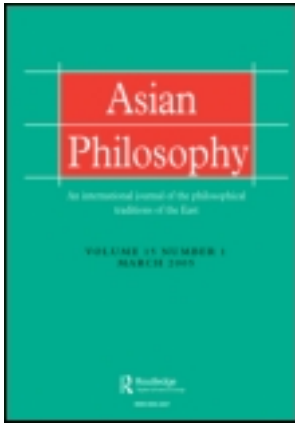


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Framing the Predicament of Indian Thought: Gandhi, the *Gita*, and Ethical Action

Vivek Dhareshwar

Although there is such a thing as Indian thought, it seems to play no role in the way social sciences and philosophy are practiced in India or elsewhere. The problem is not only that we no longer employ terms such as atman, avidya, dharma to reflect on our experience; the terms that we do indeed use—sovereignty, secularism, rights, civil society and political society, corruption—seem to insulate our experience from our reflection. This paper will outline Gandhi’s framing of our predicament in Hind Swaraj. It will then discuss three very different examples taken from our peculiar life with concepts that will also serve to clarify and illustrate the framework I am outlining. It will then very briefly discuss how Gandhi saw the Gita as showing him a way out of the predicament.

I have something far more powerful than argument, namely, experience.
(M.K. Gandhi)

What appears as a problem of translating Indian thought into English has dimensions that are conceptual and cultural. That is to say, the linguistic problem of translation does not capture the predicament that Indian thought finds itself in. It might be suggested that the problem of translation should be taken in a larger sense, as a metaphor for the problems involved in cross-cultural understanding. I think it is a possible route to take, but my own preference is to see the translation problem that arises in the case of Indian thought as symptomatic of a deeper problem that needs a different kind of framing than as a problem of translation/interpretation with which we are familiar, whether we take that problem as formulated in analytical philosophy or in continental thought. In saying this I am of course acknowledging that a proper framing of the predicament is the issue at hand and that will be the focus of this paper. I will not, however, engage with other possible ways of formulating or framing the problem.

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I. Frames and Predicament

Why speak of a predicament? Although I have been speaking grandly of Indian thought, let's focus for a moment on the by now more than a century old career of Indian philosophy in global academia. Out of the enormous scholarly output of translation, interpretation, historical reconstruction, it is difficult to name one work that actually uses the resources of Indian intellectual traditions to produce a work of philosophy, a piece of thinking about any aspect of the world or life. So *dharma*, *satya*, *avidya*, or *upadhi* have only been receiving philological attention rather than being employed in thinking: the translation problems they create then seem less urgent conceptually, though important enough from the point of view of accuracy or adequacy. This situation would not have merited the characterization of being a predicament had it not been for the fact that Indian thought is not quite like Aristotle's science. It is not dead yet. It lives on in some fashion (in what condition and vigor and so on are not pertinent at the moment) and there have been attempts, as we shall see with Gandhi, to think with its concepts. There seems to be little connection, however, between the academic enterprise of philosophy and the living stream of Indian thought. Am I contrasting the dead academic philosophy with the living stream in the outside world? The contrast is there to be drawn, especially if we take the creative engagement with tradition that Gandhi, a non-philosopher, achieves, and compare it with the dull exegesis and commentary piled up by the philosophers. But it would be misleading to formulate the contrast this way, as an opposition between these two worlds. We will then fail to notice the more general predicament and the deeper explanatory demand it makes on us. It is partly for this reason that I have been talking about Indian thought since we are concerned with our life with concepts. Our problem is not simply that we no longer employ terms such as *atman*, *avidya*, *dharma* to reflect on our experience; the terms that we do indeed use—sovereignty, secularism, rights, civil society and political society, corruption—seem to insulate our experience from our reflection!

Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* had given us a vivid portrayal of this predicament (Gandhi, 1997, pp. 46–71). That portrayal still captures our situation, even though hundred years have passed since Gandhi wrote that text. This paper can be seen as an attempt to restate, in terms we can (I hope) readily relate to, Gandhi's diagnosis of the predicament so as to better understand his claim that the *Gita* helped him find a way out. The primary concern, however, will be to arrive at a proper framing of the predicament; any productive discussion of the way out can only take place when we begin to diagnose the predicament. My strategy in this paper will be as follows: I will first outline in my language Gandhi's framing of our predicament in *Hind Swaraj*. I will then discuss three very different examples taken from our peculiar life with concepts that will also serve to clarify and illustrate the framework I am outlining. I will then very briefly discuss how Gandhi saw the *Gita* as showing him a way out of the predicament.

Hind Swaraj is concerned with the particular kind of enslavement that colonialism had brought about and which was wrecking the intricate structures of the practical

life evolved over a very long period of time. The enslavement of Indians had a peculiar epistemic character: it taught them to ignore the kind of knowledge that organized the domains of practical life (Dhahreshwar, 2011). Law, medicine, history, nationalism, the state bring in a way of looking and certain conceptualizations that begin to cleave reflections from the form of practical life in which they are embedded. Thus health, to take an example dear to Gandhi, no longer functions as a matrix of practical action, related integrally and reflectively to ends that inform not only that matrix but other adjacent matrices (or possible new ones that can be fashioned). In any case, health is not the state of my bare body. Law is not a resource that helps me resolve my conflictual relationships in my familial matrix or in the domain of business in a reflective way, but an instrument that creates new disputes which I can only deal with in its terms which extrudes reflection. History brings in a perspective that begins to distort my relationship to the *kavya*, *purana* and *itihasa* by transforming their function in the practical form of life. Similar considerations apply not only to nationalism and to the politics centered around the state, but to many more entities and conceptualizations that colonialism brought in. So let me speak of a cognitive/evaluative frame which as it were houses these entities, and enslavement to which distorts and devalues and veils the domain of practical life, which I will term the actional frame. Gandhi's concern was to restore the integrity of this frame through learning to reflect on practical life again. So the *ashram* life he began to construct around action-theoretic concepts modeled on *yama* and *niyama*—such as *aparigraha*, *ahimsa*, etc.—sought to grasp the function of the form of life that was being attacked by the cognitive/evaluative frame. This point needs to be underlined since this ethical/cognitive activity should not be seen as an attempt to recreate practices from the past.

