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Angel Latterell
Macalester College

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MAKING THE MEANS EQUAL THE ENDS: SEARCHING FOR AN ETHIC OF DIALOGUE

ANGEL LATTERELL

“Dialogue” is not merely a word describing a form of conversation, but an entire philosophy of communicative action with underlying morals based upon the idea of mutual respect. It is a step beyond the dichotomy of right or wrong to a plane of interaction and exchange for the purpose of finding mutually beneficial answers to difficult questions and conflicts. In order to fully understand the underpinnings of this concept and its contribution to the field of ethics, this paper will examine three perspectives of ethical dialogue and what we can learn from all of them. I will look at the work of Mahatma Gandhi and the contribution his philosophy of nonviolent activism, known as *satyagraha*, can bring to the discussion. I will also discuss the work of Jurgen Habermas and the philosophical duo of Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson.

Gutmann and Thompson’s book, *Democracy and Disagreement*, is a thorough examination of the principles of ethical dialogue. The authors examine what it means to engage in a moral debate and what principles one should use to ensure that the means to achieving resolution of conflict are in synch with the goals of dialogue itself. On the other hand, Habermas (in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*), looks at the principles that would create an ideal space for dialogue. He does not look into the practical application of dialogue; instead, his principles describe what an ideal space for discourse would look like if it existed. Gandhi used principles in his philosophy

of nonviolent activism that can be used as principles of dialogue in any situation, no matter what the size or political significance. His principles are similar to, yet unique from, the other two that will be discussed here, because his dialogue philosophy is motivated by faith and contains an element of nurture that is not present in either Habermas or Gutmann and Thompson's work. It is Gandhi's work that stresses unconditional compassion for everyone, and that the attitude of mutual respect can be beneficial for all parties involved in any kind of dispute. It is clearer in Gandhi's work than in Gutmann and Thompson or in Habermas that the foundation of dialogue rests upon an ethic of mutual respect. Gandhi's philosophy of dialogue is less clear than Gutmann and Thompson about dialogue procedure. He does not describe what an ideal dialogue would look like, nor does he talk about ways to conduct it. As a result, studying Gandhi alone will not lead a person to an ideal definition of dialogue; instead, it emphasizes the basic moral principles at work. Studying Habermas will result in a description of an ideal dialogical setting, and Gutmann and Thompson will fill in a detailed account of how it is possible to use procedural principles to create this setting in public policy debate. All three of these perspectives can learn from one another in order to produce a more complete understanding of the principles that make up ethical dialogue. Looking at all three, it is possible to see that ethical dialogue promotes human respect because it seeks the best possible solution for all participants in any conflict situation.

***Satyagraha* as a Method of Dialogue**

Gandhi never sat down and wrote a philosophical treatise about the dialogical ethic of his nonviolent activism. He did write a book about conducting nonviolent resistance, but on the whole, his written works are focused more on achieving political change through action than on giving philosophical proof and moral reasoning. As a result, the dialogue guidelines

present in his work need to be extracted and put into a principled form based upon the example Gandhi set with his own life, and what comes from his works as a whole.

The foundation of Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent action is based upon a spiritual definition of truth (Juergensmeyer, 19). Truth is life itself, and anything that is life-affirming is truthful. Anything that supports life, encourages life, promotes life, nurtures life, and conserves life is good and is a truth-based action. Gandhi based all of his actions upon his definition of truth. In order to properly follow his own philosophy and moral foundation, his actions had to also be life-affirming. Gandhi's work tried to take the focus of disagreement away from individual people or groups of people, changing it to the principles in conflict (Juergensmeyer, 3). The result of this shift of focus is an attempt to create dialogue by acknowledging that no one is inherently right, nor inherently wrong. It is also a way to look at conflict without creating negative feelings toward someone who disagrees with you. Gandhi taught that in every argument there is an element of truth; it is the means to get to that truth that are essential (Juergensmeyer, 3). If actions toward a goal are not life-affirming and based on truth, there is no way to resolve the real principles in conflict. If the means to an end are not life-affirming, only superficial compromises will result, which may only aggravate the real problem beneath the surface.

