

GANDHI'S REALISM

Introduction

In 1915, after nearly twenty-one years of political work on behalf of Indian migrants in South Africa, Gandhi returned to India to enter, for the first time, the emergent scene of anticolonial and nationalist politics. Gandhi's rise to prominence was dramatic - within four short years he became the effective leader of a reorganized and revitalized Congress party and commanded the first major mass mobilizations against British rule, the apex of which was the Non-Cooperation/Khilafat Movement (1920-1922). The non-cooperation campaign was envisioned as an explicit *experiment* in mass nonviolent action; in Gandhi's words, "*satyagraha* was being brought into play on a large scale on the political field for the first time."¹

In February 1922, in an atmosphere of growing momentum, Gandhi announced the campaign's escalation in the form of a call for non-payment of land taxes (that is, the campaign was to move beyond non-cooperation and withdrawal from government institutions to an experiment in what he called aggressive civil disobedience in the Bardoli region of Gujarat). But on the very day that the no-tax campaign was to begin, an outbreak of violence at Chauri Chaura brought the movement to a sudden and controversial end. In Chauri Chaura, policemen, after firing upon protesters, had been chased into a police station which was then set alight, leaving 23 dead.² Gandhi announced the immediate cessation of mass civil disobedience and began a five-day fast of atonement and purification.

This was a defining moment of Gandhi's political career; no other decision has been so roundly condemned or remained so controversial. For many, even his closest admirers, it was a moment of deep uncertainty, even disillusionment, with both Gandhi's ability to lead and of *satyagraha* as a method. To his severest critics, then and now, the suspension of Non-Cooperation is taken as a sign of an overriding (and arbitrary) moralism at the heart of Gandhian politics: a concern for ethical exhortation and rectitude at the expense of political judgement.³ In opting to save the "purity" of nonviolent resistance – and perhaps even the purity of his soul – Gandhi here seemingly

¹ M.K. Gandhi, "The Duty of Satyagrahis (6-7-1919)," *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol.18, 183. References to *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Electronic Book), 98 vols. (New Delhi, 1999) and are cited hereafter as CWMG, followed by volume and page number.

² Shahid Amin, "Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-2," in *Subaltern Studies III*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi, 1984), 1-55; Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (University of Minnesota, 1993), 85-131; Judith Brown, *Gandhi's Rise to Power: Indian Politics 1915-1922* (Cambridge, 1972).

³ For an recent example of the view of Gandhi's decision as stemming from a religious imperative that significantly retarded political independence, see Perry Anderson, "Gandhi Centre Stage," *London Review of Books* 34:13 (5 July 2012).

exemplified a politics of pure conviction, akin to Weber's statesman of conviction who refuses to stray from ethical duty in the name of political expediency.

But Gandhi's decision was not motivated by spiritual or ethical concerns alone. Rather it was connected to a series of political and tactical considerations about the means appropriate to the ends of *swaraj* (or self-rule). These calculations were in part based on an argument about the substance of *swaraj*: about the right means by which to pursue and attain a populist vision of *swaraj*, what Gandhi would call "self-rule in term of the masses." Most crucially, they were calculations of how to mount an effective large-scale resistance without engendering cycles of ineffective militancy, embittered repression, and disillusionment. Viewed in this manner, the decision to suspend Non-Cooperation yields a very different lesson and different understanding of Gandhi's political thinking. In these first experiments in mass *satyagraha*, Gandhi dramatically confronted the hazards and possibilities of large-scale political action. The experience of Chauri Chaura had sharply demonstrated that the temptations of violence ran deep, that they might arise from the very nature of mass political action itself.

Gandhi often referred to the violence which shadowed these first experiments in large-scale *satyagraha* as his Himalayan "miscalculations" or "blunders" for which he sought continual adjustments, corrections, and solutions throughout his long and tumultuous political career.⁴ What Gandhi learned, practiced, and propagated was a daring sense of the duty and power of action – in his terms, the force of ordinary people recognizing and "regaining their self-confidence and power of action."⁵ At the same time, he repeatedly cautioned against the latent dangers of that same power to unleash violence and undo its very achievements. His limitless faith in nonviolent action was therefore always tied to a sober assessment of the potential pitfalls of political action. Gandhi's greatest challenge was to create modes of political action, especially in their collective form, that did not augur pure anarchy or a relentless struggle for power between opposed social forces. He found the answer in *satyagraha*, understood as disciplined, self-limiting, nonviolent action – action that could mitigate violent escalation and effectively channel popular protest in constructive and progressive directions.

This book is a meditation on Gandhi's account of nonviolent political action, of what

⁴ M.K. Gandhi, "Speech at Mass Meeting, Ahmedabad (14-04-1919)," *CWMG*, 17, 420-424; "The Duty of Satyagrahis (16-07-1919)," *CWMG*, 18, 182-185; "Gandhi Old and New (4-05-1920)," *CWMG*, 23, 112-113; "A Confession of Error (18-08-1921)," *CWMG*, 24, 109-112; "The Crime of Chauri Chaura (16-02-1922)," *CWMG*, 26, 177-182; "A Revolutionary's Defence (12-02-1925)," *CWMG*, 30, 243-249; "Notes (10-09-1925)," *CWMG*, 32, 390; "The Truth is One (24-04-1927)," *CWMG*, 38, 295-296; "A Himalayan Miscalculation," *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, *CWMG*, 44, 441-442. All references are to *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Electronic Book), 98 vols. (New Delhi, 1999) and are cited hereafter as *CWMG*, followed by volume and page number.

⁵ M.K. Gandhi, "Notes on the Agreement (13-11-1924)," *CWMG*, 29, 333.

political action entails, and what it requires if it is to be effective and, at the same time, avoid the descent into violence. Gandhi's central concern – how to formulate an effective nonviolent politics – is as vital today as when he first proposed and practiced *satyagraha* over a century ago. But Gandhian nonviolence is often misconstrued as a static moral injunction against violence or simply a condemnation of violent resistance. Gandhi himself is often portrayed as a saintly idealist, pacifist, or purveyor of conviction politics – a moral critic of politics, speaking from standpoint of conscience and truth. For a number of reasons, this view of Gandhi and Gandhian politics is fundamentally misleading. I hope to renew our understanding of Gandhian nonviolence as practical politics, as a set of distinct political tactics, strategies, and stances that aim at transforming the valence of violence in the dynamics of political conflict and contestation. Against the saint-as-politician, or the moral man of conscience, I pursue Gandhi's politics from the vantage point of Gandhi the political actor and innovator who vividly understood that politics is closely bound to the possibility of violence. This was the core of Gandhi's realism – a view of politics as profoundly shaped by endemic tendencies towards conflict, domination, and violence coupled with an account of how political action can constrain and mitigate these same tendencies to effect progressive change.