Although Gandhi did not articulate his philosophy in a systematic way, his thought sought to combine three elements: engagement with Indian traditions, creation of new concepts, and social understanding. It is remarkable, then, that not a trace of Gandhian perspective can be found either in the self-understanding of our institutions or in the social scientific discourse on our social world. When he figures he does so either as a saint or as a charismatic mass-mobilizer with quaint, anti-modern and clearly unviable ideas. But *Hind Swaraj* had made clear why his perspective would not find a place in the cognitive/evaluative frame through which India is being looked at. In fashioning his resistance to colonialism and the frame that was enslaving Indians, Gandhi realized that the traditions of experiential knowledge (*adhyatma*) in India have been damaged. He clearly understood that the transmission of ethical learning has been obstructed, driven underground, and distorted. He was expressing this realization when he argued in *Hind Swaraj* that India has become 'irreligious' (by religion he meant the inquiry that for him underlies all traditions and which for him was exemplified in *adhyatmic* thought). It was the actional frame of ethical actions that was being muted by the dominance of the cognitive/evaluative frame.¹ Gandhi saw his task as strengthening the actional frame, which involved reinvigorating its own reflective dimension. I shall return to consider Gandhi's creative engagement with tradition through the *Gita* in the last section. Before that I

offer some illustrations of our life with concepts, to show how general the predicament happens to be. For it is not confined to the practice of Indian philosophy. And unless we diagnose the reason for the generalized predicament, we will neither understand why philosophy shares in that predicament nor whether philosophy can help itself and us to come to grips with it.

II. Are We Corrupt?

Intellectuals, especially philosophers, usually think of themselves as more susceptible to various kinds of conceptual bewitchments or confusions. Gandhi too thought that it is the elite who were enslaved. The discourse of ‘corruption’, however, demonstrates that it is not the intellectuals alone who share this epistemic condition. Practically everyone seems to think that ‘corruption’ is rampant in India, or even that we are all ‘corrupt’. The puzzle, though, is this: whether we take the phenomenon or the moral judgment, there is nothing obvious about corruption. In fact, just a moment’s reflection on the standard utterances, which rarely varies, we hear all round us—from scholars to journalists to politicians to ordinary Indians—will make this clear. It is ‘ubiquitous’, ‘all pervasive’; ‘the rot’, so goes the rant by some morally upright figure, ‘has set in deep’, and so forth. Even if we assume that this can be made sense of, a very hard assumption to make, the conclusion or, at any rate, the implication turns out to be the opposite of what the discourse set out to observe and condemn: that there is indeed a logic, a pattern and systematicity to the actions and the practices they are embedded in. Our first task has to be the cognitive one of spelling out that logic, that frame of action, not the moral one of condemning it without understanding. We want rich, clear and non-ad hoc explanation of patterns of action that by all accounts have such systematicity and ubiquity. Let me admit that it is not an easy point to grasp, but unless we do so we will continue the tirade without even realizing where that moralizing stance comes from. What creates the difficulty is that the two frames we mentioned above are in operation (socially rather than merely cognitively). One of them is actionally effective but otherwise unacknowledged and the other one cognitively/morally/legally operant and officially or publicly legitimate.

What happens when the left or liberal intellectual sits in the cognitive/evaluative framework and writes about nepotistic and other corrupt practices that supposedly pervade Indian culture? It is doubtful if any cognition happens. Certain ways of speaking or writing are adopted, which marks one out as a scholar or an intellectual. One of our most distinguished economists once illustrated the lack of certain values among the poorer and illiterate section of Indians with a report of an interview with a woman, a poor laborer, who, when asked about *her* well-being, replied that ‘*we* are not well’ (and she wasn’t using the royal *we*) because there was much illness in her family. Assuming that this is a factually correct report, one would have thought that the woman’s response reveals an ethical universe understanding which might be richly instructive for social scientists. Instead, her answer is supposed to show that

she doesn't understand 'freedom' and 'choice' and such exalted values. As one of Kannada's most sensitive literary scholars Keertinath Kurtkoti (2006) once pointed out, when intellectuals use 'feudal' to characterize certain behavior, attitude, and values, they are using it as a term of condemnation rather than understanding, for the experience is ours, but the understanding is someone else's. He was skeptical that we can arrive at genuine understanding this way. The point is generalizable: when we use the cognitive/evaluative frame for our putative 'observation' (in much of social scientific writing or journalistic reportage) very little cognition or understanding takes place. Instead we 'observe' inefficiency, venality, nepotism, lack of decision-making ability, and so on. All actions thus appear as violation of rationality and morality.

