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## The Ellipsis of Touch: Gandhi's Unequals

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We are slowly approaching the *figure* of touch.  
—Jacques Derrida, *On Touching*—Jean-Luc Nancy

“Please keep at a distance, do not touch me.”  
—Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma*

**A**t the moment of writing *Hind Swaraj* in 1909, Gandhi was still more than two decades away from perhaps the most powerful gesture of consecration in the history of anticolonial thought: the Gandhian gesture of naming the Hindu untouchable harijan, translatable as “god’s child” and, in the Mahatma’s own words, “a man of god.”<sup>1</sup> Anticolonial thought was never entirely given to secularist enchantments, so that this gesture of consecrating, and, by some angry accounts, of distancing, the untouchable hardly symbolized a profound religious deviance on Gandhi’s part. Gandhi’s thought and practices were themselves underpinned by deep moral convictions whose grounds were necessarily religious, anchored resolutely in his contingent interpretations of what was demanded by dharma, the classical rules of moral conduct. At the same time, his political com-

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1. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Harijan* (February 11, 1933), in *The Essential Writings*, ed. Judith Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 228 (hereafter cited as *EWMG*).

mitments and actions, he often vowed, operated within the limits of reason alone, by which he frequently meant the bounds of secular humanist imperatives.

The gesture of consecrating the untouchable as harijan can therefore be apprehended neither as a purely theistic act nor as an act of humanist idealism in which the act of imbuing divinity to the untouchable merely happened to conceal a patronizing, secularist sleight of hand. Nor was the gesture of consecration yet another sign of Gandhi's infinite capacity and frequent tendency, as liberal reformers and radical nationalists often alleged he possessed, to procrastinate the urgency of the political by weaving an enchanting web of moral predicates around what was an oppressively juridical and scripturally sanctioned practice of inequality. Instead, the naming of the untouchable as harijan finally revealed, after more than a decade and a half of his experiments in truth and mass politics, Gandhi's radical turning of, and his dramatic turn away from, both modern European and Indic conceptions of equality. The remarkable and complex conceptual register on which this turning of equality, this momentous touching of the untouchable, was accomplished is the subject of this article.

One must begin, then, by noting the peculiar absence of the untouchable in *Hind Swaraj*.<sup>2</sup> Of its nineteen chapters staged as dialogue between the "impatient" nationalist Reader and the morally possessed and incorruptible Editor, the latter being Gandhi's ventriloquist, there are none that deal, directly or indirectly, with the question of untouchability and caste oppression. This absence is particularly striking, given that the annihilation of untouchability, if not of caste, would subsequently become indispensable for Gandhi's preoccupations with freedom and equality.

There is some legitimate ground to think, then, that the Mahatma came rather late to the untouchable. Even if *Hind Swaraj* makes no explicit reference to the problem of the unequal and is fundamentally concerned with the problem of the fraternal, however, the same allegation of belatedness cannot be leveled against Gandhi's coming to equality and, I argue, to touchability. For Gandhi's elaboration of equality and his apprehending of the unequal were integral to the very possibilities and limits of satyagraha. The Mahatma's unequals were neither political antagonists nor imperial sovereigns who might simply be apprehended as hostile combatants of moral warfare. They were his moral unequals, the constitutive ellipses of satyagraha, without whom nonviolence itself might lose its precarious ethical equilibrium.

2. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (1938; repr., Ahmadabad, India: Navajivan Trust, 2009).

One could argue along with Bhimrao Ambedkar, the formidable anticast radical and Gandhi's relentlessly probing political opponent during the most crucial decades of the nationalist struggle, that Gandhi was indifferent to the imperative of justice for some 40 million untouchables who had been for ages slaving under the burden of the most inhuman scriptural sanctions ever known to mankind. Much of that claim is neither untrue nor shocking. Gandhi was indeed against the very idea that a wrong could be reduced to the generality of principles and remedied by foregrounding the counterprinciple of infinite victimhood, either of a human being or of an animal. For to privilege victimhood, even in the interest of justice, entailed entering into an immoral cycle of more revenge and even profounder indifference. No abstract ideal of justice could legitimately sustain such cynical violence that underpins liberalism's interest in restitution.

Instead, Gandhi argued, the problem of inequality was a moral question; the unequal was a moral other rather than a politico-judicial one. Inequality as such had to be apprehended on the terrain of religious sentiments and moral convictions before it was translated into a juridical commitment or a historical problem. "Untouchability will not be removed," he claimed,

by the force even of law. It can only be removed when the majority of Hindus realize that is a crime against God and man and are ashamed of it. In other words, it is a process of conversion, i.e. purification, of the Hindu heart. The aid of law has to be invoked when it hinders or interferes with the progress of reform as when, in spite of the willingness of the trustees and the temple-going public, the law prohibits the opening of a particular temple.<sup>3</sup>

Thus in Gandhi's conception, inequality came from indifference toward the corporeal suffering and empirical constraints of others. Indifference to the unequal's suffering and tolerance of evil constituted the limits of Gandhi's moral episteme. For him, the causes of inequality did not lie in the unjust laws against which satyagraha must itself be indifferent and immune, but in our own unjust passions. It was in our infinite greed, in our belief that our lives and needs were infinite, that inequality thrived. We became indifferent to inequality and suffering, and therefore unequals ourselves, the moment our knowledge of finitude and limit moved out from the contingent realm of morals to the possessive domain of infinitude and interest. A satyagrahi who prioritizes equality must be indifferent

3. Gandhi, *Harijan* (September 23, 1939), *EWMG*, 227.

to “pecuniary ambition,” willing to lose every penny.<sup>4</sup> Elaborating more directly on the constitutive relationship between equality and voluntary dispossession, Gandhi wrote, “I can only possess certain things when I know that others, who also want to possess similar things, are able to do so. But we know — every one of us can speak from experience — that such a thing is an impossibility. Therefore, the only thing that can be possessed by all is non-possession, not to have anything whatsoever. In other words, a willing surrender.”<sup>5</sup>

The radical break Gandhi makes here is less with liberalism’s moral sentiment than with its possessive individualism. Where the possessive individual measures equality by what he possesses, gives, and receives, the satyagrahi considers equality as something that might be accomplished neither in gift nor in possession. Equality for the latter is secured, instead, in the moral decision of not-having, that is, in the knowledge that not-having is the only empirical condition that is available to all and hence the only mode of being equal. This conceptual turn explains why Gandhi had little faith in restitution as a mode of securing justice, for restitution was based fundamentally on an abstraction, on the principle that something had been lost.

