. Gandhi made manifest the inherently experimental nature of nonviolent political action, not as a static, bounded event with a defined beginning and end, but an ongoing, dynamic unfolding, which extends as much into our past as it does into our present and future. A focus on narrative form can explicate Gandhi's nonviolent philosophy in that it explains the shifting moments and seeming contradictions in his thought as intentional, as an eschewing of a systematic, dogmatic philosophy. Gandhi's words were not spoken as final truths but as *openings* to what can and should be an open-ended practice, rather than a closed and unchanging doctrine. Gandhi is interested in *approaching* truth through practice, through action, while recognizing that ultimately grasping this truth in the phenomenal world is beyond our capacity as human beings.

Narratives are not just mere aesthetic projects, but like language in general, influence the very world of which we speak and perhaps reveal something deeper about the human condition. The narrative or myth of the modern nationstate allows for group cohesion, bringing together people who may have previously been separate along different ideological lines, for a common cause. Of course, the effects of this are both constructive (as Gandhi's movement for Indian Independence could attest) and unfortunately destructive (as in the case of Aryan

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78 In my reading of Arendt's political theory, she is interested in the process or activity of action as embodying the political itself. The performative nature of politics is also present in her discussion of thinking as contrasted from knowing. Thinking is the process of shedding light on and dispelling prejudices so that we may make new judgments, not based on any previous standards. While the activity or process of thinking is not exempt from the very concrete act of judging, thinking itself is never meant to be fully exhausted, for since humans are never without prejudices and past judgments can become present prejudices, thinking can never reach some final end and if it does, it is not properly political. See, for example, "Thinking and Moral Considerations" from *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003) and "Introduction into Politics" from *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005).

79 For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between Arendt and Bakhtin, see Ned Curthoys, "Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Narrative" in *Journal of Narrative Theory* 32.3 (Fall 2002): 348-370.

80 Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, "Discussion with Dharmadev" in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*.53 (Appendix III): 485.

nationalism). Thus, we must be careful not to assume that, as Kearney puts it, “narrative is invariably on the side of angels” or merely “[a]n agency of healing and emancipation rather than of deceit and closure.”<sup>81</sup> The ability to narrate is not merely the domain of marginalized groups. There are just as many instances of official, authoritative narratives as well, which may simply serve to blindly sway the masses to violent action.<sup>82</sup> Attachment to a particular narrative can as easily create a stagnant identity as a plural unfolding.

Of course narratives are not always on the side of angels. Both authoritative meta-narratives and responding counter-narratives can oversimplify real complexities in order to advance a particular political agenda. By smoothing over these complexities, certain narratives may too easily remove responsibility of the results of action from the shoulders of those who committed them. Moreover, our own narratives could invite excessive inconsistency and contradiction, allowing an easy gloss over errors by forcing a coherent unity on potentially dangerous faults and actions. There is clearly a danger in this, for it potentially eschews any sense of responsibility for one’s actions, since any errors can merely be catalogued and claimed to be the natural faults of the human condition. What is there to guard against this danger? The short answer is that there is not a definite prescription which would guard against the inherent dangers in acting. But again, this need not paralyze one into inaction. Gandhi anchored himself firmly in nonviolent action; despite the potential for errors, nonviolence at least guards against the most egregious faults.<sup>83</sup> In essence then, it would be a great danger to blindly argue for a romantic appraisal of the values of narratives.

But it also would not be justified to entirely throw out the narrative mode in service of a more empirical, scientific mode, for that would be to deny a fundamental aspect of what makes us human. Rather, we must appreciate the benefits of science but also recognize that a scientific rationality applied within the political sphere can be dangerous as it attempts to bind certain principles in a political world that continually eludes such a finitude and is constantly remade anew. Kearney argues that it is important to emphasize a narrative sensibility while also cultivating a sense of empiricism and universal morality.<sup>84</sup> Gandhi’s description of *satyagraha* as a “science in the making” articulates the importance of grounding his action in universal moral principles. Gandhi thus neither falls into the reduction of positivism, nor the nihilism

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81 Kearney, p. 39.

82 See Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s critique of the overextended use of the concept of ‘narrative’ across disciplines in “Concepts of Narrative.” Matti Hyvärinen, Anu Korhonen, and Juri Mykkänen (eds) *Collegium: Studies Across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences* 1 (2006): 10-19.

83 Arendt seems to have been presented with a similar problem in her time. While she suggested that the activity of thinking itself may guard against evil-doing, she was presented with a paradox of thinking: Adolf Eichmann’s sheer thoughtlessness and Heidegger’s pure philosophical thinking, both of which led them to fall into the same dangerous ideology of National Socialism. It is as though both extremes produced the same results. While Arendt herself does not explicitly juxtapose these two figures in a single piece, she does discuss both figures and others have interpreted her understanding of them. Arendt seems to suggest that the only prescription against evil-doing is the activity or performance of thinking itself. Thinking, not as an activity towards a specific end or acquisition of knowledge, but as an endless, result-less enterprise of thinking with oneself and with others in the public realm. Dana Villa suggests that Arendt uses the figure of Socrates, a worldly, public citizen as the ideal thinker, the balance between Eichmann’s complete thoughtlessness and Heidegger’s “pure, unadulterated” thinking, which is completely detached from the public sphere. See Hannah Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations” in *Responsibility and Judgment* (Schocken Books, 2003) and Dana Villa, “The Banality of Philosophy: Arendt on Heidegger and Eichmann” in *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, Larry May and Jerome Kohn, eds., (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997).