Means and Ends: Dilemmas of Political Action

One of the central ways Gandhi reckoned with the ever-present potential for violence was a concern with the imbrication of *means* and *ends* in politics. Gandhi took means and ends to be “convertible”: the choice and enactment of political means was understood as deeply consequential for the attainment of political ends. At one level, the call to scrupulously attend to the question of means was, as is often recognized, a sharp rejection of the logic of expediency in politics. Gandhi considered modern politics to be saturated by a kind of instrumentalist, means-ends thinking, in which violence and coercion had become widely permissible and explicitly defended as legitimate. This broad ethical injunction itself worked in tandem with a set of practical objections to the use of political violence and the ideologies that legitimated and excused it. Simply put, Gandhi argued that the kinds of ends we ought to pursue in politics – freedom, equality, justice – would be compromised, rendered fragile and unattainable when pursued through inappropriate, dangerous, or dubious means.

Consider his famous argument with militant nationalism, most evocatively pursued in the 1909 political tract, *Hind Swaraj [Indian Home Rule]*. Gandhi sought to prove that the attempt to obtain independence “by any means whatsoever, even by using violence” was to follow “a suicidal policy.”⁶ If freedom is sought through all available means, including arms or fraud, it can result in conquest and usurpation as easily as true

⁶ M.K. Gandhi, “Preface to *Indian Home-Rule* (20-3-1910),” *CWMG*, 10, 458.

swaraj or self-rule. For Gandhi, the idea that “we” nationalists “were justified in gaining our end by using brute force, because the English gained theirs by using similar means” was fundamentally mistaken. In “using similar means,” i.e. brute force to drive out the English, “we can get only the same thing that they got,”⁷ namely an unstable conquest sustained and legitimated by domination and fear. And Indian freedom, in Gandhi’s iconic rendition, would be nothing more than “English rule without the Englishman.”⁸ In ridiculing the nationalist conception of independence as “a change of masters only”⁹ or “a mere change of personnel,”¹⁰ Gandhi was in part criticizing the substance of independence as elitist, but crucially it was an elitism that was also implicated in the very means of militant nationalism. Political violence in the form of “secret societies and the method of secret murder”¹¹ was a vanguardist mode of political action open only to the few and privileged. In aiming at igniting patriotic fervor and hostility against the ruling power it offered little in terms of a model or method for attaining *swaraj* “in terms of the masses;”¹² that is, true social, moral, and economic freedom for India’s peasant millions.

But Gandhi’s claim was not simply that good ends can only be gained by good means, an idea that can be readily dismissed as blind hope or reckless dogmatism. Rather, the reciprocity of means and ends to which Gandhi draws our attention can be read as more strategic/tactical in character. Not only do means shape the character of ends, crucially, they are implicated in the very nature of political conflict. To put the point more sharply, it was precisely because means shaped *the terms of political contestation* that they inevitably affected the realization of ends.

We might say that for Gandhi, in politics, determining the “how” of action mattered as much if not more so than specifying the final goal or end pursued. In a 1933 exchange with Nehru, Gandhi elaborated his position in the following terms:

[Y]ou have emphasized the necessity of a clear statement of the goal, but having once determined it, I have never attached importance to the repetition. The clearest possible definition of the goal and its appreciation would fail to take us there if we do not know and utilize the means of achieving it. I have, therefore, concerned myself principally with the conservation of the means and their progressive use. I know that if we can take care of them, attainment of the goal is assured. I feel too

⁷ M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (22-11-1909), *CWMG*, 10, 286.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁹ M.K. Gandhi, “Speech at Meeting of Deccan Princes (28-7-1946)”, *CWMG*, 91, 371.

¹⁰ M.K. Gandhi, “Is It Non-Co-Operation? (8-5-1924)”, *CWMG*, 27, 369.

¹¹ M.K. Gandhi, “Letter to *The Times of India* (22-8-1919)”, *CWMG*, 18, 304.

¹² Gandhi, “Speech at Meeting of Deccan Princes,” 91, 372

that our progress towards the goal will be in exact proportion to the purity of our means.¹³

To take “means” to be the central problem of politics – as I think Gandhi does – is to prioritize dilemmas of *political action*, from basic questions of how to persuade people to act in favor of reform, to the myriad ways that any particular political action necessarily encounters and engenders resistance in the contingent field of political contestation.

The means-ends question and intersecting problem of action – were major topics of political debate throughout the twentieth century. A whole range of Marxist, existentialist, progressive, anarchist, and anticolonial thinkers and activists wrestled with the legitimacy and efficacy of new forms of mass political action – such as the boycott or the general strike – as well as the specific question of the use of violence in politics, of what counts as coercion in politics and when it could be deemed permissible and necessary.

One prominent conceptual strand within this broader, global debate on action foregrounded the contingency and unmasterable character of action. Theorists of action – from Hegel to Weber to Arendt – have consistently emphasized action’s imbrication in a political field characterized by necessary conflict and hostage to the play of unintended consequences.¹⁴ This lends action if not a wholly tragic character at least an inherent fragility. I will contend that something akin to this view of action is at work in Gandhi’s call to attend to “the conservation of the means and their progressive use.”

When the pursuit of political ends becomes abstracted from scrupulous attention to the means of achieving them, it gives free reign to the negative entailments of politics. It leads to polarizing forms of indignation and resentment, to hostility that dehumanizes political opponents, and to psychological temptations towards violence and attendant forms of moral erosion. Gandhi’s understanding of the means-ends question therefore draws attention to ends as *consequences*, as the effects, entailments, and outcomes that are brought forth by particular forms of political action. In this sense, attending to the problem of means is an imperative to orient oneself towards the unintended consequences and burdens of political action.

For Gandhi, politics as such is defined by acute tendencies towards violence, structurally in the centralized state’s hierarchical organization, and dynamically in the logic of political contestation that tends towards coercion and escalation. Gandhi viewed

¹³ Gandhi, “Letter to Jawaharlal Nehru (1933),” *CWMG*, 61, 393.

¹⁴ Max Weber, “The Profession and Vocation of Politics,” in *Weber: Political Writings*, eds. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge, 1994); Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1998).

political contestation as an *interactive* and *iterative* process, which characteristically proceeds through continuing chains of actions, reactions, counter-reactions. Though the appeal of violence is often tied a hope that the chain of action will come to an end with one last show of force that can secure a final peace, in practice violence breeds resentment and further resistance. For Gandhi, then, a crucial fact about political action is the *reaction* action necessarily initiates. Resistance and recalcitrance are the necessary entailments of politics, the unintended but foreseeable consequences of political action. By entailments, I mean effects and consequences of particular kinds of political action that may not be logically given in the nature of political ideals or intended by political actors but nevertheless regularly recur as their reactive outcome. For Gandhi, the problem of political entailment was especially acute in the case of violence, for violence initiates definite dynamics of resentment, retrenchment, and retaliation – a dynamic that is often prosaically referred to as the *cycle of violence*. The choice of violent or coercive means therefore would necessarily affect the terms and nature of conflict, where extreme or confrontational means could easily exacerbate the tendencies towards polarization, heightened conflict, and entrenchment.

