

Brian Martin
“Conclusion,” chapter 9 of
Nonviolence Unbound
(Sparsnäs, Sweden: Irene Publishing, 2015),
available at <http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/15nvu/>

9 Conclusion

Nonviolent action is commonly thought of as a collection of methods, such as rallies, strikes, boycotts and sit-ins. It is better thought of as a philosophy or an approach to conflict and social change.

Nonviolent action is widely used in struggles against injustice, including repressive governments, exploitation of workers, discrimination, environmental problems and much else. Activists and scholars have learned from these struggles, and there is now a fairly well developed understanding of the sorts of things needed for success using nonviolent action, as well as an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of nonviolent action compared to alternatives, especially violence and conventional political action.

Nonviolent action is commonly used against opponents who have the capacity to use force against activists, and who often use that capacity. A classic example is a rally by protesters, in which police use force to beat and arrest protesters. In these and similar scenarios, nonviolent action is most effective when protesters avoid using violence themselves, as indeed the term “nonviolent action” would suggest.

The question I have addressed in this book is how to apply ideas from nonviolent action to arenas where there is little or no physical violence. To this end, I’ve examined four areas involving struggles between individuals or

groups: verbal interaction, defamation, euthanasia and vaccination.

This may seem a disparate and peculiar group of topics. It largely reflects areas that I've studied for other purposes. I decided that knowledge of the issue, including contact with campaigners, was more important than starting with some arbitrary group of issues chosen for theoretical reasons.

All four case studies have one important similarity: they involve speech that is unwelcome to someone. Verbal defence has the elements of communication and personal relationships, whereas being defamed has the elements of damage to reputation and potential legal remedies. The euthanasia issue is largely a social controversy, with some technical details in dispute; vaccination is a scientific and social controversy.

In all four case studies, there is normally no physical violence involved in the struggle. Euthanasia itself might be considered, by some, to be a violent act, but the *debate* over euthanasia has mainly involved words. Verbal interactions sometimes lead to fighting, but the verbal interactions themselves do not involve physical force. Because these struggles seldom involve physical violence, it might be asked, what is there to learn from the experiences with nonviolent action undertaken against opponents who can and do use force against challengers?

A first step in answering this question is to identify key features of effective nonviolent action. The ones I selected for this purpose are participation, limited harm, voluntary participation, fairness, nonstandard methods, prefiguration and skilful use. Applying these to the arenas

of verbal interaction, defamation, euthanasia and vaccination requires some adaptation and modification of the features, perhaps amounting to distortion. This process is not necessarily straightforward, and others might choose different ways of going about it.

This process of applying insights from one field, namely nonviolent action, to others, is stimulating because it can open up new ways of thinking about an issue. Campaigners on vaccination and targets of defamation know an incredible amount about their particular issues and circumstances, but may benefit from seeing things from a different perspective. There is another potential benefit from this process of cross-pollination. By applying ideas from nonviolent action to other domains, new insights may arise that can be returned to the traditional arenas of nonviolent action.

Verbal defence

Several writers, including Suzette Haden Elgin, Sam Horn and George Thompson, have developed methods for individuals to respond to verbal attacks. The common feature of their approaches is finding a path between weakness and counter-attack. One weak option is to accept the assumptions of the attacker. Elgin says many attacks include a bait and a presupposition, for example when someone says to you, "If you really loved me, you would buy this car." Responding to the bait is to fall into the attacker's trap. If you start explaining why buying the car is a bad idea, you're in a weak, defensive position. Instead, Elgin recommends responding to the presuppo-

sition, and undermining it, for example by asking “When did you start thinking I don’t love you?” Verbal counter-attack — for example, “You’re such a spendthrift” — is often disastrous because it escalates the confrontation and sometimes makes the original attacker seem like the calm, reasonable one, as Elgin shows in many examples.

Experts in verbal defence recommend an assertive strategy that operates between weakness and aggression, and thus is analogous to the strategy of nonviolent action. Many effective methods of verbal defence involve a jiu-jitsu effect: the attacker’s energy and momentum are turned against them. The verbal barb shoots right past you and the attacker ends up with something unwelcome or unexpected. Horn titled her book *Tongue Fu!* and Thompson his book *Verbal Judo*, each of them invoking the imagery of martial arts.

