

Exploring Pedagogical Possibilities for a Nonviolent Consciousness

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In this essay we wish to explore the roles that philosophical humility and Mahatma Gandhi's notion of *ahimsa* (to do no harm) can play in undoing pedagogical violence(s). We do so by highlighting three examples of epistemological shortsightedness by which educators are often seduced, namely *dysconsciousness*, arrogant perception, and normalization. We have taken up this project in the hope of contemplating what less harmful educational practices might look like through an examination of Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent education.

By writing with two voices in concert and paying attention to a multiplicity of approaches, we wish not to arrive at a particular destination, but rather to map pathways toward less harmful/violent pedagogies. In our method of inquiry, we attempt to move away from the violence often enacted through the search for definitive conclusions and solutions; yet we still want to acknowledge the importance and inevitability of making assertive normative claims. Looking to a Gandhian notion of *ahimsa* as an unrealizable but desirable goal toward which to aspire, we explore the possibilities and shapes of a pedagogy/pedagogies of humility.

Our aim is not to assume or seek a place of innocence outside of the harms done within education, as we hold this kind of move to be potentially harmful in itself; rather our goal is to encourage a mindfulness of, first, one's/our capacity to perpetuate harm pedagogically and, second, the consequences of this capacity, at both the individual and systemic levels.

Before turning to an exploration of *ahimsa*, we will address three manifestations of what we understand to be pedagogical violence. Important to our understanding of pedagogical violence is the way in which Gandhi conceptualizes *ahimsa*. While physical harm is certainly a significant form of violence, *ahimsa* moves beyond a limited understanding that focuses on violence as physical harm toward an understanding of violence that also includes the harm of failing to interrogate the lenses through which we see — lenses that simultaneously make visible and obscure. This latter understanding of harm is what we refer to as *violent consciousness*, which we assert is a central component of the phenomena of *dysconsciousness*, arrogant perception, and normalization.

As Joyce E. King writes, "Dysconsciousness is an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given."¹ Unlike *unconsciousness*, which refers to a lack of awareness or an inability to consciously access particular ideas, *dysconsciousness* suggests a *process* by which one refuses to pay attention or give awareness to the systemic nature of social violence(s). King further explains:

If, as Heaney (1984) suggests, critical consciousness "involves an ethical judgement [*sic*]" about the social order, *dysconsciousness* accepts it uncritically. This lack of critical judgment against society reflects an absence of what Cox (1974) refers to as "social ethics";

it involves a subjective identification with an ideological viewpoint that admits no fundamentally alternative vision of society.... It is not the *absence* of consciousness (that is, not unconsciousness) but an *impaired* consciousness or way of thinking.²

The danger of dysconsciousness in education, as King points out, is its role in the maintenance of an unjust status quo. For teachers to fail to perceive the systemic nature of oppression and the underlying ideologies that perpetuate such injustice is not only an erasure of the claims of those who experience this oppression, but also a denial or erasure of the reality of structural violence in a way that serves only to exacerbate social inequity.

As King remarks in regard to race, dysconsciousness as a denial of or refusal to acknowledge the benefits that Whites enjoy at the expense of Blacks (and we would add other races as well) may “bear little resemblance to the violent bigotry and overt White supremacist ideologies of previous eras, [yet] still takes for granted a system of racial privilege and social stratification that favors Whites.”³ Such dysconsciousness results in one’s inability to perceive the ways in which he or she is implicated in and harmed by larger systems of violence, and thus prevents one from recognizing her or his social responsibility.

Dysconsciousness functions as a silencing of people’s lived experiences of injustice, shrouding these experiences in a dominant cultural mythology that offers benign and sanitized explanations for systemic suffering. As Richard Delgado remarks,

The bundle of presuppositions, received wisdoms, and shared understandings [through which we interpret the world]...are rarely focused on. They are like eyeglasses we have worn for a long time. They are nearly invisible; we use them to scan and interpret the world and only rarely examine them for themselves. Ideology — the received wisdom — makes current social arrangements seem fair and natural. Those in power sleep well at night — their conduct does not seem to them like oppression.⁴

It is the intention of King and Delgado, as well as our intention in this essay, to insist on the importance of noticing the lenses through which we look at the world, the importance of noticing how these lenses shape what it is we are able to see, and the importance of noticing the violence implicit in rendering particular people or particular injustices invisible.

