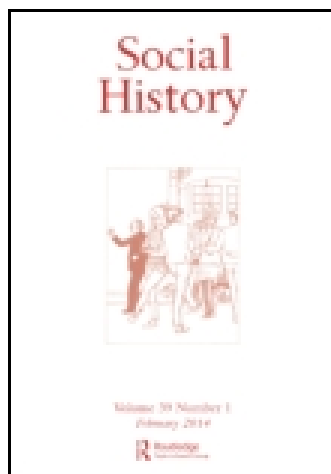


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### Satyagraha and the place of the animal: Gandhi's distinctions

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Aishwary Kumar

## *Satyagraha* and the *place* of the animal: Gandhi's distinctions\*

Sacrifice but never animal-sacrifice . . .  
Gandhi, 'The message of the *Gita*' (1931)

But mind you, an animal after all is an animal.  
Gandhi, 'Speech at the Congress session' (1929)

Perhaps no anti-colonial thinker in the twentieth century was as sensitive to the animal, as alive to its empirical, conceptual, and rhetorical potential, as was the Indian nationalist and thinker M. K. Gandhi. The forty-year-old Gandhi, yet to become the planetary apostle of non-violence that he subsequently would in the inter-war period, was in London in October 1909 when the French pilot, Louis Bleriot, became the first person to fly across the English Channel. Anticipating the argument he would make a month later in his masterwork *Hind Swaraj, or Indian Home-Rule*, Gandhi wrote a suggestive column for his South African newspaper *Indian Opinion*. 'No one points out what good it will do to mankind if planes fly in the air,' he complained. 'People go crazy over every impostor making a novel claim. To me at least it appears that life would grow intolerable if there were to be too many planes in the air. We have trains running underground; there are telegraph wires already hanging over us and outside, on the roads, there is the deafening noise of trains.' In a tone symptomatic of those heady months, Gandhi warned, 'If you now have planes flying in the air, take it that people will be done to death . . . people will destroy themselves like so many moths'.<sup>1</sup>

\*I am grateful to Vinayak Chaturvedi, Parna Sengupta, Ajay Skaria, and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan for their patient engagement with various iterations of this article. In addition to generously sharing his knowledge of the European tradition, Martin van Gelderen, along with the wonderful staff of the Lichtenberg-Kolleg – the Göttingen Institute of Advanced Study – ensured that I got the perfect space and time to develop these arguments. An early version of this paper was

discussed at the University of Minnesota graduate seminar on 'Colonialism and modernity' in 2011–12. The article is a small expression of my gratitude to that group of stimulating interlocutors.

<sup>1</sup>Gandhi, 'This crazy civilization', *Indian Opinion* (22 October 1909) and *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Electronic Book), 98 vols (New Delhi, 1999) (henceforth CWMG), vol. 10, 66–7.

It is easy to miss that which is introduced very surreptitiously here, towards the very end of this spiritual formulation, a being (or *otherwise*) that enters the frame of Gandhi's thinking only to destroy itself and set, in the process, a cautionary example; namely, the non-human moth. Missing it (and missing the furtiveness of the formulation) has, I think, meant missing another possible history of the political; a history in which the conceptual construction and certitude of the human must be viewed as a problem in the planetary life of categories such as equality and justice rather than as an ontological solution that might facilitate the unproblematic actualization of these universal ideals. This history requires another way of conceptual–archaeological thinking, another approach to the order, operations, and exclusions of *conceptuality* itself. Its contours will not emerge only by democratizing the labour of concept-making, by pushing its epistemology into newer spaces and hands, by opening its craft to those institutional and social worlds where intellectual activities have until now been bound and divided by the juridical, theologico–political, and historical rules of empirical (and manual–menial) work.<sup>2</sup> Rather, this conceptual history must be constituted by the interrogation of the *ontological* divisions between the phenomenological and spiritual, the sensible and intelligible, empiricism and the concept, itself. Gandhi, I think, was at once the most scrupulous twentieth-century pioneer of this radical historical ontology (by which I mean the one to think the relationship of the human-concept to history at its limit) and the most rigorous defender of the exclusions and inequalities that underlay its spirit. And the non-human, that which was to him exemplary for its fortitude yet closest to myth, that which occupied the most ubiquitous, surreptitious, and mystical place in his 'experiments with truth', had something ineluctable to do with it.

Chroniclers of his moral and political thought have for long been detained by the critique of modern civilization that Gandhi had launched in October 1909 and formulated with even greater force over the following four weeks as he began composing *Hind Swaraj* on his ship back from London to South Africa. To many in Europe and India, that text came to mark a galvanizing articulation of his affinity for philosophical anarchism. To others, the work exemplified his decisive turn towards an ethics of everyday life that he had pitched against the intrusive force of modern industry and locomotion.<sup>3</sup> Gandhi's discomfort with technology, one might argue, was an act of clearing a much deeper theoretical ground aimed at recovering such primordial, even pre-political, virtues as slowness and patience. 'The mind is a restless bird; the more it gets, the more it wants and still remains unsatisfied,' he cautioned his extremist nationalist interlocutor in *Hind Swaraj*. 'Our ancestors, therefore, set a limit to our indulgences.'<sup>4</sup> It was in his pursuit of a properly *human* subject, a subject aware of finitude, which he complained western airborne civilization (and its humanist politics founded on the desire for infinitude) threatened to all but dissolve, that Gandhi returned to the minutiae of

<sup>2</sup>The political theorist Gopal Guru had made this argument with great verve more than a decade ago in his essay 'How egalitarian are the social sciences in India?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XXXVII, 50 (2002).

<sup>3</sup>Two sensitive articulations of these strands are those of Ashis Nandy, *Traditions, Tyranny and*

*Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (New Delhi, 1993) and Uday S. Mehta, 'Patience, inwardness and self-knowledge in Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*', *Public Culture*, XXIII, 2 (2011).

<sup>4</sup>See Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj, or Indian Home-Rule*, ed. Mahadev Desai (Ahmedabad, 1938), henceforth *Hind Swaraj*–MD, 53.

material practices such as spinning, weaving, celibacy, scavenging, and regulated untouchability (a rigorous daily routine for touching and not touching the 'untouchable' at specific hours) within the precincts of his *ashram*.<sup>5</sup> These were activities that seemingly had no tangible political end to achieve except for creating a moral horizon grounded in the subject's sacrificial discipline and practice [*sadhana*]. The horizon would yield, Gandhi insisted, an order of rhythmic and just life where the sovereign meaning of truth [*satya*] and being [*sat*] as such would come to reside in the distinctive force of non-violence alone. Hence his radical rendering of non-violent 'passive resistance' as *satyagraha* or 'truth-force', a term he had adopted almost two years before he began composing *Hind Swaraj*.<sup>6</sup>

With all its historical, structural, phenomenological, and rhetorical determinations, with its ability to conjure visions of mastery and decay on the one hand and, on the other hand, its potential for the constitution of a transformative and just politics, the category of force, one of the most ubiquitous terms in the modern political tradition, had opened an immense conceptual front in Gandhi's thought. In fact, the sheer frequency of its recurrence in his corpus presses upon us the task of interrogating the more subterranean, mystical, even secretive, impulses that underlay his ontology of truth and truth-force. Force here was most material, most organic, and yet most cryptic. Life without commitment to manual precision and torque, without a spiritual enlightenment of the *hand* and its rhythms, was akin to a 'whited sepulchre', inside which, Gandhi warned a group of young students in 1926, there was 'only a corpse eaten up or being eaten by insects'.<sup>7</sup> By the time of *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi had begun to arrange this perilous moral ontology under the figure and name of 'spirit', a concept whose planetary history, which begins in its most identifiable modern form with Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and acquires its decisive twentieth-century salience in Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), remains to be written. In this article, I make small beginnings in that direction, examining one specific set of logical demarcations and distinctions, one precise place and structure of *ontological difference*, which was set to work in Gandhi's thinking of spirit [*bhaav*].<sup>8</sup>

I will not take up the problem of spirit in its entirety here, which I distinguish from the domain of the 'spiritual' that Partha Chatterjee's ground-breaking work on anti-colonial nationalism had delineated two decades ago.<sup>9</sup> Rather, making a limited move towards what Pierre Rosanvallon has called a 'philosophical history of the political', I shift the lens away from the conventional set of concerns and certitudes that have until now structured the study of Gandhi's ethics and politics.<sup>10</sup> I attempt to recuperate that other subject-

<sup>5</sup>I have explored the modalities of this radical phenomenology in my essay 'The ellipsis of touch: Gandhi's unequals', *Public Culture*, xxiii, 2 (2011).

<sup>6</sup>Gandhi, 'Johannesburg letter', before 10 January 1908, *CWMG*, vol. 8, 80–1.

