

Democratic Expeditions

Nonviolence as a Moral Gift

Edmund Tweedy Flanigan

Abstract

Nonviolent resistance remains one of the most powerful tools available to activists working under oppressive regimes. This reflection paper addresses the moral dilemma activists face when choosing between nonviolence and violent resistance. By reframing the moral value of principled nonviolence as relationship-oriented, this memo aims to guide activists and policymakers in understanding and publicly articulating nonviolence as a moral ideal.

Introduction

The theory and practice of nonviolent resistance is among the most important legacies of 20th-century politics, as reflected in the widespread veneration of its key exponents, Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Modern discussions increasingly treat nonviolence as a strategic choice, focusing on its potential for achieving political goals rather than on its moral value. Yet the moral value of principled nonviolence is a key part of the theory of nonviolence and is central to its public appeal. At the same time, public discussions of

principled nonviolence often present nonviolence as overly demanding or overly idealised. This memo presents a view of principled nonviolence that goes beyond strategy and avoids casting it as overly demanding or overly idealised. It suggests that nonviolence should be considered a form of moral gift that upholds the potential for transforming oppressive relationships.

Problem: Shortcomings of Common Discussions of Nonviolence

Activists in oppressive regimes often face a difficult choice between adhering to nonviolent principles and resorting to violent resistance. Even for activists who may use both violence and nonviolence, this dilemma may still arise on individual occasions of resistance. A clear understanding of the moral value of nonviolence is essential to making these decisions. However, common discussions of the moral dimension of nonviolence suffer from important shortcomings.

Current perspectives on the moral value of nonviolence include:

→ **Strategic Effectiveness:** Prominent recent research argues that nonviolent revolutionary movements have a higher success rate in achieving political

change than violent ones (Sharp 1973; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). From a consequentialist perspective, greater strategic success is a source of moral value. However, the moral appeal of nonviolence cannot be fully captured by the strategic value of its potential consequences.

→ **Moral Requirement:** Nonviolence is often presented as the only morally legitimate form of resistance. For example, despite their differences, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, Emmanuel Macron, Carrie Lam, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights have all publicly stated that there is no place for violence in protest movements. Polls show that a large majority of the public agrees. However, a rigid interpretation that excludes the possibility of justified violence would leave activists facing severe oppression with a limited set of options. Moreover, this rigid attitude towards nonviolence is inconsistent with another widely held attitude: that violent resistance can be morally justified when conditions are sufficiently oppressive.

→ **Saintly Standards:** Leaders like Gandhi and King are often regarded as heroic or saintly figures, with nonviolence cast as a heroic or saintly choice, and hence when chosen by everyday activists as an expression of a naïve idealism. This can risk framing nonviolence as unattainable for everyday activists, particularly when oppression is intense and support for nonviolence seems limited. It can also risk framing nonviolence as akin to a creed or religion rather than a secular moral ideal. However, Gandhi was clear that “non-violence is not meant merely for the rishis and saints ... [but] for the common people as well” (Gandhi 1999 [1920], 134); and King makes clear that nonviolence should be a “mass movement” that does not require belief in a personal or Christian god (King 1958, 95).

Solution: Nonviolence as Commitment to a Relationship

This memo proposes that *principled nonviolence is best understood as an act of grace, i.e., an unmerited gift by the oppressed to the oppressor*. This means that when either violence or nonviolence could be justifiably chosen, choosing nonviolence is a way of extending a moral gift to one’s oppressor. The function of this gift is to offer the possibility of a renewed, transformed political relationship.

Analogy to interpersonal ethics: To better understand this proposal, imagine a scenario in which a friend does something morally wrong to you, such as failing to keep an important promise. In this scenario, you would be justified in feeling aggrieved, and you would be justified in responding to your friend with anger, disap-

pointment, and resentment. You might also be justified in ending your friendship or distancing yourself from this person. However, you could instead choose to let go of your anger and use this moment of failure to offer a renewed relationship. You could say, “You let me down by breaking your promise, but you’re my friend, and I know you’ll do better in the future.” Extending this offer would be a form of moral gift to your friend, because your friend’s actions would permit responding in either of the two ways described. If you chose to offer this gift, it would be for the sake of neither one of you alone, but for your sakes together, i.e., for the sake of your relationship.