Related to dysconsciousness, we contend, is the concept of arrogant perception, which results in a distorted view of the world for lack of a critical lens. As María Lugones explains with reference to the work of Marilyn Frye, “To perceive arrogantly is to perceive that others are for oneself and to proceed to arrogate their substance to oneself.”⁵ Lugones focuses particularly on arrogant perception as a failure to identify with another person, leading one to ignore, ostracize, render invisible, stereotype, isolate, or interpret as crazy those who are perceived as different from the self.⁶ Arrogant perception thus involves a refusal to bring to consciousness the ways in which one perceives others from a solipsistic point of view, that is, the ways in which one insists on circumscribing the world of another in one’s own terms.

Drawing from Lugones, Maureen Ford explains that arrogant perception is a matter of “*graft[ing] the substance of others onto ourselves,*” in that it “involves

projecting one's sense of others onto them, usurping their substance."⁷ Like dysconsciousness, arrogant perception involves a refusal to take into account alternative explanations or interpretations of the world. It is not necessarily a conscious choice one makes, not the

usurping attitude of the bigot, but...the unconscious daily-life-constituting frame of reference of a subject so "at ease" with her place in "her world" as literally to ignore, render invisible, stereotype and leave untouched, the others upon whom her perceptions of the world does not depend.⁸

Ford further writes: "Indeed, part of what it means to inhabit a 'world' is that we adopt frames of reference within which people in certain social locations are invisible, *even while they are in our midst*."⁹

The violence that an arrogantly perceiving teacher visits upon his or her students is, again, the violence of erasure, of denial, of the appropriation and assimilation of another's subjectivity. Ford explains that:

Schools, and the teachers in them, rarely have the time, the freedom of expression, or the normative authority to consider the viewpoints of others with a focus on questioning, active listening where one's frame of reference is suspended, listening with a desire for newness and wonder. Consequently, teachers must battle to find the room, the right, or even the arena to develop epistemological skills that would enable them to approach students, their parents, or one another, in ways that do not "graft the substance of most others" to the service of school purposes. *Seldom do teachers have the capacity to open themselves to "world-traveling," such that they might learn who their students are when they are in "worlds" they would call their own.*¹⁰

Further enmeshed with the myopic practices of dysconsciousness and arrogant perception is the normalization of dominant beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions. As Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack explain:

White people need not and do not define themselves as members of a race; heterosexual people do not define themselves as having a sexual orientation.... Identity boxes contain those excluded from the dominant group. Conversely, to be unmarked or unnamed is to belong to the dominant group.... Subordinate groups simply *are* the way they are; their *condition* is naturalized. To be unmarked or unnamed is also simply to *embody* the norm and not to have actively produced or sustained it. To be the norm, yet to have the norm unnamed, is to be innocent of the domination of others.¹¹

Normalization, then, can be seen as a process through which systemic inequity is kept intact, much like dysconsciousness and arrogant perception keep systemic inequity intact. Normalization, in the words of Donna Haraway, operates as "a conquering gaze from nowhere. This is the gaze that mythically inscribes all marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation."¹² This "gaze from nowhere," from within a set of beliefs and assumptions so pervasive as to appear to be the only way of seeing things, affords one a position of innocence while simultaneously enacting violence against those who are gazed upon.

