11.

Living by Dying

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It is not at all true to say that, to be able to fight, it is essential to acquire the ability to use arms; the moment, therefore, a man wakes up to the power of the soul, that very moment he comes to know the strength he has for fighting. That is why I believe that he is the true warrior who does not die killing but who has mastered the mantra of living by dying. The sages who discovered the never-failing law of non-violence were themselves great warriors.

—Gandhi

I claim to be one of the greatest Kshatriyas of India.

—Gandhi

I have not got rid of the fear of death, despite much thinking.

—Gandhi

Writing in 1921 Gandhi remarks: “I have been collecting descriptions of swaraj. One of these would be: swaraj is the abandonment of the fear of death [maran-bhayno tyaag]. A nation which allows itself to be influenced by the fear of death cannot attain swaraj, and cannot retain it if somehow attained.” And a few years earlier, when his attempts in Kheda district to recruit farmers for the British Army met with little success, he wrote to C. F. Andrews: “I find great difficulties in recruiting but do you know that not one man has yet objected because he would not kill. They object because they fear to die. This unnatural fear of death is ruining the nation.”
Repeatedly in his writings and speeches Gandhi returns to the question of death. Consider the argument, in chapter 16 of *Hind Swaraj*, between the Editor (the figure who voices Gandhi’s arguments) and the Reader (the figure who voices mainstream nationalist arguments). The Reader suggests that violence is justified in some situations: “You will not find fault with a continuance of force to prevent a child from thrusting its foot into fire? Somehow or other we have to gain our end.” But the Editor responds:

Now we shall take your last illustration, that of the child thrusting its foot into fire. . . . Supposing that it can exert so much physical force that it renders you powerless and rushes into fire, then you cannot prevent it. There are only two remedies open to you—either you must kill it in order to prevent it from perishing in the flames, or you must give your own life because you do not wish to see it perish before your very eyes. You will not kill it. If your heart is not quite full of pity [unless your *dayabal* (power of compassion) is total], it is possible that you will not surrender yourself by preceding the child and going into the fire yourself. You, therefore, helplessly allow it to go into the flames. Thus, at any rate, you are not using physical force. I hope you will not consider that it is still physical force, though of a low order, when you would forcibly prevent the child from rushing towards the fire if you could. That force is of a different order and we have to understand what it is.³

Note the distinctive way in which the thought of dayabal organizes death and life in this passage. Only if there is total dayabal is the Editor’s interlocutor likely to give up his life in the futile attempt to save the child. Dayabal thus leads to the giving up of one’s life. And dayabal is not just any sentiment for the Editor. The Editor remarks of *daya*, or compassion: “Tulsi says do not leave daya, as long as the body has life.” Furthermore, the Editor uses dayabal also as a synonym for *satyagraha*, or passive resistance.

Thus a paradox is involved in the practice of daya and satyagraha: while daya cannot be abandoned as long as the body has life, the exercise of daya, or satyagraha itself, requires the giving up of life or a giving of oneself to death. Perhaps it is this paradoxical relation that Gandhi struggles to conceptualize when he remarks elsewhere that the satyagrahi is the one who has mastered the mantra of “living by dying.” Perhaps it is also this paradoxical relation that he struggles to conceptualize in a later chapter of *Hind Swaraj*, where the Editor says that the satyagrahi is one who has death as a “bosom friend.”

As the stress on living suggests, the satyagrahi is not simply someone who dies for a cause. Rather, in suggesting that the satyagrahi has death as a “bosom friend,” what is envisioned here is not the proper death but the proper life. Abandoning the fear of death, therefore, is not about dying but about
living the life proper to swaraj—a word that can be glossed as “freedom,” “independence,” or the “rule of the proper.” Indeed, through his concept of swaraj, Gandhi ventures a concept of the human—and of the life proper to swaraj, or the rule of the swa—which questions and departs from the humanist concept of life.

**Finitude**

This other concept of the human is centrally organized around immeasurable equality. Now, within the terms of humanism, immeasurable equality is invisible, or incoherent where visible. In the humanist concept of the human, humans are immeasurable in the sense that they are masters of measure: they measure and yet do not ideally submit to measure. It turns out, however, that precisely in order to maintain their immeasurability, they not only have to exercise but also submit to measure. For, to rehearse a well-worn theme in humanist thought (especially in its modern liberal iteration), the emphasis on freedom immediately encounters the fact of the freedom of other rational humans. It is this simultaneous freedom of rational humans that mainstream liberal thought has conventionally conceptualized as equality. Such equality, it finds, can be realized or made real by insisting that all humans are equal in terms of some abstract measure. Thus equality takes the form of measurably equal rights enshrined in law, whether these rights are positive or negative. This fantasy of a world where humans are originally masters of measure and only secondarily submit to measure organizes both the utopias and dystopias of the “state of nature” that were at one time so rife, and that still silently mark the conceptual limits of the liberal political imagination. In other words, liberalism thinks of its practice of measurable equality precisely as a faithful rendering of the immeasurability that for it is constitutive of the human. This emphasis on measurable equality is constitutive of our modern concepts of citizenship, democracy, justice—indeed of our modernity. Within these humanist terms, the phrase “immeasurable equality” does not make sense. For the very implementation of the immeasurability of humans requires a measurable equality.

Nor does Gandhi’s affirmation of death usually make sense from within a humanist framework. In humanist traditions, while the human body is finite (and death is a particularly dramatic marker of this finitude), what makes for the humanity of humans is their infinitude. Here finitude is the mark of the thing or the animal, the mark of that which has only limited force. And infinitude is the mark of humans; it is because humans are capable of infinitude that they are, uniquely, free. Thus humanity is centrally about affirming the infinitude of humans, about overcoming the finitude that marks their bodies. And in such an understanding of the infinitude and immeasurability of the human, death is usually a finitude in a privative sense, an empty nullity,
immeasurable only because it takes away the bodily life that is necessary to measure, to remain immeasurable and infinite. Here death is what must be constantly transcended, overcome, and fought against. Indeed, there can be no staying with death; death can only be feared. To claim a friendship with death, as the Gandhian satyagrahi does, is indefensibly morbid in humanist terms.

