

Article

A Virtual Dialogue between Gandhi and Levinas

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Abstract: Mahatma Gandhi and Emmanuel Levinas have much in common. They interpret religion in a radical ethical way and develop an ethical hermeneutics of religious sources. Levinas's thoughts on a holy history, not to be confused with history, are comparable with Gandhi's *swaraj* as the spiritual independence and self-transformation of India. Escaping war logics, they maintain a "beyond the state" in the state and insert ethics in politics. Yet, Gandhi's ethico-politics works with radical interrelatedness, whereas Levinas differentiates more between the self and the other. Gandhi trusted that, in the end, the good would vanquish evil. Levinas, in turn, did not venture into the future: the present was under "eschatological judgment." Gandhi's love of the enemy and his attempt to soften the opponent's heart are absent in Levinas's metaphysics. In addition, Levinas does not radically deconstruct the term self-defense, although Gandhi notoriously made also exceptions to his *ahimsa*. A dialogue can be established between Levinas's ethical metaphysics and Gandhi's *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*. Both thinkers make a radical critique of a peace based on rational contracts and equate peace with universal brother- and sisterhood. Without underestimating the many similarities between Levinas and Gandhi, I also highlight their dissimilarities. I argue that precisely the differences between both thinkers allow for a "trans-different" dialogue, which respects specificities and promotes communication, in a movement of hospitality and mutual learning.



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1. A Virtual Dialogue Between Gandhi and Levinas

In his Introduction to *Dialogue as a Trans-disciplinary Concept*, Paul Mendes-Flohr strikingly notes that what characterizes Martin Buber's work in manifold fields is "the principle of dialogue, which he employed as a comprehensive hermeneutic method" (Mendes-Flohr 2015, p. 3). Buber indeed created a conversation between various disciplines. Paul aptly describes Buber's dialogue as an agenda-less listening, a readiness to hear other voices without prejudice. Such a deep listening could eventually lead the partner in dialogue to change her mind. In this article, offered to Paul on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, I propose a virtual encounter between the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and the political ethicist Mahatma Gandhi. Levinas and Gandhi are dissimilar. Their voices come from different worlds, but since we live in *one* world, a Buberian "*zwischen*" (between) may be established between them.

Gandhi and Levinas have much in common when it comes to the relation between ethics and politics. Notwithstanding their many affinities, there are also significant differences. I argue that the differences between both thinkers allow for a "trans-different" dialogue, which respects specificities and promotes communication, in a movement of hospitality and mutual learning.

The Dharma of Non-Violence and the Dharma of Self-Protection

In the three Dharma traditions of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism, non-violence figures prominently. For Gandhi, *ahimsa* (non-violence) together with *satya* (Truth) are central in his struggle for *swaraj* (self-rule). Veena R. Howard raises the question if the *dharma* of non-violence and the *dharma* of self-protection are reconcilable (Howard 2018, pp. 80–81). Indeed, how can we simultaneously think of non-violence as the highest Hindu

value and of the necessary violence against violent people? In her most recent book, Judith Butler refers to Gandhi and radically deconstructs the term self-defense (Butler 2020). She makes the reader public aware that much violence hides in the current use of the word self-defense. She problematizes self-defense in her approach of the self as fundamentally related. Radical active non-violence could lead to a rupture of the eternal return of violence.

The heroic words by a Tibetan monk, who countered violence with love and compassion, show how far a human being may go in returning good for evil. For Gandhi, Buddhism belonged to Hinduism. For thirty-three years, the Tibetan Buddhist monk Palden Guyatso was kept by the Chinese in prison. Here are his amazing words: “If I was to list the methods of torture used on me it would be endless. [. . .] My biggest fear was losing compassion for my torturers. You are receiving the anger and hatred and exchanging it with your love and compassion to that ignorant person who is torturing you. [. . .] Whatever I learned [as a monk] I put into practice during my severe torture.” In vain one looks in Levinas’s philosophy for a compassionate attitude towards the torturer.

The worlds of Gandhi and Levinas differ, and, at first sight, they are rather incomparable. A closer look allows us for a more nuanced picture. Along with the differences, there are also many correspondences.

2. Differences and Similarities

In this section, I describe what is common to Gandhi and Levinas and where they differ. Gandhi strived to change the situation of Indians under the British colonial rule by practicing and advising *ahimsa* as a means of reestablishing positive interconnectedness and interdependence. It was his conviction that violence inevitably engenders violence and that *ahimsa* was the way out of this never-ending spiral. Active non-violence as a practice was a protest against inequality, humiliation and nullification. It restored equality and rendered oppressed and oppressors their dignity. The practice of active non-violence was for Gandhi the aim of humankind.¹ Instead of maintaining the relation between colonizer and the colonized, he started thinking on a non-violent way of creating a new, broadened, interpersonal and intercultural ‘we’. The means of the practice of non-violence and its end were one. Confronted with a robber, for instance, one could adopt the force of love and pity, confuse him and make him change his mind instead of using arms and reacting out of anger. (Gandhi 2009a, pp. 81–82). The force of arms was opposed to love-force or soul-force (ibid., p. 83).

Gandhi trusted that, in the end, the good would vanquish evil. In contradistinction with Gandhi, Levinas did not venture into the future: the present was under “eschatological judgment,” beyond history (Levinas 1969, p. 23). Moreover, Gandhi’s love of the enemy and his attempt to soften the opponent’s heart are absent in Levinas’s metaphysics. Although Gandhi was not a radical pacifist and made exceptions to his *ahimsa*, if necessary, Levinas attaches more weight to self-defense in the post-holocaust period. Compared with Gandhi’s ethico-politics that worked with radical interrelatedness as a remedy against contagious evil, Levinas differentiates more between the self and the other. Whereas Gandhi develops an ontology of love, Levinas formulates a metaphysical “beyond being” that inserts meaning into the being. For Levinas, the being was violent. Gandhi, too, was aware of the contrast between what he called the divine “law of nature” and problematic history. However, he believed in the basic goodness of the human being and saw even the tiniest bit of good in his enemies (although he realistically recognized the problems in human beings and in himself). As a follower of the monistic Advaita Vedanta tradition, he trusted that, in the end, love would vanquish: *satyagraha* could not be defeated.