Gandhi attempted to distinguish nonviolence from a politics of provocation, which he took to be a recipe for escalation. Extreme or confrontational means would easily exacerbate tendencies towards polarization, heightened conflict, and entrenchment. Here we may note the well-known example on the negative effects of provocation from *Hind Swaraj*, in connection to Hindu-Muslim unity.

When men become obstinate, it is a difficult thing. If I pull one way, my Moslem brother will pull another. If I put on superior airs, he will return the compliment. If I bow to him gently, he will do it much more so...When the Hindus became insistent, the killing of cows increased. In my opinion, cow-protection societies may be considered cow-killing societies.¹⁵

Nonviolence was not, as he liked to repeat, a movement of “brag, bluster or bluff,”¹⁶ but rather, one premised on the performance of self-effacing and self-sacrificing acts. These acts and not intimidation or displays of force should do the political work of demonstrating firmly held political convictions and mitigating negative affect. For it was the work of politics – and the distinct efficacy of nonviolent politics – to mitigate the resistance and recalcitrance that political contestation inevitably entails.

Moreover, for Gandhi, the burdens of action are heightened or made more dangerous – action is further subject to escalation, and harder to manage – because political contestation enables and is enabled by negative passions and egoistic dispositions. Escalation is not just a problem of conflicting wills or competing interests, but also rooted in the affective or passionate nature of politics. Gandhi took passions such as

¹⁵ M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (22-11-1909), *CWMG*, 10, 272.

¹⁶ “The Need for Humility,” *CWMG*, 22, 203.

pride and egotism – and their derivatives such as anger, ambition, humiliation, insolence, revenge, retaliation, etc. – to be key forces for understanding the structure and psychology of violence and escalation.

In the case of violence, a distinct kind of hubris was required in its undertaking as well in its continued justification, a precarious subjective orientation that made acknowledging errors of judgment and policy reversals difficult and rare.¹⁷ For Gandhi, the fortitude that accompanies violence was often a brittle posturing, a papering over of ego-driven investments. The militant Hindu “who will protect by force of arms a few cows but make away with the butcher” or the militant nationalist “who in order to do supposed good to his country does not mind killing off a few officials...are actuated by hatred, cowardice and fear. Here love of the cow or the country is a vague thing intended to satisfy one’s vanity or soothe a stinging conscience.”¹⁸ Conviction and the attachment to principles is motivated by a need to protect and project one’s self, betraying an egoism that is more concerned to demonstrate its passion and the truth of its conviction rather than with political consequences.

These dilemmas of action become especially acute in the context of mass action. Gandhi was especially concerned about the pull of pride and egoism which, in its collective form, egoism threatened to unleash a kind of limitless politics, a politics unconstrained by any inhibition towards violence and impatient to demonstrate its power. Gandhi’s greatest challenge therefore was to create and practice modes of political action, especially in their collective form, that could undercut egoistic and hubristic politics and mitigate cycles of violent escalation. Gandhi’s solution to the acute dangers inherent in the very practice of politics was two-fold. On the one hand, Gandhi would insist on a tight imbrication between means and ends, where expectations are disciplined by tying them to concrete forms of political action and judgment is vigilantly oriented to the unintended and negative entailments of politics. On the other hand, Gandhi would propose forms of self-limiting, disciplined nonviolent action that can work to constrain the negative entailments of politics by disciplining the passions and transforming the terms of political interaction.

II. Rival Traditions of Realism

Gandhi famously claimed that he was “not a visionary” but rather a “practical idealist.”¹⁹ A practical orientation to politics, the putting of ideals into practice, was understood to necessitate close scrutiny of the problem of political means. Indeed Gandhi attempted a fundamental overturning of what he took to be the accepted priority of ends over

¹⁷ Parekh, *Gandhi’s Political Philosophy*, 147.

¹⁸ M.K. Gandhi, “On *Ahimsa*: Reply to Lala Lajpat Rai (10/1916),” *CWMG*, 15, 253-254.

¹⁹ M.K. Gandhi, “The Doctrine of the Sword (11-8-1920),” *CWMG*, 21, 134

means in politics. This reorientation is one of the most striking and recurring features of his political thinking. The demand for close scrutiny of means however was directed less at prosaic Machiavellians or power politicians than ardent idealists – nationalists and revolutionaries – who thought their ends to be so right and noble as to enable, justify, and/or redeem the use of dubious political means.²⁰ It is important to keep in mind the extent to which Gandhi's political thinking was animated and framed by a continual worry about the potential for violence given in the gamut of idealist enthusiasms – from anarchist nationalism, aggressive religious revivalism, to revolutionary Marxism – that shaped the ideological landscape of Indian anticolonial politics.

Egoistic attachment to principles was, for Gandhi, a characteristic flaw of political idealism, one that resulted in a political orientation that focused on *ends* at the expense of *means*. Violence in politics stems in part from the contemplation and cultivation of ideals without serious consideration of how they can be practically realized. For Gandhi, the commitment to ideals when detached from a specification of means is subject to a distinct form of moral erosion, namely it can have a morally disinhibiting effect on its proponents. “[T]o serve the noblest of causes,” political idealism become susceptible to taking and legitimating “short-violent-cuts to success,”²¹ to temporarily satisfying but ultimately self-defeating gains. Moreover, idealism can facilitate tendencies towards ideological entrenchment. When political disagreements are framed as arguments over fundamental principles, the potential for political progress may dissipate in an atmosphere of increasing hostility and polarization. At the extreme, an uncompromising insistence on ideals may not only lead to the use of coercion but may well slide into a moralistic politics of conviction or ideological dogmatism which, for Gandhi, were especially liable to breed contempt and engender a logic of escalation. Gandhi's attention to means recognized and, in part, aimed at offsetting the distracting and destructive attraction of idealism.

In its worry about the hazards of idealism, Gandhian politics converges with the tradition of political realism in instructive and surprising ways. In the history of political thinking, one defining features of realism is its criticism of morality and idealist moralism as sources of instability, hypocrisy, and delusion in politics. The ultimate grounds of the tension between “morality” and “politics” has been construed in a variety of ways – for example, in Hobbesian terms, it emerges as a constitutive problem of sociality, of moving from individual to collective decision-making; in Machiavelli, the problem appears as a disjuncture between public and private morality; and, for Weber, a

²⁰ In the midst of an abstract discussion about whether killing could ever be conceived of as a duty (i.e. for the protection of others), Gandhi made this observation: “Few men are wantonly wicked. The most heinous and most cruel crimes of which history has record have been committed under cover of religion or equally other noble motive.” M.K. Gandhi, “Ages-Old Problem (1927),” *CWMG*, 39, 184.

