

(Short Paper: First Delivery)

Satyagraha and Open Animal Rescue¹

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What follows will be part argument and partly an exercise in attending to concepts. The first section will attempt to say something about Gandhi's concept of *satyagraha*, the second section will provide an outline of open animal rescue, and the final section will consider what we gain from associating the latter with the former. (A move which is familiar in some animal rights circles.) All three sections will also include a certain amount of 'thinking out loud'.

I. Satyagraha

Gandhi remains a key figure in the development of the concept of civil disobedience. However, he referred frequently to a rather different concept, *satyagraha* a conjunction of Gujarati terms that may be translated into English as 'truth-force' or 'love-force'. (*Satya* can mean truth or love or both but it is, above all, that which endures). His appeal to *satyagraha* represented the type of protest for which he served as a figurehead, as a spiritualized practice. Civil disobedience, in turn, was taken to be a branch of *satyagraha*, and so too was non-compliance. (Roughly, if I fail to buy a TV license because I disapprove of the emblems on the license then I am engaging in non-compliance. But if I then go out into the street and, in an otherwise peaceful manner, burn my old license I am engaging in civil disobedience.)

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This neat two-branch understanding of *satyagraha*, which figures repeatedly in Gandhi's journalistic writings and letters, i.e. in the greater bulk of his texts, does not, however, give us the whole picture. *Satyagraha* was also used, both in his journalistic writings and in his autobiography, to describe the actions which involved resisting family pressure and (in *Hind Swaraj* and his commentary upon the *Bhagavad Gita*) 'Satyagraha' was used as a synonym for spiritualized struggle of any sort. And this poses something of a problem. Do we really want to have anything to do with language which suggests that there can be a 'spiritual' dimension to political action or to human life as a whole?

I will suggest that there are two obvious considerations which might lead us to permit such a move. Firstly, talk of what is spiritual may involve no commitment to the supernatural. Indeed, it is often one of the motivations behind such talk that it *takes the place of* talk about the religious (which is generally related to *imagery* that overstrips naturalistic bounds). Talk which implies that protest has a spiritual dimension may then be no more offensive than Wittgensteinian talk about 'an attitude towards a soul'. Secondly, at least some political activists who are involved in the ecology and animal rights movements do regard their actions as having a spiritual dimension or would accept such a view if they were ever to be asked about this matter (indeed, within the ecology movement Dave Foreman has criticized the idea of civil disobedience precisely because he takes its practitioners to be preoccupied with spiritual practice and personal growth). This opens up the possibility of providing some manner of response-dependent account of what we mean by saying that protest has a spiritual dimension. Perhaps we may simply be making a claim about how such protest would be regarded by a particular kind of authoritative participant or audience.

Even so, nothing that I have to offer will disarm the determined opponent of such language. And so, a background dispute about this matter remains open. To try and avoid such a dispute being conducted upon the basis of a misunderstanding I will attempt, briefly, to clarify what I am and am not interested in exploring. I am interested in an issue of conceptual space. *Satyagraha* occupies a certain conceptual territory and, even if we happened to dislike the term, perhaps we would still need a concept that performs at least some of the same work. Conversely, I am not interested in suggesting that the concept of *satyagraha* can come to play a role which is already played, far more effectively, more frequently and more publicly by the concept of *civil disobedience*. You, me and everyone we know understand that claims of civil disobedience are claims of special standing, they are claims of entitlement to tolerant response. By contrast, except in India and perhaps one or two other countries, *saryagraha* is an ‘insiders’ term, it is used only by those who are ‘in the know’, e.g. by those who are familiar with the relevant literature. Nonetheless, activists often fall within this group and when they claim or are told that a protest is akin to *satyagraha* this may help to shape their view of the protest in question, and perhaps it may do so in an illuminating manner.

But it will only do so if the concept of *satyagraha* is sufficiently determinate to be informative. And here it may be charged that this is not the case. There is, after all, a rather large problem of ambiguity. Nathuram Godse, Gandhi’s assassin and also now something of a cult figure for some radicalized Hindus, notoriously argued that *satyagraha* meant whatever Gandhi wanted it to mean and that nobody else could pin it down. And here it may be conceded that Gandhi was indeed vague and imprecise and that this was a fault which he did not always tolerate in others. But this need not lead us to overlook the dominant sense of the concept, one

which associates a type of action with *ahimsa*, thereby with spirituality and more precisely with non-violence and, in Gandhi's revised sense of *ahimsa*, with a readiness for sacrifice.