Notwithstanding the differences between the two, Gandhi’s non-violence goes along with Levinas’s philosophical project, in which metaphysics as the non-allergic relation to the other precedes ontology. For Levinas, ontology is not the end of metaphysics. Ethics as beyond being is first philosophy. In his masterpiece *Totality and Infinity*, he writes about the epiphany of the other, from whose face comes the imperative “Thou shall not kill” (Levinas 1969, pp. 197–201). This always exterior command constitutes the I. In

disinterested service of the other, in metaphysical Desire, the I has the idea of the Infinite in him. The Infinite as the more in the less overflows the I. The I is, therefore, commanded: the Infinite is in-finite.

In the introductory pages of his *summmum opus*, Levinas writes that, according to Heraclites, the being manifests itself as war. For Gandhi, too, history was “a record of the wars of the world,” in which soul-force or *satyagraha* is not noticed (Gandhi 2009a, p. 88). Yet, he trusted that, finally, with pity, humankind would come to its full realization. The human being, although imperfect and a *samsarin* destined to many rebirths, could become perfect, not as the Ultimate, but nevertheless godlike. The good would overcome the bad. Levinas focuses upon the present. He asks the difficult question if we are not duped by morality (Levinas 1969, p. 21). The being develops violently and, therefore, one has to ask the question if it is not necessary to be a wolf against wolves. Notwithstanding the fact that being develops as evil, Levinas maintains that the good remains possible and that it is necessary for humankind. He defines ontology, foremost in Heidegger’s philosophy, as a philosophy of injustice. The being is, therefore, not the generous Heideggerian “*es gibt*,” but problematic and full of interest. To be or not to be is, therefore, not the question; the question is how to be. Both Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* and Gandhi focus upon the relatedness of the I, her belonging to others and her non-violent responsibility. Both challenged the logics of war. Like Gandhi, Levinas deemed that ethics and “religion” without politics as well as politics without ethics or “religion” are problematic.

Levinas’s second *summmum opus*, *Otherwise than Being*, pays attention to the I, who is accused, summoned to respond, unable to escape the election and therefore persecuted, hostage, subjected, exposed without possibility of retreat (Levinas 1991a, pp. 110–12, 114, 125). Here, the parallel with Gandhi is almost perfect. In a spirit of detachment and self-renunciation, the Gandhian subject is the servant of others (Chatterjee 1983, p. 39). It is the self-purifying, suffering I, who is elected to be there for the other and to arouse her goodness. Although Gandhi’s suffering is frequently self-purification from his own failures, he also suffers from and for the suffering of others. Levinas describes the I as expiating. (Levinas 1991a, p. 118) The I is the I-for-the-other, “*me voici*”, “here I am for you”, in Hebrew, *hinèni*. His language is particularly sharp: Levinas foregrounds the passivity of being called, the unescapable assignation, in never-ending responsibility. “Substitution” is the key word: “The self, a hostage, is already substituted for the others. ‘I am an other,’ but this is not the alienation Rimbaud refers to. I am outside of any place, in myself, on the hither side of the autonomy of auto-affection and identity resting on itself” (ibid.). I have the other in my skin (ibid., pp. 114–15). For Gandhi too, the I is there for the other, without persevering in the being, against the Spinozian *conatus essendi*. Gandhi was inspired by Jesus’s words in the Sermon of the Mount. This reminds one of Levinas, who writes: “The subjectivity of a subject is responsibility of being-in-question in the form of the total exposure to offence in the cheek offered to the smiter” (ibid., p. 111). Would Levinas adopt Gandhi’s motto “love the enemy” (Matthew 5:44) and approach, like Gandhi, the opponent as interlocutor? This question came to my mind by reading Victoria Tahmasebi-Birgani’s book on Levinas.

3. Dialogue Based on Affinities

Tahmasebi-Birgani establishes a dialogue between Levinas’s philosophy and Gandhi’s *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* (Tahmasebi-Birgani 2014, pp. 115–62). Both make a radical critique of the rational peace of the bourgeois and propose a kind of peace that replaces the fear of the other with the fear for the other. Like Gandhi, Levinas fears more the death of the other than his own death (Levinas 1969, pp. 244–46). Tahmasebi-Birgani admits that Levinas does not bring ethical speech into contact with liberatory praxis (Tahmasebi-Birgani 2014, p. 137). Neither is it clear for her “what role, if any, his notion of substitution plays in the political” (ibid., p. 145). She nevertheless establishes a link between Levinas’s substitution and the praxis of liberation. She argues that Levinas gave only a few concrete examples of liberation, but that Gandhi provides eminent examples of Levinas’s eschatological

peace and his substituting praxis (ibid., pp. 12–13, 126). In this way, Gandhi's religiously motivated politics complements Levinas's ethical project.

Tahmasebi-Birgani describes well how Levinas's eschatology is exterior to totality and, as such, is an alternative to the logic of war. Both Gandhi and Levinas reject a liberal approach to politics, make a critique of the autonomous, rational subject and ground the responsibility for the other in the corporeal and material subject (ibid., pp. 116, 119, 123). For both, peace is not the opposite of war (ibid., p. 127). They do not believe in a peace that is the result of armistices or stalemate. Peace is higher; it stems from the suffering for the suffering of the other. Responsibility, even for the fault of others, is common to both (ibid., pp. 145, 147–48).