The many tools of verbal self-defence presented by Elgin, Horn, Thompson and others are insightful, but can be overwhelming at first. There are many methods of verbal attack. Figuring out how to respond to an initial comment can be challenging enough. Then there’s the need for well-formulated follow-up responses, as the attacker renews the assault or shifts to another technique. The verbal domain can be complex, and some attackers have honed their skills over many years. Furthermore, many on the receiving end fall into habits of response that are hard to change.

The parallel in the realm of nonviolent action is that it can take time and effort to develop skills in strategy and action. Choosing the most appropriate form of action can be a challenge, and then the opponent may do something

unexpected, requiring a creative response. In the template of protesters versus police, protesters may fall into a pattern of always using the same method — rallies, marches, pickets or whatever — for challenging a wide range of injustices. This would be like always responding to verbal attack using the same sorts of comments. The diversity of verbal defence techniques suggests that activists should aim to develop skills in a wider range of methods and strategies. The implication is that developing skills in strategic thinking and tactical innovation should be a priority. This is exactly the conclusion made by some researchers and activists involved with nonviolent action.

In interpersonal relations, being assertive is often positioned as being intermediate between being passive and being aggressive. The idea is to respond, but not so strongly that it escalates a confrontation or becomes a form of abuse. Although one end of the spectrum is called “passive,” this can be misleading, because sometimes an apparently passive response is highly effective, especially when it is unexpected. This is highlighted by William Irvine’s approach to insults based on the philosophy of the Stoics from ancient Greece. Irvine suggests that the Stoics would have responded to insults by saying nothing or perhaps by saying “Thanks.” Although this response might be thought of as passive, it can be effective because it causes the energy of the insult, and the insulter, to be expended without effect. It is like dodging a punch rather than taking a hit without resistance.

The sort of weak response that doesn’t work well is the most predictable one, which may be defensive, for example responding to the bait in one of the scenarios

presented by Elgin. In the face of verbal attack, either a defensive or an aggressive response plays into the hands of the attackers. The intermediate positions, which can be called assertive, are often unexpected, and a non-response can fit into the category of assertiveness. The Stoic strategy is based on quiet self-confidence that is not shaken by insults. A Stoic-inspired ignoring of an insult or saying “Thanks” is premised on a refusal to play the verbal and emotional games of abuse and countering of abuse. Perhaps, in a nonviolent campaign against a repressive government, there are occasions when doing nothing in response to provocations may be a powerful mode of behaviour.

Defamation

The issue of defamation involves competing injustices. On the one side is free speech, which sometimes damages another person’s reputation; on the other side is protection of reputation, which sometimes involves curtailing someone’s freedom of speech. I’ve looked at this from the point of view of being defamed and examined options for dealing with the problem. Ideally, a resolution might involve dialogue between the parties involved. However, there are many cases in which dialogue seems impossible or futile.

Among the options for responding to defamatory comments and images are doing nothing and, on the other end of the spectrum, suing. These can be thought of as passive and aggressive responses. In between are various

assertive and avoidance options, some of which are analogous to nonviolent action.

Looking at the features of successful nonviolent action offers some tips for responding to being defamed. One of them is participation, which means getting more people involved in applying pressure on the defamer. However, there is a cost in doing this: the defamatory material becomes more widely known. Many people are uncomfortable about recruiting support if it means making them aware of damaging text or images.

This then leads to avoidance and defensive options. Qafika, with her distinctive name, was dogged on the Internet by links to the degrading image posted by her ex-boyfriend. She could take the drastic step of changing her name. Alternatively, she could post positive information about herself, thus making the damaging image less prominent in web searches.

The options for defending against defamation can be fed back into scenarios involving conventional forms of nonviolent action. Calling a rally can be effective, but in some circumstances it only makes people vulnerable to attack. So sometimes avoidance is a better option, ensuring survival until circumstances are better. The point is to do what is required to survive and to continue activities in a different way.

