Part I: Mahatma Gandhi and Michel Foucault: Two Experimenters in Self-Transformation

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Part II: Fulfilling Foucault’s Dream: Gandhi as Modernity’s Example of Epimeleia

Heautou and Parrhesia

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It may seem not surprising that no significant study has as yet compared the lives, works, and ideas of Mahatma Gandhi and Michel Foucault.¹ Foucault (1926 – 1984), French political and social theorist, and Gandhi (1869 – 1948), saintly Indian political leader, initially appear to have very little in common, and indeed strike us as intellectual opposites. Gandhi was a deeply religious man who committed at least an hour each day to prayer and meditation; Foucault was a committed atheist who resented his Bourgeois Catholic upbringing and blamed religion for much of the malaise afflicting modern man. Gandhi believed that human society and relationships could be transformed through individual hard work, selfless kindness, and love; Foucault was concerned to draw attention to hidden motivations of power in all social relations, and emphasized the often powerless positions of individuals vis à vis larger institutional structures. Gandhi advocated restraint from sense pleasures and himself undertook a strict vow of celibacy for the last more than forty years of his life; Foucault maintained a deep interest throughout his life in sensual pleasure, and published as his final works the three volume History of Sexuality. It at first appears that two more different men could hardly be found.

Our paper’s first half, however, will begin by suggesting some intriguing parallels between the two thinkers. Despite their deep differences, Gandhi and Foucault’s descriptions of their works’ methods and ends were intriguingly similar: both described their work as “experimental,” and moreover both described this experimental work as being not directed towards changing things in the world, but almost entirely at changing themselves. This focus on

¹ A book that appears to come close is Joseph S. Alter’s (2000) Gandhi’s Body: Sex, Diet, and the Politics of Nationalism, wherein Alter, an anthropologist, looks to examine Gandhi’s unique bodily practices through a Foucauldian lens. However, the book does not examine Foucault and Gandhi’s philosophies side by side; and furthermore, despite Gandhi’s prominent place in the title, Alter acknowledges that Gandhi’s thought and even Gandhi himself, are in a sense “coincidental” elements of the work: “to some extent, [the] focus on Gandhi in this book is coincidental. What follows should be understood as a kind of case study that [uses Foucauldian analyses to illustrate] more general principles about the relationship among bodily discipline, power/knowledge, and truth” (xi). To this writer’s knowledge, no work has ever examined Gandhi and Foucault comparatively, or drawn attention to Gandhi’s personal exemplification of late Foucauldian ideals.
self-transformation is made more striking by the fact that both thinkers’ work appears in its subject matter to be focused predominantly on “external” and worldly matters. However, we will also see the details of their desired self-transformations to be quite different. Foucault wishes to work on himself as an “aesthetic” subject, just as an artist works not merely to create works of art but to become a work of art himself; he seeks an aesthetic self-transformation. Gandhi on the other hand works with the spiritual goal of his own “self-realization”; following ancient Indian traditions this entails a disidentification with what we usually take to be our “self” – our life story, name, body, ego, personality – in order to discover the true self underlying all of these, a pure and unselfish divine consciousness. Gandhi also seeks through “selfless service” to further transcend his personal identity and ultimately realize his identity with the “limitless ocean of life.” Gandhi’s sought-for self-realization is different from Foucault’s particularly insofar as Gandhi wishes to disidentify from all bodily- and personality-based aesthetic stylings, which are largely the things Foucault wishes to cultivate.

Our work’s second part will explore Foucault’s interests in the final years of his life in two particular ethico-spiritual practices native to ancient Greek and Hellenistic philosophy: epimeliea heatou, the “care of the self,” and parrhesia, fearless truth-telling. Foucault felt that such disciplines were important foundations for ethical life, and lamented that such foundations could not be found in the modern age; he thus wished to draw attention to these practices in the hope that they might to some extent be revived today. The thesis of our second part will be that Foucault need not have looked back over two thousand years to the ancient Greeks and Hellenes for evidence of these practices, but could have found virtually identical practices in the life of Gandhi in his own century. We will argue ultimately that Gandhi represented precisely the modern practitioner of epimeliea heatou and parrhesia that Foucault was looking for.