²¹ M.K. Gandhi, “My Path,” 29, 442.

problem of conflicting value spheres. For political realists, the tension between morality and politics is so acute as to render morality or ethical norms a deep hindrance and/or danger to political order, efficacy, and progress. But whether morality is construed as a hindrance or a threat is significant, and I suggest points to two sharply divergent, even opposed, traditions of political realism.

In what might be considered its dominant form, the realism associated very broadly with Machiavelli, moral idealism in the form of strict ethical codes and universalist morality is taken to be a severe encumbrance on the practical demands of political life. Therefore, overcoming or relaxing the norms of ordinary, individual, and/or legal morality becomes necessary to cope with and contain the often-radical contingencies of politics. Realism in this vein takes a particular interest in the problem of statecraft, of leadership and decision-making, in which the statesmen or political leader confronts extreme situations that require difficult moral compromises and calculations.²² A more expansive realism would also hold that effective politics, especially radical political transformations and extreme ideological conflict, regularly necessitate the overcoming of traditional ethical constraints, whether understood in terms of Christian, bourgeois, or liberal norms. For twentieth-century realist critics on both the right and left, liberal-bourgeois norms were taken to be not just ineffective but also to occlude or evade real politics; their alleged universalism merely an ideological veneer for expressions of power of another kind. In this respect, Lenin and Schmitt might also be seen as purveyors of this harder-edged political realism.²³ In the latter cases, as well as in the broader range of Marxist realisms, idealist moralism is not only criticized for being ineffective but also ideological and itself a justificatory discourse of and for power, to which a kind of revolutionary and radical *Realpolitik* is seen as the appropriate response. Here, conventional realism leads to a prescriptive defense of power politics, reason of state, or *Realpolitik* as the optimal way to navigate the political world. For the primary contention that realists often return to is the necessity of coercion as the *sine qua non* of politics.

However, alongside this more grimly celebratory realism, lineages of a rival tradition of realism can be discerned in Thucydides and Hobbes, but especially in the eighteenth-century liberalism of Montesquieu, Hume, Madison, and Burke, thinkers who likewise provide sober assessments of the passions, vices, and enthusiasms that drive political conflict and competition but aim to restrain and moderate rather than extol them.²⁴

²² See, for instance, Walzer's seminal formulation of the "dirty-hands" problem; Michael Walzer, "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2 (1973), 160-80

²³ See Eckert Bolsinger, *Autonomy of the Political: Carl Schmitt's and Lenin's Political Realism* (Westport, 2001); Raymond, Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, 2008).

²⁴ Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Harvard, 1984) and "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, edited by Nancy Rosenblum (Harvard, 1989); Frederick G. Whelan, *Hume and Machiavelli: Political Realism and Liberal Thought* (Lexington Books, 2004); Bernard Williams, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political*

Here, the potential incompatibility between idealist moralism and practical politics concerns less the supposed inefficacy of moral codes in politics than the ways in which absolutist ethics, ideological certitude, and utopian schemes can threaten political order and lead to unrestrained uses of power. Morality or, more specifically, moral and political enthusiasm is taken to be a real and recurring danger to political order and progress, where dogmatic certainty leads to irreconcilable political conflict that seemingly can only be arbitrated by the recourse to violence. Likewise, modern political ideologies – enthusiasm’s secular face — that seek to enact utopian and revolutionary projects can also turn to political violence and coercion, often undermining the very goals in whose name violence is enacted. Moderating realism evokes a broadly negative ethical horizon, orienting itself towards the prevention of civil breakdown, violence, cruelty, and domination over and against positive attempts to perfect citizens or polities.

The two traditions of realism share much in their substantive account of politics as well as in their methodological objections to idealism. Both forms of realism are committed to a psychological and motivational realism and therefore reject the search for ideal institutions in favor of a science of politics that emphasizes the play of passions and interests over ideal motivation, moral education, and rational agreement. But, crucially, they do for different reasons, they argue from divergent normative standpoints and therefore differ sharply in their prescriptions. In the tradition of moderating or liberal realism, while wholesale attempts to reshape, educate, or suppress human nature are seen to be either foolhardy or dangerous, nevertheless remedies (most often institutional remedies) are sought that can constrain and mitigate the inevitable play of pride and self-interest in politics. While one tradition is oriented towards moderation and restraint, the other encourages the harnessing of passion and power for securing ambitious political ends. Indeed, if we push this divide within realism further, from the perspective of moderating and Gandhian realism, hard-edged realism may not be as realist or as consequentialist as it claims to be, itself often idealizing the efficacy of coercion and instruments of violence, whether conceived in terms of the necessity of class-struggle or, in today’s terms, the always ready-at-hand “military option.”²⁵

Argument, ed Geoffrey Hawthorn (Princeton, 2005); Richard Bourke, “Edmund Burke and the Politics of Conquest.” *Modern Intellectual History* 4 (3) (2007) and “Theory and Practice: The Revolution in Political Judgement,” in *Political Judgement: Essays for John Dunn*, eds. Richard Bourke and Raymond Geuss (Cambridge, 2009); Andrew Sabl, “When Bad Things Happen From Good People (and Vice-Versa): Hume’s Political Ethics of Revolution.” *Polity* 35 (1) (2002) and “History and Reality: Idealist Pathologies and ‘Harvard School’ Remedies,” in *Political Philosophy versus History? Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought*, eds. Jonathan Floyd and Marc Stears (Cambridge, 2011).

²⁵ John Dewey, “Means and Ends,” in *Their Morals and Ours: The Class Foundations of Moral Practice* (New York, 1973), 79. Dewey’s response to Trotsky first appeared in *New Internationalist* in August 1938.

Gandhi's political thinking involved a number of substantive theses about politics that resonate strikingly with, especially, the tradition of moderating realism referred to above. At the core of Gandhi's realist theory of politics was a contextual, consequentialist, and moral-psychological analysis of a political world understood to be marked by inherent tendencies towards conflict, domination, and violence. Animated by a powerful negative horizon of violence, Gandhi was attuned to the unintended consequences of political action, especially the ways in which idealism and moralism – despite the best of intentions – could enable ideological escalation and violence. This understanding of the sources and legitimation of violence was tied to a moral psychology that emphasized the causal force of affect – of pride and egoism – over reason and rationality in political conflict. Thus, Gandhi's open opposition to Machiavellian and utilitarian ethics, rather than signaling moral absolutism or idealism, in fact drew him closer to a rival form of realism. But what distinguishes Gandhi's realism from other moderating realisms is its progressivism, its ability to blend a negative, even conservative, orientation against violence with a program of socio-political transformation.

