III-17. An Activist Perspective

First they ignore you. Then they laugh at you. Then they fight you. Then you win.

- Mohandas K. Gandhi

What is common between Einstein and Gandhi? In 1925 both signed a document against forcing men into Military service. At the end of the century both were among the three judged to be most influential persons of the 20th century. Albert Einstein is remembered for developing the current understanding of matter and energy in relation to space and time. In the pursuit of his belief in the superiority of his strain of humans (ill defined as race), Adolf Hitler annihilated 100 million people within a decade. Even in his life time Mohandas Gandhi was called Mahatma, the great soul, for emphasizing conflict resolution through non-violent behaviors. He argued against arbitrary principles and beliefs.

Paradoxically, based on their individual beliefs, each of the three above followed a *rational* course of action to address a problem recognized by many. In each case the behavior was contrary to the prevailing belief system. Clearly, their efforts were not directed towards self-goals, nor was their vision accomplished in their lifetime. Yet they continue to influence choices available to virtually all of us.

As an activist thinker Gandhi used to talk disparagingly of dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be

good. In 2001 Nelson Mandela noted: *At a time when Freud was liberating sex, Gandhi was reining it in; when Marx was pitting worker against capitalist, Gandhi was reconciling them; when the dominant European thought had dropped God and Soul out of the social reckoning, he was centralizing society in God and soul; at a time when the colonized had ceased to think and control, he dared to think and control; and when the ideologies of the colonized had virtually disappeared, he revived then and empowered them with a potency that liberated and redeemed.*

Understanding human behaviors. Wasted effort is also wasted resource. Consequential actions also impact others. Direct causality is difficult to establish in a multivariate and uncertain world. Yet most recognize causal, evidential, and symbolic relationships between the action and consequences. Charting a rational course of actions poses the challenge of recognizing deeper potentiality while grounding the vision in reality.

Self-reference is good yard stick. Chances of success improve through practice of doing what you preach. By avoiding irreversible action we get a second chance. As we learn from feedback, prudence for decision-making dictates avoiding traps of paradoxes and contradictory behaviors. On the other hand deontological a priori (moral, ethical and legal principles and values) is often a matter of arbitrary interpretation that leaves considerable gap between theory and practice.

Language and communication have become integral part of human behaviors. So much so that most of our learning and experiences are now language based. Communication abilities are not unique to humans. Humans excel in behaviors based on abilities to communicate, share thought, and pass the experience for the future. Word interactions also help individuals enhance their potential and compensate for weaknesses. Language

abilities are beginning to compete with other individual attributes of nurture and nurture.

We interact in commonsense way with the imminent and the immediate. The tit-for-tat tendency may be an instinctive behavior but it is also captured by virtually all models of successful group behaviors. Rationality of human group behavior extends to initially treating one's fellow being well with benefit of doubt. Reciprocation may follow on subsequent encounters.

The observed and phenomenal worlds may be indifferent, but at least humans are not indifferent to the interactions with such worlds. The uncommon sense of all animal behaviors lies in way we perceive patterns where none may be obvious. This is how we learn, develop and share information to facilitate future actions with lesser reliance on trial and error. To extract information we also appeal to imagination, transcendence and potentiality Operational rationality of individual and group behaviors lies in the actualization of reality and its potential. Within this framework, damage control is a part of consequence evaluation.

Future is touched by the activist approaches of the past, and others are touched by the influential actions. Tools, agriculture, and symbolic manipulation of language are some of the cherished developments of such collective heritage. So are the practices that perpetuate blind faith, exploitation, and means of warfare. As a lesson of history, rational behavior does not emerge from any particular development. But those which contribute are considered desirable for all times to come.

Practice based validity contributes to longevity. Through literature, peer interactions, and carrot-and-stick approaches we nurture abilities to identify the consequential. Instrumental and serviceable truths emerge as ways to minimize regrets by

avoiding contradictions and irreversible acts. In the process all are touched by the collective vision as more individuals recognize their potential to incrementally become what they never thought was likely.

