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A Response to Shyam Ranganathan's Review of *The Virtue of Non-Violence: From Gautama to Gandhi*

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Shyam Ranganathan's review of my book *The Virtue of Non-Violence: From Gautama to Gandhi* (*Philosophy East and West*, vol. 57, no. 1) exceeds all the expectations that an author might have for a fair and constructive appraisal, and I thank him for it. Ranganathan offers accurate summaries of each chapter, praises the strong points, graciously indicates some weaknesses, and offers viable options for alternative interpretations. Before I tender more specific remarks, I would like to offer an anecdote.

While on sabbatical in India in 1992, I attended a meeting of the Indian Association of Christian Philosophers held at Dharmaram College in Bangalore. The topic of the conference was Śaṅkara and Christian theology. As I sat and listened, in quiet amazement, to talks about how well these two suited one another, I was moved to make a comment. I stood and declared that Rāmānuja would be a much more promising partner for Christian theology. The audience went deathly still, as if I had uttered some sort of rude remark. Looking back at this incident, I have imagined that it must be the equivalent of someone standing up and promoting Duns Scotus, my favorite medieval philosopher, in a group of confirmed Thomists.

In my thirty years of teaching Indian philosophy, I thoroughly documented the references to personal theism in the Upaniṣads, and I informed my students that many of them have invocations to Viṣṇu or Śiva. I also reminded them that the word *advaita* is found only once in all the Upaniṣads and that there are over a dozen schools of Vedānta. My students were amazed to learn that many Indian philosophy professors, after lecturing on Advaita Vedānta, go home and make offerings to Gaṇeṣa. Just as no European ever worshipped Aristotle's unmoved mover, no Hindu has ever bowed before nirguna Brahman. I do not think it is too much to say that I have been a devoted champion for the "neglected" Vedānta.

Professor Ranganathan's main critique of my book is that I did not consider theistic Vedānta as a way to read Gandhi. He grants that I briefly compare Rāmānuja and Gandhi favorably, but he fails to note that I refer frequently to Gandhi's devotion to Rama and his Vaiṣṇava background. Furthermore, I also reference Glyn Richard's article relating Gandhi, quite successfully in my mind, to neo-Vedānta,¹ thus refuting Ranganathan's charge that I conflate Vedānta with Advaita. My statement that "Vedantist metaphysics cannot possibly serve . . ." is made in the context of a discussion of the Advaita school. Finally, in my chapter "Rules, Vows, and Virtues," I concede that making vows to a personal deity is a viable Gandhian alternative to my preference of virtues supplanting vows. Gandhi's several references to nonviolence as a virtue led me to press on with my thesis.

The main reason for my focus on Advaita Vedānta is that, with very few exceptions, it is the Vedāntist school with which Gandhi is associated. Although I stand firm in my belief that Gandhi is not an Advaitin, I definitely do not exclude a Jain or Hindu theistic interpretation. I propose a Pāli Buddhism framework, not because I think Gandhi would have chosen it, but because I believe that is the best way to develop a philosophically coherent Gandhian ethics of nonviolence. If he had actually allied himself with Buddhism, his Vedāntist tendencies would have drawn him to Mahāyāna.

I am most troubled by Ranganathan's attempt to make Jainism, Sāṃkhya-Yoga, and the Vedāntist schools into process philosophies. First, I object to his phrasing that Buddhism "makes room for a process conception." It is not a problem of accommodating Buddhism to process philosophy, because Gautama's explicit rejection of an impermanent Ātman and affirmation of the flux of existence makes his view the standard for ancient process philosophy. Second, Sāṃkhya-Yoga has process only on the material *prakṛti* side, not in the spiritual *puruṣa* where *ahimsā* is an intrinsic and not a developed virtue. Even though Jain commentators have attempted to give their philosophy a process interpretation, I believe that they have failed.² Ranganathan admits that only Rāmānuja's lower self is impermanent while the higher self remains permanent, so this is a substance metaphysics and not the process philosophy I learned from John Cobb and David Griffin as a graduate student at Claremont. Third, the isolated individual self of Jainism and Sāṃkhya-Yoga, which Ranganathan contrasts favorably with Śaṅkara's absolute monism, does not support the relational self that is implied in Gandhi's organic holism and required for non-violent activism.

