

# Gandhi in South Africa: An Interpretation<sup>1</sup>

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It is surely something of a paradox to begin a series of seminars on “Lives of South African Philosophers” by discussing a historical figure who was neither South African nor, at least in the strict sense, a philosopher. But I want to argue that M. K. Gandhi’s years in South Africa—from 1893 to 1914—and his writings of that time provide an indispensable lens through which to view South African intellectual life during the twentieth century.

South African intellectual life today is largely cut off from its past. It may be orientated to a greater or lesser extent toward the problems of South African society. But it looks elsewhere for its philosophical premises and theoretical perspectives—above all to the advanced capitalist societies of Western Europe and North America, with their long-established traditions and well-resourced academic systems.

This is a familiar pattern in colonial and post-colonial societies; a pattern now being given a new twist in South Africa. As intellectual life becomes increasingly specialized and confined to the universities, so the universities are increasingly integrated into the global marketplace, with academics required to orientate their work toward publication in international journals, and the like. That which is distinctive about South African intellectual life over the past century is disappearing before it has been grasped and articulated.

What is distinctive about South African intellectual life is not so much the originality of its philosophical arguments or the influence of its doctrines, but rather the ways in which they have developed in relation to a conflict-ridden history in which philosophical argument has been an embattled and often costly vocation. The ideal of unity of life and thought has been more pressing here than in more stable societies and also harder to achieve.

In this context a distinctive form of philosophical project has provided a way of living out a philosophical vocation.<sup>2</sup> This project has been shared by individuals of diverse philosophical and political persuasions. In this series I’ll try to show a similar form in the work of an activist for Indian rights and proponent of nonviolence (Gandhi), an Afrikaner nationalist opponent of imperialism drawing on the philosophy of pragmatism (Tobie Muller), a founder of the ANC Youth League and the leading theorist of Africanism in South Africa (Anton Lembede), a liberal opponent of apartheid working in the idiom of analytical philosophy (Daantjie Oosthuizen), and a Marxist academic much influenced by existentialism (Richard Turner).

The thought of these individuals has in common the rough form: It begins with a critique of the dominant philosophy of history they have encountered as an oppressive force in their context. In developing this critique, they put forward an alternative perspective on the world-historical process that provides a rudimentary philosophy of history with an emancipatory thrust. Finally, they use that philosophy

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2 To say that this project is distinctive is not to say that it is unique, nor that it occurs nowhere outside South Africa. However, I do not know of another historical context in which a similar form of philosophical project is as clearly characteristic.

of history as a basis on which to establish an ethics capable of being embodied in an individual life and of providing a larger social and political horizon. In each case they themselves lived out their ideas with unusual integrity, sometimes at the cost of their lives. Three of the five died in their thirties; two died by the assassin's bullet.

This form is in some ways closer to the classical conception of philosophy than it is to the conventions of contemporary academic life.<sup>3</sup> But at the same time—in these South African versions—it is a distinctly modernized version of the classical idea of philosophy as an ethical vocation.

Among them, as in all matters of living by your ideas, none was as extreme and relentless as Gandhi. Because the events of his life are so well-known, and because this seminar series begins with him, I will concentrate mainly on his writings—and one text in particular, *Hind Swaraj*. In this way, I hope to set out in more conceptual terms the form of project that provides the theme of my narrative.

## II

For many decades the vast literature on Gandhi focused on his years as an Indian political leader and treated his twenty-one formative years in South Africa as so much colorful background. Judith Brown's biography, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (1989) played an important role in changing this image of Gandhi's South African years. Brown argued that, for Gandhi, "the South African experience was a rich and formative one, molding him into a very special kind of public figure, far greater in range and experience than most [Indian] politicians of his day."<sup>4</sup> In her biography, Brown concentrates mainly on the ethnic, religious, and class diversity of Gandhi's South African constituency, and also on the complex divisions of the larger South African society in which he had to seek alliances and form strategies.

In a subsequent essay Brown argued more emphatically that in crucial ways "South Africa made the Indian Gandhi."<sup>5</sup> South African conditions allowed Gandhi to develop in the way he did, and Indian conditions could not have, she argues. Gandhi could not have risen to political prominence in India without patronage, family connections, great wealth, or professional prestige. He could not have done so without aligning himself in some way within India's religious divisions—above all, those between Hindu and Muslim. In the small and heterogeneous Indian community in South Africa he was able to take on the role of the spiritual teacher and political leader at the same time and effectively integrate them. In India it would have been far harder to turn the shame of arrest, imprisonment and conviction in the courts into a badge of honor. Finally, the ideological construct of the equality of all subjects of the British empire, which functioned in India largely as a means of co-option and control, was available in South Africa, where there was less need for co-option and cruder methods of state control, as a basis for mobilization.

