Gandhi's nonviolent struggles in South Africa and India had already brought him to such a level of notoriety, adulation, and controversy that when asked to write an autobiography midway through his career, he took it as an opportunity to explain himself. Although accepting of his status as a great innovator in the struggle against racism, violence, and, just then, colonialism, Gandhi feared that enthusiasm for his ideas tended to exceed a deeper understanding. He says that he was after truth rooted in devotion to God and attributed the turning points, successes, and challenges in his life to the will of God. His attempts to get closer to this divine power led him to seek purity through simple living, dietary practices (he called himself a fruitarian), celibacy, and ahimsa, a life without violence. It is in this sense that he calls his book The Story of My Experiments with Truth, offering it also as a reference for those who would follow in his footsteps. A reader expecting a complete accounting of his actions, however, will be sorely disappointed. Although Gandhi presents his episodes chronologically, he happily leaves wide gaps, such as the entire satyagraha struggle in South Africa, for which he refers the reader to another of his books. And writing for his contemporaries, he takes it for granted that the reader is familiar with the major events of his life and of the political milieu of early 20th-century India. For the objective story, try Yogesh Chadhas Gandhi: A Life. For the inner world of a man held as a criminal by the British, a hero by Muslims, and a holy man by Hindus, look no further than these experiments. --Brian Bruya

My Personal Review:
From this book we can see that Gandhi took everything in his life, from the smallest details of his diet to the grandest political decisions, very, very seriously. He believed that only a blade of the purest metal could cut through illusion to reveal the underlying truth of a society and of a world. The key to this purity for Gandhi was integrity and consistency in every word and deed. If he made a promise to abstain from milk, or to support a particular political position, he would keep that vow even at the risk of his life.

This concept of integrity started from Gandhi's personal life and extended outward to each community and each nation that he touched with his message and with his political campaigns. When he worked to elevate the status of the Indian community in South Africa, he worked simultaneously...
to improve the sanitary habits and internal justice of that community, thereby ensuring that there was integrity not only in the nation of South Africa, but also in the Indian community itself. The same pattern can be seen in his work with the Champaran peasants (ryots) to remove the crushing feudal tribute of indigo required of them by their landlord masters. As he led that campaign, he simultaneously established schools in the region and once again taught the rudiments of sanitation to the oppressed farmers. And of course his tireless campaign against untouchability, and his work to heal the rifts between Muslims and Hindus were both attempts to ensure the integrity of Indian society itself, which he considered a necessary part of attaining Indian independence from Britain, thereby helping to heal the inconsistency of colonialism at the global level, which in turn brought greater integrity to international relations.

Likewise, his promotion of the use of Hindi and Gujarati (this book was written by Gandhi in Gujarati) rather than English in Indian public life, his promotion of homespun Indian cloth and revival of a cottage industry to create it, his civil disobedience in the making of Indian salt from seawater, were all attempts to ensure that the Indian nation and people could define themselves as a more self-sufficient entity having a distinct identity, rather than describing themselves as they related to an external entity, i.e., the British government.

At every level, then, he desired and sought to create one thing: integrity. His ethics seemed to be: every person, every family, every community, every nation, that is founded upon an organic set of relationships, has a right to exist, to strengthen its own identity and to shine forth with its own kind of light. The process of integrating smaller such entities into larger ones must be a dialectical, interactive one that respects differences, rather than one of control or subsumption. In this way, the material world comes to reflect the infinite diversity, and the inviolable integrity, of the All, and the Divine thus creates an expression of itself in that material substrate, however transient and imperfect that expression may be.

Part of his genius as a political organizer lay in his understanding that control hierarchies such as the British colonial administration depended upon the organic processes of Indian society to create the value that they wished to extract and exploit. A policy of peaceful non-cooperation, when carried out in a determined and disciplined fashion, could rob the imperial power of the very wealth upon which it is based, thereby forcing it to release its hold. This exposes the fundamental paradox of imperialism: that it can only rule by breaking down and compromising the very social fabric that generates the wealth upon which it depends. Therefore, there are limits to the measures that it can take to coerce obedience from an organized and disciplined population.

As imperialism breaks down the internal relations of a society, it simultaneously presents that breakdown as a justification for its continued dominance, since otherwise (it claims) the disparate parts of the organic
system would surely attack and consume each other in internecine conflicts. Thus, Gandhis implicit answer to Hobbes notorious quote that without the state life would be nasty, brutish and short was evidently to re-build the fraternal relationships of the sundered parts of the organic social and political animal (e.g., Hindus and Muslims), thereby rendering the state-based control structure a superfluous and unnecessary remedy.

Although there are many aspects of this book that could be improved for the naive reader (of which I count myself as one) by creating an annotated edition, the narrative retains its hold because of the sense of discovery and self-revelation that emerges from every page.

As we each grapple with the finiteness of our own lives and the question of how meaning can be derived from something so transient as this life and this world, Gandhis integration of the material with the spiritual in his own life provides a rare and helpful example. As he writes at the end of the book, I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means. In a world that is increasingly run by totalitarian corporations that impose their control over people, governments and the environment with results that are utterly destructive to the integrity of each, Gandhis struggle for a spiritual politics and a political spirituality shines in a way that can still give us hope today, if only we will take our lives as seriously as he took his own.

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