As Haraway goes on to explain,

Knowledge from the point of view of the unmarked is truly fantastic, distorted, irrational. The only position from which objectivity could not possibly be practiced and honoured is the standpoint of the master, the Man, the One God, whose Eye produces, appropriates, and orders all difference.¹³

Approaching education from an unmarked perspective, from the position of the One Who Sees and Knows All, is both dangerous and epistemologically suspect. It is dangerous in the sense that one risks *rendering invisible or nonexistent* anything or anyone that fails to enter one's line of vision. It is epistemologically suspect in that it mistakes a part (one person's knowledge) for the whole (all knowledge).

Borrowed images/willed our skins pale/muffled our laughter/lowered our voices/let out our
hems/denied our sex in gym tunics and bloomers/harnessed our voices to madrigals/and
genteel airs/yoked our minds to declensions in Latin/and the language of Shakespeare

Told us nothing about ourselves/There was nothing about us at all

How those pale northern eyes and/aristocratic whispers once erased us/How our loudness,
our laughter/debased us

There was nothing left to ourselves/Nothing about us at all

Studying: History Ancient and Modern/Kings and Queens of England/Steppes of Russia/
Wheatfields of Canada

There was nothing of our landscape there/Nothing about us at all¹⁴

In this essay we want to move away from the violence embedded in normalization, arrogant perception, and dysconsciousness by calling for philosophical humility: the recognition of knowledge as necessarily partial and necessarily located within particular social, economic, political, spatial, and temporal contexts. Philosophical humility, as we use the term, is a matter of accepting that there are things people cannot know. Rather than insisting upon claims to certainty and objectivity, philosophical humility calls upon our capacities for reason, intuition, imagination, and sensation as means of grappling with complex philosophical questions. As Gandhi suggests, failure to recognize the partiality of one's knowledge and its relation to the whole is also a failure to address violent consciousness. Though it may be impossible to say that one has achieved humility or has succeeded in doing no harm,¹⁵ or that one has completely rid her or his teaching practice of dysconsciousness, arrogant perception, and normalization, we nevertheless hold all of these as goals toward which to strive, as they are the only means by which to move away from violent educational practice.

For Gandhi, educational violence "cannot be separated from linguistic, economic, psychological, cultural, political, religious, and other forms of violence."¹⁶ We contend that included in these *other forms of violence* is philosophical violence, which includes arrogant perception, normalization, and dysconsciousness. Paying attention to such violence is significant for a number of reasons, most notably because:

If we do not understand and respond to the larger framework of complex, multidimensional, interrelated structures and relations of violence, if we do not address the root causes, conditions, and dynamics of violence, then our short-term response will not be sufficient for dealing with the escalating violence that creates such widespread suffering and threatens human survival.¹⁷

Attempts to address physical suffering and violence are most effective when coupled with attempts to address violent consciousness. Hence, while paying attention to the physical manifestation of violence is a critical point of inquiry, equally important are its philosophical dimensions.

Although Gandhi is best known for his political achievements, his philosophical framework is worthy of detailed attention when addressing the philosophical violences we have discussed. Ahimsa as the overall response to physical and structural violence is not a notion exclusive to Gandhi. Its presence in Indian philosophical traditions is well established. While ahimsa is often translated as nonviolence, its literal meaning is “to do no harm.” In Gandhi’s interpretation, “ahimsa means the largest love, the greatest charity.”¹⁸ It is not only a physical act, but also a mental behavior and a form of consciousness; therefore, carrying out relationships with the effort to do no harm is what is essentially important. Ahimsa requires engaging with the other interdependently and extending oneself to the other with humility.

The basis for ahimsa as an underlying principle for all life and human engagement is found in Gandhi’s understanding of Truth. Within the context of Gandhian scholarship, discussions of his notion of Truth often are spoken of in terms of Absolute Truth and relative truths. Gandhi embraces Absolute Truth as an ideal toward which to aspire, while recognizing its unattainable nature. Unattainable Truth thus is realized in the world through relative truths, which are intended to guide human thought and action. These relative truths are imperfect and embodied aspirations of Truth. Whereas Absolute Truth is characterized by its fixed and unalterable nature, relative truths are definitive ideas that practically inform our way of being in the world and with others.