Gandhi comes from the Hindu tradition of faith. The idea at work in his concept of truth is rooted in the Hindu understanding of violence (or *himsa*) and anti-violence (or *ahimsa*). Gandhi describes *himsa* as "anything that violates in a physical, mental or emotional way—the integrity of something living," including the "very attitude of wanting that violence to come about" (Juergensmeyer, 27). Inner violence could be classified as violence of the spirit, including such things as lack of humility, arrogance, incivility, insolence and a lack of self-control. *Ahimsa*, or nonviolence, is seen not simply as the lack of violence, but as its positive antidote (Shastri and Shastri, 67). In order to be more than just the lack of violence,

ahimsa must be a positive force within itself. *Ahimsa*, then, is complete nonviolence: "Complete nonviolence is complete absence of ill-will against all that lives. Nonviolence is therefore, in its active form, goodwill towards all life. It is pure love" (Gandhi, 41). The application of this force can be found in Gandhi's concept of *satyagraha*, or "truth-force." Gandhi termed his nonviolent conflict resolution method *satyagraha* in order to show its significance in comparison to other ways of conflict resolution. The word itself means "firm grasping of the truth" (Singh, 522). Truth, to Gandhi, is ultimate respect for all life and the complete lack of ill will. If one has nothing but love for an adversary, it will be possible to find a way to resolve the principles at hand. The element of nurture found in *satyagraha* is unique to Gandhi, mainly because his definition of truth requires a faith-based understanding instead of a philosophical proof or reason-based principles. This quality does not make it any less important than those who base their principles of dialogue upon reason alone, because in the end, even their rational principles require an element of mutual respect to be effective.

As mentioned above, Gandhi stressed the importance of the means equaling the ends, a concept that is not very clear without examples. According to Gandhi, the truth of a situation is represented by its outcome; in other words, the means that the method used to create an end will be represented in the end itself. His theory of conflict resolution takes this into consideration, whereas others do not necessarily apply this concept. On the whole, there are four general categories of conflict resolution. The first, and most common throughout history, is forced victory or coercion. Forced victory is when one side triumphs over the other without any change occurring within either position. A clear place to see this form of conflict resolution played out is in wars between peoples and nations. The principles in conflict are not resolved through coercion; the only thing learned is that one side had more physical force than the other. The result is that war can occur and reoccur between the same groups of people without ever reaching a

conclusion. The situation in Bosnia and the civil war in Somalia are good examples of centuries of difference turning into countless years of bloodshed with no resolution. Another form of coercion occurs in politics. Political issues are presented to the public in binary opposition to one another, and people are asked to choose which one is right. They are not encouraged to find out what principles are beneath the proposed political action; instead, they are fed rhetoric about how one is better than the other, and majority rule ultimately decides which is right or wrong. As is clear with the abortion issue, majority rule will never resolve the issues in conflict, and as a result, the conflict at hand will continue to resurface.

The second general form of conflict resolution is accommodation. Accommodation is premature compromise. If one party enters into an agreement without full autonomy or satisfaction with what the outcome includes, then it is accommodation. The principles in conflict are not resolved; they are instead put aside for a superficial adjustment for the sake of co-existence (Juergensmeyer, 5). The result, much like coercion, is lingering differences that could become enflamed again in the future. An example of this kind of accommodation is the status of African American citizens of the United States in the pre-civil rights era. After the abolition of slavery, the United States ratified the 13th and 14th amendments; yet the 14th amendment, which allows equal citizenship rights to all peoples, was not widely enforced. A black citizen was forced to live "free" without complete democratic privilege because the ideology that justified slavery was never changed. The amendment was not enforced, nor were the victims given the ability to change the situation; therefore, emancipation was not really a resolution or a solution to the principles in dispute.