Now, loss is only possible under conditions of interest. The experience of loss is comprehensible only when someone has an interest in the thing that is being considered lost. In the absence of such desire to possess, the thing might merely be construed as having disappeared. At the same time, there may or may not exist any such empirical thing in the first place that might reasonably or unreasonably be construed as having been lost. “The only thing the interested party has to ‘own’ ” in order to experience loss, as Adi Ophir has argued, “is the interest itself.”<sup>6</sup>

The satyagrahi must radically shift this logic of interest grounded in proprietary equality and translate it into a problem for moral ontology. The liberal ideal of justice based on abstract possession of rights must be rehabilitated within the experiential register of corporeal nonindifference and dispossession. For Gandhi, the only possible measure of equality among unequals, a measure that did not violate the unequal’s difference and disrespect his forced poverty, was hinged on the satyagrahi’s embrace of equality through his own voluntary sacrifice, or *tyag*,

4. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 74.

5. Gandhi, “Speech at Guildhouse Church, London,” *Guildhouse* (September 23, 1931), *EWMG*, 79.

6. Adi Ophir, *The Order of Evils: Toward an Ontology of Morals* (New York: Zed Books, 2005), 106.

on the satyagrahi's capacity to experience "immeasurable pity" at the moment of that equalizing dispossession.<sup>7</sup>

There is a radical paradox involved here in trying to find measure through the immeasurable, equality through pity, a paradox that is foundational to Gandhi's elaboration of satyagraha. I return to the paradox later in the essay. The measure of being equal, meanwhile, is here unhinged from the calculable predicates of political sovereignty and rehabilitated instead as an irreducible cognate of moral force. Gandhi's most explicit attempt to apprehend equality in *Hind Swaraj*, then, comes by way of his critique of the normative language of sovereignty. Responding in detail to the nationalist reader who advocates the use of force in the face of imperial power, the Editor takes up the example of petitioning, the most prolific activity of Indian nationalism in its early decades.

A petition backed by force is a petition from an equal and, when he transmits his demand in the form of a petition, it testifies to his nobility. Two kinds of force can back petitions. "We shall hurt you if you do not give this," is one kind of force; it is the force of arms, whose evil results we have already examined. The second kind of force can thus be stated; "If you do not concede our demand, we shall be no longer your petitioners. You can govern us only so long as we remain the governed; we shall no longer have any dealings with you." The force implied in this may be described as love-force, soul-force, or, more popularly but less accurately, passive resistance. This force is indestructible.<sup>8</sup>

Gandhi does not so much disengage from his commitment to the legislative norms of empire, that is, from petitioning, as he radically redefines the nature of force that underpins the imperial engagement. Only in the possession of this indestructible force, one that might be possessed only through refusal and abandonment, can the unequal be rendered equal. It was such a state of possession that Gandhi elaborated as satyagraha: the armed force that must be transformed from being an imperative produced by the satyagrahi's inequality in the face of the dominant into an ethical relation of hospitality among equals. In response to those understandings of equality that see in it a natural extension of power, in other words, Gandhi instituted equality as the indestructible capacity to abandon the very principle of sovereignty, as the capacity to refuse to govern or be governed as the unethical unequal. Equality was to be not the precondition of the

7. On *tyag*, see Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 73–75. On the satyagrahis and pity, see Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 66.

8. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 65.

satyagrahi's combat with the sovereign and the unequal; it was supposed to be the ground for his ethical production of immeasurable hospitality in the midst of moral warfare.<sup>9</sup>

Engagement through disengagement, possession through abandonment, mastery through surrender, force through love: such were the promiscuous and sacrificial impulses of satyagraha. Its founding principle dictated that satyagraha be contingent and fallible, for its "beauty" fell into a statist redundancy the moment it was mastered. What would the satyagrahi rule if he had already mastered his self and attained a narcissistic finality, thereby merely mirroring in sublimated form the narcissistic sovereignty of the modern state? What would the satyagrahi battle and live for if he had already accomplished the desired equality with himself, the sovereign, and the unequal? The satyagrahi found equality only in the contingency of the battlefield. His only duty as warrior, Gandhi mandated, was to rush "into the mouth of *himsa* [violence]," yet to do so without "once harboring an evil thought" in the face of disarmament and dispossession.<sup>10</sup>

Satyagraha was possible, then, only on the limits of life. It could be conceptualized only on the boundaries of an imperfect humanity perennially at war against the foundational *himsa* from which it was itself born. Thus its radical desire for equality was tied, as Gandhi often conceded, to the impossibility of living an equal and *ahimsak*, or nonviolent, life. The beautiful equality that the satyagrahi sought was impossible to perfect without an elliptical sacrifice of life itself. For *himsa* was constitutive of all life; one accomplished the purity of *ahimsa* and equality only in death.