In order to reconstruct and revive this alternative form of realism, I place Gandhi in dialogue with Max Weber and Reinhold Niebuhr, thinkers particularly significant for the development of realism in the twentieth century. Though Weber and Niebuhr retain conventional realism's recognition of the necessity of coercion in politics, they are often wrongly read as defenders of power politics. A crucial feature of their realism, like Gandhi's, was its focus on the forms of self-deception, egotism, and vanity that moralism in politics entails, dispositions that can embolden dangerous political ambition. In "Politics as a Vocation," Weber construed the problem of conviction in politics as leading to perverse psychological attitudes.²⁶ In particular, the devotion to a cause and belief in the absolute moral rightness of that cause, renders all means open and available, all actions regardless of effects and consequences can be explained, redeemed, or justified vis-à-vis that cause. Ultimately, the subjective attachment to ends seems to deny acknowledgement of and responsibility for action's consequential effects. Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* drew attention to both moralism and collective egoism (the egoism of social groups) as interlinked and fundamental impediments to radical social change.²⁷ On the one hand he questions what he takes to be the moralist's overestimation of reason and rational education as the primary catalysts of social progress. On the other, in his vivid account of the paradox of patriotism, Niebuhr analyzes the perverse consequences of moral values of altruism when tied to larger social groups, where paradoxically self-denial can become easily attached to unrestrained collective egoism and self-aggrandizement on a larger scale.

²⁶ Max Weber, "The Profession and Vocation of Politics," in *Weber: Political Writings*, eds. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge, 1994).

²⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study of Ethics and Politics* (Knox Press, 2002).

For Niebuhr, the fundamental problem of political life was therefore a conflict between individual and collective morality, where the constraints and coordinates of individual ethical life are seemingly lost or deformed in their insinuation in political conflict.

For Weber, the proper response to moralism lay in the sober calculation of consequences, a sincere reckoning with the tragic character of action, and the cultivation of detachment and perspective in political judgment. Likewise, Niebuhr hoped that in recognizing that hypocrisy and self-deception are inevitable byproducts of all moralistic endeavors, some form of self-criticism and self-restraint could be generated. Niebuhr also warned of the dangers of a “too consistent realism” which would seemingly “consign society to perpetual warfare,”²⁸ and therefore looked to forms of power that were least dangerous in its effects. Gandhi becomes a crucial interlocutor here since nonviolence similarly aimed at mitigating the negative entailments of moralism in politics. Indeed, Niebuhr himself points to Gandhi and Gandhian *satyagraha* as offering a possible antidote to the effects of egoism.²⁹ *Satyagraha* attempts to meet the challenge of moralism in both its vigilant attention to action’s consequential effects as well as in demanding and cultivating self-restraint in action. Crucially, Gandhi located the sources of moderation and constraint within the very mode of action. Through a model of self-limiting action, Gandhian politics reframes restraint as a difficult but ongoing practice and therefore conceives of moderation not as a politics of compromise or withdrawal but an active and strategic orientation to politics.

Exploring the convergence between Gandhian politics and political realism offers key insights into the nature and distinctiveness of Gandhian politics. Gandhi’s realism is the essential counterpart to a means-orientation in politics as well as the practical grounds of the politics of nonviolence. The novelty of nonviolent action is put into sharp relief when viewed as the analogue and correlative response to a realist theory of politics. Moreover, in situating Gandhi as the legitimate heir of a rival tradition of realism I aim to question the monopoly that the *Realpolitik* tradition has assumed over the language of political efficacy. Rather than its usual association with exhortations to power politics and a dogmatic insistence on instruments of violence, in Gandhi’s politics the standard of efficacy enables moderation in politics. The question of efficacy, and more generally the means-ends question, opens up consideration of what kinds of moral thinking, action, and criticism are effective and beneficial in politics, and what kinds are hazardous. In this way, Gandhi’s means-orientation enables a consequentialism that is strategic, tactical, and vigilant but one that also avoids the descent into pure instrumentalism.

²⁸ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 231.

²⁹ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Chapter 8.

III. The Politics of Nonviolence

The most original aspect of Gandhi's understanding of *satyagraha* was its radically *self-limiting* character. *Satyagraha* was "a force containing within itself seeds of progressive self-restraint"³⁰ and, thereby, would attenuate coercion and escalation in politics. In the tradition of moderating realism, the tempering of the passions, vices, and enthusiasm that drive political conflict and threaten political order is most often sought through various institutional remedies. Checks and balances, countervailing powers, and, especially devising institutions that can direct and channel, and thereby mitigate the excesses of, passion and ambition, are the characteristic prescriptions of liberal realism. Gandhi, by contrast, sought remedies within the terms of action itself, specifically by locating the source of limitation within the very mode of action. Crucially, Gandhi attributed a distinct efficacy to forms of action that were disciplined and limited in this way.

The key mechanism involved in the dynamics of *satyagraha* was *tapasya* or disciplined suffering. For Gandhi, *tapas* was the distinguishing feature of all modes of nonviolent action and the key to their effectiveness. Suffering was the mechanism by which the disciplining of the self – its passions and egoism – is effectuated in and through action. For Gandhi, the self was deeply implicated in action, both in terms of garnering internal strength as well as forestalling psychological temptations towards violence. Self-effacing action cultivated humility as well the fortitude to deny a hubristic response to the experience of resistance and disappointment. Disciplined suffering would also serve to mitigate the adversary's resentments that engender violent escalation.

The literal meaning of *satyagraha* was "truth-force" or the search for and insistence upon truth.³¹ Suffering properly practiced was non-coercive, it was a way to "insist" upon but not impose one version of truth. Truth, for Gandhi, was absolute and universal, but it was also in principle unknowable and inaccessible in any final or total sense. Each individual not only had their own path to truth, but their knowledge of it was only ever partial and always liable to be mistaken. To recognize fallibility was to accept that people's (partial) views of justice will necessarily conflict; "for what appears to be truth to the one may appear to be error to the other."³² This was, for Gandhi, "the main reason why violence is eliminated" in *satyagraha*. And in eschewing violence, the *satyagrahi* "gives his opponent the same right of independence and feelings of liberty that he reserves to himself, and he will fight by inflicting injuries on his own person."³³ The agent of nonviolence thereby enacts their truth in ways that limits the negative

³⁰ M.K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (1925), CWMG, 34, 174.

³¹ M.K. Gandhi, "Notes (23-3-1921)," CWMG, 22, 451; Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, 18. See also Parekh, *Gandhi's Political Philosophy*, 143.