Individual behaviors of all shades are based on internal models. Such models rely less on the grand universals or inherited traits, and more on what we learn from contingent and local contexts. It is easier said than to figure out how it happens. Both by rational and irrational variants of human behaviors appear to follow the same pattern, if not the trajectory. What do we do when things go wrong? How do we recognize a rational approach? Can we follow a democratic model to recognize or identify rational behaviors? When do we recognize that things have gone wrong? Why and when do things go wrong? It works out if we are free to make decisions, follow through, and have to live with the consequences.

Emotions rule our sensitivity and sensibility. Consider the fascination of the news and entertainment media with morbidity. Most remain unconcerned unless victimized personally. From the comfort of our homes, we think little about wiping-out the space-aliens on the silver screen. Before it was not politically corrected most reacted with the same insensitivity in the history class about decimation of millions of natives of the Americas and Africa. Responses were not very different to deaths from nazi gas chambers, atomic holocaust (Hiroshima and Nagasaki), from poisons (Kurds), from industrial accident (Bhopal), or from the smashing of an airplane into Twin-Towers (Manhattan) or Pentagon. Different people may have been touched differently, but most did little.

Not many are shaken even when they see the imminent. Very few smokers, alcoholics, gun-slingers and drug-users seem to worry about what these do to the quality of their own lives, let alone of the others. Do we understand why we do or do not do certain things even when the outcome is more or less certain? When and how do we react to unfolding events? When do tragic events become a tragedy?

Why do we hold back?. People do what they have to do. We accept the consequences as the best of the possible real worlds. Risk taking is a factor in the realization of human potential. But few take risk even the consequences of not taking risk are evident. Depending on what motivates us and what we desire we make principles to justify our actions. With such ad hoc deontological a priori, consequences are evaluated as narrow utilitarian after-thought. We know too little to consider the interests of everyone to arrive at a utilitarian or deontological utopia. The best, most effective, or most efficient actions are not necessarily rooted in rational conception of goals or means.

Truth accumulates baggage. Truth has been called as the essence, spirit, or soul. As commonly conceived, truth is a static term for a facet of reality. It may even be a hypothetical view of reality that barely touches upon the potential. The downside emerges as the belief in a hypothetical version degenerates into true-belief and faith. It is hard to get rid of such liabilities of truth. Beyond serviceability, qualifications like coherence and correspondence do not peel truth away from ad hoc and a priori of one brand or another. Apparently, the problem stems from the fact that we still do not have a theory of truth as noted by Robert Nozick in *Invariances* (2001): *To know the correct and deep theory of truth's nature requires far more than the mere ability to state particular truths. It requires knowledge of the ultimate dependence relations, and of the*

ultimate explanatory and ontological factors. A theory of truth, therefore, arises closer to the end of inquiry than to its beginning. Do not be surprised that we have not reached it yet.

Neither do we a theory of medicine or of its practice. In all such cases we do not have the ultimate dependence relations. We are unlikely to know when to expect these to arrive.

There are far too many invented truths, and more can be made to order. For our purposes we often confuse truth with facts of information and other particulars (Rothman and Sudarshan, 1998). Even if we assume that truth is a useful version of actuality, the multidimensionality of phenomenal reality is unlikely to be compressed into a null point where the various valid assertions about the world intersect. Similarly, without compromising the essential character of reality, its hierarchical nature cannot be compressed into a singularity of truth – not even as an extrapolation. Maybe the universal or basic truth, like omniscience, is also one of those unattainable ideals that contradict reality.

Omniscience contradicts reality. Consider the liar's paradox. Would you trust a person who asserts *I always lie*? Clearly, no matter how much effort one puts into the analysis of such a self-referential statement, its truth-value cannot be established. Omniscience is also such a paradox because it means little beyond what it is said to be. Beyond that it does nothing and means nothing. Like the philosopher's stone and perpetual machines such wishful constructs convey little that is useful. Very few habits of mind can reinforce inflexibility of behavior and attitudes to the extent that reliance on omniscience does. Omniscience by omnipotence fosters and then thrives in an environment of ignorance of fear.