The part begins with an examination of criticisms of Foucault by certain scholars of ancient philosophy; through these we entertain the intriguing possibility that Gandhi may have come closer to exemplifying these ancient practices and beliefs than Foucault’s own work did even to explaining them. Next, we will examine Foucault’s intriguing distinction between ancient and modern philosophy as pertains to the care of the self: most ancient philosophers, Foucault suggested, viewed the attainment of knowledge as possible only after one had performed painstaking preparatory work on oneself; this often took the form of particular
“spiritual practices.” Foucault felt that modern philosophy since Descartes had lost this emphasis on preparation for knowledge to its own great detriment. We suggest that Gandhi, through his rigorous programme of self-purification performed with the goal of realizing Absolute Truth, embodies almost precisely the characteristics of *epimeleia heautou* that Foucault drew attention to in his classical sources: again, Foucault could have taken heart in Gandhi’s example. We finally argue that Gandhi, through his uncompromising aspiration to speak truth in every situation, also manifests the ancient philosophical ideal of *parrhesia* (the fearless telling of truth), to the extent that we may call him a modern *parrhesiastes*. We suggest that Foucauldian and ancient scholars, and all others wishing with the late Foucault to discover a return to truth, integrity, and spiritual discipline today, would do well to look at the life of Gandhi as an instructive example of the live application of these ethical and epistemological principles in a modern context.

In our appendix, examining various reasons why these striking connections between Gandhi, *epimeleia heautou*, and *parrhesia* seem to have been ignored in academia, we will find that what *prima facie* might have been good reasons for this neglect end up being unimportant. This leads us to shift our focus away from “internal” reasons and towards pragmatic considerations of broader tendencies in academic research: significant among these is the long-standing chasm separating philosophical dialogue between East and West. We assert that a collective effort by researchers to correct this situation is vital: through transcending traditional academic and philosophical boundaries, there is great potential for learning on all sides. Finally we look back in time, gesturing towards the possibility of these striking correspondences (between the philosophy and praxis of the ancient Greek and Hellenistic philosophers on one hand, and those of Gandhi (predominantly derived from classical Indian sources)) being one more piece within the intriguing puzzle of possible connections and cross-fertilizations between the ancient civilizations of Greece and India. Research in this field of comparative philosophy has for many years been surprisingly neglected, often for reasons distressingly more political than academic. We urge renewed work in this area, work which contains the possibility of altering our understanding of the deepest historical foundations of human thought.
Part I: Gandhi and Foucault: Two Experimenters in Self-Transformation

Gandhi and Foucault lived very different lives, had different professions, different beliefs, and different worldviews. This begins of course with their vocations: Gandhi was a lifelong political campaigner and politician, while Foucault, though he often wrote on political matters, was a professor and academic. The greatest differences however appear to have been in their fundamental existential worldviews: Gandhi was a deeply religious man who spent over an hour every morning in prayer and meditation, devoting all of his work to the pursuit of God-consciousness. Foucault was a committed atheist who resented his Bourgeois Catholic upbringing, seeing religion as complicit in the malaise facing modern mankind. Gandhi dreamed of a world that could be transformed by selfless kindness and by love, while Foucault alerted his readers to the pervasiveness in all human life to relations of power. Gandhi believed that individual discipline and spiritual striving could manifest genuinely benevolent forces even in the political sphere, while Foucault maintained a suspicion of socio-political structures claiming to pursue benevolent ends, revealing the ways in which many of these masked latent drives for power. Gandhi fasted regularly, never took food after sunset, and upheld a vow of strict brahmacharya (celibacy) for the last 43 years of his marriage. Foucault maintained a fascination with intense sensory experiences, ever seeking stronger sensations through drugs and sex, and explored his interest in sexual pleasure in his final and definitive works. The reader could be forgiven for thinking that two different men could hardly be found.

