

MORALITY IN THE SHADOW OF POLITICS

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Having put an end to his first great movement of non-cooperation following the First World War, Gandhi sat down to learn the lessons of this early experiment in mass politics. In 1926 he went on to impart these lessons to his fellow workers in the Sabarmati Ashram by way of a series of lectures on the Bhagavad Gita. Gandhi was interested in exploring the relations between violence and non-violence, which he thought were so intimate that one could very easily turn into the other. Seeking out the Archimedean point that made such a turning possible, the Mahatma had occasion to criticize any ethics that would divide good from evil on the basis of a moral calculus. How, he asked, was an ethics possible that recognized the intractability of ignorance and compulsion? Any ethical system that relied upon knowledge and choice, he thought, was either deluded or true only for a very small elite. A common ethics, then, had to be one which recognized ignorance and compulsion not negatively, as posing limits to moral life, but rather in the form of positive virtues like duty and obedience. Gandhi's commentary on the Gita was therefore an attempt to think about moral action in the context of ignorance and compulsion, which he did by focusing on the integrity of the act itself divested of the idealism lent it by any moral calculus.

The story has often been told of Gandhi putting an end to the first and arguably most successful experiment with civil disobedience across India in 1922, after some of his followers burnt to death nineteen policemen trapped in their station at a place called Chauri-Chaura. Explanations of why the Mahatma should have called off a movement that was enjoying extraordinary success include, on the one hand, his fear of losing control over its potentially revolutionary drift, and on the other his realization that the Indians who took to all manner of violence during the *satyagraha* were not quite ready for their freedom. I am interested neither in the communist theory of Gandhi as an agent of some bourgeois nationalism desperate to rein in the people's revolutionary impetus, nor, for its part, in the liberal theory of a people too immature for independence. Such explanations cannot account for awkward details like the fact that no situation could be very revolutionary that was stopped by a man to whom no police or military force was available, or the fact that Gandhi had consistently demanded immediate self-rule and always rejected the claim of India's being unprepared for independence.

Non-violent protest was, for the Mahatma, not a means but an end in itself, one that stood apart from politics conceived as a practice of conjuring up some future. While such forms of civil disobedience had political consequences, in other words, their purposes were achieved in the very moment of expression rather than subsequently. And so acts of non-violent resistance were already free and did not require an independent or democratic state for their guarantee. Indeed it was only this kind of freedom that deserved the name, being immediately within the reach of anyone who desired it, no matter how powerless or oppressed. When Gandhi's would-be followers resorted to violence in 1922, therefore, they had already lost their freedom, not by abandoning morality so much as by forsaking the immediate virtues of *satyagraha* for a politics dedicated to some time other than the present, whether this was in order to avenge a past or to create a future. In fixing upon the present as a site of freedom Gandhi refused any politics that would sacrifice it for the future, and indeed inverted this logic to say that only by sacrificing the future can we safeguard it. For a future known ahead of time would no longer be true to itself, while at the same time blinding us to the possibility of incalculable change, which the Mahatma identified with the working of God in history. So in his 1924 preface to *Satyagraha in South Africa*, Gandhi described moral action in the present as a *dharma yuddha* or holy war, because it risked everything to attend upon and welcome the incalculable:

That is the beauty of Satyagraha, it comes up to oneself; one has not to go out in search for it. This is a virtue inherent in the principle itself. A *dharma-yuddha*, in which there are no secrets to be guarded, no scope for cunning and no place for untruth, comes unsought; and a man of religion is ever ready for it. A struggle which has to be previously planned is not a righteous struggle. In a righteous struggle God Himself plans campaigns and conducts battles. A *dharma-yuddha* can be waged only in the name of God, and it is only when the Satyagrahi feels quite helpless, is apparently on his last legs and finds utter darkness all around him, that God comes to the rescue.¹

The Mahatma sought to inhabit the present in such a way as to maintain both its own integrity and that of a moral life possible in no other time. This accounts for his promises made throughout a lengthy career that self-rule might be achieved within a year, or his calls for the British to depart India immediately and let her suffer invasion or civil war, as in the famous Quit India movement of 1942. The philosopher Mohammad Iqbal had perhaps the most acute comment to make about Gandhi's focus on the present in a speech delivered to the All-India Muslim Conference in March of 1932. He claimed that the struggle of imperialism and nationalism in India was based upon a fundamental misunderstanding. For oriented as they were to the future in which their ideals lay, the British were unable

¹ M. K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (Stanford: Academic Reprints, 1954), xiv–xv.

to recognize themselves as oppressors in the present, while Gandhi was equally unable to grasp that his interlocutors could only be engaged by arguments that invoked this future:

The Western man's mental texture is chronological in character. He lives and moves and has his being in time. The Eastern man's world-consciousness is non-historical. To the Western man things gradually become; they have a past, present and future. To the Eastern man they are immediately rounded off, timeless, purely present . . . The British as a Western people cannot but conceive political reform in India as a systematic process of gradual evolution. Mahatma Gandhi as an Eastern man sees in this attitude nothing more than an ill-conceived unwillingness to part with power and tries all sorts of destructive negations to achieve immediate attainment. Both are elementally incapable of understanding each other. The result is the appearance of a revolt.²

Whether or not Gandhi's struggles missed their mark, he well understood that the future was his enemy's greatest redoubt. Not only the mental texture of Western man, but modern politics itself was founded upon predicting and controlling the future, which was why the Mahatma set out to oppose it in a venture he called a holy war, whose battles were about setting moral action in the present against a politics of the future. My task in this essay is to describe the way in which Gandhi thought this war through after the failure of his first great *satyagraha* in 1922. Not the explanation of an event, then, but rather the words and actions of Gandhi as he struggled to come to terms with what he called "the death of non-violence" are of interest to me, since they provide us with an exemplary analysis of moral life in the shadow of modern politics. That the Mahatma took responsibility for the failure of his non-violent form of civil disobedience indicates that he thought it to be one of theory rather than of practice. What he learnt from this failure was to attend to the nature of violence more closely, as something embodied not simply in crimes like arson or murder, but more generally as a quality inherent in all action. Violence occupied Gandhi not as a political, let alone a peculiarly Indian, problem, but as a problem of everyday life. Yet it was the battlefield that provided him with a site to think about such violence, specifically the battlefield of the Bhagavad Gita, whose hero, Arjuna, suddenly loses the will to fight in a fratricidal war, and has to be persuaded to do so by his divine charioteer Krishna. Gandhi was not alone in seeing this war as the greatest manifestation of a *dharma yuddha*, to which he returned frequently for inspiration.

² Mohammad Iqbal, "Presidential Address Delivered at the Annual Session of the All-India Muslim Conference at Lahore on the 21st of March 1932", in *Speeches and Statements of Iqbal*, ed. Shamloo (Lahore: Al-Manar Academy, 1948), 53.

Rather than representing the end or limit of moral action, the battlefield was for Gandhi its true home. Perhaps because moralists tend to describe warfare as the instantiation of all vice, thus depending upon the fear it inspires to justify their arguments, the Mahatma, who thought fearlessness the essence of virtue, chose to locate morality on the battlefield instead. In doing so he dismissed the political ideal of a state at peace as a good example of righteousness, even letting go of otherwise much-invoked models like Rama the king as a personification of virtue, or his capital, Ayodhya, as its privileged site. But then the ideal of *ramrajya*, or Rama's rule, with which Gandhi is so often associated, should not be seen as a political category in either its traditional or modern senses, since Rama here was not a king so much as a son, brother, father and husband. More importantly he was the hero of sacrifice, willing even to have his own wife suffer and die in the name of duty, and therefore a model for everyday life. Similarly war is not given over to politics in the Mahatma's telling of the Gita, and is often rendered into a spiritual struggle, as if in recognition of the fact that a state at war no longer represents even its own political ideals, though it might claim to be defending them. Lying at the heart of politics while at the same time constituting its outer limits, war has the paradoxical status of being political and anti-political at the same time, even threatening the dissolution of politics altogether, and in all these ways it serves as the most appropriate arena for moral action considered as a far more protean and universal form of human behaviour. It is this form of action that Gandhi focused upon when thinking about the place of morality in the shadow of politics, which he did most powerfully in a commentary on the Bhagavad Gita delivered at the Satyagraha Ashram in 1926.

THE DEATH OF NON-VIOLENCE

I will return to Gandhi's commentary on Arjuna's dilemma in another section of my essay, and begin instead with a remark made towards the end of his lengthy interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita, which was made piecemeal during its public reading over several days at the ashram: "Following the death of non-violence, we discovered the value of the spinning-wheel, as also of *brahmacharya* [celibacy]. Beyond the river (Sabarmati) is *bhogabhumi* [the site of passivity], while this is *karmabhumi* [the site of action]."³ Notable about this comment are the two distinctions it makes: the first between non-violence and spinning or

³ M. K. Gandhi, *The Bhagavadgita* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1980), 284. While *bhogabhumi* might more literally be translated as a site of enjoyment, the fact that *bhoga* is a kind of passive or receptive enjoyment, as well as the fact that it is counterposed here with *karmabhumi* as a site of action, seems to me to justify its translation as a site of passivity.