Out of his at first scattered responses to these conditions came the fusion that was Gandhi's unique voice. Whether or not we accept that the same trajectory could

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3 Cf. Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2002).

4 Judith Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 57.

5 Judith Brown, "The Making of a Critical Outsider," in Judith M. Brown and Martin Prozesky, ed., *Gandhi and South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1996), p. 22.

not have been followed in India (when Gandhi first appeared in an Indian law-court, he was literally speechless), we can recognize in them conditions that apply in varying degrees to many other South Africans. Gandhi's legacy is more conspicuous in such contexts as the passive resistance campaign of the 1950s or in acts of defiance of unjust laws under apartheid. But it is not the only place in which it is felt.

### III

Gandhi's major philosophical text *Hind Swaraj*—written while he was returning by sea from an unsuccessful attempt to petition the British government to intervene on behalf of South African Indians—lists the authors whose work has most influenced him. “I have but humbly endeavoured to follow Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreau, Emerson and other writers, besides the masters of Indian philosophy.”<sup>6</sup>

Even if we take him at his word, we have to recognize that he followed their thought in response to very different conditions from those of his masters. He responded to different issues. His list does not give us a clear idea of the philosophical perspective that he sought to criticize or develop by drawing on these authors.

*Hind Swaraj*, like Gandhi's other South African writings, was largely a response to racial domination and its accumulated burdens. Whether implicitly or explicitly, Gandhi was addressing a peculiar combination of ideas of race and freedom.

Systematic ideologies of race emerged for the first time with the expansion of Europe. Their earliest versions allowed for the recognition of the humanity of black people. Thus, Oliver Cox quotes Gomes Eannes de Azurara's *Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* on the killing and capturing of infidels: “Though their bodies were now brought into subjection, that was a small matter in comparison to their souls, which would now possess true freedom for evermore.”<sup>7</sup> As European political thought became more secular, so the justification of slavery increasingly required the exclusion of the enslaved from the realm of humanity. The basic dilemma which racial domination created for bourgeois political thought in the era of slavery is well-captured in Francis Hutcheson's *System of Moral Philosophy* (1755), which condemns slavery as a violation of the principle that “each man is the natural proprietor of his own liberty” while at the same time defending the rights of property of the slave-owner.<sup>8</sup>

The idea that secular freedom was attainable by Africans and Asians—previously excluded from it by nature or history—emerged in response to the struggles of Africans and Asians against colonial domination. But it was for a considerable time a distinctively Western idea, drawing on Christian ideas of the value of the individual, early bourgeois ideas of the transition from a “state of nature” to civil society; the idea of progress which informed industrial capitalism, and all manner of racial stereotypes.

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<sup>6</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and other writings*, ed. Anthony J. Parel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> H.M. Hunter and S.Y. Abrahams, ed., *Race, Class and the World System: The Sociology of Oliver Cox* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987), p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 48-9.

The historical juncture at which these diverse sources coalesce, and this idea is most clearly embodied in Western political practice, was the aftermath of the Indian Mutiny of 1857. Queen Victoria's proclamation of November 1858 ended the rule of the English East India Company and made India part of the British Empire. It enacted "that so far as may be, our subjects, of whatever race and creed, be freely and impartially admitted to offices in our service, the duties of which they may be qualified by their education, ability and integrity, duly to discharge."<sup>9</sup> This formula located the freedom to which Indians could aspire within the restrictive context of service to the deeply-racialized cause of British imperialism, and set British norms of "education, ability and integrity" as the precondition for that freedom. It provided the framework within which Joseph Chamberlain, as colonial secretary at the end of the century, could defend "the traditions of the Empire which makes no distinction in favour of or against race or colour."<sup>10</sup>

A specific philosophy of history was central to this interpretation of the capacity of non-Europeans for freedom. Its central metaphor is set out in the classic text of modern liberalism—John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859)—in order to explain the exclusion of two categories of people from the principles of liberty which he defends: His doctrine applies, according to Mill, "only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties," and specifically excludes "children, or young persons below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood . . . who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others," and "those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage." For "despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end."<sup>11</sup>

