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Verbal defence

Suppose you are having a conversation with a friend, who says something nasty, condescending or hurtful to you. You might think that a friend should never say anything like this, but it does happen. Your friend might be responding to something *you* said, or be in a bad mood, or think it's okay to say certain things, not realising how much they hurt you.

How do you respond? And how *should* you respond? There are lots of factors here. In the heat of the moment, you might react angrily, saying something equally nasty and causing an escalation in hostility. On the other hand, you might say nothing at all, just hoping it won't become an issue, in order to maintain your harmonious relationship. This might work — unless your friend continues with similar comments, thinking there is no problem.

Conversations are the stuff of everyday life, and it may seem obsessive to analyse every passing comment. However, precisely because conversations are so basic, it can be worthwhile figuring out how to deal with problems in interpersonal verbal interaction.

My interest here is in seeing whether ideas from nonviolent action can be applied to verbal interactions, and what the implications might be. Interacting verbally does not involve physical violence, but it certainly can cause harm, sometimes called emotional violence. However, drawing a direct analogy between the methods

of nonviolent action and methods of verbal engagement may not be all that fruitful. It is possible to propose verbal equivalents to methods such as rallies, strikes, boycotts and sit-ins, but their suitability is questionable.

An interpersonal analogy to a boycott is ostracism, namely refusing to acknowledge or interact with another person. Social ostracism is a recognised method of nonviolent action. However, collective ostracism of officials serving a repressive government is quite different from personal ostracism of an individual, which can be extremely hurtful and is probably too strong for most circumstances.¹ Rather than trying to make direct analogies with methods of nonviolent action, an alternative is to look at the features of effective nonviolent action and translate them into the different realm of interpersonal communication.

Several authors have published practical guides for verbal defence. These guides typically describe modes of verbal attack and how to respond to them. Most of these are based on personal experience, with classifications of modes of attack and defence developed by the author, sometimes supplemented by some linguistic theory. These practical guides are excellent sources for assessing the relevance of nonviolence theory. Indeed, some of the authors' suggested options reveal insights that can be fed back into traditional nonviolence thinking.

¹ On the damaging effects of interpersonal ostracism, see Kipling D. Williams, *Ostracism: The Power of Silence* (New York, Guilford, 2001).

In the following sections, I consider in turn the approaches to verbal defence of Suzette Haden Elgin, Sam Horn, George Thompson and William Irvine. For each one, I describe the basic approach, give a few examples and try to extract some ideas that relate to the features of effective nonviolent action.²

Suzette Haden Elgin

Elgin's book *The Gentle Art of Verbal Self-defense* was first published in 1980.³ It tells about various types of verbal attacks and how to respond to them. Many people found this immensely useful: they felt they were under attack and wanted to know what to do about it. The book sold and sold, eventually more than a million copies. Elgin went on to write a dozen more books on the same theme.

The books are filled with insights about attacks. A basic approach used by Elgin is to give an example of a verbal attack, analyse it and describe different responses. Consider this one, from a child to a parent: "If you *really* loved me, *you* wouldn't waste so much *money*." How would you respond?

Elgin starts with four principles. The first is to realise when you're under attack. Many people don't: they come away from conversations feeling bad but not knowing

² I looked only at English-language books. Verbal interactions in other languages may contain cultural and linguistic differences from those in English.

³ Here I cite the revised and updated edition: Suzette Haden Elgin, *The Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense* (New York: Fall River Press, 2009).

why. The second principle is to understand what kind of attack it is. A key part of Elgin's approach is explaining the different sorts of attack. The third principle is to design a defence appropriate for the attack. The fourth principle is to follow through your response, using the same defence.

Elgin next introduces five modes of behaviour and communication, calling them the Satir modes after family therapist Virginia Satir. First is the blamer mode. Blamers feel unappreciated and compensate by trying to be dominant: "You *never* consider my feelings, and I'm *not* going to put up with that!"

Second is the placater mode. Placaters fear the anger of others and hence try to please them by submitting: "Whatever anybody else wants to do is *fine* with me."

Third is the computer mode. Those who use this mode seek to hide their feelings, like Mr Spock in *Star Trek*: "No rational person would be alarmed by this incident."

Fourth is the distracter mode. Distracters keep changing the topic, cycling through various other modes; underneath is a feeling of panic.

Fifth is the leveller mode. Levellers will say exactly what they feel, which is sometimes useful and sometimes inappropriate. Elgin gives this example of five frightened people trapped in a lift that has become stuck between floors.

Placater: "Oh, I *hope* I didn't do anything to *cause* this! I sure didn't *mean* to!"

Blamer: “*Which one of you idiots was fooling around with the buttons??*”

Computer: “There is undoubtedly some perfectly simple reason why this elevator isn’t moving. Certainly there is no cause for alarm.”

Distracter: “Did *one* of you hit the *Stop button*? Oh, I didn’t *mean* that, of *course* none of you would do anything like that! It is, however, extremely easy to do that sort of thing by accident. *Why* do things like this *always* happen to *me*?”

Leveler: “Personally, I’m scared.”⁴

When someone is attacking verbally, it’s very helpful to figure out which Satir mode they are using and to decide which mode to use in defence. Elgin makes the qualification that someone using the leveller mode may not be attacking at all, but simply stating facts. Placaters, who are trying to please, may cause much more difficulty.

Elgin says that many verbal attacks contain a presupposition — an assumption, usually questionable — accompanied by a bait, something to which it is tempting to respond. Suppose Tom says to Meg, “If you *really* loved me, you wouldn’t waste so much *money*.” The presupposition is that Meg doesn’t love Tom; the bait is that she’s wasting money.

Here is Elgin’s strategy for responding:

1. Figure out which Satir mode is being used.
2. Identify the presupposition.
3. Ignore the bait (this is crucial).

4 Ibid., 31.

4. In a neutral tone, respond by asking or saying something about the presupposition.
5. Usually use computer mode, or maybe leveller mode if it's safe.⁵

So let's look at Tom's attack: "If you *really* loved me, you wouldn't *waste* so much money." The Satir mode is blaming: Tom is blaming Meg for wasting money. The presupposition is that Meg doesn't love Tom. Meg needs to ignore the bait and say something about the presupposition, in a neutral tone, using computer mode. One possibility for Meg is "It's interesting when men say their wives don't love them." Another, a bit more pointed, is "When did you start thinking I don't really love you."

According to Elgin, these sorts of responses are likely to make Tom change the topic. His attack didn't work. To understand Elgin's approach, it's useful to look at what happens when Meg doesn't follow the strategy.