Many nationalists in India (including the Gandhi before *Hind Swaraj*) accepted this rich, deeply nuanced, and often empowering ethical tradition of thinking about the human. For this tradition provided the resources to question colonialism by claiming, in an anticolonial spirit, humanity for the colonized. But by the time of *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi cannot affirm this tradition even in an anticolonial spirit. By this time, for him the tradition is based on one founding assumption that he cannot accept—its insistence on the infinitude of humans. For Gandhi, the mastery of finitude on which such infinitude is founded already involves a fundamental and unacceptable violence, a violence toward that which is transcended because it is finite. As he was acutely aware, this line between the human and the animal or object always passed between humans, and sustained a hierarchy among them. Perhaps one way to describe the overall stakes of Gandhi’s intellectual, ethical, and political interventions, then, is to say that they struggled to conceptualize the human differently, in a way that would not be marked by such a profound domination of the animal and the thing.

The point of departure for Gandhi’s interventions was the insistence that the human is marked by a constitutive finitude, and, by staying with and in this finitude, a relation that properly allows for the otherness of the other is possible. This emphasis on finitude occurs repeatedly in Gandhi’s writings. In chapter 13 of *Hind Swaraj*, for instance, the Editor, speaking for Gandhi, argues that “true civilization” is “that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty [potani farj, his own obligation].” This duty requires following “morality [niti, ethics],” and morality requires that we “obtain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves.” He goes on to argue that “the mind is a restless bird; the more it gets the more it wants, and still it remains unsatisfied. The more we indulged our passions, the more unbridled they become. Our ancestors, therefore, set a limit to our indulgences.” Thus it was that Indians continued for thousands of years with “the same kind of plough,” “the same kind of cottages”:

It was not that we did not know how to invent machinery [sancha], but our forefathers knew that, if we set our hearts after such things, we would become slaves and lose our moral fibre. They, therefore, after due deliberation decided that we should only do what we could with our hands and feet. . . . This nation had courts, lawyers and doctors, but they were all within bounds.
But what is at stake in this finitude, or in death as its most dramatic marker, is by no means readily available to us. Precisely because his thinking involved a relatively unprecedented way of questioning humanism, Gandhi struggled to conceptualize the other human that he affirmed, and his thinking of the other human is not readily available to us. It must be comprehended by attending closely to the hesitations and forks that mark his arguments, to the gap between his Gujarati and English writings.

In this essay I track Gandhi’s fractured thinking of finitude by attending to his concern with death. In the next section, I focus on how his emphasis on “living by dying” may be too easily understood in relatively familiar terms—that is, as enabling sublation through practices such as brahmacharya (celibacy) to a larger phenomenon such as the nation or moksha (salvation). I suggest, however, that these terms are insufficient. The remainder of the essay is organized under the sign of immeasurable equality, a phrase I use axiomatically to indicate the most important and most obscured stake of Gandhi’s interventions. It is the most obscured precisely because it is quite inaccessible within the humanist traditions that continue to dominate our categories, perhaps never more insidiously than when we proclaim that we have broken from humanism. What makes it the most important is that it entails another way of thinking of the human—that is, another way of thinking about, among other things, politics, religion, ethics, sociality, and the animal. Where humans are immeasurably equal, measure is always violent. And yet a politics of immeasurable equality opposes this violence not in the name of nonviolence but rather in the name of a force greater than violence, the force that Gandhi occasionally described as satyagraha (passive resistance), atmabal (soul force), or daya (compassion).

Obviously Gandhi’s arguments about immeasurable equality are too complex even to be systematically intimated within this brief essay. So I set myself a more limited task. The entire essay, after the first section, focuses on the one initial question that must be encountered when thinking about immeasurable equality: What can equality mean in the absence of measure? I argue that Gandhi’s emphasis on finitude and death, by proceeding through the figure of the warrior, provided a distinctive way to think about equality. The warrior was the figure who was equal to his own death. The warrior encounters death, I suggest, not as a portal to life eternal but as a finitude in a productive sense, as that to which the warrior seeks to be equal. And this equality with and to death in its immeasurability is necessarily accompanied by an intimation of the immeasurable equality of the other—the warrior’s antagonist. This intimation of the immeasurable equality of both self and other is, for Gandhi, central to the concept of the warrior. And yet the warrior must cleave away from it despite his encounter with it. If Gandhi calls the satyagrahi the “warrior,” I suggest, it is because the satyagrahi seeks to abide instead by immeasurable equality.
In the future I hope to explore the questions that follow from the formulations I end with here. For what is still not thought through in either of these formulations—neither in the Socratic brahmachari nor the warrior—is precisely what would be involved in the living by dying practiced by the satyagrahi, which proceeds through a friendship with death. A friend always gives only him- or herself. Thus the thought of satyagraha leads to a twofold question. First, with what kind of death is a friendship possible, the death, in satyagraha or dayabal, that becomes a “bosom friend”? And, second, exactly what would be involved in a friendship with death? The answers to these questions would clarify how satyagraha is living by dying, and though not addressed here, my goal in this essay is to prepare for these answers.

