

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.”¹⁸ 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).¹⁹ 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

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

¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.”²¹ 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.

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

²¹ 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.”²²

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.²³ 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.

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.