

Politics without paternity

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AS ‘father of the nation’ Gandhi plays an existential as much as political role for Indians. Is this why he must be claimed or rejected with such passion by his ‘sons’ who are unable to remain indifferent to the Mahatma more than six decades after his death? What in fact does it mean for a nation to have a father, however symbolic this status may be? It is curious that republics rather than monarchies tend to possess such fathers, and in the case of the US more than one of them. Perhaps they presume a paternal death making possible the state’s inheritance by a community of sons.¹

Even if he is a virtuous replacement of the monarch who had to be unseated for a republic to be founded, the national patriarch is in this way an ambiguous figure. Dynastic states, of course, require no founding father because they repudiate the idea of a paternal death, and therefore the polity’s inheritance by a democracy of

sons. So the formula ‘the king is dead, long live the king’ both recognizes and denies the patriarch’s death. But the father of a democracy must die to become one, whether his demise is biological, political, or indeed both, since it seems as if republics as much as monarchies cannot do without the domestic language of family.

I shall be concerned here not only with the manner in which Gandhi became India’s father, but also with how he thought about the relationship between politics and paternity. The burden of my argument will be that in deploying the apparently inescapable language of familial relations in his politics, the Mahatma redefined them in such a way as to make it very difficult for Indians to either claim him as a father, or constitute themselves as his sons in any conventional fashion. Instead their republic has always had to struggle with this patriarch who, like the dynastic sovereign, refuses to die. Now what is interesting about fatherhood as a role is that it is confirmed by the son’s obedience as

1. See for this Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1988.

much as his resistance. For attempts to reject the father generally end up either with the son replacing him in one kind of triumph for the latter, or else being consigned to eternal immaturity in a paternal victory of another sort. This predicament faces all the 'sons' of Gandhi in his role as father of the nation. The name of the father, in other words, does violence to the son by claiming him even when it is rejected.

But is it possible that violence enacted in the name of the father might take its strength from the failure of patriarchy? That it may be the very lack of authority in such forms of fatherhood, from *paterfamilias* to president, that inspires their sons with the urge both to avenge and destroy it? This at any rate is the suggestive line of argument in Avital Ronell's recent study of authority and politics in our time.² There are two moments in Ronell's argument. The first is an effort to break down the autonomy of politics by noting its almost absolute reliance upon apparently non-political metaphors and similes having to do with domestic life in particular. There is a remarkable instance of this in Gandhi's manifesto of 1909 entitled *Hind Swaraj* or Indian Self-Rule.

Written as a dialogue between a newspaper editor and a reader, one of the many striking passages in the future Mahatma's booklet has the reader comparing British imperialism to a thief breaking into one's house, which justifies Indians in repelling him by force. To this the editor responds by asking what the putative owner would do if he discovered the thief to be his father. Would he pretend to continue sleeping and let the thief proceed out of shame and sorrow for his father?

2. Avital Ronell, *Looser Sons: Politics and Authority*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Springfield, 2012.

The passage deserves quoting for the complex set of relations it describes:

If it is my father who has come to steal, I shall use one kind of means. If it is an acquaintance, I shall use another, and, in the case of a perfect stranger, I shall use a third. If it is a white man, you will perhaps say, you will use means different from those you will adopt with an Indian thief. If it is a weakling, the means will be different from those to be adopted for dealing with an equal in physical strength; and, if the thief is armed from tip to toe, I shall simply remain quiet. Thus we have a variety of means between the father and the armed man. Again, I fancy that I should pretend to be sleeping whether the thief was my father or that strong-armed man. The reason for this is that my father would also be armed, and I should succumb to the strength possessed by either, and allow my things to be stolen. The strength of my father would make me weep with pity; the strength of the armed man would rouse in me anger, and we should become enemies.³