celibacy, and the second between these practices of the ashram and those of the life beyond. How is non-violence different from spinning or celibacy? Why do these practices make of the ashram a site of action compared with the world outside as one of passivity? Non-violence, says Gandhi, was something negative and had no existence of its own. Unlike violence, which sought to have an effect as instrumental action, non-violence did not plan, produce or achieve anything, but rather made change possible by withdrawing from such action. Non-violence, however, did not flee the world of cause and effect, but made possible the most spectacular changes in it, and this by a process of negation instead of affirmation. Non-violence allowed for changes in the world of cause and effect by setting up ever-newer arenas of withdrawal in a manner deliberately opposed to the instrumental action so beloved of politics. Non-violence, indeed, was so little a positive entity, let alone a political strategy, that Gandhi saw it as a kind of epistemological quality, one whose detachment he defined as an effect of truth:

Truth is a positive value, while non-violence is a negative value. Truth affirms. Non-violence forbids something which is real enough. Truth exists, untruth does not exist. Violence exists, non-violence does not. Even so, the highest dharma [duty] for us is that nothing but non-violence can be. Truth is its own proof, and non-violence is its supreme fruit. The latter is necessarily contained in the former.⁴

Now the comparisons made in the passage above, between truth and violence as positive objects and untruth and non-violence as negative ones, suggest that Gandhi had come to see a series of complicated entanglements among them which no longer permitted of easy distinctions. This becomes clear in an example of violence that Gandhi gives from the Gita, that of Karna, Bhishma and Drona, all good men who yet sided with the evil Duryodhana in his battle against the Pandavas:

Whether out of compassion for Duryodhana, or because he was generous-hearted, Karna joined the former's side. Besides Karna, Duryodhana had good men like Bhishma and Drona also on his side. This suggests that *evil cannot by itself flourish in this world*. It can do so only if it is allied with some good. This was the principle underlying non-cooperation, that the evil system which the Government represents, and which has endured only because of the support it receives from good people, cannot survive if that support is withdrawn. Just as the Government needs the support of good men in order to exist, so Duryodhana required men like Bhishma and Drona in order to show that there was justice on his side.⁵

Gandhi's use of this example to illustrate non-cooperation as a form of non-violence is curious, since the good men supporting Duryodhana did not after

⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁵ Ibid., 16, original emphasis.

all withdraw their support of him, so that the evil of the Kauravas could only be defeated in a war of extreme violence, which the Mahatma elsewhere calls a righteous one.⁶ The problem was not simply that good men refused to withdraw from evil, but that evil itself, or rather the violence it gave rise to, was also a product of goodness and inextricable from it. Here, in the mutual entanglement of truth and violence, untruth and non-violence, might be found the latter's cause of death. This was why it became imperative to think about action and its inevitable violence in greater detail, because non-violence alone was capable neither of replacing nor even of comprehending it. In other words the task Gandhi set himself in his interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita was not to avoid action, or even its inevitable violence, but to attend upon its very materiality in a sort of phenomenology.

Spinning and celibacy, we saw earlier, provided the Mahatma with illustrations of moral action, having been chosen as experiments for his inquiries into its nature. Experiment, of course, was the English word Gandhi used to describe the various practices, such as non-cooperation or non-violence, which he promoted from time to time as ways of being faithful to the truth. Like the practice of non-violence, spinning and celibacy were also not instrumental activities, being meant neither to produce homespun cloth in the first instance, nor to endow the body with some unusual power in the second. Indeed Gandhi speaks of these practices without once mentioning anything they are supposed to produce, since it is precisely their character as disengaged actions that he is interested in. This is especially true of celibacy, which most clearly exits the instrumental logic of purpose and production, cause and effect, that for Gandhi marks the nature of violence, and of politics in particular as a practice of violence: "If destruction is violence, creation, too, is violence. Procreation, therefore, involves violence. The creation of what is bound to perish certainly involves violence."⁷ Unlike practices of non-violence, however, spinning and celibacy are not negatively conceived, but important in their own right as experiments in freedom. What is more, they are the most material and weighty of actions, because disengaged from the idealizing imperative of instrumental thought, for which every act has meaning only in terms of some vision of the future, whether as cause or effect, purpose or product. Indeed violence might well represent the real outcome of such unreal acts that take leave of their own materiality to try and control the future. So in his example from the Gita invoked earlier, it becomes clear that for Gandhi Duryodhana's plan to annihilate the Pandavas is violent because unreal, relying as it does on the support of good men like Karna, Bhishma or Drona, whose purposes in supporting the Kauravas were very different from his own. In fact

⁶ Ibid., 36.

⁷ Ibid., 292.

the Mahatma suggests that these men fought under Duryodhana's banner for completely non-political reasons, including compassion and generosity, which gave their actions materiality and so goodness. The point here is that actions intending to control the future not only are perfectly ideal in themselves, but are ideal also because they can never quite control even their own instruments.