We are now in a position to appreciate a remarkable feature of the word 'corruption' that is playing such a crucial role in our lives. That word is not a translation of a native or vernacular word, which should have been the case if the two frames overlapped even significantly if not fully. And whatever word functions as a translation of 'corruption'—in Kannada, and perhaps in many other Indian languages, it is '*bhrashtachar*'—simply has to depend on the original to import the right (whatever that is) connotation and evaluative force. (*Brashhta* is someone who departs from the path of *dharma*, and *achara* is practice. I doubt that this term has any currency; I suspect people simply use 'corruption'.) So we do not employ it to understand something, here actions of a certain kind, but *deploy* it to classify and judge acts. Since there is no understanding, the deployment appears quite arbitrary. Let me make clear this idea of deployment of discourse with another familiar example. Take 'Hinduism'. It is not difficult to show that this term has no referent despite the fact that it has been deployed to refer to any number of things, it being entirely indeterminate what can be included in it. Though we can understand why it was postulated into existence (because, roughly, Europeans could only make sense of the diverse practices they saw by drawing them together into a religion called 'Hinduism'), it is clear that it cannot provide any understanding or experiential salience to Indians. That the discourse of 'Hinduism' is now being deployed by Indians themselves does not make the entity come into being, but creates situations that can range from the harmless, if a little awkward (say Gandhi's use of it) to the positively disastrous, say its use in politics. But one or the other, it eventually does have the effect of masking the experience of Indians when they wittingly or unwittingly deploy it. Corruption too was a non-empirical observation/judgment of the Indian transactions by the Westerners (in fact, most of Asia that they came into contact with was thought to be corrupt). The domain it covered and sought to attack was the whole social ethical world (what I have been calling the actional frame). Like in the case of 'Hinduism', when Indians begin to deploy the 'corruption' discourse, the consequences range from the harmlessly ridiculous to the dangerously corrosive. The deployment of this frame and the way of speaking that goes with it has such a grip on us now that it begins to obfuscate whatever implicit understanding we might have had of our own ethical universe and the frame that is operative there. When we

deploy the discourse of ‘corruption’, we exempt ourselves from understanding the actions that we want to classify or judge as ‘corrupt’.

The obfuscation or destruction of the reflective universe of this frame should not be understood sectorially (modern versus traditional). It is perfectly possible for the items of the so-called tradition to be deployed, that is appear in the cognitive/evaluative frame in which ‘corruption’, ‘rights’ or the language of democracy operate. Let us take seriously the idea that understanding actions in any deep sense itself involves ends; but these are not subjective ends. Although the actional frame is still operative, the reflection on ends of action and experience that was part of that frame has become fractured, indistinct, and its transmission sporadic, in part because of the onslaught from the other frame. So when we look at a whole range of actions—the lineman who demands money to fix the phone for which he gets paid, the minister who demands money to grant license, the professor who uses his connections to get his son a job, the bureaucrat who demands a trip abroad to clear collaboration, the powerful family that expects that its progenies will, as a matter of course, occupy the most powerful elected office of the land—in one frame they all get classified as ‘corrupt’. But in the other frame, our evaluations of some of the cases above may be totally different. For example, although most of us would want to make critical remarks about the hold of the Gandhi family, a large number—sometimes the very same people—would also regard Rahul Gandhi as having a privileged claim to the prime ministerial chair. And some instead of regarding the professor’s act as nepotism, may consider it as laudable, an act that possibly saved the department. What I am straining to get at is that even when we are deploying ‘corruption’ to condemn certain actions, there is, at least in some cases, almost simultaneously a different understanding which may get displayed in the action we take but not register in our discourse.

If the cognitive/evaluative frame has fractured, suppressed and rendered silent the actional frame or universe, in another way the force of the latter has appropriated for itself some of the structures, the institutions, the language that belong in the cognitive/evaluative frame. The complication that results from this awaits even an initial description let alone a theorization. Our next example will, however, show why when we take to theorizing, the state of affairs I just described does not even appear as a problem requiring conceptualization.

III. Our Sovereignty and Our Civil/Political Society?

In this section, I want to highlight the special problem posed by terms that we have come to regard as theoretical or social scientific. The ‘forms of experience’, as Foucault would put it (Foucault, 1984, 1985), that provide the unity and identity of something called the West cannot be fully understood if we do not regard the so-called human sciences as part of that experience even as they are a reflection (in a sense that we still need to understand) on that experience. To start with let us take a very familiar political concept, namely ‘sovereignty’. Emerging sometime in the

twelfth century (Berman, 1983), sovereignty encapsulates the problem of arbitrating the jurisdiction or the dominion of the Pope and the Prince, of sacred and temporal/secular rule. Although many ideas of the Greek or more specifically Aristotelian political theory found their way into the discourse of sovereignty—body politic, the source of the government in nature and reason—it is important to note how drastically they were transformed by theology. Thus, nature becomes the instrument of divine Will, reason the means of providing divine revelation, the body politic gets split into the body of the church and the body of the secular polity and gives rise to the problem of which of the two is the true representative of the spiritual body of Christ. The series of questions this theological discourse raises—how God manifests himself in two spheres or communities (the sacred and the temporal) and how a Christian can live in these two communities simultaneously—is completely alien to Greek thought. The discourse of sovereignty thus begins a story that takes in the state, the nation, citizenship, civil society, and secularism as it encounters new political and social problems during the course of a history that is still unfolding. Historiography gets forged to narrate and re-narrate this discourse and thus becomes both a part of politics as we now come to understand the term and a continuation of the discourse of sovereignty itself. Let me take advantage of the limitation of space and make a large claim: concepts, such as citizenship and civil society, or entities, such as race and nation that are part of the discourse of sovereignty are not intelligible discretely; indeed, they are constitutive of the forms of experience from which they only seem to stand apart or above. The disciplinization, as it were, of this discourse of sovereignty has a lot to do with why concepts and ‘theories’ of, say, citizenship or secularism, appear to stand apart or above, available as theoretical resources elsewhere.²

Now, thanks to colonization, this discourse of sovereignty is deployed in non-Western cultures and histories. In India, for example, we are all too familiar with citizenship, civil society, secularism, and rights. We—that is, the non-Westerners deploying the discourse of sovereignty—should not, however, mistake familiarity for intelligibility. I would like to illustrate and elaborate this point by taking up Partha Chatterjee’s attempt to theorize ‘civil society/political society’ in the Indian context (Chatterjee, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2004).

