

# “Transforming Rationality to Sustain the World: Dialogical Rationality as a Key to the Ecological, Political, Technological and Moral Existential Crises We Face”

by

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To set the tone and context, a song . . .

I'm gonna slow right down,  
so I can get there sooner.

I'm gonna slow right down,  
so I can get there today.

I'm gonna slow right down,  
maybe even come to a full stop.

Maybe if I come to a full stop  
I'm gonna get there right away.

The civilization globally dominant on our planet is structured by modes of reasoning in economics, governance, technology and morality that threaten our species with ecological collapse, mutually assured destruction, domination by super-human machine intelligence and the annihilation of meaning for human life.

A species which imposes such radical existential threats upon itself must, in some sense, have a problem rooted not simply in its environment and desires but also in the manner in which it reasons about these and seeks to adapt. Our dominant reasoning strategies are, in a profound sense, irrational. How has this come to be? And what might be a more rational way to understand the general nature of reasoning and substitute better forms of it for the economic, realpolitik, instrumentalist, and foundationalist/relativist modes of reasoning that frame and further our current existential threats?

Details vary but in general this vision supposes rational thought begins with clear definitions, observations of fact, general hypotheses, and rules of inference in order to calculate or compute the implications of them. The vision generally supposes that such implications follow as a matter of fact and that the rational agent drawing them can be best understood as a hypothetical, objective and neutral spectator who is simply concluding what follows rather than making judgements of some subjective kind. The spirit of “objectivity” in this sense of the term is emphatic in what are, arguably, the dominant understandings, globally, of economic rationality, realpolitik, instrumentalist reasoning about technology, and post-Enlightenment attempts to understand morality in Utilitarian, Kantian or related frames. Rational agents so conceived can, of course, use their “objective” knowledge to act in the world but in doing so simply express individual utility preferences, national interests, intuitions or other subjective forms of valuation they happen to have.

The merits and limitations of these mono-logical patterns of reasoning are relatively well known. On the one hand, economic rationality aimed at maximizing personal income and GNP has offered models yielding dramatic gains in prosperity for many. Realpolitik has provided clear headed and unsentimental analyses of international politics that have enabled leaders to jettison traditional superstition and pursue national interests in more coherent and effective ways. Instrumentalist rationality has empowered developments in technology that can ignore religious and other kinds of metaphysical concerns and focus on acquiring the power to manipulate our environment (and each other) in increasingly effective ways. And Utilitarian, Kantian and related human rights ways of analyzing moral issues have offered ways to increase the systematic coherence of moral intuitions previously muddled in confused cultural customs and intuitions.

On the other hand, economic maximization has led to irrational pursuit of material growth exceeding our ecological capacity. (Brown 2009) Realpolitik has led to pursuit of military power yielding strategies of mutually assured destruction which will preclude the realization of any coherent set of goals. (Schell 1988) Instrumentalist technological reasoning is leading to the development of a “Smarter Planet” and Artificial General Intelligence in forms that may surpass human control and supervene human interests of all kinds -- including the survival of our species. (Bostrum 2016) And mono-logical attempts to frame and justify systems of moral and spiritual convictions are plagued by relativisms that undermine attempts to frame the meaning of our lives. (MacIntyre 2014)

Let us consider some paradigmatic exemplars of an alternative way of understanding reasoning – as “dialogical” rather than “monological”. These exemplars include Quaker communal discernment, the Gandhian satyagraha, and a wide variety of other traditions of nonviolent negotiation and conflict transformation. (Cox 1986, Sheeran 1996, Bondurant 1988) The first definitive feature of them is that they understand the reasoning process as involving two or more real rather than hypothetical agents who typically have substantively different practices for interacting with the world and systematically different starting points provided by their varied language, beliefs and norms.



The challenge of the reasoning process is for these parties to negotiate those differences and develop new language, practices and plans of action on which they can agree. A second feature of the exemplars I have in mind, is that they are committed to seeking genuine agreement through nonviolent practices of investigation and persuasion that forgo violent threats to coerce an unwilling consent.