Euthanasia

In a few countries, voluntary euthanasia is legal; in many other countries, legalisation is supported by a majority of the population, often 70 to 80%. Yet most politicians are

resistant, refusing to support proposed laws. Those who oppose voluntary euthanasia — who themselves often feel like an embattled minority — can draw on support from some church leaders and medical associations.

The euthanasia debate involves competing concerns about justice. Proponents of voluntary euthanasia are concerned about the suffering of individuals, typically with terminal diseases or intractable conditions, for which they seek release through dying on their own terms, typically among family and friends in their own homes. Opponents of euthanasia are concerned about the potential for abuse, with euthanasia imposed without consent, including on people who are depressed, disabled or whose suffering can be controlled with palliative care.

I have chosen to examine the application of ideas from nonviolent action to one side in this debate, the campaign for voluntary euthanasia, because in most countries these campaigners are opposed by the power of the state, including the threat of arrest and imprisonment for assisting someone to die. The euthanasia debate has been largely carried out through the means of conventional politics, including distributing information to win public support and trying to influence politicians. This sort of engagement with the political process is a conventional approach to change; in most countries it has proved to be ineffectual in legalising voluntary euthanasia. This is an example of the shortcomings of “official channels.”

Many of the typical methods of nonviolent action, for example strikes, boycotts and occupations, would be difficult to use to promote voluntary euthanasia because economic factors do not play a major role, and there are

no obvious physical locations to mount a challenge. Furthermore, the immediate constituency for voluntary euthanasia includes many who are frail and ill, and thus less able to be participants. Traditional methods of nonviolent action should be considered as options, as there are no fundamental obstacles to using them, but thus far they have played relatively minor roles in euthanasia struggles.

The major direct challenge to government laws against euthanasia has been the do-it-yourself movement, in which people learn ways to end their lives peacefully without relying on others. In most countries, it is legal to commit suicide, but most of the familiar means available for doing so — hanging, guns, jumping out of buildings or in front of trains — are not peaceful, and can be traumatic for others. Many people would prefer to take a pill or a drink, but ending one's life this way has become more difficult with controls over medicines.

Exit International is one of the groups providing information for people who want to end their lives peacefully, most commonly by obtaining the drug Nembutal or constructing an exit bag. The approach has parallels with Gandhi's constructive programme, in that it involves directly creating a desirable society rather than asking or pressuring government leaders to bring about changes.

One of the important lessons from the euthanasia debate is the role of competing injustices. Advocates of having the option of voluntary euthanasia focus on the injustice of people having to suffer when they would prefer a peaceful death. On the other hand, opponents of

euthanasia focus on the injustice of lives being ended prematurely should euthanasia become legal and extended to vulnerable groups such as people with dementia.

When there are competing injustices, the principle of fairness becomes especially important when planning actions. Although different people have different assessments of what constitutes injustice, often there is a boundary beyond which actions can become counter-productive because many people are offended. For proponents of voluntary euthanasia, it is disastrous when individuals have their lives ended without clearly giving consent. This was a key factor in Jack Kevorkian's conviction for murder.

The same principle of fairness applies to opponents of euthanasia. When an individual is suffering greatly from a terminal disease, palliative care is insufficient to ease the suffering, and the individual asks to die, but is refused this option, the case against voluntary euthanasia is damaged. From these examples, it is apparent that cases that seem unfair to significant audiences provide powerful messages that can be used by one side or the other.

The idea of competing injustices, and the need to avoid situations of apparent unfairness, can be applied to familiar scenarios involving nonviolent action, for example protesters versus police. The protesters might be opposing militarism: they draw on popular concerns about the damage due to war and military spending. Opponents of the protesters can draw on concerns about the need for defence against aggression. Opponents can also draw on concerns about the behaviour of the protesters, if they are aggressive towards the police, for example pushing or

shouting abuse — this can be seen as unfair towards the police, who are thought to be just doing their duty.

The message from these examples is that it is worthwhile thinking of the situation from the other side of a debate or confrontation, and figuring out what might be considered unfair by those on the other side, or by third parties. The two sides in the euthanasia debate can readily do this, and so can protesters and authorities. Sometimes there is nothing that can be done in the short term to change perceptions of unfairness: if some people think public protest is a disturbance of public order and therefore inappropriate, this would rule out protest or perhaps even disagreement. But in other cases, small things, such as expressing sympathy or avoiding derogatory comments, can make a big difference in perceptions.