A third way of conflict resolution is through arbitration and law. This route, though better than those previously mentioned, is not perfect. Law involves the possibility of someone deciding for the two opposing parties. This does not allow a full resolution of conflicting principles because the two sides never go through the learning process themselves; a judge

does it for them. A good example is the famous 1954 case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. If all the Americans who support the concept of "separate but equal" were forced to understand why they were wrong and to seriously consider the other side's point of view, integration would not be taking so long. As it stands today, 46 years later, some people still do not understand the importance of integration in our schools. The Supreme Court may have gone through a conflict resolution process to come up with its decision, but the whole country did not. As a result, the judges are the only ones who have a firm understanding of how the principles in conflict are resolved by their decision. If law uses dispute resolution tactics, the outcome can be different because its principles are dialogical in nature. The people involved in the conflict will be asked (via their lawyer) to understand the opposing side's point of view and to engage in dialogue to find the best possible solution for both parties.

Similar to this is Gandhi's method of *satyagraha* or truth-force. This method of conflict resolution can be broken down into five steps: 1) one must look at the truthful and untruthful elements of both sides; 2) look at the truthful elements of each side together; 3) form a new side based upon those truths; 4) revise that understanding as you learn more from the other side; and 5) end the struggle only when both can come to an agreement of principle (Juergensmeyer, 9). These steps are rather unspecific and leave quite a few questions unanswered, although the basic outline is apparent. It is clear that the steps of Gandhi's dialogue process are based on the ability of both sides to exchange ideas and to find a solution that is good for both. It is also clear that Gandhi does not believe that either side should refrain from giving its opinion, because both sides' understanding of the truth is essential to the final outcome.

What is not clear is what exactly truth is, or how one should go about finding it in either side. Another ambiguity is the entire process of exchange itself. For example, what guidelines should one use to frame his or her new position, and how does one know when the conclusions reached are really a resolution

of principle? Some of the questions raised by Gandhi's method are not answered within his writings. He leaves a lot of the process up to the individual to feel out for himself or herself. He thinks that the truth could arise out of any situation in which it was sought by using the correct attitude. The attitude he stresses is one of utmost compassion. Truth to Gandhi is a spiritual notion; therefore, if one seeks the good of all individuals involved in the conflict and does not compromise this stance, no matter what violence is inflicted upon him, the truth will surface, and a resolution to conflict will come about.

The faith-based element of Gandhi's dialogue method is problematic for exactly the same reason it is so unique. Gandhi's definition of truth is not from the tradition of scientific method or mathematical proof. Truth is the element or principles that are life-affirming in every point of view. It is a moral position that changes with every person, but can be shared by many. It is the element or principle that is agreeable in your opponent's argument. It is a common denominator. This is the very thing that Gutmann and Thompson address in their procedural principles of reciprocity. The idea of finding the truth in each position rests on the idea of finding some common moral position or common principle and working from there, instead of resorting to violent forms of conflict resolution.

There is a lot to be learned by looking at this group of philosophers together. Gandhi's idea of truth adds a moral level to the procedural principles that can be found in Habermas and in the work of Gutmann and Thompson. He creates a moral basis upon which to base an ethic of dialogue. The others will set forth principles for how one goes about acting in this way, whereas Gandhi leaves these details up to intuition.

Before I discuss Gutmann and Thompson's work, I want to discuss Habermas. His work is a small but important piece of this discussion, because he gives a basic outline upon which Gutmann and Thompson elaborate.

Habermas and the Ideal Ethic of Discourse

Jurgen Habermas is a German philosopher whose work considers the idea of dialogue as a communicative action. He looks at what kind of communication needs to happen in order to convert a conversation into space for dialogue. The characteristics of an ideal space for discourse would look like this:

1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.
2.
 - a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.
 - b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.
 - c. Everyone is allowed to express his or her attitudes, desires and needs.
3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in 1 and 2 (Habermas, 89).

The first characteristic states that for a discussion to be a dialogue, it must allow all who are able to speak to take part in the exchange. For example, the discourse of Mississippi politics in the pre-civil rights era was not an example of a state encouraging dialogue. Mississippi barred, through the use of literacy tests, over 70% of its eligible citizens from voting, even though they were completely capable of participating in politics. The points that make up the second characteristic are the rules of the game, so to speak. The procedure is that there is no procedure; no one involved in a dialogue should be constrained or refrain from speaking directly about their point of view. The third characteristic says that no one should feel hindered by outside forces to withhold or add to the discourse.