No doubt referring to the paternal role the British adopted for themselves in India, Gandhi is, on the one hand, drawing attention to the domestic vernacular that makes political argument possible, if only by assuming that it is 'merely' metaphorical; and on the other insisting upon taking such reasoning seriously and showing how it disintegrates in the process. For he suggests that the colonial state is oppressive precisely because it is a father, and vice versa of course, being in either case intimately connected to its Indian subjects. Indeed he argues in the text that Indians kept the British in India

3. M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* edited by Anthony J. Parel. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 82-83.

out of desire rather than because they were forced to do so. Indians desired British goods and, indeed, the culture of ever-increasing consumption that imperial capitalism made possible, economically as well as politically, by inhibiting the productive capacities of colonial subjects in the same movement as they were denied responsibility for their own futures.

On the one hand, then, the colonial state was a false father because its authority was derived from the son's desire, as if in a perverse version of social contract theory. And, on the other, it produced a false dependence among Indians by increasing their desire for goods and consumption. Going beyond the world of commodities, the Mahatma argued that religious communities in India also quarrelled because they had lost both power over and, therefore, responsibility for their shared society. 'The fact is that we have become enslaved, and, therefore, quarrel and like to have our quarrels decided by a third party.'⁴ The children here have set up a father whose interventions in their mutual quarrels will absolve them of the responsibility to become adults. But did Gandhi really want sons to become fathers?

A few pages after the editor in *Hind Swaraj* describes his father as a thief, the reader justifies terrorism by comparing Indians to a child, who must be prevented by an act of violence from running into imperialism's fire. What if, suggests the editor, the child is too big and strong to restrain? Would the paternal terrorist cast himself into the flame to demonstrate its danger? By taking these crucial yet apparently unimportant rhetorical devices at face value, Gandhi is able to reverse their logic and leave violence without a subjective place to call its own. And this

4. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

is to say nothing about the way in which he rethinks the father's authority as well as the son's duty, by making the former depend upon the latter's pity and forbearance. In the following passage, for example, Gandhi moves from describing the violence of an armed father to that of a powerful son, predicating the parent's authority to his fear and helplessness in the process:

What do you really do to the child? Supposing that it can exert so much physical force that it renders you powerless and rushes into fire, then you cannot prevent it. There are only two remedies open to you – either you must kill it in order to prevent it from perishing in the flames, or you must give your own life, because you do not wish to see it perish before your very eyes. You will not kill it. If your heart is not quite full of pity, it is possible that you will not surrender yourself by preceding the child and going into the fire yourself. You, therefore, helplessly allow it to go into the flames.⁵

The second moment in Ronell's argument has to do with her attempt to think about authority as a form that is crucial to politics and yet, like Gandhi's violence, without a place of its own. For if authority is distinct from compulsion, then its visibility becomes the same thing as its absence. So can authority ever exist, or does it need to be spoken about only in the past tense, as Ronell shows us that the philosophers Hannah Arendt and Alexandre Kojève do? The everyday relations of fathers and sons allow Ronell to think about the problem of an invisible authority, one that can only be betrayed by its manifestation as force. She is concerned with the way in which compulsion becomes a sign of failure, with authority forever looming over its sub-

jects and goading them to more self-destructive violence. Gandhi also thought violence was a mark of failure and saw non-violence, precisely because it was a negative concept derived from its all-too-real opposite, as the only form that authority could take. Indeed he argued that it was this non-entirety, one that possessed no history precisely because it was invisible in its ubiquity, which made quotidian existence possible. And this not because it put a stop to violence, which Gandhi thought an inevitable part of living, but by converting it into its opposite as we have seen the editor in *Hind Swaraj* do.

Ronell's book is full of defeated fathers who, like the ghost of Hamlet's father, return as apparitions, demanding a vengeance that will destroy their sons in the retrospective process of fulfilling the desire for patriarchy. It is also populated by sons whose childhood cannot be confined to any age, but returns in an equally spectral fashion to haunt them as a status that can never be overcome. In this situation, neither accepting the father and, like Hamlet, dying in the process, nor rejecting and so replacing him in the classically Freudian manner, will bring about any kind of emancipation, personal or political. The implication being that politics is not only deprived of autonomy, but, even as a phenomenon out of place, can no longer rely upon a logic or trajectory for which dialectical relationships between fathers, sons and other identifiable subjects are required.