Example – The American Civil Rights Movement:

Many would agree that the system of racial apartheid and terror that characterised the Jim Crow South in 20th-century America was a form of oppression severe enough to justify violent resistance, or even revolution. Even Martin Luther King, Jr. emphasised that violence in “self-defense, even involving weapons and bloodshed, has never been condemned, even by Gandhi” and is universally recognised as “moral and legal” (1959, 6). Yet King urged Black Americans to have a “willingness to sacrifice” (ibid.) by choosing nonviolent resistance instead. One of his arguments for this position was the argument that “the nonviolent approach ... is the only way to reestablish the broken community” (1958, 215), or what he elsewhere called the “high road of human brotherhood” (1958, 190) and the “beloved community” (1958, 91). This was a way of offering white Americans the possibility of a renewed political relationship characterised by justice and equality rather than difference and acrimony, and it was an offer made through the gift of self-sacrifice.

The clearest historical cases of principled nonviolence as commitment to a relationship are from the 20th century. However, aspects of many 21st-century nonviolent resistance movements also reflect this idea.

Example – Otpor!: Between 1998 and 2000, the Serbian resistance group Otpor! (“Resistance!”) engaged in a nonviolent campaign to undermine dictator Slobodan Milošević and ultimately remove him from office. One key to their success was that Otpor’s use of nonviolence won the support of large sections of the police and military who saw themselves not as agents of oppression but as neutral guardians of order. As one police officer, Daniel Popović, put it, “we tried to tell ourselves we did not work for one side or the other, but for the people” (Cohen 2000, 46). By engaging nonviolently with those who tolerated or even supported the regime, activists offered them a gift of grace: they could see themselves as agents of justice rather than agents of oppression, and thus transform their relationship with their fellow citizens into one of joint participation in the struggle to end Milošević’s dictatorship.

Example – Declaration of the Peace People: In 1976, a British Army patrol shot and killed an Irish Republican Army fugitive at the wheel of a car, causing the car to veer and kill three children. Following this incident, activists Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan organised a petition calling for peace in Northern Ireland. The petition’s “simple message” set out seven “wants,” including that “we want for our children, as we want for ourselves ... to live and love and build a just and peaceful society” (Williams 2012 [1976]). This plea for love, community, and peace against the backdrop of a decade of brutal violence attracted 6,000 signatories in just two days and was ultimately supported by more than 100,000. Violence-related deaths fell by 70% in the six months following the incident. By responding to violence and tragedy with love rather than hate, Williams and Corrigan were able to help a fractured Northern Ireland begin to come together again (Encyclopedia Britannica 2016).

Conclusion and Recommendations

No view of the moral value of principled nonviolence can by itself resolve the dilemma activists face when choosing between violent and nonviolent resistance, which involves complex strategic and moral considerations. However, a better understanding and articulation of the moral value of principled nonviolence can make these choices clearer.

To effectively articulate a relationship-oriented model of principled nonviolent resistance, activists and policy-makers can consider the following steps:

- **Frame nonviolence as a moral gift.** Resist narratives that cast nonviolence as a moral imperative, and instead frame it as a moral gift from those who resist to those who oppress, for the sake of a renewed or reformed future relationship. Consider appealing to the analogy of friendship: just as it is good, but not required, to extend gracious goodwill to a friend who has wronged you, it is good, but not required, to extend nonviolence to oppressors.
- **Emphasise nonviolence as one option in a toolbox of resistance.** Considering nonviolence as an option rather than a moral requirement reduces the rigid constraints on resistance and opens up a wider range of options for those who resist.
- **Recognise the moral dimension of the dilemma.** While nonviolence can have strategic benefits, part of its enduring appeal lies in its distinctive moral character. Be prepared to acknowledge and clearly discuss the moral value of nonviolence. Understanding and clearly discussing the moral dimension of

the choice between violent and nonviolent resistance can help activists better navigate complex, high-stakes political environments.

- **Take steps to build moral credibility.** Activists are best positioned to give the gift of nonviolence when they have moral credibility. This is possible not only through commitment to principled nonviolence but also simply through consistent commitment to the cause of resistance. Otpor! (see above) provides an example of this: through several years of organising and sacrifice, even those who initially disagreed with the activists’ tactics were often able to respect their decision to resist, paving the way for the moral transformation that eventually followed. Similarly, Williams and Corrigan were able to appeal to their positions as a mother and an aunt in demanding peace on behalf of themselves and the children of Northern Ireland.
- **Recognise moments of moral inflection.** Principled nonviolence is enacted in specific moments of moral interaction. Just as there are better and worse times to extend grace in a friendship, there are better and worse times to give the gift of nonviolence in contexts of resistance. Paying close attention to moments of moral significance, not just strategic significance, can make the gift of nonviolence more powerful.

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