**Sublation**

Consider, for a start, Gandhi’s fascinating rendering, in 1908, of Plato’s *Apology* from English into Gujarati under the title *Ek Satya virni katha* [Story of a warrior for truth]. The introduction to the rendering describes Socrates as a satyagrahi who “adopted satyagraha against his own people.” And though Gandhi abbreviates several themes from the *Apology*, he foregrounds, quite consistently, perhaps even more than in the English version, Socrates’ insistence that he had no “fear of death.” The reason for this, to quote from Gandhi’s translation, is that “to fear death is equal to [barebhar] claiming the pomp of knowledge [gyaan]. For who has discovered for certain that death is a thing to be afraid of? Why should we not believe that death is the greatest good that can happen to men [manas]? . . . If I have any wisdom [dahapan], it is this: I claim to know nothing about death.”

Socrates’ absence of a fear of death follows from his questioning. This questioning, this principle of the question, is the wisdom that sets him apart from everyone else. When the question becomes a principle in this manner, then the question is not driven simply by the desire for answers—the desire to establish a positive knowledge that dispels ignorance. Rather than seeking the truth, here the question itself is the truth, always questioning and dispelling the “pomp of knowledge.” If Socrates does not fear the nonbeing that death usually symbolizes, this is because the being of the question questions even the apparent nonbeing of death. The nonbeing of death itself is here sublated into the being of the question.

If Gandhi found Socrates’ fearlessness so attractive, this may have been because he, too, often practiced a similar fearlessness, denying the nonbeing of death. In a speech he gave on the death of the Indian nationalist “Deshbandhu” C. R. Das, for instance, he remarked:

But what I want to do is to explain to you the meaning of death [mrtvyuna rahasya]. If you believe with me that the *Gita* is an allegory [rupak],
you will also be able to understand the meaning of death as explained in it:

What is non-Being is never known to have been, and what is Being [asat] is never known not to have been. Of both these the secret has been seen by the seers of the truth.

This verse contains the whole meaning. Verse after verse states that the body is asat [untruth]. . . . But there are probably no other people who fear death and cry and grieve over it as much as we do. In the Mahabharata, in fact, it is stated that lamentation after someone's death gives pain to the departed soul, and the Gita, too, was composed to remove the fear of death. . . . The more I think about the ceaselessly active life of Deshbandhu, the more I feel that he is alive today. While he lived in the body, he was not fully alive, but he is so today. In our selfishness, we believed that his body was all that mattered, whereas the Gita teaches—and I understand the truth of this more clearly as days pass—that all worry about a perishable thing is meaningless, is so much waste of time.

Non-Being simply does not exist, and Being never ceases to exist.5

Both arguments reject the commonsensical contention that associates death with nonbeing, prompting a fear of death. Both arguments also respond by insisting that being persists even beyond death; both share an emphasis, organized quite differently, of course, on the transcending of finite life by the infinitude proper to the human. Within this problematic, “living by dying” means that even as one dies, this death allows another life to live all the more intensely. Within this problematic, if swaraj is the abandonment of the fear of death, this is so only because by such dying can a transcendent and infinitely finite entity like the nation live; here the nationalist dies into the nation.

Such living by dying need not even imply sacrificing one’s own life. Disagreeing with a correspondent who had attributed cowardice to the Indian nationalists who espoused violence, Gandhi wrote: “The writer pays poor compliment to the party of violence or by whatever name it may be called, when he imputes to them fear of death. They forfeited their lives when they dedicated themselves to their creed. That they keep themselves in hiding does not mean that they fear death, but it means that they want to hang on to life as long as possible so as to carry out their project.”6 In other words, the heroic nationalists who gave their life to the nation also practiced a certain living by dying, where they gave themselves to their very death for a cause. This very giving of themselves to their death authorized a living on and an evading of death so that their cause, the nation, could be better pursued.
Gandhi never explicitly abandoned this sublative way of thinking about death. Symptomatic of it was his insistence throughout his life that he was only concerned with politics because, in the current age, it was the best way to attain moksha (a word he translated quite conventionally as “salvation”). Also indicative of this thinking was his usual presentation of the vow of brammacharya, or “celibacy,” which Gandhi repeatedly claimed was the first vow that should follow the twinned vows of satya and ahimsa observed by satyagrahis. His understanding of brammacharya emerges in his remarks in Mangalprabhar: “Let us remember the root meaning [mool arth] of ‘brammacharya.’” Charya means “course of conduct”; brammacharya, “conduct adapted to the search of Brahman, that is, Truth [brahmani—satyani].” From this root meaning arises another special meaning, namely, “control of all the senses” [sarvendriyasaiyam]. The incomplete definition, which restricts itself only to the sexual aspect of the term, must be entirely forgotten.7

When brammacharya is thought of in this way (an interpretation that is sanctioned by many texts associated with canonical Hinduism), its ascesis is entirely compatible to the infinitization of being beyond death practiced by Gandhi’s Socrates or the Gandhi of the funeral speech quoted above. The brammachari does not fear death because he gives himself to Brahman, so that death, for him, is only a “portal to life eternal.” Thought of in this way, the finitude of the brammachari’s life is necessary so that proper subsumption into moksha can take place.

Thought of in terms of brammacharya, satyagraha is primarily a radicalization of the terrorists’ living by dying. The extremists give their lives for a cause and at the same time kill for that cause. But though satyagrahis also die and achieve infinitude, they refuse to kill for it. Thus it can be said that the satyagraha requires an even more fearless relationship with death than that of the nationalists.