A common pattern is for Meg to take the bait, for example saying "I *don't* waste money! Do you have any idea how much it *costs* to feed a family these days?" According to Elgin, Meg has just lost the confrontation. Tom can continue the attack by saying "Your sister manages to feed *her* kids without sending the family bankrupt." Meg might then become angry: "How would you know how much she spends on food? You never do any shopping. You wouldn't have a clue. You're spending a heap on your company credit card and you have the nerve to criticise my spending!" Tom then says, reasona-

⁵ Ibid., 38–39.

bly, “How come you get so upset whenever I discuss our finances?” — and Meg ends up apologising.⁶

With this sequence, Elgin shows how Tom wins the interaction, with Meg seeming to be the problem, even though Tom was the attacker. Meg, playing into his hands by taking the bait, is humiliated. If this sort of interaction is typical, the prognosis for their relationship is not good.

Tom has been using the blamer mode and has managed to goad Meg into counterattacking, which is disastrous for Meg. Elgin concludes from this that you should never use blamer mode when responding to someone’s blamer-mode attack. It causes an escalation that might end in shouting, with the loudest or most persistent person winning in the end, though both are losers if judged by the goal of productive communication.

Elgin’s advice can be interpreted as saying to avoid passive or aggressive responses, but instead to be assertive. If Meg meekly accepts Tom’s chiding complaint, she is too passive. On the other hand, if she responds by blaming — an aggressive response — she has fallen for a trap, especially if Tom is more skilled at these sorts of engagements. In between is an assertive response, though it has to be skilfully used. Elgin provides guidelines on responding to a variety of verbal attacks.

Another type of attack described by Elgin starts “*Why* don’t you ever ... ?” The rest of the sentence might be “try to make me happy?” or “consider anybody’s feelings but your own?” A variant starts off “*Why* do you always ... ?” and can conclude “try to make me look *stupid*? or “eat so

6 Ibid., 50–55. I have slightly reworded some of Elgin’s dialogue.

much junk food?” or any of a multitude of possibilities.⁷ This attack is also in the blamer mode. Elgin says this sort of attack is obvious but nonetheless is especially dangerous because it usually comes from someone very close to you who knows your vulnerabilities, and therefore the temptation to counterattack is strong. A counterattack could lead to a shouting match.

Elgin recommends offering something that rebuts the presupposition and offers something the attacker doesn’t want.

One of Elgin’s sample scripts goes like this.

Abby: “*Why* do you *always* have to be *different*? *Why* can’t you act like *other* people’s moms?”

Mom: “Okay. From now on, like other moms, I’m giving you a ten o’clock curfew on school nights.”

Abby: “But, *Mom* —”

Mom: “And like other moms, I’ll expect you to be in by eleven on Saturday night. Does that solve your problem?”

Abby: “That’s not fair!”

Mom: “Really? Let me introduce you, my dear, to the real world, in which *many* things are not fair. Including lots of other people’s mothers.”⁸

Mom in this confrontation has rebutted Abby’s claim that she never acts like other moms, and does it by offering something Abby doesn’t want, as Elgin recommends. However, Elgin notes that Mom has exerted her power,

7 Ibid., 157–158.

8 Ibid., 168.

with the message “don’t try the blamer mode on me,” and communication with Abby is likely to suffer.

Here’s a better response:

Abby: “*Why* do you *always* have to be *different*? *Why* can’t you act like *other* people’s moms?”

Mom: “Well, let’s see. Would I seem more like other moms to you, honey, if I always waited up for you when you go out at night? And then you could come sit on my bed when you got home, and we could have a nice cozy chat about what your date was like, and what everybody was wearing ... *You* know, *girl* talk. Would you like that?”

Abby: “Mom, that would be *horrible*.”

Mom: “Well, then, we certainly don’t have to do it.”⁹

This will only work if having a “nice cozy chat” is not their standard practice. Assuming it’s not, then Abby has to accept or reject it, and Mom wins without being heavy-handed. Elgin notes that the language has to be appropriate. If Abby thinks referring to a “nice cozy chat” is making fun of her, then maybe “a discussion of your evening” will work.

Then there’s the blamer mode response: a disaster.

Abby: “*Why* do you *always* have to be *different*? *Why* can’t you act like *other* people’s moms?”

Mom: “Because *you* don’t act like other *daughters*, *that’s* why! And until you do, I don’t intend to put myself out for you.”¹⁰

⁹ Ibid., 169.

¹⁰ Ibid., 170.

In the Abby-Mom interaction, Elgin recommends a response that avoids taking the bait and avoids counterattack. Instead, the trick is for Mom to offer something that rebuts the presupposition inherent in “*Why do you always ... ?*” and that Abby won’t want. This can be a challenge, especially in the heat of the moment. Learning Elgin’s gentle art takes practice, especially when patterns of interaction are entrenched. Furthermore, her recommendations are not always intuitive. This is to be expected. After all, if there was a quick and easy way to deal with verbal abuse, it’s likely everyone would know about it.

This description of Elgin’s approach has been brief and limited: there are many other features of “the gentle art of verbal self-defence” worth exploring. Her books are filled with insightful observations and references to relevant writings.¹¹ For example, in her book *How to Disagree without Being Disagreeable*, in which she presents her basic approach, she adds a new angle: hostile language is bad, but often is used and accepted as necessary and inevitable. She says that actually it can be eliminated. This has several advantages: (1) safety and security for speakers; (2) better health; (3) greater success in communication; and (4) a legacy for the future. She

11 Among those I’ve enjoyed are Suzette Haden Elgin, *Genderspeak: Men, Women, and the Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense* (New York: Wiley, 1993); Suzette Haden Elgin, *Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense at Work* (New York: Prentice Hall, 2000).

says hostile language is like pollution, except that no permanent evidence is left behind.¹²

Metaphors are commonly used to understand verbal interactions. The usual metaphor for disagreement is that it is a type of combat, but this is not conducive to agreeable interactions. Elgin says men are more likely to use the metaphor of a game — two individuals or teams competing to win — whereas women are more likely to use the metaphor of a classroom, with the teacher trying to induce children to learn. Elgin recommends a different metaphor for disagreements: carpentry, with carpenters working together to produce a quality outcome.

On a side point, Elgin states, “Few things provoke more hostility in a group — even a group of only two — than the presence of someone who never makes a mistake.”¹³ Therefore, rather than trying to win every time, it’s better to appear cooperative, pleasant and modest by making a few strategic mistakes.

As for gender differences, Elgin says there are not many, despite prevailing stereotypes. She says men are less happy to give in when conflict is in public. However, the differences are more due to power than gender.

