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# Resistance, Suffering and Leadership: An Introduction to Apophatic Leadership

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## Abstract

The academic approach to leadership rests on a particular understanding of human action as goal-oriented: leadership helps a group achieve a common, given goal or reward. One of the iconic historical figures that students of leadership never fail to present as an example, however, had a very different conception of human action. Mohandas Gandhi did not understand the orientation towards goals, outcomes or rewards as the essence of human action. Drawing on the *Bhagavad Gita*, Gandhi emphasized that proper human action must not be preoccupied with its fruit, i.e. that we enact the fullness of our human nature precisely when our action, in a sense to be clarified, is disinterested. Gandhi's influence concerns the very attitudes that we adopt towards ourselves and our pursuit of goals. A discussion of Gandhi's reading of the *Gita*, and of the manner in which it informed key notions such as *satyagraha*, truth and non-violence, will suggest that to those that were drawn to him, Gandhi served the role of a touchstone, enabling others to ponder a "truer" and "better" version of themselves. If we wish to characterise his influence as "leadership", I propose to describe it as "apophatic leadership", which is "negative" in the sense that it enables us to detach ourselves from goals that hitherto were taken for granted.

**Keywords:** leadership, interested and disinterested action, Gandhi, Bhagavad Gita, non-attachment, renunciation, the leader as touchstone, apophatic leadership

The purpose of this paper is to examine theories of leadership in relation to conceptions of human action. Standard introductions to leadership, such as Northouse (2013: 5), associate leadership with goal-oriented, instrumental action. In other words, leadership helps a group achieve a common, given goal. Based on these definitions, historical figures such as Gandhi appear as obvious examples of leadership given the magnitude of their historical roles, achievements and influence. No general account of leadership fails to mention Gandhi as an example. This is of interest because Gandhi did not understand the orientation towards goals, outcomes or rewards as the essence of human action. Drawing on the *Bhagavad Gita*, Gandhi emphasized that proper human action must not be preoccupied with its fruit, i.e. that we enact the fullness of our human nature precisely when our action, in a sense to be clarified, is disinterested. It is the ability to act in a disinterested, selfless manner, to act without regard for the "fruit" of our action, that defines our humanity. Empirically, of course, we often fall short of our humanity in that much of what we do we do in an interested manner, but it is our potential rather than our shortcomings that defines us.

This paper does not want to argue for or against Gandhi's understanding of action. Rather, I want to explore how his understanding informed his political involvement and his leadership style, and whether existing theories of leadership are able to capture the particular kind of action that he tried to cultivate for himself and, by example, among his followers. Can we even think of leadership without assuming an orientation towards goals and objectives? And yet, if our approaches to leadership always assume that goals are given – that they are, as it

were, “external” to the dynamics of the situation in question rather than produced by it – will our approaches then not be limited in the extent to which they can think through processes of radical change? In other words, are our approaches to leadership inherently constrained by a “conservative” bias, an inability to think through the dynamics of change?

### **Gandhi as leader: conventional approaches**

Among the prominent categories of leadership that are typically evoked in relation to Gandhi are transformational leadership, charismatic leadership, servant leadership and authentic leadership. Recent studies have shown that there is a considerable degree of overlap or “construct redundancy” among them, suggesting that “transformational leadership” captures most of the explanatory value of the other concepts (Hoch, Bommer, Dulebohn and Wu 2018). The notion of transformational leadership was initially introduced by Downton (1973), and then taken up by Burns (1978) in his classic study of leadership. According to Burns, transforming leadership “occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality” (20). For Burns, too, all leadership is “goal-oriented” (455), but in transformational leadership the goals and purposes of leaders and followers become fused, raising “the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, and thus it has a transforming effect on both” (20). Burns’ main and indeed perhaps only source on Gandhi is Erikson’s classic study, *Gandhi’s Truth: On the Origins on Militant Nonviolence* (1970), which draws heavily on Freudian language as it outlines a psychological profile of the Indian leader. Quoting liberally from Erikson, Burns notes that Gandhi was “perhaps the best modern example” of a transformational leader, as Gandhi “aroused and elevated the hopes and demands of millions of Indians” and thereby “enhanced his own life and personality” (20). Gandhi was “completely” involved with his followers, “‘giving direction to their capacity to care, and multiplying miraculously both their practical gifts and their sense of participation’ ” (Erikson, quoted in Burns, 1978: 129-130). Gandhi – in Erikson’s analysis, adopted by Burns – created followers who were also leaders, “aspirants for highest political power”, thus calling into questions “the conventional distinction between leaders and followers” (130). The problem for the transformational leader, Burns explained, was “not to promote narrow, egocentric self-actualisation but to extend awareness of human needs and the means of gratifying them, to improve the larger social situation for which [...] leaders have responsibility and over which they have power”. Gandhi “almost perfectly” exemplified this (448-449).

Northouse (2013: 187) finds it difficult to distinguish transformational and charismatic leadership, noting that the two concepts are often used synonymously. First popularised among students of leadership by Robert House in 1976, theories of charismatic leadership draw on Max Weber’s discussion of charisma, from *charis*, grace. Charisma is a central concept in the writings of St Paul, where it occurs sixteen times. The only other occurrence in the New Testament is in 1 Peter 4:10. Charisma refers to the dynamic experience of being taken hold of, upheld and used by God, achieving strength and ability beyond personal strength as a result of being inspired – from *inspirare*: “blowing into” – by a divine energy. According to Weber (1968: 213), charismatic authority rests on “devotion to a specific sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him”. In leadership studies, charisma usually denotes a special personality characteristic that

gives a person exceptional or “superhuman” powers. It is reserved for a few, is of divine origin, and results in charismatic figures being treated as leaders, highlighting the role of the followers in “validating” the leaders’ charisma (e.g. Northouse, 2013: 188). Typically, charismatic leaders are strong role models for the beliefs and values they want their followers to adopt – and again, Gandhi and e.g. his insistence on non-violence are often used as prime examples (Bass, 2008: 578, 593; Bligh & Robinson, 2010; House, 1976; Northouse, 2013: 188).

Many studies identify Gandhi as a servant leader (Barnabas & Clifford, 2012). A category created by Greenleaf (2002) in the early 1970s, servant leadership puts the good of followers first, emphasizing characteristics such as e.g. listening, empathy, awareness, persuasion, conceptualisation, foresight, stewardship, community building. Northouse (2013: 234) explains that servant leadership is unique in the way it makes altruism the central component of the leadership process. The concept of authentic leadership focuses on the leader’s self-understanding, self-knowledge and self-government. Authentic leaders will lead from convictions, are guided by strong principles and will embody these principles. They are “genuine” and, therefore, trustworthy in that they do not have ulterior motives other than those they profess to their followers. Typical Gandhian discourses on serving, honesty and integrity, and his insistence that the morality of ends and means cannot be separated, appear to make Gandhi a prime example of these types of leadership. However, all of these theories understand leadership as goal-oriented influence.

### **Gandhi: “a failure of biography as a literary genre”**

Gandhi famously declared that “[his] life was [his] message”. While Gandhi’s status as a leader, of various kinds, is undisputed in the leadership literature, biographers seem to have a much harder time to determine the contents of his “message”. More than one thousand Gandhi biographies have been written and published; more than five hundred titles in English alone, and yet Gandhi in many ways remains an enigma. Markovits (2004: 40) speaks of “a failure of biography as a literary genre”. What could possibly account for this failure? It appears that from the earliest attempts to assign meaning to Gandhi’s life, the stakes were high.

Gandhi’s earliest biographies, written by and for a Western audience, imbued his life with a religious and civilizational importance. Joseph Doke, an English Baptist clergyman from Devon, was the first to present an account of Gandhi’s life to a wider audience (Doke, 1909). Doke met Gandhi for the first time in late December 1907, while Gandhi was campaigning for the rights and welfare of the Indian community in South Africa, and he proceeded to interview Gandhi in a series of meetings, resulting in a book entitled *An Indian Patriot in South Africa*. For Doke, who was sympathetic to the Indian cause and helped edit Gandhi’s newspaper magazine – *Indian Opinion* – the encounter with Gandhi was a significant spiritual experience: “Our Indian friend lives on a higher plan than most men do,” he wrote, acknowledging that his actions were often “counted eccentric, and not infrequently misunderstood”; yet, “those who know him well are ashamed of themselves in his presence” (Doke, 1909: 7).

Doke also inaugurated what would become a prevailing tradition in Western accounts of Gandhi by evoking New Testament imagery in order to situate the “eccentric” Gandhi within a more familiar framework. It became common to canonise Gandhi as a Christ-like figure, a Christian Saint – apart from Jesus, St Francis of Assisi was a regular reference point. Unitarian pastor John Haynes Holmes popularised this image in the United States, famously

claiming in 1921 that Gandhi was the “greatest man in the world”: “But when I think of Gandhi, I think of Jesus Christ. He lives his life; he speaks his word; he suffers, strives and will some day nobly die, for his kingdom upon earth” (Holmes 1976[1921]: 620). This image of Gandhi was immortalised in Western culture by Romain Rolland’s book *Mahatma Gandhi* (1924), which in its English translation carried the subtitle *The Man Who Became One with the Universal Being*. Rolland had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1915, and was a highly respected public intellectual and writer – Stefan Zweig famously called him the “moral consciousness of Europe”. At the time of writing his book on Gandhi, Rolland had no personal experience of India or Gandhi and later admitted that he brought to the subject his very own “European preoccupations, the spectre of war which had raged over Western fields”, needing to believe that “the little St. Francis of India” could provide the remedy for the self-destructive tendencies inherent in European culture: “The way to peace leads through self-sacrifice. This is Gandhi’s message. The only thing lacking is the cross” (Rolland, 1924: 157; see also Markovits, 2004: 17-19).

Those who encountered Gandhi as a political opponent were unlikely to share those impressions. To them, Gandhi’s eccentric asceticism was a façade, behind which lurked a shrewd, manipulative and relentless political agitator. British officials generally found him a strange and tricky adversary. Some respected him for his spiritual and moral aspirations, while others were more hostile, calling him a hypocrite. All of them, whether sympathetic or hostile, struggled to hide their exasperation when dealing with the “ ‘seditious Middle Temple lawyer’ ” posing as a “ ‘half-naked fakir’ ”, as Churchill famously described him (as in Ashe, 1968: xi).

Gandhi’s place in modern India’s imagination is unique. Rabindranath Tagore, the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature (1913), is often credited for having been the first to call Gandhi *Mahatma*, or “great soul”. Following the Non-cooperation movement, Gandhi was a figure of national significance, and in the early 1930s he became the dominant symbol of Indian nationalism. As early as 1906, while serving as a volunteer stretcher bearer with the forces of the colonial government during the Zulu Rebellion in Natal, Gandhi had fashioned his unique approach to public service by taking his *brahmacharya* vow, which required him to live a life marked by desirelessness – a life of chastity, poverty, non-violence and truth – as a precondition for effective, “disinterested” public work. Such self-less action, lived in the furnace of public life, was just as valid a path towards self-realisation as ascetic withdrawal. It was Gandhi’s ascetic activism, with its concomitant symbolism as expressed in his outer appearance, the cult of the spinning wheel and his experiments in communal living, which enabled him to restore the dignity of rural life in India and to develop a deep relationship with the Indian public. As a renouncer by choice, a *sanyasi*, Gandhi appealed to and mobilised millions of impoverished Indians, renouncers by necessity, in his struggle for *swaraj*, self-rule. Accordingly, Gandhi was praised as a “man among men” rather than as an otherworldly saint. He was referred to as *bapu*, “father”, mainly because of what were perceived to be his human virtues: worldly wisdom, courage, love and especially a warm sense of humour; he was revered because of his closeness to life, not as an ideal remote from reality. Members of the anglicized middle classes in India, however, frequently failed to understand him and found him a barbarian, a visionary and a dreamer.

For some, then, Gandhi was the saintly, self-less leader, committed to poverty and non-violence, who brought down an Empire; for others, he was a religious eccentric, who complicated and delayed, at a high cost, the inevitable by spiritualising the political processes

leading to India's independence. For some, Gandhi was the reformer who, himself a member of the Vaishya caste, defied a thousand Hindu taboos by campaigning against untouchability and, by implication, the caste system; for others, including Ambedkar, the leader of the untouchables, he was the "saint of the status quo" who was not only ambiguous about caste but in fact prevented affirmative action in support of untouchables by launching a fast to the death against the creation of a separate electorate. While many admire him for fighting against the government-sanctioned, racist discrimination of Indians in South Africa, others wonder why he not only failed to take an interest in the government-sanctioned, racist discrimination of the African natives, but on occasion even expressed racist views on the "inferiority" of the "kaffirs". For some, Gandhi chose to live a life of chastity, poverty, non-violence and truth in order to devote himself entirely to the common good; while others point out that Gandhi's non-violent campaigns always entailed at least the threat of violence, a fact unacknowledged but exploited by Gandhi. While some admire his self-renunciation, self-denial and discipline, others draw attention to the fact that for a man who advised chastity even in marriage, he experienced a high degree of "intimate female contact" (Adams, 2010: 282) even in his late seventies when, as an open "experiment" in desirelessness, *brahmacharya*, he took to the practice of taking unclothed young women to bed with him at night so as to prove to himself that he had successfully eliminated all desire, alienating some of his closest disciples and colleagues as a result (Lal 2000). While some praise the openness, organisation and generosity of Gandhi's *ashrams*, others point to his neglect of his family and his failure as a father and husband. While some praise Gandhi for his concern with diet, health and well-being, others laugh at his dilettante, obsessive dietary experiments, which he stubbornly imposed not just on himself but also on family members, friends, and fellow *ashramites*, putting their lives at risk. And while some comment on his openness and skill that allowed him to work with both Hindu and Muslim Indians in South Africa, others blame what they perceive as his Hinduisation of Indian politics for the alienation of Muslims in India and ultimately for the partition of the country. While some continue to erect Gandhi statues, as in Parliament Square in London in 2015, others campaign for the removal of his statue, as on the University of Ghana campus in Accra in 2016.

### **Gandhi's encounter with the *Bhagavad Gita***

The dramatic range of interpretations has not narrowed with time. Biographers continue to struggle especially with Gandhi's early life, because he established himself as an internationally known, public figure only in his late forties. The reconstruction of the first four decades of his life therefore has to rely heavily on Gandhi's autobiography (1982[1927]), raising methodological questions of bias and reliability. Furthermore, Gandhi's status within India's self-understanding regularly tends to imply him even in contemporary political disputes, with some wanting to preserve and others to "debunk" his legacy in order to further their own political agendas. Still, problems of historiography and politics past and present aside, Gandhi poses a challenge primarily because of his self-understanding, his actions, and the impact he had on others. He had no intention to live a life that conformed to standards and expectations that were defined by others; he did not live, as it were, in the eyes of others. Even in the preface to his autobiography, he made it clear that it was not his intention to contribute to a genre that was "peculiar to the West" (Gandhi, 1982: 13). Rather, instead of writing a "real"

autobiography, Gandhi was going to narrate his “experiments in the spiritual field,” which were foundational for his political work (14). These experiments did not line up in a continuum; rather, they were spiritual trials, which were valuable for the lessons that they taught, and the lessons in turn served as stepping stones towards action and were to be reviewed in light of the consequences of such action. There was no finality to the relative truths of these lessons, and they were to be abandoned, if lived experience proved them inadequate. Gandhi knew and admired John Bunyan’s classic *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), and it may have inspired him to place questions of spiritual progress, of gradual self-realisation, at the centre of his reflections, giving his own life a certain revelatory quality. For Gandhi, the quest for truth – a path that was “strait and narrow and sharp as the razor’s edge” – eclipses in importance the appearance of consistency. When new insights had been gained, he never hesitated to contradict views he previously held to be true, advising his audience that if there were inconsistencies between any two writings of his, they “would do well to choose the later of the two on the same subject” (CW, Vol.55: 61).

Where Gandhi was consistent, however, is in his appreciation of the *Bhagavad Gita* as his “spiritual dictionary”, “the mother who never let him down”, or his *Kāmadhenu*, the divine mother of all cows “that grants all wishes” (as in Jordens, 1986: 88). He considered the *Gita* his “Eternal Mother”, so that the reading of the text was “a religious practice, a prayer, a fasting” (Gowda, 2011: 2) There are numerous statements by Gandhi, in writing and speech, highlighting the *Gita*’s importance for him as a spiritual and practical guide:

The *Gita* is for me a perennial guide to conduct. From it I seek support for all my actions and, if, in a particular case, I do not find the needed support, I would refrain from the proposed action or at any rate feel uncertain about it [...] Every time I have suffered the loss of a relative or friend, I sought consolation in the *Gita* (as in Gowda, 2011: 168).

In Calcutta in 1925 he declared to an assembly of Christian missionaries:

when doubt haunts me, when disappointments stare me in the face, and when I see not one ray of light on the horizon, I turn to the *Bhagavad Gita*, and find a verse to comfort me; and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming sorrow. My life has been full of external tragedies, and if they have not left any visible and indelible effect on me, I owe it to the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* (as in Sharpe, 1985: 114).

The *Gita* is the key reference for Gandhi in the thousands of letters of spiritual advice he sent out, and the communal reading of the *Gita* was a regular feature on political campaigns, such as the Salt March (1930), and in the life of his ashrams. It is significant that Gandhi was first introduced to the *Gita* in 1889 by two theosophist friends during his time as a law student at the Inner Temple in London (1888-1891). The two friends were members of the Theosophist Society in London, and they, together with their Theosophist leaders, were inspired by a flurry of theosophical publications on the *Gita*. They had read the text in Edwin Arnold’s translation *The Song Celestial*, but were hoping that Gandhi would help them work through the text in its original Sanskrit. This, however, he was unable to do as he could not read Sanskrit well enough, and hence they proceeded to read the text together in Arnold’s translation:

The book struck me as one of priceless worth. The impression has ever since been growing on me with the result that I regard it today as the book par excellence for the knowledge of truth (Gandhi, 1982: 50).

Still, as he also wrote in his *Autobiography*, “though I read the *Gita* with these friends, I cannot pretend to have studied it then. It was only after some years that it became a book of daily reading” (Ibid.). By his own admission, Gandhi had very little knowledge or understanding of his own cultural and religious background at the time, and it was not before 1903, while in South Africa, that Gandhi read the work more closely, again after coming in contact with the Theosophist community there. He started to read the text more regularly and even devoted some time to learning Sanskrit, yet it is fair to say that this initial study of the text initially remained a private exercise. Textual references in his writings and speeches in South Africa remain rare even though he finds opportunities to return to the text. While in prison in Johannesburg in 1908, he read the *Gita* again, focusing on the verses that had a “bearing” on his situation and, “meditating on them, [he] managed to compose [him]self” (as in Gowda, 2011: 169).

Gandhi's first clear interpretation of the *Gita* appeared in May 1919 when, back in India, he called for a *hartal*, a form of strike where people refuse to engage in economic activity and instead pursue spiritual goals through prayer, fasting and meditation, and suggested that his followers read the *Gita* for and during the campaign. Gandhi's use of the *Gita* on this occasion led some Hindus to question his interpretation as the text was commonly read and used as a text that justified violence in pursuit of just goals, prompting Gandhi to explain that, in his understanding, the contents of the *Gita* was allegorical rather than historical or literal. Further prison sentences allowed him to continue his studies of the *Gita*, and in October 1925 he published a six-page article entitled “Meaning of the *Gita*”, showing that by that date he had fully worked out his understanding of the text (CW, Vol.28: 315-321). His later writings did not add anything substantially new apart from practical and concrete applications. In 1926 Gandhi delivered 218 lectures on the *Gita* at the *Satyagraha Ashram* in Ahmedabad during morning prayers over a period of nine months. Mahadev Desai and Punjabhai attended and took notes, which were later translated and included in Gandhi's *Collected Works* (Vol.32: 94-376). In 1929, while in Yeravda jail, Gandhi prepared a translation of the *Gita* into Gujarati with an introduction and commentary, entitled *Anasaktiyoga* or the path of selfless, unattached action. *Anasaktiyoga* was released by Navjivan Press on 12 March 1930, the day of the start of the Dandi Salt *Satyagraha*. As the 78 marchers began their 240-mile journey to Dandi, they all carried a copy of the book with them. During 1930, while in prison following the Salt *Satyagraha*, Gandhi wrote weekly letters about the *Gita* to be read out at Ashram prayer meetings. Overall, Gandhi wrote almost a thousand pages explicitly on the *Gita* – more than on any one other topic (Skaria, 2016: 192).

### **The *Gita*'s “matchless remedy”: the renunciation of the fruits of action**

The *Gita*, “the Song of the Beloved One”, or “the Song of God”, is a 700-line section of the much longer Sanskrit war epic, the *Mahabharata*, traditionally attributed to the sage Vyasa, who is thought to have lived between the fifth and third centuries BCE. The *Mahabharata* narrates the story of a legendary conflict between two branches of an Indian ruling family. Pandu, the



king of Hastinapura, retired to a forest in response to a curse, never to return. For some time, his elder brother, the blind Dhritirashtra, acts as a regent – his blindness prevents him from becoming king – presumably until Pandu's son, Yudhishtira, is old enough to take on the throne and resume the normal line of succession. However, Dhritirashtra wants his own son, Duryodhana, to become king, thus provoking a conflict between Duryodhana and his followers, known as the Kauravas, and the supporters of Yudhishtira, known as the Pandavas, over the rule of Hastinapura. The setting for the Gita is the decisive battle of Kurukshetra, where the Kauravas are ultimately defeated. The text of the Gita is a conversation between Arjuna, who is Yudhishtira's brother and the general of the Pandava army, and Krishna, an incarnation of the God Vishnu. The conversation takes place just before the commencement of the battle, as Arjuna is overwhelmed with doubts. As a warrior, it is his duty to fight when called upon to do so, but looking across the divide between the two armies, he sees his relatives and his teachers – people he loved – among his enemies and thus he hesitates. As indecision paralyses him, he turns to Krishna, his charioteer, for advice. Krishna instructs Arjuna that he must fulfil his duty as a warrior and fight, and that instruction is embedded in a longer discourse on the nature and order of reality, and human duty.

For Gandhi, there was never any question that the Gita was an allegory. The battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas, whether or not it was an historical event, was used by the poet Vyasa as an occasion to express fundamental truths of human existence:

Personally, I believe that Duryodhana and his supporters stand for the Satanic impulses in us, and Arjuna and others stand for God-ward impulses. The battle-field is our body. The poet-seer, who knows from experience the problems of life, has given a faithful account of the conflict which is eternally going on within us (CW, Vol.28: 320).

Since his first encounter with the work, in 1888-89, he “felt that it was not a historical work, but that, under the guise of physical warfare, it described the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind, and that physical warfare was brought in merely to make the description of the internal duel more alluring” (Gandhi, 1929: 93). And at the beginning of his 1926 prayer meetings and lectures he again clarifies:

The *Mahabharata* is not history. It is a work treating of religious and ethical questions. The battle described here is a struggle between *dharma* [duty, right conduct] and *adharma* [its opposite]. It is a battle between the innumerable forces of good and evil, which become personified in us as virtues and vices. The Kauravas represent the forces of Evil, the Pandavas the forces of Good. [...] this work was written to explain man's duty in this inner strife (Gandhi, 2009: 3).

While Gandhi's allegorical reading of the text was not particularly original – after all, the Theosophists read everything as an allegory; and the allegorical method was well-known within Hinduism – it did separate him from the nationalist appropriation of the *Gita* as an instruction to use violence for the achievement of just goals such as e.g. independence. In fact, when Gandhi first published his interpretation of the *Gita* within the context of the Rowlatt *satyagraha* (1919), fellow activist Swami Anand questioned the manner in which Gandhi derived the principle of non-violence from the *Gita*: “I do not think it is just on your part to deduce *ahimsa*

from stray verses” (Gandhi, 1929: 90-91). Reactions like this prompted Gandhi to embark on a translation and deeper study of the text, but further study only led Gandhi to confirm what he felt since his early encounters with the *Gita*, namely that “the theme of the *Gita* is contained in the second chapter”. In fact, “from the last verse of Chapter II, it would seem that Sri Krishna had nothing further to add;” and “with Chapter II the *Gita* ends. It need not have been followed by anything more”. Frequently Gandhi highlighted the importance of the last 19 verses in Chapter II as the essence of the *Gita*, even to the point that anything in the poem that contradicted these verses was to be rejected: “These stanzas are the key to the understanding of the *Gita*. I would even go so far as to advise people to reject statements in the poem which bear a meaning contrary to that of these nineteen stanzas” (Jordens, 1986: 94). Accordingly, about two thirds of Gandhi’s quotations from the *Gita* come from chapters 2 and 3.

What, then, is the theme of the *Gita*? The theme of the *Gita* is not a historical feud between family factions, but to expound the ethical truth of how spiritual progress is to be achieved: “The object of the *Gita* appears to me to be that of showing the most excellent way to attain self-realisation” (Gandhi, 2009: xviii). The last 19 verses of Chapter II are Krishna’s answer to Arjuna’s request for a description of the *sthitaprajna*, the person who has achieved mastery over his inner and outer senses, over his desires and dislikes, and who has reached an attitude of total even-mindedness to all that may please or displease him. “Such a person is at peace with himself, and his attitude to the outside world is one of equanimity and indifference” (Jordens, 1986: 100). Yet how are we to achieve this state, which prepares the mind for total devotion to Krishna? In a world where we cannot avoid to act, where embodied existence implies action, and where every action regulates and begets further action so that, in fact, “it is beyond dispute that all action binds” (Gandhi, 2009: xxi), how is self-realisation possible? If “[e]very action is tainted, be it ever so trivial” (xix), how is liberation possible if we cannot not act? “[...] how is one to be free from the bondage of action, even though he may be acting?” (xxi)

The manner in which the *Gita* has solved the problem is, to my knowledge, unique. The *Gita* says, “Do your allotted work but renounce its fruit. Be detached and work. Have no desire for reward and work.” This is the unmistakable teaching of the *Gita*. He who gives up action falls. He who gives up only the rewards rises (xxi).

Renunciation of the fruits of action is the “matchless remedy” offered by the *Gita* for avoiding the bondage of karma. Thus, the central theme of the *Gita* is *anasakti* or non-attachment.

We should do no work with attachment. Attachment to good work, is that too wrong? Yes, it is. If we are attached to our goal of winning liberty, we shall not hesitate to adopt bad means. [...] Hence, we should not be attached even to a good cause. Only then will our means remain pure and our actions, too (24).

Non-attachment is the key to the even-mindedness of the *sthitaprajna*:

He is the devotee who is jealous of none, who is a fount of mercy, who is without egotism, who is selfless, who is ever forgiving, who is always contented, whose resolutions are firm, who has dedicated mind and soul to God, who causes no dread, who is not afraid of others, who is free from exultation, sorrow, and fear, who is pure,

who is versed in action and yet remains unaffected by it, who renounces all fruit, good or bad, who treats friend and foe alike, who is untouched by respect or disrespect, who is not puffed up by praise, who does not go under when people speak ill of him, who loves silence and solitude, who has a disciplined reason (xx).

But what does “renunciation of fruit” mean? Gandhi clarifies that “renunciation of the fruit in no way means indifference to the result. In regard to every action one must know the result that is expected to follow, the means thereto, and the capacity for it. He, who, being thus equipped, is without desire for the result, and is yet wholly engrossed in the due fulfillment of the task before him, is said to have renounced the fruits of his action” (xxi). Thus we are asked to pursue the tasks that are placed before us, and which we approach out of a sense of duty, without expecting a reward for ourselves:

Again, let no one consider renunciation to mean want of fruit for the renouncer. The *Gita* reading does not warrant such a meaning. Renunciation means absence of hankering after fruit. As a matter of fact, he who renounces reaps a thousandfold. The renunciation of the *Gita* is the acid test of faith. He who is ever brooding over result often loses nerve in the performance of his duty. He becomes impatient and then gives vent to anger and begins to do unworthy things; he jumps from action to action, never remaining faithful to any. He who broods over results is like a man given to objects of senses; he is ever distracted, he says good-bye to all scruples, everything is right in his estimation, and he therefore resorts to means fair and foul to attain his end (xxi-xxii).

Much of what we do, we do with ends in mind. We act in certain ways in order to achieve a particular end, which makes our current action a means towards achieving that end. As the action now appears relative to an end, it becomes subject to calculations of efficiency and effectiveness. It also becomes relativized in terms of time: its purpose is not in the here and now, in the present, but in the future, thus reorienting our attention away from the present into the future, possibly even a distant future. As a result, we are not fully present in the present – the present has meaning only as a transitory moment on the way to the future. In Gandhi’s understanding of the *Gita*, “renouncing fruit” means to act in the present, and to make this action as full an expression of righteousness and truth as possible without regard to future rewards or losses for ourselves. Arjuna’s paralysis was the result of him being entangled in self-centered desires, fears and family interests. He projected his actions into the future, worried about consequences, and thereby lost sight of his duty as a warrior of justice. Thus, Krishna needed to teach him to “renounce the fruit of his actions”, i.e. to act justly and not worry about the consequences these actions will entail for him or his family. As he is instructed by Krishna, Arjuna comes to realize that he is not the “owner” of his actions, and realizing this, he is liberated (Mackenzie, 2001). Arjuna is liberated from a sense of self that views the world and acts within it to fulfill its desires and thus is fundamentally invested in the results of action.

Once the acquisitive and arrogant self is liberated in this manner, and he is no longer preoccupied with the possible fruits of his action, he is liberated from the distractions of selfishness, greed and fear and for once is able to focus on the action itself and its true meaning. Therefore, the actions of the liberated self are performed with equanimity, with skill, focus and clarity, with the acting person being at one with himself, and without desire or selfishness. Importantly, the detachment from the fruits of action does not imply a disregard

for the consequences of action for others. On the contrary, such detachment will liberate the self to fully appreciate the action's impact on others – it will bring the others, and more, into view. The Gita associates this liberation with *sattva*, one of the three *gunas*, or fundamental qualities from the Samkhya system of Hindu philosophy, which are the fundamental constituents of reality. While *sattva* reflects purity, light and harmony, *rajas* reflects activity and passion, while *tamas* reflects inertia, dullness and ignorance. In its very last chapter, at the end of Arjuna's education, the *Gita* explains how these qualities or modes of existence are manifested in different types of action:

Work performed to fulfill one's obligations, without thought of personal reward or of whether the job is peasant or unpleasant, is *sattvic*. Work prompted by selfish desire or self-will, full of stress, is *rajasic*. Work that is undertaken blindly, without any consideration of consequences, waste, injury to others, or one's own capacities, is *tamasic* (Easwaran 2011, Chapter 18, verses 23-25).

*Sattvic* workers are free from egotism and selfish attachments, full of enthusiasm and fortitude in success and failure alike. *Rajasic* workers have strong personal desires and crave rewards for their actions. Covetous, impure, and destructive, they are easily swept away by fortune, good or bad. *Tamasic* workers are undisciplined, vulgar, stubborn, deceitful, dishonest, and lazy. They are easily depressed and prone to procrastination (18, 26-28).

To know when to act and when to refrain from action, what is right action and what is wrong, what brings security and what insecurity, what brings freedom and what bondage: these are the signs of a *sattvic* intellect. The *rajasic* intellect confuses right and wrong actions, and cannot distinguish what is to be done from what should not be done. The *tamasic* intellect is shrouded in darkness, utterly reversing right and wrong wherever it turns (18, 30-32).

From the *Gita's* ethics of non-attachment, Gandhi derived key notions of his thinking such as *ahimsa*, truth and even *satyagraha* (Gowda, 2011: 168-98). As noted previously, even close disciples wondered whether *ahimsa* – no-harm, non-violence – could be found in a conversation that takes place in the centre of a battlefield, and where the main protagonist is taught, by a divinity, that he must not shirk from his duties and fight and kill. However, Gandhi's allegorical reading of the text allowed him to conclude that non-attachment to fruits of action corresponded to truth and *ahimsa*:

When there is no desire for fruit, there is no temptation for untruth or *himsa*. Take any instance of untruth or violence, and it will be found that at its back was the desire to attain the cherished end (Gandhi, 2009: xxii).

Still, Gandhi admitted that the text itself did not explicitly promote *ahimsa*, but the practical application of its ethical principles left no space for violence and untruth:

Let it be granted that, according to the letter of the *Gita*, it is possible to say that warfare is consistent with renunciation of fruit. But after forty years' unremitting endeavor fully to enforce the teaching of the *Gita* in my own life, I have, in all humility, felt that perfect

renunciation is impossible without perfect observance of *ahimsa* in every shape and form (xxiii-xxiv).

Gandhi acknowledged that “from the point of view of scholarship, my qualifications for attempting the translation would seem to be nil”, but when it came to the interpretation of an ethical treatise like the *Gita*, lived experience was much more important than the learned commentaries of the scholars and the historians. Only he can interpret the *Gita* correctly “who tries to follow its teaching in practice, and the correctness of the interpretation will be in proportion to his success in living according to the teaching” (Jordens, 1986: 96). This is how Gandhi defended his authority as an interpreter of the *Gita*: “At the back of my reading there is the claim of an endeavor to enforce the meaning in my own conduct for an unbroken period of forty years,” so that “as one following its teaching I may be considered to be fairly well qualified” (97).

### ***Satyagraha*, truth, non-violence**

Gandhi provided an important example of action without attachment in *satyagraha*, the “force born of truth”. He developed the idea and the practice of *satyagraha* while in South Africa from 1893 to 1914. In August 1906 the Transvaal government announced the introduction of new anti-Indian legislation in form of the so-called Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance, also known as the Black Act, whereby Indians were forced to register with the “Registrar of Asiatics”, submit to physical examination, provide fingerprints and carry a registration certificate at all time. Failure to produce the certificate on request could lead to fines, imprisonment or deportation. Gandhi was one of the organisers of a meeting held in September of the same year in the Imperial Theatre in Johannesburg, where he persuaded an audience of some 3,000 people to take a vow that they would not comply with these unjust regulations even unto death. As the English press became aware of the troubles in the Transvaal, commentators struggled to understand what the Indians were doing: they offered resistance by not submitting to the new legislations, but they did not resist being arrested or generally suffering the consequences of their disobedience. The term “passive resistance” was used to refer to the practice. Gandhi became aware of the terminology and objected that there was indeed nothing “passive” in what the Indians were doing. In his journal *Indian Opinion*, he invited submissions from his readers, even offering a prize for the entry: how should we call this campaign we are all involved in? The first prize went to the entry *sadagraha*, which was to mean “firmness in a just cause”, but Gandhi still changed it to “satyagraha”, which is a combination of *satya*, truth, and *graha*, firmness or force, so that the term could be translated as “truth-force” or “the force born of truth”. When Gandhi was imprisoned as one of the instigators of the protest, he found the time to read the *Gita* and it appears that the inspiration provided by the *Gita* helped Gandhi develop *satyagraha*.

