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Beyond Violence : A Comparative Analysis of  
Hannah Arendt and Mahatma Gandhi

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# **Beyond Violence : A Comparative Analysis of Hannah Arendt and Mahatma Gandhi \***

When considering the subject of non-violence, the name of Hannah Arendt may not quickly spring to mind. Despite her vigorous advocacy of participatory politics and her famous critique of the totalitarian system, Arendt rarely addressed directly the philosophy of non-violence, except occasionally to discuss the issues of power and violence. She mentioned Gandhi only once in her writings and that was in her essay *On Violence*, where she reminded us that, 'If Gandhi's enormously powerful and successful strategy of non-violent resistance had met with a different enemy—Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany, even pre-war Japan, instead of England, the outcome would not have been decolonisation, but massacre and submission' (Arendt, 1970: 53). Though having been an acute and attentive analyst of American society, Arendt's conceptions of political pluralism and the ethos of worldliness never truly focused on the political project of the American civil rights movement, and more specifically on the non-violent struggle of Martin Luther King. Even her controversial essay entitled: 'Reflections on Little Rock', which followed the historical events that unfolded in Little Rock in the fall of 1957 and the spring of 1958, argues against forced integration which, according to her, undermines the basis of cooperation and diversity in American society, without taking seriously into consideration the non-violent campaigns of Martin Luther King and his followers. As wrong as Arendt might be on so many of the particulars of the situation in the American civil rights movement and in relation with the true philosophical

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significance of Gandhian non-violence, her views stand as a warning against a too facile dismissal of non-violence as an irrelevant mode of political thought. As such, Arendt's strict distinction between politics and morality, as well as her critique of the moralism of political views beyond the proper limits of politics, brings her to dismiss non-violence as a way of moralising politics, though she perceives it as a tool in the process of constituting or perpetuating freedom in the public sphere.

Unlike Gandhi who derives political decision-making from the primacy of the ethical on the political, Arendt makes clear, both in her essay on Lessing , 'On Humanity in Dark Times' and in *On Revolution* that the ethics of compassion is of no political significance. According to Arendt, Lessing did not consider fraternity as the political fulfilment of humanity; instead he considered 'friendship to be the central phenomenon in which alone true humanity can prove itself' (Arendt, 1968:12). According to her, 'Because compassion abolishes the distance, the worldly space between men where political matters, the whole realm of human affairs, are located, it remains, politically speaking, irrelevant and without consequence.... As a rule it is not compassion which sets out to change worldly conditions in order to ease human suffering, but if it does, it will shun the drawn-out wearisome processes of persuasion, negotiation and compromise, which are the processes of law and politics, and lend its voice to the suffering itself, which must claim for swift and direct action, that is, for action with the means of violence' (Arendt, 1990: 86-87). Though Arendt acknowledges that 'solidarity' and not 'compassion' makes 'a community of interest with the oppressed', her analysis does not really support the idea that selflessness and care for the other is the foundation of moral consciousness. We would recall Arendt's uncompromising idea that, 'In the centre of moral considerations of conduct stands the self: in the centre of political considerations of conduct stands the world' (Arendt, 2003: 153). This passage is familiar to all Arendt's readers. She means to situate the political outside of the individual, in between a plurality of human beings. As such, she insists that we depend on others for our sense of reality and for the task of organising our political co-existence. However, a basic question remains: does morality originate in human plurality or as Arendt seems to say, concerns the individual in his singularity? I think the sense of morality

that Arendt has in mind when she says, 'In the centre of moral considerations... stands the self,' is the morality which she finds in the Socratic idea, taken from *Gorgias* (469c), which prohibits against involvement in evil-doing. As Socrates says, it is better to suffer wrong than do wrong. If this morality concerns our actions amongst others: it is, therefore, a morality of the world rather than that of the self. It is abstention from participation in acts of evil and to leave aside acts of violence. To be sure, Arendt makes it clear that the question of living harmoniously with oneself goes with the primacy of the question of what I owe others. This is why Arendt, in her essay *On Violence*, shows special attention to 'the willingness to suffer', which gives evidence of one's serious commitment to moral resistance against injustice.

Therefore, I would argue that for Arendt, presence among others requires not only acting, but also the capacity of suffering. Linking action to suffering takes us immediately out of solipsism and to the question of responsibility in acting. I suffer for the other because I share a collective responsibility with my fellow humans. To say that I suffer means that I am present among others and my suffering initiates a chain reaction of plurality. This is because suffering is a form of action that 'though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every action becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes ... the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation' (Arendt, 1958:190). Suffering is unpredictable because it is a capacity to alter situations by engaging in them; but also, and primarily, because it takes place within the web of human relationships, within a context defined by morality. As such, the risk of suffering forces the actor to accept that he/she is bound up with others, and is bound to act against some even as he/she acts for others. It is also because one suffers that one can forgive.

Forgiveness plays a crucial role in Hannah Arendt's understanding of political action. In *The Human Condition* she claims that forgiveness allows the public sphere to remain both confident and able to move from the past into the future. Forgiveness is perceived by Arendt not only as an opportunity for a new

commencement or recommencement, but also as releasing the political future of a society from the results of its past misdeeds. This break with the past, therefore, is an act of freedom that would be impossible without forgiveness is on the one hand a genuinely new and free action, and on the other hand ‘the miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, “natural” ruin.’ It may be said that Arendt’s phenomenology of forgiving is her own version of liberating the individual and the society from the cycle of violence.

Therefore, therefore, is an act of freedom that would be impossible without the faculty of forgiving. Moving on from the past—while not constituting a completely new way of thinking—entails a negation of and liberation from past actions. In contrast to revenge and retaliation, the act of forgiving is a way to remedy an action’s predicament of irreversibility: ‘Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever’ (ibid.: 237). Forgiveness here is clearly linked to a society’s genuine action to free itself from the chain of revengeful attitudes and to re-establish the moral integrity of the public sphere. The individual who forgives is an actor emerging out of his/her forced marginality in order to enter into relations with others based on plurality. In this play of commencement or recommencement lies an act of narrating or interpreting history without being crushed by the memory of guilt. Therefore, forgiveness is on the one hand a genuinely new and free action, and on the other hand ‘the miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, “natural” ruin’ (ibid.: 247). It may be said that Arendt’s phenomenology of forgiving is her own version of liberating the individual and the society from the cycle of violence.

Non-violence is thus central to political theory for Arendt. But Arendt’s political theory is only concerned with the problem of limiting violence, never suggesting non-violence as a mode of political construction. However, like Gandhi, Arendt finds the need to equilibrate means and ends. Though she sees that violence is an extricable part of the political realm, she recognises the fact that violent means have a potential to produce a cycle of resentment and revenge. This is more clearly developed in *On Violence*, Arendt’s most important book on the role of violence in political life. For Arendt, violence signals a descent into

conditions which, instead of ameliorating the detrimental effects of dictatorships, either reawaken them in new forms or even exacerbate them. She emphasises Aristotle's point that man, 'to the extent that he is a political being, is endowed with the power of speech,' while 'Violence itself is incapable of speech' (Arendt, 1970:51). The point is to focus on power rather than violence, for the latter 'is by nature instrumental; like all means, it always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues' (ibid.: 70). Arendt argues that violence is 'utterly incapable' of creating power—that 'The danger of violence, even if it moves consciously in a non-extremist framework of short-term goals, will always be that the means overwhelm the end. If goals are not achieved rapidly, the result will be not merely defeat but the introduction of the practice of violence into the whole body politic' (ibid.: 44). She thereby explains succinctly how violence diminishes the power of those who use it. So for there to be a politics at all, each promise must insist upon its non-violent terms and conditions. Hence Arendt's repeated insistence on resisting the simplistic reduction of politics to violence and standing in opposition to the claim that violence is necessary for all foundations and unavoidable in all revolutions, a claim that she suggests is refuted by the American revolutionary experience and to which we can also add the non-violent struggle of the Indian independence movement.

Arendt's reflections on politics and violence have the merit of returning our attention to the fundamental dimensions of Gandhian thought as always ultimately concerned with a conception of non-violent transformative politics. In her essay 'What is Freedom?' Arendt affirms eloquently that 'Courage is indispensable because in politics not life but the world is at stake' (Arendt, 1993:156). In the case of a figure like Mahatma Gandhi, courage goes hand in hand with self-sacrifice and self-transformation. As such, Gandhi struggled not only to liberate the Indian society from colonial rule, but he also made an effort to transform himself into a non-violent activist. According to Gandhi, a *satyagrahi* had to participate in truth and truth 'could not depend on individual impressions and decisions alone'; it had to be extraordinarily disciplined, with a 'commitment to suffer the opponent's anger without getting angry and yet also without ever submitting to any violent coercion' (Iyer, 1991: 314-20). For Gandhi,

Gandhi's argument in support of this is that truth is the foundation of non-violence and he often claims that truth and non-violence are the two sides of the same coin.

truth is not only a metaphysical category but also a moral and a political concept signifying the importance of truth in social life. In this regard, Gandhi does not dismiss the concept of truth from the sphere of action. He seeks to comprehend which uses of truth cancel pluralism and which conversely warrant pluralism. Truth is a moral link between different actions and it cements the gap between political freedom and moral necessity. Therefore to adhere to truth is based on the principle that moral life is centred around truth-following. Gandhi's argument in support of this is that truth is the foundation of non-violence and he often claims that truth and non-violence are the two sides of the same coin. In other words, truth has the character of a moral imperative which is self-imposed on the truth-seeker by his/her 'inner voice'. The inner voice cannot be fully defined in words, but it may be described as one's conscience. Gandhi refers to the inner voice as a Truth force or Soul force that would lead us to find peaceful solutions to conflicts in life. So, the purpose of listening and responding to the inner voice is for practical and progressive reality transformation.

Guided by the inner voice, Gandhi decided to undertake fasts as a form of self-sacrifice through which he wished to arouse compassion in other people's hearts. He fasted many times to end bloodshed between Hindus and Muslims; even in his last fast when he was seventy-eight. For him fasting was a political action, as well as an experiment with truth. The idea of experimenting with truth primarily means abiding by the principle of truth in thought, action and speech. For Gandhi, an experiment with truth is always empirical and open to inspection and revision. Thus, the Gandhian experiments with truth are moral practices which are undertaken in the midst of a political action. Gandhi chose politics as the field of his experiments with truth. That is why for Gandhi, truth and non-violence go together, truth as the end and non-violence as the means. Gandhi considers non-violence as a means to truth because he believes that only a non-violent person can attain truth. Here, Gandhi holds that non-violence is the practical and political way to truth and leads us to the ultimate victory of truth over untruth. In other words, the *satyagrahi* or follower of non-violence does

not mind sacrificing his life for the sake of truth and thus is ready to encounter any difficulty on the path of truth. *Satyagraha* as a political weapon also does not lose its moral grounding in view of the fact that for Gandhi, morality and politics go together. Therefore, in the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence, truth wears a human face and speaks to everyone in the inner voice, thus compelling each person to respond to the fundamentally political problem that the public world continually raises.

In order to import some kind of meaning to the concept of non-violence as a moment of 'shared sovereignty' and in order to take his critical distance from the concept of modern politics of its state-oriented treatment, Gandhi presents the idea of shared sovereignty as a regulatory principle and, at the same time, a guarantee that there is a limit to the abusive use of political power. It is also a principle that has a meaning only with reference to the idea of responsibility. The major shift in focus that appears in the Gandhian debate is from the everlasting idea of deriving political decisions from the primacy of the political to an idea of the primacy of the ethical where the pursuit of moral life in politics takes Gandhi to an argument in favour of the responsibility of citizens. Gandhi's challenge to the modern state is, therefore, not just the ground of its legitimacy, but of its basic rationale itself. The Gandhian principle of non-violence is presented, therefore, as a challenge to the violence that is always necessarily implicated with the foundation of a sovereign order.

Gandhi's critique of modern politics leads him to a concept of the political which finds its expression neither in the 'secularisation of politics' nor in the 'politicisation of religion', but in the question of the 'ethics of togetherness' which is framed in terms of a triangulation of ethics, politics and religion. This Gandhian moment of politics leads indubitably to the possibility of a synthesis between the two concepts of individual autonomy and non-violent action. Gandhi succeeds in making new words of ancient wisdom in turning the Hindu and Jain concept of 'ahimsa' into a civic temperament and a democratic allure. As such, Gandhi believed that the centre of gravity of modern politics needed to be shifted back from the idea of material power and wealth to righteousness and

truthfulness. In his critique of modernity, Gandhi saw modern civilisation as promoting ideals of power and wealth that were based on individual self-centredness and the loss of bonds of community that were contrary to moral and spiritual common good (*dharma*). Therefore, as in the Hindu concept of *purusharthas*, meaning objectives of a human being, Gandhi advocated a life of balance, achievement and fulfilment. Ultimately in Gandhi's political philosophy, the two concepts of self-government and self-sufficiency are tied into his political ideal of *Rama Rajya*, the sovereignty of people based on pure moral authority. For Gandhi, therefore, politics is a constant self-realisation, self-reflection and self-reform within the individual. It is a process of self-rule through which citizens are able to contribute to the betterment of the community. Far from being utopian, Gandhi approached this idea of self-rule as a philosophical foundation for the evaluation of existing political practices in the contemporary world. As King once affirmed, 'Timid supplication for justice will not solve the problem. We've got to confront the power structure massively' (James, 2004:19). In Gandhi's mind, democratising politics meant not only ending British colonialism but also waging a non-violent action on coercive power relations and unjust social structures. For him, the stability of human civilisation, the democratic potential of a community and the moral dignity of individuals depended on challenging the evils of the growing gap between a sovereign state and its citizens. As such, non-violence is the cornerstone of citizenship as a space of empowerment and self-government. That is why Gandhi believed in a more enlightened and mature form of democracy as the exercise of active citizenship. By this he meant that the success of democracy depends on its dialogical nature. The very essence of democracy, then, is the dialogue of citizens among themselves and the success of democracy is therefore the success of this dialogue. Therefore, the breakdown of dialogue always means a breakdown of democracy and the failure of the very foundations of the body politic. Violence is liable to present itself as the ultimate means of expression of the anti-political.

For Gandhi, in the same way as for Arendt, the aim of politics is constructing the future of 'human living together', though according to Arendt politics engages the human adventure outside the grips of truth and in the indeterminacy of the

future. So the future gives rise to opinion, not truth, but at the same time Arendt believes that we need a safeguard against opinions that would approve and promote violence and barbarity. Arendt thus seems caught in a dilemma: in particular, contra Plato and Descartes, she makes it clear that the realm of politics is the realm of opinion and the pursuit of truth is a solitary business, since truth can be known by each knower individually; but she is also conscious about the fact that the realm of politics needs to be rescued from the dangers of relativism and the murder of *doxa* victims by *doxa* killers.

Arendt tries to rescue politics from the dangers of relativism by a rejection of the confusion of opinions. As a result, she considers rational truth as nothing more than an opinion which is shared and becomes the criterion by which to carry an action in the public sphere. In this sense, all opinions are not equivalent because all opinions do not seek the truth. As Arendt writes in her *Denktagebuch* (Book XXIV, No. 21): 'There will always be One against All, one person against all others. [This is so] not because One is terribly wise and All are terribly foolish, but because the process of thinking and researching, which finally yields truth, can only be accomplished by an individual person. In its singularity or duality, one human being seeks and finds—not the truth (Lessing)—but some truth.' This requires a distinction among opinions and the political worlds that they draw. If the norm from which to draw is the political world of plurality, it is, therefore, politics as the common ground of reality and responsibility which defines the limits of violence permissible by an opinion. In short, the idea of the 'care for the world' should make a *doxa* truthful. This maybe is the reason why in answer to questions posed in 1963 by the journalist Samuel Grafton regarding her report on Eichmann, Arendt states: 'Once I wrote, I was bound to tell the truth as I see it.' Arendt's point is simple: we cannot give up on truth, even when we fight against the absolutisation of truth. This is because the loss of truth leads to the loss of the common world. Without truth, without the ability to say what is, there is nothing that holds us together. In other words, from Arendt's point of view the world which is concerned with the process of truth-telling is a world where the principle of violence is tamed. As such, the ultimate reason to reject violence is not the will to save oneself, but the knowledge that living with

violence would be intolerable. Though for Arendt, unlike Gandhi, non-violence retreats from a notion of truth as 'objective', nonetheless, as she argues, it has nothing to do with a kind of subjective relativism where everything is considered in terms of self-interest. Arendt is not invoking hereby a moral or religious foundation for the process of non-violence in the political world, such as 'thou shalt not kill'.

In her reading of Arendt, Julia Kristeva asks: 'If we resist the traditional safeguard of religions, with their focus on admonishment, guilt and consolation, how can our individual and collective desires avoid the trap of melancholic destruction, manic fanaticism, or tyrannical paranoia' (Kristeva, 2001: 129). I want to argue

**...Arendt answers** that Arendt answers Kristeva's question by arguing in favour of the  
**Kristeva's** idea of friendship as a political principle of non-violence. Though  
**question by** without recourse to transcendent principles, friendship, for Arendt,  
**arguing in favour** could give rise to a non-violent dimension of human solidarity in  
**of the idea of** the face of humanity's demonic capabilities. As Arendt suggests,  
**friendship as a** human solidarity is where violence is tamed through the  
**political principle** fundamental exigency of assuming responsibility for what is just  
**of non-violence.** and what is unjust.

It is important to bear in mind that for Gandhi, non-violence was not simply a political tactic but pulling out all support for an unjust system and non-cooperation with evil. Gandhi, of course, is very concerned with violence in the more usual sense of overt physical violence. Unlike Arendt, he devotes considerable attention to identifying such violence not only in the social dimension, but also in the linguistic, economic, psychological, cultural, religious dimensions. These many dimensions of violence interact, mutually reinforce each other, and provide the subject matter for his philosophy of non-violence. Unlike most philosophers and others who adopt political approaches, Gandhi places a primary emphasis on non-violent education of the citizens. The much greater strength of Gandhi's educational approach to non-violence is in terms of preventative socialisation, relations, and interventions so that we do not reach the stage of overt violence and war. Key to this preventative approach is Gandhi's

famous analysis of means and ends. Gandhi rejects utilitarianism and many other positions, which assume or maintain that economic, political, and other ends justify the means. According to him, non-violence must emphasise both means and ends. Gandhi argues that we cannot justify the means by the ends because there is an 'inviolable connection' between the means and the ends. His perspective is totally opposite of Frantz Fanon who justifies violence in order to decolonise or dispose of the oppressor. As we know, Fanon considers violence as a liberating force. 'Decolonization is always a violent phenomenon,' he explains, for 'Colonialism is violence in its natural state and will only yield when confronted with greater violence' (Fanon, 1963: 26-7, 47).

However, for Gandhi the process of liberation could not really be separated from the non-violent ends of liberation itself as it is this active process that specifically gives both the individual and the nation back the ethical dimension that had been stripped by colonialism. Gandhi saw the development of an independent and free society as one in which each individual would adhere to the principle of non-violence and would wilfully choose to serve society as a whole. 'Self-evolution is wholly consistent with a nation's evolution,' he said, because freedom of the individual will from any violence would lead irrevocably to the freedom of the nation from violence. As such, where Gandhi sees the self-transformative non-violent liberation as the generating force behind both political liberation and national regeneration, Fanon derives the destructive process of liberating from collective liberation itself. Therefore, where Fanon teaches us the value of a strategic essentialism in the use of violence in conditions of oppression as a harbinger of a new humanism, Gandhi talks about the sacrifice of violence in the colonised self in order for non-violent resistance to succeed. Once again, for Gandhi, the relationship between truth and non-violence is axiomatic. Since one cannot be certain that one possesses the absolute truth in a given situation, one has to proceed non-violently. However, Fanon's views on truth being 'what hurts the oppressed most,' for him the enlightening and healing powers of violence have the capacity to cure the ailments of the colonised while unifying a people as a basis for a new nation.

In view of Fanon's characterisation of violence as an essential component in the process of political liberation, it is not surprising that Arendt is highly critical of him in her book *On Violence*. Where Fanon considers violence as a 'necessary' aspect of politics, Arendt sees violence as destructive of politics. In Fanon's analysis therefore, the instrumental character of violence can be channelled to create a new and better world. As for Arendt, I believe, she is closer to the Gandhian critique of violence when she affirms that 'Violence, being instrumental by nature, is rational to the extent that it is effective in reaching the end which must justify it. And since when we act we never know with any amount of certainty the eventual consequences of what we are doing, violence can remain rational only if it pursues short-term goals. Violence does not promote causes, it promotes neither History nor Revolution, but it can indeed serve to dramatise grievances and to bring them to public attention' (Arendt, 1970: 79). In the same way as Gandhi, Arendt's argumentation against those who claim as to the political instrumentality of violence draws attention to the absurdity of arguments that rest on the idea that we can rely on the subordination of means to ends and on the certainty of outcomes of human action in violent politics. Both Gandhi and Arendt are committed to an ideal of politics without violence, whether in the form of the post-colonial or the classical tradition of civic republicanism. But, in the end, both argue that non-violence is the only way in which public action and participatory deliberation can give shape to an authentic democratic power. Therefore, both Gandhi and Arendt believe that human dignity discloses itself most fully in a non-violent political action. Hence, the urgency of a democratic constitutional framework, that could prevent the constant expansion of violent human social and political activities which they both identify as lethal to political freedom. Maybe this is one central idea in both Gandhi and Arendt's political theories that cannot be considered obsolete whatever changes have occurred within the framework of global politics during the past fifty years.

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