Gandhi's ethico-politics comes, indeed, close to Levinas's reflections in his article "Peace and Proximity," where the relationship between peace as the result of rational thinking and peace as proximity is discussed (Levinas 1996). Peace, as the response to a call, is higher than peace as the interruption of war through contracts. It is foremost a relation to alterity. Levinas's and Gandhi's discourse is, therefore, less on freedom and rights of the individual than on relationality. In Levinas's humanism of the other, one is one's brother's keeper. This humanism of the other is elevated over classical humanism with its focus on human rights. Gandhi's *satyagraha* actively resists the colonial injustice of the British. He avoided hurting his opponents and gave them the opportunity of becoming aware of their inequity. He preserved the dignity of the oppressor, but also of the oppressed. He aimed at a restriction of violence that always produced violence.

Like Levinas, Gandhi changed the narrative of rights into a narrative of duties: "Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty" (Gandhi 2009a, p. 65). Good conduct or mastery over one's passions and over the restless mind was the Gujarati equivalent for civilization.

A remarkable parallel exists between Gandhi's care for others in hospitality and Levinas's notion of infinite responsibility when confronted with the other's face.² Like Gandhi, who regarded the illness of others as an imperative or call for himself, Levinas deemed that the suffering of the other is a cry for help, an urgent demand to the I, who becomes the one-for-the-other.³ In the perspective of Levinas's ethical metaphysics, the suffering for the suffering of someone else is a meaningful suffering (Levinas 1988, p. 159). Gandhi can be seen as a kind of "Suffering Servant," who felt the pain of others and acted out of a duty of care (Isaiah 42:1–2; 49:1–6; 50:4–7; 52:13; 53:12). His experiment with time as a time-out devoted to the palliative care for the ill—be it a friend or a foe, at home or on the battlefield—finds its parallel in Levinas's understanding of time as time for the other, without self-interest (Levinas 1991b, p. 27). Both thinkers held proximity in high esteem.

Finally, Gandhi's concept of truth as born within an ethical life is reminiscent of Levinas's concept of fraternity and sorority as above logical truth and giving birth to it. For Levinas, the aim of truth is to bring peace and to be in proximity to the other. Truth is not only the logical truth of Athens, but the higher truth of the ethical praxis of Jerusalem. Contracts and peace treaties as rational compromises between nations are necessary, but they will be easily broken if one side becomes stronger than the other. The higher truth is the truth of peace, of communion with others, of a covenantal relationship within a liberating praxis of fraternity (Levinas 1984). This practical concept of a higher truth is shared by Gandhi, whose self-discipline and self-transcendence made it possible to create a community, in which the relation with the Divine was lived in the experiment of an extended family.

Whereas Tahmasebi-Birgani pays attention to the similarities between Gandhi and Levinas, I would like to also highlight their dissimilarities. The differences between Gandhi and Levinas make a fruitful dialogue between them possible. A virtual "trans-different" dialogue between their positions brings a platform of communication as well as respect for the specificity of their thoughts.

4. Dialogue as “Trans-Difference”

Unlike Gandhi, Levinas avoids speaking about love, because of its interested connotations. He prefers the term “responsibility” or the more religious term “holiness”. Levinas’s language is, of course, philosophical and phenomenological. He describes the ethical demand coming from the face of the other, in distinction to Kant, who grounded ethics in the categorical imperative of universal reason.

Aside from their different terminology, there are more basic differences between Levinas and Gandhi. Levinas did not want to transform or melt the heart of the enemy, as Gandhi tried to do, for instance, in the case of general Jan Smuts. Substitution, central in Levinas’s ethical subject, never means putting oneself in the shoes of the persecutor or oppressor. Gandhi’s love of the enemy and his attempt to soften the opponent’s heart are absent in Levinas’s ethical metaphysics. Levinas does not follow the path of the Gandhian care for the well-being of the enemy in order to transform him. Unlike Gandhi, he does not radically deconstruct the term self-defense: in his metaphysics, the self and the other are intimately linked, but not interchangeable.

More political than Levinas, Gandhi led the movement of civil disobedience and non-cooperation with the British Empire. Through his political activism, he wanted to create trust, to change the opponent, safeguard his dignity and lead him to the recognition of his injustice. Such elements are absent in Levinas’s writings. For him, one’s own people are also other to others and, therefore, self-defense is a duty. His insistence on substitution does not diminish his claim that one’s own people have the right to defend themselves. For Gandhi, non-violence was universal; Truth as inherently linked to *ahimsa*, the law of non-hurting, had to be realized. Gandhi’s exceptions on this rule were rather rare. He was aware of the impossibility of perfect *ahimsa*, but firmly believed in this eternal principle. Levinas also stressed the anarchic call of the other and the vulnerability in the face-to-face encounter, but foregrounded more the choice of the lesser of two evils, that is to say: the necessary, proportionate violence against violence. The Gandhian position that one is not allowed to lie in order to save a life, for instance, would not be shared by Levinas (Gandhi 2009a, p. 96).

In his ethics as primal philosophy, Levinas focuses on the human rights of the other in an asymmetrical relationship, which requires at least “justice” in a symmetrical relationship. Gandhi’s project was to liberate the oppressed as well as the oppressor. The Levinasian position limits the infinite responsibility when it comes to the relation with the third, who is already present in the original face-to-face relation. Speech as ethical peace is primordial and the social and political reality remains under the sceptre of this primordial, anarchic, face-to-face relation. Levinas, therefore, maintains the ethical imperative in concrete society. Even so, politics are a limitation of the infinite demand, the limitation of a Desire that feeds upon its own hunger. However, as Tahmasebi-Birgani knows well, in his philosophical writings, one looks in vain for the concrete way in which this ethical imperative is expressed in the political. Gandhi, in contrast, inserted unconditional love in politics.