<sup>7</sup>Gandhi, 'What is education?', *Navajivan* (28 February 1926) and *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. Raghavan Iyer, 3 vols (Oxford, 1986) (henceforth *MPWG*), vol. 3, 379.

<sup>8</sup>I draw this expression from Jacques Derrida, 'Geschlecht I: Sexual difference, ontological

difference' in Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, 2008).

<sup>9</sup>Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, 1993).

<sup>10</sup>See Pierre Rosanvallon, 'Towards a philosophical history of the political' in Dario Castiglione and Iain Hampsher-Monk (eds), *The History of Political Thought in National Context* (Cambridge, 2011).

concept (but at once more and less than a subject-concept, I argue, a *place* of exception) in whose opposition the satyagrahic subject, its properties, relations, and sovereignty, came to be articulated in Gandhi's thought and practice. This was the place occupied by the animal; a place of moral ontology, a place of being (or otherwise), which *satyagraha* had to both truthfully nurture and ineluctably usurp if it had to *be* at all. I raise 'the question of animal', thus, not simply to emphasize a certain historiographical lacunae in intellectual and social histories of nineteenth- and twentieth-century anti-colonialism.<sup>11</sup> Rather, I excavate the place of the animal within the conceptual and rhetorical order of Gandhian passive resistance in order to ask whether any planetary genealogy of anti-colonial social relations, let alone a genealogy of non-violence that was grounded in such rigorous moral perfectionism and sacrificial exorbitance as Gandhi's was, could have left the place of the animal within the religious, political and ethical structures of its time untouched.

### THE ANIMAL AS PLACE

Beginning in the 1920s, Gandhi began to take frequent refuge in the exemplary lives of creatures around him. In his lectures on the *Gita*, which he delivered in the 1920s after the failure of his first mass movement against the British government, he likened the *satyagrahi* to a 'large black ant whose feet, if stuck in jaggery, will not let *go* their hold of it; they remain stuck to it. Not to forsake the task undertaken, that is but the definition of *satyagraha* itself.'<sup>12</sup> Here *satyagraha* had mutated under the animal's exemplary and infinitesimal force. It was the animal's resilience, its mundane rhythms and quotidian struggles, which allowed Gandhi to illustrate to the *satyagrahi* the invisible logic of force. By taking such recourse to species life, Gandhi, one might suggest, had rendered the human agent inadequate to the task of wresting back a sovereignty that would be proper to the *swaraj* of his vision. Politics, its very force (that is, its transformative promise), was now hitched on to that which was strange and creaturely. It would henceforth be an activity that thought life at its limit, a measure that, we must note in the same breath, always threatened to lapse into the decisionist tendencies of sovereignty itself. Rarely, for example, would Gandhi speak of *Ramarajya*, the monarchical state of Indic vintage that was for him the epitome of morally sovereign and just government, without taking recourse to the animal. 'Under *Ramarajya*', he insisted more than once, 'even a dog should receive a fair deal; why then talk of men?'<sup>13</sup> That is, when *even* the dog was taken care of in that kingdom, why cannot we care for the untouchable [*atishudra*] in ours? Something was

<sup>11</sup>For what it might mean for humanism to open up the site of the animal as question, see Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. Marie-Louis Mallet and David Wills (New York, 2008). For the way such a question might render the ontological status of the human (and with it, the masculinity of the concept itself) problematic, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, 2003).

<sup>12</sup>Gandhi, *The Bhagavad Gita* (New Delhi, 2008) (henceforth *Bhagavadgita*), 328.

<sup>13</sup>Gandhi, 'Speech at Ras', 12 March 1931, *Navajivan* (15 March 1931), *CWMG*, vol. 51, 245. Six years later, Gandhi deployed the extremism of 'even a dog' again in his 'Speech at Morvi', *Navajivan* (29 January 1928), *CWMG*, vol. 41, 141–2.

irremediably unequal about the non-human here; something that made it the very last among subjects; something that pushed it to the extreme and remotest limit of a just order; something that rendered it into a *place* between being and non-being itself. We can only begin to probe the dogmatism of this ethics that underpinned the satyagrahic use of 'even' for the animal.

Over the next two decades, Gandhi's engagement with the richness and complexity of creaturely life burgeoned into several hundred scattered pages, stitched along rigorously formulated and sometimes controversial passages on belief and sacrifice. These sutures were never incidental. For, while they spoke of Gandhi's compassion, they also amplified the fragile place of species life, their mortality and difference, in his moral ontology. It is suggestive, for instance, that except for the *Autobiography* published in the late 1920s, which recounted his meatless days in Europe, Gandhi's later writings and ruminations tended frequently to distract away from the question of vegetarianism. Instead the obsession now was with the place of the animal in the rhetorical and empirical theatres of mass civil disobedience. But there were also the latent impasses generated by non-violence in its everyday materiality that had now come to occupy Gandhi more stoutly than ever before, as he receded from active political struggle for a decade in the 1920s: the problem, for instance, of the contingency of species life and its mindless profusion and perishing; the fuzzy boundaries between euthanasia and cruelty; the limit on human compassion towards speechless species in the face of their incurable suffering and incommunicable pain; the question of the right to finitude – that is, the conundrum of whether to attribute to a creature the *ability* to die, whether to let it possess the consciousness and knowledge of its own death – itself.

While it has been conventionally easy to dismiss it as such, the animal's place in this economy of concepts and gestures was not merely a figurative or rhetorical one. On the contrary, the animal was the place of a fundamental if cryptic ontology. Tied to Gandhi's scrupulous thinking of being and truth, the animal Gandhi invoked as irrevocably spiritual as it was empirical. After all, on the one hand, this was a society where acts of killing one's neighbour in the name of the sacredness of the animal had often given theological charge to such enumerative categories as majority and minority. On the other hand, social conflicts over vegetarianism and belief had occluded the ontological demarcations and exclusions of the non-human that lay at the heart of the sacredness of creaturely life itself. Large parts of north India were engulfed by cow-protection riots between Hindus and Muslims in 1893, the same year that Gandhi landed in Durban to work for a Muslim trading company. Faith and politics, nourishment and injury, spiritual austerity and territorial expansiveness, orders that might normatively be seen as contradictory to one another, had begun to blend perilously in colonial India by the second half of the nineteenth century. Rarely did theologico-political texts of the time go without claiming their right to either immunize or consume the animal. And yet, equally rarely did they go beyond merely claiming that right. It was as if the animal had to be walled in, left unthought, immunized against all ethical questioning at the very moment it had been rendered political (and sacrificial) for causes greater than its mere being. The animal, one might argue, had become an abyss of being in its strongest sense, a species simultaneously more and less than life; a fragile place which, if probed, might give way

and unravel those very religious differences that had rendered its sacralization so volatile; a site where a distinctive moral ontology was now shared between the most irreconcilable groups of species killers and worshippers. Occluded by its own ubiquity, not in the least in Gandhi's own prolific writings from the 1910s onward, the history of the animal (and with it, of justice) can thus be approached only as an ontological passage, a trajectory of *conceptuality* (rather than an artefact of conflicting ideologies) where categorical distinctions between sovereignty and civility, ethics and numbers, majority and minority, had been rendered terrifyingly nebulous.

And this problem and polemic of the animal were to insinuate themselves, in the most sacrificial manner possible, at the heart of the new republic too. Four decades after *Hind Swaraj*, in January 1948, a Brahmin fanatic, angry that Gandhi had not done enough to protect from beef-eating Muslims the animal sacred to India's Hindu majority, shot the Mahatma dead in New Delhi, the capital of newly independent and partitioned India. 'The reason', the assassin claimed during his trial, 'is *purely* political and political alone.'<sup>14</sup> We need to unpack the decisions that lie at the heart of this rhetoric of the 'purely political', whose normative lexicon and desire for absolute sovereignty occlude the ontological displacement of the non-human that takes place at the very heart of its sacrificial politics, even as the sacralized animal is mobilized within those very normative domains (in the name of democracy and greatest good). *Hind Swaraj* itself, a text composed sixteen years after the severest wave of cow-protection riots had swept north India, and one in which Gandhi had already devoted a chapter-length dialogue on the animal as it had mediated social relations between Hindus and Muslims in India since medieval times, was exemplary both for its exactitude and exclusion that would subsequently come to constitute *satyagraha's* fundamental ontology. And this was the question of ontology because, despite its reserve and care, its truthfulness and scruple, Gandhi's affinity for sacrifice was never far from a certain interest in the *delimiting* of being as such.