Absolute Truth is the only fundamental truth, and it is the guiding principle for existence. Interestingly, as Gandhi points out: “The word *satya* (truth) comes from *sat*, which means ‘to be,’ ‘to exist.’”¹⁹ Therefore, to live through Truth is “to be” or “to exist.” Significant to this notion of Truth is Gandhi’s conceptualization of subjectivity as inherently interconnected. For Gandhi:

Individuality is and is not even as each drop in the ocean is an individual and is not. It is not because apart from the ocean it has no existence. It is because the ocean has no existence, if the drop has not, i.e. has no individuality. They are beautifully interdependent.²⁰

Neither Absolute Truth nor relative truths are the universalizing truth of the individual that imposes a singular worldview on others; rather, they require contextualization, recognition of partiality, and appreciation for one’s interrelatedness.

Because of these requirements, Gandhi’s understanding of Absolute Truth is intentionally vague. Gandhi does not define Truth. Rather he highlights particular characteristics of it — one of these characteristics is ahimsa. In maintaining this vagueness, Gandhi does not limit the possibility of Truth. He therefore makes no claims to a single universal truth.

Since Gandhi does not define Truth, we cannot make claims to its attainment. After all, if we do not know what Truth looks like, how can we assert that we have found it? Yet the unattainability of Truth does not diminish its importance. Instead, Gandhi insists upon the need for Absolute Truth to serve as the guiding principle for relative truths. The term “relative truth” often is seen as a dirty word in philosophical circles. Yet key to understanding Gandhi’s Truth is understanding that “relative” in

his context is not relative *subjectively* but rather *objectively*, as a *part* in relation to the *whole*.

Take, for example, the property known as H_2O . Some may describe it as a warm vapor, others as a wet liquid, and others still as a cold solid. All of these descriptions are truths about H_2O , although none of them capture the whole truth. Indeed, there is a universal property to H_2O , in that certain things *cannot* be said about it. Although there are multiple truths that can be spoken about H_2O , it cannot be said truthfully that water is furry. Like Gandhi's notion that relative truth is partial, we must approach knowledge with humility, recognizing that it is impossible to see the whole picture at once.

In the Gandhian context, it becomes clear why we see dysconsciousness, arrogant perception, and normalization as manifestations of violent consciousness, as they take for granted and insist upon the possibility of a single universal Truth. In failing to pay attention to our interconnectedness, they visit violence upon both ourselves and others. Neglecting philosophical humility leads to the silencing, erasure, and denial of diverse social realities and the power structures within which they are embedded. Through our failure to recognize (1) the partial truths of others and (2) our interconnectedness with these partial truths, we assume (incorrectly) that Truth can be known. In making claims to a full consciousness of what the world really looks like, and what is normal, we inevitably claim to know Truth — Truth that in Gandhi's paradigm is unknowable. As a result, claims of this nature are not driven by ahimsa.

We put forward a particular philosophical (and political) project. Using the concept of ahimsa in the context of education, we hold that a nonviolent consciousness brings us closer to addressing the violence done by dysconsciousness, arrogant perception, and normalization. "One of the most arrogant and dangerous moves — as seen in the ethnocentrism of modern, post-Enlightenment models of education — is to make what is relative into an absolute."²¹ Given our relative relationship with truth, characterized in part by our contexts and situations, we hold that there can only be partial and relative truths.

So what does a nonviolent consciousness look like in educational settings? Reva Joshee describes a pedagogy of ahimsa that seeks to address the violence embedded in both learning and teaching. In demonstrating the ways in which ahimsa is related to education, Joshee offers three key components to the development of a pedagogy of ahimsa: "a re-evaluation of our understanding of power in all relationships, a conscious move from debate to dialogue as the dominant form of public discussion, and an emphasis on creativity and imagination."²² These components are tackled through ahimsa's connection to three other important ideas central to Gandhi's thought: "*sarvodaya* (the uplift of all), *satyagraha* (the power that comes from acting in ways consistent with the principles of ahimsa) and trusteeship (the notion that we should think of all that we possess as things we hold in trust and that we should use what we have for the benefit of others)."²³ When these ideas are read through the lens of ahimsa, their potential for addressing educational violence is invaluable.