84 Kearney argues that “[s]uch a dual approach—narrative *and* empirical—would also safeguard history from what Frederic Jameson has called the ‘postmodern cult of the depthless present,’” p. 44.

of postmodernism, which denies *any* correspondence between things in the world and our representations of them. Finally, as Bakhtin elucidates, while there is an authoritative voice to which competing voices must inevitably respond, it is also through narratives that we are able to undo these authoritative narratives. Through constructing our own languages, our own narratives, we can maintain language and narratives as living entities, rather than dead, univocal objects. To see political life as a narrative does not mean a collapse into a mere aestheticism of this narrative,<sup>85</sup> but rather allows for a critical history.

## VII. Conclusion: Freedom for Uncertainty

I think it is wrong to expect certainties in this world, where all else but God that is Truth is an uncertainty. All that appears and happens about and around us is uncertain, transient.

—M.K.Gandhi<sup>86</sup>

While it is possible to list basic principles of Gandhi's conception of nonviolence to acquaint an interested person to his philosophy, such a list would invariably reduce the breadth of his approach. The narrative mode is an ideal medium for realizing political thought because it renders political thought irreducible to such a list and instead embraces the varied nuances and processes of individual human existence. Again, this does not mean that a rational argument does not exist in Gandhi's writings but that essential pieces of Gandhi's thought are lost if close attention is not paid to the narrative form in which he frames his argument.<sup>87</sup> This is why the philosophy of nonviolence is never reducible to the usually pejorative label 'pacifism,' which obscures its function as an active, constructive force.

Human lives happen in this gray area of existence and experience, and it is by no means a fault of Gandhi that he wishes to position his politics there. Thus, while we should not entirely eschew rational political philosophies and should be just as wary of the potential of dangerous myths to sprout from the stories of influential people, we should also expect more from our politics than scientific, rationalized discourse. Gandhi's ability to articulate his own science of narrative exploration, of the co-production and becoming of truth is not Gandhi's weakness but is the potential of his greatest strength. The narrative becoming of truth is not defined as complete, radical subjectivity but as shared objectivity which engages a plurality of diverse individuals without imposing a false unity or identity upon the speakers. Rather, this conception of truth allows for authentic individual speech which constitutes a politics that is never closed-off and finished but always continually interacting with the world.

Gandhi said that, "the way of violence is old and established... The science of non-violence is yet taking shape. We are still not conversant with all its aspects. There is a wide scope for

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85 In interpreting Arendt's thought, Kristeva writes, "For Arendt, if political life is inseparable from its story... it is uniquely to the extent that that political life resists its own aestheticization, sees itself as an 'activity' (*praxis*) that cannot be reduced to its simple 'product' (*poiesis*), and allows itself to be shared by the irreducible plurality of those who are living... That the narrator can sometimes be mistaken and at other times see clearly is another problem that leaves intact the structural potentialities of narration as wide-open and infinite political action..." p. 43.

86 *Autobiography*, p. 250.

87 Martha Nussbaum articulates the inseparability of form and content and how the literary form is central to molding particular philosophical conceptions of truth in *Love and Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

research and experiment in this field. You can apply your talents to it.”<sup>88</sup> My intention is not to say that Gandhi was merely a story teller or that he 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 towards the widening of the field of action. Narratives are not about mastering truth but are about engaging a plurality of individuals, ideas, and modes of action. 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. To be involved in politics does not just equate to one particular kind of engagement but rather allows for a plurality of modes of action. Some may be active in campaigns of civil disobedience, others may be leaders, and others may be writers or artists. 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. A politics founded upon a narrative dimension engages a plurality of individuals and prevents political activity from collapsing into univocal, authoritative discourse. Politics is rather envisioned as a dynamic process that is always underway, co-produced, and opened. 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.

This vision of politics 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,”<sup>89</sup> open to our actions, interpretations and re-creations. Though we may disagree with some of his “experiments,” we can still keep an eye on the larger understandings of truth and nonviolence and learn how to conduct such experiments ourselves. The abilities to speak and to narrate 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 the something in human experience in a way that cannot be confined within the bounds of a mathematical system. This narrative understanding makes the domain of politics more accessible, closer within our grasp and understanding. Politics is not something out there to be done by others but within the field of our own understanding, our own truths, our own stories, and our own language.

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88 Mohandas K. Gandhi, “To The Readers,” *Harijan* 77 (1939): 371.

89 *Autobiography*, p. 201.

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