Just as children are excluded from the realm of freedom until they have reached maturity (or at least a legally-fixed age), so entire societies are excluded from that realm while their "improvement" is undertaken by those who have already reached historical maturity. Until that has happened, they do not have the knowledge to achieve that condition for themselves. "The real causes which determine the prosperity or wretchedness, the improvement or deterioration, of the Hindoos are too far off to be within their ken," Mill writes in *Representative Government* (1861). "They have not the knowledge necessary for suspecting the existence of those causes, much less for judging of their operation."<sup>12</sup>

All the many fallacies contained in theories of the "child races" rested on this complex of ideas: that historical progress followed a gradually ascending line through the centuries, from Greece and Rome to modern Europe; that each "race" had to make its way along that line at whatever pace it was able, although allowance might be made for exceptional individuals who surpassed the racial norm; that freedom could only be achieved through this linear ascent; and that until the "backward" (or less "civilized") races were ready for freedom they should remain under the guardianship

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<sup>9</sup> R.E. Huttenback, "Indians in South Africa, 1860-1914: The British Imperial Philosophy on Trial," *English Historical Review* 81:319 (April 1966), pp. 273, 279.

<sup>10</sup> Huttenback, "Indians in South Africa, 1860-1914," p. 279.

<sup>11</sup> J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism, Liberty, Representative Government*, ed. H.B. Acton (London: J.M. Dent, 1972), p. 73.

<sup>12</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism, Liberty, Representative Government*, p. 384.

of the “advanced” (or more “civilized”). This might be described as the linear idea of racial freedom.

#### IV

I want to digress briefly in order to point out that it would be mistaken to see Mill’s argument as an unfortunate accretion—a concession to the prejudices of the Victorian age—that could in time be removed from the essential principles of liberalism without affecting their character. Liberalism is in large measure a theorization of the freedom that is made possible in the context of capitalism, and liberal acquiescence in racial domination is most clearly seen in this light. At certain stages in its development, either in a specific national context or globally, capitalism requires coercion in order to create a class that depends on the sale of its labour in order to survive. Race often provides a basis for such coercion, whether in the form of slavery or proletarianization. However, to the extent that capitalism establishes the political and economic conditions for its own further development, it becomes possible for it to do away with extra-economic forms of coercion, and rely mainly on the “free” and “equal” contract between capitalist and wage-labourer in order to perpetuate itself. In this context, liberalism can dissociate itself from racial domination to the extent that capitalism has established itself securely in a given context. The precise moment at which this happens is itself a question on which disagreement and debate within the ruling class are often likely.

Indeed, even those seeking the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism initially conceived of it within the context of a linear view of history that overlapped on crucial points with that of Mill. For Marx, Indian history “is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society.” Their domination and exploitation can be ended only by revolution in the capitalist West: “Then only will human progress cease to resemble that hideous pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain.”<sup>13</sup>

This conception found formal expression in the doctrine of trusteeship: a doctrine to which Gandhi at one stage gave his support. The Treaty of Versailles provided in 1918 that the “backward peoples” in the former German colonies, who were “not yet able to stand by themselves,” were to be treated as a “sacred trust of civilization.”<sup>14</sup> But this linear conception of racial freedom was also the starting point for the struggle *against* racial domination in the colonial world.

This was clearly true for the small educated elites, who sought not so much to challenge racial domination itself as to overcome racial barriers to taking up their rightful places within the hierarchy of class society. But it was true as well for those who sought to challenge the global order of racial domination at a more fundamental level. Indeed, it often happened that the more fundamental challenge to racial domination grew out of the frustrated ambitions of a small elite, and never altogether shook off its origins. This is evident in Gandhi’s political thought.

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<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, “The Future Results of British Rule in India,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Colonialism* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1959), pp. 81, 87; cf. Michael Lowy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development* (London: Verso, 1981), pp. 1-29.

<sup>14</sup> R.F. Alfred Hoernle, *South African Native Policy and the Liberal Spirit* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1945), p. 57.

Gandhi's political activism began in South Africa in 1894, and was for many years premised on his loyalty to the British Empire.<sup>15</sup> It was only in the struggle against the Asiatic Laws Amendment Ordinance of 1906, requiring that Indians in the Transvaal register as residents and produce their certificate of registration on demand, that Gandhi developed the strategy of nonviolent resistance that came to be known as *satyagraha*. His account of this development shows how Gandhi both depended on the linear conception of freedom, and at the same time contested its criteria for measuring advancement along its path.