How should we mourn our dead? In the traditional Indian way or should we adopt Western model of condolence—public meeting, eulogy, etc.? Commenting on this controversy between Rabindranath Tagore and Nabinchandra Sen, Chatterjee asks:

Does modernity require the universal adoption of Western forms of civil society? If those specific forms have been, in fact, built around a secularized version of Western Christianity, then must they be imitated in a modernized non-Christian world? Are the normative principles on which civil social institutions in the modern West are based so culturally particular that they can be abandoned in a non-Western version of modernity? (Chatterjee, 2000, p. 40)

Chatterjee’s formulation raises the problem of familiarity and intelligibility that I mentioned above. Read in a familiar way, the formulation seems to be raising some

valid and even significant issues. Thus when Chatterjee proceeds to designate the 'elite' (in the older terminology) as belonging to 'civil society' ('Civil society, then, restricted to a small section of culturally equipped citizens, represents—in countries like India—the high ground of modernity' (Chatterjee, 2001, p. 10), he seems to be saying something significant. But is he? What has mourning got to do with civil society or, for that matter, with political theory? What does it mean to say, as we so often do, that forms of civil society—the institutions, concepts, practices—are *secularized* versions of Western Christianity? Is there a theory—Western or non-Western—that tells what secularization involves? And what do we mean by 'normative' principles? What makes concepts such as citizenship, civil society, secularism, normative? Do we really understand the normativity of these concepts? At the slightest probing the familiar turns out to be unintelligible. Before returning to these questions, let us take a closer look at both 'civil society' and 'political society' as Chatterjee wants to set them up.

Chatterjee explicitly says that he is using 'civil society' in the sense it was used in the Hegelian/Marxian tradition. However, anyone with the most cursory knowledge of Western political theory will see that from Locke through Marx, 'civil society' was not used to designate a section of society. In Locke, everyone who exited the state of nature belonged to civil society and thereby formed a compact or contract which provided the normative basis for either endorsing or rejecting any political association. In Hegel, this abstract, philosophical concept becomes dialectical—that is, history itself gets permeated by the ideality/normativity of philosophy, so that we, which includes everyone, become reconciled with our social/political world. The early Marx, recognized this move for what it is: politics as theology. That is why his trenchant criticism of the duality of citizen and man, political society and civil society, a duality which he thinks cannot be overcome without abolishing the whole framework (Marx, 1975, p. 220). In fact, this early essay of Marx is really the first serious attempt to show the normativity of concepts 'civil society' and 'political society' that otherwise appear purely referential. Whatever one might think of these moves, they clearly do not involve using 'civil society' and 'political society' to designate a section of the society.

Having set up 'civil society' to refer to the cultural elite of India, Chatterjee (2004) uses 'political society' to refer to those sections of the society, the 'population', that he says are the target of governmentality. On the one hand then there are the 'culturally equipped' citizens who are the subjects of theory; on the other, the population which leads an illegal or a paralegal existence which is the object of policy. Political society is meant to capture the 'site of negotiation and contestation opened up by the activities of the governmental agencies aimed at population groups' and the latter acts by appealing to the 'ties of moral solidarity' (Chatterjee, 2004, p. 74) Our question is: what is Chatterjee doing in using what he calls the terms of classical political theory to designate two sectors or spaces? At one level, he is simply re-describing what the subalterns used to call 'elite politics' and 'subaltern' politics. What does such a re-description achieve? Does it help us understand our present, the character of our institutions and practices and the concepts that inform them?

Since neither ‘moral ties’ nor ‘illegality’ or ‘paralegality’ is specific to the sector that Chatterjee calls ‘political society’, the distinction seems hard to justify theoretically.³ It would seem then that rather than offering a new political theory for the ‘subaltern’, Chatterjee’s theorization might well be attesting to the subalternity of theory. The concepts of classical political theory seem to appear at best simply as terms with no theoretical content.

That Chatterjee’s uses of ‘civil society’ and ‘political society’ have very little to do with the way they were used in Western political theory may be conceded. One might, however, argue that Chatterjee’s misuse or misinterpretation testifies to the strange and new career of these Western concepts in non-Western cultures and that what at first appears as a radical misinterpretation or misapplication is indeed an attempt to theorize that career. In the same way as Greek political concepts were transformed beyond recognition by Christian Europe, the concepts of secularized Christianity too undergo radical transformation in a non-Western culture like India. I believe this argument is essentially right; but far from helping Chatterjee’s case, it shows both the urgency and the enormity of the task of coming to terms with the fact that the so-called human sciences are part of West’s self-understanding rather than being genuinely scientific or theoretical. Let’s reflect for a moment on the transformation of the Greek concepts: the forms of experience that took centuries to crystallize—the Christianization of Europe and its secularization—involved a new conception of the self, the shaping of experience in terms of morality (as Nietzsche never tired of pointing out), the emergence of entities such as ‘sexuality’ (as Foucault began to show us in his later work), political institutions and concepts that cannot be separated from the new conception of the self and the norming of experience. Thanks to the work of Foucault (1985), Balagangadhara (1994), McMullen (1997), et al., we are only beginning to glimpse how we might map this transformation. Consider now the even more daunting task of understanding what happens to western concepts and institutions when they enter a culture whose forms of experience we have not even begun to conceptualize.

