

The Authority of Detachment and Moral Force

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In what consists the most characteristic quality of our species? Some would say, in moral virtue; some, in godliness; some, in courage; some, in the power of self-sacrifice. Aristotle found it in reason. It was by virtue of our reason that, he held, we were chiefly distinguished from the brutes. Aristotle's answer gives, I suggest, part of the truth, but not the whole. The essence of reason lies in objectivity and detachment. It is reason's pride to face reality, when the garment of make-believe, with which pious hands have hidden its uglier features, has been stripped away. In a word, the reasonable man is a man unafraid; unafraid to see things as they are, without weighing the scales in his own favour, allowing desire to dictate conclusion, or hope to masquerade as judgment.

The reasonable man, then, is detached: detached, that is to say, from the subject-matter which his reason investigates.

Is he also detached from himself? I think that he is not. I have known men of the highest intellectual ability who swore like "nitwits" when they broke their bootlaces, and lost their temper when they missed their trains. Great scientists and mathematicians are not remarkable for serenity of mind, while philosophers, who should be equable, are peppery; philosophers, indeed, are noted for the irritability of their dispositions. Hence I think that Aristotle's pronouncement hints at the truth rather than states it. The truth is that the characteristic virtue of humanity lies in the extension to the self, its passions, temptations, hopes and desires, of that attitude of objective detachment which the man of reason applies to the subject-matter which occupies the attention of the intellect. To combine non-attachment to the self with the passionate apprehension of certain truths and the disinterested attachment to certain principles, is to generate what I take to be the most distinctive virtue of humanity – moral force.

It is in the possession of the virtue of detachment from self that, I suggest, lies the source of Gandhi's authority. A superficial expression of his detachment is his control over his body. The detached man has power over his body because, having effected its separation from the true self, he is enabled to use it as an instrument for the purposes of the self. Thus, it is no accident that Gandhi can sleep at will, at a moment's notice, for any period that he likes to prescribe, no accident that he can deliberately lose or gain weight without altering his diet.

Another expression of the same virtue is the combination of a fixed resolution in regard to ends combined with a maximum adaptability in regard to means. The detached man is not a fanatic; he is never so attached to his way that he is not prepared to abandon it and substitute for it another way. Provided that the end remains clearly in view, he will approach it by whatever road events and circumstances suggest. Hence the combination of the politician and the saint in Gandhi, which has so puzzled observers; the adroitness in negotiation, the childlike simplicity which is seen in retrospect to have been the most astute political wisdom, the aptness at and the readiness for compromise are characteristics of a man who, firmly fixed in regard to his end, can be non-attached in regard to the means to that end.

Thus Gandhi, the instigator of Civil Disobedience as a political weapon, feels no scruple at calling it off, the moment it seems unlikely to succeed; thus Gandhi, the saint who fasts for the good of his soul, is perfectly ready to make use of his fasting as a bargaining counter, and to begin to eat again, when fasting has served its political turn; thus Gandhi, the implacable opponent of the Constitution, is now prepared to co-operate in working for the Constitution which he so strenuously opposed, provided only that the representatives of the Native States are elected by the peoples and not, as the Constitution at present envisages, nominated by the Prince; and thus, finally, Gandhi, the lifelong enemy of the British in India, is now rightly regarded as the best friend of the British in India, a friend whose authority alone prevents not only a resumption of Civil Disobedience, but a resort to the more familiar methods of revolutionary agitation. Will the British, one wonders, extend before it is too late the small concessions that are now asked, extend them voluntarily and with a good grace, or must India become another Ireland, driven by their refusal into an intransigence which refuses to accept the concessions which would now content her?

To return to detachment. Detachment, I am suggesting, is one of the most potent ingredients of that power so easy to recognize, so difficult to define that we call moral force, a power which men, alone of sentient beings, possess.

Physical force affords no problems and raises no questions. A man is physically stronger than you and accordingly, he has his way with you, either directly through the compulsion exerted by his superior strength, or indirectly through fear of the pains and penalties he may inflict upon you, if you thwart his will. It is the compulsion of direct physical force that throws one man over a precipice; it is fear of indirect physical force that causes another to deny himself in this life that he may please God and escape eternal torment in the next. Physical force bestows power, which may be defined as the ability to make other men do your will for fear of the consequences, if they do not.