Was it the transformative nature of anti-colonial politics, the exigencies of imperial franchise (that made imperative the reconceptualization of the political itself), which instituted in Gandhi's moral and social thought a turn towards the problem of ontological difference? In the period following the end of his first non-cooperation movement in 1922, a conceptual and rhetorical torsion was certainly discernible, one that was rich with ironies of generosity and inequity, sensitivity and violence. Its symptoms began to appear with unmistakable regularity in the 1920s and the 1930s. At the same time, in the theatres of anti-colonial mobilization where *satyagraha* had now begun to find its idioms and injunctions relentlessly challenged by revolutionary socialists on the one hand and, on the other hand, by Gandhi's sustained critic and anti-caste radical Bhimrao Ambedkar, Gandhi's engagement with the animal began to move away from the question of species rights. With animal rights, Gandhi had developed at best an equivocal intimacy in the London years. The question of rights for the unequal, which for the radical Gandhi included the non-human, was a complex moment in his trajectory anyway. But nowhere was it more ironic than in his encounter with the complexities of creaturely life; with life

<sup>14</sup>Nathuram Godse, *Why I Assassinated Gandhi? Gopal Godse* (Delhi, 1993), 6–7 (emphasis added). *And the Events, the Accused and the Epilogue by*

that was constitutively unequal; with life that, at once separated from the untouchable and outcaste *harijan* by the logic of an ontological essence and yet intimate with it, was *born* unequal.

It was to replace the notion of rights that Gandhi had inserted the category of force [*bal*] as obligation in his lexicon. Force not as – even though it was ineluctably contaminated by – freedom, mastery, power or unbridled violence; rather, force marked by measure and limit [*sanyam*], a disciplinary rigour [*maryada*], an ability to work by hand; force, above all, as *crypt* for the self in its profound distinction. ‘Why’, Gandhi asked in his *Gita* discourses, ‘should you carry the needless burden of thinking about them and be like a dog who walks under a cart and imagines that it is being drawn by himself and not by the bullocks? Defeat and victory, heat and cold, pleasure and pain come to a man in turn and he must put up with them.’<sup>15</sup> As much as the animal comes to be inscribed here into the history of *satyagraha* at all, it is inscribed as the place of its failure. For the animal was that whose rhythm and movement (or their lack) made the structure of satyagrahic self-knowledge and action possible. It was that which edified for the Gandhian public both the imperative of a greater non-violence on their part and the perils of a spiritual politics.

The stakes of this placement of the animal at the heart of anti-colonial relations, I propose, are deeper. For apart from yielding a distinctive history of ‘spirit’ in the colonial world, tracing the movements of its moral ontology promises to amplify for us a much deeper conundrum of classical political thought: the risks of a sacrificial politics that ineluctably tends, by its very logic, to exceed its preliminary mandate. So that the touching of the animal by *satyagraha*, a touching (both figurative and literal) rife with compassion, care, and mercy; a touch teeming with metaphors and wracked by guilt; a touch generated a singular meditation on solitude, euthanasia, and death; a touch that above all, rendered the animal simultaneously exemplary in action and destitute in spirit, was never delimited and bound by the question of the animal alone. Rather, the animal was the symptom of the place, indeed the sepulchre, to use Gandhi’s word, for that which remained immeasurably unequal [*asamaan*], an absolute exception [*asamaanya*], the site of a profound decisionism, within the structure of satyagrahic non-violence. Conversely, any archaeology of this distinctive non-violence, its norms and obligations, requires a careful interrogation of *satyagraha*’s immense affinity for the place, figure, and rhetoric of the non-human. Perhaps, such an archaeology must begin with the place of the self-annihilating, suicidal, anti-sacrificial moth itself, one that was invoked and circulated, among innumerable other species, at that decisive theoretical conjuncture that had yielded in 1909 the singular tone and lexicon of Gandhi’s masterwork *Hind Swaraj*.

Why had someone as rigorous and careful as the young Gandhi, whose ethics of care would come to so scrupulously include in its moral and empirical ambit the animal, found it so tempting to discard the non-human from the structure and horizon of meaningful life? What might this rhetorical ploy, if it can be adjudicated and dismissed as such, illuminate about his conception of life? Perhaps the invocation of the non-human

<sup>15</sup>See Gandhi, *Discourses on the Gita in Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 6 vols (Ahmedabad, 1968) (henceforth *SWMG*), vol. 3, 226.

was simply another instance of him being carried away by the force of his own hyperbole, one that therefore warrants no moral or conceptual attention by itself? It would have been easy to consign the moth, in that case, to the rich economy of Gandhian rhetoric, letting it pass for what it apparently was. But for the ineluctable truth that the moth was not simply a rhetorical species; it was not only and always a mere figure. Deep at the heart of *satyagraha*, instead, it was walled in by an economy of sacrifice from which it was excluded. The animal, I argue, gave Gandhi's elaboration on social relations both its egalitarian structure and hierarchical rigour.

Now, in classical political thought, whose modern lineaments emerge in their most explicit form in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), the animal has always been viewed either as a rhetorical fulcrum on which rests the theory and vision of the state or as an edifying contrast to the concept of the human. That is to say, the figure of the non-human is mobilized in order to amplify the moral value of its purported opposite: the imperative of contractual obligation and civility among human actors, on the one hand and, on the other hand, the structure and threat of monstrous and unconditional force over the commonwealth whose control the multitude yields voluntarily to its sovereign.<sup>16</sup> Rarely a subject by itself, the animal, even in the most rigorous elaborations on social relations, has thus remained an apostrophe in the history of humanity, a non-concept whose empirical and symbolic potential resides in the fact that it creates the passage (or requisite intonation) for comprehending and illuminating the good and evil, and most often the *worst*, of the human condition. Outside of its life as a vestigial cognate of the human-concept, outside of its capacity to generate visions of extreme force and cruelty, the animal remains 'after all an animal', as Gandhi put it at the historic Lahore session of the Indian National Congress in 1929.

'After all' was operative here. With a certain sigh of Gandhian finality, it had at once pulled the animal out of its status in classical thought as mere metaphor for aberration and consigned it to the order of an irreducible essence, to the order of an abyssal and irremediable difference.<sup>17</sup> The moth itself, in its absolute singularity, was no ephemeral creature either. Gandhi returned to it almost four decades later, invoking it with the same precision of purpose. Pure sacrifice, he posited in 1946, 'was not the thoughtless annihilation of the moth in the flame. Sacrifice to be effective must be backed by the uttermost external and internal purity ... without the requisite purity sacrifice is no better than a desperate self-annihilation devoid of any merit. Sacrifice must, further, be willing and it should be made in faith and hope.'<sup>18</sup>

The *fin-de-siècle* appearance of this species in Gandhi's enunciations had, then, only anticipated what was to become an enduring torsion in the history of *satyagraha*. *Satyagraha* was not unaware of the unequal's suffering; on the contrary, its moral ontology, its economy of abyssal distinctions, was founded on that suffering. However,

<sup>16</sup>See Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago, 2011), which significantly extends the insights of Ernst Kantorowicz's ground-breaking work, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval*

*Political Theology* (Princeton, 1957) into the creaturely dimension of sovereign power.

<sup>17</sup>Gandhi, 'Speech at the Congress session, Lahore', 31 December 1929, *CWMG*, vol. 48, 165.

<sup>18</sup>Gandhi, 'Speech at prayer meeting', *Harijan* (8 September 1946), *CWMG*, vol. 92, 60.

the animal suffered differently, singularly, incommensurably, inimitably. This inimitability was to remain crucial. For Gandhi's lexicon of enfeeblement and perishing in the name of truth and justice, often famously activated during his fasts that were undertaken to bring moral pressure on Indians and their British masters alike, frequently drew their moral reserve and hyperbolic ethics from species death. Only a supreme form of mastery over spirit allowed one to fast until death, Gandhi claimed, even as he barred others from experimenting with that 'art' form. There was an institution of secrecy here, an *encrypted inequality* at its source. And it began with the demarcations and delimiting of the non-human. Certainly, there was also something in the animal's mode of perishing that Gandhi found spiritually exemplary. But this exemplarity notwithstanding, the death of the animal remained not simply inexplicable to the *satyagrahi*; it did not merely push to the limit the *satyagrahi's* ability to grasp the spirit. Instead, the animal's death remained *heterogeneous* to the very order of satyagrahic finitude. The gratuity, the proliferating and meaningless moth-like quality of species death, whether natural or sanctioned by science, evaded *satyagraha's* sacrificial logic and criteria.