Liberal traditions find it easy to understand and even admire such satyagraha. For here satyagraha is primarily a radicalization of those influential liberal traditions that recognize the state as the only legitimate entity, the only entity that one can die or kill for. By dying without taking another’s life, satyagrahis seem to respect, undeniably, the state’s injunction against violence by any actor other than the state. They submit to the state’s violence against them with nonviolent resistance, and refuse to allow for any state of exception in which to practice a founding violence that might produce another state order. Understood in this way, satyagraha becomes an extremely radical liberalism toward which mainstream liberalism expresses the deepest respect and at the same time the deepest skepticism (for here satyagraha is utopian again in the sense that it does not allow for the exception that would allow for the constitution of a state).
Warrior

But although Gandhi never quite abandons the sublative way of thinking of death, by the time of *Hind Swaraj* that thinking is ruptured by a consideration of “living by dying” that is organized around the figure of the warrior. The warrior already occurs in Gandhi’s titling of his earlier translation of Plato’s *Apology* as *Ek Satyavirni katha*, meaning “Story of a Warrior for Truth”. He is even more pronounced in the title of Gandhi’s English translation “The Story of a True Warrior.” In this English translation (less conventional than another that occurs in Gandhi’s *Collected Works*—”The Story of a Soldier of Truth”), we recognize the consolidation of a new concept. Whereas in the Gujarati title the warrior fights for truth, in the English title satyagraha is the truth of the concept of the warrior. But neither the English nor the Gujarati texts do much more with the figure of the warrior.

Yet within two years, by the time of *Hind Swaraj* (the text marking the break between the young and the mature Gandhi), this figure becomes more prominent. In chapter 17 the Editor responds to the Reader’s assertion that “passive resistance is a splendid weapon of the weak” by asking: “Is he the warrior who himself [potey] carries his death on his head, or he who keeps the death of the other in his own [potana] hands? [Potey maathey maut lai faray tey ranvir ke bhejana maut potana haath ma raakhey che te?].” The English translation adds the adjective “true.” “Who is the true warrior—he who keeps death always as a bosom-friend [cannot delete: in original quote] or he who controls the death of others?” Furthermore, whereas in the Gujarati text the satyagrahi carries his own death while the conventional warrior controls the death of others, the English text modifies the argument significantly by insisting that the satyagrahi has a further relation with death, namely, that the satyagrahi has death as a “bosom friend.”

In this invocation of the “true warrior,” there is clearly a concept of the warrior at work. In Gandhi’s explicit formulations, this concept is founded on the sublative notion of the brahmachari. Thus the Editor remarks in chapter 17 (to translate for ourselves from the Gujarati: “To become a ranvir [warrior]—it is not as though everybody can do so as soon as he wishes to. A warrior [ladvaiya] will have to observe brahmacharya.” Indian classical traditions certainly testify to this argument. It may even resonate etymologically. The Editor uses the word *vir* independently to refer to the warrior but also as a suffix in the words *satyavir* and *ranvir*. And the brahmachari is one who retains his *virya* (semen). As is well known, many classical Hindu texts insist that the production of semen requires enormous male energy and that to expend it is to lose that energy and power, that is, to “lose stamina”—Gandhi’s translation of the word *avirya*. Thus, to be a brahmachari in such accounts, is simply the essential and unavoidable foundation for becoming a
warrior; there can be no warrior who does not practice the sublative ascesis of brahmacharya.

But in the divergence between the Gujarati and English versions of the sentence given above, the concept of the “warrior” is also thought of entirely differently from this sublative ascesis. This other concept of the warrior is, without doubt, as profoundly gendered and violent as the classical concept of the brahmachari-warrior which it displaces. Nevertheless a conceptual segue takes place here. Now what becomes crucial is the warrior’s encounter with death.

Perhaps the prefix ran in the word ranvir is symptomatic of this break. Ran usually refers to a battle or battlefield. Ranvir thus appears to be somewhat redundant—the brave warrior in battle or in the battlefield. This redundancy, however, does foreground the centrality of battle and the battlefield. The metaphor of battle and the battlefield (and especially the battlefield of Kurukshetra, where the war described in the Mahabharata took place) is central to Gandhi’s arguments. As we know, he describes the Bhagavad Gita (the discourse delivered by Krishna to Arjuna at Kurukshetra, or the battlefield of Kuru) as the single greatest inspiration for his satyagraha. He also sometimes describes the human body as a “little Kurukshetra,” and the metaphor of battle and the battlefield governs many of his descriptions of the confrontations involved in satyagraha. Indeed, he also refers repeatedly to satyagraha against the British as a dharmayudh. The word is rendered into English in various ways, though perhaps the most common translation (and the correct one in view of the usual translation of dharma as religion and yudh as battle) is “religious battle.” Thus an inversion of the explicit terms of Gandhi’s argument occurs in his texts. Rather than brahmacharya being a way to think of the warrior, the warrior becomes the way to rethink the sublative concept of brahmacharya.

Thus we have arrived at a place quite different from the one where we began. Initially the word brahmachari took us to the word ranvir which in turn led us to the discomforting word dharmayudh. A word such as this, within a liberal problematic, can only be misunderstood (as indeed has its equivalent, jihad) to mean the pursuit of a goal or values or ethics that are authorized through religion (that is, by a force not amenable to reason) and that are therefore to be pursued religiously (namely, by any means possible). This misunderstanding is not merely an error. It occurs because liberalism encounters a strangeness it cannot fathom when contemplating dharmayudh, and therefore the term is necessarily misunderstood because it is evaluated in liberalism’s own terms of rule-bound means and rationally defensible ends.

Equal

So what is strange about Gandhi’s concept of religious war or of the brahmachari warrior who fights a dharmayudh? The word dharmayudh is most
commonly associated with the *Mahabharata* (which Gandhi often referred to) and the battle at Kurukshetra. That battle was a dharmayudh because it was governed by rules of conduct followed by both parties. Gandhi’s understanding of the rules of conduct involved in a dharmayudh emerges when he compares two alternative translations of an article title, “Nidaan dharmayudh karo.” He suggests that the translation “Fight Square If You Must” is superior to “At Least Fight a Religious War.”