Joshee's analysis puts forth a particular reading of power dynamics in the classroom. She convincingly maintains that power imbalances exist between teacher and student. Rather than try to eliminate power imbalances, teachers ought to hold their resources (skills, knowledge, social positions, and so forth) in trust in order "not to give charity but, rather, to create structural changes that lead to a more peaceful society."²⁴ While Joshee is writing from an educator's perspective and therefore is looking for ways to hold her own resources in trust, it is significant to point out that teachers must also consider students as holders of "resources," acquired through their living in the world. The resources that students hold can educate teachers.

For example, manifestations of arrogant perception are incompatible with the principles of trusteeship. Again, we are not making a claim to eradicate arrogant perception in its entirety. This is an impossible task. However, working within a framework that insists upon a nonviolent consciousness brings us closer to the goal of eradicating violence. Through holding in trust the resources we have available through our particular social positions, we have the capacity to move away from the violent pedagogies and consciousnesses that have broad educational, political, and societal implications.

Joshee further holds that a pedagogy of ahimsa reframes the way in which we approach communication. She holds that "we should work to replace the current emphasis on debate with an approach based on dialogue.... Whereas debate is constructed as a context between two opposing ideas, dialogue suggests the possibility of many approaches and ideas being brought together."²⁵ Dialogue then becomes an act of *satyagraha* as it aims to work within the context and intricacy of ahimsa. The goal is to pay attention to the partiality of knowledge and how it comes together, rather than to focus on one view overcoming or defeating another.

Much that has been written about the challenges of championing dialogue as a solution to philosophical educational problems could be used to critique Joshee's expectations of dialogue. Yet when couched in the conceptual framework of philosophical humility, new possibilities for dialogue in educational contexts are opened up, making it a viable response to the types of violence we have outlined. For example, as Uma Narayan suggests, working together across difference with an aim to reduce social harms requires intergroup dialogue approached with humility and caution.

For Narayan, humility requires that a person come to dialogue with the assumption that "she may be missing something," that "what appears to be a mistake" on the part of another "may make more sense if she had a fuller understanding of the context."²⁶ Approaching dialogue with caution means to "sincerely attempt to carry out [one's] attempted criticism of [another] in such a way that it does not amount to, or even seem to amount to, an attempt to denigrate or dismiss entirely the validity of [the other's] point of view."²⁷ A willingness to approach dialogue with an appreciation for the limitations of one's own knowledge is necessary in order to begin to address the harms done by violent consciousness. In keeping with the partiality found in ahimsa, humility and caution are but two parts of a larger framework of nonviolent consciousness.

As Joshee explains, other significant components of this framework are imagination and creativity. In acknowledging the limits of dominant forms of knowledge production, Joshee calls upon creativity and imagination to “connect with the issues we are studying on more than just an intellectual level.”²⁸ She is careful to insist that education maintain its intellectual rigor, yet at the same time she holds that knowledge can be expressed in a variety of ways. In accepting only one way of presentation, or one way of communicating knowledge — most specifically papers and formal presentations — we limit our understanding of what constitutes knowledge. Some may excel at paper writing, for example, and find that this activity is the clearest way to express thoughts, interpretations, and new conclusions. Others may find that their interpretations are more clearly expressed through visual art, music, or poetry. All have the capacity to present knowledge in specific ways while allowing for multiple perspectives.

Joshee’s list of possibilities in favor of a pedagogy of ahimsa is by no means exhaustive. Indeed, offering a checklist for a pedagogy of ahimsa denies the philosophical humility required to practice it. Yet this list does demonstrate the importance of and possibilities for the uplift of all, *sarvodaya*, as opposed to the uplift of the few that are privileged and powerful.

Sarvodaya requires challenging systemic violence, though due to our interconnected nature, the uplift of all may at times be experienced as harm by some groups or individuals. Thus, the goal of our project is not to eradicate harm, but to suggest that when harm is done, it should be done with the intention of disrupting larger systems of violence. For example, Megan Boler’s essay “All Speech is Not Free: The Ethics of ‘Affirmative Action Pedagogy,’” argues for the pedagogical value of silencing particular voices in the classroom: “An affirmative action pedagogy seeks to ensure that we bear witness to marginalized voices in our classrooms, even at the minor cost of limiting dominant voices.”²⁹ Through a Gandhian lens, this could be interpreted as harm being done to those silenced, yet the critical space created by that harm opens up possibilities for confronting violence on a larger scale. Like Boler, in this essay we have attempted to move beyond individualistic conceptions of harm in an effort to more adequately address violent consciousness and the systemic social harms to which it can lead.

1. Joyce E. King, “Dysconscious Racism: Ideology, Identity, and the Miseducation of Teachers,” *Journal of Negro Education* 60, no. 2 (1991), 135.

2. *Ibid.* (emphasis in original). “Heaney (1984)” here refers to Thomas Heaney, “Action, Freedom, and Liberatory Education,” in *Selected Writings on Philosophy and Education*, ed. Sharan B. Merriam (Malabar, Fla.: Robert E. Krieger, 1984); and “Cox (1974)” here refers to George O. Cox, *Education for the Black Race* (New York: African Heritage Studies, 1974).

3. *Ibid.*, 139.

4. Richard Delgado, “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative,” *Michigan Law Review* 87, no. 8 (1989), 2413.

5. Marilyn Frye, as paraphrased in María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 78.

6. Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 83.
7. Maureen Ford, "Considering the Standpoints of Differently Situated Others: Teachers and Arrogant Perception," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2004*, ed. Chris Higgins (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2005), 340 (emphasis in original).
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 342 (emphasis in original).
10. Ibid., 343 (emphasis added).
11. Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack, "The Race to Innocence: Confronting Hierarchical Relations Among Women," *Journal of Gender, Race and Justice* 1, no. 2 (1997–1998), 341.
12. Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988), 581.
13. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 587.
14. Olive Senior, "Colonial Girls School," in *Uncommon Wealth: An Anthology of Poetry in English*, eds. Neil Besner and Deborah Schnitzer (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 646–647.
15. A.G. Rud, "Learning in Humility," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2007*, ed. Barbara S. Stengel (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2007), 233–35.
16. Douglas Allen, "Mahatma Gandhi on Violence and Peace Education," *Philosophy East and West* 57, no. 3 (2007), 295.
17. Ibid., 300.
18. Mahatma Gandhi, "On Ahimsa," in *Mahatma Gandhi: Selected Political Writings*, ed. Dennis Dalton (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 1996), 40.
19. Mahatma Gandhi, "What Is Truth?" in *Mahatma Gandhi: Selected Political Writings*, ed. Dalton, 36.
20. Mahatma Gandhi, "Letter to P.G. Mathew, September 8, 1930," in *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. Raghavan Iyer (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2000), 174.
21. Allen, "Mahatma Gandhi," 303.
22. Reva Joshee, "Ahimsa and Teaching," *Connections* 29, no. 1 (2006), 8.
23. Ibid., 7.
24. Ibid., 8.
25. Ibid., 9.
26. Uma Narayan, "Working Together Across Difference: Some Considerations on Emotions and Political Practice," *Hypatia* 3, no. 2 (1988), 38.
27. Ibid.
28. Joshee, "Ahimsa and Teaching," 10.
29. Megan Boler, "All Speech is Not Free: The Ethics of 'Affirmative Action Pedagogy,'" in *Democratic Dialogue in Education: Troubling Speech, Disturbing Silence*, ed. Megan Boler (New York: Peter Lang), 4.