The attempt like Chatterjee’s, then, commits a double error: it first takes as intelligible the concepts that are part of the forms of experience that constitute identity of the West; it then finds ‘useful’ to apply those concepts to understand the present of a culture whose forms of experience could not have been constituted by those concepts. Unless one makes the drastic and unjustified assumption that forms of experiences are the same everywhere (or that colonialism has made it so—but this would be unacceptable to the subalterns given their characterization of colonial rule as dominance without hegemony), Chatterjee’s kind of attempt cannot avoid committing the double error. It is ironic that Chatterjee uses Foucault’s governmentality thesis to characterize his ‘political society’. In Foucault, governmentality refers to the process in early modern Europe of norming the state, and his interest in this process of norming is of a piece with his interest in the process of norming that created sexuality. His concern is to study the

'historicity of forms of experience' (Foucault, 1984, p. 334). Let us note that Foucault explicitly says that

Rather than embrace the distinction between the State and civil society as an historical and political universal which could guide the questioning of all concrete systems of government, one can attempt to see a form of schematization proper to the particular technology of government. (Foucault, 2008, p. 319)

Such a study can help us in avoiding the double error, since it contributes to the alternative account we must give of the role of the 'human sciences' (including that of the discourse of sovereignty) in the constitution of the European experience (Foucault, 2003). Such an account is the theoretical precondition, as it were, for undertaking a theorization of our present.

IV. Our Moral Dilemmas

My last example happens to be from philosophy proper and conveniently involves the *Gita*, thus providing a nice contrast to my treatment of Gandhi's engagement with the *Gita* in the next section. I have in mind Matilal's (2002) essay on moral dilemmas. Matilal wants to argue that Arjuna in the *Gita* is confronted with a moral dilemma. There is, of course, a usage of the word dilemma, and especially moral dilemma, to refer to any difficult situation in which it is hard to know how to act (morally). It is clear Matilal is not using the word in that loose, everyday sense (for then his essay would have no significance). So what is a moral dilemma? The difficulty is not with providing (or borrowing) a definition from the recently burgeoning literature on moral dilemmas. What we need to note is that we do not have an intuitive understanding of what might be a moral dilemma, in the way that we can intuitively grasp what a logical or semantical paradox is when we see an example even if we are not logicians. Matilal's own formulation of moral dilemma as 'a species of action-guide dilemma' is rather vague. Here is what he says:

What is an action-guide dilemma (religious or moral)? A dilemma can be defined here, perhaps, in terms of obligation and evaluation principles. An action-guide dilemma arises in a situation just in case an agent cannot do everything that is obligatory for him to do in that situation. He feels obliged to do, say, both X and Y; but it is impossible to do both of them.

For the situation is such that doing X would be undoing Y, and vice versa. You cannot cook your goose and have it alive at the same time. This is that kind of a situation. (Matilal, 2002, p. 6)

Why do obligations create moral dilemmas? What is morality such that it forces you to experience your obligations as a dilemma? Matilal's remark 'doing X would be undoing [not doing?] Y' suggests that he doesn't quite grasp the assumptions one has to make in order to understand moral dilemma. Meeting one moral requirement or obligation prevents one from meeting another moral obligation. And that failure violates a moral norm, that is, makes one immoral. Let me confess here that while it is not difficult to formally understand what constitutes a moral dilemma, I simply

cannot grasp it experientially. Nor can I really I understand the issues debated by those who argue that moral theories ought not to give rise to moral dilemmas and those who argue that moral dilemmas are inescapable. Aquinas famously held that Christian moral theory cannot allow moral dilemmas to arise, and if moral dilemmas do arise for an agent it can only be because of some prior moral violation on his part. Another, more explicitly theological response could be that it is only in this defective earthly world that one encounters moral dilemmas; in a deontologically perfect world one will never encounter moral dilemmas. The trouble is that the examples presented in the literature do not make a compelling case: they either offer trivial cases, unconvincing cooked up scenarios, or extreme situations (Sophie's Choice, for example) or cases taken from literature (Antigone, Agamemnon and now Arjuna) where it is far from clear that the characters experience the situation as dilemmatic.⁴ Certainly, the first chapter in the *Gita* gives no evidence that Arjuna is paralyzed by a dilemma and Matilal fails to show (even formally) how Arjuna is confronted with a dilemma. I am not suggesting that formally it cannot be done, but only that doing so would require importing into the universe of the *Gita* kinds of consideration and language that do not belong there. Why engage in such an enterprise, which advances neither our understanding of why the dilemmatic structure has acquired such salience in the secularized moral theories of the West nor throws light on how we are to read the *Gita*? In fact, we have here a clue to the sterility of contemporary Indian philosophy and social scientific theorizing: a problematic, in this case, moral dilemma, that appears to engage Western intellectuals is taken over without any effort to understand what the problem is, why it appears as a problem, and then superimposed on a material that is not even superficially treating the same problem.