Gandhi describes the draft ordinance as an attempt to lower the prestige of the Indian community, where registration by mutual consent would have increased it. It sought to "humiliate not only ourselves but also the motherland."<sup>16</sup> He protests that he has "never known legislation of this nature being directed against free men in any part of the world." He knows that "indentured Indians in Natal are subject to a drastic system of passes, but these poor fellows can hardly be classed as free men." Their oppression is anyway "a mere fleabite" compared to the potential losses faced by wealthy traders, who could be faced with "utter ruin in virtue of the Ordinance" (p. 137).

This sense of the prestige and honor of "free men" being attacked animated Indian resistance to the measures. This resistance was led initially by the merchant class with whom Gandhi had long been associated. In the years from 1907 to 1909—as Maureen Swan has shown—Gandhi became increasingly less dependent on the support of merchants and traders until he finally turned from them and sought support among the poor instead.<sup>17</sup> But the vocabulary of *satyagraha* was drawn at the outset from this defence of prestige and honor—informed, if not necessarily determined, by factors of class.

Gandhi's proposal to the Transvaal protest meeting of 1906 was centrally concerned with the maintenance of prestige. The meeting decided that rather than submit to the Ordinance, they would suffer the penalties of defying it—including prison, loss of property and deportation. One of the older members of the Indian community proposed that this resolution be accompanied by an oath taken in the name of God. The metaphor of "manhood" is central to Gandhi's explanation of the significance of this step to the meeting: "A man, who deliberately and intelligently takes a pledge and then breaks it, forfeits his manhood"; no one there "can be classed as an infant or as wanting in understanding"; all are "well advanced in age and have seen the world." None can say, "he did not know what he is about when he took the oath" (pp. 143-4).

This idea of demonstrating a degree of manhood that is denied by the oppressor through willing acceptance of suffering is central also to the question of

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. J.H. Stone, "M.K. Gandhi: Some Experiments with Truth," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 16, no. 4 (December 1990), pp. 721-40.

<sup>16</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, in S. Narayan, ed., *Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1968), vol. 3, p. 138. Further references are given in brackets in the text.

<sup>17</sup> Maureen Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), pp. 137-90, especially pp. 144, 167.

how this strategy is to be named. When a sympathetic commentator describes it as “passive resistance, which is a weapon of the weak” (pp. 152-3), Gandhi immediately responds: “If we continue to believe ourselves and let others believe that we are weak and helpless and therefore offer passive resistance, our resistance would never make us strong.” In contrast, by “fostering the idea of strength, we grow stronger and stronger every day” (p. 156). In this sense, *satyagraha* was not simply a means of demonstrating the moral capacity of the oppressed, but also a means of increasing that capacity in order genuinely to earn the rewards of their “civilization.”

It was essential to Gandhi’s strategy that it should not be merely a strategy for winning political gains, but also a moral affirmation of the capacity and willingness of the oppressed to take on the larger civilizational task ascribed to them by the linear conception of racial freedom. Inevitably, this produced an ambiguous relationship to the very idea of civilization.

## VI

A few years later, Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* articulated more fully his conception of civilization. *Hind Swaraj* has been described, in the recent scholarly edition, as “Gandhi’s seminal work . . . the seed from which the tree of Gandhian thought has grown to its full stature . . . the norm by which to assess the theoretical significance of his other writings.”<sup>18</sup> It is certainly a rich and multifarious text: a dialogue between “editor” (Gandhi) and “reader” (a composite of the Indian anarchist groups he had encountered in London in 1909) on the nature of freedom for India. The term *swaraj* is itself ambiguous, referring both to the constitutional domain of “home-rule” and the spiritual goal of self-mastery. Gandhi exploits this ambiguity to argue against the violent overthrow of British rule in India which, he says, will result in “English rule without the Englishman” (p. 28).<sup>19</sup> Instead he argues that a more fundamental moral transformation of Indian life is necessary, which can be undertaken through *satyagraha*, which in turn will make British rule impossible and establish true freedom in India.

Gandhi’s argument rests on a contrast between “modern civilization,” on the one hand, and “true civilization,” on the other. Modern civilization, according to Gandhi, makes “bodily welfare the object of life” (p. 35). Its technological advances are made at the expense of any underlying moral or political purpose. Gandhi is especially scathing about the British “Mother of Parliaments,” which is “like a sterile woman and a prostitute” (p. 30). It produces nothing lasting and final, is always subject to new pressures, its members are hypocritical and selfish and guided by short-term advantage. Turning the metaphor of historical maturity around, Gandhi asks of parliamentary government in Britain: “if it has remained a baby after an existence of seven hundred years, when will it outgrow its babyhood” (p. 32). By contrast, true civilization is “that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty” (p. 67), and that path does not change with the pressures of the moment: “India remains unmovable, and that is her glory” (p.66). Gandhi calls upon Indians to return

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<sup>18</sup> Anthony J. Parel, “Editor’s Introduction,” in M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and other writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. xiii.

