Debates in contemporary Indian Philosophy: Gandhi’s Truth

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Abstract

This paper makes an attempt to reinterpret Gandhi’s conception of truth. In this context, the paper states and examines Professor Akeel Bilgrami’s reconstruction of Gandhi’s position on moral judgment, moral principles, moral criticism and truth. This is done because Bilgrami’s interpretation is an important reading of Gandhi’s notion of truth as having been primarily relativist. It seems important to reconcile this relativist interpretation of Gandhi’s truth with Gandhi’s own methods of arriving at the truth satyagraha, debate and tapasya. There are philosophical problems with attempting such a reconciliation. For instance, it can be argued, that debate played a critical role in Gandhi’s method of a search for the truth. He debated with Tagore for about twenty six years about the truth of the central Gandhian “principles” (Gandhi himself used this term) such a satyagraha, noncooperation, self suffering etc. Gandhi also debated with Savarkar about Indian nationalism and with Ambedkar about varna. Surely if Gandhi believed that truth was simply a matter of “our own experience of moral value” (Bilgrami, 2006: 261) he could not have contemplated the possibility of different viewpoints being able to converge on the truth in any but a thin strategic sense. Gandhi appeared to have believed in the possibilities of closure in arguments about moral value and on the convergence on truth itself as substantial and not merely strategic. This seems clear enough by his use of Satyagraha and tapasya/self suffering as methods to be used in order to arrive at the truth in conflict situations. Gandhi insisted that satyagrahi’s have to be ready to suffer even unto death in order to arrive at the truthful solution of a conflict. They have to be ready during such conflict to either transform the opponent or be transformed by her in order to see the truth. It might therefore be difficult to sustain any philosophical reconstruction of Gandhi which unequivocally claims that he was a complete relativist about truth.

Section 1 of this paper will look briefly at what Gandhi said about truth. Section 2 will examine Professor Bilgrami’s argument in brief. Section 3 will, across four sub sections, examine if that reconstruction of Gandhi is, as a matter of fact, close to what Gandhi himself said and did. Section 3.4 will specifically address Bilgrami’s contention that Gandhi had a relativist and purely ‘experiential’ understanding of truth and will attempt an alternative reinterpretation of Gandhi’s truth.