Vaccination

The examination of the campaign to shut down a vaccine-critical group, the Australian Vaccination Network, reveals that some of the group's defensive measures were far more effective than others. In particular, the AVN's attempts to use the law and other formal processes turned out to be futile. In one case the AVN was successful: it challenged the Health Care Complaints Commission in court, and won the case. But this was a pyrrhic victory, because the state government then changed the law to give the HCCC greater powers.

The AVN spent enormous efforts trying to defend its organisational entity, an incorporated body in the state of New South Wales. However, in the face of a tremendous

onslaught, another strategy was worth considering: dissolving the organisation and reconstituting as a true network. As a network of individuals, there would be far fewer targets for opponents.

There is an important lesson here for nonviolent activists. Often the main focus of attention is on methods of action, for example whether to initiate a boycott and how to run it. Less attention is given to how the group and movement are organised. Possibilities include a traditional organisation with formal leaders, a network of local groups, and a loose collection of ad hoc operations. There is no right or wrong form of organisation, because much depends on the issue, the goals and the opposition. The point is that the way the movement is organised can be very important for its success or failure. Furthermore, the way people interact with each other in actions has a major influence on their satisfaction, commitment and energy.

Many activists are highly attuned to group dynamics and spend a lot of time maintaining relationships and supporting individuals. The same attention needs to be given to organisational forms. The key point here is that in developing a campaign, often the main focus is on action. Activists need to reflect on the way they are organised. Getting the organisational form right may make the difference between survival and collapse in the face of a ruthless opponent, or make the difference between temporary success and long-term transformation in an ongoing struggle.

To learn from the vaccination struggle in Australia, it is not necessary to take a stand on vaccination. It is possible to support vaccination and yet learn from the

challenges faced by the AVN. This points to the value of seeing all sorts of conflicts as strategic encounters and of learning from the experiences of others.

Future directions

Nonviolent action has proved to be a powerful approach to popular social action. It is more forceful than conventional political action such as lobbying and voting while avoiding the damaging and counterproductive consequences of physical violence. Because of the success of nonviolent action in dramatic challenges to repressive regimes and its widespread use by campaigners in social movements such as the labour, feminist, environmental, anti-racist and peace movements, there seems to be potential to apply the basic approach of successful nonviolent action to other arenas — arenas seemingly outside the template of nonviolence versus violence.

To do this, I first needed to identify key features of successful nonviolent action. This is not so easy, because some of these features are implicit in the normal way practitioners think about nonviolent action. Furthermore, different people might well come up with different “key features.” What I’ve done here is just one way of doing it.

I chose case studies in which I could rely on work by experienced practitioners (verbal abuse) or about which I had some familiarity (being defamed, euthanasia, vaccination). Others might choose different case studies. Possibilities include lying, file sharing (including music downloads), surveillance, the abortion debate, the climate

change debate, and bullying. Sometimes the most unlikely arena can offer unexpected insights.

My approach to each of these case studies has been to examine the typical techniques and strategies used by participants and analyse them in light of the features of successful nonviolent action. This sounds straightforward but actually requires a fair bit of creative thinking. Nonviolent action is a huge realm within its traditional domains, such as protesters versus police, so it is not surprising there is no simple application of nonviolent action to other domains.

An important lesson from this exercise is that applying ideas from nonviolent action to different arenas can lead to new approaches to action. Nonviolent action can generally be thought of as an assertive option, different from conventional action and from aggression. What this means in practice depends quite a lot on the arena. The other benefit is that this process of applying nonviolent action can lead to insights that can be fed back into traditional arenas for nonviolent struggle.

The study of nonviolent action has been neglected. History books and media stories are filled with attention to conventional politics, especially politicians and elections, and violence, such as wars and terrorism. In comparison, nonviolent action is invisible, and often misunderstood as well. This means there remains an enormous amount to be learned about nonviolent action. Applying ideas about successful nonviolent action to unusual arenas is one way to go about this. There is plenty more to do.