To recap, here are the key elements of the gentle art of self-defence. It’s important to remain detached rather than make emotionally-driven responses. It’s important to listen carefully to the other person, and not interrupt, using

12 Suzette Haden Elgin, *How to Disagree without Being Disagreeable: Getting Your Point Across with the Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense* (New York: Wiley, 1997), 13–25.

13 *Ibid.*, 161.

Miller's law: assume the other person's statement is true, and try to figure out what it's true of. In response to attacks, avoid blaming, placating and distracting. Instead, use the computer mode or, if it is safe, levelling. Use appropriate presuppositions: instead of stating the other person's bad behaviour, assume it while moving towards a solution. In dealing with verbal attacks, ignore the bait and respond to the presupposition, perhaps by agreeing with it or providing a boring meandering response. Finally, reduce tension by using "I" messages — "When you do X, I feel Y because Z" — that match the other person's sensory mode, and make trivial mistakes that can be fixed with no harm, thereby providing opportunities for the other person to display dominance.

The gentle art and features of effective nonviolent action

This brief account is enough for a preliminary assessment using seven features of effective nonviolent action: participation, limited harm, voluntary participation, fairness, prefiguration, non-standard action and skilful use.

Participation

The more people who can engage in a method of nonviolent action, the more powerful it can be. An obvious example is mass rallies. What about verbal self-defence? In most cases, Elgin's methods are intended for use in a one-on-one interaction, though they can be used in a group setting too. The obvious way to expand participation is for more people to adopt the methods and use

them in their own personal circumstances. A community in which half the people used gentle-art methods would be different from one in which only a single individual used them. Furthermore, practitioners can help each other improve.

In situations where people interact verbally in groups, it would be possible to coordinate use of the techniques against verbal abuse. If two people are using Elgin's methods, each may recognise what the other is doing and reinforce the other's efforts. Indeed, a group of practitioners might join together to respond to someone prone to verbal abuse, such as a boss who bullies subordinates. Elgin focuses on one-on-one encounters; an obvious extension of her approach is to develop coordinated group responses to verbal abuse. The gentle art thus lends itself to widespread individual use, with collective use being an extension.

Limited harm

The methods in the gentle art are designed to limit harm. Elgin warns against responding in kind, for example using the blamer mode in response to blamer-mode statements, which leads to an escalation of abuse. Verbal self-defence methods are designed to reduce hostility and encourage self-reflection, and thus minimise harm to the other party. Elgin has good reason to call her approach a "gentle art."

Voluntary participation

The implication here is that no one should be required to use Elgin's techniques. This is not likely to be a problem unless her approach became so popular that it was taught

in schools and practised in all sorts of settings, so that anyone who responded using a different set of protocols was put under pressure to adopt specific gentle-art techniques. This of course would be a perversion of the approach, given that it is about defending against verbal assault. It's possible to imagine using gentle-art techniques to resist pressure to use them: "It's interesting when people try to prescribe how others should speak." This is only a hypothetical situation, because Elgin's approach is very far from becoming standard practice.

Fairness

A nonviolent defence against attack should seem fair to observers in order to win wider support; it might even win support from opponents. As applied to person-to-person interactions, this can be interpreted as implying that verbal defence should be seen as entirely defensive. If it seems, instead, like an attack — even in disguise — then it may lose credibility.

Elgin is aware of the risks of being too aggressive. In the scenario of Tom saying, "If you *really* loved me, *you* wouldn't waste so much *money*," Meg might reply "It's interesting that so many men — once they reach *your* age — begin to feel that their wives don't love them."¹⁴ Here Meg uses the computer mode, but slips in a dig about Tom's age. This is an escalation of the encounter, which is likely to end badly.

Fairness in verbal defence is thus achieved by avoiding any form of counter-attack, while still defending.

14 Elgin, *Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense*, 56.

This means that the words used need to avoid hidden meanings and the tone of voice needs to be neutral and non-accusing. This can be difficult to achieve. It can be very specific to the two people who are interacting. Tom and Meg will have a history of shared experiences, annoyances, sensitive points and much else, so that even a single word, gesture or voice inflection can trigger a cascade of memories. In such circumstances, learning to be non-judgemental, neutral and in other ways non-aggressive can be very difficult. Furthermore, Tom might react badly even if Meg uses the best sort of technique — maybe Tom is so volatile that it doesn't matter what Meg says or does.

One of the primary differences between encounters between protesters and police — a typical scenario in nonviolent campaigning — and verbal encounters is the presence of witnesses. In a nonviolent action encounter, there are often many witnesses. This includes members of the public as well as protesters and police who are not directly involved in an encounter. If a protester throws a brick at police, or spits at them or even just calls them nasty names, this will be witnessed by others, and hence can be counterproductive. Similarly, if the protesters are all polite but the police are brutal, this will be witnessed by others. If one officer goes berserk in beating a protester, even other police might be appalled.

However, when just two individuals are interacting, often there is no external audience. Therefore, only these two individuals will be making assessments of fairness. If the person making a verbal attack treats any response at all, even one of Elgin's computer responses, as aggressive,

then there is little hope of using the person's sense of fairness as a measure of suitable responses. In such circumstances — when a person seems to have an unrealistic sense of what counts as a reasonable comment — then it may be helpful to have witnesses, for example to invite friends or counsellors to be present. People who make abusive comments to a target often are more careful in their language when someone else can hear them.

Another option is to record the interaction. If this is done covertly, and discovered, it very likely will cause a breach of trust. Making a recording might be worthwhile when there is little prospect of an ongoing relationship based on mutual respect. For example, an employee might record a boss's tirade in order to document and expose the boss's abuse. The recording enables others to become witnesses.

Assessments of fairness depend very sensitively on expectations, circumstances and personal styles. Some people enjoy boisterous interactions and expect to be confronted when they go too far, and are not offended by strong language. Others are excessively polite and may take offence at the mildest comment. Often tone of voice, eye contact or body language communicate much more than words, and even a raised eyebrow can cause offence. All this is to say that in private conversations assessments of fairness are often complicated and challenging. More remains to be done in studying this issue.

Prefiguration

The idea of prefiguration is to behave in a way that is compatible with the goal being sought: if you want peace,

then behave in peaceful ways. In verbal interactions, prefiguration can mean not being abusive, and the gentle art of verbal defence certainly satisfies this criterion.

However, it is possible to ask for more. Desirable verbal interactions might be characterised by respect for others, sensitivity to needs, the encouragement of positive behaviours, building of intellectual and emotional capacities, and much else. There are quite a few models for positive human interaction that can be applied to verbal interactions. Defending against abuse is only a start. A conversationalist with a vision of a better world can aim more highly.