Tahmasebi-Birgani shows the affinity between Gandhi’s penance for the sins of others and Levinas’s infinite responsibility, also for the responsibility of others. Levinas indeed went so far as to say that one is responsible even for one’s persecutor (Levinas 1998, p. 106), but he did not want to be misunderstood and immediately added that such an utterance has to be explained and asks for further explanation.⁴ He uses such a formula with utmost prudence, precisely because he worked with the notion of a justice that reckons with self-defense. Gandhi, in contrast, made penance for any harm to the opponent.

Tahmasebi-Birgani is right in arguing that Gandhi’s *satyagraha* has a close affinity with Levinas’s substitution. I wonder if she is right in maintaining that “Levinas would have agreed with Gandhi, who insisted that non-violence be the overriding principle of liberation” (Tahmasebi-Birgani 2014, p. 156). I agree with her that the third “embodies the demand for an equality that does not negate the asymmetry of the social [meaning: the ethical]” (ibid., p. 158). In a Levinasian perspective, the ethical is, indeed, never abandoned in the political. The Saying as the anarchic, face-to-face relation had to be formulated in the

Said of the social, which has always to be un-said and re-said without ever reaching the Saying. In his ethico-politics, Levinas avoids a Machiavellian state of Caesar without ethics as well as pure ethics. He criticizes the state with its violent means, but also those who remained in the purity of ethics without becoming engaged in an always messy world. His position allows for the criticism of any state with violent means as well as of those, who do not want to dirty their hands by becoming engaged in the world. The “beyond” the state is not without the state. All of this is similar to Gandhi. Yet, Gandhi’s ethico-politics works much more with a radical interrelatedness or inter-subjection, in which the self and the other are almost interchangeable. More than Gandhi, Levinas limits the infinite demand coming from the face of the other, putting boundaries to the infinity that characterizes the substitution.

I conclude that Tahmasebi-Birgani keenly observed the similarities between Gandhi and Levinas, but paid less attention to the differences between them. In his Talmudic readings, Levinas develops a political thinking, in which the dissimilarities with Gandhi’s thinking become clear.

5. The “Talmudic Readings” as Levinas’s Political Thinking

Elsewhere, I have shown that the professional, philosophical writings and the confessional, Jewish writings of Levinas are written in different languages but convey a similar message (Meir 2008). The two types of writing are complementary. In her recent book, Annabel Herzog, a political theorist, argues that Levinas’s phenomenological writings present his utopian ethics, whereas the Talmudic readings reflect practical politics. Unlike Tahmasebi-Birgani, she considers Levinas’s Talmudic readings to be a “philosophical product”: The Talmudic casuistry provided Levinas with paradigms of political reasoning that “display a coherent political thought” (Herzog 2020, pp. 5–6, 9; Meir 2021, pp. 145–90).

Levinas passed from ethics to politics, from the other (*autrui*) to all the others (*le tiers*). The Greek *polis* and the command “Thou shall not kill” as the lofty message of Jerusalem were not contradictory, but rather called for each other. Levinas’s comment on the Talmudic story of Rabbi Eleazar, son of Rashbi (Baba Metsia 83b) shows the necessity of politics and of the inherent violence of the army and police forces. Gandhi, too, did support defense forces, but he wanted to reduce them to a strict minimum. He was not an absolute pacifist and allowed violence, for instance as in the case of the military defense of Kashmir in 1947 or of the Polish against the Nazis in 1939. However, these cases are rare. He supported Indian recruitment for the British army in WWI and counted upon the British protection in case of a Japanese attack. He realistically acknowledged that a government cannot become entirely non-violent, since it represents and mirrors all the people. A government had to fight anarchy, but Gandhi strongly believed in the possibility of a predominantly non-violent society. He would allow violence against the violator of a helpless girl, for instance (CWMG 1999, 79:174). In the face of violence, he did not accept helplessness and condemned it as cowardice. Instead, he pleaded for courage to resist. Nevertheless, he preferred to say that he had not sufficient loving for non-violence in himself rather than admitting exceptions to what he calls “an eternal principle” (Gandhi 1968, p. 18).

Dissimilar to Gandhi and his “eternal principle,” Levinas thought that there is a kind of violence that is not only allowed, but necessary. Zionism, for instance, was not only a lofty ideal, it was a solution for persecuted Jews all over the world. It was the political power that assured the defense and survival of Jews. Simultaneously, Levinas criticized the state with the help of his “eschatological vision” (Levinas 1969, p. 23; Ben-Pazi 2017). Israel was the land that—in biblical parlance—vomits up its inhabitants if they commit injustice (Levinas 1990, p. 69). Zionism was, therefore, not like any other nationalism (Levinas 1989a, p. 271). In Gandhi’s eyes, too, *Hind swaraj*, the independence of India was first of all the independence and loftiness of the Indian soul. However, the Indian independence that strived to shake off British colonialism was not like the independence of Israel, which had to guarantee the Jewish survival.

Levinas's view on Zion differed from that of Gandhi. The former's Zionism diverged also from that of Buber. Paul Mendes-Flohr extensively wrote on Buber as a dissenter, a political activist and a man of peace. The Jewish–Arab coexistence was indeed at the heart of Buber's Zionism (Mendes-Flohr 2019, chp. 9). In his well-known reaction to Gandhi's disputed article on the Jews (in Germany and Palestine) in the newspaper *Harijan* of 26 November 1938, Buber disagreed with Gandhi's proposal of *satyagraha*. Concomitantly, he highlighted the dialogical character of his Zionism. Buber and Magnes admired Gandhi, but they opposed Gandhi's position that also contained the advice for the Jews in Germany to feel as German citizens and to adopt the courageous and lofty attitude of *ahimsa* (*Harijan*, 26 November 1938; CWMG 68, 137–41; Buber and Magnes 1939).