By this point a typically Gandhian reversal has been effected, and we realize that the very peculiarity of his concerns with spinning or celibacy in fact represents the peculiar materiality of everyday life, which forever escapes the idealizing violence of instrumental action, itself another name for politics. Spinning and celibacy are therefore practices in the materiality of action as a characteristic of everyday life, intended to restore to all action its gravity or existential weight. But this is by no means a nostalgic or even desperate effort to retain some old-fashioned materiality within the abstract politics of modernity. Indeed we might even say the opposite, that the increasing idealization of modern politics actually makes the materiality of action more disruptive and powerful. In any case, the Mahatma is adamant about the intractable nature of such materiality, which he merely brings to political consciousness by offering it up as a sacrifice to the latter's idealism. In other words, everyday action can only protect itself from politics by attending to its own materiality, just as politics can only protect itself from its own idealism by recognizing the intractable nature of action's everyday materiality.

But the act is material in more ways than lacking instrumentality, which as I have described it thus far may quite rightly be confused with a lack of motive or intention. What makes an action instrumental is neither motive nor intention, but the illusion that it might be absolutely created and absolutely controlled: that it might therefore be a sovereign act in the peculiarly theological sense this word has for modern politics. As the fantasy of a creation from out of the void, such action may characterize monotheistic thought, but is opposed by the notion of *karma*, action seen to be completely determined by a chain of cause and effect which begins before the actor's birth and continues well after his death. I shall return to this notion of action as part of a predetermined universe illustrated by the idea of rebirth, as well as to the role it plays in Gandhi's interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita. For the moment it suffices to note the following irony: that the act can only accede to its materiality and thus also its autonomy if it is limited, contingent and determined by the weight of a past rather than by the idealism of a future. In other words, action enjoys its materiality and autonomy only if it is separated from the instrumental thought that would idealize it, and it retains its separateness only insofar as it finds itself in a universe of determinations and is so unfree. Gandhi's phenomenology of the act is about precisely this unfreedom of everyday action, which he reflects upon in the concept of authority as the one form of determination that is moral rather than merely brutish in its force.

THE PARADOX OF AUTHORITY

Now the paradox of authority is that it commands and forbids choice at the same moment, in effect demanding that a moral actor dignify his will by exercising it once only in the decision to obey. The weightiness of this choice, says the Mahatma, lends it a reality unknown to those who choose lightly and out of self-indulgence:

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 sling-shot. 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.⁸

Choice, therefore, becomes unreal by repetition and ends up as a purely mental fixation on self-gratification. Giving it up to authority, however, allows choice access to reality by freeing its agent from good as well as evil, seen as objects to which the moral actor is attached, and in whose name he justifies his action:

We say that we should offer up everything to God, even evil. The two, good and evil, are inseparable, and so we should offer up both. If we wish to give up sin, we should give up virtue too. There is possessiveness in clinging even to virtue.⁹

Authority, then, in giving the act its materiality and autonomy in the most everyday manner, by the same token gives it a kind of freedom as well. And it is the authoritative nature of this freedom that the Mahatma proceeds to study in his interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita.

It should now be evident why Gandhi, in the statement I first quoted from him, on the one hand distinguished non-violence from spinning or celibacy, and on the other described these practices of the ashram as active ones, compared to the passive practices of the world beyond. His commentary on the Gita conducts a phenomenological examination of the act's materiality, in terms of what he considered to be its necessary relationship with an authority that alone bestows upon it some measure of freedom. And while such speculations might seem at times arcane, it is worth repeating that they insistently take everyday life as their subject, and deal with it in the most quotidian of ways. Indeed it was the Mahatma's frequent self-description as a crank, and his very obsession with what he often called fads, such as fasting, spinning or celibacy, that put his concerns squarely at the centre of everyday life. And this is not even to mention his immense

⁸ Ibid., 40–41

⁹ Ibid., 183.

popularity, which to this day brooks no rival anywhere in the Subcontinent. But why think about action, authority and freedom through a reading of the Bhagavad Gita? The suitability of its content apart, it was the sacred authority of the text that drew Gandhi to it: not because the Gita was in fact such an authority, but because its reading allowed Gandhi to pose authority itself as a question for all action. It goes without saying that posed as it was in a reading of the Gita, this question enabled the Mahatma to address the nature of action in his typically indirect way, as if from outside the arena of politics.