Gandhi's elaboration of the relationship between satyagraha and equality, therefore, was peculiarly autoimmune. Without this constitutive autoimmunity, without satyagraha's promiscuous relationship with humanism's love for life, neither the satyagrahi nor the unequal could be brought to life; neither could be brought to the moral battleground of satyagraha. With this pernicious autoimmunity that pushed satyagraha into an elliptical relationship with a beautiful death, however, either the satyagrahi or the unequal must forgo the priority of life once he entered the battleground.

9. In considering Gandhi's elaboration of equality as production, I draw from Jacques Rancière's *Dis-agreement: Philosophy and Politics*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

10. Gandhi, "Speech at Kathiawar Political Conference, Rajkot," *Harijan* (June 17, 1939), in *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. Raghavan Iyer, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 2:371 (hereafter cited as *MPWMG*).

Hence Gandhi's radicalization of finitude, of which voluntary dispossession, if need be the voluntary dispossession of life, was turned into the sovereign mode of encountering the unequal. It was only in such dispossession that the satyagrahi could experience the unequal's estrangement from life. Gandhi's sarcastic description of disciplinary history in *Hind Swaraj*, which he aptly called "the finishing touch" of the English in India, hit hard not merely at the political divisiveness of epistemic truth-games. It also underlined why a scientific episteme that breached the finitude of our "limited mental capacity" and deluded us into believing that our sovereignty was unquestionable possessed no resources to help us reach moral judgments about the proper and the improper.<sup>11</sup>

### Indifference against *Tapasya*

By morals, Gandhi hardly ever referred to justice and never to equality desired by restitution. When he did deploy the vocabulary of justice, as he did during his 1932 fast unto death against the move to introduce separate electorates for the untouchables, he invariably clarified that his motivations were drawn from the morality of conscience than from the necessity of principles. They were intended, as he said using a suitably corporeal metaphor, "to sting the Hindu conscience into right religious action," to show them, at the cost of his own sacrificial cleansing, what was proper.<sup>12</sup> Morals for Gandhi were a set of fundamentally contingent and conscientious judgments about one's own capacities and the other's limits, not an imperative of principles.

If indifference to the unequal's suffering brought the satyagrahi's morals to crisis, then the satyagrahi's nonindifference, or *dayabal*, was constituted by his moral strength to understand the unequal's mortality. Rather than focus on the unequal's capabilities and constraints, nonindifference demanded openness to his plight in all its corporeal visibility, for only that visibility of the unequal revealed the finitude and injurability of life. The satyagrahi became equal with the unequal only by opening himself to this empirical knowledge of suffering and, if need be, death.

Within the logic of satyagraha, then, the preliminary ground of moral judgment was cleared by a constitutive nonindifference. One became a warrior proper to satyagraha only by opening oneself to the emotional and corporeal suffering of unequals to which one might otherwise be blind. Satyagraha entailed a radical-

11. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 45–46.

12. Gandhi, "Fasting against Separate Electorates" (September 16, 1932), *EWMG*, 221.

ization of finitude that was possible to accomplish only when the unequal's pain was interiorized in all its tactility. Thus the scriptural laws of calibrated distancing became for Gandhi a profound symptom not only of Hinduism's blindness to the violent tactility of its practice. They also became for him a moral insight into Hinduism's indifference toward its unequals, and thus laid the foundations for satyagraha itself. "But even a blind man can see," Gandhi had argued,

that the practice of untouchability is contrary to *dharma*. . . . To make any persons crawl on their stomachs, to segregate them, to drive them to live on the outskirts of the village, not to be concerned whether they live or die, to give them food left over by others—all this certainly cannot be religion. That an untouchable cannot live in our neighborhood and cannot own land, that an untouchable must, on seeing us, shout: "Please keep at a distance, do not touch me," and should not be permitted to sit with us in the train—this is not Hinduism.<sup>13</sup>

Gandhi's intricately corporeal and ocular detailing of harijan suffering formed the crucible out of which the satyagrahi's kinship with mortality was to be molded. Awareness of suffering was the true measure of *daya*, or pity; it was the irreducible ground of patient moral judgment. Its experience lent itself to slow, intimate, minute, and particular details of everyday existence. Suffering under the predicates of discipline was especially meaningful, for it allowed the satyagrahi to comprehend his indivisible kinship with estrangement and mortality. His alienation from blood kin was exemplary, precisely because it was the only moment when the moral predicates of extreme discipline and penance, the ethical and corporeal demands of *tapashcharya*, as Gandhi framed the classical rules of Hindu spiritual practice, touched and rendered the satyagrahi untouchable from his own kin.<sup>14</sup> "Every time that my mother handled unclean things she became untouchable for the time being and had to cleanse herself by bathing. . . . I refuse to believe that anyone can be regarded untouchable by reason of his or her birth, and such untouchability as recognized by religion is by its very nature transitory—easily removable and referable to the deed not the doer."<sup>15</sup>

By repeatedly rehearsing his mother's transitory and necessary untouchability, Gandhi sought to create a ground of moral nonindifference toward the unequal without forgetting the sacrificial imperative of his difference and distance from her. What is radical about these examples he drew from his own childhood and

13. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1978), 47.

14. Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma*, 100–102.

15. Gandhi, *Young India* (January 22, 1925), *EWMG*, 215.

of his own mother was Gandhi's rendering of untouchability contingent and intimate rather than principled and distant. Estrangement from his own mother and the familial intimacy with contamination woke him up to the immeasurable hospitality involved in service. Within the moral calculus of a humanity proper to satyagraha, everyone was at some point or the other meant to be unequal and untouchable. The satyagrahi was the figure who possessed this ethical knowledge in all his humility; he embraced contamination and purity with equal rigor. Those who refused this knowledge remained moral unequals, incapable of satyagraha.