In 1965, Levinas offered his famous Talmudic readings, entitled "Promised Land or Permitted Land." He discussed Talmudic Tractate Sotah 34b–35a, a text that deals with the twelve spies whom Moses sent to explore the land of Canaan. The Talmudic discussion on the spies concerns the question whether the land is permitted or promised. The various justified and unjustified feelings of the spies are reflected upon by the Talmud and by Levinas's subtle and multiperspective reflections on the Talmud. Gandhi's perspective was quite different: Zionism was something in the heart, not linked to a concrete land that belonged to the Arabs. The Jews had to adopt *ahimsa* and to offer themselves to the goodwill of the Arabs.

The discrepancies between Levinas's and Gandhi's political philosophy are undeniable. The next section shows that they also differed in their approach to the Hebrew Bible.

6. Hermeneutics

Levinas and Gandhi developed an ethical hermeneutics of religious sources. Gandhi's allegorical reading of the Bhagavad Gita was of great importance in the development of his non-violent praxis (Bijlert 2016). He did not need scripture to support non-violence. In his personal experiments with Truth, he came to the conclusion that non-violence was the kernel of a reformed Hinduism. He turned *ahimsa* into a political method and into a universal moral attitude (Bijlert 2016, pp. 273–74). During his time studying in London, he read the English version of the book. In 1926, he read the Gita in Sanskrit and commented it (CWMG 37, 75–254). The overall teaching of the Gita was non-violence (Gandhi 1991, p. 12). The battle of the Gita was symbolic, it was in the heart (ibid., p. 15): "Krishna is the *atman* in us, who is our charioteer. We can win only if we hand over the reins of the chariot to him" (Gandhi 2009b, p. 30). For Gandhi, non-violence leads to *moksha*, spiritual liberation. His interpretation of the Gita differed substantially from that of Hindu nationalistic revolutionaries, who were inspired by Krishna's advice to Arjuna, a *Kstriya*. Arjuna had to punish the wicked. Rabindranath Tagore and Gandhi disagreed with the violent actions of these militants. They embraced non-violence and developed universal love and brotherhood. Steadfast in the Truth and through patience, Gandhi discovered that one's opponent had to be convinced of his error. This patience meant self-suffering: "So the doctrine came to mean vindication of truth not by infliction of suffering on the opponent, but on one's self" (Gandhi 1992, p. 114).

Gandhi contrasted the Jewish law of retaliation to Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount on the turning of one's cheek to the aggressor. He loved the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5:38–39 reads: "You have heard that it was said, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." These words are part of a larger section (Matthew 5:21–48), which is frequently interpreted as a series of antitheses. Yet, they rather attest to an intensification or a radicalization (Levine and Brettler 2011, pp. 11–12).⁵ Gandhi, however, interpreted these verses antithetically. Following a classical Christian interpretation, he contrasted the loftiness of the Christian message of love with the *lex talionis*, the obsolete Jewish mentality of retaliation.⁶ Matthew 5:43–44 reads: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (comp. Rom. 12:14–20). The sentence

“hate your enemy” is absent in the Hebrew Bible (Levine and Brettler 2011, p. 12; Coogan 2010, p. 1754). Nevertheless, Gandhi was fond of these verses, and he tried to persuade his Jewish friend Hermann Kallenbach to pray for Hitler, which was impossible for Kallenbach.

Gandhi’s view on religions was broad. Yet, he inherited Christian supersessionism and what René Girard calls its mimetic desire. Much like Simone Weil, he contrasted a powerful Jewish God with the loving Christian God. At the same time, Gandhi was aware that Christianity had not shown that it holds the key to non-violent behaviour. In pointing to the violent elements in Judaism, which were contrasted to the lofty message of the Sermon on the Mountain, he fell in the trap of supersessionist thinking. In preferring the non-violent New Testament above the Old Testament, he put the Old Testament God of power in the category of false religion. He did not like the Old Testament. In 1938, he wrote in *Harijan* that Kallenbach and thousands of Jews “have no thought even of ‘loving the enemy’,” for them “revenge is sweet, to forgive is divine” (*Harijan*, 18 February 1939). He did not imagine a different reading of the Hebrew Bible. Gandhi considered Judaism to be equal to the Old Testament. After the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE and the large depopulation of the land by the Romans, however, the post-biblical Rabbis shaped Judaism and gave it its specificity. The Hebrew Bible was filtered through rabbinic Judaism. The Talmudic sages mostly interpreted violent biblical passages in a peaceful manner.⁷

Gandhi absolutized the text of the Hebrew Bible. He abhorred the violence that comes to expression in the Hebrew Bible. He interpreted the Bhagavad Gita as an ethical allegory and did not apply the same principle in reading the Hebrew Bible. Gandhi interpreted the Gita in a non-violent way, he could have done the same with the Hebrew Bible. Levinas complements Gandhi in that he came to an eminently ethical hermeneutics of the Bible and of the Talmudic tradition.

In the next section, I turn again to the significant difference between Gandhi and Levinas on the subject of self-preservation and self-defense. A central point in a virtual dispute between them concerns the legitimacy or necessity of the use of force.

7. Non-Violence and Proportionate Violence

Gandhi’s non-violence has influenced peace makers around the globe. It is even present in the film industry. A Gandhian scene appears in the film “Winter Sleep” of the Turkish filmmaker Nuri Bilge Ceylan. In a conversation between the hotel owner Aydin and his sister Necia, the latter takes a Gandhian position. Aydin protests against this position. Necia refers to Jesus’s command to turn the other cheek, when slapped. Aydin protests: when slapped, one has to react. Necia insists: those who slap, will become ashamed that they slap defenseless people. To her brother’s objection, she persists in her standpoint that when such a pattern of behaviour is repeated enough, they will become ashamed and change their behaviour (Benedict 2016, pp. 194–95). In the marvel of relatedness, the dignity and humanity of the human being is based on one’s positive relationship to others.