<sup>19</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and other writings*, ed. Anthony J. Parel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 28. Further references are given in brackets in the text.

to the ancient simplicity of the village, to the spinning-wheel and the hand-loom, and the unity of rich and poor (p. 109).

In this vein, he develops a sweeping critique of the characteristic institutions of modernity, summed up in this indictment: "Railways, lawyers and doctors have impoverished the country, so much so that, if we do not wake up in time, we shall be ruined" (pp. 47). Railways cause people to "rush from place to place," whereas "man is so made by nature as to require him to restrict his movements as far as his hands and feet will take him" (p. 51; this was written while travelling by ship from London to South Africa). Lawyers "advance quarrels, instead of suppressing them" (p. 59). Hospitals are "institutions for propagating sin" (p. 63), encouraging people to neglect their health in the illusion that medical science can cure their illnesses.

*Hind Swaraj* is an amalgam of linear and cyclical views of history: calling for a return to an ancient and immovable past, ridding that past of its "backward" elements (untouchability, poor sanitation, etc), and motivating the call by the principle that "no nation has risen without suffering" (p. 118). Much of its argument can be interpreted as a kind of protest against the British betrayal of their own ideal of "civilization." Rather than abandoning the ideal, Gandhi relocates it where it is inviolable, in the Indian past. In this conception of world history, India comes to represent moral progress, which is real progress, through its refusal of economic progress as a social goal (pp. 156-63).

Gandhi continued to stand by the arguments of *Hind Swaraj* until the end of his life, to the bemusement of his younger comrade, Jawaharlal Nehru.<sup>20</sup> In his famous "Quit India" speech of 1942, he contrasted his idea of freedom with that of the modern West: "I do not regard England, or for that matter America, as free countries. They are free after their own fashion, free to hold in bondage the colored races of the earth. . . . You shall not limit my concept of freedom. . . . If they will know the real freedom they should come to India" (p. 185).

Long before then, he had accepted that India was "not ripe" for the *swaraj* which he upheld, that this was a goal towards which he strived as an individual, while his "corporate activity is devoted to the attainment of Parliamentary Swaraj in accordance with the wishes of the people of India."<sup>21</sup> The idea of parliamentary swaraj is, however, a denial of the entire argument of *Hind Swaraj*, which indicts British parliamentary government precisely for the systematic hypocrisy it produces, and its erosion of moral self-mastery. By the time of Indian independence, Gandhi had made himself into a unifying symbol of tradition and modernity, and effectively abandoned the quest for that unification to take place within society.

## VII

*Hind Swaraj* provides no more than a rough sketch of a philosophy of history, and I have outlined only its main tendency. But Gandhi did enough to distinguish his position clearly from that of the philosophy of history that justified colonialism and racial domination.

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<sup>20</sup> Gandhi-Nehru letters, in Parel, ed., *Hind Swaraj*, pp. 149-55.

<sup>21</sup> Gandhi, "A Word of Explanation" (1921) in *Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 4, p. 96.

For Gandhi, developing an alternative philosophy of history was never an end in itself. The purpose of his thought was always to be found in action. His philosophy of history was developed primarily as a basis on which a distinctive conception of ethics could be established—an ethics that was at the same time a practice of politics, as for Gandhi these two fields were completely unified. The task of the *satyagrahi* was to act in accordance with this understanding of the historical process.

A brief account of some features of the ethics that results will enable me to return to the larger argument of this paper concerning the distinctive form taken by philosophy in South Africa.

1. As already noted, Gandhian ethics insisted on nonviolence, in political and personal relations alike. *Satyagraha* is described as “a method of securing rights by personal suffering; it is the reverse of resistance by arms” (p. 90). This is the essential premise of all that follows.

2. This commitment to nonviolence is supported by a rejection of any moral calculus that justified specific actions by the ends they achieved. The editor tells the reader in *Hind Swaraj*, “It is perfectly true that [the English] used brute force, and that it is possible for us to do likewise, but, by using similar means we can only get the same thing they got. You will admit that we do not want that. Your belief that there is no connection between the means and the end is a great mistake. . . . The means may be likened to a seed, and the end to a tree; and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree” (p. 81). This rejection rests partly on Gandhi’s conception of the ends of political action as the transformation of the agent, rather than any external goal.