Under the disciplinary constraints of *tapashcharya*, the satyagrahi could be rendered different and distant not only with the untouchable but also with one's impure kin. Such reversible estrangement from kin could be radicalized as the satyagrahi's comprehension of distance from himself and integrated into Gandhi's conceptual turning of equality away from its liberal iterations. For it would allow him to apprehend the unequal on the terrain of revocable touchability and contingent kinship, one where touching and not-touching could be rescued from the principles of liberal (familial, fraternal, statist, territorial) kinship and rehabilitated into the moral realm of reversibility, promiscuity, and sacrifice. If fidelity to *tapashcharya* so demanded, one's kin must be willingly rendered untouchable and unequal. Relatedly, the satyagrahi must be willing to be rendered unequal with himself. Only then would he be capable of apprehending the estrangement of the harijan from life, his abyss-like mortality manifest in the state of "letting die," left to perish on the indifferent boundaries of humanity.

### Touchabilities

There was a radical paradox involved in Gandhi's rendering of the satyagrahi equal with the unequal through *tapasya*, the rigorous rules of moral conduct and corporeal discipline that the Mahatma politicized during the nationalist struggle. I call this paradox touchability. Touchability, or *sparshyata*, was, before anything else, one of Gandhi's many abilities. It shared a kinship with another early-twentieth-century ability, Walter Benjamin's "impartibility." By impartibility, Benjamin meant the capacity to render and deliver oneself to others *outside* of speech and yet enter into an immediate, touchable, contact with them.<sup>16</sup> As kin of Benjamin's impartibility, Gandhi's touchability did not necessarily entail a communication with the unequal; it instead demanded a rigorous impartibility

16. See, for instance, Walter Benjamin's 1916 essay "On Language as Such and the Language of Man," in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1: 1913–1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

of the satyagrahi into the unequal. It required the satyagrahi to perfect the art of becoming-other, of becoming-harijan.

At the same time, touchability desired such impartibility of the satyagrahi not for a once-and-for-all implementation of equality and sameness; such a perfect translation of one into the other would deny the very heterogeneity that is entailed in impartibility. Rather, touchability foregrounded the possibility of contingent and promiscuous reversal. It neither mandated nor desired synthesis; it instead demanded touching the unequal at an incommensurable point where neither speech nor gesture would suffice and where only an exacting, silent sacrifice must prevail. As a mode of contact with the unequal that bordered at once on the immediate and the unsaid, then, touchability profoundly divided and displaced the abstract qualities of equality itself.

Touchability therefore must not be seen as the negative of untouchability, that is, of *asparshyata*, for it shared with the latter a resolute mindfulness of the satyagrahi's irreducible and, for Gandhi, necessary difference with the unequal. A negative relationship between the two might moreover imply a filial bond between them; it might suggest a relationship of cocreation, like the one Gandhi elaborated between himsa and ahimsa. Instead, on reading Gandhi's conceptual registers, one can discern that what might be conceptualized as his touchability and what the liberal reformer referred to as untouchability can be thought of as being constituted without each other. Within the predicates of liberalism and *dalit* (subaltern) humanism alike, untouchability was the corporeal cognate of social oppression sanctioned by caste. Within these statist predicates, untouchability's solution lay in the law. Gandhi's touchability, by contrast, eschewed the instrumental abstractions of jurisprudence altogether. His was an attempt to rigorously elaborate on morals and moral warfare that stayed proper to an empiricist resolution of satyagraha's unequals. Gandhi's unequals were predicates of discipline rather than subjects of indemnity.

As such, there needed to be no militant hostility between untouchability and touchability. In fact, touchability was more fundamentally constituted by inequality than it was by its antithesis to untouchability. Where the calculus of touchability profoundly integrated the moral and negative registers of nonindifference and ahimsa was in its extreme politicization of distance and impurity, in its deployment of finitude for accomplishing an unambiguous break with the humanist ideals of equality for life. It was also at the seams of this thinking of touchability, I suggest, that the sharp edges of satyagraha began to cut through Gandhi's moral sutures.

Gandhi's copious writings on the suffering of the harijan reveal the same empirical obsession with what he called his "intimate acquaintance" with the

banality of evil.<sup>17</sup> His addresses to the harijans carried very similar, if not lengthier, prescriptions about the necessity of distance and the importance of not touching indiscriminately. For touching, or *sparsh*, demanded an economy of propriety and discipline. Strongly underpinned by humility and measure as it was, touching was not to be rendered into a militant relationship of corporeal excessiveness among false equals. After all, “a fanaticism that refuses to discriminate,” Gandhi wrote succinctly in his critique of nationalist iterations of freedom, “is the negation of all ideals.”<sup>18</sup>

Apart from instituting the ground of moral nonindifference, the prescriptive detail of Gandhi’s writings on touch performed a specific epistemological function. It foregrounded the moral and political requirements of the paradox of touchability. It is a paradox because touchability, contrary to its name that invokes the incalculable purity of love and contact, was not merely a gesture of touching the unequal so as to render him into immeasurable and immediate sameness. It was also the satyagrahi’s measure of fidelity and finitude; it was his mediation on love and foreignness expressed through the language of a distancing death.

Touchability, like satyagraha, demanded the apprehending of the unequal on the limits of life. It involved touching the unequal on the edges of sacrifice, beyond which satyagraha and its mandate to die for equality itself became sacred and untouchable. Beyond those edges of life, the unequal became at one and the same time touchable and foreign to satyagraha’s battleground. It was through this productive paradox that Gandhi attempted to sequester both equality and the unequal from those humanistic impulses that see in lived and living freedom the only ground for pure equality.