Gandhi represents a welcome correction to Huntington’s clash of civilizations. He believed that without a vision of brother- and sisterhood, humanity does not reach its full potential. However, criticizing the intoxicated British civilization with its imperialism and armed forces, he did not completely condemn their way of doing. He appreciated the British talk about rights, equality and public health. He adopted many elements of that civilization. Although he was extremely critical of modern civilization that was *adharma*, “irreligion,” he never thought that it was incurable (Gandhi 2009a, p. 36). He mended that civilization with the help of the best of the Indian civilization, with the help of *Swaraj* as self-transformation, self-mastery and self-discipline. Being human is being related, being embedded in a social frame and developing social bonds. Concomitantly, Gandhi deemed that the human condition also asked for realism in the creation, promotion and preservation of social bonds. For the sake of the preservation of life, one could be demanded to put limitations to the practice of nonviolence. Chatterjee notes that Gandhi tended to make non-violence “an overriding principle.” (Chatterjee 1992, p. 116) Was the *dharma* of saving life less important than the *dharma* of non-hurting?

Gandhi comes close to the eminently Christian message of love of the enemy and of self-suffering in order to put an end to retaliation and violence. In this train of thought, love of the enemy prevents one from the danger of blaming others for one's own shortcomings. For Levinas and Gandhi, sustained peace is never the result of violence, which produces violence. However, in Levinas's political thinking, self-preservation occupies a larger space than in Gandhi's *ahimsa*; Gandhi pushed people towards a rather radical non-violence. Gandhi's non-violence and the Christian utopia are great visions that also allow for active resistance. Gandhi's way was a third way besides violence and absolute non-violence. This is the way that escapes war logics and builds an alternative logics of interconnectedness, a Levinasian "beyond being," that asks to be realized in the always messy and muddy reality of everyday life. This third way is far removed from a black–white police morality. It is also non-naïve. It knows about physical, structural and social forms of violence, but does not lend it the last word. It is a vision that asks to be implemented in concrete, daily life.

Levinas repeatedly quotes Dostoevsky's saying that all are guilty and I more than everybody else. However, not entirely like Gandhi, he highlighted that this high morality of brother- and sisterhood asks for a limitation, in the performance of justice for all. One's own self, one's family or one's group also counts and asks for legitimate defense in case of lethal aggression. Levinas's position on the use of violence does not entirely overlap Gandhi's radical position of self-suffering in the service of others, even until death.

In a Levinasian perspective, brotherhood or sisterhood in which all lives matter asks for political, economic and social organizations that take into account the problematic nature of the human beings. The mentioned political, economic and social structures and systems, however, are not exempt from structural violence and, therefore, they always remain under the scepter of universal ethics. Unlinked to the good of all, these structures and systems become aggressive, victimizing, demonizing or serving the egotistic interests of certain groups. Structural violence in the name of security or interests of certain groups is opposed to the interconnectedness and interdependence of all. Inclusive attitudes aiming at the creation of a "new we" will prevent outbursts of violence. The cultivation of these attitudes asks for patient education, which allows the functioning in a society, in which violence is never absent. More than Gandhi, the Holocaust survivor Levinas is attentive to the dangers of people who destroy life. Activity is required not only in order to diminish rage and hatred, but also in order to boost the flourishing of life against destructive forces.

Gandhi's advice to the Jews in Germany of the thirties to practice absolute non-violence was an Ahitophel counsel. Protecting life is an ethical imperative. Deut. 5:14 foregrounds the demand to protect one's life (*ve-nishmartem me'od le-nafshotekhem*). Self-defense is also clear in the moral rule mentioned in the Talmud: "If someone comes to kill you, rise up and kill him first" (*ha-ba le-horgekha, hashkem le-horgo*; Sanhedrin 72a and Yoma 85b). Gandhi himself, who brought *ahimsa* and interrelatedness together, admitted that one cannot ask from people who are in a struggle of life and death to adopt *ahimsa*.⁸

True, one has to approach self-defense critically, as does Butler in her recent book. Many conscious and unconscious motives hide behind the notion of self-defense, certainly if that so-called self-defense is orchestrated by states, in contexts of police and military violent actions. However, in the case of Hitler's Germany, self-defense against brutal state terror and the practice of violence on Jews was necessary. Jewish lives did not matter in those times. They were registered as threatening the Arian population and, as such, they were outlawed, humiliated, incarcerated, excluded from the social fabric and murdered.

In Gandhi's hermeneutics, the Gita was a fight against evil inclinations and pleaded for non-violent action. Necessary violence was a last resort, when everything else had failed. The Gita underscored the unity of all, the non-duality of the Self and the Divine, the interconnectedness of all. Justice was attained through forgiveness and compassion. However, Gandhi also thought that if a human being comes and kills everyone who comes in his way, there is the duty to kill him: "From the point of view of *ahimsa* it is the plain duty of everyone to kill such a man" (CWMG 36, 449). Then again, he stated that the purest way of seeking justice against murders is not to seek it: their punishment could not recall

the dead to life. His approach to justice differs from Levinas's, who highlighted more the necessity of self-defense. With his undying faith in non-violence, Gandhi did not see a contradiction between *ahimsa* and the duty to kill somebody who kills everyone who comes in his way. *Ahimsa* was a process. Although it collapses always, non-violence as a way of acting and of rehumanization constitutes a protest against violence as regime. Gandhi's non-violence did allow for violence in some cases. Nevertheless, my critique of Gandhi is double. Historically, he did not sufficiently assess the lamentable position of the Jews in Germany of the thirties. Second, he continued to pursue *ahimsa* as a panacea, although he had seen its limits before and during WWII.

Levinas and Gandhi disagreed on the subject of self-defense. Yet, a virtual meeting between the two that does not disregard their differences could lead to a promising "trans-different" dialogue.