3. The element which makes Gandhian nonviolence different from other conceptions of pacifism or civil disobedience, is its insistence both that non-violent resistance be guided by inner conscience, and at the same time that it acknowledge the limits of that conscience—that is, that the *satyagrahi* might be making a mistake, or acting for an unjust rather than a just cause. “It is a bad habit to say that another man’s thoughts are bad and only ours are good, and that those holding different views from ours are the enemies of the country” (p. 17).

Also, if nonviolent resistance is used in a cause that is unjust “only the person using it suffers. He does not make others suffer for his mistakes. Men have before now done many things which were subsequently found to have been wrong. No man can claim to be absolutely in the right, or that a particular thing is wrong, because he thinks so, but it is wrong for him so long as that is his deliberate judgement” (p. 91).

4. To some extent Gandhi’s argument on the fallibility of our opinions resembles that of classical liberalism—for example, that of Mill’s *On Liberty*. Akeel Bilgrami has explored this resemblance in an illuminating recent account of Gandhi’s thought that brings the difference between Gandhi’s perspective and that of liberalism clearly to the fore.

Bilgrami argues that Gandhi denies the entire western tradition according to which a moral principle must either be followed or its violation subjected to criticism. Put differently, he understands the universality of moral acts in a different way. “He too wants one’s acts of conscience to have a universal relevance, so he too thinks he choose for everyone, but he does not see that as meaning that one generates a principle or imperative for everyone. . . . In Gandhi’s writings there is an implicit but bold proposal: ‘When one chooses for oneself, *one sets an example to everyone.*’ That is the role of the *satyagrahi*. To lead exemplary lives, to set examples to everyone by

their actions. And the concept of the exemplar is intended to provide a wholesale alternative to the concept of principle in moral philosophy.”<sup>22</sup>

This captures a central element of what I had in mind in talking, at the beginning of this paper, about the distinctive form of philosophical project in South Africa reasoning from a critique of the dominant philosophy of history to an *embodied* ethics—that is, an ethics that is lived out by the individual thinker, rather than being a matter of abstract argument. Such an ethics is intended to provide a basis for political action and to prefigure the society that a movement seeks to bring into being, rather than being addressed to a philosophical community. Put differently, philosophy has only taken on a truly distinctive form in South Africa insofar as it has been practised in organic connection with larger social movements, rather than seeing its tasks in purely academic terms.

5. Gandhi departs most fully from the characteristic features of this philosophical project in seeking to provide a detailed set of rules and guidelines for individual and community life that make *satyagraha* possible. His starting point is that “nature has implanted in the human breast the ability to cope with any difficulty or suffering that may come to man unprovoked” (p. 98). The fully prepared *satyagrahi*, then, unlike the rest of us, finds it easy and natural to submit without fear or resentment to suffering in a just cause.

But for this the right preparation is needed: “After a great deal of experience,” Gandhi writes, “it seems to me that those who want to become passive resisters for the service of their country have to observe perfect chastity, adopt poverty, follow truth, and cultivate fearlessness” (p. 96). Already at Phoenix settlement and Tolstoy Farm he had begun to formulate rules of dress, diet, hygiene and the like that he would continue to elaborate throughout his life and which he saw as an essential part of his experiments with truth.

This aspect of Gandhi’s ethics also reveals the limitations of the form of embodied ethics he upheld. For in Gandhi’s life and thought, his embodiment of ethics was so *singular* as to depart from the political or to create a political cult.

One of his personal assistants commented to Ved Mehta that it cost huge amounts of money to keep the Mahatma in a condition of poverty.<sup>23</sup> It was not poverty itself—the simple diet, homespun khadi, mud hut, or traditional methods of keeping clean—that was so expensive. What required constant funding from wealthy benefactors was ensuring that his poverty was conspicuous, emblematic, and open to outsiders who wished to share in it. A political strategy of inner moral transformation requires diverse means of signaling that transformation to its constituents. Gandhi embodied that transformation and his body was its icon. Without him, it is hard to see how the gap between individual and collective action was to be bridged.

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22 Akeel Bilgrami, “Gandhi’s Integrity: The Philosophy Behind the Politics,” *Postcolonial Studies* 5: 1 (2002), p. 86

23 Ved Mehta, *Mahatma Gandhi and His Apostles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), page reference and exact quotation to follow.