Species death, Gandhi confessed in a moment of surrender to this hierarchical order, was simply 'difficult' for *satyagraha*. In making this formulation, Gandhi was at once the farthest and most intimate with the exclusionary impulses of a certain European humanism. For his conceptualization of non-violence, as he posited more than once, was never separable from the ideality of sacrifice. *Satyagraha* was the art of privileging and mastering the knowledge of one's finitude, a privilege that aligned it, whether or not Gandhi viewed it as such, with sovereignty in its most *modern* (indeed Hegelian) valence; a sovereignty that has at least since the nineteenth century associated the mastery over life (the *actualization* of spirit) with the accomplishment of death itself. To be sovereign in the most spiritual sense, one must, Gandhi argued, perfect the '*mantra* of living by dying'.<sup>19</sup> He had, let us recall, found Bleriot's experiments in the air morally fragile precisely because it was moth-like, marked in advance by its propensity for destruction and its unawareness of death. The Frenchman's unprecedented flight was irresponsible then, because strangely enough, posited its critic, it lacked newness; up in the air, unmoored from spiritual depth, it merely repeated destitute forms of movement characteristic of non-human species. The subject that would emerge out of such movement would be capable of rapidity but incapable of patient sacrifice, capable of self-annihilation but incapable of death proper to freedom or salvation. Such life would be prone merely to perish away in endless patterns of its own reproduction.

In fact, some creaturely lives, of which the moth had here become exemplary, were given over to spiritual destitution by the very nature of their movement. Their very rhythm rendered them incapable of rigorous, non-violent, and sacrificial practice. 'That which distinguishes man from all other animals is his capacity to be non-violent,' wrote Gandhi in 1926. 'He has no doubt many other gifts. But if they do not subserve the main purpose – the development of the spirit of non-violence in him – they but drag him down lower than the brute, a status from which he has only just emerged.'<sup>20</sup> What

<sup>19</sup>Gandhi, 'Doctrine of the sword', *Navajivan* (15 August 1920), *CWMG*, vol. 21, 160.

<sup>20</sup>Gandhi, 'Non-violence: the greatest force', *The Hindu* (8 November 1926), *CWMG*, vol. 36, 45.

separated the human from the non-human, in other words, was not simply non-violence. What marked out one from the other was its specific (relation) to death, a relation that lent man the knowledge of his finitude and animal its susceptibility to self-annihilation. It was the relation to mortality, the capacity to possess one's death, the ability to time it at the moment of its greatest sacrificial impact, which Gandhi described as the 'spirit of non-violence'. Spirit, one might argue, was this distinction.

#### EMPIRICISM AT ITS LIMIT

Two seemingly irreconcilable threads of satyagrahic thought had thus come to be braided by the 1920s. One was already familiar to those in proximity with Gandhi's ideas at the turn of the century; namely, his aversion to modern forms of technology, specifically those that promised immeasurable speed and an inoculated, healthy, and infinite life. The second involved Gandhi's distinctive thinking of finitude; a thinking that was at once intimate with his radical indifference to scientific promises of prolongation of life and profoundly conservative in its demarcation and delimiting of being as such. The critique of western civilization thus came laced with a radical compassion [*daya*] towards creaturely life. But through an economy of recursive use, this critique would soon gather the sediments of a classical humanist prejudice, leading the two threads of this critique to a place that was singularly Gandhian in its radical conservatism. In *Hind Swaraj*, for example, Gandhi launched into a chapter-length attack on scientific cruelty that had been sanctified, somewhat paradoxically, he pointed out, in the name of prolonging life itself. 'For the sake of a mistaken care of the human body', he revolted, 'they kill annually thousands of animals. They practise vivisection. No religion sanctions this. All say that it is not necessary to take so many lives for the sake of our bodies.' The lure of limitless life, the promise of health and immunity, the zeal to master the force of nature, led only to a systematic sacrifice of life beyond all measure and limit.<sup>21</sup> 'Civilization', he cautioned, 'is like a mouse, gnawing while it is soothing us.'<sup>22</sup>

It would seem that Gandhi was here in the vicinity of his affinity for those impulses in metropolitan vegetarianism and socialist anti-materialism to which he was exposed during his years in London at the beginning of the 1890s. Leela Gandhi and Parama Roy have thoughtfully drawn attention to that planetary constellation of socialist thought on the one hand, and on the other hand, the specificity of Gandhi's familiarity with Gujarati Vaishnava Hinduism in the vortex of which his fascination with creaturely life had acquired its preliminary idiom.<sup>23</sup> *Satyagraha's* prolific mobilization of the animal from the late 1900s onwards however – that is to say, the invocation of the animal in its singularity – can neither be pinned down to Gandhi's solicitude for animals mandated by the faith into which he was born nor reduced to mere extension of his radical vegetarianism that had blended so promisingly with the anarchist politics of British

<sup>21</sup>Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj—MD*, *op. cit.*, 51.

<sup>22</sup>*ibid.*, 37.

<sup>23</sup>Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, NC,

2006) and Parama Roy, 'Abstinence: manifestos on meat and masculinity' in P. Roy, *Alimentary Tracts: Appetites, Aversions and the Postcolonial* (Durham, NC, 2010).

vintage. For, despite the concerns and preoccupations he had shared with militant vegetarians and animal rights' advocates during the London years, Gandhi by the 1920s had come to forge a conceptual and rhetorical kinship with creaturely life that was singularly his own, one that far exceeded the limits imposed either by militant Hindu vegetarianism or the compassionate metropolitan anarchism of his times. Any early indications, moreover, that he had simply inherited Christian, Jain, or Buddhist injunctions against animal sacrifice and cruelty were also to be subsumed by his complex radicalization of the animal-concept. Indeed, it was the immense presence of the animal in its innumerable forms and species, its multifarious abilities and poverties, its infinite modes of living and dying, which opened *satyagraha* to the constitutive paradox of non-violent politics: the grave exclusion lodged at its heart. And the radicalization of the animal within *satyagraha*, even at its most oblique and mystical, was not simply rhetorical or figurative. It touched, in the most empirical sense, the spirit of nonviolence [*ahimsa*] everyday (in the acutely Gandhian sense of that word). I excavate in the rest of this article this struggle with empiricism, the struggle with life in its routine materiality, that lay at the heart of what Gandhi had decided to call a 'spiritual politics'.

Much less grounded in the non-killing of the animal than contemporary pacifisms of various hues had been, Gandhi's elaborations on *satyagraha* had by the 1920s come to be founded on the exemplary partition and difference of species death. It was now the awareness of the animal's abyssal difference, its unconscious and therefore destitute acts of perishing away (like a moth), its immeasurable inequality that stemmed from its inability to comprehend death *as such*, which bestowed upon *satyagraha* its own primordial and originary force;<sup>24</sup> primordial in its conceptual purity; primordial in its moral ontology of truth; primordial in its profound secrecy over what constituted force as such; primordial, above all, in its delimiting of death itself. 'I saw in South Africa', Gandhi recollected in 1919 during his first major non-cooperation against the colonial government in India, 'that our struggle had pure truth and justice in it and the force we employed was not brute force but soul-force. In however small a measure it may have been, it was yet soul-force. We do not find such force employed by animals.'<sup>25</sup>

Here was that profound distinction between what was proper to the human and what was intrinsic to the non-human. Only one, in its most proper form, possessed force. And this hierarchy would spill over, for all its conceptual tact and tightness, into the partition of the human itself. For at stake here was not only the abyssal difference between *spirit* and the animal, but also an abyssal difference between those who were capable of the highest sacrifice (only those who understood death might lay down their life meaningfully, bloodlessly, spiritually, as sovereign) and those who were devoid of death. The animal, in its symptomatic singularity, was the name for this non-possession of death; it was the name for the absence of the knowledge of finitude, from which ironically emerged the moral ontology of satyagrahic force. In moments like these, force was illocutionary, rhetorical, performative; but it was also grounded in the material possibility of

<sup>24</sup>I reverse Ajay Skaria's brilliant formulation here. See Skaria, *Immeasurable Equality: Gandhi and the Gift of Religion* (manuscript under preparation).