Consider just one option for a positive verbal interaction: attention to the needs of the other person. Needs might include recognition and autonomy; needs should be distinguished from wants, which are not necessary. The complication here is that one person's needs in an interaction can differ from another's, depending on the relationship. Needs in a close friendship will be different from needs in a commercial interaction, and will vary from individual to individual as well as varying between cultures and times in a person's life. So a prerequisite in paying attention to the needs of the other person is to spend some time finding out what those needs are. In a friendship, this is more possible than in a brief interaction in a supermarket.

In nonviolence theory, prefiguration is related to Gandhi's constructive programme, which involves building a just, equal and nurturing society, as contrasted with the usual orientation of nonviolent action, which is confronting injustice. As applied to verbal interactions, a

constructive programme would involve a just, equal and nurturing verbal environment. The gentle art of verbal self-defence is compatible with this, but there needs to be much more, though what this might involve remains to be developed.

Non-standard

Nonviolent action is different from and often stronger than forms of conventional political action such as lobbying, voting and election campaigning. The gentle art of verbal defence, likewise, is different than the usual verbal responses. Indeed, Elgin frequently comments that, by using her techniques, attackers are flummoxed: their attack is stymied and they often don't know what to do, and sometimes say nothing further.

In a blamer mode attack, for example when Tom says "If you *really* loved me, you wouldn't waste so much *money*," Meg's usual response is to defend by saying she doesn't waste money, or to counterattack by blaming Tom for wasting money or doing something else. By questioning the hook, and saying, for example, "When did you start thinking I don't really love you?" Meg can disrupt the usual pattern of interaction. In the context of the most common sequences of attack and response, gentle-art methods are definitely non-standard.

It's possible to imagine children being trained in the gentle art from an early age and becoming adept at defusing verbal attacks. In this scenario, the methods would become conventional and no longer have the same shock value. This is analogous to some methods of nonviolent action. In a dictatorship, sending emails

criticising the government is a serious matter, potentially leading to arrest and imprisonment. However, in places where free speech is protected, sending emails criticising the government is likely to be so common as to be ignored. It is no longer non-regular, and thus not classified as nonviolent action.

Using a method that is non-regular is not a goal in itself. The key question is whether the method is effective. In this sense, it would be an achievement if so many people used gentle-art techniques that they become routine.

Skilful use

Methods of nonviolent action do not work automatically. For example, a boycott can be a powerful method, but it will fail unless it is carefully organised. Furthermore, it needs to be the right method for the occasion. Choosing and implementing methods well is crucial to the success of nonviolent campaigns.

The same applies to Elgin's methods of verbal self-defence. She emphasises the need to understand what sort of attack is being made, to choose the right sort of response and to continue with the response, in a sustained fashion. Although she does not discuss the practising of responses in any detail, it is obvious that skill is required to use her techniques effectively. Many people develop habitual responses to verbal aggression, for example falling for the bait every time. Changing these habitual responses requires more than reading about a technique in a book. One option would be to practise the new technique

with a friend over and over, until it becomes automatic to use it even in a heightened emotional state.

Nonviolence campaigners know the importance of maintaining nonviolent discipline, which means resisting the urge to respond to violence with violence. If protesters are physically attacked by police, and remain nonviolent, the attack can rebound against the police, in what Gene Sharp called political jiu-jitsu.¹⁵ In the same way, by resisting the urge to respond to verbal attack with a counter-attack, it is possible to make the attack backfire on the attacker. Protesters sometimes spend days or even months in preparation and training so they can use their techniques effectively. Verbal defenders may need to do the same.

In summary, Elgin's gentle art of verbal self-defence has nearly all the characteristics of nonviolent action, when these characteristics are translated into the realm of verbal interaction.

Sam Horn

Sam Horn's book *Tongue Fu!* is a wonderful manual on effective verbal communication. It contains 30 short chapters, each with a key point, a rationale for the point, numerous relevant quotations, and a practical-example page with "words to lose" (namely, things you shouldn't say) and "words to use." The main parts of the book deal with (1) responding rather than reacting, (2) choosing

15 Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boson: Porter Sargent, 1973), 657–703.

appropriate words, (3) moving towards cooperation, and (4) developing life skills such as choosing your battles, saying no, being confident and controlling your emotions.¹⁶

Horn developed her approach after being asked to present a workshop on dealing with difficult behaviours, especially for workers who encounter customers who are rude or co-workers who are uncooperative. The participants found this workshop highly useful, and this response led Horn to give hundreds of other workshops and to write *Tongue Fu!*

Chapter 1, titled “Fast-forward through frustration,” recommends imagining yourself as the other person, trying to understand what they’re going through. Rather than reacting, the idea is to understand first, and then respond. Often, a person who makes an aggressive or insulting comment is in a bad mental space, with their own problems. By thinking what they must be feeling, you can develop empathy and formulate a response that addresses their needs.

Chapter 2 offers a way to respond to comments that are especially irritating, pressing your emotional buttons. Horn suggests using humour, and preparing in advance with replies to the most frequent or annoying comments.

A woman who was still heavy several months after the delivery of her second child reported that she often ran into people who made such tactless

16 Sam Horn, *Tongue Fu!* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1996).

comments as “I thought you already had your baby” or “Are you going to have another one?” Instead of being tongue-tied by their tactless observations, she pats her tummy while wagging her eyebrows à la Groucho Marx and retorts, “These are leftovers,” and then switches the topic.¹⁷

Another technique Horn recommends is simply ignoring an accusation and deftly switching the topic.¹⁸ The key ideas presented in this chapter are to prepare answers to questions you dread and to make interactions humorous.

Horn’s chapters cover such a wide range of situations and skills that summarising them is not easy. Chapter titles give an indication of some of the approaches: “Acknowledge, don’t argue”; “Become a coach, not a critic”; “Listen up!”; and “Take charge of your emotions!” Some of her advice is about becoming more persuasive; some is about being tactful, such as how to say no to requests while maintaining relationships or how to gracefully exit from a conversation in which the other person talks interminably. These are not specifically about responding to verbal abuse, but are more generally about being effective in verbal interactions.

Despite the diversity of situations that Horn addresses, her advice overall can be categorised as assertion, operating somewhere between passively accepting abuse and responding aggressively. Furthermore, the aim in much of her advice is to foster a cooperative relationship.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

So it is possible to say that her approach is compatible with Elgin's.