If the father-son relationship has to be constructed after the fact, it cannot be the cause of anything, but only an effect of the search for an authority that is nowhere to be found. But what happens if there is no presumption of such a relationship to begin with? I'd like to offer an example of this situation by looking at the way in which Gandhi thought about paternity in the

context of colonialism, which arguably served as one of the earliest political forms relying upon the displacement of fathers and sons as categories of identification. The Mahatma's autobiography, first published in 1927, begins with a surfeit of fathers, from the alien rulers whose representatives were called 'maa-baap' (mother-father) to the petty Indian ruler, called 'bapa' (father) in Gujarati, whom Gandhi's own father served as prime minister. While ostensibly augmenting each other's authority, these fathers existed in a relationship of mutual denial and emasculation, putting the category itself into question by their very multiplicity. For as Gandhi tells us, 'My father was a Diwan [prime minister], but nevertheless a servant, and all the more so because he was in favour with the Thakore Saheb [the ruler].'⁶

The young Gandhi is described in the autobiography as a stereotype: puny, cowardly and attached to his mother. He tries to match up to the size and strength of the British by secretly eating meat at the behest of a Muslim friend, himself representing another version of masculinity and the history of foreign rule. Named Mohandas, or slave of the child god Krishna, the future Mahatma bore no apparent resemblance to this playful deity known for his tricks and thefts. But Krishna, too, both lacked a father and had too many, since he had been smuggled out of the reach of his uncle, a king who murdered his sister's sons to forestall a prophecy that he would be killed by one, and was brought up away from his parents by a family of pastoralists. Of course Krishna eventually killed his uncle, though he never became a father in turn, but rather a lover, war-

6. M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography, Or The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, trans. Mahadev Desai. Navajivan Trust, Ahmedabad, 2009, p. 8.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.

rior and always the trickster. Gandhi, who became an overbearing father and indeed the father of his nation, being called 'bapu' (an affectionate form of father) by millions, would achieve fearlessness by holding to a non-violence that saw in the sacrifice of one's own life the highest form of courage. He, too, admired the warrior's duty, but preferred to die rather than kill in demonstrating it.

Gandhi did not remain an eternal child, a son like Krishna with too many fathers and so none, but instead became a father for too many and the son of nobody. Two anecdotes about his own father in Gandhi's autobiography tell us how this might have happened. In the first the son, too afraid to approach his father in person, writes a letter confessing to shaving off some gold from his brother's armlet to pay off the latter's debts. He watches his father read the letter, and instead of punishing the boy, something the latter both desired and feared, proceed to weep silently:

I was trembling as I handed the confession to my father. He was then suffering from a fistula and was confined to bed. His bed was a plain wooden plank. I handed him the note and sat opposite the plank.

He read it through, and pearl-drops trickled down his cheeks, wetting the paper. For a moment he closed his eyes in thought and then tore up the note. He had sat up to read it. He again lay down. I also cried. I could see my father's agony. If I were a painter I could draw a picture of the whole scene today. It is still so vivid in my mind.

Those pearl-drops of love cleansed my heart, and washed my sin away. Only he who has experienced such love can know what it is.⁷

There is certainly a process of identification here, and we might even see in this incident a precedent for the

future Mahatma's own displays of suffering, in fasts that broke the resolve of enemies, but not a dialectical relationship. Indeed if anything the father is behaving maternally, and even taking on the role of Gandhi's own mother, in forsaking the punishing role his son desired from him, if only to further exacerbate his guilt. Neither castration nor parricide, in the psychoanalytic sense, is possible here.