I found it disappointing that a recent book on Indian ethics had no chapter on virtue ethics.³ The fact that virtue ethics does not appear in this volume does not mean, however, that one cannot find it in the Indian tradition. In my essay "Toward a Hindu Virtue Ethics,"⁴ I have sketched what this option might look like. I was inspired to write that essay because of Bimal Kṛṣṇa Matilal's book *Ethics and Epics*, but his view of Kṛṣṇa's virtue aesthetics gave me pause, and I returned to Confucianism or Buddhism as the preferred Asian virtue ethics.

I am not convinced, without much more discussion, that theistic Vedānta, as Ranganathan suggests, would give us the developmental model of virtue that I find in early Buddhism and Confucianism. I suspect that one would find a "recovery" model of virtue that is found in Plato and the Stoics. Because of my limited knowledge of theistic Vedānta, I will not foreclose the possibility of the developmental view. Nevertheless, I very much doubt that one would find there the ethical pluralism that is definitely implied in Gandhian experiments in truth, especially Gandhi's controversial attempts to remain spiritually pure while sleeping with young women.

It appears that Ranganathan has confused a relativized Hindu nonviolence with Buddhist/Gandhian pragmatic nonviolence. Ranganathan describes the former better than I did in my book: "Its nature and scope is defined relative to ritual and social contexts and self-interest (e.g., ritual slaughter is the general occasion when the gen-

eral prohibition against killing is suspended)." The sacrifice of a goat to Durgā and eating its flesh, which a priest declares is not killing or meat eating in this ritual context, is very different from Gandhi's decision to euthanize a calf at the Sabarmati Ashram in 1927.

Gandhi's 1927 decision sounds utilitarian in that he is principally concerned about the calf's suffering, but Gandhi's experiments in truth have a strong personal and pragmatic tone ("this works for me") without reference to the hedonic calculus. In my book I discovered the same pragmatism in the Buddha's eightfold path being interpreted as, for example, suitable livelihood and appropriate speech.⁵ Arjuna was exempt from *ahimsā* because of his caste and Kṛṣṇa's assurance that no negative karma could affect his inviolable soul, but Buddhists have no such soul, and because they are never excused from any intentional act, Buddhist farmers, for example, must perform penance for killing insects with pesticides.

Finally, considering the fact that Gandhi was not a systematic thinker and warned us against unitary views of his thought, I find Ranganathan's attempt to eliminate legitimate Gandhi interpretations by syllogistic reasoning the most un-Gandhian hermeneutic imaginable. This is, after all, a thinker who declared that he was an Advaitin and a Dvaitin at the same time. (Gandhi was not trained in philosophy, so we must take this as an affirmation of the identity-in-difference that describes his organic holism.) With the exception of an Advaita interpretation, I made it clear that I would not foreclose the possibility of a Jain or Hindu view, which of course includes theistic Vedānta. Ranganathan demonstrates that he has solid grounding in these schools, and I urge him to write a full-fledged essay on this topic. This would be a welcomed contribution to Gandhi scholarship, and perhaps it would also convince some Indian Christian philosophers to take a second look at Rāmānuja.

Notes

- 1 – Glyn Richards, "Gandhi's Concept of Truth and the Advaita Tradition," *Religious Studies* 22 (1) (March 1986): 1–14.
- 2 – See my *Spiritual Titanism: Indian, Chinese, and Western Perspectives* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 92–97.
- 3 – P. Bilimoria, J. Prabhu, and R. Sharma, eds., *Indian Ethics: Classical Traditions and Contemporary Challenges: An Anthology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishers, 2007).
- 4 – "Toward a Hindu Virtue Ethics," in *Contemporary Issues in Constructive Dharma*, ed. R. D. Sherma and A. Deepak (Hampton, VA: Deepak Heritage Books, 2005), vol. 2, pp. 151–162. The editors went to press without my revisions to the piece, but you can read it in full at www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/hindve.htm. More revisions are forthcoming.
- 5 – *The Virtue of Non-Violence* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), pp. 76–80.