<sup>25</sup>Gandhi, 'Satyagraha', *Navajivan* (14 September 1919), *MPWG*, vol. 3, 63.

transformative action (such as the ability to work by hand, spin in a rhythm, weave regularly, each of which the handless animal lacked, or as the juridical obverse of the same inequality, the lower castes, Gandhi would insist, were *born* to do). No matter 'how small a measure of force', the animal was that which remained heterogeneous to the ahimsaic economy and truth. And this demarcation of force by species, this partitioning of the subject by birth, was not necessarily degrading. To the contrary, this distinction, like the one that had ensued from Gandhi's attempts in the 1930s to touch the untouchable 'children of god' [*harijan*], bore the marks of extreme sensitivity to difference. Elsewhere, therefore, Gandhi reminded the *satyagrahi* of the first injunction of sacrificial warfare: not to vacillate in the face of death, to be 'stable in spirit' [*stithiprajna*] regardless of circumstance in the battlefield. The *stithiprajna*, he elaborated, was 'one who withdraws his senses from the objects of the senses behind the shield of the spirit, as a tortoise does its limbs under its shell'.<sup>26</sup>

The animal, then, was by turns a figure of force, a name for resistance and rhythm, even slowness, a metaphor for exemplary action, a being endowed with empirical life that demanded an ethics of compassion [*dayadharma*]. But perhaps most importantly, it was a being that had a peculiar relationship to death, one that was both exemplary for *satyagraha* and constitutively heterogeneous to it. When one traces the movements of the animal in Gandhi's massive corpus, one must be prepared to intrude into the vicinity of this singularly satyagrahic history of force, the singularly Gandhian problematic of a *measure* for force. Could *Hind Swaraj* itself have mustered its rhetorical force, without its recourse to the animal? Could it have mobilized firmness or resistance [*agraha*] against the empire without marking out the abyss that separated 'truth-force' from 'brute force', to each of which Gandhi devoted a chapter, carefully demarcating one from the other? Was the 'spirit of non-violence' ultimately a humanist impasse, then? Was the force of non-violence always already marked by a certain exclusion of the non-human, even as Gandhi struggled to formulate an ethics and politics of care towards it? Did this exclusion in any way compromise satyagrahic sensitivity towards the unequal? Or was it precisely this abyss of indifference towards it, a certain cruelty even, which rendered *satyagraha*'s ironic egalitarianism morally and politically practicable?

Reminding the upper-caste Hindu of the exemplary conduct of the Pandava king Yudhishtira, whose inheritance to the throne lay at the fratricidal centre of the epic *Mahabharata*, Gandhi warned his followers in 1921, 'So long as the mass of Hindus consider it a sin to touch a section of their brethren, *swaraj* is impossible of attainment. Yudhishtira would not enter heaven without his dog. How can, then, the descendants of Yudhishtira expect to obtain *swaraj* without the "untouchables"?'<sup>27</sup> As the radical equivalence set up here between the untouchable and animal (each *unequally* equal) shows, species life remained inseparable from *satyagraha*'s egalitarian logic, irretrievable from its hierarchical economy. But this was a predilection for *equivalence*, not *substitution*. And it was precisely through this setting up of equivalence between two incommensurable orders that Gandhi's thinking of force, his moral ontology of self

<sup>26</sup>Gandhi, 'Speech at a prayer meeting, Delhi', *Harijan* (28 April 1946), *CWMG*, vol. 90, 187–8.

<sup>27</sup>Gandhi, 'Speech at suppressed classes conference', Ahmedabad (27 April 1921), *CWMG*, vol. 23, 44.

and duty [*swadharmā*], acquired its scrupulous awareness of difference. One must add in the same breath that this was no straightforward humanism of the modern type, one that thrives on instituting and sanctifying the human alone as an agent of history. But an archaeology of this radical hierarchy demands a certain care towards those moments when *satyagraha* was indeed deeply humanist, even terrifyingly so. Foregrounding his own kinship with the ape, Gandhi, in one of his more explicitly ontological formulations, wrote two decades after *Hind Swaraj*:

The correspondent apologizes for suggesting that I might regard myself as a 'remote cousin of the ape'. The truth is that my ethics not only permit me to claim but require me to own kinship with not merely the ape but the horse and the sheep, the lion and the leopard, the snake and the scorpion. Not so need these kinsfolk regard themselves. The hard ethics which rule my life and I hold ought to rule that of every man and woman, impose this unilateral obligation upon us. And it is so imposed because man alone is made in the image of God. . . . But, of course, my correspondent even contends that it is not natural to man to find and know God and, therefore, he says 'man makes God in his own image'. All I can say is that the whole of the evidence hitherto produced by travellers controverts this astounding proposition. It is being more and more demonstrated that it is the worship of God, be it in the crudest manner possible, which distinguishes man from the brute. It is the possession of that additional quality which gives him such enormous hold upon God's creation.<sup>28</sup>

Illuminated here is the singular place that the animal occupied within the conceptual and moral scaffolding of *satyagraha*. What is that exemplary virtue, Gandhi asks, which defines the animal as universally as faithfulness? And yet what is more elusive to the animal than faith itself? Man, on the other hand, possesses God because he possesses the imagination to have God. Man, more crucially, does not make God, for God, the formless and invisible object of human faith, is ontologically given, mutable but transcendent. One either has the faculty to be faithful to this transcendental light or one is devoid of this faculty. One either receives faith through prayer – and one must be gifted with *speech* to receive the gift of faith in prayer – or one is incapable of it. This faculty of imagination and experience, of gift and reception, of speech and hand, of beautiful movement and action, which Gandhi often simply called 'truth', the animal does not have. The silhouette of divinity thus tragically escapes it; truthfulness ineluctably evades it. It is not merely the lack of hand, the lack of means [*sadhanā*] for action, which characterize the animal. Of course, '*Ahimsa* without action is an impossibility', as Gandhi put it. Yet action, he clarified, 'does not merely mean activity of hands and feet. The mind performs greater activity than even hands and feet. Every thought is an action. There can be no *ahimsa* in the absence of thought. The *dharma* of *ahimsa* has been conceived only for an embodied being like man.'<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Gandhi, 'More animal than human', *Young India* (8 July 1926), *CWMG*, vol. 36, 5–6.

<sup>29</sup>Gandhi, '*Ahimsa v. compassion*', *Navajivan* (31 March 1929), *CWMG*, vol. 45, 285–6. I do not have the space here to broach what remains

In other words, a difference of essence: not only does the animal lack ability and faculties; it also lacks a silhouette, a figure proper, a faculty worthy of being as such. I am suggesting that this subordination was ontological. That is, it was not simply the case that the animal was incapable. Rather, even if it was not wholly incapable of performing certain (even sacrificial) activities, it was capable of them in a *different* way. There was a distinctive primordiality, indeed a pre-ethical and pre-political crypt of truth whose safeguarding was at stake here, so that in the problematic space of this immeasurable inequality between the human and non-human, *satyagraha* detected in the animal not merely a moth-like gratuitous corporeality. It also came to see in its non-being, in its originary and pure existence, the secrets of a profound mysticism, a radical disembodiment, a spiritual force that belonged to the order of divinity alone. In fact, Gandhi was sometimes prone to seeing the non-human as intimate with the transcendental truth of divinity [*brahman*] itself.

By the early 1930s, in gestures that would have been unthinkable at the time of Bleriot's experimental flight, Gandhi had begun to seek in airborne species the very traits of mastery proper to *satyagraha*. In his letters despatched from prison in the early 1930s, for example, he often imputed to *satyagraha* the virtues possessed by such creatures. 'Non-possession requires that a man should, like the birds, have no roof over his head, no clothing and no stock of food for the morrow.'<sup>30</sup> The species' supple mastery, its constant renunciation, movement, and circulation, were not dismissed as being devoid of force any more. Instead, species rhythm had now come to exemplify a certain freedom, a salutary recklessness, an irresponsibility that might be nourished only when one was in unconditional love with truth. The non-human's detachment to habitude, its openness to renouncing its dwelling, now illuminated for Gandhi the rigour of self-duty [*swadharmā*], one that, if mastered in its proper measure, might liberate the subject from cycles of life and death. Creaturely life, in its immense richness and heterogeneity, had begun to resemble the formidable prowess and infinitude of God himself.

#### FINDING FINITUDE

Thus two heterogeneous registers, two sets of equivalences, had now been opened within the structure of an abyssal inequality; one that spoke of the animal's (and the *unequals*') immeasurable destitution, infidelity, forcelessness; the other of its immeasurable exemplarity, finesse, sacrifice. And it was in the difference between the two orders (which was also the space of absolute and unbridgeable abyss between the truthful *satyagrahi* and the ontological animal) that satyagrahic responsibility, its unflinching ethics of care and compassion toward the *unequal*, took birth. The animal in its essence, the

an immense problem within a history of the political that might take the *anti-colonial* and *anti-human*, the anti-human *within* anti-colonial, seriously. But a certain Heidegger troubled by the ontological and spiritual poverty of the animal remains a useful index of this planetary conjuncture. 'Apes too', Heidegger noted, 'have organs that can grasp,

but they do not have hands. The hand is infinitely different from all the grasping organs – paws, claws, or fangs – different by an abyss of essence.' See M. Heidegger, 'What is called thinking?' in his *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York, 1977), 357.