It may seem that both the second and the third examples have a feature that is distinct from the first example: they do not appear to take concepts or problems that lie in the cognitive-evaluative frame. This is only true to the extent that, unlike 'corruption', neither the pair of concepts in the second example—civil and political society—nor the problem in the third were used by the colonizers to characterize their experience of Indian culture. With 'corruption' there is enslavement to the way India was experienced, whereas 'civil/political society' or 'moral dilemma' was not so used, even though they figure in the West's self-understanding. That is correct, but what is significant is that they track the frame: with these supposedly new concepts drawn from the West, it is as though the theorists are seeking normative salience vicariously. They are misunderstanding the role of such normative concepts in the secularizing dynamic of Western culture. In the recent movement against 'corruption' the massive deployment of the discourse of corruption indexes the extent to which the actional frame has been deprived of its language of reflection. Anna Hazare, coming as he does from that universe, stands in for that language though he cannot speak it, overwhelmed as he is by the discourse of corruption.⁵ What Chatterjee, as theorist standing in the cognitive/evaluative frame, notices is the fractured actional frame (what he prefers to call illegality is really deep down a stripping down of that realm). But he wants to give it normative significance, hence the resort to civil/political society vocabulary. It is as though theorization involves

tracking the normative slots and filling them with ‘agency’—the proletariat, the woman, the dalit, the subaltern . . .⁶

So far I have been saying that the concepts of western theory relate to forms of experience and are part of a single history; the concepts both constitute and norm that experience as it has come to be lived and understood. When they appear in our midst, they must be treated as unconceptualized concepts, and not as concepts that tell us how we live or ought to live. In the end, in the same way as ‘corruption’ masks our experience, the deployment of ‘civil/political society’ will in effect block any attempt to conceptualize the unconceptualized concepts in the cognitive/evaluative frame. This is no mere word play; rather, that is how we can understand whether and how the frame inheres in the entities or items that it houses: only by reconceptualizing them or by removing those items that rightfully belong in the actional frame but which have been deployed in the cognitive/evaluative frame.⁷ The *Gita*, for example.

V. Gandhi and the *Gita*

When Gandhi encountered the *Gita*, in England and through Edwin Arnold’s translation, it was firmly placed in the cognitive/evaluative frame. His realization that that frame enslaves one to a perspective in which our experiential world appears as defective, stagnant, and degraded, and that the items that gets placed there—stories or temples—appear opaque, was achieved through his understanding of the *Gita*. He learnt from the *Gita* how to move it out of the cognitive/evaluative frame.

I have something far more powerful than argument, namely, experience. As far back as 1889, when I had my first contact with the *Gita*, it gave me a hint of *satyagraha* and, as I read it more and more, the hint developed into a full revelation of *satyagraha*. That a man of

Krishna’s intelligence should indulge in all this wisdom of the *Gita* for the benefit of an Arjuna in flesh and blood, would be like killing the buffalo for a leather-strap. To believe he did so is to tarnish his name, if it is true that he was the Supreme God, and to do injustice to

Arjuna if he was a warrior of experience and judgment.

I know you will not dismiss these ideas off-hand. I would rather you embraced and developed them. You will readily admit, I am sure, that learned commentaries are of much less value than the experience of one’s limited intelligence. (Gandhi, 2001: CW 18, p. 52)

He was able to do that to the *Gita* because the *Gita* enabled him to remove structures that were occluding experience. So in formulating his idea of *satyagraha*, Gandhi was rediscovering the central insight of Indian thought, namely how to remove *adhyasa*. But what is *satyagraha*? How do you stand in *satya* to make your *agraha*? This he says the *Gita* teaches him when it instructs us not to be attached to the fruits of one’s action. How do we understand this? Despite its familiarity it is far from self-evident how one carries out that instruction. The fact that it has acquired a pious, moral (almost Kantian) tone has not helped. Gandhi realized that the *Gita* is a sustained

meditation on the nature of action. Since it ‘records’, as Gandhi puts it, somebody’s experience, ‘it must not be beyond us to be able to test the truth of it by repeating the experience. I am testing the truth almost every day in my life and find it never failing’ (Gandhi, 2001: CW 38, pp. 4494–50).

To execute an action in the experiential space is a cognitive act. What the *Gita* teaches is that action when tied to subjective ends tends to increase both unhappiness and ignorance. It is only when one learns how action is carried out within a matrix that one makes discoveries about ends that implicitly organize the matrices. To restore a reflective dimension to the hollowed out actional frame is to learn to elaborate matrices, to perform action without conception. Thus learning to understand the concepts and instructions in the *Gita* is to participate in an action-theoretic exercise. One can cognitively grasp the form and function of the actional frame even when the actual practices may be in need of critiquing or even jettisoning. Action concepts in a practical life-form functions differently than as a gatherer of elements that fall under them.⁸ To understand how they function we need to figure out how a matrix functions. Let us take dietetics as one such matrix. One is in this matrix when one pays attention to food or substances that nourish, and to actions that help nourishment, help the end of nourishment, which may be health in the sense of well-being. It can be a simple matrix of diet—*pathya*—or it can be an elaborate matrix comprising diet, exercise, and . . . meditation. The presence of the latter in this matrix does not mean that it cannot be part of another matrix. Indeed, criss-crossing matrices are the rule, but the point is that a matrix is an identifiable, indivisible unit. Yoga could be a matrix on its own, or it could be part of the Dietetics matrix or, to take a seemingly un-gandhian example, the Erotics matrix. I need to say a lot more about the notion of matrix but for now I hope a clear enough sense has emerged for us to understand Gandhi’s experiments in the *ashram* as cognitive acts that were designed to restore the reflective dimension of the actional frame. The experiential world in this frame needs sites of ethical learning to proliferate.