Of course, the Gita had been an important text for modern Hinduism since the nineteenth century, especially among nationalists and religious reformers. (The names Vivekananda, Tilak and Aurobindo immediately come to mind). With these men, very interested in their country's political life, the text seems to have functioned as an authority alternative to that of politics seen in the traditional terms of *artha* or power. Is it possible that given their political subjection during this period, the Bhagavad Gita allowed these men to distinguish authority from power in a way that refused even to define the former as a legitimate form of the latter? Whatever the case, such colonial interpretations of the Gita brought to the fore a thinking of ethics rather than of politics. But the fact that it is war that provides the arena of moral action, rather than simply its limits, for the Bhagavad Gita as much as for its colonial interpreters, suggests that this ethics was not meant to be something inner or spiritual as juxtaposed with the outer or material world of the state. Indeed we shall see with Gandhi that morality addressed the politics of the state precisely by undoing these divisions of inner and outer, spiritual and material, which were all products of the latter's modernity.

For Gandhi, then, the Bhagavad Gita was neither history nor scripture, and certainly not philosophy. To begin with, the Mahatma always made it clear that far from being a symbol of precolonial authenticity, the text for him was completely mediated by his first reading of its English translation while a student in London:

It was at this time that, coming into contact with two Englishmen, I was induced to read the *Gita*: I say "induced" because I had no particular desire to read it. When these two friends asked me to read the *Gita* with them, I felt rather ashamed. The consciousness that I knew nothing about our holy books made me feel miserable. The reason, I think, was my vanity. I did not know Sanskrit well enough to be able to read the *Gita* without help. The two English friends, on their part, did not know Sanskrit at all. They gave me Sir Edwin Arnold's excellent translation of the poem. I went through the whole of it immediately and was fascinated by it.¹⁰

In any case, continues Gandhi, the book is not a work of history for both epistemological and ethical reasons:

¹⁰ Ibid., 9.

The Mahabharata is not a history; it is a dharma-grantha. Who can ever describe an actual event? A man cannot exactly describe even a drop of water seen by him. God having created him so weak, how can he describe an actual event perfectly? In this battle, moreover, the warriors were, on the one side, the sons of Dharma, Vayu, Indra and Ashvinikumars and, on the other, a hundred brothers all born at the same instant. Have we ever heard of such a thing actually happening? Duryodhana rode on the chariot of adharma, and Arjuna that of dharma. The battle described here is, therefore, a struggle between dharma and adharma.¹¹

As far as its status as scripture is concerned, Gandhi claims that the Gita is not a particularly Hindu book but rather a non-sectarian teaching of ethics: "This is a work which persons belonging to all faiths can read. It does not favour any sectarian point of view. It teaches nothing but pure ethics."¹² Far from being a book of revelation in the monotheistic sense, it is actually a second-order source of authority, important only because one cannot find true gurus or preceptors in the present age. The text is important, in other words, not as a source of revelation, since it is not in fact capable of solving the problems of everyday life, but instead as an authority for everyday action:

If by Shastra we mean a book, the Bible, the Koran and other books have been before mankind for so many hundreds of years, but no-one has come to the end of these problems. The intention of this verse is to tell us not to look upon ourselves as an authority, that is, not to be guided by our wishes and feelings.¹³

What does it mean for the Bhagavad Gita to be an authority? For one thing, it means that the text is not a work of philosophy but one whose very externality allows individuals to judge their actions in its terms, and in doing so to form a community of interpreters whose debates over the text submit the actions of each one of them to examination. For the Mahatma, therefore, the Gita, like the unavailable guru, is an authority chosen and even interpreted, though not in a way that sets specialized learning over the generality of moral action that is available to all:

Simple like a villager that I am, why should I insist on reading the *Gita* myself? Why should Mahadev refuse to do that? Why did I take this upon myself? Because I have the necessary humility. I believe that we are all imperfect in one way or another. But I know well enough what dharma means, and have tried to follow it in my life. If I have somewhere deep in me the spirit of dharma and loving devotion to God, I shall be able to kindle it in you.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid., 15.

¹² Ibid., 280.

¹³ Ibid., 260.

¹⁴ Ibid., 17.

As an external authority the Bhagavad Gita creates a community of interpreters by preventing subjects from speaking in their own names. It also prevents the actions of these subjects from being idealized in the instrumentality of political life, thus giving them both freedom and materiality. This is why Gandhi was so insistent upon maintaining the externality of the Gita, prescribing for its recitation all manner of ritual attentions, because it was “necessary to create an atmosphere of holiness round the *Gita*.”¹⁵ Yet at the end of the day he had to confess that the book alone offered no help:

The conclusion of our study of the *Gita* is that we should pray and read holy books, and know our duty and do it. If any book can help, it is this. Really, however, what help can a book or a commentary on it give?¹⁶

The point of authority, therefore, was neither its power nor its truth but merely its externality. This comes through very clearly in that part of Gandhi’s commentary on the Gita where he suddenly describes a Protestant named Wallace, who experimented with Hinduism before turning Roman Catholic and accepting the authority of the Pope:

If the Pope is immoral, there is bound to be corruption in society, but any person who has decided that he will do nothing on his own but do only what the Pope asks him to do, will only benefit himself. A Protestant would say that one should obey one’s conscience, but this Wallace kept his conscience out and surrendered himself to the Pope. His giving up concern for his conscience was a great idea.¹⁷

Gandhi was not interested in a book called the Bhagavad Gita or even in its message, but rather in the kind of moral action that the external authority they represented made possible, such externality being a prerequisite for the autonomy and materiality of action. His reading of the *Gita* was therefore nothing more than an exploration in the nature of action.