At the core of touchability was Gandhi’s rehabilitation of impurity into the disciplinary ethics of satyagraha. “Does untouchability in the case of a cobbler or scavenger,” Gandhi asked,

attach to birth or occupation? If it attaches to birth, it is hideous and must be rooted out; if it attaches to occupation it may be sanitary rule of great importance. It is of universal application. . . . The scavenger’s children may remain scavengers without being or feeling degraded and they will be no more considered untouchables than Brahmins. The fault does not therefore lie in recognizing the law of hereditary transmission of qualities from generation to generation, but it lies with the faulty conception of inequality.<sup>19</sup>

17. Gandhi, “Fast against Separate Electorates,” *EWMG*, 222.

18. Gandhi, “Our Helplessness,” *Young India* (March 21, 1929), *MPWMG*, 3:229.

19. Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma*, 82.

What is this faulty “conception of inequality” that Gandhi is revolting against? I go back very schematically to Jacques Rancière’s probing book *Dis-agreement* where, much like Gandhi, legal principles for instituting equality are seen to be a conceit of the “police” rather than a site of politics proper.<sup>20</sup> For Rancière, equality is a double occurrence. It is a condition and a production. Equality is a condition inasmuch as its accomplishment institutes a new universality, a new relation to knowledge, and the distribution of knowledge in heterogeneous and previously unequal spaces. This condition of equality, or this equality as condition, is epistemological. Equality is a production inasmuch as the new universality and new spaces of knowledge themselves bring about an equality that did not previously exist in those spaces. This production of equality, or this equality as production, is disseminative, for it reconfigures existing knowledges with respect to new spaces. Here in this double occurrence lies the momentary possibility of emancipatory politics, that which Rancière calls the egalitarian contingency.

If we agree with Rancière’s powerful double formulation of equality, one of condition and the other of production, then Gandhi radically opens the moral ground of satyagraha to the latter regime; that is, he institutes satyagraha as the regime for the production of equals. His problem with untouchability is not that the scavenger’s child is still a scavenger, for there is, according to Gandhi, no problem with the inheritance and transmission of knowledges in spaces where they have traditionally existed. He is perfectly willing to call the *vidya*, discipline and skill, of carding *dhanurvidya*, which is the Sanskrit word for the art of archery and was reserved, within the classical rules of *varnashrama* (the fourfold division of the Hindu ritual world) for Kshatriya warriors.

I have given a new definition of the word Kshatriya. The latter is not a person who knows how to kill others but rather one who acquires the art of sacrificing his own life so that others may live. . . . What knowledge of archery should such a Kshatriya possess? While reflecting on this problem, just as a carpenter invariably thinks of a babul tree, is it any wonder if my mind turns towards carding? . . . This *vidya* presupposes both physical and spiritual strength.<sup>21</sup>

The weaver, the spinner, and the carder were not unequal to the archer merely because the latter was invariably a high-born Kshatriya or because the skill

20. Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, 21–42.

21. Gandhi, “Carding or Archery,” *Navajivan* (September 1, 1929), in *The Collected Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, 98 vols. (New Delhi: Government of India, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Publications Division, 1958–), 47:1–3 (hereafter cited as *CWMG*).

demanding by the latter was any greater than that required by the former. If anything, the moral and physical capacities that characterized them, the ethical compassion of the warrior and the spiritual and bodily strength of the carder, were not only equal but also reversible. One's capacity to sacrifice necessarily brought to mind the humility and strength of the other. In their shared mastery over specific knowledges, the Kshatriya warrior and the harijan weaver were tied in spirit and reversible in the bodies they inhabited.

For Gandhi, the inequality between these disciplined practitioners stemmed from our lack of fidelity and moral courage to touch existing knowledges in their corporeal authenticity. Inequality lay in our moral failure to learn from the disciplines and produce new and more compassionate ones ourselves. Gandhi's equality was productive—his equality was the equality of radical production, in Rancière's terms—because it pushed these disciplines into new spaces, rendered them into radically promiscuous vocabularies, and realigned the relationship between their unequal practitioners and the moral spaces the practitioners inhabited.

There was an element of changeability and contingency allowed within this egalitarian order that called for, on the part of both the satyagrahi and the harijan, measure, restraint, and humility. The harijan could be rendered touchable without being forced to purge his vocation and discipline. Instead, it was his fidelity to his craft that demanded the turning of the satyagrahi's knowledge and apprehension of contamination. The harijan and the satyagrahi came to equality in these infinite moments of measured regularity and unconditional humility of everyday life of the ashram. The act of touching and practicing the impure vocations transformed the disciplines into knowledge; it made the contamination attached to such practices extrinsic to the disciplines; and it made the disciplines and their practitioners touchable. Regularity transformed not merely the satyagrahi but also the harijan. It pushed knowledge into new spaces and made those spaces equal. It was from this productive equality that the universality of Gandhi's ashram dharma was extracted, a radically egalitarian universality that he was willing to call *Shudradharma*.<sup>22</sup>

### Properly Unequal

Gandhian suffering, the mastered suffering of the satyagrahi, as we have seen, aroused a fundamental nonindifference toward the unequal, for it was only in the satyagrahi's own suffering that his senses generated the morals proper to

22. Gandhi, "Answers to Questions at Gandhi Seva Sangh Meeting" (May 6, 1989), *MPWMG*, 3:491.

apprehending the unequal. At the same time, this ethical knowledge demanded “immeasurable pity,” or *daya*, a radical touchability that never failed to mark out the difference that separated the equal from the unequal. How else would pity be possible without this difference? Didn’t nonindifference, or *dayabal*, by its very name recall the abyss of need that separated the satyagrahi from the harijan, that moral chasm where the satyagrahi’s distance from the untouchable was reinstated in his very gesture of becoming-harijan?

That abyss of craving and pity, the Gandhian void of “the immeasurable,” forged the satyagrahic kinship of touch between unequals—a strange kinship that must remain irreproducible, for satyagrahic touching was powerful only as long as it remained singular, promiscuous, and transgressive. Satyagraha did not desire a law of faithful touching; in that, it remained ironically antitrust. Touchability, then, like Benjamin’s impartibility, could thrive only in the incommunicable chasm that estranged the harijan from the satyagrahi. It was not against this tension between spurning and desire but rather in it, in this radical infidelity, that the Mahatma’s egalitarian contingency gained its political form.