However, the two share some curious commonalities; these include: Gandhi and Foucault’s mutually held views of themselves as “experimenters,” and of their lives as representing constant experiment; and their interesting characterization of their respective fields of work, despite their apparently worldly bent, as being devoted not to changing the external world but almost entirely to working on themselves. Examining their respective desires to work on themselves, we will see that a large part of what made their respective projects of self-transformation so different were their divergent definitions of themselves. Gandhi’s view of himself was deeply informed by an Advaitic metaphysics and the desire to identify not with his individual personality but with all life. Foucault on the other hand wished through his project of self-transformation to work specifically on his individual personality – precisely what Gandhi wished to transcend.
Foucault’s Experiments in Self-Transformation

Foucault described himself as “more an experimenter than a theorist”:

Each new work profoundly changes the terms of thinking which I had reached with the previous work. In this sense, I consider myself more an experimenter than a theorist; I don’t develop deductive systems to apply uniformly in different fields of research. When I write, I do it above all to change myself and not to think the same thing as before. (‘EB’ 27 (cited in Taylor 9n.))

Foucault writes not for what we might call ‘external’ ends – developing systems to be applied by others in various fields of research – but rather works with the goal “above all to change [him]self.” This statement is particularly intriguing coming from an academic and social theorist like Foucault: we generally view academics as focusing not on themselves but on their subject matter, seeing their work as primarily externally rather than internally oriented. We see them as trying to bring other people – their academic colleagues or the general public – to a different or more complete understanding of the particular issues in their field.

Moreover, this is generally thought to be particularly so for sociological writers such as Foucault: while professors of psychology may investigate the ‘inner world’ of the psyche, and professors of poetry may explore our feelings and our experiences of beauty, socio-political research looks decidedly to concern the world ‘outside.’ Like other socio-political theorists, Foucault studied the structure of society, its institutions, how people come under these institutions’ influence, and related topics. Indeed, Foucault’s work appears to be characterized by the exceptionally wide scope of sociological topics he explored throughout his life, not particularly by any focus on the inner self.² What then are we to make of Foucault’s claim that he worked above all “to change himself,” and specifically what kind of change does he refer to?

Foucault expanded on this in an interview some years later, explaining that his desired self-transformation was primarily an aesthetic one:

² Though he did move increasingly towards study of the self and subjectivity over the course of his career, and finally focused on these explicitly in his final works. Our opening quotation, however, is from a 1978 interview, in which he interestingly is speaking not only of his most recent projects but of his work throughout his entire career.
For me, intellectual work is related to what you would call ‘aestheticism,’ meaning transforming yourself . . . I am not interested in the academic status of what I am doing because my problem is my own transformation. That’s the reason also why, when people say, ‘Well, you thought this a few years ago and now you say something else,’ my answer is . . . [Laughs] ‘Well, do you think I have worked like that all those years to say the same thing and not to be changed?’ This transformation of one’s self by one’s own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting? (“RI” 130-131)

Foucault felt that his work would be of little use if it did not constantly change his personal views; the evolution of his feelings and opinions was a crucial product of his academic pursuit. This again appears to be particularly different from the work of the majority of academics, who, we might suggest, more often hold fast to and identify with one particular position, often then defining their task as supporting and attempting to convince others that their position is correct – they seek not to change themselves, but chiefly to change others. Not so for Foucault: he wished not to continually “say the same thing” but rather to be changed through his work to the extent that he would, some years later, “say something else,” and thus constantly “transform [him]self by [his] own knowledge.” His work was directed not merely outwards to teaching his readers, but inwards as a continual process of (re)teaching himself. In particular, Foucault specified, this transformation would take an aesthetic form, as a painter does not merely work on his artwork, but seeks through his artwork also to become a work of art himself.

Foucault related the goal of self-transformation to his entire life: “The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not at the beginning.” (“TPS” 9; Taylor 1). For him this would constitute “straying afield of himself”:

As for what motivated me, it is quite simple; I would hope that in the eyes of some people it might be sufficient in itself. It was curiosity – the only kind of curiosity, in any case, that is worth acting on with a degree of obstinacy: not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what is proper for one to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself. After all, what would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain amount of
knowledgeableness and not, in one or way another and to the extent possible, in the knower’s straying afield of himself? (UP 8 (quoted in May 176-177))

We must avoid allowing Foucault’s description of his motivation as “curiosity,” and of his goal as “aesthetic,” to lead us to think that this self-transformation was a lightly-indulged hobby – something perhaps not worked at seriously but as an artistic whimsy. We must rather take quite seriously his evocation of “obstinacy” – Foucault was a notoriously hard worker. Many have drawn attention to his “formidably ascetic work ethic” (cf. Edward Said 2): Dider Eribon notes that Foucault’s “enormous capacity for work” allowed him to undertake an extraordinary amount of research every year, constantly seeking new fields of study (Eribon 63); Foucault often worked days and nights on end needing little recreation or diversion. He asserted that his burning desire for his own self-transformation was the reason behind this near obsessive commitment to work: “You see, that’s why I really work like a dog, and I worked like a dog all my life[... ] my problem is my own transformation” (“RI” 131). Foucault did not work on himself as a mere pastime: the project of self-transformation was the driving force in his life, to which he devoted enormous energy.

Gandhi’s Experiments With Truth

Gandhi described his life’s work as experimental also. He gave his Autobiography the alternate title, My Experiments with Truth, asserting from the outset: “It is not my purpose to attempt a real autobiography. I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth, and as my life consists of nothing but those experiments, it is true that the story will take the shape of an autobiography” (Autobiography 14). Gandhi emphasized that his experiments should be taken only as working hypotheses – guidelines for those who wished to carry out their own experiments themselves:

I hope and pray that no one will regard the advice interspersed in the following chapters as authoritative. The experiments should be regarded as illustrations, in the light of which every one may carry on his own experiments according to his own inclination and capacity. I trust that to this limited extent the illustrations will be really helpful; because I am not going either to conceal or understate any ugly things that must be told. (Autobiography 16)
Gandhi also thus relates his retelling of his experiments to honesty and truth: his experiments are valuable largely because they conceal nothing. This emphasis on truth-telling we will see to be both a central Gandhian principle and one that intriguingly anticipates Foucault’s final ideals.

Again like Foucault, Gandhi pursued his experiments with a notoriously dedicated work ethic. The incessant busyness at Gandhi’s Sevagram Ashram speaks to this: while ashrams are usually thought of as places for rest and retreat from worldly life, this was not so at Sevagram; as Easwaran relates a typical day:

Gandhi plunged into the business of the day. Every minute was given over to others, beginning with the steady stream of visitors who came from all over the world for every conceivable reason: to get an interview for the *New York Times*, to settle some question of Harijan voting rights, to argue with his opinions on birth control, or to get help in disciplining an unruly child . . . Gandhi gave each one his attention, fitting them somehow into his own close schedule for the day: talking to them on his morning walk, or at breakfast, or over the spinning wheel.

(Easwaran 156)

Gandhi “had not the slightest privacy; everything he did was observed by strangers” (156). He was perpetually busy. In addition to this busyness, we must note also that most of the issues occupying him appeared to be decidedly worldly matters – voting rights; news interviews; birth control issues: like Foucault, Gandhi’s field of work was society and politics. His work was mostly concerned with the apparently external and worldly. It is thus surprising that, just as with Foucault, Gandhi declared his work to be directed not primarily at changing the world, but rather at changing himself.

Gandhi described his work’s true goals as not outer but inner – “spiritual” rather than “political”: “You will be astonished to hear from me that, although to all appearances my mission is political, I would ask you to accept my assurance that its roots are—if I may use that term—spiritual” (Speech at Guildhouse church, London, 23 Sept. 1931; from Brown 77). He expands upon this concept in the introduction to his *Autobiography*:

What I want to achieve – what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years – is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain *moksha*. I live
and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field, are directed to this same end. (*Autobiography* 14)

All of Gandhi’s speaking, writing, and work in politics is directed to the end of “self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain *moksha*” – all seemingly inner goals. We shall inquire more precisely what Gandhi means by these terms. First: “to see God face to face” seems to suggest a personal view of the divine (for cannot only persons have faces?) As we read on however, we find that Gandhi was speaking merely metaphorically: for him, God is Truth.