A third feature of these exemplars is that they understand the elements and aspects of the reasoning process in “emergentist” rather than “static” or “reductionist” ways. For instance, they understand the meaning and truth of sentences, the identities of the selves and communities stating them, and many of the social realities they are interacting with as things that emerge and grow or otherwise develop during the dynamic course of negotiation.

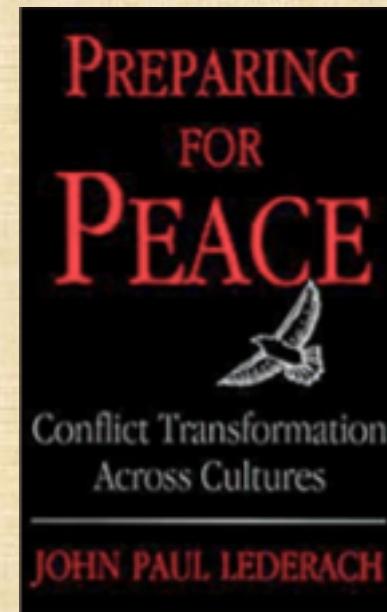
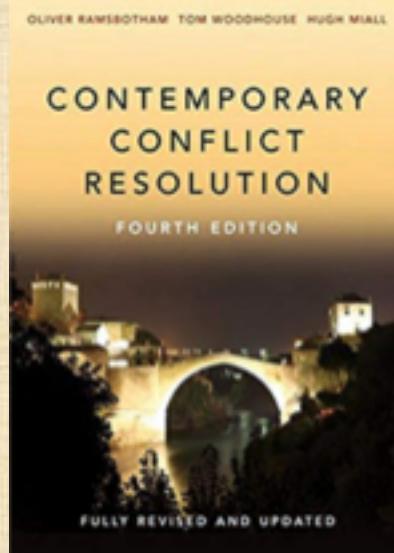
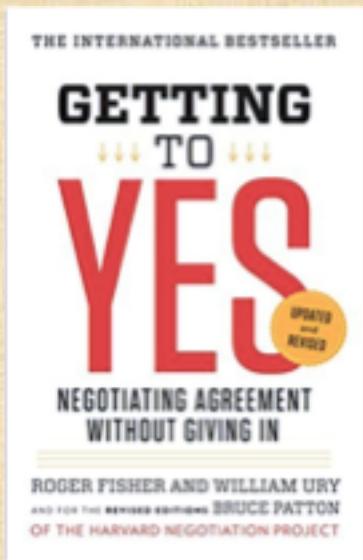
Many of the distinctive practices of rationality in these traditions focus, precisely, on methods for getting shared meanings to emerge in forms that express increasingly truer views of our options and are found more agreeable.

To illustrate, briefly, one such strategy is to provide methods to creatively generate multiple options that might productively redefine the situation. Consider the kind of hypothetical dilemma focused on in many courses on ethics: A surgeon has five patients in need of different organs for lifesaving transplant.