8. Virtual Encounter

An encounter between Gandhi and Levinas could take place if Gandhi's utopia of responding to evil with good and—to a large extent—his renouncement of self-defense are tempered and balanced with the duty and value of self-defense.⁹ In this case, one has to make a realistic estimation of dangerous situations that threaten the life of people and, on the other hand, do everything possible to create bonds that foreclose violent developments. The relativizing question "what is reality?" is a way of making oneself blind for what Levinas calls the always "harsh reality," which "sounds like a pleonasm" (Levinas 1969, p. 21). However, an alternative reality is always possible. Nonviolence is not an absolute principle, it is always a struggle. Realists could learn from the Gandhian non-violence, whereas the Gandhian active non-violence could learn from the realistic way of coping with violence. Realists and Gandhian active non-violence agree that one does not have to go as sheep to the slaughter bank.

Gandhi's staunch belief in human nature as "not himsa, but ahimsa" (Chatterjee 1983, p. 64) is not necessarily in contrast with Levinas's ethics stemming from the demand of the other "Thou shalt not kill." In a Gandhian perspective, one is rightly warned that the power of courts quickly becomes violent; words lead to incarceration and punishment. Levinas, too, knows about the potential violence of laws. He highlights that the Saying of the ethical imperative always had to be translated in the Said of laws. For Gandhi and Levinas, a "divine law" criticizes legal violent regimes.¹⁰

Levinas and Gandhi represent two different worlds. However, if they would have met, they could have shared an understanding of the Messiah. Clara Joseph deems that the Levinasian "man of sorrow" of Isaiah is the Gandhian *satyagrahi*. Levinas's interpretation of "the love of the neighbour" as the self is reminiscent of Gandhi's realisation of the Truth in a praxis of permanent dialogue. Both Gandhi and Levinas wanted people to become a Messiah, not to worship him (Joseph 2014).¹¹

All lives matter.

Butler problematizes the term self-defense, arguing that the self is a related self in the perspective of interrelatedness. Self-preservation is therefore associated with the preservation of all lives in the social bond. Frequently, Butler contends, humans live the phantasm of the defense of the own group at the destruction of other groups. The question is who do we not defend when we defend ourselves. Self-defense often increases aggression. Butler's book is a welcome critique of nationalist bias and of economic and social inequality. It is a protest against the "I" culture that negates alterity. We do not have to live at the expense of others, every life should be grievable. A different game is possible. There is a counter-reality, in which there is interdependence and bonding: all are related. This is called by Butler "the force of non-violence." Similar to Tahmasebi-Birgani, she refers to Levinas's notion of substitution, which is prior to the self. Utopia looks for its topical realization in an always messy world.

Yet, in situations of life-threat, as in the time of the Nazis, self-defense is an ethical command, in fact, it is a hallowing of the divine Name. Butler admits in a non-naïve

way that Hobbes was not altogether wrong. Freud recognized next to the erotic drive the destructive death drive. Melanie Klein noted that in the mother–child relation, dependency is always there and at the same time it is unbearable. Butler also foregrounds that we have to aggressively defend our lives in order to preserve life. It is this last idea, which is not the main tenet of her train of thought on a new approach of violence that I would like to underscore. With her novel approach to violence and her defense of non-violence, Butler is conscious that love is never pure and always ambivalent, but love is given priority and justice appears as justice for all, as the grievability of all lives. “Grievability,” a linguistic innovation of Butler, underscores the fragile and mortal aspect of all human beings, whose lives matter. Justice as defense of life in order to preserve life receives less attention in her book. In her attempt to redefine violence and relocate it from the individual to the social domain, she focusses less on a necessary form of defense by using violence. Gandhi, too, paid less attention to necessary self-defense. Of course, his law of love and his non-violent actions that control the senses reckon with human aggression. Yet, his advice to the Jews failed to measure the intensity of this aggression and to give vulnerable Jews the strength and power to counter a threatening reality.

In Gandhi’s failure to endorse an aggressive form of resistance to the regime, the possibility of equality was adjourned. Jews were, in Butler’s terminology, “ungrievable,” they did not count in Nazi Germany, which tore apart the social fabric in the name of self-protection. Jews thus became victims of security forces that regarded them as less than human. Voiceless and subjugated, they deserved more than consistent *satyagraha*, which largely excluded the use of violence. Jews had the right to live, to persist and to be supported. Exposed to supreme violence and to unthinkable inequality, they had the duty to defend themselves.

For Gandhians, colonial situations with their economic, judicial and political forms of violence are vanquished by compassion and love. All human beings are equal and therefore oppressive structures and violent institutions have to be challenged. All lives are valuable and lamentable, as Abraham knew by asking: “Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?” (Gen. 18:25). The Haggada of Pesach celebrates the exodus of Jews from Egypt. The Midrash (Sanhedrin 39b), however, is conscious of the violence in this event. When the angels wanted to sing a song of praise before God because the children of Israel were saved, whereas the Egyptians were drowning in the sea, God told them: “The work of my hands is drowning in the sea, and you will sing before Me?” The joy of the angels was the joy of victory over enemies. God did not allow this joy. Recalling the ten plagues that came upon the Egyptians, Jews at the Pesach ritual are shedding ten drops of wine that symbolize blood in an attitude of compassion for the perishing Egyptians.

Gandhi’s active non-violent practice challenged the British. Much can be learned from Gandhi, whose almost naked appearance was a demonstration of his vulnerability and whose fasting was a protest against violence. His “unrealistic” struggle was a welcome protest, but it had its limits, since life threatening situations cannot be left without an adequate response: one’s own life is also valuable. Unworldly alternatives are important in our world, but given our messy world, other possibilities also exist. All lives, including the own life, are grievable if interdependence is taken seriously.