The single-minded devotion to truth is what helps *satyagraha* to avoid the attachment to sense-objects that normally preoccupy us. The subtitle chosen for his *Autobiography – The Story of My Experiments with Truth* – is instructive in that it reveals how, using the *Gita* as guide, Gandhi came to understand himself and his work. In his later life, he was very clear that he wanted his life to revolve around truth: “But I worship God as Truth only I have not yet found Him, but I am seeking after Him. I am prepared to sacrifice the things dearest to me in pursuit of this quest. Even if the sacrifice demanded be my very life, I hope I may be prepared to give

it” (Gandhi, 1982: 15). To Gandhi, truth meant above all “truthfulness”: the determination to make one’s life a true reflection of one’s beliefs and commitments. Narayan Desai, who spent the first two decades of his life in Gandhi’s *ashrams* at Sabarmati and Sevagram, noted that it was his “crystal clear transparency” that made Gandhi unique: “There was no discord or deviation between his thought, word and deed” (Desai, 1999: loc. 162).

The concern with truthfulness leads to a concern with the concrete, minute details of everyday life. For example, if I am committed to justice, I must examine every aspect of my life in order to establish how much my way of being in the world entails, and relies on injustice: the food I consume, the clothes I wear, the products I use, how much injustice is implied in the texture of social practices that I have come to rely on? Are the clothes I wear priced cheaply because the methods of production are exploitative? And if I cannot be sure, am I not obliged to ensure that I know how my life is sustained, and the moral cost of it? And if I find that there are aspects of my way of life that are not in congruence with the truth I cherish, am I not compelled to change my life *at once* in order to make it a more perfect manifestation of this truth? Truth, for Gandhi, was therefore an existential concern. It required introspection in order to identify and clarify the truth that should govern life, as well as the willingness to surrender to truth, to change one’s life accordingly and to accept and suffer the consequences. To live truthfully meant to live *as if I was free*, to act in a manner that allowed me to be at one with myself, to make my life a true and transparent incarnation of my convictions.

Truthfulness comes with its own power – it empowers people – and it is at the centre of what Gandhi called *satyagraha*. *Satyagraha*, for Gandhi, was the infallible antidote to injustice and evil. Evil, Gandhi noted, “cannot by itself flourish in this world. It can do so only if it is allied with some good” (Gandhi, 2009: 4). People are tricked into tolerating and promoting evil amongst them, because they are made to fear the consequences of doing otherwise, or they fool themselves into believing that their desires will be satisfied through their complicity. In the language of the *Gita*, we can say that it is attachment to the fruits of action that makes us vulnerable to the machinations of power and evil. Power entices us to become complicit by offering us rewards or by threatening punishments – but non-attachment as taught by the *Gita* will make us immune to such enticements (Chakrabarty and Majumdar 2010). Therefore, if I am serious about defeating evil, my first step must be to courageously withdraw myself from it – to examine my life in every detail, to establish how my way of life has allied with it, and to eliminate it from my own habits, my own actions, my own thoughts and feelings, and to habituate non-attachment. If everyone does this, evil will be starved of the life-support that it feeds on, and over time it will evaporate.

The site of the quest for truth is the here and now, the mundane fabric of everyday life. As Uday Singh Mehta noted, for Gandhi, it was the everyday, even in its most banal form, that supplied “the very material through which one gives ethical substance to one’s life” (Mehta, 2010: 358). The power of *satyagraha* was available to everyone, everywhere, always. Here and now, I can examine my life, and I can withdraw whatever tacit or explicit support I may give to the concrete injustice surrounding me. My “conversion” will surely attract the attention of those who have vested interests in perpetuating the injustice I am leaving behind, but at the same time it may serve as an inspiration for others to follow my example. This quest for truth does not require the “elevated gravity of the political”, which as Gandhi observed, always had “larger purposes” (Mehta 2010). Gandhi was suspicious of the abstraction and teleology implicit in modern politics, which assumed that purposeful change required collective

organisation; and that transformative political action was to be predicated on the ability to determine the likelihood of desired outcomes. In this sense, Gandhi was a profoundly anti-political thinker and activist. He did not share the founding orientations of modern politics, which to him amounted to an indefinite deferral: we will accept violence now in order to enjoy peace in some future; we will tolerate injustice now in order to create justice for everyone in some future, and we will change *only* if everyone else does so too. This, in fact, is the reason why he so often *appeared* to accept the terms in which social life was given: change was never preconditioned upon a “political” transformation of these terms, which would require collective action, political organisation, i.e. time and resources. Change *can* take roots from within any given terms, at any time, and it starts with me examining how my life sustains those terms, and changing accordingly. I must not wait for politics to resolve the problem for me in some indefinite future.

In fact, when Gandhi wrote and spoke about home-rule, *swaraj*, he had in mind the ability of individuals and communities to take control of their own truth quest, a spiritual and practical ambition much more holistic and comprehensive than mere political independence – and an ambition that Indians could begin to realise immediately even without political independence, with the latter being a mere side effect of genuine *swaraj*. Gandhi’s first book, entitled *Indian Home Rule (Hind swaraj)*, and written shortly after his imprisonment in 1908/9 after the *satyagraha* offered against the Black Act, outlined his vision for his home country. However, the book did not provide a political vision or programme, but a criticism of his compatriots. As Gandhi explained, the reason for India’s situation, as a victim of British colonialism, is that Indian society itself is deeply divided, caste-ridden, conformist, fragmented, selfish, cowardly, demoralised, dirty, and lacking in social conscience and civic virtues: “The English have not taken India; we have given it to them. They are not in India because of their strength, but because we keep them” (Gandhi, 2012: 32). Political independence, Gandhi concluded, was not the solution to India’s problems. Rather, what was needed was a programme of Indian “regeneration”, what he came to call the Constructive Programme.

The main culprit in Gandhi’s analysis is “modern civilisation”, which leads people into dependencies. Worldly pursuits are replacing spiritual pursuits; railways are cutting up India, separating people rather than holding them together. He rebukes the lawyers, his old profession, for having enslaved Indians – instead of resolving issues amicably through direct contacts and negotiations, an entire legal industry was created driven by self-interest and profit. Court cases do not aim to resolve issues; instead, litigation is unashamedly about money-making – for lawyers and clients. Similarly, the medical profession no longer encourages patients to adopt healthier life-styles, but instead makes money by making us dependent on medicine which will manage our symptoms while allowing us to perpetuate unhealthy habits. The English, Gandhi observes, are victims of the same disease, and they are spreading it to India. In contrast, Gandhi’s Constructive Programme was to promote Hindu-Muslim unity, the removal of untouchability, the prohibition of alcohol, the use of khadi, the development of village industries, craft-based education, equality for women, health education, helping lepers and beggars, cultivating respect for animals, the use of indigenous languages, the adoption of a common national language, creating and supporting workers’ organisations, helping peasants etc.

Gandhi’s diagnosis of the problems of India highlighted the national and indeed civilizational costs of attachment. The Indians had become complicit in the British rule; too

many were benefiting from having the British in the country. As a result of having become attached to the shallow and material promises of modernity, they had lost the ability to be morally in control of themselves. Home-rule meant to regain this ability individually and collectively, and it required a regeneration based on the detachment from the “fruits” that English modernity introduced to India. Within Gandhi’s framework, inspired by the *Gita*, political independence was a secondary concern. The Indians had to work on themselves first so that they could be worthy of independence and self-government. Gandhi’s *swaraj* was a form of self-overcoming, a weaning off dependencies that were alien to Indian culture. Political independence would follow as a corollary of this process. Clearly, declaring independence from Britain a primary objective of the campaign would fall foul of the *Gita*’s injunction to not be preoccupied with the “fruit” of action.

The *satyagraha* campaigns included activities such as *hartals*, non-cooperation with the British institutions, non-compliance with discriminatory laws, fasts, and new and innovative protests such as e.g. the Salt March with its culmination in the illegal production of salt on the Dandi beaches. By refusing to become complicit with the injustice of the day, and by accepting the punishment that would inevitably follow, Gandhi and his disciples both challenged injustice, increasing the costs of sustaining it, and surrendered to it, absorbing the oppressor’s violence and thereby making it visible for all to see. As a reversal of the principles of traditional political campaigns, *satyagraha* does not attempt to vindicate truth by inflicting suffering on the opponent but by absorbing the opponent’s violence. In order to be able to be steadfast in their quest to remain true to themselves, even as they or people close to them suffer as a result of their stance, the *satyagrahi* will undergo a process of self-purification; they will have to learn to overcome their self-interests, gain in authenticity as they do so, and thereby demonstrate to their opponents that the normal workings of power will not work on them. The power of *satyagraha* was not lost on the contemporaries:

Persons in power should be very careful how they deal with a man who cares nothing for sensual pleasure, nothing for riches, nothing for comfort or praise or promotion, but is simply determined to do what he believes to be right. He is a dangerous and uncomfortable enemy – because his body, which you can always conquer, gives you so little purchase upon his soul (Murray, 1918: 201)

For Gandhi, of course, the main impact of *satyagraha* was that the voluntary suffering of the *satyagrahi*, if endured over a sufficiently long period of time, would eventually evoke compassion and soften the hearts even of the oppressors, helping them retrieve their own humanity and liberating them from their own attachments. It is this conversion of the oppressor that will in the end lead to lasting change.

### **Apophatic leadership: the leader as touchstone**

It is important to appreciate the implications of Gandhi’s outlook for the kind of leadership he was able to provide. Because Gandhi entered the Western imagination mainly in a political context, as a “patriot” (Doke) and the perceived leader of an independence movement, he was considered a political leader, even if of a peculiar kind, who motivated his followers to sacrifice themselves in support of a common goal, political independence. However, as we noted above,



Gandhi understood the *Gita* as a manual for achieving and living a *sattvic* consciousness, which cannot be manipulated to act against its own convictions. In fact, Gandhi's diagnosis of the Indian situation highlighted the problems of externalization – i.e. the manner in which the Indians had outsourced their agency to the institutions and routines of modernity. As an educator, therefore, he faced the paradoxical task of encouraging his compatriots to detach themselves from externalisations, to make their own choices, and follow their own rather than Gandhi's moral compass. The *Gita's* injunction, to not be preoccupied with the fruit of action, is situated at a level that is beneath, or prior to, the formulation of individual or collective goals for it addresses the very relationship we have with, and our attitude to, the goals we pursue.

If we look at Gandhi outside the political context of his campaigns, and focus on the impact he had on those who encountered him, we get a glimpse of the influence he had on those who were close to him. Eyewitnesses and followers who encountered Gandhi personally would often recall the encounter as one of the greatest spiritual experiences of their lives, for Gandhi appeared to have shown them, by example, a path towards a better version of themselves. Agnes M. Phillips, who met Gandhi in South Africa, found it difficult to articulate her impressions, but recognised in Gandhi a “master”, a teacher, whose “ ‘simplicity and integrity were very manifest [...]’. He made one think of the deeper things of life and religion without any apparent effort on his part. [...] His influence was such that it was impossible to do or even to think meanly’ ” (as in Shukla, 1951: 193). Henry S. L. Polak wrote that, in his first visit to Gandhi, he felt that he was “ ‘in the presence of a moral giant, whose pellucid soul is a clear, still lake, in which one sees Truth clearly mirrored’ ” (45). Karel Hujer, who spent time with Gandhi in Wardha, India, in 1935, found his first sight of Gandhi “ ‘the most inspiring moment of [his] life’ ”, because in Gandhi's presence, he “ ‘realised that boundless spiritual beauty which lifts the soul above this world’ ” (129). Asaf Ali noted Gandhi's “ ‘penetrating appeal to what is noble in human nature’ ” (18), an appeal which was always also a personal appeal, bringing listeners, through their attraction to him, to recognize what is noble in them. And, in turn, as his listeners came to discover the higher, more noble dimensions of their souls, they would commit themselves to act upon their discovery: “ ‘I remember when we left his presence, how overcome we were at the thought of what we had promised to do!’ ” (Hansa Mehta, in *Ibid.*: 179) And Doke noted, as mentioned previously, how visitors would “feel ashamed of themselves in his presence.”

Gandhi pursued his spiritual quest with vigilance, intensity and energy – attributes which were easily mistaken for political purposefulness. Yet, those who abandoned their former lives in order to follow him, to take part in his campaigns and become *satyagrahi*, and to live with him in his *ashrams*, did so because in terms of the sacrifices he was willing to make in order to become as transparent and as pure an embodiment of the truth he wished to represent, he was prepared to go further than most. “ ‘Well’ ”, he said to Doke at some point, “ ‘it is a matter with me of complete surrender. I am nothing, I am willing to die at any time. Or to do anything for the cause’ ” (as in Doke, 1909: 9). The accounts of these eyewitnesses suggest that the encounter with Gandhi presented them with the vision of a more devoted, more deliberate life that *they too could live*. Already Gokhale had observed in Gandhi the “ ‘marvelous spiritual power to turn ordinary men into heroes and martyrs’ ” (as in Weber, 2004: 50). Through their encounters with Gandhi, these ordinary men and women discovered hitherto unknown possibilities *in themselves*, and often they felt empowered to act upon those possibilities. Interestingly, for devotees like Herman Kallenbach, their ability to sustain this better version of

themselves depended on their physical proximity to the Mahatma. Without Gandhi's direct and daily influence, he fell back into his old ways.

In the many personal relationships that he maintained – at peak times, Gandhi would write approximately sixty letters per day – and even by proxy, Gandhi served the role of a *basanos*, of a touchstone. In Greek antiquity, the word *basanos* referred to a dark-coloured slate on which pure gold, when rubbed, left a coloured mark, which helped bankers and money changers assess the value of the many coins circulating throughout the Aegean world. The term was also used, however, as a metaphor for a tool, instrument or process that could reveal the truth behind appearances. For example, the metaphor is used in some of the Platonic dialogues, and in one of them, the *Laches*, one of Socrates's interlocutors implies that being drawn into a conversation with Socrates was like being rubbed against a touchstone (187E-188B). Evoking the figure of Socrates in the context of Gandhian ethics is not accidental, because Gandhi translated the *Apology* into Gujarati in 1908, at a time when he was re-reading the Gita and developing *satyagraha* as concept and practice. Socrates, for Gandhi, was a soldier of truth, “‘a great *satyagrahi*’ ” (as in Vasunia 2015: 177-178). Personal recollections of conversations with Gandhi frequently reveal a similar touchstone effect, as e.g. when he persuades a very young Kamalnayan Bajaj to admit that his silk, gold-embroidered cap was *less* beautiful than Gandhi's white, plain cotton cap that he wore with his *dboti* (in Shukla, 1951: 26-27). The conversation allows Gandhi to disabuse young Kamalnayan of his attachment to his expensive clothing. Bajaj recognises the moment when he was “‘caught’” by Gandhi in the conversation, feeling embarrassed, but through Gandhi's reassurance the embarrassment was turned into an invitation for self-improvement.

While some resented the embarrassment of an encounter in which they were made aware of their attachments and dependencies, and consequently blamed Gandhi, others were willing to search for the cause of the embarrassment in themselves, and thus to consider the possibility of a better, truer notion of themselves. To different degrees, therefore, Gandhi's touchstone effect placed the individual members of his audience in a liminal situation between the hope that they may be able to sustain this truer notion of themselves and the fear that they may fail. “‘Sustaining’” means here that they succeed in allowing their heightened sense of self permeate their being and their actions – that they reach out to that nobler version of themselves that Gandhi enabled them to see dimly. “‘Failing’” means that they do not recognise how they are implicated in the liminality of the touchstone encounter – that the insights gained, the hope and the fear, are deferred to the realm of politics, or that the effect is externalised by locating it with the agent of the touchstone effect. Gandhi, they may say, has moved them not because of the truth he helped them discover about themselves, but because of a peculiar quality that is unique to him – “‘charisma’”, as used in theories of charismatic leadership, is a typical example. By attributing charisma to the agent of the touchstone effect, we deflect its impact – after all, I am not implied and no change is required to live up to the glimpse of truth I was permitted to see. The attribution of charisma is a short-circuit of the touchstone liminality: it allows us to freeze in admiration where we should seek self-improvement in accordance with what we have seen.

The touchstone effect in this relationship is all the more powerful, the less the witness of the effect is able to attribute it to the agent, thus externalizing the liminality. It is to Gandhi's credit that he was able to make it so very difficult, both during his lifetime and posthumously, to let himself be objectified through attribution. Even his critics acknowledge that “‘as a man,

he [was] most remarkable for making every day, perhaps every minute, a matter of reaching forward, for never settling in any one place in his long, intricate spiritual journey” (Adams, 2010: 283), making it hard to nail attributes to him. As he grew older and embraced the spirit of the *Gita*, he was able to gradually detach himself from the fruits that once preoccupied his desires. The *Autobiography* is a record of this gradual detachment. The man who once lied to his parents, stole, ate meat and smoked; the man who was in the grip of lust, and who, while in London, liked to dress as Englishmen do and who wanted to take up ballroom dancing – this man gradually disappears from view. Remarkably, the process of asceticism and purification not only continues but is intensified in the furnace of public and political life, as his single-minded devotion to truth reduces him figuratively and literally to near-nakedness, to an existence that is almost entirely nourished by itself. The singularity that is Gandhi’s life cannot be anything but an enigma – as no attributes easily attach themselves to the man who lived non-attachment. For those who were caught in the liminality of the touchstone effect, this meant that they were, in fact, left on their own to figure out how they would respond to the truer version of themselves that Gandhi had helped them see. As Veena Howard has explained in great detail, Gandhi’s activism was ascetic – he did not assert himself but, on the contrary, he surrendered to this work and he was honed and purified in the process, turning himself into a singular embodiment of truth. We shall call this influence, which Gandhi had on his followers and, possibly, also his enemies, *apophatic leadership* – from Greek *apophatikós*, the adjective derivative of *apophasis*, “denial”. Medieval Latin had *apophaticus*, meaning “negative, negating.” Apophatic leadership draws on the liminality of the touchstone effect, but then negates externalisation as the agent of the touchstone effect has turned himself into a singularity, a pure presence, forcing us to examine *our* lives as we respond to him.

### **Concluding reflections**

Other interesting examples of apophatic leadership could be added to Gandhi, including examples that involved poetic inspiration. In his philosophical writings, Karol Wojtyła, better known as Pope John Paul II, developed a notion of personhood which centred on what he called the “Law of the Gift”, whereby “it is precisely when one becomes a gift for others that one most fully becomes oneself” (Wojtyła, 1993: 194). However, this gift was to be a disinterested or “transutilitarian” gift, because a gift that we give with a purpose, e.g. with the expectation of a reward, is not really a gift of ourselves but, on the contrary, a projection of ourselves into the future. “ ‘In interhuman relationships’ ”, Wojtyła explained, “ ‘the disinterested gift [of the person] stands at the basis of the whole order of love and the whole authenticity of love’ ”, adding “ ‘for freedom is measured by the love of which we are capable’ ” (as in Frossard, 1984: 126) The ideas were inspired by Wojtyła’s reading of St John of the Cross’s poetic work, especially *The Dark Night of the Soul* and the *Spiritual Canticle*. In turn, St John’s poetry and commentaries drew on years of reflection upon the “strange figures and likenesses” (St John of the Cross, 1979: 408) of the *Song of Songs*, the shortest book in the Old Testament. Lay teacher Jan Tyranowski introduced Wojtyła to St John of the Cross in early 1940, and Wojtyła confirmed that “ ‘ever since then I have found him [St John of the Cross] a friend and master who has shown me the light that shines in the darkness for walking always toward God’ ” (as in Weigel, 2005: 61-62). The Law of the Gift is implicit in St John’s account of the encounter between the human soul and God, which he described as a “spiritual

marriage” involving the “mutual surrender of God and soul” in a manner that is “free” and “disinterested”, i.e. as a reciprocal relation of self-giving. (St John of the Cross, 1979: 499, 517, 526) This union with God, however, requires a self-emptying of the soul so as to create space for God to dwell in, and the self-emptying is a gradual overcoming of the attachments that have come to crowd out our awareness. During his first pilgrimage to Poland in June 1979, John Paul II delivered 32 sermons, preaching not an insurrection against European communism but the “final revolution”, the revolution of the spirit in which conscience confronted the fear and acquiescence that kept the Polish people in the grip of power. The revolution of the spirit is an inward revolution, a conversion, that forces us to recognise our complicity in the evil that surrounds us. The Polish nation was, the Pope declared, a “land of a particularly responsible witness”, and each individual Pole had to ask him- or herself: Am I as responsible as I should? (Wojtyla, 1979) Wojtyla’s sermons targeted “dishonourable living”, a life of deception, of fear, of greed, of self-interest, that had become attached to the fruits and rewards of complicity.

Apophatic leadership, as I have tried to discuss and explore it in this paper, is not just yet another type to be added to the long lists of “types” that crowd the introductory textbooks on leadership. In that it highlights influence that is effective prior to the formulation of goals, it raises wider questions about the very idea of leadership as a goal-oriented activity. Before goals are formulated and taken for granted, the apophatic leader says, we must know who we are and who we can become. We must review our attachments and dependencies and thereby restore our agency, and reclaim our actions as ours. Apophatic leadership is “negative” – hence the label – in that it leads precisely by *not* setting goals, but by asking those who care to listen to review their attachments to fruits. By not speculating about the fruits of one’s actions, we become free to consider the truth and justice of what we do. While in this sense, apophatic leadership is “negative”, its impact can be liberating, empowering, positive. The challenge for apophatic leaders is paradoxical, because the detachment that they may be able to evoke among their listeners must not replace previous attachments with an attachment to their leadership. If it is successful in helping others to not hanker after fruit, apophatic leadership is genuinely “poetic” in the true sense of the word, for it empowers others to creatively and courageously shape their lives in accordance with the principles they hold dear.

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