The basic rule of conduct of a dharmayudh, then, is to “fight square.” But how does a warrior do this? In the opening passages of the *Bhishma Parva*, or the sixth book of the *Mahabharata*, before the battle begins, the commanders meet and agree on several battle codes. These provide the necessary equality required of combatants, stating that those engaged in combat will only fight their equals and will never engage in combat against unequal opponents. Though violating these rules of conduct marks even the most virtuous—for example, Yudhistir, who, as Gandhi noted, tells a lie to win a crucial battle)—nevertheless it is this theme of equality that is central to Gandhi’s concept of dharmayudh.

But what can equality among warriors mean here, when there is no common measure?

Speaking in 1921 to a group of Kathi Rajputs, Gandhi said that they should, for the sake of Hindustan,

abandon the thought of killing, prepare to die, and become pure [shudh, “true”] Kshatriyas. Killing is not a Kshatriya’s dharma. The Kshatriya who kills someone weaker than himself is not a Kshatriya but a murderer. He who, in order to rescue the weak [durbal], fights with a strong man and kills him is forgiven, but the one who dies when rescuing the weak, without killing even the stronger opponent, is a complete [pooro, “true”] Kshatriya. To die—to not run away—this is his dharma. It is not his dharma to create the fear of death in the other [beeja]. Rather, his dharma is to abandon the fear of death.\(^12\)

Three arguments emerge from this and related passages. First, the warrior seeks above all to be equal with his own death, rather than to be fearless in the face of death because death sublates the warrior into a being beyond death—that is, nation, moksha, and so on. The warrior seeks to kill only those who are equal. To fight those who are equal, however, and to fight in a way that allows them to remain equal, involves making one’s own death a constant prospect. In other words, though it is empirically correct to argue that the warrior seeks to survive the battle, and in this sense embraces not death but the last chance before death, this statement does not at all understand the concept of the warrior. For the warrior’s distinctiveness is not only
in killing and surviving, in seizing the last chance. To think in this way is to think of death as a commonsensical problematic, where death is considered to be privative or sublative (as that finitude that takes away life or as that which must be transcended for one to become a being beyond death).

By contrast, the very dharma of the warrior is to give himself to his own death. The warrior does not die for some cause that transcends or is beyond his death. (I do not speak here in an anthropological or sociological spirit. Were that the case, it would be easy enough to multiply examples of South Asian warrior cultures that believe in a transcendental afterlife.) Rather, the warrior seeks to live only after having given himself to his own death; the warrior himself has received himself back from his own death. Here it is his own death that gives life to the warrior. As such, what is understood here is not only the proper death but, more important, a distinctive life.

What is meant by the warrior receiving a life equal to its own death? The warrior has received himself back from death, but death here is a peculiar limit. Given his death, which is always his own, the warrior no longer “is.” Something significant is revealed here: that this is a life where perseverance in being is no longer dominant. Being a warrior is no longer about being and, above all, is not about the mastery of death that allows a being to exist beyond death. The warrior has been separated from his being in the most radical manner possible—by giving himself to his nonbeing. Of this radical separation there can be no measure, for there no longer “is” something substantive to be measured. (Hence the centrality of finitude, for only in finitude can this separation be suffered: that which is infinite must necessarily seek to transcend this separation.) This is the equality the warrior establishes with his own death, which he has never transcended and from which he is both separated and also received his life. In this life the distinctive immeasurability of the warrior is apparent; that is, the warrior is immeasurable not because his life is infinite or an end in itself but rather because he receives his life from and through a refusal to persist in being, through an equality with death.

Gift

The second argument that can be gleaned from Gandhi’s talk to the Kathi Rajputs in 1921 is that equality with death always intimates an immeasurable equality with the other. This intimation of equality with the other sets the life and death of the warrior apart from all privative or sublative forms of dying. In *Hind Swaraj*, the Editor is highly critical of the extremists who call for the assassination of key Englishmen as a way to secure swaraj. Speaking of Madan Lal Dhingra, the extremist who, in 1909, shot and killed a British official, the Editor says: “It is a big mistake [bhool] to believe that the murders committed by Dhingra in Hindustan will reap any benefit I do consider Dhingra a
patriot [suwađeshabhimani], but his love [priti] was blind [gheli]. He sacrificed [bhog, “gave”] his own body in the wrong way [ku-margey]. And therefore only a loss of benefit [ger-fayado] can result.”

Precisely how did Dhingra give his body in the “wrong way”? Strikingly, Gandhi argues, Dhingra’s violence was not demonstrated so much by his use of arms but rather by his violation of hospitality codes and, in turn, his refusal to bestow equality on his opponents. In an essay written in London immediately after the assassination, Gandhi argued:

If I kill someone in my own house without a warning—one who has done me no harm—I can only be called a coward. An ancient custom [asli rivaj] among the Arabs is that they would not kill anyone in their own house, even if the person was their enemy. They would kill him only after he had left the house and after he had had time to arm himself. Those who believe in violence [“that violence will lead to good”] are brave men [bahadur] only if they observe these rules when killing someone. Otherwise they must be looked upon as cowards [beekan]. It may be said that what Mr. Dhingra did, publicly and knowing full well that he himself would have to die, attests in no small way to his courage. But, as I have pointed out above, in a state of intoxication [nasha] men can act in these ways and also banish the fear of death. Whatever courage is expressed here is the result of intoxication and not a quality of the man himself. A man’s own courage consists in suffering deeply and over a long period. Only when an act is preceded by careful reflection [samajhpurvak] does that act become a brave one.13

Two related points are important to consider here. First, there is the familiar one: “In this the courage is that of the intoxication, not of the man.” Gandhi’s warrior seeks a death quite distinct from the death of the one who dies fearlessly in the name of a cause. In the latter case, the fearlessness belongs to the intoxication, not to the man. “A man’s own courage” emerges only in the finitude that comes when one resists intoxication and sublation, when, in other words, one is equal to one’s own death.