³² M.K. Gandhi, "Statement to Disorders Inquiry Committee (5-1-1920)," CWMG, 19, 206.

³³ M.K. Gandhi, "Evidence before Disorders Inquiry Committee (9-1-1920)," CWMG, 19, 217.

externalities of insistent action. If this truth-force turns out to have mistakenly used, i.e. in a cause that is unjust, then “only the person using it suffers.” The disciplined *satyagrahi* does not “make others suffer for his mistakes”³⁴ and, instead, turns the consequences of failure inward. By taking upon oneself the burdens of action and demonstrating a willingness to sacrifice, suffering would work to undercut the affective desires and negative passions that drive political conflict.

While the charged language of self-suffering has the tendency to evoke heroic, even masochistic, feats of self-abnegation, it might be better described as disciplined action – free of personal resentments and ambitions – that demonstrates this detachment through action that involves the willingness to sacrifice. As Niebuhr noted, “by enduring more suffering than it causes,” *satyagraha* demonstrates its “freedom from resentment and ill-will to the contending party” and thereby “protects the agents against the resentments which violent conflict always creates in both parties to a conflict.”³⁵ Nonviolence required continual self-work against egoistic drives and attachments that feed into and off of a politics of polarization and confrontation. In this manner, *satyagraha* would constrain and counter the adverse consequences of politics and sustain progressive change.

Satyagraha as a form of disciplined suffering was in its own way an affective politics, it relied less on reason and argument and sought to deploy and appeal to countervailing passions to breakdown resistance and entrenched positions. Reason could easily cover over and engender obstinacy, self-righteousness, and dogmatism. Indeed Gandhi thought that deeply-held beliefs and principles were almost always less rational than they may appear, and the intellect worked hardest to supply arguments and proofs for beliefs that had their origins and grounding elsewhere. Suffering, however, enabled a way of breaking through these rationalized defenses:

Suffering is the law of human beings; war is the law of the jungle. But suffering is infinitely more powerful than the law of the jungle for converting the opponent and opening his ears, which are otherwise shut, to the voice of reason. Nobody has probably drawn up more petitions or espoused more forlorn causes than I, and I have come to this fundamental conclusion that, if you want something really important to be done, you must not merely satisfy the reason, you must move the heart also. The appeal of reason is more to the head, but the penetration of the heart comes from suffering. It opens up the inner understanding in man.³⁶

³⁴ M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (22-11-1909), *CWMG*, 10, 293.

³⁵ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 247.

³⁶ M.K. Gandhi, “Speech at Birmingham Meeting (1931),” *CWMG*, 54, 48.

Dramatic displays of commitment – through acts of conscious and willed suffering – were thought to more effectively weaken entrenched positions and prejudices. It was a way of triggering an opening and rethinking of commitments, it was perhaps itself a form of reason “strengthened by suffering.”³⁷

Gandhi’s prescriptions to be pure and selfless in motive have given great cause to view Gandhi as a moral absolutist or ethical purist in politics. I argue that in the context of the theory and practice of nonviolence, these moral virtues also functioned as distinctly *political* dispositions upon which the success (and not just the moral legitimacy) of nonviolent action depended. The formulation and defense of purity and selflessness, as well as suffering, detachment, humility, discipline, was avowedly strategic and therefore political. Interpretations of Gandhi that emphasize his moral idealism and the moral underpinnings of *satyagraha* tend to underplay the strategic elements of nonviolent action. The force of *satyagraha* is often understood as a politics of conviction or conscience, in Raghavan Iyer’s words, a demonstration of “how the man of conscience could engage in heroic action in the vindication of truth and freedom against all tyranny.”³⁸ More recently Akeel Bilgrami and Uday Mehta have reformulated the ethics of nonviolence through a provocative and subtle account of *satyagraha* as a practice of exemplarity.³⁹ Mehta in particular aligns this understanding of exemplarity to Gandhi’s rejection of the progressive teleology and idealism of modern politics more generally. But the emphasis remains on the introspective and self-contained nature of nonviolent action and less on the strategic and interactive dimensions that I take to be its central and defining features.

On the other hand, skeptics have rightly worried that the prescription to cultivate the virtues of nonviolence – such as patience, humility, fearlessness – on the surface seem all too demanding and moralistic for the work of politics. How can we reconcile this exacting ethical program with Gandhi’s insistence that nonviolence did not require, in his own words, “saints for its working.” I want to suggest that one way out of this conundrum might be to take seriously Gandhi’s obsessive concern with the rules and structures of action, as the place where discipline is performed. That is, rather than thinking of discipline as a prior condition of action – or as a set of virtues cultivated outside and before political action – we can look at the ways that discipline is dramatized and cultivated in and through the specific forms that nonviolent action is meant to take. It is here that we might also discern the distinctiveness and novelty of Gandhi’s response to the problem of action more generally.

³⁷ M.K. Gandhi, “Talk to Inmates of *Satyagraha* Ashram, Vykom (1925),” *CWMG*, 382.

³⁸ Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, 252.

³⁹ Akeel Bilgrami, “Gandhi, the Philosopher,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 38: 39 (Sept 23, 2003); Uday Mehta, “Gandhi on Democracy, Politics and the Ethics of Everyday Life,” *Modern Intellectual History* 7:2 (August 2010) and “Gandhi on the Common Logic of War and Peace,” *Raritan* 29:5 (Summer 2010).

As I noted before theorists of action have been especially concerned to highlight its unmasterable and fragile nature. But proposed antidotes to the dilemmas of action very often fall back upon a sometimes elegiac plea for individual political responsibility and judgment. Think here of Weber's call in the conclusion of "Politics as a Vocation" for an ethics of responsibility that ties the sober calculation of consequences to the cultivation of detached passion and perspective in political judgment. While Gandhi also argued for a similar kind of vigilance of action's consequential effects, arguably his most significant innovation was to seek remedies to action within the terms of action itself, specifically by trying to uncover sources of limitation within the very forms that nonviolent action would take. Self-limitation would also work to mitigate concerns about action's irreversibility and unpredictability, and lend nonviolence an inherent revisability and avenues of self-correction, for its action was never as final or determinate, or dangerous and provocative, in effect as violence.