Does this still retain a certain ambiguity? Up to a point yes. But here we may defend such ambiguity in more general terms as a matter of preserving the 'open texture' of at least some moral and political concepts. Openness of texture allows that there is always more to be said, and more to be learned, a point about such concepts which is familiar from Derrida, from Iris Murdoch, from Bernard Williams and from more than one philosophical tradition. What is needful is only that a concept be *sufficiently* determinate to perform a useful role and with regard to *satyagraha* this seems to be the case. If I were to suggest for example, that a particular action of ϕ -ing is an instance of *satyagraha*, I would presumably be suggesting that it has distinctive features which mark it out as different from sabotage or from actions which are carried out in a spirit of hatred, or which are carried out under the cover of darkness and without appeal to the conscience of the other. In line with this open rescue may be a candidate for being *satyagraha*-like while covert rescue (of the sort associated with the Animal Liberation Front) is not.

II. Open Rescue

By 'open rescue' I mean the illegal (or apparently illegal) removal of animals, often laying hens (for reasons of portability), from private property (e.g. sheds), where such removal and its aftermath deliberately makes the action (and the identity of some participants) available for public scrutiny. While the boundaries between such open rescue and covert rescue are not absolute because open rescue is not *comprehensively* open and covert rescue is not comprehensively secret, nonetheless, open rescue is open in the sense that the media and/or

authorities and/or animal owners are alerted during or after the rescue and some or all participants make no attempt to disguise their identities. Masks may sometimes be worn while rescuers are in chicken sheds, but this is often only a temporary measure, for health reasons rather than as a means of identity concealment. Identity disclosure is normal and arrest is a familiar outcome.

Unless you depart from Gandhi and adhere to the anthropocentric claim that there can *only* be civil disobedience over matters that concern human interests (a point suggested by John Rawls but rejected even by various Rawlsians), or unless you again depart from Gandhi and hold that there can *only* be civil disobedience when the direct target is the state rather than a private corporation (the view of civil disobedience associated with the pre-Rawlsian account of Hugo Bedau) there seems to be no good reason to reject the claim that open rescue, as described above, really is civil disobedience. What I have in mind is, in effect, the paradigmatic form of open rescue pioneered during the 1990s by Animal Liberation Victoria, practiced by a variety of organizations in Australia and New Zealand, associated with the prominent animal rights activist Patty Mark, and transplanted (with varying degrees of success, and more often failure, to North America and Europe) from 1999 onwards.

In the decade following an initial rescue at Alpine Farm, the practice of open rescue was refined and given some roots by appeal to Gandhi, to civil disobedience, and, from time to time, by appeal to *satyagraha*. According to Mark, ‘Openrescue is an act of peaceful civil disobedience that involves breaking laws in order to give aid and rescue to individuals who are neglected and in peril. It is also all about *opening* - whether it's a door, a gate, a cage or a mindset.’ Here we have, similarly to Gandhi, a combined emphasis both upon rescue and upon

the transformative freeing of the political agent themselves (a step in the direction of Gandhian *Swaraj*). ‘The other imperative is innocent lives are at risk, individuals who are defenseless or unable to help themselves. To be an Openrescue activist one's passion for justice and non-violence must override fear. Fear of breaking unjust “laws” and the consequences to oneself that may follow. Though Openrescue may involve incarceration, there is an unparalleled sense of freedom when one steps up to help someone else who is imprisoned, tormented, tortured, abused, sick or dying.’²

III. Some Qualifications

But why, when we have the concept of civil disobedience ready-to-hand, would we want to, even if only sometimes and in very specific contexts, think of open rescue, and perhaps also some other protests in the light of the concept of *satyagraha*? One obvious reason is that it may sometimes not be enough to appeal to a protest as civil disobedience. In other words, drawing a *satyagraha*/civil disobedience contrast allows us to separate out a more demanding Gandhian protest from civil disobedience in general. The requirements for the latter may then be understood as significantly less stringent (perhaps even some instances of covert rescue may qualify). However, this can only be done at the expense of sacrificing Gandhi’s own two-branch approach which makes *all* genuine instances of civil disobedience automatically instances of *satyagraha*. Instead, we might identify those cases of civil disobedience which are akin to *satyagraha* and those which are not.