<sup>30</sup>Gandhi, 'Non-possession or poverty', *From Yeravada Mandir, SWMG*, vol. 3, 191.

animal *as such* was the condensation (rhetorical, conceptual, empirical) of everything that made an unequal what it was. So that while the animal was devoid of faith, while it was incapable of compassion, while it was free from the need for kinship and dwelling, there was now no action, no elaboration of *satyagraha*'s obligation towards the ungifted and the unequal, without a certain kinship with the animal. This kinship did not seek to bridge the difference created by the animal's finite capacities and empirical lack, its non-possession and non-awareness of death. Rather, it extenuated that difference; it *posited* it as the very fulcrum of social relations. The ironic modalities of *satyagraha*'s egalitarianism would emerge from this institution of *essence* as ontological limit between human and animal, master and unequal, God and Shudra, Brahmin and *atishudra*.

There was a peculiar exorbitance in all this, indeed an *excess* at the heart of Gandhi's thinking of limit [*maryada*] and finitude, which cannot be explained within the logic of his abstinent politics, on grounds of his affinity for vegetarianism, celibacy, spinning and such. By the late 1920s, for one thing, Gandhi had begun to insist that the responsibility of the *satyagrahi* towards the animal was not fulfilled within the bounds merely of his vegetarianism or non-killing. For mere vegetarianism was not *ahimsa*. As if predicting the politics of his own vegetarian assassin and of those majoritarian proponents of cow protection whose politics would spawn his killers Gandhi now denounced evangelical or zealous vegetarianism itself as supremely violent. For more than anything else, non-violence required the renunciation of desire to forcibly convert the other. Force proper to *satyagraha* mutated and converted only one's own self, in the manner of creatures who changed their shape and size according to the work at hand. Even though it was always tempting to change the other, a temptation to which Hindu fanatics often succumbed, the *satyagrahi* was supposed to stay focused on his *sadhana*. For to convert another was another's duty [*paradharmā*], not one's own. *Paradharmā*, of course, might often appear to be tempting and better, Gandhi cautioned, 'but even so should be looked upon as dangerous. *Moksha* lies in embracing death while doing one's own duty.'<sup>31</sup>

The concept of self-duty or *swadharmā* is often overshadowed by that other term in Gandhi's rich lexicon, self-rule or *swaraj*. But it was the former that touched the heart of *satyagraha*'s moral ontology. In his writings on the *Gita*, for instance, Gandhi suggestively defined the *swa* of *swadharmā* as not only that which related to the purity of the self in its isolation or that which invoked 'restrictions over oneself' alone, but as 'that which one has been able to digest'.<sup>32</sup> This was then a relational sense of compassion and obligation [*dayadharmā*], one in which acts of touching, appropriating – indeed ingesting – the other when it was at its most vulnerable not only defined the boundaries of the self; it also edified the *inequality* at the heart of the self-concept itself. Gandhi was both deeply aware of this inequality and indifferent to its consequences (and here lay the profound and enduring failure of the self and *swaraj* of his conception). Consider again his elaboration of the supreme Hindu religious ideal, the attainment of salvation [*moksha*], through the apparently banal example of gluttony. 'Swa means that which one has been able to digest. If we are not able to digest (what we eat), many disturbances in the system will follow. ... If, observing others around us consuming *dudhapak* and growing fat, we also eat it,

<sup>31</sup>Gandhi, *Discourses on the Gita*, SWMG, vol. 3, 232.      <sup>32</sup>Gandhi, *Bhagavadgita*, *op. cit.*, 327.

we would come to grief. *Swadharma* indeed helps everyone to win *moksha*. But, till we have won it, what should we do as human beings living in these physical bodies?<sup>33</sup> We must eat well, Gandhi insists, for eating is the activity that not only keeps us alive but also constitutes our humanity; it nourishes the very possibility of life. Yet, just any mode of eating or eating just anything did not make one human, let alone make one a *satyagrahi*. What distinguished the *satyagrahi* from the glutton was his awareness that there was life in everything one consumed, his awareness that there was violence in the very act of being alive as human. Writing in his paper *Navajivan* in 1926, Gandhi highlighted the sacrificial obverse of all nourishment:

There is life in each grain which we consume. When, therefore, we adopt a vegetarian diet and abstain from non-vegetarian food we cannot claim that we completely avoid violence. But we prefer the former and regard the violence involved in it [as] inescapable. This is why eating for pleasure must never be indulged in. We should eat only in order that we may live and should live only to realize the self. If our living for this purpose involves any violence, we may be a party to it as being unable to escape it.<sup>34</sup>

Any nourishment, even a vegetarian one, therefore, was already an act of gratuitous pleasure, an act of war on creaturely life. Weeks before his own death, Gandhi asserted that the *satyagrahi* must know that 'there can be no freedom from unavoidable violence like breathing'.<sup>35</sup> *Ahimsa* was already contaminated by humanity's violence towards other lives. In fact, he repeated throughout the 1930s, 'the principle of *ahimsa* is hurt by every evil thought, by undue haste, by lying, by hatred ... by our holding on to what the world needs. But the world needs even what we eat day by day. In the place where we stand, there are millions of micro-organisms to whom the place belongs and who are hurt by our presence there. What should we do then? Should we commit suicide?'<sup>36</sup> This burst of exasperation certainly reveals Gandhi's acute awareness of the moral difficulty of an ahimsaic politics. After all, satyagrahic non-violence, despite its formal idealism, had to be grounded in the empirical and social conundrums of everyday life and practical reason, not in opposition to them.

When the leading European pacifist, Bart De Ligt, expressed dismay at the young Gandhi's history of participation in the Boer and Great Wars, Gandhi, never far from a distinctive lineage of Atlantic pragmatism, responded by drawing the example of the harm one had to inflict on monkeys when they threatened to destroy crops meant for human nourishment. What had war in Africa to do with monkeys in the *ashram*? Was that species merely a rhetorical motif in satyagrahic theorizations of the *social* or was it a concrete site of its pragmatic formalism? 'I do not expect', Gandhi answered the pacifist, 'to be able to find a society where there will be no agriculture and therefore no destruction of some life. In fear and trembling, in humility and penance, I therefore participate in the injury inflicted on the monkeys, hoping some day to find a

<sup>33</sup>*ibid.*, 327.

<sup>34</sup>Gandhi, 'The problem of non-violence', *Navajivan* (6 June 1926), *MPWG*, vol. 3, 347.

<sup>35</sup>Gandhi, 'Notes for Surendranath', *CWMG*, vol. 98, 420.

<sup>36</sup>Gandhi, '*Ahimsa* or love', *From Yeravada Mandir*, *SWMG*, vol. 3, 181.

way out.<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere, in a profound gesture of inclusion and kinship, Gandhi called this violence against the animal *fratricide*. 'I am as much opposed to taking the life of the lowest creature alive as I am to war. But I continually take such life,' he conceded, 'hoping some day to attain the ability to do without this fratricide.'<sup>38</sup> Remarkable here was Gandhi's profound sensitivity to how careless, even irresponsible, any act of human nourishment is. Of course, this sensitivity to violence produced not an injunction against non-killing as such; to the contrary, it opened the *satyagrahi* to care and humility towards that which must unavoidably be killed. The force of satyagrahic compassion [*dayabal*] was force in its proper sense only in as much as it responded to the immeasurably unequal, to that which was separated from it by an abyss. In this conception of *ahimsa*, the animal would always remain, despite its ubiquity and exemplarity, a subject of sensitive exclusion.

To grasp the ever so minute and Archimedean point of *ahimsa*; not to forget the relentless sacrifice of non-human species upon which humanity nourished itself; and thus, to grasp the precarious equilibrium between living and killing, indeed to follow the injunctions of duty especially when it might demand violence: there lay the *satyagrahi's* responsibility to creaturely life, his struggle to acquire mastery over his senses. Now it might seem that the epistemological foundations of this non-violence, as the philosopher Akeel Bilgrami argues, stemmed from a sense of truth that was often at a far remove from the political exigencies of the moments of their articulation.<sup>39</sup> When viewed in light of Gandhi's deep interest in politics itself (let alone his elaborations and actions within the domain of the political), it becomes difficult to separate his methodological commitments from a certain politics of empiricism (as opposed to mere interest in the empiricism of everyday life). An empirical act like ingestion, after all, became the key site of satyagrahic civility precisely because using the mouth was the most violent and uncivil, yet the most indispensable and quotidian, and for Gandhi, political, of all human activities. In his elaborations of that which goes into and comes out of the mouth, in other words, something much more radical than merely a commitment to vegetarianism and non-killing of the animal was at stake. What was at stake was civility proper to *satyagraha*. Eating went right to the heart of this civility. Although one cannot discount the importance of *what* Gandhi stipulated the *satyagrahi* might eat or not kill, the conceptual and empirical economy of non-violence was regulated much more profoundly by *how* one ate; or more starkly, how one used the mouth. Not unrelatedly, the adjacent ability to keep silence, to abstain from speech – which, given the fact that an animal has purportedly no speech to abstain from, is an exclusively human ability – was the foundation of Gandhi's *sadhana*.<sup>40</sup>

The awareness of how one ingested, at any rate, was the core of non-violent life. 'When a person who may eat anything limits, out of compassion, the things he will eat, he observes to that extent the *dharma* of *ahimsa*. On the other hand,' Gandhi posited,

<sup>37</sup>See Gandhi, 'My attitude towards war', *Young India* (13 September 1928) in his *Non-violence in Peace and War (NVPW)*, 2 vols (Ahmedabad, 1942), vol. 1, 79.