VIRTUE OUT OF NECESSITY

The setting for Gandhi’s exploration of moral action was Arjuna’s celebrated dilemma on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Arjuna’s dilemma, according to the Mahatma, was not whether he should or should not kill his relatives, but how any choice he might make in the circumstances would be at all meaningful morally. After all, whether he killed or did not, a slaughter would in any case ensue, and

¹⁵ Ibid., 283.

¹⁶ Ibid., 283.

¹⁷ Ibid., 287.

one in which he was fully implicated. How, then, could Arjuna either claim or avoid responsibility by any choice he might make? Or as Gandhi puts it,

Let us suppose that Arjuna flees the battlefield. Though his enemies are wicked people, are sinners, they are his relations and he cannot bring himself to kill them. If he leaves the field, what would happen to those vast numbers on his side? If Arjuna went away, leaving them behind, would the Kauravas have mercy on them? If he left the battle, the Pandava army would be simply annihilated. What, then, would be the plight of their wives and children? . . . If Arjuna had left the battlefield, the very calamities which he feared would have befallen them. Their families would have been ruined, and the traditional dharma of these families and the race would have been destroyed. Arjuna, therefore, had no choice but to fight.¹⁸

The question here is therefore the opposite of that normally asked in discussions of ethics: not how one should exercise choice, but how an act might retain moral meaning in a situation where choice itself has become superfluous. And choice becomes superfluous only in a world where every act includes what it intends as well as its opposite, thus giving rise to violence. Such a totality could be addressed neither by a calculus of means and ends nor by the arbitrariness of conscience, but instead, Gandhi thought, by action that abandoned choice altogether, which was after all meaningless if it could not determine the future. For only action that gave up the myth of control or effect might occur within a universe of determinations without itself falling prey to the sublime character of its totality.

Starting with the criticism that moral choice was delusionary and self-indulgent, Gandhi went on to reject its unacknowledged politics, by which such choice was held to determine the future and so retrospectively justify itself, just as ends are said to justify means. But how was choice or will to be eliminated from moral behaviour? For one thing by rejecting the quest for self-realization upon which it was so often predicated in an ostentatious disavowal of crass instrumentality. Though a votary of self-realization at other times, the Mahatma was deeply suspicious of its narcissistic potential in his commentary on the Gita, because he thought that such a concern deprived action of its gravity by turning it into one among many options in an endless quest for fulfillment. Self-realization as a spiritual activity should therefore be replaced by self-purification as a bodily one:

We discussed yesterday that we should speak not of “self-realization” but of “self-purification”. Self-purification is to be achieved through the body. We act through the

¹⁸ Ibid., 20.

atman [soul] to the degree that we act through the body. In truth, however, the *atman* does nothing, nor does it cause anything to be done.¹⁹

In other words self-realization was only possible by way of bodily action as a form of self-purification, since the self did not exist without a body that determined it:

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

Running against the current of moral thought down the ages, this was an extraordinary attack on the supposedly free subject of ethics, conceived in terms of a spiritual or mental self that remained unhampered by the body. It was also an attack on the knowledge that gave substance to the freedom of such an ethical subject. Both attacks were prompted at least in part by Gandhi's recognition that this self and its knowledge were necessarily confined to a few adepts alone, serving at most only as ideals for the rest and not therefore the stuff of everyday morality. But it is important to note that the Mahatma did not reject this form of ethics because it was difficult for the generality of people; indeed he thought them capable of far more in the way of sacrifice than anything prescribed a moral elite by the votaries of self-realization. What he objected to was the fact that such aristocratic forms of ethical life depended upon luxuries like time and learning that were not available to most. But more than this he thought that selfhood could not exist apart from the body and that knowledge was never adequate to the choice required of it. And so Gandhi had to eliminate moral choice altogether by sacrificing its agent and knowledge to action as a process of forgetting. This involved disciplining oneself to behave in such a way as to make morality something habitual and spontaneous, in the same way as the body functioned automatically and was so free:

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.²¹

Having in this marvelous way turned willing into a disease and revealed the body as a site of freedom, the Mahatma went on to recommend that the latter's

¹⁹ Ibid., 155.

²⁰ Ibid., 84.

