

GANDHI: ON HAPPINESS AND THE GOOD HUMAN LIFE

Bindu Puri*

*This paper will argue that though Gandhi thought of the good human life as a life of self restraint and practice of virtue (and as not connected with the pursuit of happiness as an end in itself) he considered goodness as inseparably connected with happiness. In this connection **Section I** of this paper will briefly discuss Gandhi's understanding of the good human life as a life of self sacrifice spent in the exercise of the yama/niyama (cardinal and casual virtues). **Section II** will argue that Gandhi (like Aristotle) thought that the good human life was a happy life.*

Key Words: Greatest Happiness Principle, Utilitarianism, *Eudemonia* (Faring Well, Flourishing, Happiness), *Yama/Niyama* (Cardinal and Casual Virtues), Sacrifice/*Yajna*, *Tapsaya*/Voluntary Acceptance of Pain.

The title of this paper could well seem strange to the casual reader and one might say that there is small connect between Gandhi's conception of the good human life, as a life of the practice of the *yama/niyama* (cardinal and casual virtues), and what one might ordinarily consider a happy life. One might, for instance, recall that Mill had suggested that the “Greatest Happiness Principle” (Mill 2003: 190) implies that happiness is not only the “end of human action” but also “the standard of morality” (*Ibid*: 190).

* Professor and Chairperson, Centre For Philosophy, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi-110067; Email: drbindupuri11@yahoo.com

In his words;

“The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to produce happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness pain, and the privation of pleasure. To give a clear view of the moral standard set up by the theory, much more is required to be said; in particular, what things it includes in the ideas of pain and pleasure; and to what extent this is left an open question. But these supplementary explanations do not affect the theory of life on which this theory of morality is grounded –namely, that pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends;” (*Ibid*: 187)

Gandhi would certainly not have made this kind of connection between the good human life and happiness or have been able to endorse the utilitarian idea that pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends. Indeed, quite to the contrary, he had recommended, that the *satyagrahi*/soldier of truth should resist injustice to the point of giving up his/her own life with all the happiness that it could bring. Indeed, as he clarified (*Young India* 1926);

“A votary of ahimsa cannot subscribe to the utilitarian formula (of the greatest good of the greatest number). He will strive for the greatest good of all and die in the attempt to realize the idea. He will, therefore, be willing to die, so that the others may live. He will serve himself with the rest, by himself dying. The greatest good of all inevitably includes the good of the greatest number, and therefore, he and the utilitarian will converge in

many points in their career, but there does come a time when they must part company, and even work in opposite directions. The utilitarian to be logical will never sacrifice himself. The absolutist will even sacrifice himself.” (Gandhi 2002: 4)

The emphasis that Gandhi put on self-sacrifice (which was essential to the notions of both *satyagraha* and *tapasya*/voluntary acceptance of pain) could lead one to think that (like Kant perhaps) Gandhi thought that leading a good human life and leading a happy life had no connection with each other. One might recall here that Kant had rejected the connection between following one's inclinations (no matter these be of a sympathetic or even empathetic kind) and a life of goodness. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* Kant (2009) had argued that an action performed from inclination which was *in accordance with duty* could have no distinctive moral worth. Kant went on to insist that only an action done from duty *and for the sake of duty* could be characterized as a good action.

In this paper I will argue that though Gandhi thought of the good life as a life of self restraint and practice of virtue (and therefore as not connected with the pursuit of happiness for itself) he considered goodness as inseparably connected with happiness. In this connection **Section I** of this paper will briefly discuss Gandhi's understanding of the good human life as a life of self sacrifice spent in the exercise of the *yama/niyama*. **Section II** will argue that Gandhi (like Aristotle) thought that the good human life was a happy life.