Horn describes her approach this way:

The purpose of kung fu (a Chinese martial art emphasizing internal development) is to defuse, disarm, or deflect someone's *physical* attack. The purpose of Tongue Fu! (a mental art emphasizing internal development) is to defuse, disarm, or deflect someone's *psychological* attack. It is a spoken form of self-defense — the constructive alternative to giving a tongue-lashing or to being tongue tied.¹⁹

In this description, Horn positions her approach as between aggression (giving a tongue-lashing) and passivity (being tongue-tied), so it is reasonably described as a strategy of assertion. Her reference to psychological attack suggests that attacks and responses might not just be verbal. Some psychological attacks involve not speaking — this is a key element in the method of ostracism — or using gestures or behaviours that cause emotional pain.

George Thompson

George J. Thompson obtained a PhD in English literature, and then became a police officer. He was also a karate expert. As an officer dealing with belligerent and abusive individuals, he discovered that confrontation didn't work and that certain verbal techniques did — and that these same techniques also worked in other parts of life. He

19 *Ibid.*, xii.

wrote a book, co-authored with Jerry Jenkins, titled *Verbal Judo*, which presents his approach.²⁰

Verbal Judo is filled with anecdotes that are highly effective in getting across Thompson's main points. He likes simple, easy-to-use methods. The context is US culture, with special emphasis on what to do when you are an authority figure, such as a police officer, up against recalcitrant people. Thompson has taught his self-developed system to police across the country.

Thompson found that few of his academic colleagues could "apply what they taught."²¹ The academic world is good on theory but falls short in applications, at least so far as verbal defence is concerned. Thompson found that police were eagerly seeking practical material. His academic articles generated no response, but after publishing an article in the *FBI Bulletin* in 1982, he received 600 letters.²² He knew there was a great demand for what he had to say.

From his experiences, Thompson extracted a set of principles. The first one is always to present your professional face, in his case the persona of a police officer, and never try to save your personal face. In other words, always respond professionally, no matter how badly you are hurting underneath. His second principle is to treat others as you would like to be treated, an application of

20 George J. Thompson and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Verbal Judo: The Gentle Art of Persuasion* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993, 2004).

21 *Ibid.*, 19.

22 *Ibid.*, 59.

the do-unto-others rule found in several religions and philosophies. These two principles are the most important for police.

Thompson lists a large number of additional principles. For example, number 3 is to distinguish between reasonable resistance and severe resistance. If the verbal resistance is reasonable, Thompson says to ignore it and not be annoyed by it. If the person does what you ask, then don't worry about what they say. Principle 4 is to treat each verbal interaction as unique: as potentially different from dozens of apparently similar previous interactions.

What Thompson calls principles might be better described as rules of thumb. They are practical reminders of how to proceed. Here are some examples of how he sees verbal judo operating.

Thompson says it is vital to recognise verbal attacks. (Elgin and Horn say the same thing.) Rather than fighting back, he says to "laugh it off." Counterattacking only gives the original attack credibility.²³ Rather than resisting the opponent, it's better to move with them.²⁴

Thompson gradually learned, through trial and error, a five-step approach to obtain voluntary compliance. The first step is to ask the other person to do what you want. This is a moral appeal. If this isn't enough, the second step is to explain why you've asked them. This is an appeal to reason. The third step is to describe a set of options for the other person, telling what is likely to happen to them, giving plenty of detail. This is an appeal to self-interest. If

23 *Ibid.*, 37.

24 *Ibid.*, 43

the other person cooperates, the fourth step is to confirm that they are doing so, giving feedback to encourage continued responsive behaviour. The fifth step is to act.²⁵

Elsewhere, Thompson lists the five “basic tools to generate voluntary compliance.” These are somewhat different from the five-step approach, which is a sequence of methods. In contrast, the five tools can be used in any order. Thompson created an acronym for the tools: LEAPS, for listen, empathise, ask, paraphrase and summarise. *Listen* means to attend carefully to what the other person is saying or, often more importantly, to appear to listen, for example when you’ve heard it all before. *Empathise* means to imagine you are the other person and try to understand what they are thinking and feeling. Thompson distinguishes between empathy and sympathy. Sympathy means approving of the other person; empathy means understanding their point of view. *Ask* means questioning the other person to obtain responses. Specifically, questions are about who, what, when, where, how and why. *Paraphrase* means putting the other person’s complaint or concern in your own words and checking with them that you’ve understood it. *Summarise* means putting everything discussed into a compact, straightforward form. Thompson says the summary must be brief, concise and convincing.

Thompson provides several toolkits of techniques. As well as the five-step approach and LEAPS, he provides PAVPO (perspective, audience, voice, purpose and organisation) and PACE (problem, audience, constraints

25 Ibid., 96–101.

and ethical presence). Added to over 20 principles, this is quite an array of tools. Using Thompson's approach requires practice rather than mindlessly following a set of guidelines. Probably the best way to learn his approach is to try out a few techniques in an encounter, record what happened and revisit his book to better understand this interaction and to plan for the next encounter. Like much learning, the ideas sound great in the abstract but require the test of practice to acquire personal meaning and to develop capabilities.

Like the approaches of Elgin and Horn, Thompson's approach sits between passivity and aggression. It connects with all the features of effective nonviolent action, translated into the realm of interpersonal relations. The distinctive contribution of Thompson is in addressing situations in which you are the person with formal authority. He writes as a police officer seeking compliance; others in analogous situations include parents, teachers, religious leaders, judges and military commanders. In such relationships, in which one party has more formal authority, there is a greater risk of using aggressive methods, including physical force and emotional abuse. This is a special risk when those with power do not control their own emotions and actions. Just think of cases in which bosses bully subordinates or teachers humiliate students. Thompson argues for developing skills that help pull back from hurting others.

Applied to the classic confrontation in studies of nonviolent action, police versus protesters, Thompson's approach speaks to the role of police. In some rallies, protesters yell abuse at police, sometimes engaging

verbally with individual officers. Police who are experienced in using Thompson's approach will be better able to engage with such protesters, avoiding violence and increasing the chance of getting protesters to do what they want.

From the point of view of protesters who are committed to nonviolent action, it has long been a challenge to figure out what to do about other protesters who yell abuse, push and shove or even assault police. Aggressive protesters like this can discredit the entire movement, lead to bad media coverage and provide legitimacy to the police, including when the police use force to control the crowd. Those committed to nonviolent action should consider another option: encourage police to learn Thompson's approach. When police are better prepared for abuse, and can use verbal techniques to turn it against the protesters, everyone is better off.

William Irvine

A different approach to dealing with verbal attacks is provided by William Irvine in his book *A Slap in the Face*.²⁶ Irvine is a philosopher and decided to tackle one particular facet of verbal interaction: insults. His book displays the careful thinking characteristic of a philosopher combined with engaging examples and accessible writing.