²¹ Ibid., 59.

spontaneity be extended to moral life by a practice of forgetting that was both familiar and easily available:

When typing on a typewriter has become mechanical work with the typist, the finger will alight on the right letter even when he is not looking at the keyboard; he who is able to work in such a spontaneous manner and is fully alert, like the typist, in everything he does, may be described as the Buddha.²²

But forgetting has to do with more than spontaneous action, and involves putting even the objects of one's morality out of mind, so that these latter cannot become part of some bargain in which one good deed is repaid by another. For this orientation of an act to the future would simply smuggle politics back into ethics by an obscure back door:

We should not serve anyone with the hope that he, too, will serve us one day, but we may serve him because the Lord dwells in him and we serve that Lord. If we hear anyone crying in distress for help, we should immediately run to him and help him. We should help the Lord crying in distress. After doing what was needed, we should feel that it was all a dream. Would the Lord ever cry in distress?²³

Though it seems far-fetched, Gandhi's advice in the passage above offers us a way of dissociating moral action from the politics of reciprocal obligation and contract, avoiding which entails forgetting ethical relations and therefore rejecting any community based upon them. This was certainly the Mahatma's way of avoiding all action motivated by sentimental reasons like pity, horror and even hatred, each deriving from an imagination exercised by stories of needless suffering. So while he advocated the display of suffering voluntarily undergone, Gandhi thought that it could only inspire admiration in the hearts of observers, and prompt their conversion to the sufferer's cause, rather than calling forth passions stoked up by tales of victimization and the obligations of charity as much as revenge that they implied. Indeed, as responses to suffering, charity and revenge used the same language and thus amounted to the same thing, which was perhaps why one could so easily turn into the other. Quite unsentimental himself, Gandhi remained level-headed during the most tumultuous of times, refusing to enter into what he thought of as a political relationship of pity and gratitude with his interlocutors.

²² Ibid., 133.

²³ Ibid., 148.

ACTION WITHOUT A SUBJECT

All this meant that the traditional figure of the moral subject, constituted by will and freed from bodily dependency, had to be replaced by someone quite different. Gandhi chose as his moral exemplars the figures of the child and the slave, who had in the past, a few religious ideals apart, served as the very emblems of moral lack. While criticizing the unhealthy effect that slavery had upon the master, who was after all tied to his slave by self-interest, the Mahatma saw in the latter someone who could forget himself because he was unable to exercise choice:

The slave can never conceive of his existence without his master. A person who has the name of another on his lips all the twenty-four hours will forget himself in the latter. The *atman* [individual soul] becomes the *paramatman* [universal soul] in the same manner.²⁴

The slave, then, becomes for Gandhi the model of a moral subject, as indeed he was for a number of religious traditions in India and beyond. Similarly, children were examples of virtue because they alone could be counted as truly free, their physical, and even intellectual or spiritual, needs all being taken care of by adults, so that they could live non-politically in the immediate present:

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], a *muni* [saint], a *sthitaprajna*. He is so in the sense that he does what he is asked to and carries out every instruction.²⁵

By locating traditional virtues like freedom and faith, to say nothing of celibacy and asceticism, in the unexpected figures of children and slaves, Gandhi was doing more than pointing out the superficiality and contradictions of older ethical models. He was also attempting to universalize moral ideals in non-hierarchical ways and see them at work in every aspect of social life. This did not, of course, mean that the Mahatma glorified slavery and advised obedience to all authority. Indeed his own life was dedicated precisely to contesting such authority, whether in the form of politics or religion, and however imperfectly he might be seen to have done so. Obedience was important because it was a necessary and inevitable part of social life in general. And if anything it was more important for moral life in particular, since even an ethics founded upon conscience requires obedience to the call of one's better self if it is to function. Instead of seeing in obedience merely a limit to moral action, in other words, Gandhi recognized it as an irreducible

²⁴ Ibid., 49.

²⁵ Ibid., 49.

element of ethics, one whose virtue needed to be fostered in its own right, much as religions of various kinds had always done, though perhaps not for the same reasons. And in doing so he showed up the poverty of ethical principles, as they are commonly understood, confined as these are to a moral aristocracy while prevaricating about crucial features of social life, obedience being only the most obvious instance of these.