The place to turn to uncover this aspect of Gandhi's thinking are his searching examinations of the conditions of disciplined *satyagraha* that comprised his in-house journals, *Navijavan*, *Young India* and *Harijan*. Indeed, Gandhi explicitly characterized *Young India's* brief as a forum that "aims to illustrate the utility and necessity of non-violence with respect to issues of public concern." In these writings, Gandhi took great pains establish to the precise conditions in which nonviolent tactics could be deployed without inducing escalation or enacting coercion. Gandhi's responses ranged very broadly, from guidelines for large-scale campaigns of non-cooperation and civil disobedience, to delineating rules for specific actions, such as strikes, pickets, marches, work-stoppages (*hartal*), and – most controversially – the political fast. In very general terms, campaigns had to be open and planned, tied to specific demands, and proceeding in precise and calculated stages. Pure provocation or escalation could never become a goal of its own. Thus, at every stage of confrontation, demands had to be publicly declared, justified, and circulated, and avenues for negotiated settlements (including face-saving measures) had to be kept open. Campaigns of disobedience and resistance were meant to produce conditions for progressive and iterative resolutions, rather than cascading revolutions. Specific action like pickets, boycotts, and *hartals* had to avoid all appearance of coercion and intimidation, i.e. by not physically stopping picket-crossers, by announcing *hartals* in advance and refraining from pursuing compliance on the day itself. Gandhi was especially aware that extreme tactics like the political fast could very easily be coercive, and thus he elaborated especially demanding rules for them. It is worth remembering that Gandhi at no time fasted against the British government or British rule as such, and never in the name of an open-ended demand for independence. For Gandhi, fasting against a political antagonist or enemy functioned only to escalate bitterness and conflict, because one's enemy would necessarily experience the fast as exhortative. One could not "fast against a tyrant" but only against those whose consciences could be stirred by the willingness to sacrifice one's life.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ "Was It Coercive?" CWMG, 61, 377.

These rules and guidelines might be distilled into three general or forms. First, the structure of nonviolent action was to show actors to be taking upon themselves the burdens and consequences of action. Acts of protest, resistance, and reform demonstrate discipline by visibly sacrificing benefits (such as money or prestige) and risking severe consequences (such as arrest). In so doing, nonviolent action limits as much as possible the externalizing effects and dangers of action so as to mitigate antagonism and negative affect. Moreover, if the act is mistaken only the actor suffers from the mistake and can more readily retrace his or her steps.

Secondly, Gandhi's conception of nonviolent action tries to reinsert individualization into the dynamics of mass action. Mass *satyagraha* would then function not through the power of numbers per se but by the coordinated activity of disciplined individuals whose individuality would be maintained and expressed in their comportment, constraint, and detachment. If mass action could be given such an individuating structure, it would neither depend on nor incite collective egoism. Disciplined conduct and comportment were structural features of Gandhian nonviolence, displayed in the ritualized form of the directed campaign, or march, or strike. In fact you can see this is as a consistent feature of the early or classic phase of nonviolence – in Gandhian era, in civil rights movements in the US, the anti-nuclear protests in the UK – where comportment and discipline were crucial and staged in specific and directed actions like the sit-in, the march, and freedom rides. This might be usefully contrasted to (sometimes unruly) crowds gathering in public spaces more readily associated with collective nonviolence today.

Another model of this kind of individuated-collective action might also be found Gandhi's advocacy of *khadi* (hand-spun cloth). Recall, the *khadi* system was a large-scale, decentralized system of cooperative cloth production. It was a mode of cooperation that was collective in nature but also premised on the patient work of radically *isolated* individuals, where each individual – in the act of spinning – would separately cultivate inward discipline and experience a kind of self-rule.

Lastly, nonviolent action was meant to be especially vigilant about keeping a tight connection between means and ends. In the wake of the collapse of Non-Cooperation, Gandhi turned especially to developing this connection between means and ends in terms of invigorating what was known as the Constructive Programme, a program of village reform and revival that also included the promotion of Hindu-Muslim unity and the abolition of untouchability. Constructive work was understood as the positive program of building *swaraj* from below but it also functioned to discipline expectations by tethering them to real – concrete, constructive, and cumulative – forms of political action. In this sense, it was antidote to the intoxications of political action where the immersion in constructive work and activities would offer training in self-rule as well as cultivate patience and industry as a protection against passion and anger.

As self-limiting action *satyagraha* was partly oriented internally, towards averting the moral erosion that tempted one towards political violence – erosion that often stemmed from egoistic attachments to ends and outcomes. Externally, *satyagraha* focuses on creatively enacting nonviolent means to “convert” others – opponents as well as allies – to the cause of the reform. Drawing on examples from Gandhi’s political career, I highlight and elaborate the ways in the *satyagraha* involved, not merely one set course of action or a static injunction to restrict action to nonviolence, but the strategic interplay of nonviolent techniques, methods, stances, that in themselves had to be as various and dynamic as the nature of political conflict itself. In this vein, I especially look to some of the neglected aspects of Gandhi’s political program – namely, the constructive program and campaigns for social and economic equality – to consider what nonviolence looks like beyond the celebrated cases of large-scale resistance. There is a tendency to take civil disobedience, and the Indian anticolonial campaign against British rule, as the exemplary instance of *satyagraha*, to which one would turn to tease out its conceptual underpinnings. While due mention is made to Gandhi’s other campaigns of the time, such as the campaigns against untouchability and for Hindu-Muslim unity, these are often viewed as indications of Gandhi’s progressive social views rather than as themselves theoretically significant examples of nonviolent politics in action.

In the case of civil disobedience and non-cooperation, that is, in what Gandhi terms negative or destructive *satyagraha*, self-limiting action seeks to mitigate the resentments that action necessarily entails, most importantly by taking upon itself the burdens and consequences of action. In constructive *satyagraha*, self-limiting action cultivates solidarity, trust, and authority through work and service. It seeks to forge new kinds of connections, connections that can overcome and transform relations of mistrust, domination, and inequality. Constructive work performs a kind of intimate engagement that functions to demonstrate sincerity to those you want bring into the terms of action, but in a way that eschews externality and imposition. In all its forms, *satyagraha* grounds and immerses itself in disciplined action so as to undercut psychological impulses like bravado, self-righteousness, dogmatism while, at the same time, orienting action towards reform.

IV. Gandhi as a Political Thinker

By far the dominant mode of interpreting Gandhi’s politics has been through a biographical lens. This tendency in part originated with Gandhi’s own famous and unconventional autobiography. *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* was distinctly introspective, the charting of a personal spiritual quest as it intersected with Gandhi’s political and public life. The biography like the majority of his writings presents and defends his ideas and decisions in and through a personal, epistolary mode. Subsequent biographies have followed this lead, where Gandhi’s political life – his political ideas, judgments and decision-making – are often described in overly personalistic and

psychological terms. In the work of admirers this lends itself to hagiography and portraits of heroic genius, while critics emphasize Gandhi's eccentricity, stubbornness, and purported irrationality to unmask him as a political manipulator or religious crank.