However, before I go on to discuss this issue it might be useful to answer a very basic question that might emerge at this point. Namely why is it important to connect happiness with the good human life? This question can only be answered perhaps by raising another question and trying to answer that second question. This second

question concerns the sources of moral motivation and is of overriding concern to morality. Every moral outlook needs to answer this second question best phrased as 'why should I be moral? It is perhaps in response to such a question that one might see the close connection between the good human life and happiness. For the best way to answer this question could be (in Aristotelian terms) by pointing to the inseparability between morality and happiness.

Section I

Gandhi and the Good Human Life

The philosophically appropriate notion with which one might initiate a consideration of Gandhi's conception of the good human life is the idea of integrity. This is not only because Gandhi was a man of integrity but also on account of the fact that his thought itself was highly integrated. As Akeel Bilgrami has argued all Gandhi's ideas on politics economics and governance flowed from the most abstract methodological and epistemological convictions. (Bilgrami 2006: 249). Extending Bilgrami's argument about the integrity in Gandhi's ideas I would like to argue that one place where this integrity in Gandhi's life and ideas could be best unpacked is in terms of his fundamental moral insights about the good human life. Most of Gandhi's ideas on politics economics even aesthetics flowed from his fundamental moral convictions. However, this integrity in ideas goes further and is reflected in the continuities that mark Gandhi's conception of the good human life-a continuity between the past and present-between the religious and the moral-between the moral religious and the political-a continuity between man and nature.

A point about the idea of integrity and its connection with goodness might be in order at this point. In a certain sense the good human life is

the opposite of the fragmented, piecemeal or sporadic. One thinks of it as a continuous engagement with moral ideals so that **all** of the good man's actions flow from being at home in the life of goodness. One cannot for instance think of goodness as episodic in a truly good life. One could unpack Gandhi's idea of the integrated and good human life by saying that it was a life of the continuous and progressive search for the truth and that he thought of this life as a life spent in the exercise of 'virtues'. As these virtues, to which Gandhi often referred, marked his philosophically inventive re-interpretation of the traditional *Yama/niyama/vratas* of Indian philosophy it might be appropriate to take note (in passing) of the first continuity I had spoken of—that between the past and the present.

Gandhi spoke of the good human life (in continuity with the Indian philosophical tradition) as a life spent in the practice of 'the cardinal and casual virtues';

.... Even knowledge of the self within presupposes a pure heart, which in its turn depends on the practice of the *yamas* and *niyamas*-the cardinal and casual virtues.... (Gandhi, *eCWMG*, Vol. 33: 447-448)

A footnote provided by Gandhi in this text clarifies that;

Yamas, the cardinal virtues, according to Yoga Shastra are: *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satya* (truth) *asteya* (non-stealing) *brahmacharya* (celibacy), *aparigraha* (non-possession); and the *niyamas* or the casual virtues are, according to the same authority: *shaucha* (bodily purity) *santosha* (contentment) *tapa* (forbearance) *swadhyaya* (study of scriptures) *Iswarpranidhana* (resignation to the will of God). (*Ibid*)

Gandhi went on to expand this list and included

swadeshi/recognizing one's primary duty as service to one's immediate neighbors as one of the *yamas*. It is important to note here that Gandhi's re-interpretation of the *yamas/niyama* as "virtues" (*Ibid*: 448) was a philosophical reinventing. The word that had commonly been used for translating the *yamas* and *niyamas* was *vratham/vow*. The term 'vow', unlike the term 'virtue', appears to relate less directly to a disposition of character and more to an act of freewill involved in taking a moral pledge. In the traditional schools of Indian philosophy *Yama/niyama* had often been translated as vows. For instance, the *Ācārāṅga Sutra* of the Jains refers to the *yamas* as the "five great Vows" (Muller, (ed) 1895, Vol. XVI).