Second, the passage does not attack violence per se but rather violence directed at an unequal, for example, one who is unarmed. Similarly, in the earlier passage, the injunction on the Kshatriya is not so much against killing as against killing those weaker than oneself. But what does equality with the other mean here? We are often tempted to interpret this equality in terms of common measure, where an equal warrior would be one with equal power. This, for instance, is what most evidently happens in the Bhishma Parva, where, when warriors agree to fight with their equals, their equals are understood as those with the same weapons and equipment.
But the passages we have read suggest that equality, where there is no such common measure, can only mean equality with reference to a death that is always their own, even as it provides a relation between the two. In being equally given to their own deaths—which can never be a shared and substantive measure—the warrior and the other sustain their equality. It is in this sense that the warrior always practices an immeasurable equality with the other. This equality is especially evident when the warrior fights with the knowledge from the beginning that he will lose. In still wagering his death in the battle, he refuses to accept subordination to the other and so he is equal to his enemy. Even where the warrior secures domination over the other, he does so only by means of his own hands and feet, refusing to seek infinity by acquiring or deploying whatever weapons may be necessary to win. In this sense, even if the remark in the Gujarati text is inadvertent in describing the warrior as “he who keeps the death of the other in his own [potana] hands,” that remark is congruent with Gandhi’s understanding of the warrior who kills his equals. Such a warrior keeps the death of the other in his own hands, which is also to say that he always faces the prospect of death at the hands of the other.

Furthermore, this equal relation between the combatants makes the battlefield a site that refuses every totalization that cannot be subsumed or turned into a narrative about either the victory or defeat of one of the actors. As such, this violence, however immense and epic, is nevertheless finite and travels by analogy and metaphor rather than by causality and the mastery causality involves. The warrior does not give his life for a larger or transcendent cause. Rather, he gives up his life because that is what constitutes a warrior. And the giving up of his life is, paradoxically, not a gift to a transcendent entity or even to those whom he protects; perhaps, above all, it is a gift to the one he battles against. This emphasis on being and finding a worthy opponent occurs repeatedly in Gandhi’s writings. Consider the remarks he made in a speech in Dakor:

Though I criticize the British Empire [English Sultanate], I also call it fearless [bahadur]. The British love their country. It is their evil [rakshash, demonic] tendencies which are to be shunned. I would even admire Ravana’s courage. Tulsidas has said that, if one must have an enemy, let him be like Ravana. To fight against Lakshmana, one must be an Indrajit.14

The gift that a worthy opponent gives to the warrior by engaging him—whether in battle or peace—is equality to the warrior’s own death. This equality is not a constative equality that the warrior already has, as is the case with the formal equality of measure. Rather, this immeasurable equality must be performed, and it is always performed by being received from the other as a
gift. Without receiving it from the other, even where the other seeks to kill him, the warrior cannot claim an immeasurable equality with the other. In the *Bhishma Parva*, which so fascinates Gandhi, perhaps this is why Bhishma seeks to goad Krishna into taking his life. Losing his life to a godly figure like Krishna would have allowed Bhishma to achieve an illustrious equality to his own death.

Thus we arrive at a curious insight, one that is foreign to Gandhi’s explicit formulations and yet in another way faithful to them. Through the figure of the brahmachari, Gandhi struggles to think an immeasurable equality with the other, an equality that he articulates most forcefully through the figure of the warrior. The warrior is not only equal to his own death, but he can receive this equality only from the other. At the same time the warrior’s dharmayudh is not so much a battle that follows codes of ethical conduct as it is a battle that is fought in equality with death.

The distinctiveness of this immeasurable equality with the other can be elicited by contrasting it with the equality practiced in modern warfare. The modern general must, in principle, respect the enemy combatant’s human rights; these rights are laid down in protocols such as the Geneva Convention. Yet these protocols institute only a measurable and abstract equality. Here, in contrast, equality is a rudimentary baseline that must be respected under all circumstances. This way of thinking about equality and rights is intrinsic to our usual liberal distinctions between positive and negative rights and freedoms. Beyond this rudimentary and abstract equality, modern generals must measure so perfectly that they master the enemy without bringing their own deaths into play, without making their opponents into equal combatants. Indeed, it is precisely equality in the immeasurable sense that the modern general must deny to his enemy. Even where modern soldiers are out-measured and have to become heroic, wagering their own lives, their claim is not to that immeasurable equality with death and with the other. Instead, they give their lives to an infinitude—the nation, for example—which is greater than either they or the enemy. As such, modern soldiers can never give the intimation of an immeasurable equality either to themselves or their others: even when modern warfare involves “dying for,” such dying occurs for and toward an infinitude. In Gandhi’s terms, the modern soldier-hero must, like Dhingra, always “give his body wrongly.” From Gandhi’s perspective, this kind of modern warfare is cowardly precisely because the purposes of the calculation and measure precludes the soldiers’ equality to their own death, and therefore also their equality to their enemy.

In contrast, the warrior’s protocols of immeasurable equality sustain a relationship of respect between opponents. This respect between combatants organizes, for example, the suspension of the battle in the *Bhishma Parva* while Bhishma lies dying. This respect recognizes the equality that prevails between
the warrior and his enemy, because both put their own deaths into play. Where such equality exists, even when the warrior seeks to kill his enemy, the latter cannot be thought of as evil. Instead, another relation with the enemy is always possible, perhaps one of love and respect. This may be why Gandhi insisted, on several occasions, that even if Indians lacked the courage to practice satyagraha, they should try to develop the courage to act as warriors.