Touchability was, in other words, a radical epistemology of satyagrahic difference; it was a double occurrence, as it were. It was the knowledge of suffering and finitude that made unequals equal, but it also enabled distinction between unequals. Not everyone was Gandhi’s unequal. There were morals proper to being an unequal too; such were the morals possessed by those who can be called Gandhi’s moral unequals. These moral unequals, like the extremist nationalists and remorseless terrorists of *Hind Swaraj*, remained constitutively incapable of being satyagrahis. They were the ellipses foundational to satyagraha.

Thus in the extreme politicization of suffering that was entailed in Gandhi’s spectacular fast of 1932 against separate electorates for untouchables, in the extreme politicization that is entailed in any act of conceiving one’s fast unto one’s own public death, the satyagrahi’s suffering was rhetorically directed toward friends and equals. The fast was not against those

who have no faith in me, whether they be Hindus or others; but it is against those countless Indians (no matter what persuasion they belong) who believe that I represent a just cause. . . . If the Hindu mass mind is not yet prepared to banish untouchability root and branch, it must sacrifice me without the slightest hesitation. . . . Any betrayal of the trust can merely postpone the day of immolation for me and henceforth for those who think with me.<sup>23</sup>

23. Gandhi, “Fast against Separate Electorates” (September 16, 1932), *EWMG*, 221.

Feverishness, immolation, purification: these constituted the satyagrahi's irresolvable existence between life and death, his unsettled cohabitation with mortality and ahimsa at once. The sacrificial language of the 1932 fast, that spectacular act that Gandhi ironically termed "the last seal on non-violence," pushed humanist—both nationalist and *dalit*—apprehensions of death to their limits.<sup>24</sup> For fasting was necessarily an experience on the verge, unfathomable within the humanist certainty of life's infinitude. It was an accommodation with death, an act of staying with it, addressed only to the faithful equal rather than to the unapproachable unequal or the disbelieving antagonist. It was only in that strange ground between suffering and death that the absolute knowledge of finitude was accomplished and the moral capacity of nonindifference aroused.

Yet it must have also occurred to Gandhi's unequal, the harijan who was never addressed by the satyagrahi, that this knowledge of finitude, this exceptional verge of experience, this enormous moral resource that sprang from spectacular suffering, remained unavailable to him except as an unspectacular and unequal everyday. Fasting was a profound measure of finitude and touchability. But its epistemology, the moral epistemology of satyagraha itself, remained sacred and secretive. Its untouchability was a true measure of distance between unequals, between those who were the proper subjects and addressees of satyagraha and those who were not. The satyagrahi's mastery over finitude, his equality with himself, became the very ground, paradoxically, on which to maintain the distinction between equals and unequals. Without this ironic inequality, without satyagraha's absolute disinterest in the fidelity, audience, and antagonism of the unequal, without its loving abandonment of the harijan for whom it was perfected but to whom it was never properly addressed, satyagraha might lose its very value.

Reminding the upper-caste Hindu of the exemplary conduct of the Pandava king Yudhishtira, whose righteous inheritance to the throne was at the center of the fratricidal Hindu epic *Mahabharat*, Gandhi warned that "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>25</sup>

I leave the question of the animal for now, but one cannot ignore that the animal was indeed a radical ellipsis within satyagraha, a nearly invisible point at which Gandhi's thinking about ahimsa curved out of its antihumanist ground and

24. Gandhi, "Fast against Separate Electorates," *EWMG*, 223.

25. Gandhi, *Young India* (September 22, 1921), *EWMG*, 216.

strayed onto the shadows of a peculiarly sacrificial humanism. The animal was a proper unequal that might replace another unequal. Yet it could also be sacrificed, if need be, in place of an equal.<sup>26</sup> This sacrifice need not amount to killing of the unequal; satyagraha, after all, forbade such killing. Instead, this sacrifice entailed a strangely intimate and possessive abandonment of the unequal, an act of keeping him safe, sacred, and distant, a gesture, in short, of fidelity and consecration.

In the moral allegory he draws here from the *Mahabharat*, Gandhi is unambiguous that the satyagrahi's physical abandonment of the harijan was improper to satyagraha. Such corporeal desertion would mean the disavowal of touchability on which the satyagrahi's moral edifice was founded. Yet there is abandonment at work in Gandhi's allegory that is tied not to desertion but to the experience of witnessing. If we resist reading Gandhi literally, then the word *abandonment* might reveal a gesture that inverts the meanings of its conventional usage. This Gandhian abandonment might instead mean the satyagrahi's refusal to let go of the harijan in the same exemplary way that Yudhishtira refused to part with his dog on the gates of heaven. The dog in that closing scene of the *Mahabharat* is proper to the exemplary conduct of dharma because it institutes, through its presence, an act of exemplary witnessing. The animal must be present not because it is the warrior or messenger but because it must witness that singular moment of Yudhishtira's sacrifice. The abandonment was manifest not in the corporeal desertion of the animal, in other words, but rather in the rendering of the animal into the intimate and sacred spectator of Yudhishtira's ethical refusal to part with it.