While Gandhi chose to translate the *yama* and *niyama* as cardinal and casual virtues he continued to use the term 'vow' in connection with them. One might understand the connection between the two -virtues and the taking of vows- if one were to ask the question: 'How should a moral aspirant be inculcated into a life of virtue?' Gandhi would have answered that the only way to be inculcated into a life of virtue was by taking a vow to practice the virtue concerned. He had explained that: "To do at any cost something that one ought to do constitutes a vow" (Gandhi in Narayan (ed), 1995, Vol IV: 249). In that sense Gandhian virtues were *also* vows or rather one could cultivate virtues by taking vows that is, by strengthening the individual will to do the right thing.

Moving now to the two other important concepts that were central to Gandhi's idea of a good human life-*tapasya* and *yajna*. The *Bhagavad Gita* had spoken of *yajna* and translated as sacrifice and as forming part of individual *dharma*/righteousness/duty. It would be useful to look at Gandhi's arguments about the proper sense of sacrifice/*yajna* as it appears in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Gandhi wrote on re-interpreting *yajna* in his several comments on the *Gita*. In his commentary on Chapter 111 of the *Gita* Gandhi had related *yajna* or sacrifice to the

Sanskrit root “*yaj*” as “to worship” (Gandhi, 1980: 75). In his comments on the *Gita* Gandhi had emphasized the need to re-interpret the traditional association of *yajna* with animal sacrifice and later with sacred fires “for securing the fulfillment of many worldly desires” (*Ibid*). In another instance of philosophical re-inventing of traditional terms Gandhi had gone on to relate *yajna* **with a sacrifice of the self rather than of the other** in “real service” (*Ibid*: 78). Gandhi argued that *Yugadharma* (for Indians who were struggling with colonialism) involved *yajna* understood as disinterested action in “working for those whom one does not know personally” (*Ibid*: 78). One may note here that Gandhi's reading of *yajna* as service of those most distant from oneself put him at complete odds from the greatest happiness principle of the utilitarian's. By arguing that if one served those with whom one was intimate there would be traces of self-interest (even where such action appeared most disinterested) Gandhi distanced himself from the equation between goodness and the pursuit of individual happiness. He emphasized, to the contrary, that individual moral aspirants would need to practice austerities and accept pain for a sacrifice of the self and self-interest. In this connection he often emphasized that individual moral aspirants ought to practice *tapsya*/voluntary acceptance of pain for the diligent fulfillment of moral duties.

Tapas became another instance where Gandhi both accepted and revised from the tradition in which all his thought was so powerfully located. Interestingly it was, Gandhi's contemporary and friend, the poet Rabindranath Tagore who recognized the significance of *tapasya* to the ethics of Gandhian politics. In the third phase of the Gandhi Tagore debate in the 1930's the Gandhian idea of *tapasya* became a subject of serious contention between the two men and Tagore called Gandhi the great *Tapasvi*. In a Gandhian framework

tapa was epitomized in the life of the *satyagrahi*:

“That is dharma in following which one suffers in the body to the limit of one's endurance.” (*Ibid*: 84)

That Gandhi did not quite re-iterate the traditional sense of the term *tapasya* as practices of self-mortification, but re-invented it, can become clear from a consideration of how Gandhi used that term. Firstly, Gandhi argued that *tapasya* was a part of non-violence- “...I discovered in the earliest stages that the pursuit of Truth did not admit of violence being inflicted on one's opponent ...” (Bose (ed), 1948: 17). Consequently, Gandhi argued that the “...vindication of Truth...” meant “...not...infliction of” pain on the opponent “but on one's self.” (*Ibid*) Forbearance/*tapas* as a form of *ahimsa*/love was the basis of the use of fasting as non-violent resistance by Gandhi. Secondly, such *tapas* as a self-imposed austerity became a part of moral education and a method of cultivating the virtue of non-violence in oneself. In this connection Gandhi argued that “...non-violent training must be of a different kind...I am of opinion that it used to be given in the past and is even now being given in a haphazard way. The various exercises of Hatha yoga are in this direction...I do not know...that the author of this science had any idea of mass non-violence.” (Gandhi, *eCWMG*, Vol. 79: 272)