While children and slaves might have provided models of virtue for the Mahatma, he did not think that moral subjects were all the same, and possessed no generic idea about them. On the contrary, he defined their obligations in the most multifarious ways by citing the old notion of *swadharma* (individual duty), according which people belonging to different castes, genders and generations each had their own particular role to play, also therefore owing obedience to particular authorities.²⁶ Opposed to the standardized subject of modern law, and therefore of politics as well, *swadharma* could not be determined by others but only decided by oneself. And its task was not simply to differentiate one's own duty from that of others, but also to distinguish among the recipients of one's action. This ostensibly unequal treatment, both of oneself and of others, produces real equality in an almost communist sense, as in the famous shibboleth "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs". And it does so by turning the subject who distinguishes and differentiates into someone who by that very token is *samadarshi*, able to see everything equally:

When can we say of a person that he is *samadarshi*? Can we say so of that man who would give equal quantities to an elephant and an ant? Indeed no. We can say it of him who gives to each according to his or her need.²⁷

The test of equal regard, however, as of moral action in general, was undoubtedly sacrifice, which Gandhi prized above knowledge, freedom and the like because it was the only moral form available to everyone without distinction. Indeed the bulk of his commentary on the Gita is taken up with a discussion of sacrifice, whether it is called spinning, celibacy, fasting or dying. For the Bhagavad Gita, of course, it is not dying but killing that is seen as the ultimate sacrifice, in its own way much more arduous than dying when it involves killing one's relatives. Though in principle opposed to killing, the Mahatma did see it as being unavoidable on certain occasions, for instance when it came to protecting the weak.²⁸ But his approbation of the act went much further when describing Arjuna's dilemma:

The *Gita* permits no distinction between one's relatives and others. If one must kill, one should kill one's people first. Shri Krishna asks Arjuna: "What is this you are saying about

²⁶ Ibid., 301.

²⁷ Ibid., 157.

²⁸ Ibid., 25.

people being your relations?" The *Gita* wants to free him from this ignorant distinction of some people being his relations and others not. He has resolved to kill. It was not right, then, that he should shrink from killing particular individuals.²⁹

The duty enunciated by *swadharma* required that one's own relatives be killed before anybody else, this proof of detachment and equal regard being the truest way in which killing could partake of morality. Such forms of killing even represented the most sublime of moral acts, because they entailed greater sacrifices than merely dying for others. And so Gandhi repeatedly praised the sacrificial killings, whether only intended or actually carried out, that were ascribed to heroic or saintly figures like Arjuna, Harischandra and Prahlad, though he did not, of course, recommend the practice among his contemporaries. How did the apostle of non-violence come to see killing as the highest form of sacrifice, and therefore as the supreme moral act? The process of reasoning that led him to this conclusion was driven by a desire for universality: ethics was either possible everywhere and available to everyone or it had no meaning at all. We have already seen how this desire informed the Mahatma's rejection of choice, knowledge and self-realization for authority, obedience and self-purification. It is because he did not think any morality worthwhile that abdicated responsibility in situations of extreme violence, or had to be confined to a moral aristocracy, that Gandhi ended up investing traditional moral categories like authority and sacrifice with a universality they had not previously possessed. For his idea of ethical universality was fundamentally egalitarian in nature, and thus tied to the politics of anti-colonialism, though without partaking of its instrumentality, which bartered the virtues of the present for ideals of freedom and equality in the future.

This is the sense in which Gandhi's morality can be said to exist in the shadow of politics, with whose practices it had perforce to engage, if with the gravest of doubts. Rather than simply an inheritance from some Indian past, therefore, his deployment of traditional moral categories, all transformed in the process, might be recognized as an effort to avoid those, like legal freedom and equality, that provide the currency of modern politics. And this was important not because politics was altogether evil, but because it was founded upon an instrumentality that sacrificed the present for the future, thus denying the former its existential weight while robbing all action of reality. The Mahatma's alternative, then, was to sacrifice the future for the present, in the faith that the former would be better secured by attending to the latter's virtue. Controlling the present, after all, was more feasible than predicting the future, which was one reason why self-purification and sacrifice were so crucial for Gandhi, and part of the same

²⁹ Ibid., 25.

logic as his otherwise inexplicable rejection of locomotives and fast cars, which he thought deprived their passengers precisely of a lived present.

Indeed the Mahatma can be said to have inhabited the present more fully than anybody in the last century, and to have invested it with more significance than it had ever possessed, if only by replacing the fleeting and illusory character of this category with a gravity appropriate to modern times. And so to become arenas for moral action, war and killing had also to be diverted from their orientation to the future and made fully present. For Gandhi saw in the battlefield not an exception to ethics but the very stuff of its reality, if only because it provided a site for moral action that politics could not occupy without risking self-destruction. Instead of withdrawing from such violence, then, moral action had to prove its mettle by domesticating and even going beyond it, to occupy an arena such as Arjuna did on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, where politics might not venture because choice had been rendered superfluous there. Only by exceeding its future-making violence in this way would politics finally be cast in morality's shadow:

In this world which baffles our reason, violence there will then always be. The *Gita* shows us the way which will lead us out of it, but it also says that we cannot escape it simply by running away from it like cowards. Anyone who prepares to run away would do better, instead, to kill and be killed.³⁰

³⁰ Ibid., 14.