Thus it was for Gandhi's harijan, who remained the exemplary hostage and unequal witness to satyagraha. Inasmuch as witnessing is always constituted by the convergence of two experiences—first, by remaining untouchable and foreigner, by being kept unscathed at the site of war, and second, by embodying the fiduciary—the harijan was by his very name the profoundest witness present on satyagraha's moral battleground.<sup>27</sup> As god's sacred child, the harijan was the consecrated spectator to the art of moral warfare. He was the figure of absolute fidelity to his own skill and discipline that might be exemplary to the satyagrahi; yet

26. Gandhi's most incisive encounters with the animal occur in his discussions of ahimsa and euthanasia. These subsequently become the fulcrum of his elaborations of equality, especially in satyagraha's face-to-face with the alien. I discuss satyagraha's kinship with inequality and euthanasia, its movement from *asamaanta* to *asamaanyata*, in the face of the foreigner in Aishwary Kumar, "The Satyagrahi's Zion: Aliens and Neighbors at the Limit of Fidelity" (forthcoming).

27. Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 98.

he could not host, or himself embody, the satyagrahi warrior. The abandonment, therefore, was not of the unequal's elliptical and alien presence, such an ellipsis being constitutive of witnessing and, therefore, of satyagraha. The abandonment instead was of the unequal's address; the abandonment was of the unequal's desire and capacity to host satyagraha; the abandonment was of the unequal's will to himself embody the figure of the warrior proper to satyagraha.

In the exemplary moments of fasting and sacrifice, the harijan was neither the proper destination, then, nor the proper addressee of the satyagrahi's moral struggle. If satyagraha properly addressed and sacrificed only kin and equals, then this child of god was a moral unequal who called for the militant satyagrahi's disarming. The satyagrahis, Gandhi stipulated, "should approach them not in a militant spirit but as befits their non-violence, in a spirit of friendliness."<sup>28</sup> The harijan was constituted by this sacrosanct and ironic untouchability; he was the sacred message of one satyagrahi to another, a foreigner who was to be kept unscathed on the boundaries of war. He was the properly unequal and perverse ellipsis of satyagraha.

This was the paradox of touchability, which touched inequality, or *asamaanta*, at the very moment that it rendered the unequal into an exception, into an *asamaanyata*. Touchability was not merely the gesture of Gandhi's tactile approaching and apprehending of the untouchable. It was also the mark of the strange reversibility between the satyagrahi's radical contact with, and his loving abandonment of, the untouchable. It was the mark of contingency of the satyagrahi's transgression against the law that dictates touching by separation. It was, above all, the mark of the satyagrahi's irresolution regarding who was proper and improper to the immeasurable hospitality of touching itself.

Rather than purely as a cognate of his attempt to touch only the harijan, therefore, Gandhi's touchability must be apprehended as the site of his distinctive elaboration of our necessarily violent, or *himsak*, relationship with the unequal. This unequal was never only the harijan, although there is no thinking of equality in Gandhi's massive corpus that does not directly or elliptically touch the untouchable. This unequal, instead, was the moral unequal of satyagraha, the unequal who was necessary and proper to satyagraha inasmuch as satyagraha, with its language of hospitality and sacrifice, needed a moral unequal. This is why *Hind Swaraj*, despite the absence of the untouchable, did not merely mark the formidable beginning of Gandhi's thinking of the unequal; it became foundational to that thought.

28. Gandhi, *Constructive Program: Its Meaning and Place* (December 13, 1941), *EWMG*, 167.

Life has absolute value only if it is worth *more than* life.

—Derrida, *Acts of Religion*

It is really the spirit behind.

—Gandhi, *Gulldhouse*

If equality over oneself and others could be accomplished only in sacrifice, then Gandhi was not oblivious to the moral conundrum it introduced for his political practice. He was awake to the contaminating kinship between his elaborations of *himsa* and equality. The question, then, was how to conceptualize equality in a way that stayed proper to the demands of nonviolence and ethical life rather than contingent upon the satyagrahi's or the unequal's death. How to elaborate on an equal life without committing violence against that very knowledge of finitude, that openness to death, which made men satyagrahis and equals? If such a life were to be elaborated, wouldn't the existence of the unequal be necessary to that life's staying proper with satyagraha? Was there such an elaboration of equality that might ever allow the unequal to live a satyagrahi's life, to be an equal, to exist not as an unequal? Did not satyagraha itself need, was it not in itself both a reminder and remainder of, the unequal?

Gandhi's equality, after all, could not possibly be accomplished by just any kind of sacrifice by just any unequal. In response to those extremist nationalists who privileged the method of political assassination in their pursuit of freedom, the editor's retort in *Hind Swaraj* still remains illuminating for his thinking of such an unequal. The indifference toward the sacrifice of the moral unequal that Gandhi had displayed there, not for the last time, is an exemplary site for apprehending his elaboration of the sacrifice proper to satyagraha.

Do you not tremble to think of freeing India by assassination? What we need to do is to sacrifice ourselves. It is a cowardly thought, that of killing others. Whom do you suppose to free by assassination? . . . Those who believe that India has gained by Dhingra's act and other similar acts in India make a serious mistake. Dhingra was a patriot, but his love was blind. He gave his body in a wrong way; its ultimate result can only be mischievous.<sup>29</sup>

29. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 60. Gandhi is alluding to Madanlal Dhingra, the Indian radical who was tried and hanged to death in London for having murdered a high-ranking British official, Sir William Curzon Wyllie, in 1909.