Thirdly Gandhian *Tapasya* as a form of penance for the sins of others became a mode of inculcating virtues in others, specially, children. In this respect it functioned in a dual way. Firstly, as itself a form of *ahimsa*/love it brought about a requisite change of heart in the young and secondly self-imposed voluntary penance helped in setting up examples for others to emulate in moral matters. While looking after the education of youngsters at the Tolstoy farm in South Africa Gandhi noted that: “To develop the spirit is to build character”

(Gandhi in Narayan (ed) 1995: 504). At this point he realized the efficacy of *tapasya* as a mode of value education. When youngsters at the ashram made moral mistakes, Gandhi felt that "...the only way for the guilty parties to realize ...the depth of their own fall would be for me to do some penance. So, I imposed upon myself a fast for seven days...." (*Ibid*: 511). As a part of the individual's practice of love /*ahimsa* such fasting/*tapas* was at the same time an expression of effort to diminish "...anger against the guilty parties..." (*Ibid*: 511) and substitute it by "...a clearness of vision..." (*Ibid*: 512). This made it possible to give the moral mistakes of others a non-distorted attention free of anger and hostility, which are essentially characteristics of egoistic 'attention'.¹ This active *ahimsa* could also potentially transform all others-whether students, opponents or truant followers.

It seems to have become clear from the discussion above that Gandhi thought of the good human life as a life of restraint self-sacrifice and practice of virtue. This might seem to distant him from the idea with which this paper began i.e the idea that goodness is inseparable from happiness. This insight (it may be recalled) is an important source of moral motivation. A difficulty related to that of the paucity of sources of moral motivation might emerge if one would consider that Gandhi's conception of the good human life (with all its emphasis on sacrifice and self-limitation) could seem to be somewhat unrealistic. One might however gather hope for Gandhian ethics by reflecting on an idea that Gandhi had himself emphasized. This was the idea that a good human life could only be realized progressively and one step at a time. In this connection it is useful to recall the poem from Newman

1 Some part of this discussion on *tapasya* has been taken from Bindu Puri The Gandhi Tagore Debate: On matters of Truth and Untruth. Sophia: Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures, Vol. 9, Springer 2015. (ISBN 978-81-322-2115-9)

that Gandhi quoted;

“Lead kindly light, amid the encircling gloom
Lead Thou me on;
The night is long and I am far from home;
Lead thou me on;
Keep Thou my feet, I do not ask to see
the distant scene; one step enough for me” (Gandhi in Murti
(ed) 1970: 73)

Section II

Gandhi and Aristotle: On Morality and Happiness

A consideration of Gandhi's moral conceptions in **Section-I** seems to have shifted the argument of this paper very far away from the issues that had been raised at the start. These, it may be recalled, related to the connections between moral motivation and the role of happiness thereof. It had been argued that one needs to answer the question 'why should I be moral?' and that one might answer this question by positing the inseparability between happiness and goodness.

It can be philosophically useful to posit a Gandhian connection between happiness and goodness by bringing in a more ancient philosophical reading of that connection-between goodness and happiness. It can be useful to recall Aristotle and his notion of *eudemonia*. For Aristotle, like Gandhi perhaps, *eudemonia* (i.e., faring well, flourishing, happiness) was an activity of the soul in accordance with the practice of the virtues. However, one might also note, that Aristotle had also spoken of the necessity of external goods for happiness. He had made the point that in the absence of an adequate infrastructure for a potentially fulfilling human life, this connection, between the good life and the happy life, might not quite

begin to surface. Thus Aristotle (perhaps unlike Gandhi) recognized that in conditions of debilitating poverty, complete lack of power, great-unforeseen misfortunes the internal connection that he had posited between virtue and happiness may actually become invisible.