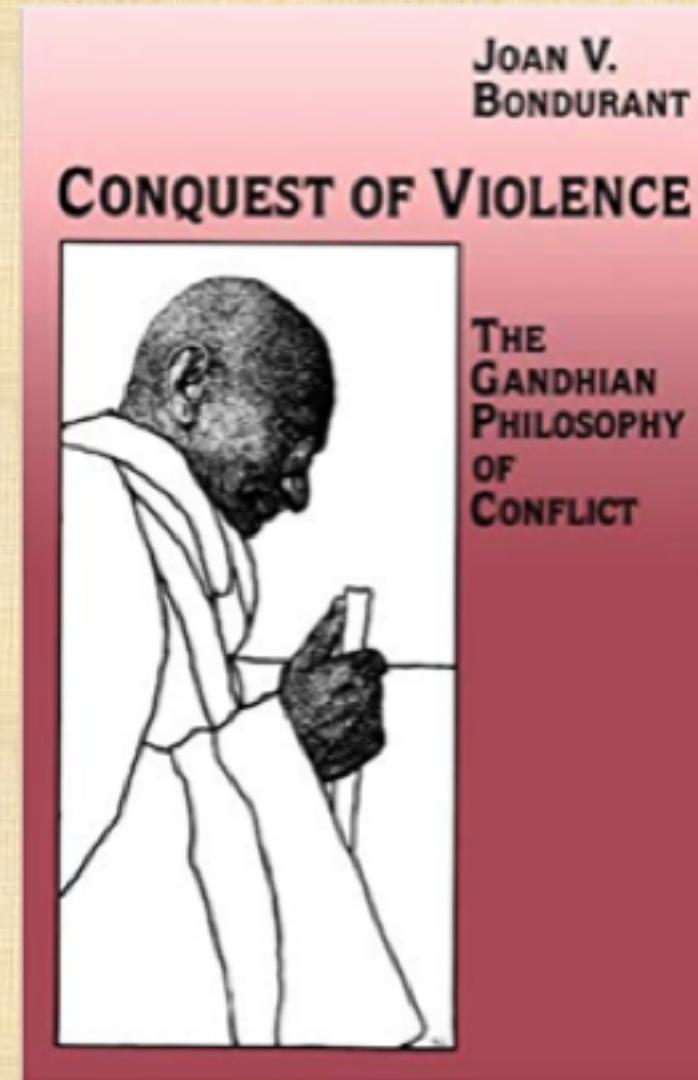


She has a healthy young patient napping in a private room. Should she harvest his organs – sacrificing the one for the many like a good Utilitarian – or abhor such an option like a self-respecting Kantian? In real life, we would want to reject the horns of this dilemma and search for alternatives. We might invite others into the dialogue who have knowledge of other sources of organs, ways of prolonging the ill patients' lives while awaiting suitable transplants, ways of substituting artificial devices or treatment regimes for the organs or ways of brainstorming other creative options – like inviting one of the terminally ill patients to sacrifice his organs to save the others. The search for new ways of framing peoples' interests and the options available can often provide “win/win” outcomes by “increasing the size of the pie” or even provide outcomes that stop framing the situation as a conflict that results in winners and sees it instead as a shared problem participants are seeking solutions for.

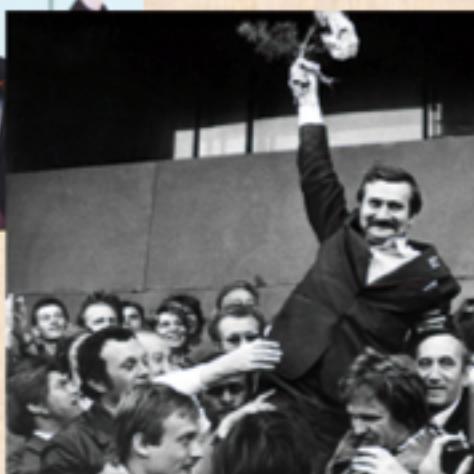
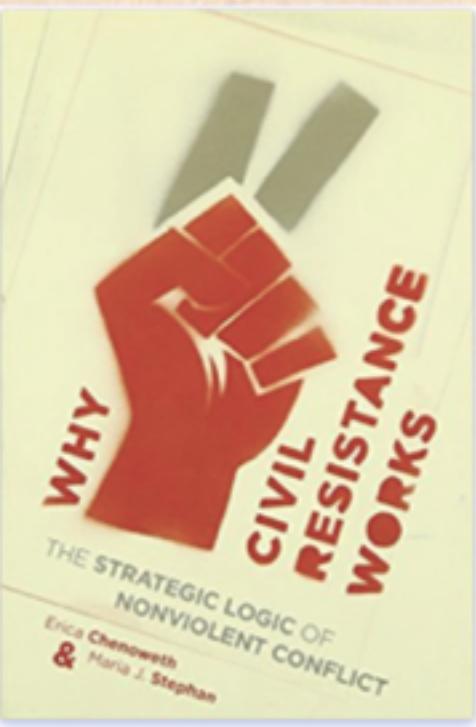
Research on negotiation and conflict transformation has yielded detailed accounts of these strategies and a host of others that help parties “get to Yes” -- like “focusing on interests”, “separating the people from the problem” and “searching for objective, independent criteria”. In recent decades, research on ways such strategies may vary in different situations, settings, and cultural traditions has been especially productive. (Fisher 1996, Chew 2001, Cox 2014, Bartoli 2011, Ramsbotham 2016)