These two insights regarding the warrior’s immeasurable equality to his own death and to his enemy can prepare us to understand the third argument that emerges from Gandhi’s talk to the Kathi Rajputs in 1921. On one occasion, referring to Lakshman and Indrajit, two key figures from the Ramayana, he remarks in a letter to his nephew, Maganlal Gandhi:

Lakshman and Indrajit were both celebates (brahmacharis) and had conquered sleep and were therefore equally valorous (parakrami). But the valour of the former was divine, while that of the latter ungodly (asuri, “demonic”). This means that the vow of brahmacharya and other vows are holy and bring happiness only when they are taken as a spiritual discipline (atmathey). If resorted to by a demon, they only add misery. This is a very serious statement to make, but, all the same, it is no doubt true (yatharth). [Missing in the English translation: Ema shanka jaraye nathi (“There can be no doubt in this matter”).] Lord Patanjali has shown this very well in his Yogadarshan. This is the thing our religion teaches us.\footnote{Recognizing and perhaps recoiling from the radicalism of his words, Gandhi describes his pronouncement as a “very serious statement to make” but adds that it is nevertheless “the thing our religion teaches us.” Here an inversion occurs, and the concept of the warrior is now central to that of brahmacharya. No longer is brahmacharya a way to Brahman or Being (sat), and even less is it a way to realize ahimsa, or nonviolence. Rather, it is equally the greatest violence and the greatest nonviolence, equally demonic and godly; in fact it is intrinsic to the very conception of violence. Indeed, it is a moment one might call pre-ethical—a moment necessary to both ethics and the violation of ethics. Moreover, given that the brahmachari is now conceived of through the figure of the warrior, a further implication of Gandhi’s argument is that the warrior’s immeasurable equality is itself pre-ethical.

We should not think of this pre-ethicality technologically, where the warrior has, through his austerity and discipline, acquired a great force that can be used for either good or bad ends and, in this sense, is a means to an end. It is
true enough that Gandhi himself sometimes writes in a way that is congruent with such a technological understanding of brahmacharya. Yet it is precisely a technological and measurable understanding that Gandhi wants to question, and this should caution us against such an understanding of pre-ethicality.

What does it mean, then, to call immeasurable equality pre-ethical? Staying with the example of the warrior, it appears that his immeasurable equality is necessarily accompanied by an immeasurable inequality. There are, first, those who cannot be granted any equality. Perhaps exemplary of this is the account in the _Bhishma Parva_ of Bhishma’s death, which Gandhi never alludes to but which he would doubtless have been aware of given his fondness for the text. As is well known, Bhishma dies following a battle with Shikhandi, whom he chooses not to fight against. As a woman in a previous birth, Shikhandi is immeasurably unequal to Bhishma, and this inequality cannot be overcome by Shikhandi’s skill in weapons, however great. Such immeasurable inequality is central to the concept of the warrior, and prevails not only between men and women but between various groups and between castes—as most famously illustrated in the demand made by the teacher of the _Pandavas_, Dronacharya, for the bowstring thumb of his low-caste disciple, Eklavya. This immeasurable inequality is not a secondary aspect but a necessary condition of the warrior’s immeasurable equality.

Second, even with his enemy, the figure with whom he acknowledges an immeasurable equality, the practices of the warrior must necessarily obscure that very equality. The warrior practices equality with the enemy only momentarily. Even though the warrior must fight only against enemies who are his equals, he nevertheless wagers his death—that is, he fights to win or to dominate. (In this limited sense, it is certainly correct to say that the warrior seizes the last chance before his own death.) In this wager the warrior seeks to secure an immeasurable domination over the other. Such domination is very different from the violence and domination characteristic of “modern civilization,” which is marked by abstraction and measure. (With the warrior, as I argue at length elsewhere, we glimpse another concept of violence itself, a violence that no longer belongs to the concept of measure and abstraction.)

This, then, is the paradox of the warrior: he exemplifies and is impossible without an immeasurable equality, and yet that immeasurable equality is constituted by immeasurable domination and immeasurable inequality. As such, for Gandhi, the warrior is exemplary not only of immeasurable equality but of the way such equality always comes into the world: always as an obscuring of immeasurable equality, as immeasurability (or a domination, subordination, and equality that does not belong to measure). In other words, with Gandhi’s thinking of the warrior, it is not at all the case that first there is a concept of immeasurability which can then be separated into immeasurable equality and immeasurable inequality. Rather, immeasurable inequality inevitably comes in
the wake of immeasurable equality, and yet both constitute and obscure the latter. When we are not attentive to this constitutive obscuring, then it seems to us as though immeasurability is a general category of which equality and inequality are merely forms.

It is immeasurability in this pre-ethical sense that the Editor struggles to consider when he insists that sadhan (“means”) and sadhya (“ends”) belong together. In the years after Hind Swaraj, he sometimes names this belonging together of sadhan and sadhya as sadhana. The word sadhana possibly entered Gandhi’s conceptual vocabulary in 1922, after he read the English translation of Tagore’s book Sadhana, which Gandhi once described along with Gitanjali as “a world apart.” That word, again derived from sadh and again a recurring concern of Indian philosophical traditions, is usually glossed as “spiritual discipline geared toward self-realization.”