Aristotle's answer to the question, 'How is the moral motive to be cultivated?' it might appear is two-fold. Firstly, Aristotle has pointed out a great variety of ways in which rational arguments can be used to show that in the large majority of cases, it is the virtuous who flourish and the vicious whose life is miserable. Secondly, and this is important to a understanding of Gandhi's position, Aristotle seemed to have insisted that the belief that the virtuous flourish and the vicious do not *is a part of morality itself*. To lack this belief is to lapse into moral despair and thence to immorality. Therefore, for Aristotle, an enterprise that must be internal to the good life is that of the cooperative effort by citizens to create a *Polis* which is such that this belief is seen to be overwhelmingly plausible and which thus effectively counters the possibility of moral despair. For Aristotle it is important that both these answers be made effectively available within a well-conceived system of moral education and training within the *Polis*.

This twofold answer might lead one to describe Aristotle's answer to the question, "How is the moral motive to be cultivated?", or 'why should I be moral?' -as an external answer, though this answer is still very far from being utilitarian. Gandhi, in contrast, might be described as positing an internal answer to this question in terms of spirituality and religion. For Gandhi one might say, moral training and education involves a movement to overcome the powerful impulses towards self-deception and self-ignorance that tend to entrench human beings in forms of life that are devoid of the moral motive. Gandhi believed that there was an 'internal route' to moral

truths just as there is an external route to the truth of the natural sciences. His 'experiments' perhaps consisted in traversing that interior route till the possibility of the moral life was firmly established. This journey to happiness and peace of mind, was of course, far from easy. As Gandhi put it himself;

“It may entail continuous suffering and the cultivating of endless patience. Thus, step by step, we learn to make friends with all the world; we realize the greatness of God or truth. Our peace of mind increases in spite of suffering, we become braver and more enterprising...our pride melts away, and we become humble. Our world attachments diminish and so does the evil within us diminish from day to day.” (Gandhi 1968: 217)

For Gandhi, one could say, that the test of the ultimate truth of the moral life is to be established in a form of life in which 'a person comes to feel a spirit which delights to do no evil', or in Gandhi's case, 'a spirit which delights to do justice to one's adversary in practical political and religious matters'. In a Gandhian understanding to take a joy in goodness was (at the same time) to achieve self-knowledge and come to be established in the moral life. This was the way to achieve true freedom or *swaraj*-a state where one's actions flowed spontaneously from one's knowledge. One could argue then that, for Gandhi, happiness was internal to the good human life.

REFERENCES

- Bilgrami, A. 2006. Gandhi's integrity: The philosophy behind the politics. In A. Raghuramaraju (Ed.), *Debating Gandhi: A Reader* (pp. 248–266) (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).
- Bose, N.K. (Ed.) 1948. *Selections from Gandhi* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing).

Gandhi, M.K. 1968. *From Yeravda Mandir: Ashram Observances*. Translated by V G Desai (Ahmedabad: The Navajivan Trust)

Gandhi, M. K. 1980. *The Bhagavadgita*. (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks)

Gandhi, M. K. 2002. *Sarvodaya*. Edited by Bharatan Kumarappa. (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing);

Gandhi, M.K. 1947. *Collected works of Mahatma Gandhi*, electronic edition (e C W M G), V o l s . 1 – 9 7 , a c c e s s i b l e o n l i n e a t <http://gandhiserve.org/cwmg/cwmg.html>.

Kant, I. 2009. *Groundwork of Metaphysics of Moral*, H J Paton (Tr.), Harper Collins;

Mill, J. S. 2003. *Utilitarianism and On Liberty*. Edited by Mary Warnock. Blackwell Publishing.

Müller, M. (Ed.). 1895. *Selections from the Jain Sūtras; The sacred books of the East*, Vol. XVI (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Murti, V.V.R. (Ed.). 1970. *Gandhi: Essential writings* (New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation).

Narayan, S. (Ed.). 1995. *The selected works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vols. I to VI (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing).