Nonviolent Consciousness and the Pedagogy of Peace: Further Territories to Explore

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Karen Sihra and Helen Anderson alert us to how education commits pedagogical violence through *dys*consciousness, arrogant perception, and normalization. By *pedagogical violence* they mean the serious harm we cause when we assume that our beliefs represent the whole truth, thereby erasing the insights of people who see things from other points of view. Mistaking partial knowledge for complete knowledge causes moral as well as epistemological harm when dominant perspectives function ideologically to legitimate structural and other systemic forms of oppression, in part by concealing how members of dominant groups both maintain and also benefit from the unjust status quo. Dysconsicousness, arrogant perception, and normalization also cause serious harm when the perspectives rendered invisible are wholly or partially constitutive of the subjectivities of people, whose existence is thereby denied recognition in the public sphere.

The antidote to pedagogical violence that Sihra and Anderson prescribe is a Gandhian philosophical framework centered on ahimsa, which provides four important elements of a theory of nonviolent education. First, by connecting epistemological violence to its more concrete forms, Mahatma Gandhi draws our attention to the wide range of causes and conditions that must be addressed to achieve significant long term results. Second, by interpreting ahimsa as a commitment to embodying peace in one's intentions as well as one's actions, Gandhi underlines how a nonviolent *pedagogy* arises from a nonviolent *consciousness*. Third, by distinguishing between relative truths and the ultimately unknowable Absolute Truth, Gandhi affirms the partiality of all conceptual frameworks without falling into relativism, thereby providing the philosophical basis for epistemic humility. Fourth, by articulating a nondualistic, relational world view, a Gandhian framework grounds commitment to nonviolence in the interconnectedness of all beings.

To address the question of what nonviolent consciousness would look like in education, Sihra and Anderson introduce Reva Joshee's pedagogy that combines ahimsa with three complementary concepts. When relationships between teachers and students are based upon the principle of trusteeship, the power and resources that both teachers and students hold are dedicated to the benefit of all, and in particular to redressing structural violence as it manifests inside and outside of schools. When communication is undertaken from a position of epistemic humility, the educational emphasis shifts from debate to dialogue, which is an expression of nonviolence because "the goal is to pay attention to the partiality of knowledge and how it comes together, rather than focusing on one view overcoming or defeating another." When the partiality of any one *form* of knowledge is understood, educators embrace human

creativity, intuition, imagination, and sensation, as well as reason, as important means to experience and express different dimensions of Truth.

By combining sociological perspectives on the varieties and causes of violence with Gandhian teachings about its cessation, Sihra and Anderson provide essential elements of a pedagogy of peace. They make no claim to present an exhaustive account of nonviolent education, for this would contravene epistemic humility. Even so, I expect that they and other educators committed to ahimsa would wish to construct as comprehensive a conceptual framework as possible, where *comprehensive* is defined heuristically to mean "integrating all the elements necessary to achieve desired results." Such a project is consistent with the points that (a) "dialogue suggests the possibility of many approaches and ideas being brought together";[1] (b) we must understand the links between different forms of violence in order to reduce systemic oppression; and (c) an adequate characterization of peace education requires "a highly selective approach to Gandhi…integrated with compatible non-Gandhian approaches."[2] Constructing a comprehensive conceptual framework for the nonviolent pedagogy that Sihra and Anderson prescribe means venturing into philosophical and other territories not explored in their essay. The following are possibilities for future work that I recommend as having potential to support their project.

First, I recommend that they explore the semantic territory of the relationship between *harm* and *violence*. As these terms are commonly used, something or someone can cause serious harm without necessarily being violent, and something can be violent (think of a sneeze or a storm) without necessarily causing harm. That Sihra and Anderson use *harm* and *violence* as essentially synonymous suggests to me that they have a particular conception of *violence* in mind, and I expect that it would be instructive for them to make it explicit.