But this is not Gandhi’s usage. In his vocabulary sadhana came to refer to being given to a task at hand in such a way that one was no longer either a means to an end or even autonomous in relation to that task. For Gandhi, this surrender of autonomy was the mark not only of satyagraha but even of all instrumental action once it came to be assiduously pursued. Thus he does not only talk of his own sadhana of ahimsa and spinning but also of Hitler’s sadhana of war:

We have to be up and doing every moment of our lives and go forward in our sadhana. We have to live and move and have our being in ahimsa, even as Hitler does in himsa. It is the faith and perseverance and single-mindedness with which he has perfected his weapons of destruction that commands my admiration. That he uses them as a monster is immaterial for our purpose. We have to bring to bear the same single-mindedness and perseverance in evolving our ahimsa. Hitler is awake all the 24 hours of the day in perfecting his sadhana.17

As this dizzying passage suggests, even something as overwhelmingly defined by instrumentality and means-end relations as the Nazi war machine can for that very reason not be treated as only instrumental. The more aggressive the pursuit of instrumentality and means-end relations, the more immeasurably it is given to this pursuit, the more it is in an immeasurable relation to the very measure it pursues. In such a formulation, Hitler’s war is no longer defined by its instrumentality but by Hitler being given over to it, by his immeasurable relation with it. Of the immeasurable equality of the warrior, Hitler, too, may be an example for Gandhi.

Perhaps because of this immense violence of the warrior’s immeasurable equality, Gandhi breaks with it and struggles to think of the satyagrahi as a true warrior. In conceptualizing the true warrior, Gandhi seeks to transform
this immeasurable equality by moving it from its pre-ethicality to an ethical commitment. An exploration of the ambiguities of that other direction intimated in Gandhi’s intriguing suggestion that the satyagrahi has death as a ‘bosom friend’, and that it is in such friendship that the satyagrahi practices living by dying—will have to await another occasion.

For now, in conclusion, I wish only to stress how the arguments made in this essay have pointed to the inadequacy of understanding Gandhi only in terms of his most explicit arguments (which is how we have largely understood him). Understood in this way, Gandhi, analyzed too quickly, comes across as a romantic, and when more rigorously analyzed, as a figure committed to substantive virtues. By this latter understanding, Gandhi is a critical traditionalist; he could even be conceived of as a figure situated outside the thematic of post-Enlightenment thought, adopting the perspective of the traditional intelligensia. If we think in this way, it is tempting to see substantive virtues embodied in the way that the unspecific vows of satya and ahimsa lead on to very concrete vows—celibacy, control of palate, non-stealing, fearlessness, equality of religions, removal of untouchability, and so on.

What I have suggested instead is that yet another argument is also involved in Gandhi’s writings, one that he might recoil from but one that is nevertheless faithful to the tensions and fissures of his writings. In this other argument Gandhi’s emphasis on vows and virtues initiates a profoundly modern response to the humanist tradition, and its necessary colonialism. This response receives from the humanist tradition the emphasis on equality, but it refigures the latter’s abstract equality into an immeasurable equality. In the process this response also refigures the tradition of vows and virtues that it inherits. Vows and virtues no longer establish substantive qualities; rather, they always produce a distinctive relation with the other. In this broaching of another kind of equality and of the politics proper to it, we discern the stakes of Gandhi’s emphasis on niti—the word he translated as “morality” and that we now more usually translate as “ethics.”

Notes


3. Gandhi wrote Hind Swaraj in Gujarati and later translated it into English. I discuss the significant differences between these versions in my forthcoming book, Immeasurable Equality. Here, suffice it to say that while I adhere to the official trans-
lation as much as possible, I have also made changes where necessary. On occasion, I have provided Gandhi’s Gujarati words in brackets. In the footnotes I first cite the reference in the language that it seems to have been written in originally.

What will also be evident to readers is my immense debt to many thinkers—among them Agamben, Benjamin, Chakrabarty, Chatterjee, Derrida, Heidegger, Kant, Nandy, and Schmitt. I have refrained from providing explicit references to them, because a responsible engagement with these thinkers would have required the kind of careful reading I attempt here of Gandhi. Nevertheless, I have also refrained from erasing phrases or themes that recall these thinkers, because I worry that such an erasure would involve another kind of irresponsibility.

4. In this essay I do not dwell on teasing out what legions of scholars have identified (revealing more about their manner of analysis than about Gandhi’s texts) as his romanticism or utopianism, a discourse of intimacy where the two entities are so inseparable that there is no need or possibility for a means-end relation or a relation of measure between them. With an immediate neighbor understood in this sense, conflict needs to be addressed not by resorting to the measure of the judge but by deepening this immediacy, to the extent even of giving oneself over to one’s death to those with whom one is intimate. Here the emphasis on immediacy and the renunciation of means and ends impart a changeless and eternal character to “true civilization.” This is certainly a defensible interpretation of the Editor’s claim that plows, huts, occupations, and education remain the same over thousands of years.

But it is also the least productive of Gandhi’s efforts to think satyagraha. Here measure is refused by insisting on a union with the other. In such a union it is impossible to think the separation from the other that is necessary to formulate the question of what might be involved in equality with the other.

If space allowed it would be possible to show that, despite Gandhi’s explicit affirmations of this romanticism, it is a conceptually marginal moment in his writing, and one he consistently abandons.


8. This is his 1910 translation. See “Our Publications,” Indian Opinion, May 7, 1910, in CWMG, 11:35.

9. See, for instance, the titles of the translation of Ek Satyavirna Katha, in CWMG, 8:246ff.


16. One could argue that even equality with death is similarly obscured in the *Mahabharata*. Perhaps this obfuscation is distinctively marked by the figure of Bhishma, arguably the most famous brahmachari, who acquires his name because of his vow of celibacy. Having taken this vow, he is granted the power to choose the time of his own death. Thus he has mastered both death and the other in a very precise manner: though he is not immortal he can die only when he decides to, and though he is not unconquerable he can only be conquered when he decides to be. Bhishma is equal to death, for though he cannot dominate death, neither can death dominate him. This immeasurable economy organizes both his defeat and his death in the *Mahabharata*.