² Patty Mark, ‘The Ones Left Behind: Openrescue,’ <http://www.alv.org.au/rescueteam.php>.

Elsewhere, I have advanced a view of civil disobedience which runs broadly along these lines, an account which stresses that protests do not have to be idealized in order to qualify. And this is not altogether a departure from Gandhi. It is strongly continuous with a pragmatic strand of his thought. At times, there is a doubling of his discourse when he associates civil disobedience primarily with the requirement that dissent must exhibit ‘civility’. Such an appeal is very different from an appeal to spiritual discipline. Civil disobedience may then be understood as action which is expressive of a special virtue of civility (which to me still looks too demanding) or else as action which remains within the bounds of a number of basic civil norms. (An altogether less demanding option.)

Another side of the same coin is that, at least sometimes, we will want to describe an action as one which expresses something closer to the highest possible standards of consideration for others. Perhaps, in cases such as open rescue, an appeal to *satyagraha* could perform this task in ways that are in fact more effective than an appeal to civil disobedience alone. And if we do not have *satyagraha* to fall back upon, we may still want to have a concept which occupies this role or which (figuratively) occupies the same conceptual space, a concept which helps us to identify what sits *beyond* civil disobedience in a particularly admirable way. One point in favour of allowing *satyagraha* to play precisely this role is that we can readily separate out civil disobedience and *satyagraha* in a way which does not seem to leave either normatively impoverished. An agent, who by ϕ -ing engages in civil disobedience or *satyagraha* is entitled to tolerant response in one case and actual admiration in the other. By contrast, the same is not true with regard to an agent whose action of ϕ -ing is considered under a description of ‘direct action’. The latter is the kind of thing that both political saints and fascists might engage in, to promote

their respective causes. Accordingly, an inclination towards tolerant response or admiration does not go automatically with regarding acting in this way.

Even so, two considerations, when they combine, might lead us to wonder whether open rescue really is akin to *satyagraha* in *quite* the sense that Gandhi had in mind. Firstly, for Gandhi, there was no such thing as *satyagraha* in an unjust cause. The term denoted the power of truth, a requirement which seems to fit with *satyagraha* but which we might hesitate to apply to civil disobedience. (We would not, after all, want a claim of civil disobedience to be rejected by the courts simply because a judge did not like the cause we happened to be promoting.) Secondly, as noted at the outset, Gandhi chose the term ‘*satyagraha*’ precisely because the concept of *satya* connects truth and love. And this may be a connection too far. My point here is *not* that Gandhi was wrong to suggest that the concept of love can be politicized in various ways (Plato, Aristotle, Tolstoy and Hannah Arendt, have all made the same, plausible, claim). Rather, my point is that it is too much of a stretch to politicize love in quite the way that Gandhi attempted, a way which requires us to love agents who in some cases may simply not be deserving of such a response. To love such agents would then not be to align ourselves with truth but with a delusion about their merits. In line with this, perhaps we may credit open rescuers with incredulity at the cruelty of humans, or anger at the callous actions of others (i.e. emotions which register disapproval) but crediting them with love for their enemies is an altogether different matter.

Yet, this may not be decisive. Here we should perhaps reflect upon the limitedness of the requirements for love in the relevant sense. Effectively, what Gandhi had in mind by talking of ‘love-force’ was a strengthened version of *ahimsa* with overtones of an extended version of Pauline *agape*. Love of this sort may reduce to a strong combination of compassion and

benevolence. And whether or not we regard this as love, in any proper sense, it was something that was well within the reach of some of Gandhi's supporters and may similarly be within the reach of those who engage in open rescue. Or, more cautiously, it may be within the reach of open rescuers *to much the same extent* as it was within the reach of those agents who were once described by Gandhi as *satiagrahis*. And this may, again, lead us to think more favourably of the open-rescue/*satyagraha* connection.