The second incident from the autobiography involves Gandhi as a married man sitting at his father's deathbed. Feeling the desire for sexual relations with his wife, he leaves his uncle in charge and goes to her. As Gandhi is engaged in intercourse, his father dies as if in a final inducement of guilt:

I felt deeply ashamed and miserable. I ran to my father's room. I saw that, if animal passion had not blinded me, I should have been spared the torture of separation from my father during his last moments. I should have been massaging him, and he would have died in my arms. But now it was my uncle who had this privilege. [...] Before I close this chapter of my double shame, I may mention that the poor mite that was born to my wife scarcely breathed for more than three or four days. Nothing else could be expected. Let all those who are married be warned by my example.⁸

It is from this period that Gandhi decides to adopt celibacy, though he won't actually do so for some time. Surely this is a typically Freudian situation—the son who 'kills' his father by identifying with him in the sexual act, and who is therefore replaced by his uncle, while losing his own child in the process? His guilt in fact is so great that it determines him upon renounc-

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

ing intercourse. Celibacy or the retention of sperm, however, was traditionally seen as a sign of masculine power, as indeed by Gandhi himself, and is characteristic of ascetics who are often called 'baba' or father. Shiva, for instance, is portrayed as a forest dwelling ascetic but also worshipped in the form of a *lingam* or phallus, being in addition a father.

One father cancels out the other, while the son can replace a father in reproduction and remain celibate at the same time, thus taking on both roles, just as Gandhi's father had adopted that of his mother. So it is no accident that Gandhi will also come to identify as a mother, and indeed get his grand-niece Manu to call him mother after his wife Kasturba's death, saying, 'I have been father to many but only to you I am a mother.'⁹ It is as if he wanted in this way to bring his wife back to life in his own person. I would like to suggest that it is the excessive and even stereotypical meaningfulness of the Mahatma's autobiography, in psychoanalytical terms, which leads to its loss of meaning altogether. For the multiplicity of fathers and sons in the narrative, some of who occupy more than one role, renders identification either as acceptance or rejection impossible.

Gandhi seems to revel in adopting all kinds of familial roles and sticking to none, his treatment of his own sons being particularly oppressive because of this ability to colonise the place of authority as much as dissent.¹⁰ For his unorthodox experiments in domestic life were twinned with those in anti-colonial resistance to make for

9. See Manubehn Gandhi, trans. Chitra Desai, *Bapu – My Mother*. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 2007, p. 5.

10. See, for example, Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Gandhi's Prisoner? The Life of Gandhi's Son Manilal*. Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2007.

a potent mix of the personal and political. Having refused to advance them in life out of a sense of impartiality, the Mahatma was faced with the rebellion of one of his sons, Harilal, who eventually died an alcoholic, his wife and children having been taken in by Gandhi in an apparently classic instance of the father castrating his son.¹¹

If anything, Gandhi's relations with his political heirs, in particular Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel, were even more complicated, and he has even been seen as 'betraying' the latter, a fellow Gujarati to whom he was arguably closer intellectually and politically, to anoint the former as India's first prime minister. The Mahatma's ambiguous politics of paternity were in full evidence in a speech at a meeting of the All-India Congress Committee in January 1942. In it he urged Congressmen to support a resolution suspending satyagraha, with which he himself did not agree, in order to preserve the party's unity and its international reputation.

More interestingly, he wanted Congress to recognize that unlike its 'father', the 'sons' were not in fact committed to non-violence as a creed, but only for instrumental reasons with which the Mahatma fully sympathized even if he could not espouse. Here is Gandhi urging his political offspring to abandon their father, and thus, of course, preventing them either from fighting or replacing him:

I had once said that everyone would become his own leader after my arrest. Today also can become your own leaders and think for yourselves. [...] I do not want it to be said that in order to retain my leadership you bade good-bye to your senses because you had no courage to give

me up. I do not covet leadership by undermining anyone's manhood.¹²

Gandhi went on to describe Nehru as his successor precisely because he resisted the Mahatma, and seeing in this very resistance a medium by which the recalcitrant son would come in future to identify with his father despite himself:

Somebody suggested that Pandit Jawaharlal and I were estranged. This is baseless. Jawaharlal has been resisting me ever since he fell into my net. You cannot divide water by repeatedly striking it with a stick. It is just as difficult to divide us. I have always said not Rajaji, nor Sardar Vallabhbhai, but Jawaharlal will be my successor. He says whatever is uppermost in his mind, but he always does what I want. When I am gone he will do what I am doing now. Then he will speak my language too. [...] He fights with me because I am there. Whom will he fight when I am gone? And who will suffer his fighting? Ultimately he will have to speak my language.¹³

Gandhi's own sons, then, were unable to either defeat or replace him, this feat being accomplished by his assassin, a Hindu militant who finally made a patriarch out of the Mahatma.¹⁴ For Nathuram Godse tells us in his lengthy courtroom address that he killed Gandhi out of respect for him, in order to prevent the old man from expending his love on Muslims, who

like treacherous and changeling sons would only betray him once again, as they had already betrayed and in fact divided Mother India:

Gandhiji is being referred to as the Father of the Nation – an epithet of high reverence. But if so, he has failed in his paternal duty inasmuch as he has acted very treacherously to the nation by his consenting to the partitioning of it. Had Gandhiji really maintained his opposition to the creation of Pakistan, the Muslim League could have had no strength to claim it and the Britishers also could not have created it in spite of all their utmost efforts for its establishment. The reason for this is not far to seek. The people of this country were eager and vehement in their opposition to Pakistan. But Gandhiji played false with the people and gave parts of the country to the Muslims for the creation of Pakistan. I stoutly maintain that Gandhiji in doing so has failed in his duty which was incumbent upon him to carry out, as the Father of the Nation. He has proved to be the Father of Pakistan. It was for this reason alone that I as a dutiful son of Mother India thought it my duty to put an end to the life of the so-called Father of the Nation, who had played a very prominent part in bringing about the vivisection of the country – Our Motherland.¹⁵

The true son must therefore avenge the father by killing him and taking his place, with Godse maintaining that, 'I shall bow in respect of the service done by Gandhiji to the country, and to Gandhiji himself for the said service and before I fired the shots I actually wished him and bowed to him in rever-

11. See Chandulal Bhagubhai Dalal, trans. Tridip Suhrod, *Harilal Gandhi: A Life*. Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2007.

12. M.K. Gandhi, 'Speech at A.I.C.C. Meeting', *Harijan*, 1 January 1942, in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Electronic Book). Publications Division, Government of India, New Delhi, 1999, vol. 81, pp. 430-1.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 432-3.

14. For a remarkable interpretation of the relationship between Gandhi and Godse see Ashis Nandy, 'Final Encounter: the Politics of the Assassination of Gandhi', *At the Edge of Psychology: Essays in Politics and Culture*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1991.

15. Nathuram Godse, *Why I Assassinated Mahatma Gandhi*. Surya Bharati Prakashan, New Delhi, 1998, p. 111.

ence.¹⁶ Godse, it seems, was so taken up with the fantasy of a national fatherhood that he neglected to note how Gandhi had in fact consistently repudiated any single model of human relationship for the nation. Indeed in line with Hindu tradition he thought that one's *dharma* or duty was not generic but had to be determined by context, or rather by who one was. Thus if the relations between Hindus and Muslims, whom the Mahatma considered to be political equals, were to be defined by *mitrata* or friendship, as well as of brotherhood, the unequal relations between higher and lower castes should be defined by *seva* or service.¹⁷

So when during the Round Table Conference of 1931 Gandhi was asked by a representative of the Muslim League to look upon the Prophet's followers as his children, the Mahatma shocked the Aga Khan by refusing to do so, and it was only many years later that he explained why:

I didn't mean that I was aware of no emotional attachment, no feeling for the welfare of Muslims; I only meant that I was conscious of full blood *brotherhood*, yes, but not the superiority that *fatherhood* would imply.¹⁸

The nation state, we might say, requires the Mahatma to become its father, and in this way reinstates the logic of patriarchy in politics despite Gandhi's own intentions and eccentricities. And so the 'loser son', who Gandhi undoubtedly was, ends up becoming the father of his country, for those who revere as well as revile him. But the un-fatherly elements of

his career continue to roil Indian society, for which non-dialectical relations and the avoidance of identification remain important. Ronell writes that in the western tradition neither the child nor the slave has ever represented the ideal of freedom. Yet it is precisely slaves and children whom the Mahatma, himself the slave of a child god, holds up as such ideals in his commentary on a famous Sanskrit text.

The *Bhagavad-Gita*, or Song of the Lord, recounts a conversation between the warrior Arjuna and his divine charioteer Krishna, the two being situated between opposing armies drawn up on a battlefield and awaiting only the command to fight what will be an apocalyptic war. Surveying the friends, relatives and preceptors in the ranks of his enemies, Arjuna suddenly loses the will to fight and Krishna's task is to persuade him to do so.

One of the lessons Gandhi takes from this conversation is that choice can never be the basis of morality since it has been rendered superfluous, for a war will occur on the *Gita*'s battlefield whatever Arjuna decides. As an instrumental act, moreover, choice sacrifices the present for an imagined future, thus sapping the former of all reality in an extraordinarily violent way, and the Mahatma even goes so far as to describe it as a kind of illness:

When a man's ears, nose, eyes, and so on, go on performing their functions naturally without conscious willing on his part – the winking of the eyelids does not need to be willed, there must be some disease if it is otherwise – we say of such a person that his sense organs, having become free of attachments and aversions, function spontaneously.¹⁹

In any case, says Gandhi, knowledge is never sufficient for any moral

choice, even though the latter depends absolutely upon it. The absence of such knowledge, further, inevitably disqualifies all but an intellectual or political elite from exercising it with any justice. For all these reasons, then, the Mahatma rejects freedom of choice as a degrading sign of hierarchy. One should do one's duty out of principle alone and without taking any notice of causes or consequences, with Gandhi often saying that he did not need to know what happened in order to act morally when faced with violence. And though he was at other times an advocate of conscience, which he called the 'inner voice', Gandhi also repudiates it here as a form of narcissistic disembodiment. Instead of choice, free will and conscience, then, he recommends sacrifice as the only kind of moral act that is truly universal and available to everyone.

Gandhi conceived of sacrifice as a form of abstention, such as fasting, celibacy, non-cooperation or non-violent resistance to the death, all of which transformed an immoral situation by the negative act of withdrawal rather than by proposing a positive alternative that could only take its place, as the rebel son would that of his father:

All this talk about knowledge is because of the body; otherwise, for an unembodied one, how can there be any question of knowledge? The highest knowledge of all in the world is knowledge of the self. Moreover, the idea of a human being having no body exists only in our imagination. Mortification of the body, therefore, is the only means of self-realization and the only *yajna* [sacrifice] for everyone in the world.²⁰

It is in this context that Gandhi makes the most disadvantaged of fig-

16. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

17. See Ajay Skaria, 'Gandhi's Politics: Liberalism and the Question of the Ashram', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 101, no. 4, Fall 2002, pp. 955-986.