Habermas does not discuss these principles in relation to any moral philosophy other than the ethic of discourse itself. The situation he describes is ideal, because there is hardly ever

a moment in the day-to-day workings of people and politics in which all of these conditions are met. To establish these communicative conditions everywhere would cause people to understand each other better and to choose violent forms of conflict resolution less frequently. Unlike Gandhi, Habermas does not come at dialogue from a spiritual or moralistic approach. Similar to Gandhi, Habermas does not discuss or lay out in any way how one should go about conducting dialogue, or how one will know if their resolution is really one of principle or not.

Filling in the Details: Gutmann and Thompson

The two people who have effectively addressed this practical issue within the dialogue ethic are Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson. Their work is a very thorough examination of the principles that are at work in creating and conducting an ethical dialogue. The book breaks dialogue down into three conditions of deliberation and three principles for dealing with moral disagreement in politics. The three conditions of deliberation are reciprocity, publicity, and accountability. The three principles are basic liberty, basic opportunity, and fair opportunity. The difference between conditions and principles is that conditions talk about general procedural ideas that need to be accepted by all people in order for dialogue to happen, whereas the principles are actual ways to go about finding an answer to questions raised within dialogue.

The principles and conditions are supposed to facilitate and encourage dialogue because all of them force the participant to think about the topic at hand on a deeper level than most political rhetoric asks the citizen to do today. They do not want dialogue to be left up to an elite class of people, such as the Supreme Court. Dialogue encourages citizens to take a broader perspective on questions of public policy. It also takes incompatible moral values into consideration and can clarify the actual nature of the moral conflict in order to

recognize what is actually in debate (Gutmann and Thompson, 2), thus making progress on that issue instead of perpetuating pointless argument. In order for dialogue to not become elitist, regular people must understand the importance of ethical discourse and how to conduct it.

A unique quality about the work of Gutmann and Thompson is the approach they use to describe each principle. The explanation of each principle comes from its application in practical politics and from examples of how dialogue can be used as a tool of conflict resolution in the formation of public policy. The first three conditions of deliberation are procedural. These three things must exist in order for dialogue to exist. This concept is very similar to Habermas's conditions of discourse. These principles do not determine the exact content of what will be talked about, but they do allow the participant access to the knowledge that will be necessary in order to have an informed discourse.

The first procedural condition that needs to be met is called *reciprocity*. I spoke of this condition in relation to Gandhi because his idea of truth rests upon an understanding of this idea. Reciprocity is the "capacity to seek fair terms of social cooperation for their own sake." In other words, reciprocity is like seeking a middle ground with your opponent. The point is to recognize that people can appeal to mutually shared reasons or principles with their opponent in order to make moral claims. If reciprocity were to be implemented, it would mean that opposing sides would have to look at their adversaries' point of view to find principles and reasons that they could find agreeable. This is the same as step two of Gandhi's *satyagraha* method of conflict resolution, because each side is searching for truth in the stance of their opponent.

In the end, reciprocity alone cannot solve any conflict; it can only create an atmosphere of mutual respect. Within this concept rests the idea of moral accommodation. Moral accommodation asks the people to affirm the moral status of their own position. In other words, they must examine why they support a point of view, what exactly their moral principles

are, and whether or not these are values worth standing upon. In politics, this would be an examination of civic integrity. For example, one would examine a politician's consistency in speech, consistency between speech and action, and lastly acceptance of the broad implications of the presupposed principles of one's moral position (Gutmann and Thompson, 81). The next step of moral accommodation is to recognize the moral status of the opposing position. This calls for open-mindedness and treatment of the countering position as a moral claim instead of a purely strategic, political, or economic view. The last part of moral accommodation is the key to the third step, or revision part of Gandhi's *satyagraha* method, and it is called the economy of moral choice. The economy of moral choice requires the participant to seek a rationale that "minimizes the rejection of the position they oppose": in other words, to seek common ground and find a solution both parties can agree upon. The condition of reciprocity gives both Gandhi and Habermas more meaning. Gandhi's idea of truth is found in moral principles, making its location in a person's argument a bit easier to locate. Furthermore, Habermas gains clarity because one can begin to see how that discourse will actually happen.