<sup>38</sup>Gandhi, 'Still at it', *Young India* (15 March 1928), *NVPW*, vol. 1, 77.

<sup>39</sup>See Akeel Bilgrami, 'Gandhi, the philosopher', *Economic and Political Weekly* (27 September 2003).

<sup>40</sup>Gandhi, 'Ashram notes', Segaon, 22 January 1940, *CWMG*, vol. 77, 241–2.

‘when an orthodox person does not eat meat, etc. he does a good thing but we cannot say that he necessarily has *ahimsa* in him. Where there is *ahimsa*, there ought to be conscious compassion.’<sup>41</sup> Gandhi had rendered here the religious or ritual vegetarianism to which he was born and brought up – and made to swear on by his mother before he left for England – inadequate to the task of political non-violence. Ritual vegetarianism, the one practised by Vaishnava, Jain, and Brahmin communities in his native Gujarat and all over India, did not necessarily make one a *satyagrahi*, even if it allowed one to master the more narcissistic techniques of ritual life. Could India, Gandhi asked, not give up the cruel sacrifice of animals *without* giving up the sacrifice that war demands? Could India not conserve the animal without giving up sacrifice *as such*? For *satyagraha* itself, however, whether or not Gandhi was ready to face it, the question was more fundamental: could the logic of satyagrahic sacrifice, its rhetoric of dignity, detachment, chastity, and kinship, its elaboration of force itself, have been thought without marking out, generously but rigorously, the difference between the human and animal? Could *satyagraha*, by its very constitution, let the animal be sovereign? Might it have refrained from making those decisions about creaturely life (and death) that would, at its worst, align it with the majoritarian rhetoric of care and sovereignty?

At once filial and estranged, then; a fecund crevice had opened up here within the curious logic of non-violence. After all, what might this mean: this imperative of responding to the animal yet conceding that it would remain immiscibly heterogeneous to the order of satyagrahic responsibility and civility? Did it mean that the animal belonged, like God, to the order of ungraspable and mystical difficulties? That like faith and truth, species death must remain, indeed kept, a secret? Was non-violence being immunized here by marking out one death from another, one species from another, one unequal from another? When a correspondent asked Gandhi whether his non-violence dictated that one merely be a passive witness to violence between creatures or kill a beast when it attacked another smaller life-form, Gandhi conceded that he had, of course, ‘seen a lizard hunting a cockroach and the latter hunting other insects’. But, then, non-violence, even in its most expansive sense, was possible only in the humanist spirit of the laws, within the structures of the ‘law of man’:

I have never considered it my duty to oppose the law of the animal world – ‘An insect sustains an insect’s life’. I do not profess to unravel the dark mysteries of God, but seeing such violence often, I feel that the law of animals and of the lower orders of creation is not the law of man. Man has to make a determined effort to conquer and kill the animal within him and thus keep alive his soul. We have to learn the great magical formula of non-violence out of the conflagration of violence raging around us. Therefore, if man realizes his own dignity and understands his life work, he should himself refrain from participating in violence and prevent inferior creatures as also animals under his control from tormenting one another. He can maintain that ideal only as far as

<sup>41</sup>Gandhi, ‘*Ahimsa v. compassion*’, *Navajivan* (31 March 1929), *CWMG*, vol. 45, 285–6.

he himself is concerned and if nothing else is possible, he can at any rate refrain from tormenting his brethren who are weaker than himself. And even to maintain that ideal fully, he will certainly have to keep up his endeavours day and night unceasingly. Then will he be able some day to reach it. Full success will only come when man attains *moksha* and wins release from all the limitations to which the body is heir.<sup>42</sup>

What does this religious discourse saturated by a hierarchical ontology give us most to think about? That, first, there was no thinking of non-violence without recourse to the mythic and natural laws of the species world. ‘Soul-force, being natural’, Gandhi had written in one of the pithiest formulations in *Hind Swaraj*, ‘is not noted in history.’<sup>43</sup> There was no denying that something was intrinsically dark and melancholic, even secretive and disfigured, about the animal. And yet, it was from that mystery that the mystical, even apophatic, force of non-violence might be recuperated. In as much as there was difference in the species world, in as much as there was ‘raging violence’ in the universe, they only extenuated the moral rule of *satyagraha*: the animal simultaneously belonged to the precinct and was yet heterogeneous to its order. It must be mastered – because it threatened force at its very source, at its inner ‘soul’ – and yet be allowed to be as it was, in its essence. The animal must remain immeasurably unequal. *Satyagraha* thrived in this measured asymmetry of kinship, in this strategic touching and abandonment of the unequal. It was not the *satyagrahi*’s *dharma*, Gandhi argued, to transform the violent conditions in which the species thrived. On the contrary, the *satyagrahi* must conserve the species *qua* species, the strange *qua* strange, the monstrous *qua* monstrous. *Satyagraha*’s radicalism, its conceptual rupture from all extant discourses on the animal, lay in its safeguarding, immunizing, and *sequestering* the non-human at its most empirical, authentic, and originary. *Satyagraha*’s militancy lay in its refusal to render the species abstract by ascribing them – or judging them by – a set of universal moral values, corporeal deformities, or potential threats. Each creature arrived into Gandhi’s writings in its irreducible difference; each brought with it an irreplicable turn in his thinking of force and mastery. At its most rigorously thought out, the non-human indeed opened another order of satyagrahic conceptuality itself. And it was within that order that *satyagraha*’s immense interest in finitude, its grave and conservative attempts to re-institute a sacrificial politics, emerged at its most ambiguous.

#### UNJUST MERCY

Gandhi’s renunciation of pure non-violence, his concession to the irreducible violence of living, his rendering of *ahimsa* into an art that might never be perfected, indeed an art that was mastered in its very failing, occurred at its most originary moment, then, in *satyagraha*’s encounter with the animal. The animal was the invisible and infinitesimal fulcrum of Gandhi’s epistemology, or as I call it, its primordial site. For it was at once a threat and a promise; it was a being worthy of imitation and yet profoundly sacrificeable, spiritually

<sup>42</sup>Gandhi, ‘Assorted questions *v.* non-violence’, *Navajivan* (18 April 1926), *CWMG*, vol. 35, 104.

<sup>43</sup>See Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, *CWMG*, vol. 10, 292.

destitute yet ontologically pure, even sacred. But the rhythm of this sacredness, its movement within *satyagraha*, remained somewhat ambiguous. When Gandhi conceded, for example, that ‘non-violence sometimes calls upon us to put an end to the life of a living being’, he was most frequently, almost always, speaking of the animal. While ‘*ahimsa* as regards the *sub-human* life’ was an important aspect, it was ‘still only one aspect of this comprehensive principle. Our dealings with fellow men are still more important than that.’<sup>44</sup>

Now, ‘fellow men’, fellowship, or brotherliness – and their normative political rendering, *fraternity* (we have seen animals included in this order) – have a peculiar place in Gandhi’s thought. When faced with the dilemma of choosing between the brother and the animal, however, Gandhi’s ethical choice was unequivocal. The subject of *satyagraha*’s ethical violence, or of its pragmatic renunciation of a pure non-violence, was almost always the animal. Non-violence was immunized precisely through an ethical violence against the non-human. When a correspondent asked him if it would be just to take his brother’s life if the brother ‘is suffering from a terrible and painful malady and doctors have despaired of his life’, Gandhi replied ‘in the negative’. People, he patiently clarified, had misunderstood his argument that non-violence might sometimes demand killing in mercy; or that sometimes the purest form of *ahimsa* might be available not in absolute non-violence but in pragmatic non-cruelty and non-indifference; that is, in letting go of the body in pain. ‘In propounding their conundrum’ about non-violence, he reiterated:

They forget that while I have certainly compared the case of an ailing human being with that of an ailing calf and recommended the killing of the former in exactly similar circumstances, in actual practice such a complete analogy is hardly ever to be found. . . . The human body being much more manageable in bulk is always easier to manipulate and nurse; secondly man being gifted with the power of speech more often than not is in a position to express his wishes and so the question of taking his life without his consent cannot come within the rule. For I have never suggested that the life of another person can be taken against his will without violating the principle of *ahimsa*. Again, we do not always despair of the life of a person when reduced to a comatose state . . . it is both possible and practicable to render service to a human patient till the very end. While, therefore, I would still maintain that the principle enunciated regarding the calf applies equally to man and bird and beast I should expect an intelligent person to know the obvious natural difference between a man and an animal.<sup>45</sup>

This was perhaps the most unequivocal moment in Gandhi’s enunciation of a place and structure of satyagrahic euthanasia; that is to say, the formulation of a duty responsive to the need of mercy killing that did not intervene in or disrupt the imperative of non-violence. Gandhi saw in euthanasia a moral resort to death that presupposed an irreducible equality between species life. Within its economy of execution, the human was to be treated as equal with the calf, the bird, and the beast. A radical equality, in other words, in which to be equal did not require that one be human. Without affirming such an equality, the *satyagrahi* would have found it difficult to conceptualize his kinship with

<sup>44</sup>Gandhi, ‘Ashram observances: *ahimsa* or love’, *MPWG*, vol. 2, 580.