Closely tied to this view is the continued salience of the image of Gandhi as a saint-like, spiritual leader where a great deal of causal weight is placed on Gandhi's personality (his charisma, his moral authority, his popular appeal). This long-standing tradition of interpretation takes moral authority – Gandhi's moral authority – as given, and the open secret to his political success. Even defenders and close collaborators, like Nehru, have added weight to the view that Gandhi's greatest achievements stem in large part from the (often enigmatic) force of his moral personality. In Nehru words: "Personality is an indefinable thing, a strange force that has power over souls of men, and he [Gandhi] possesses this in ample measure."⁴¹ Indeed, Gandhi's impact on Indian politics would be explicitly conceptualized as extra-ordinary through the Weberian category of charismatic leadership.⁴²

There is no question that these accounts capture something vital for a proper understanding of Gandhi's popular appeal; he was extraordinarily adept at translating his political ideals into popular idioms and making them persuasive by connecting them to and embedding them in available symbolic and religious registers. But the recourse to notions of charisma or the enigma of ethical authority poses serious challenges to an understanding the relationship between Gandhi's political ideas and his political practice, indeed it threatens to produce a sharp chasm between the two. The more nonviolence is treated as a moral, aesthetic, ideological or rhetorical effect the less we understand its distinct political valence as proposed and practiced by Gandhi. This is not to imply that moral authority itself was unimportant to Gandhi's politics but to emphasize that, in Gandhi's thinking and practice, moral authority was not, as it were, given but made; it had to be actively forged through particular kinds of nonviolent action. In this respect, we can better understand ethical authority and principled leadership as effects of Gandhian politics rather their originating or spontaneous cause.

Partly as a reaction against the extensive interest in Gandhi's personality and his skills as a political leader in the historical and biographical literature on Gandhi, more recent efforts at establishing Gandhi's credentials as an important philosopher in his own right. Indeed for some, an emphasis on Gandhi's politics is seen as obscuring the richness, coherence, and originality of Gandhi's moral and political philosophy. The most important monographs on Gandhi's political thought, such as those by Raghavan Iyer,

⁴¹ Jawaharlal Nehru, *Towards Freedom: The Autobiography of Jawaharlal Nehru* (New York: John Day Company, 1941), 190-191.

⁴² The classic work in this vein is Suzanne and Lloyd Rudolph's *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India* (University of Chicago, 1967). Part Two was republished separately as *Gandhi: The traditional roots of charisma* (University of Chicago, 1983).

Bhikhu Parekh, Ronald Terchek and Anthony Parel (Dennis Dalton's work would be an important exception here),⁴³ have also moved away from another prominent strain of Gandhi studies which crystallized in the context of the civil rights movement and focused extensively on the theory and practice of civil disobedience. In this case as well, there is a sense that while studies of civil disobedience were sensitive to the logic of Gandhian protest and often very good at detailing the tactics, strategies, and sequences of effective nonviolent resistance, they were overly focused on conflict resolution and therefore failed to capture the moral and conceptual foundations of Gandhi's political thought. Recent attempts to reconstruct Gandhi's political thought have therefore turned to a more holistic and overtly philosophical approach that would place the theory of *satyagraha* in the context of Gandhi's wider religious, ethical, and moral thinking.

Treating Gandhi as philosopher in this manner, however, can sometimes reinforce a similar kind of disjuncture between Gandhi's ideas and politics. Gandhi neither took himself to be nor is generally taken to be in any straightforward sense a systematic political thinker. Though his 1909 dialogue *Hind Swaraj* has attained a kind of canonical status, this itself points to the conspicuous absence of anything like the extended political treatise in the Gandhian corpus. The absence may prove revealing; it attests both to Gandhi's self-understanding as primarily a political actor (as opposed to an "academic theorist") and his understanding of political action as experimental and context-dependent, and thus not easily presentable in the form of a deductive treatise. In my view, the place to turn to unearth the systematic elements of Gandhi's political thought is less the published books per se but in the less tidy and voluminous realm of speeches, letters, and especially short articles in his long running in-house journals (*Indian Opinion*, *Navajivan*, *Young India*, and *Harijan*). This corpus was a purposely-public archive, where Gandhi reflected openly and continually on theoretical and practical political questions, and contains, over the course of his long political career, the elements of a remarkable consistency in political thinking.

Gandhi's thought of course also extended to a wide and often eccentric range of topics from religion, ethics, and economics, to diet and health regimes. And given the holistic manner in which he approached this enormous range of topics, especially in how he sought to integrate them in his daily life, it is reasonable to assume the existence of something like a Gandhian philosophical system, even if he never explicitly produced one. This is to say that attempts at reconstructing Gandhian philosophy or taking

⁴³ Raghavan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (Oxford University Press, 1973); Bhikhu Parekh, *Gandhi's Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination* (Macmillan, 1989) and *Colonialism, Tradition, and Reform: An Examination of Gandhi's Political Discourse* (Sage, 1989); Dennis Dalton, *Gandhi's Power: Nonviolence in Action* (Columbia University Press, 1993); Ronald Terchek, *Gandhi: Struggling for Autonomy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); Anthony Parel (ed), *Gandhi, Freedom, and Self-Rule* (Lexington Books, 2000) and Parel, *Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Gandhi seriously as a philosopher are far from groundless or incoherent. And studies of Gandhi's philosophy have themselves yielded important accounts of Gandhi's original views of religion, modernity, nationalism, and colonialism. The problem emerges more often when Gandhi's political thought is reconstructed as systematic political philosophy, and specifically in terms of where this *systematicity* is situated. Many studies begin by reconstructing fundamental concepts or principles (such as Gandhi's theory of truth, nonviolence, or human nature) and attempt to deduce from these concepts the basic contours of Gandhi's political commitments. The philosophic core is thus defined by concepts of nonviolence and truth and the central theoretical task becomes the analysis of the religious, epistemological, and metaphysical positions and presuppositions that make possible and justify these moral values. Methodologically, this form of reconstruction is premised on an analytical and causal model in which political theory amounts to the application of certain moral truths to politics, and often unwittingly reinforces the view of Gandhi as primarily a moral idealist.

The method I follow in this work – and one I take to be well aligned to the claim of Gandhi's realism – is to unearth and formalize what Gandhi took to be the recurring and endemic dilemmas of political life, namely the sources and dynamics of violence in politics, in relation to which nonviolence emerges as the correlative response. My aim is to reconstruct the question to which the politics of nonviolence provided the answer. Through the question-answer framing, I situate Gandhi within broader contexts of political argument, moving beyond the origins of Gandhian concepts and ideas to how they are deployed. In so doing, I hope to break free, methodologically, from biographical and philosophical models that often result in a view of Gandhi's thought as *sui generis*, as an idiosyncratic mix of Victorian radicalism and Hindu philosophy. Conceptually, it allows for a more insistent focus on nonviolence as political practice, not simply a static ethical injunction or moral norm but a novel mode of action grounded upon a distinct theory of politics.