Second, I assume that epistemic humility is an intellectual virtue, a moral virtue, or some combination of the two. How might nonviolent consciousness be cultivated, then, in a cultural context saturated with aggression? In the article cited by Sihra and Anderson, Douglas Allen outlines Gandhi's proposals for interrupting cycles of violence by first understanding the dynamics of the contingent constellations of causes and conditions upon which fear and aggression depend. Where the root causes of violence are structural and systemic, "peace education must focus on the political, cultural, social, economic, linguistic, religious, and other aspects of overall socialization that contribute to, tolerate, and justify violence, oppression, exploitation, and war." Where the root causes of violence are psychological,

> peace education must focus on psychological awareness and an analysis of how we constitute and must decondition ego-driven selfishness and greed and defense mechanisms responding to fear and insecurity, hatred, aggression, and other violent intentions and inner states of consciousness.[3]

This characterization of peace education suggests two complementary territories to explore. One is the literature identifying the structural and cultural features of educational environments — including colleges and universities — that perpetuate

violence.[4] The other is the spiritual practices for deconstructing ego that work with both the Absolute and the relative, or the Unconditioned as well as the conditioned dimensions of the path to genuine peace. Here I have particularly in mind Mahayana Buddhist teachings on the *two accumulations*: good karma or merit (which is created and conditioned) and wisdom (which is uncreated and unconditioned).[5]

Third, all conceptual frameworks are partial in the sense that, according to the interests they serve, they highlight some features of human experience and leave others in the shadows. This suggests a distinction between two different kinds of pedagogical violence. In the first case, a theoretical framework that offers a valid and helpful perspective on some domain of inquiry and practice causes harm because, for reasons other than the particular strengths and limitations of the framework itself, it dominates its field and excludes other equally valid and useful points of view. In the second case, a theoretical framework causes harm because it is irredeemably warped by the desire to dominate. Assuming this distinction holds, a comprehensive approach to peace education must enable us to discriminate which perspectives and frameworks to accept and which to reject. To affirm the value of multiple perspectives, even when some are radically at odds with one another, is not to say that anything goes. The corresponding territory I recommend for further exploration is the epistemological literature on nonfoundational justification that takes a closer look at the notion of relative truth.

Fourth, Sihra and Anderson have focused upon the consequences of pedagogical and other forms of violence in terms of human pain and suffering. Is it not consistent with affirming the interconnectedness of all beings to expand the moral realm to include nonhumans, and perhaps entire ecosystems as well? The corresponding territory to explore is the literature on ecological justice that makes the links between, for example, anthropocentric philosophies on the one hand and the holocaust of species extinction on the other.[6]

My final comment is simply to wonder how Sihra and Anderson's account of non-violent pedagogy compares to other conceptions of peace education. What is illuminated, and what obscured, by focusing upon *ahimsa*? I appreciate, however, that Sihra and Anderson could simply reply with Allen's point that, given limitations of time and space, "One is necessarily selective not only in terms of Gandhi's writing, but also in comparing Gandhi with other philosophical approaches and assessing their respective contributions."[7] Whatever further avenues they elect to explore, I look forward to more important contributions from Sihra and Anderson toward a Gandhian pedagogy of peace.

1. Reva Joshee, "Ahimsa and Teaching," *Connections* 29, no. 1 (2006), 9.

2. Douglas Allen, "Mahatma Gandhi on Violence and Peace Education," *Philosophy East and West* 57, no. 3 (2007): 290.

3. Ibid., 300.

4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990). MacIntyre's analysis of how the modern university excludes perspectives radically at odds with secular liberalism is relevant here.

5. Daniel Vokey, "Hearing, Contemplating, and Meditating: In Search of the Transformative Integration of Heart and Mind," in *Cross-Cultural Studies in Curriculum: Eastern Thought, Educational Insights*, eds. Claudia Eppert and Hongyu Wang (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2008).

6. Brian Baxter, *A Theory of Ecological Justice* (London: Routledge, 2005).

7. Allen, "Mahatma Gandhi," 290.