Gandhi and Levinas brought ethics and politics together, but the differences between them remain. Gandhi was not in favour of Zionism, he distanced himself from the violence in Palestine of the thirties and directed his advice of *satyagraha* to the Jews as the ones who entered the Arab land. Levinas regarded Israel as a haven for Jewish refugees. To Shlomo Malka he said that “in alterity we can find an enemy” (Levinas 1989b, p. 294). The Jewish people are also other to others. On the other hand, he dreamed of the realization of a just society, after two thousand years in which this had been impossible for Jews. In Levinas’s writings on Israel, the real and the ideal go together. He challenges a *Realpolitik* and upholds the prophetic vision of social equality. He did not develop a radical universalistic position with the neglect of a necessary protection of the own collective self. Self-preservation and preservation of all went together. In this sense, his thoughts were congruent with the

Talmudic saying “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I?” (Sayings of the Fathers 1:14). Sound realism and responsiveness went hand in hand.

Gandhi taught humankind the way of non-violence. His peaceful protests and demonstrations and his mass mobilisation—long before the period of the Internet and the social media—were a deliberate tool against the unjust colonial situation. Through Gandhi, many learned that peaceful protest assemblies are a useful strategy for a reformation of the social contract. Governments also learned to accommodate and not simply tolerate peaceful demonstrations, which embody the right of freedom of expression. Governments have many violent means and use lethal weapons in order to crack down demonstrations. However, there is an increasing awareness that the physical presence of masses may influence the social, the political and the economic. There is a growing recognition of non-violent resistance. Gandhi greatly contributed to this peaceful way of changing societies. States are no longer all powerful, they have the obligation to allow for changes in view of a more democratic society. More and more, people demonstrate for human rights in order to bring about changes in society. They use the public space for their protest. Anti-communist protests, for instance, led to the crumbling of the communist Soviet Union. Many learned from Gandhi’s active resistance and civil disobedience.

Gandhi was ready to suffer and sacrifice himself as a way of transforming violence. He used a suggestive image for self-giving for the good of others: “It is the characteristic of the candle to consume itself and give light to others. Never, therefore, avoid serving people as best as you can” (Chatterjee 1983, p. 72).¹² For Levinas too, the I in ethical maternity or as an Atlas bearing the world suffers from and for the non-I. Serving the other was not possible without suffering. This suffering is “useful” since it is suffering for the other. At the same time, the self was also grievable and had his own rights. In a Levinasian perspective, non-violence is not a universal solution for combating evil. Having survived the Holocaust, he gave more room to self-defense. In the virtual encounter between Gandhi and Levinas, there are differences and convergences. They make a “trans-different” conversation possible.

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Notes

- Butler uses the expression “aggressive non-violence,” a kind of oxymoron, parallel to Einstein’s “militant pacifism.” Rabbi Arthur Waskow calls active non-violence “assertive non-violence” (“Towards Assertive Non-Violence”; available on the Internet).
- Sandhya Shetty brings Gandhi’s nursing in relation to Levinas’s and Derrida’s views on hospitality (Shetty 2007, pp. 52–61). In her view, nursing the stranger and the enemy cannot be delinked from Gandhi’s *satyagraha* as the political protest against the inhospitable treatment of Indians in South Africa. Gandhi’s selfless dedication to the sick or wounded was exemplary. He nursed outsiders, strangers, a nameless and wandering leper, indentured laborers or anonymous victims of war or plagues. He did not distinguish between friends and strangers. He took care, for instance, of wounded Zulu soldiers in the Zulu Rebellion (1906).
- In Levinas’s view, Sacred History calls for the suffering of the self, inspired by the suffering of the other person. It is a call to compassion, “a non-useless suffering (or love), which is no longer suffering ‘for nothing’” (Levinas 1988, p. 164). Levinas’s welcoming of the face in his philosophical writings is parallel to the concept of hospitality in his Jewish writings. Abraham, who opens his tent in order to become a host for three strangers is the prototype of hospitality. Abraham is “the other-in-the-same,” the “one-for-the-other” (Meir 2008, pp. 266–67; Meir 2014, p. 27).
- Levinas explains that “my people” are also already “the others” and for them, he claims justice (Levinas 1985, chp. 8).
- Levine and Brettler refer to Lam. 3:30. It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord (Lam. 3:26), to accept the burden of suffering (Lam. 3:27–29) and to give one’s cheek to the smiter, and be filled with insults (Lam. 3:30).
- Later, he corrected this interpretation by remarking that righteous retribution was the start of the positive process of limiting man’s attraction to violence.
- Robert Eisen studied how violence and peace is present in Jewish texts and interpretations throughout history, from the Bible unto modern Zionism. His conclusion is that the Jewish tradition is ambiguous and one has to recognize two voices: a violent one and a peaceful one. All depends upon how one interprets the texts in different historical periods (Eisen 2011).
- Romain Rolland records that Gandhi said: “I believe non-violence has a universal application. But I do not believe that I myself can give this method to Europe” (Rolland 1976, p. 180). To a Chinese delegation that visited him from 31 December 1938 to 1

January 1939, Gandhi told that someone outside the fight like him should not say to a people engaged in a life and death struggle, 'Not this way, but that'" (Chatterjee 1992, p. 117).

Interestingly, in the Qur'an, Sura 5:28, Abel did not resist Cain, who wanted to kill him.

Butler refers also to Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 245, 248, where the latter characterizes the sphere of human agreement that is non-violent as "the proper sphere of 'understanding,' language (*die eigentliche Sphäre der 'Verständigung,' die Sprache*)."

For Levinas, "[t]he love of the neighbour is 'yourself'" (Levinas 1998, p. 90).

For Gandhi, Simone Weil and René Girard on sacrifice, see (Palaver 2020). Palaver notes that Weil recognized that Jesus's willingness to suffer and to sacrifice himself allowed the enemy to change his mind. She also turned to the Bhagavad Gita, where she found a way of fighting in a spirit of detachment: one had to sometimes fight without passion, greed or expectation of any result. The true God overcomes violence through self-suffering. The false God turned sacrifice into violence. Levinas's reaction to Weil shows that she fled from the Hebrew Bible where God is a forgiving Father, but also the Judge of the world.

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