18. Cited in Aga Khan, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan*. Cassell and Co, London, 1954, p. 227.

19. M.K. Gandhi, *The Bhagvadgita*. Orient Paperbacks, New Delhi, 1980, p. 59.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 84, parenthesis mine.

ures, children and slaves, into models of moral life, since no ethics would be worth its salt if it deprived society's weakest members of such a life. But the slave and the child were models for another reason also, because they alone could live fully in the present, relieved by their parents and masters of the kind of abstract and violent instrumentality that was determined by a future. While disapproving of the master's paternal figure, therefore, the Mahatma praised the slave and his close cousin, the child, because by living in the present they not only treated it with requisite moral seriousness, but by their refusal to think in terms of the future at the same time made room for the incalculable, something that spoke of the insufficiency of knowledge and that was capable of transforming history more effectively than the best laid plans ever could:

If children have faith, they can live as a *sthitaprajna* [one who is single-minded or self-possessed] does. They have their parents and teachers to look after their needs. They have, therefore, no need to take thought for themselves. They should always be guided by their elders. A child who lives in this manner is a *brahmachari* [celibate or unattached person], a *muni* [saint], a *sthitaprajna*. He is so in the sense that he does what he is asked to and carries out every instruction.²¹

Is this the voice of a father or a son? By focusing exclusively on the present, Gandhi manages to avoid the various logics, dialectics and trajectories that require the future for their existence, all of which are crucial for any conception of politics. And in doing so he also circumvents the generational narrative of paternal or filial identification. But where does his authority come from?

Could it be the radicalization of obedience as an act that is not only inevitable, even in the world of conscience where we have to obey our better selves, but one that can also manifest itself as the epitome of choice? For the Mahatma is clear that choice is devalued into self-gratification the more it is exercised, which means that its self-abnegation in a single act of obedience to a moral duty, seen as something forever external and non-subjective, turns out to be its moment of apotheosis:

The action of a man whose intellect is not fixed on one aim, who is not single-minded in his devotion, will branch out in many directions. As the mind leaps, monkey-fashion, from branch to branch, so does the intellect. A person who clings to his life will seek help from any *vaid* or saint or witch doctor whom he meets. Similarly, a monkey will fly from branch to branch and ultimately meet an untimely death, the victim of a slingshot. The mind of a person of uncertain purpose grows weak day by day and becomes so unsettled that he can think of nothing except what is in his mind at the moment.²²

The paradox of obedience as the most precious form of choice lies in its repudiation of subjection. By maintaining the externality of its self-selected and quite particular form of authority (which for Gandhi was the Gita, though it might be any other text or person), obedience in this way attempts to exit the play of identification altogether. The Mahatma's most famous accounts of such obedience to a duty imposed from the outside all involve the sacrifice of relatives, especially parents and children. So if Arjuna's dilemma has to do with his desire to avoid killing his relations, among Gandhi's other heroes,

Harischandra is happy to slay his wife and son, while Prahlad in effect becomes a parricide by praying that Vishnu deliver him from his father's tyranny.

Unlike the Abrahamic story that sets a model for sacrifice in the monotheistic religions, including the crucifixion of Jesus and the martyrdom of Husayn, it is not only the sacrifice of a son that is important here, but that of the father as well, in yet another example of the way in which identifying with one or the other is evaded. Indeed even when Gandhi did invoke such biblical themes, he often reversed their narrative logic, as when he famously described the partition of India in Solomonic terms, but as the vivisection of a mother by her sons rather than the reverse.

By refusing to distinguish between the sacrifice of oneself and one's kinsfolk, or rather that of one generation for another, the Mahatma short-circuits the dialectical relationship between past, present and future that makes of politics the kind of instrumentalism it is. In the eternal present of a moral life whose paragons are children and slaves, sacrifice is available to everyone and does not have to be 'for' anything. Or rather a childlike attention to the present, in which alone could moral life occur, allowed Gandhi to keep the future open by attending to the incalculable within it. Instead of trying to predetermine this future in the way that politics routinely did, either negatively as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, or positively, with its success blighted by unintended consequences, attending to the incalculable meant adopting a religious attitude towards it. For the incalculable was neither more nor less than the incarnation of God on earth, something that broke through the causality of human action, intention or generation to transform it utterly.

21. Ibid., p. 49, parentheses mine.

22. Ibid., pp. 40-1.