But moral force can command no such penalties. If I resist moral force, I do not suffer. Why, then, do I obey it? It is difficult to say. I recognize its authority, and, even if I resist it, I know that it is right and I wrong, and I recognize and know these things because I am myself a spirit, acknowledging the superior spirit of another. Thus, moral force exerts not power but influence, which may be defined as the effect produced by one human being upon the mind and actions of another, not through fear of punishment or hope of reward, but by virtue of the latter's intuitive acknowledgement of intrinsic superiority.

It was by moral force that Gandhi induced thousands to besiege the gaols, demanding that they should be arrested; it was by moral force that he caused thousands to allow themselves to be beaten to pulp without lifting a hand in self-defence.

The experiment of Civil Disobedience, inspired by moral force, has an immense significance for the contemporary West. Is it only by devoting all its savings to equipping itself with the instruments of slaughter, is it only through the willingness of its members to use these instruments, whenever the Government of the State to which they belong deems the mass-murder of the citizens of some other State to be desirable, that a modern community can hope to survive? Is there no way for a nation engaged in dispute to demonstrate the superior rightness of its cause, except by killing off as many members of the opposing nation as it can

contrive? These are questions which insistently demand an answer in the Western world, and unless our generation can find some other answer than the one which has been traditionally given to them in the past, its civilization is doomed to destruction.

To Gandhi belongs the supreme credit of having had the wit to suggest and the courage to act upon another answer. Christ and Buddha, he has said in effect, are right. It takes two to make a quarrel, and if you resolutely refuse to be the second, nobody can quarrel with you; refuse to resist by violence, and you will not only gain your ends more effectively than by violent resistance, but you will defeat violence itself by demonstrating its non-effectiveness. It is this method, theoretically as old as human thinking, which Gandhi sought – it is his supreme claim to our gratitude – to apply to the conduct of human affairs. He is a man who has shown himself persistently willing to take the risk of the noblest hypothesis being true. No doubt, the method he advocates is in advance of the times; no doubt, therefore, his thought appears shocking and subversive to the conventional many. Inevitably, it challenges vested interests in the thought of the present, unsettling men's minds, alarming their morals, and undermining the security of the powerful and the established. Hence, like all original geniuses, he has been abused as an outrageous and often as a blasphemous impostor. Heterodoxy in art is, at worst, rated as eccentricity or folly, but heterodoxy in politics or morals is denounced as propagandist wickedness which, if tolerantly received, will undermine the very foundations of society; while the advance on current morality, in which the heterodoxy normally consists, is achieved only in the teeth of vested interests in the thought and morals it seeks to displace. Thus, while the genius in the sphere of art is usually permitted to starve in a garret, the genius in the sphere of conduct is persecuted and killed with the sanction of the law. An examination of the great legal trials of history from this point of view would make interesting reading. Socrates, Giordano Bruno, and Servetus were all tried and condemned for holding opinions distasteful to persons in authority in their own day, for which the world now honours them. One of the best definitions of a man of genius is he who, in Shelley's words, "beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germ of the flower and fruit of latest time." To put the point biologically, the genius is an evolutionary "sport" on the mental and spiritual plane, designed to give conscious expression to life's instinctive purpose. He represents, therefore, a new thrust forward on the part of life and destroys the prevailing level of thought and morals as surely as he prepares for a new one. The thought of the community as a whole presently moves up to the level from which the genius first proclaimed his disintegrating message, and we have the familiar historical spectacle of the heterodoxies of one becoming the platitudes of the next.

It is in this sense that Gandhi is a moral genius. He has announced a method for the settlement of disputes which may not only supersede the method of force, but, as men grow more powerful in the art of destruction, must supersede it if civilization is to survive. No doubt his method has for the moment failed; no doubt he has promised more than he can perform, but if men had never promised more than it was possible for them to perform, the world would be the poorer, for the achieved reform is the child of the unachieved ideal. Because Gandhi has believed, he is himself believed, and his authority in the world, though unbacked by force, is greater than that of any other man.