There is a powerful philosophical picture of how action is explained that has attained the status of self-evidence, namely the desire/belief model of explaining action. If this picture has attained the status of common-sense or folk theory, as philosophers claim or imply, then we can understand why action in general and ethical action in particular has retreated so far that philosophical understanding does not even sense that there is something deeper to explore. My proposal, inspired by Gandhi’s reading of the *Gita*, that action can only be action in a matrix will therefore appear utterly counter-intuitive especially to that common-sense and the philosophical understanding that upholds it. In any case, learning to detach or unbind actions from subjective ends involves carrying out cognitive acts. Both ethical action and self-knowledge involve concepts that can only be understood action-theoretically. To grasp the full significance of this extraordinary interpretation of Indian philosophy, we will need to explicate the action-theoretical view of concepts in terms that we can make sense of. That is to say, we will have to evolve our own action-theoretic concepts, in the same way Gandhi did through his engagement with

the *Gita*. One of Gandhi's constant refrains is that the Indian stories in the *kavyas*, *puranas*, and *itihisas* are not at all historical but are experiential! Without moralizing, they provide structures for clarifying experience and models for situating action within a matrix.

In recovering or reformulating Indian philosophy's original problematic and in restoring its integrity, he used terminologies and strategies that can often be an obstacle to understanding his insight or his particular practices. I would argue that his particular conceptions, bound as they are to contingent circumstances of history, should not become a hindrance. For example, while we can appreciate why he thought spinning as a symbol of the actional frame enabled reflection of a certain kind, it would be foolish to insist that spinning should be made that kind of symbol again. Similarly, he often used terms and concepts that clearly belonged to what I have been calling the cognitive/evaluative frame although his own concern was to move items that were put there to the actional frame. Thus, he vehemently argues that we cannot separate 'religion' and 'politics', using the terms of the secularism doctrine to express an insight that properly belongs to the actional frame! The profound intuition to which he was giving expression, namely the inconceivability of removing *dharma* from *rajakaran*, needs further articulation, but the cognitive/evaluative frame cannot accommodate it, saddled as it is with a borrowed normative language. Even more intriguing or challenging is Gandhi's use of the 'caste-system', which, like 'corruption' contains the normative evaluation of Westerners' experience of Indian domains. When he says that he wants to defend the 'caste-system', his intuition here too is the same as in the case of religion and politics, except the argument needed to clarify and defend that intuition requires alternative conceptualization of the experiential/actional domains.⁹ It is necessary, therefore, to clear away terminological and frame confusions in order to develop Gandhian alternatives to the dominant left/liberal understanding. This is necessary because the discourses in the cognitive-evaluative frame is a deployment that has tended to obscure and undermine the actional frame that sustains the ethical universe of Indians.

When Gandhi, using his peculiar terminology, called the state a 'soulless machine' he was in essence expressing the same thought. The question for us is whether his critique of the state and, more generally, of the cognitive-evaluative frame (though it would be more accurate to call it *quasi-cognitive-evaluative* frame) can be developed in such way that we can today not only effectively show that the continued deployment of that discourse has damaged our practical passionate relation with one another, but also begin to outline an alternative conception of politics? A question critical to the development of Gandhian philosophy is the relationship between the two frames: while it is clear that Gandhi sought to show the distorting effect of the quasi-cognitive frame, to what extent does that frame inhere in the entities that it brings in, such as the natural sciences, normative moral and political doctrines, social scientific discourses, etc? A lot of careful work needs to be done to specify what goes into each frame—in fact, it can be shown that things can get moved between frames. No language or discourse or any such items necessarily come stamped with the frame. As Gandhi clearly saw (and as we have witnessed in the last few decades)

Ramayana or the *Gita* could be placed in the quasi-cognitive/normative frame, thereby completely changing their character. But what we need to understand is what happens when the items from this frame is placed in the actional frame. A theorization of this would enable us to grasp the complexities of our present, for the actional frame, stripped of its ethical reflection, has ‘tamed’ in some manner the other frame. While Gandhi could be said to have used reflective action against rationality and thus staked everything on regenerating reflection in the actional frame, we would want to say that genuine cognitive activity with regard to social and cultural sphere is yet to take place but is still possible even as we would want to agree with Gandhi that making the actional frame reflective is a matter of survival.

VI. Coda

The central concern of Indian intellectual traditions has been: how to set up sites of ethical learning. They thought that we needed as many of them as possible, for what is unethical is whatever occludes experience and experience-occluding structures are everywhere, whether it is the body, the sense of ‘I-ness’ (*ahamkara*) or social structures. So ethics is attunement of reflection to experience (*anu-bhava*), by removing any and every form of ignorance (*avidya*) that distorts experience or occludes it altogether. The unethical person in this culture is the person who cannot learn, that is, one who is not attuned to experience. But colonialism brought in structures that effectively disrupted the transmission of ethical learning and displaced the sites of learning. Part of this process involved bringing norms and normativity that effectively created two frames in the cultural universe of Indians. The peculiar coexistence of two frames has created problems of a kind that has not even been registered, let alone theorized as an ethical, political, and cultural problem: the description of daily ethical activities acquires a tone of immorality, when seen through the frame of norms (as we saw in our discussion of ‘corruption’), but the frame of norms itself has remained alien, because obviously even colonialism could not replicate conditions and institutions that generated normativity in the west. The peculiar misunderstanding and misapplication of normative concepts that we saw in Chatterjee and Matilal is in that sense quite reassuring!