26 William B. Irvine, *A Slap in the Face: Why Insults Hurt — and Why They Shouldn't* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Irvine systematically classifies different types of insults. For example, he looks at direct attacks (“you’re a stupid fool”), insults by omission (when others are praised but you are not), backhanded compliments (“you’re pretty good for an amateur”) and many others. Insults can be hurtful, sometimes exceedingly so. However, one type of insult is positive: teasing. According to Irvine, playful teasing (“how did you get to be so ugly?”) is a way of bonding, among those people you know pretty well already: “Teasing implies a level of acceptance and even intimacy.”²⁷

Many people feel obliged to respond to insults. A common rationale, often unconscious, is that an unanswered insult leaves them open to further insults, by the same person or others. People with low self-esteem who are unsure of their identity, and who depend on assessments by others, are vulnerable to insults. On the other hand, there are some people with high self-esteem who have a fragile self-image: narcissists. They are also vulnerable to insults. Narcissists need to counterattack to defend their sense of self. This leads to another dynamic: some people insult others to prevent being insulted first. Often this is triggered by envy, a common emotion, yet seldom recognised.²⁸ Imagine this scenario. Someone sees your car, your clothes, your good looks or your friend-

27 Ibid., 81.

28 On the importance of envy in understanding society, see Joseph H. Berke, *The Tyranny of Malice: Exploring the Dark Side of Character and Culture* (New York: Summit Books, 1988).

ships, is envious, and attacks by making a belittling comment.

Irvine, to develop a way of responding to insults, was inspired by the Stoics, a group in ancient Greece who followed a particular philosophy of life. The Stoics did things because they were worth doing, not because of the possibility of honours or admiration. The Stoics advocated what Irvine calls “insult pacifism,” which means not insulting others and not responding to insults.

Irvine tried out, in his personal life, the approach of not responding and found it worked well. So does saying “thank you,” in a neutral tone, without sarcasm. This baffles the insulter. If the insulter tries to explain the insult, just say, “I know. Thanks.” Irvine found that this response sometimes led the person to retract the insult.

Not responding or saying “thanks” is hard enough. Even harder is the emotional side of the Stoic approach to life, which is to appear calm in the face of insults, and be calm inside. If insults don’t hurt you emotionally, much of their power is gone.

There is another aspect: responding to praise. Many people get a buzz out of compliments, and a few spend a lot of effort in the hope of receiving compliments. They derive much of their self-image from what others say. However, Irvine believes that Stoics would have responded to praise minimally, for example by just saying “thanks” and perhaps adding a self-deprecatory remark such as “You are very kind.” Furthermore, Stoics would seek to be calm inside, not being emotionally affected by praise.

The basic idea here is to do things because they are worth doing, not because of a fear of insults or the possibility of praise. This was an unusual capacity in ancient Greece and seems to remain unusual today. In essence, according to Irvine, the Stoic approach means opting out of the status race. He says genuine praise of others is rare because people playing the social hierarchy game know it is a losing strategy, helping others rise in estimation and hurting one's own status.

So how does the Stoic approach to verbal interaction relate to nonviolent action? It is certainly non-aggressive. However, it might not satisfy the condition of being "action," namely of being stronger than conventional methods of responding. The Stoic approach seems, at least on the surface, to be a passive method, a form of non-response. But in this it is unusual, because the conventional methods of responding to verbal abuse all involve some sort of engagement, either defensive manoeuvres or positive steps such as demonstrating compassion.

To understand better how the Stoic approach relates to nonviolent action, it is useful to distinguish between promoting social change and defending the status quo. Many of the signature campaigns cited as successes of nonviolent action involve challenges to injustice, such as the Indian independence struggle, the US civil rights movement and the numerous people power movements against repressive governments. In these campaigns, the activists use methods to confront and change the existing system. Being passive is seldom part of the repertoire in such situations.

Another type of campaign is defence of the status quo against assault. A classic example is popular resistance to military coups, such as in Germany in 1920, Algeria in 1961 and the Soviet Union in 1991. In such defensive actions, refusal to obey commands can play an important role. In Germany in 1920, bank officials refused to sign cheques made out by the coup leaders; in Algeria, many troops stayed in their barracks, not joining the coup; in the Soviet Union, commandoes refused orders by coup officials to attack the Russian White House.²⁹ Methods of resistance by not cooperating are well known but are often forgotten in the emphasis on bringing about change.

Applied to verbal interactions, noncooperation can be interpreted as refusing to engage with the normal scripts or patterns of dialogue. All of the methods of verbal defence involve refusal to follow the path of escalation, in which abuse leads to counterattack. The Stoic approach of non-response or polite acceptance is a special case of noncooperation. It can be thought of as a form of ostracism: a refusal to continue with a type of interaction.

The Stoic approach can become more powerful if adopted by more people. If an insulter is met repeatedly with indifference or politeness, the impulse to insult is likely to subside: there is no reinforcement of the behaviour. Some verbal attackers gain energy by the subsequent escalation: a response vindicates the original complaint. Non-response drains energy.

²⁹ See Adam Roberts, "Civil resistance to military coups," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1975, pp. 19–36.

Behaving like a Stoic requires considerable self-confidence and inner peace. Not responding to insults is a technique; the harder part is developing the ability to be calm emotionally in the face of insults. It certainly can be worthwhile seeking to develop this capacity. Even if you prefer to use techniques such as those suggested by Elgin, Horn or Thompson, it is helpful to be calm and focused. A possible goal would be to become a skilled and compassionate verbal defender on the outside and a Stoic on the inside.

Conclusion

Verbal interactions can involve attempts at domination and humiliation, and often cause emotional pain. Sometimes this is intentional, sometimes inadvertent and often due to habitual behaviours. Because verbal interactions are so important in people's lives, it is worth exploring how to do better. In particular, it is worth seeing whether features of effective nonviolent action are relevant to the verbal domain.

Nonviolent action, with methods such as rallies, strikes, boycotts and sit-ins, goes beyond conventional methods of social action such as lobbying and voting, but avoids any physical violence against opponents. Nonviolent action can be seen as part of a strategy of assertion, being neither passive nor aggressive. Nonviolent action is a challenge to repression and oppression that, if done well, demonstrates commitment and mobilises support without serious damage to opponents, thus opening the door to switches of allegiance.

Taking the key features of effective nonviolent action and applying them to verbal interactions gives a simple prescription for verbal defence: do something different from the usual response, without being aggressive. When someone makes a nasty comment or hostile put-down, a response inspired by nonviolent action would be respectful to the other person, while acting to challenge or sidestep the attack.