Sacrifice was proper only when one died in a particular way. One could not just die using any method and be called a satyagrahi. A death proper to satyagraha was underpinned by a resolute and fearless, almost militant, equality of means. If those who were killed were unequal to the one who sacrificed himself and others, if the battle was not of the equals, then that sacrifice was not proper to satyagraha. Dhingra had shot dead an unarmed British official in a civil gathering of noncombatants: that was clearly not a battlefield proper to satyagraha. Such sacrifice, unworthy of its very name, was an infantile mischief, the wrong way of giving one's body away. An Indian capable of being a satyagrahi, however, "will know that no nation has risen without suffering; that, even in physical warfare, the true test is suffering and not the killing of others, much more so in the warfare of passive resistance."<sup>30</sup>

Laying down the requisite virtues of the satyagrahi with the same conviction almost four decades later, Gandhi would declare that "to die without killing was the badge of the satyagrahi."<sup>31</sup> Gandhian ahimsa was thus grounded in an ironic perfectibility of death. The satyagrahi's openness to dying, his willingness to abandon life, remained the only moment of his living with the proper, equal with himself and the unequal. Till that moment, his life was necessarily unequal, *himsak*, and impure. At the same time, a sacrifice that involved killing those whose means and ends were unequal would merely underline the superfluity of an unequal life rather than exemplify the spectacular equality that satyagraha desired. Satyagraha was the relocation of sacrifice away from the life-bound instrumentality of statist modes of sovereignty and into the ethics of a fearless humility that would refuse to flinch even in the face of death. One sacrificed his or her own self, or sacrificed the other, for something that was always worth more than mere life. One sacrificed for sovereignty only over oneself.

Herein lay the elliptical and ethical violence of ahimsa, not necessarily toward the other, which would indeed have made it more appropriable by and acceptable to the logic of the modern state, but rather toward life, a life possessed by one's own self and others in equal measure. Asked if he would take the life of his own daughter if her modesty had been outraged, Gandhi dug into the *Ramayana* in order to underline the moral priority of dharma over life.

I would take her life only if I was absolutely certain that she would wish it. I know Sita would have preferred death to dishonor by Ravana. And that is also what I believe our Shastras have enjoined. . . . I am not prepared

30. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 89.

31. Gandhi, "Speech at AICC" (June 26, 1946), *MPWMG*, 2:314.

to admit that the loss of chastity stands on the same footing as the loss of the limb. But I can imagine circumstances in which one would infinitely prefer death even to being maimed.<sup>32</sup>

Gandhi begins by allowing Sita the radical knowledge of and openness to her own death and therefore grants her that wish. But he immediately, if reluctantly, reverses the possession of this knowledge, so that it is now he who nudges and imparts to the unequal the shastric injunction of putting honor before life, death before disfiguration. It is difficult to read this passage on honor and killing without thinking about the consecrating violence, the irreducible violence of all consecration that leaves in its wake sacred unequals forever immobilized by deification.<sup>33</sup> Yet in its absolute politicization of suffering and inequality that evades humanistic conceptions of right and force, satyagraha invites the ethical subject to do exactly that. Its power lies in its capacity to militantly stare at death without parsing out responsibility and judgment for one's unequal life. If satyagraha had an antagonist at all, then that antagonist was not the contingency of an equalizing death that the satyagrahi must militantly embrace but rather the superfluous prosthesis for a disfigured, dishonored, and unequal life that the warrior must unconditionally relinquish.<sup>34</sup>

In the face of a superfluous humanity, to modulate Hannah Arendt's description of the human condition produced by radical evil, the gesture of owning up responsibility for others' or one's own death ceases to matter.<sup>35</sup> For humanity renders itself superfluous only under those extreme conditions of inequality where one's actions over the other become both nonpunishable and nonforgivable.<sup>36</sup> Superfluity, for Arendt, revealed the very limits of ethical and political responsibility. It revealed the final breakdown of our capacity to institute a measure of equality that would be commensurate with suffering.

Gandhi's audacity lay in anticipating and diverging from this line of thought. The moral force of satyagraha lay in liberating the gesture of forgiveness uncon-

32. Gandhi, "Implications and Interpretations of *Ahimsa*," *Young India* (October 25, 1928), *MPWMG*, 2:220.

33. One thinks, for instance, of Roop Kanwar, who committed *sati* in 1987, choosing to voluntarily die on the funeral pyre of her young husband in accordance with the honor codes governing the Rajput traditions of northern India. Roop Kanwar was widely deified as news of her suicide spread. Other reports of the time insisted that a sacrificial homicide, a clan-enforced honor killing, may have been involved. The moral, and one might add democratic, impasse here between consecration and cruelty, between civility and desecration of life itself, is unmistakably satyagrahic.

34. Gandhi, "Implications and Interpretations of *Ahimsa*," *MPWMG*, 2:222.

35. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968).

36. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 23.

ditionally from the nature and magnitude of others' powers to perpetrate evil, in wartime or peace. For what concerned Gandhi was not the responsibility *for* death on the basis of which punishment and forgiveness were sought or refused. What mattered to Gandhi instead was death *as* responsibility in the face of inequality. Satyagraha was, after all, an act of fidelity to one's own death; it was the act of becoming equal with oneself. No life touchable or untouchable could therefore be superfluous to satyagraha. It was only that for Gandhi, in the end, not every life was equally proper for dying.

Hence the folding of satyagraha onto one's moral equals. Hence the rendering of the moral unequal into a consecrated witness proper only to the satyagrahi's exemplary and elusive sacrifice. Where the precariousness of the satyagrahi's suffering, such as during the fast, could have formulated a new condition of equality by universalizing the epistemology of satyagraha and pushed its knowledge into untouchable spaces, it instead receded into a nonegalitarian solitude. Where satyagraha could have addressed unequals, it hosted only friends and sovereigns. Where it could have revealed the painful ambiguity of suffering in which the unequal dwelled, it merely reaffirmed its own unambiguous mastery over finitude. Where it could have radically politicized the unequal's vulnerability by making it equal with the satyagrahi's mortality, it instead lapsed into the sacred language of self-injury on behalf of the unequal.

Such radical disengagement within engagement, such loving abandonment of the unequal, such intense folding of corporeal and moral responsibility onto oneself, and, above all, such untouchable sovereignty over oneself that only death, paradoxically, could embody, demanded discipline and resolve. Perhaps it was this elliptical mode of dwelling in death, this long wait to equality, that Gandhi had called "patience."