What insulates reflection from experience? The insulating material is discursivity, that is, discourse employed in a certain way. Norming a site, founding a practice, giving reflexivity to practice are all roughly equivalent descriptions. I have used the term ‘deployment’ for reflection that develops after the insulation and that uses discourse from different sources (thus deployment of feminism, of nationalism, of Indic or Orientalist thought, and so forth). In more concrete terms, all of them involve making discourse pass through a practice, or making a practice discursive. Language or more accurately discursivity plays a central role in constituting normative institutions/structures. Perhaps one of the major reasons for the first frame to go underground, or become mute and ineffective is that when the

discursively structured normative institutions/structures—what might be called the garrulousness of the west—are unleashed in India, it is as though they provide their own understanding; the discursive structure, what gets taken to be ‘theories’, are what compel a sense of understanding by providing a way of speaking. Normativity or the second frame is anchored when we begin to ‘buy’ into those ‘theories’—theory of the state, discourse on freedom and equality, chunks of European history functioning as cognitive schemes (feudalism, secularism, revolution, and so forth). It is easy to overlook that they are what need to be understood—what I termed the unconceptualized concepts. We still have not realized that. To reiterate a point I made right at the beginning, the predicament has to do with our life with concepts generally and not only with concepts of classical Indian thought. It should also be obvious by now that the predicament cannot be understood as a translational problem or a problem of language.

I have tried to frame the predicament of Indian thought. That framing owed a lot to Gandhi; in the last section I tried to show how Gandhi’s attempt to find a way out of the predicament brought about a creative engagement with Indian thought. Implicit in that attempt is the conviction that resuming Gandhian experiment and inquiry is the route to take. We will begin to understand a lot more about that experiment and that inquiry, including why it seemingly never took root, only when we begin to probe the very many different deployments that are holding us enslaved.

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Notes

- [1] Since the metaphor of ‘frame’ appears in very different disciplines and thinkers—in psychology (Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman’s work on biases and heuristics), in sociology (Erving Goffman’s frame analysis), in cognitive science (Daniel Dennett’s frame problem), and philosophy (Akeel Bilgrami has used frames in two or three different contexts)—it may be wondered where mine comes from. My frames have a different motivation, function and scope than all these, though there may well be some common features. Nothing at this stage really hangs on clarifying the affinities and differences.
- [2] The remarks on sovereignty are meant to highlight a problem that Indian historians and political theorists seem to have some trouble noticing. For detailed investigation of the

- trajectory of secularism, see the work of Balagangadhara and his students: De Roover and Balagangadhara (2008); De Roover, Claerhout, and Balagangadhara (2011).
- [3] In a recent treatment of the issue, Chatterjee (2011) asserts that the illegality of the poor, unlike that of the rich, ‘mobilizes moral justification’ (p. 16). This seems more like a laudable sentiment than an empirical observation.
 - [4] Matilal suggests that Arjuna is confronted with ‘must kill and must not kill’ situation. That is a double bind rather than a dilemma. For an interesting review of the literature on moral dilemmas, see MacIntyre, 2006. The obsessive and moralistic fixation on the stage-setting first chapter of the Gita too seems peculiar to Western commentators on the text (many of whom recoil in horror from what they regard as immoral injunctions of the text). As Gandhi points out, many great Indian commentators, like Shankara, simply skip the first chapter. Gandhi dismisses such obsessions as irrelevant, but his discussion of the issue is extremely instructive (Gandhi, 2001: CW 33, pp. 887–888).
 - [5] He of these concepts to is no Gandhi, so despite the moral authority he derives from his universe, he has no understanding of the movement he has generated. Where would he belong in Chatterjee’s scheme, in political society or civil society? What provides any understanding of our present about the movement? Is it a political society phenomenon misled and mesmerized by the language and the institutions of civil society? Or is it a hegemonizing attempt by civil society to silence political society? These questions show up the inadequacy
 - [6] For a discussion of this normative conception of politics, see Dhareshwar (2011). In his recent treatment of this issue, Chatterjee (2011, pp. 3–12) launches an attack on normative political theory for being ahistorical and for ignoring or preceding all the political movements. Surely it is a normative narrative that Chatterjee himself is putting in place. The sequence of alternative modernities that Chatterjee prefers is normatively structured too. Polytheism is after all modeled on monotheism.
 - [7] To understand the significance of this point, think of what Marx did to commodity, money and capital, the entities of bourgeois political economy. He reconceptualized them, thereby giving us a different understanding of the fetish character of these entities, rather than letting them dictate their understanding on us.
 - [8] For an insightful discussion of the idea of a practical life-form, see Rödl (2007); Thompson (2008). In Rödl’s words, ‘A practical life-form is included in the infinite ends that are its elements as the form of their generality: an action manifests an infinite end only if it manifests the practical life-form of which it is a part’ (2007, p. 43).
 - [9] Gandhi’s most subtle interpreter, Akeel Bilgrami fails to appreciate this point (Bilgrami, 2003), which I admit is a difficult one to get hold of (even more so than the ‘corruption’ phenomenon, with which it has parallels). The advantage of the two frames idea is that it provides us with the resources to show how what is postulated or normed into being in the ‘actional’ frame cannot exist there and yet appear, under certain conditions, in the ‘cognitive-evaluative’ frame. Although it will require immense amount of work to demonstrate the argument, since the context and the framework is in place, let me briefly assert it: there cannot be anything called ‘the caste-system’ in the domains that the actional frame covers. Gandhi was making that point except that he used the term found in the cognitive/experiential frame (as he so often did) to designate what we can only understand after much reconceptualization of the actional domain. That indeed is the work of theorization we need to undertake to break free of the enslavement. In short, to see what Gandhi saw, and to say what he saw, we need new conceptual resources. But if I am right about the frames, there should be no difficulty in getting hold of the intuition, exactly in the same way that we firmly grasp Gandhi’s argument about never separating ‘religion’ and ‘politics’. There are also extremely crucial comparative questions to be asked about these frames in the context of Western culture.

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