To see how this might apply in practice, I have looked at several approaches to verbal self-defence, written by different authors. Interestingly, these different approaches were developed independently, for the most part, in some cases built out of practical experience. The most systematic approach is that developed by Suzette Haden Elgin in her books on the gentle art of verbal self-defence.

The advice by these writers is varied, but there are some core similarities. They all recommend against responding aggressively. In this, they adhere to a key principle of nonviolent action, which is not to use violence in response to violence. In a verbal interaction, this means not responding to provocative or demeaning comments with similarly provocative or demeaning comments. Elgin, for example, says to avoid the bait and respond to the presupposition, usually using computer mode, which minimises the risk of escalation, instead taking the interaction in a different direction. Irvine, in response to an insult, recommends saying nothing or saying “Thanks,” which defuses the attack. These authors recognise that responding in kind simply feeds the negativity, giving the verbal attacker a justification for having attacked.

Instead of returning fire — to use a military metaphor — a common theme is to respond in a way that expends the psychological energy of the attacker without any return. It is for this reason that martial arts metaphors are used: Horn's *Tongue Fu* and Thompson's *Verbal Judo*. The energy and momentum of the attacker are used against them, or are dissipated without impact. This is reminiscent of Sharp's concept of political jiu-jitsu, in which activists, by remaining nonviolent, gain support from the violence of their opponent.

Another way to think about these recommendations is as means to change the topic of conversation. Both passive and aggressive responses remain in the same arena, following the attacker's agenda, either defending against accusations or slights, or counterattacking.

One of the features of successful nonviolent action is widespread participation. Many people, and people from different social locations, are able to join the movement, and do. Applying this idea to verbal interactions implies that more people need to learn the techniques of verbal defence. If, at a meeting, several participants use verbal defence techniques, they can support each other and provide a model to those present.

An important part of making nonviolent actions effective is appropriate preparation, which can include training in responding to provocation, in particular avoiding aggressive responses for example when police use force against protesters. Remaining nonviolent is essential for triggering the jiu-jitsu effect in which violence by police generates a backlash. In verbal interactions, preparation is also essential. Caught by an unexpected

comment, a verbal defender needs to inhibit the impulse to resist or counterattack, and instead use one of the numerous techniques that defuse, sidestep or transform the attack. Practice is vital. Practising among friends or work colleagues can prepare people for particular scenarios, and also develop skills that can be used in one-on-one situations. The books about verbal defence are filled with excellent techniques, but just reading about them is seldom sufficient. It's possible to imagine schools teaching verbal defence techniques.

Then there are activists, who want to be as effective as possible. In encounters with police, some protesters shout abuse. It's not physically violent, and so does not violate the usual boundary put around nonviolent action, but often it is ineffective or counterproductive. Activists could use the advice manuals on verbal defence to develop ways of expressing themselves that advance the cause. On the other side of the protest lines, police can learn how to defend against protester provocations. That is what Thompson recommends in *Verbal Judo*.

There is one final connection between nonviolent action and verbal defence: some of the most penetrating insights arise from practical experience. The practice of nonviolent action has been the driver behind most theoretical treatments, and similarly experience in verbal confrontations provides much of the insight in manuals on the topic. The common theme is learning by doing, which involves trying things out, seeing what happens and making suitable adaptations.

Appendix: other approaches to verbal defence

In this chapter, I looked at advice manuals on verbal defence, looking for parallels with the features of effective nonviolent action. There are some different approaches to this issue that I didn't pursue but which may be just as fruitful, in different ways.

Ellen Gorsevski in her book *Peaceful Persuasion* sets out to explore links between two fields: rhetoric and nonviolence, rhetoric being persuasive discourse or communication, through words, symbols or action.³⁰ Gorsevski covers a range of topics, ranging from speech communication pedagogy to the rhetoric of a Macedonian leader. Much of *Peaceful Persuasion* is about national and international politics, in which rhetoric plays a key role. Gorsevski makes the point that scholars of rhetoric have looked mostly at violence and almost never at nonviolent action.

Nonviolent action can itself be conceptualised as a form of communication. Wendy Varney and I identified five main dimensions of nonviolence as communication:

- conversion, persuasion, symbolic action, which are forms of dialogue with opponents
- noncooperation and intervention, which apply pressure as a way of equalising power and preparing for dialogue with opponents

30 Ellen W. Gorsevski, *Peaceful Persuasion: The Geopolitics of Nonviolent Rhetoric* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004).

- mobilisation of third parties, who then can influence opponents
- collective empowerment via dialogue within activist groups
- individual empowerment, which can be connected to a person's inner dialogue.

This is a framework for highlighting the communicative aspects of familiar forms of nonviolent action, namely protest, noncooperation and intervention.³¹ It does not have any obvious applications to defending against verbal attack. However, it might be useful in designing resistance against an organised campaign of verbal abuse.

There is a growing body of writing about bullying at work, some of which refers to mobbing, which is collective bullying. Many of the treatments of bullying deal mainly with documenting and explaining the nature and impacts of bullying and with formal processes for dealing with it, with little information on the practicalities of resistance. Indeed, to emphasise resistance might be seen to put the responsibility for solving the problem on the target of abuse. Nonetheless, there are some helpful hints in some treatments of bullying, which overlap with those provided in manuals on verbal defence.³²

31 Brian Martin and Wendy Varney, "Nonviolence and communication," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2003, pp. 213–232. See also Brian Martin and Wendy Varney, *Nonviolence Speaks: Communicating against Repression* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2003).

32 Treatments that I especially like include Andrea Adams with contributions from Neil Crawford, *Bullying at Work: How to*

Sharon Ellison advocates an approach she calls “non-defensive communication.”³³ This involves using carefully formulated questions, statements and predictions that reduce the likelihood of opposition and open up channels of communication. At the core of this approach is avoiding defensiveness. Being honest and revealing vulnerabilities can, in suitable situations, be extremely powerful in changing interpersonal dynamics. Ellison’s approach has many overlaps with the books on verbal defence.

Marshall Rosenberg’s book *Nonviolent Communication* is an approach to interpersonal communication to achieve true connection, getting past various barriers.³⁴ It includes:

Confront and Overcome It (London: Virago, 1992); Carol Elbing and Alvar Elbing, *Militant Managers: How to Spot ... How to Work with ... How to Manage ... Your Highly Aggressive Boss* (Burr Ridge, IL: Irwin Professional Publishing, 1994); Susan Marais and Magriet Herman, *Corporate Hyenas at Work: How to Spot and Outwit Them by Being Hyenawise* (Pretoria, South Africa: Kagiso, 1997); Judith Wyatt and Chauncey Hare, *Work Abuse: How to Recognize and Survive It* (Rochester, VT: Schenkman Books, 1997).

