

# Is the Ideal of Non-violence Practical?

Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948) is the most prominent advocate of non-violence in all of human history. He is well-known for using non-violent tactics to oust the British Empire from India. His essential tactic was that if the British police beat protesters who did not resist, they would feel shame and end up having world opinion against them, in effect forcing Britain to withdraw from India. Gandhi's tactics were successful. It should also be noted that the British at the time were finding the maintenance of a colonial regime in India to be onerously expensive, and it should also be noted that there were also violent resisters of the British. Gandhi came to strongly influence Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), the American black civil rights leader who also used non-violent tactics. Gandhi advocated non-violence even to the point of not using it in defence, although King did not agree with him on this point.

**Philosophical Problem: Can we reconcile an ideal of non-violence with a minimal use of physical force in self-defence and the defence of others?**

*Let us consider some of the things that Gandhi stated about non-violence and think about them carefully:*

“[T]he aggressor will, in time be mentally and physically tired of killing non-violent resisters...[and] will probably desist from further slaughter.”<sup>1</sup>

*Gandhi recommended that the Jews not resist the Nazis with violence during the Second World War. Unfortunately, had Jewish partisan resisters heeded this advice, not as many Jews would have been saved. The Nazis would not have “tired” of killing Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, political dissidents and others until they were all destroyed.*

Human nature “unfailingly responds to the advances of love.”<sup>2</sup>

*Again, the Nazis and sociopaths do not invariably respond to loving overtures.*

Non-violence “is a quality of the heart, [and] cannot come by an appeal to the brain.”<sup>3</sup>

*We will see, however, that although compassion, sympathy and empathy are important qualities to have, we can also make a rational argument for an ideal of non-violence.*

“I know [non-violence] cannot be proved by argument. It shall be proved by persons living it in their lives with utter disregard of consequences to themselves.”<sup>4</sup>

*Again here Gandhi downplays the role of reasoned argument in ethics. His idea of not defending oneself even if attacked surfaces in this idea of practicing non-violence with utter disregard for*

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<sup>1</sup> Mohandas Gandhi, *Gandhi on Non-Violence*, ed. Thomas Merton (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1965), p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

oneself. In this Gandhi is like the faith of the Quakers, which also renounced all use of physical force.

Non-violence is a means of self-purification.<sup>5</sup>

*This leaves the question: is it more “pure” in goodness to allow an attacker to commit violence against others without effective physical resistance? A reasoned argument against violence can be given insofar as it causes harm, and harm is a bad thing. However, we should not only be concerned with our **commission** of violence in our actions and thus the causing of harm, but also **omission** in failing to effectively counter violence, which results in harm as well. We are responsible not only for what we choose to do, but what we refuse to do.*

Again: Does it make sense to uphold an ideal of non-violence but to use physical force in some cases? Is this a self-contradiction? There is no contradiction if we make some important distinctions.

Best Caring Ethics aims for what is best, and “best” is taken to mean the most good and the least bad, understood in a way that considers what is best for each and every individual. So for example it exemplifies the best caring to advocate what is best for you, me, and every individual concerned in any given case.

Here it is helpful to offer a distinction between **rights reasoning** and **rights-overriding reasoning**. The first kind of reasoning is preferable and means respecting the rights of all individuals (which just means each and every individual). Since what is best includes the least bad (i.e., no bad if possible), normally a rule against harming anyone is upheld. Rights-overriding reasoning is used in cases in which one cannot uphold the rights of all persons and one cannot avoid harm. In these cases one must choose between the rights of one person and another, choosing the least possible harm. For example, let us say you are faced with an attacker who intends to commit violence. The choice in that case is: (1) allow the attacker to commit violence at will, or (2) use the minimum force to stop the attacker (assuming this is a realistic option). Thus rights-overriding reasoning can justify the use of force in certain cases by choosing the lesser harm. Minimal force to stop an attacker may well cause less harm than allowing someone who wants to hurt others to do as they wish.

Therefore **non-violence** is indeed an ideal in normal circumstances in which the rights of all individuals are respected—the realm of rights reasoning which is best for all individuals. It is not merely “minimal violence” that is what is generally best but *no violence whatsoever*, or non-violence. Only in certain circumstances when one faces a choice of harms could minimal violence ever be justified, which is still not as ideal as non-violence, but may be considered to be necessary. There is no contradiction here because non-violence is used for rights reasoning while minimal violence is used sometimes for rights-overriding reasoning. This is a rational argument for non-violence, which need not only stem from “the heart” as Gandhi claims.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.