The lore is also implicit in many other all-encompassing constructs for "unification," arguments for the civilizing influence of certain behaviors, survival of the fittest, manifest destiny, wars to end all wars, and the theory of everything. No wonder Plato's recipe (Republic), for authoritarian rule of the *wise* few over the *stupid* multitude, has inspired many despots. Here is Plato's recipe for the Perfect State: "… *best of either sex should be united with the best as often, and the inferior with the inferior as seldom as possible, and .. they should rear the offspring of the one sort of union, but not the other, if the flock is to be maintained in first-rate condition. Now these goings on must be a secret which the rulers only know, or these will be a further danger of … rebellion*." Hitler took this to his heart.

As caricatured in George Orwell's *1984*, whosoever comes into authority grabs the garb of the Wise. Such drum beating invariably has nefarious agendas against which we need a constant vigilance. Yet we fall for the pretender of know-all and tyrannies of half-baked ideas. Even if there is no enduring laws of history, the lesson is that all societies are far from being models of perfection. Ideologies have emerged as recipe for tyranny. As humans get propelled uncontrollably in the whirlpool of such influences, to protect self-interests their minds also regress for self-preservation.

Episodic instrumental in the shared circumstantial. Reactions and revolutions for social upheavals are desirable only if feudalism is not replaced by other forms of tyrannies, including the tyranny of a majority. Reliability of a call for action increases if predicated on objective reality. Traditionally, anecdotes and parables capture episodic circumstances as playful experience as the essence of reality. The process is vicarious. But we learn to explore and deal with episodes as make-believes from virtual worlds. Like the literary narratives, the entertain and news media

also build on the episodic changes. In all such cases, without a suitable narrator the burden of continuity of thought is on the consumer. Possibly for such reasons these devices have become messages for products.

Interaction with the episodic requires analysis and synthesis from the parts and relations. It is the way do inquiry in arts, philosophies, technologies, and the sciences. These are successful so long as there is a clear recognition that reality is not an arbitrary construct no matter how we represent it. As we pick and choose for the serviceable truths, our interest in the underlying reality becomes circumstantial. Such representations of circumstantial reality are always with us. We reaffirm their staying power every time we draw on them and share. If we are not careful, they encumber us. Without constant scrutiny over period of time, even the most useful representations and interpretations become listless intellectual property at best. For example, sound bites and memes degenerate into make-beliefs disconnected at the core of rituals.

Synthesis from beliefs. Instrumentality and serviceability of circumstantial representations of reality lies in the observer participation. Otherwise, such representations are indistinguishable from mindless propaganda based on fiction or faith. Impossibilities that contradict, but mimic the experience, are initially included *ad hoc* as in creationism, mysticism, and omniscience. Unless impeded through circumstances of nurture, such make-beliefs stay with us the rest of our lives. The unformulated models that interfere with the individual perception of reality behind awareness (*yoga chitra vritti nirodh* as noted by Patanjali ca. 450 AD) are ultimately weeded out through shared experience or contemplation. However, certainty emerges only in stages as specific doubts are resolved one at a time.

Shared circumstantial and potential are explored through narratives such as anecdotes, parables, poetry and epics. Utility of what is communicated lies not necessarily in the content, but in the exploration of effective alternatives with varying degrees of doubt and certainty. Narratives in effect celebrate shared perceptions while making the alternatives accessible to an individual for real-time use. It is also the purpose of play before it becomes a game. In such dealings with diverse level and range of emotions, the player develops constructs to deal with the circumstantial.