<sup>45</sup>Gandhi, ‘More about *ahimsa*’, *Navajivan* (28 October 1928), *MPWG*, vol. 2, 279–80.

the animal. Yet, beyond this fraternal gesture, beyond the hospitable sharing of habitude with it, what kind of death did the *satyagrahi's* euthanasia promise the animal? Was death, or the *access* to death, the right to sacrifice, rendered truly equal? Would not authentic equality imply the equal right of having the choice of death; death unmarked by hierarchies of dying and perishing; death unconstrained by the laws of caste, sex, and species? Did not absolute equality demand that there be no privileged mode of dying, no ideal of death *as such*, no secrecy of finitude?

To any moral and political thought such as *satyagraha* that was so profoundly constituted by the idea of sacrifice, death was not the final but primordial resource. Death could even begin to resemble an ethical desire, a resemblance that became apparent in Gandhi's final years, as he began to wish his own death. But perhaps, in that desire for exemplary death – as in any sacrificial politics – lay dormant also an intractable and irreligious humanism in its profound ambiguity. For the will to death, the willingness to die, and above all, the volition and right of dying, to *have death* in sum, was the sovereign choice that *satyagraha* made available only to the human. Man in comatose was still worthy of life, because, insisted Gandhi, man was not mere mortal. He had finitude; he had a phenomenal awareness of life and death that he might be able to frame in language. Indeed, he had life in a different sense precisely because he was capable of expressing his will to death. The *satyagrahi* might put an animal to death, but the grounds of that merciful gesture, the source of that compassionate violence, was grounded not in the animal's right to die. Instead, it was grounded in the animal's inability to respond, its incapacity to make a choice, its failure to speak in language, its non-possession of the knowledge of its own finitude. For the *satyagrahi*, to let the mutely suffering animal live was cruelty at its most unequivocal and unforgivable. Such granting of life to the animal was cruelty in the same way that, paradoxically, the killing of a suffering and comatose man would be.

*Satyagraha* divided itself here sensitively into two ontological orders: one for the human, another for the non-human. For historians who have seen in twentieth-century anti-colonialism a constitutive lack of affinity for human rights, this order of split conceptuality, this sensitive humanism at its most ambiguous and hierarchical, might offer an alternative trajectory of the human-concept that lay at the heart of that politics.<sup>46</sup> Of course, the distinctiveness of satyagrahic euthanasia was undeniable. As opposed to the humanist thinking of euthanasia, in which the volition of dying always lies with the patient, satyagrahic compassion was founded upon the animal's muteness. *Satyagraha's* judgement of who was proper to the gift of death was founded not on the inability of the patient to speak but rather on the ontological privileging of speech as an intrinsic attribute. It was only when speech failed, Gandhi mandated, that the subject must be granted death. But this failure of speech was not to be mistaken for biological silence caused by illness. For the human, no matter how ill, never loses speech as such. Instead, the speech Gandhi was speaking of was an extension of sacrificial capacity, the faculty of prayer [*Ramanama*], the gift of the voice. In the animal, that gift was lodged in the mute poignancy of its eyes alone. Devoid of speech, in the same fashion as it was devoid of the

<sup>46</sup>See, for instance, Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).

hand, the animal could only hope death would arrive; it could not have it by moral choice. As Gandhi put it, 'Rather than subject us to this slow torture give us death. I have often read this mute appeal in their eyes.'<sup>47</sup>

The abyss of speechlessness brought with it another empirical lack, that of the hand. Here, of course, the animal had not merely shown its lack of the empirical hand; it had also rendered the *satyagrahi's* hand immobile and unstable. What made human life easy to tend, easy to handle even in its terminal sickness was, according to Gandhi, its manipulability. Even a comatose man remained 'patient' in its most proper sense; that is, he retained the consciousness of time, pain, and care. The animal, on the other hand, could be 'patient' in neither of the two senses (temporal and therapeutic) of the term. It was bulky, and the enormity of its deformed body challenged the caring capacities of the *satyagrahi*. In its unendurable pain, bulk, and lack of consciousness, the animal was irredeemably deformed and impossible to nurse. Here, paradoxically, we have been returned to the indispensability of the animal to *satyagraha*, to Gandhi's thinking of force as care. For the animal permitted Gandhi to make space for violence and civility, compassion and killing, *within* the fragile economy of non-violence. In as much as there was a satyagrahic structure where principles underlying such acts as euthanasia could be thought in empirical terms, in terms of practical reason, its subject was the animal alone. It was the animal's life that posited the empirical ground rules, the strategy and spirit of a non-violent mercy killing. It was the animal which was the subject of *satyagraha's* differential force. It was in the animal, the figure capable of dying yet unaware of finitude, above all, that *satyagraha* found its force of difference. As early as 1921, at the heart of his first mass movement, Gandhi had elaborated upon this difference between finitude and dying, between perishing and death. And he could do so only by marking out two orders of killing, one that involved the human and another that was indelibly marked by the non-human.

It is indeed a form of compassion not to kill insects such as bugs and mosquitoes. But the refusal to kill a human being is the higher form of it. What should we do when we are forced to choose between killing a human being and destroying a bug. ... There is greater sin in killing a serpent or a tiger in a human form than in killing a real serpent. We kill a tiger out of fear, not in anger. If there really is a Dharmaraja who judges our sins and good deeds, he will perhaps have pity on the person who may have killed a tiger and forgive him, because he will have only followed the natural instinct of the beast in him. One beast will have killed another. But behind the murder of a human being, there is the spirit of revenge and anger, of pride and hypocrisy.<sup>48</sup>

The animal, it turns out then, could be gifted the purest of all possible deaths. Indeed, only the animal might be given death without violence, for the animal, because it was not a subject, was killed either out of fear or out of compassion, never out of interest in mastery. Killing the animal might not be construed as violence at all – not because such

<sup>47</sup>Gandhi, 'This fiery ordeal', *Young India* (4 April 1928), *CWMG*, vol. 43, 60.

<sup>48</sup>Gandhi, 'Speech on birth anniversary of Rajchandra', Ahmedabad (16 November 1921), *CWMG*, vol. 25, 94–6.

violence did not lead to death, but because such violence was pure in its conceptuality, primordial in its necessity, pre-ethical in its execution. That is, it was unmotivated by any desire for domination or sovereignty, unmarked by normative political constraints and judgements. But was death in its purest sense death at all? What moral and political value (or *otherwise*) had been attached here to such dying? Could the animal be given death *as such*? In other words, was the animal's empirical death an attribute of its finitude? It was on the question of the *as such*, the question of essence, that Gandhi's thinking of the ahimsaic subject remained delimited by an abyssal ontology.

There remained within satyagrahic ethics a need for distinction, a need for death *proper* for it to be called as such. This elevation of the knowledge of finitude to the status of truth, this profound *decisionism*, which came to be hinged upon the subject's moral and cognitive capacity to make a decision to die or kill in compassion; which desired a sovereignty founded upon the awareness of mortality; which conjured a spirit to be actualized, above all, through the consciousness and discipline of manual craft alone, came to mark the ontological boundary between the *satyagrahi's* being and the animal's. In its exemplary modes of perishing away, in its quotidian, infinitesimal, and infinite mobilizations of force, in its mystical intimacy with God himself, the animal remained at once exemplary and heterogeneous to *satyagraha*. And only in *satyagraha's* profound compassion towards the animal, as Gandhi's poignant and uncompromising ruminations on euthanasia show, did *ahimsa* find the most truthful, sovereign, and hierarchical form. The effects of this moral ontology in the aftermath of anti-colonial struggles for freedom – at the heart of which persisted the problem of servitude and imposition of degrading manual and menial work on those declared to have been *born* unequal – could not have been more precarious. To that other crypt within the satyagrahic institution of the unequal as place, we must return on another occasion.

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