33 Sharon Strand Ellison, *Taking the War Out of Our Words: The Art of Powerful Non-Defensive Communication* (Deadwood, OR: Wyatt-MacKenzie, 2008).

34 Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion* (Del Mar, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 1999).

- expressing how you are — observations, feelings and needs — without criticising or blaming others
- requesting without demanding
- listening, empathetically, to the other person, without hearing criticism or blame
- listening, empathetically, without hearing demands.

Rosenberg does not give much attention to defending against verbal attack. His orientation is more about fostering good communication, which is typical of a large body of writing and practice on interpersonal communication. I mention Rosenberg's book here because he uses the word "nonviolent" to refer to his approach. However, he does not cite any writings about nonviolent action, nor does he mention any of the concepts from the field. Activists may gain the incorrect impression that *Nonviolent Communication* has some special connection with nonviolent action.

Activists can find much valuable material in manuals for preparing for nonviolent protest, in what is often called "nonviolent action training." These manuals include suggestions for planning actions, preparing participants to refrain from using violence (for example, how to react to police violence), publicity, techniques for group dynamics (especially consensus decision-making), strategic analysis, and much more.³⁵ Some of this material is relevant to dealing with verbal attacks.

35 Important contributions include *Handbook for Nonviolent Campaigns* (War Resisters' International, 2014, 2nd edition); Per Hengren, *Path of Resistance: The Practice of Civil Disobedience* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1993); Srdja Popovic,

Thomas Gordon's *Leader Effectiveness Training* is a classic book that includes communication methods for workplace leaders.³⁶ Then there is the huge body of writing on conflict resolution, which includes quite a bit of practical advice on interpersonal communication.³⁷ However, these guides do not give as much attention to responding to verbal attack as the ones covered in this chapter.

Conflict resolution can be approached by starting with Gandhian principles and applying them to interpersonal conflict.³⁸ Thomas Weber does this in a few pages of

Slobodan Djinovic, Andrej Milivojevic, Hardy Merriman, and Ivan Marovic, *CANVAS Core Curriculum: A Guide to Effective Nonviolent Struggle* (Belgrade: Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies, 2007).

36 Thomas Gordon, *Leader Effectiveness Training* (London: Futura, 1979).

37 A classic in the genre is Roger Fisher and William Ury, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (London: Hutchinson, 1982).

38 Important treatments of the Gandhian approach to conflict include Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: the Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958); Robert J. Burrowes, *The Strategy of Nonviolent Defense: A Gandhian Approach* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Richard B. Gregg, *The Power of Nonviolence*, 2nd ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1966); Krishnalal Shridharani, *War Without Violence: A Study of Gandhi's Method and its Accomplishments* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1939).

his book *Conflict Resolution and Gandhian Ethics*.³⁹ The basic approach is to internalise the principles of satyagraha, which includes working through one's own internal conflicts and obtaining a degree of clarity to enable seeing whether there is some truth in the opponent's position and, if so, admitting it. A Gandhian will attempt to find a resolution satisfactory to both parties. Weber suggests using techniques such as "I messages" (for example, "When you accuse me of not caring, I feel upset because I do care") and role-reversal, in which each person puts themselves in the situation of the other. In making these suggestions, Weber draws on conflict-resolution techniques that were developed outside the Gandhian tradition.

Mark Juergensmeyer in his book *Fighting with Gandhi* illustrates Gandhian approaches to conflict using various examples, including one involving a dispute with a neighbour and another a family feud.⁴⁰ Juergensmeyer says the Gandhian process is to examine each side's principles, create an alternative resolution and start doing the alternative. He also says that not all fights should be taken up; they should be pursued when fundamental principles are at stake.

Juergensmeyer seems to assume that opponents are open to persuasion; non-rational people are not mentioned. The approach of rational persuasion has much to offer, but

39 Thomas Weber, *Conflict Resolution and Gandhian Ethics* (New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1991), 60–65.

40 Mark Juergensmeyer, *Fighting with Gandhi* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).

may miss some techniques found in manuals on verbal defence that address underlying assumptions and motivations. Elgin, for example, recommends responding to the presupposition in a comment, not to the bait. This sort of technique might be hard to discover starting with a general Gandhian approach to conflict.

Writings on bullying, nonviolent action training and conflict resolution cover some of the same ground as the books on verbal defence addressed in this chapter. It is especially useful to compare the conflict resolution manuals with the verbal defence manuals. A parallel can be drawn with two approaches to nonviolence, commonly called principled and pragmatic. Adherents to principled nonviolence refuse to use violence because they consider it to be ethically wrong, even when used for a good cause. Principled nonviolence is in the tradition of Gandhi and is sometimes called Gandhian nonviolence. Pragmatic nonviolence is the use of nonviolent action because it is more effective than violence. It is most commonly identified with nonviolence scholar Gene Sharp.

Sharp is known for identifying, classifying and documenting historical examples of 198 different methods of nonviolent action, in the three broad categories of protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention. Sharp's approach is sometimes seen as a "methods" approach, in contrast to the Gandhian approach, which is a more comprehensive programme of seeking a solution to a conflict, as illustrated by Juergensmeyer's examples. Critics of the methods approach see it as too mechanical and insufficiently goal

directed, though ironically Sharp places more attention to strategic planning than just about anyone in the field.

In practice, choosing methods without an overall plan and goal is unlikely to be effective, while having a goal but lacking skills in a variety of methods is also likely to fail. The differences between pragmatic and principled approaches to nonviolence are not as great as sometimes suggested.

The same applies to verbal defence and conflict resolution. Verbal defence techniques can be likened to methods of nonviolent action, while conflict resolution approaches can be likened to principled nonviolent action. Writers on verbal defence provide many techniques, but invariably see them as part of an integrated package designed to achieve changes in relationships. Writers on conflict resolution discuss techniques as part of a wider goal. These two bodies of writing thus can be seen as complementary, just as pragmatic and principled nonviolence are complementary.

Some people start from general principles and apply them to specific situations. However, it is probably more common for people to address particular problems — whether verbal abuse or a repressive government — and perhaps gradually integrate their understanding into a broader set of principles. In this chapter, I focused on manuals for verbal defence because it is easier to assess them in relation to features of effective nonviolent action. Others may find it useful to undertake the same sort of analysis starting with writings and experiences of conflict resolution.