Playful interactions are significant for breaking new ground for virtually all representations. Playful exploration and interactions are encouraged at the leading and the lagging edges of science. At the lagging edge one explores implications. At the leading edge one develops thoughts about the workings of a specific and limited part of the universe. These are encoded in models with as many assumptions as necessary. In between one fills the information gaps to have confidence in the beliefs. Such analytical reductions have been remarkably successful in describing parts of the universe. In fact, predictive power of the practice-based beliefs is the basis of all rational decision-making. **Beliefs to ensure that** *love will stay true to itself.* Philosophers search for reasons to support their beliefs and construct arguments against other views. The rational core of European philosophy is dominated by the idea of *justified true belief.* This is the basis for thought applied as the explanatory power for reasoning to justify goals, desires, means and ends. Theologies have varyingly drawn upon such models, often with more emphasis on belief in the a priori than that can ever be justified by practice.

The cognitive merit of stating assumptions was widely recognized in several cultures around 600 BCE. Some versions placed a high premium on the formulation of theories. These came to North Europe through Euclid, and in 16th century it evolved as the Cartesian rationality. Descartes' rationalism surmised that we should trust the self-evident backed up by reasons. Yet the basis for this belief is grounded in ever-so-elusive omniscience. The overall justification has elements of belief in prior knowledge, reliable facts, and reliance on certain universals. So what comes first in reasoning: belief or justification? An axiom-based treats search as an after the fact analysis. It deals with the past in the form of justifications that may often be built, knowingly or unknowingly, into the axioms, assumptions, and practice. Recognition of such limitations has opened ways to scrutinize the *worlds* of reason and criteria from within and without.

Ground for reason. Over the last few millennia numerous attempts have been made to arrive at *justified true beliefs* based on reasons to eliminate vagaries of chance, empiricism of whim, and the authority of grandfather clauses. Yet it is not easy to say what constitutes good reason for believing something. As individuals we perceive through conceptual schemes that guide and mislead us in real-time decision making. Through reasoning we actively interact with the awareness of events and happenings.

Reason is also an instrument for defining the goal as well for attaining the goal. Reasonable goals may be attainable goals but are not necessarily worth having. Thus they differ from rational goals. Reasons themselves have been used as evidence for what they are reason for. This is often the justification for the belief that reasons with connection to all relevant facts about the world must guide action, at least for the consequential actions.

What seems evident at the surface does not necessarily impart reality. Similes, metaphors, and the *bitters and yellows* of alchemists stay in touch with reality, but hardly anybody would call them real. In the same vein, wars give meaning to hollow lives and meaningless existence.

Cognizant of such difficulties, reason is grounded in induction (Hume) from generalization such as *all ravens are black.* This is valid only so far as the conclusion works. Such empirical validation is also inherent in the search for the *domain of reason* (Kant). This has evolved into non-deductive (statistical) probability of various forms. Such approaches have metamorphosed into the so-called path-based approaches for scientific knowledge based on the outcome of multiple events. Here knowledge is a way to intuit facts through reason. Inferences are used to construct empirical reality of single events but only in hypothetical terms. Consider the fact: People are more likely to be victims of violence if they keep guns around their homes. It does not mean that *all gun owners are victims of violence,* or *all victims of violence own guns.* Yet the probability of being a victim of violence increases if there are guns around.

Prisoner's dilemma

For an appreciation of how we deal with information in the domain of probability, consider the matrix of the possible prison terms (the numbers in years) facing two persons A and B charged with a crime:

		B confesses	
		No	*Yes*
A confesses	*No*	2,2	20,0
	Yes	0,20	10,10

While awaiting trial, their prosecutor, with insufficient evidence to charge either one, offers a deal. If only one of them confesses he gets 20 years and the other goes free. If both confess they get 10 years each. Based on the weak and circumstantial evidence that the prosecutor has, if neither party confessed they could be sentenced to only 2 years each. Clearly, not confessing is to the advantage of both prisoners. Clearly what one says has consequences for the other. What would they choose even when they know what they should choose?

Deontological a priori of reason and cause. As a comforting guide, certain kinds of actions are considered inherently right or wrong. We often assume that all action choices should be morally, ethically and legally defensible. Such pure deontological *rights* and *wrongs* without concern for consequences are virtually nonexistent. No where is it backed up by practice.