The second procedural condition discussed is the condition of *publicity*. Publicity is most applicable in public policy debates, and refers to the necessity of information availability. The goal is to make the self-interest of public officials coincide with the general interest of the populace (Gutmann and Thompson, 98). Publicity is essential to keep the deliberative process from becoming a process of the elite. The people need to understand the moral and political reasoning process used to justify the claims of politicians in order to judge their validity. There are three general areas in which publicity contributes to political dialogue. First, it is the way to get the consent of citizens. The public moral justification offered by politicians can give a sense of legitimacy to political debate. Second, making public different points of view encourages dialogue because it is a way to broaden moral perspectives. Third, public

reasons contribute to the idea of mutual respect because they allow for the clarification of the nature of moral disagreement, instead of just perpetuating line drawing and propaganda wars.

The third condition of dialogue procedure is *accountability*. It asks the question: to whom are your actions accountable? If you are a politician, do you count your constituents as the only ones you represent, or does your vote need to consider others whom your action may affect? Accountability requires representatives to give reasons to their constituency for the actions they take. On a more personal level, accountability addresses the need for each person to honestly take responsibility for his or her actions and to not enter into dialogue with a dishonest argument. In the political sphere, accountability forces the politician to explain his or her reasoning process, allowing the observer to agree or disagree with the moral principles at work in the reasoning process. As a result, more people will be able to look at the principles in dispute and encourage worthwhile dialogue about the issue in their own sphere. This practice will keep people informed about political discourse and decision, and will make sure it does not become an elitist activity.

Accountability delegitimizes arguments based on majority rule. A majority of individuals voting on one choice does not make that body of people accountable as to why that particular action is the best for everyone involved. In order to justify a course of action, a group must come to an agreement of principle before they can show that they went through a legitimate reasoning process. Accountability shows that majority rule really is not conflict resolution because it does not require the disclosure of moral principles before voting.

The principle of basic liberty recognizes the legitimacy of a diversity of moral claims. It grants people from completely different ends of the spectrum a chance to contribute to the discourse. Basic liberty is a standard to judge how one can weigh the moral principles of very different perspectives. If a claim violates personal integrity, it is in violation of basic liberty

no matter what political persuasion the claim may originate from. Basic liberty allows for people to change their minds about the status of their personal liberty and to view a decision in retrospect. If something within the decision-making process is forcing people to compromise their personal integrity, the outcome will not be a resolution of principle, since a violation of personal principles occurred to make the decision happen. This concept is very similar to both Gandhi's concept of ultimate respect for life and Habermas's ideal discursive situation, where no one is prevented by outside or internal elements from fully expressing his or her opinion.

The basic opportunity principle is based on the understanding that there are basic goods that all humans need to properly function in society. It asks that each individual receive an adequate amount of basic opportunity goods, and not be denied these basic opportunities based upon factors over which he or she has no control. The difficult part of this principle is what determines the meaning of *adequate* level of basic goods. The answer to this question may be different for each situation, but an answer is possible if this principle is kept in mind by those engaged in debate. At the bottom level of this principle rests the idea of respect for life and a commitment to sustaining it, a characteristic very similar to Gandhi's requirement that no one act out of ill will toward their opponent in any argument, although the idea of basic opportunity makes Gandhi's idea more apparent in the political realm.

The fair opportunity principle is concerned with goods that are socially valuable, although not imperative to sustain life. A good such as this could be something like a skilled job. Gutmann and Thompson examine the way in which such jobs could be distributed in order to examine the principle of fair opportunity. The fair opportunity principle requires that the government make sure that each citizen has a fair chance to secure opportunity goods (Gutmann and Thompson, 306). What constitutes fair opportunity depends upon the context of each individual situation or philosophical persuasion of

equal opportunity. The key is to clarify exactly where the conflict of principle occurs and to work from there.

Conclusion

All of the principles mentioned here work toward establishing a method of dialogue based upon the idea of mutual respect. Mutual respect may not be the direct goal of these philosophers' theories, but each of these theories of dialogue could not exist if mutual respect was not a factor of its existence. No matter from what discipline the idea originates, the basis of its dialogical principles are the same in this sense, and point to dialogue as a way to go about creating the best possible solution for all.

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