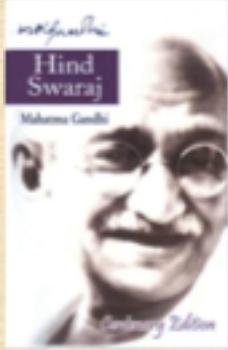
Perhaps the most challenging situations for dialogical reasoning involve people ready to use violence – either directly in attacks or indirectly through institutionalized power imbalances that create structural violence. Fundamental to genuinely dialogical reasoning is the respect for others that is grounded in I/thou relationships that preclude the appeal to violence to settle disputes. (Buber 2013) Instead, following Gandhi, the appeal is to forms of “clinging to truth” or “satyagraha” that provide compelling witness to emergent, objective moral truths. Such witness involves self-sacrifice that can “melt the heart” of the Other and also provide a check on the moral clarity of the self offering sacrifice. Further, such witness is characterized by a refusal to cooperate with injustice and wrongdoing.



Such nonviolent direct action can provide effective sanctions to urge the Other to comply with justifiable moral claims, giving Truth power. (Rediehs 2015) The effectiveness of such non-violent direct action has been extensively studied and shown to be as or more powerful and successful than violent methods of resistance and revolution. (Sharp, Chenoweth)



Gandhi's vision for freeing India from the British Raj grounded the change in nonviolent satyagraha campaigns of boycott, salt making, et cetera that extended to every walk of life, generating parallel institutions for law, agriculture, education, health, et cetera. (Gandhi, Bondurant) Indian home rule or "Hind Swaraj" would be won, in this way, by displacing the colonial state with indigenous – nonviolent -- institutions. Facing an irrational global security system appealing, ultimately, to mutually assured destruction, we need to likewise pursue an "Earth Swaraj" through systematic development of parallel institutions using nonviolence to rule the world from the ground up.



From the ground up, we can fund such institutions if we who are consumers with First World levels of income begin to spend a half or more of it as agents of history instead of addicts to consumption. We can spend on acts of solidarity, socially responsible investment, and political change in order to both cut our ecological footprint in half and transform the world. We can make this shift in five stages, 10% a year, by progressive increases in expenditures on charity, retirement investment, and political action – and by drawing on cultural practices of fundraising for community events and family gifts. For example, a million person march for climate change can be transformed into a “march-athon”, raising a billion dollars for the Least Developed Countries Fund.



Instead of giving loved ones objects at holidays, we can give them checks to donate to worthy causes that enhance the world they love. Giving such “gifts of giving”, can nurture our shift to a new framework of reasoning. Instead of “Rational Economic Man”, mono-logically pursuing endless increase in material consumption, we may become “Rational Agents of History”, in dialogue and collaboration, pursuing a worthy future.

The technology of science and institutional management that currently fuels consumption is guided, fundamentally, by mono-logical algorithms that pursue profit and GDP through creation of an ever “smarter planet”. This threatens us with the creation of artificial intelligences (AI) that may surpass us in power and perhaps render us useless and extinct. To insure any AI that runs our planet is friendly to humans, good in intents, and wise in actions, we need to insure that the methods of dialogical reasoning – including Gandhian satyagraha – are “em-bodied” in its program structures and incarnations.

Such dialogical reasoning is essential to being human. “In-carnating” it in global economic, political, technological and spiritual institutions provides our only coherent hope for survival that can give life enduring meaning – through creating not just a “smarter planet” but a “Wiser Earth”.