Moral precepts from omniscience are backed up by grace and judgment. With faith in place the responsibility for consequences is placed in the choice of action, and the decision is disassociated from the individual. In the Confucian approach the *a priori* comes from the ancestors and the emperor. Such faith-based decision still continue to influence the lives of many. Even in 21st century, in some are stoned to death, loose limbs, or raped as punishment under Islamic moral and legal code as in Saudi Kingdom.

Modern law and justice systems have made the causality connection more direct. Consider the consequences of keeping *undesirables* off the streets. Even if some are stopped from doing wrong, locking away petty criminals tends to make them more determined. Such threats are certainly not effective in stopping the political corruption, accounting manipulations, and corporate

wrongdoings. The white collar crimes cause far greater damage to innocent individuals while shaking confidence in institutions of organized society.

Rationality Rooted in Conceptual Schemes

To perceive worlds through conceptual schemes, we use knowledge to develop principles as standards and benchmarks of rationality. Most of our social activities are driven by principles thrust upon us. Specific principles guide us through learning chemistry, making marriages work, negotiating mergers of corporations, making pronouncements about the systems of education, government, and the world. Whether or not we understand, let alone learn to reason with such principles, as social beings we all learn to mimic the expected responses. In fact, in some cases the chasm can be so deep that the correspondence between the principle-based social expectations and personal beliefs is unbridgeable. Principles are not immutable. They change with time as we learn more about the system, at other times they have to be pushed out by force, if necessary.

At the very first level certain principles provide a road map for steering through the chores of living. Consider the utility of the following principles of behavior:

(a) Intellectual principles permit acceptable decisions as they constrain and restrain personal factors.

(b) Interpersonal principles assure adherence in the face of temptations and inducements. By reducing distractions, this increases the range of interactions and cooperation with others.

(c) Personal principles define one's physical being and intellectual identity. Self-control to overcome temptations is an important part of personal growth. Such commitments make certain decisions easier.

(d) Sometimes principles come to symbolize the standing and meaning of a person and society. It is known to induce irrational actions.

(e) Principles are also teleological devices that transmit evidential support and probability. Through give-and-take, they transmit utility from some actions to others.

It is worth examining what motivates us to justify our actions in terms of principles that we did not formulate ourselves. Possibly, at some stage principles become dissociated from reality with role playing and peer pressure as the judge. How do people take responsibility for their actions based on the principles they did not set? When do they try to overthrow principles? Would the leaders sponsor a war if they knew that they would at the front line? Does it make a difference if the war involves: Islamist mercenaries, or Christian missionaries, or Undercover operations of Superpowers, or Corporate raids? Would you be able to justify the difference?

Selective use of facts. Without clear recognition that we do not necessarily know all the facts about the world, rationalizations based on selected facts become vehicles for bias justified as beliefs. Such charges against the *standard* of rationality are not to be construed as bias against the *process* of rationality. Biases are often built into the attempts to develop a theory of rational action. For example, game theory is merely a model of a small part of the world in which certain human actions have defined outcome. It is evaluated only as winning or losing. It is only pragmatic that the fluid character of bounded, justified and veridical beliefs, if that is what theories and laws supported by principles aspire for, can be an aid in harnessing facts. Beyond that it is more desirable to shape reason with inferences rooted in emerging reality and acknowledge the liabilities built in the process.

Rationality of beliefs involves credibility of the reason and goal coupled with credibility of the source. The lesson is to remain cognizant of liabilities inherent in the assumptions, method, and inference and other products of reason (actions, behaviors). Even with this recognition sooner or later we begin to suffer from the out-of-context beliefs assured to be true. Beliefs are tied to the context with which incompatible possibilities are excluded or deemed unworthy of consideration. As the belief algorithms deteriorate further, the rituals take over. Many decisions are carried out without attention to the context, let alone thought of the consequences or risk-cost assessment. The casualty of this metamorphosis is reason itself.

Against Gods and Humbug