For me, truth is the sovereign principle, which includes numerous other principles. This truth is not only truthfulness in word, but truthfulness in thought also, and not only the relative truth of our conception, but the Absolute Truth, the Eternal Principle, that is God. . . . there are innumerable definitions of God, because his manifestations are innumerable. They overwhelm me with wonder and awe and for a moment stun me. But I worship God as Truth . . .

(*Autobiography* 15)

Gandhi acknowledges the innumerable possibilities of God’s manifestations and definitions. He wishes not to discount or denigrate any definitions of God besides his own; but his own chosen God is Truth. ³

Another of the goals Gandhi stated of his work was his “self-realization.” What precisely is this “self” that he wishes to realize? Gandhi expounded elsewhere on what he means by “know[ing] oneself” – what he called “the purpose of life”:

The purpose of life is undoubtedly to know oneself. We cannot do it unless we learn to identify ourselves with all that lives. The sum total of that life is God. Hence the necessity of realizing God living within every one of us. The instrument of this knowledge is boundless selfless service. (*Mahadevbhai*ni *Diary*, 21 June 1932; from Brown 41)

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³ Gandhi’s view here we might note to be typically Hindu: he allows that there are many Gods; and holds one’s own preference of one particular God or manifestation not in itself to be a comment on the ontological reality or unreality of various other Gods. It is a standard Hindu view that there are many gods, all of whom may be real, and each potentially more important for different people and in different ways.
In speaking of “God living within every one of us,” Gandhi draws on a central tenet of much Hindu spirituality: that God is present within all creatures. Gandhi wishes to realize this God living within all by “identifying [him]self with all that lives.” He aspires to identify himself not as the particular, individual self we call “Gandhi”, but rather with all life. This in turn he seeks to do through “boundless selfless service.”

As this may seem like a tall order, we shall explore in further detail the meaning and implications of Gandhi’s aspirations. To begin with, many readers may initially be baffled by Gandhi’s describing the identification of himself with all that lives as being a necessary condition for knowing himself. This appears quite opposite to what we usually think of as the chief condition for knowing oneself: that for one to know who one is personally, one must first distinguish oneself as an individual from other people and life forms – certainly not “identify” with these others. This we think allows us to know what makes us unique or separate.

However, this is not the type of self-knowledge Gandhi seeks. Gandhi desires rather to lose this conception of himself as a separate self. As he writes elsewhere: “... one has to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service of all life. Realization of Truth is impossible without a complete merging of oneself in and identification with this limitless ocean of life” (“Responses to S. Radhakrishnan”; from Brown 64). Gandhi’s wish to lose his identification with the separate individual self or ego further illuminates his desire to help all through “selfless service”: he wishes to act selflessly in service of all humanity and even all life, and this service is dedicated further to dissolving his individual self. Gandhi wishes to lose himself (his personal self) in order to find himself (as something greater, identified with all life).

Gandhi’s philosophy bears many similarities to the Indian non-dualist school of Advaita Vedanta. Indeed, he declared that “I believe in advaita [non-dualism], in the essential unity of man and for that matter of all that lives” (Young India, 4 Dec 1924; from MMG p. 398). While he is not here committing to the full doctrinal implications of Advaita Vedanta, he is stating his agreement with the basic principles of non-dualism. Advaita Vedanta posits that our true Self or atman is in fact not what we usually take it to be: it is not our name, our body, or even our

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Declared for instance in the opening line of the Isa Upanishad, traditionally placed first in collections of the Upanishads: “Whatever living being there is in the world ... [is] dwelt in by the Lord” (Isa Upanishad 1.1; Olivelle trans., 249).
personality or life story. Our true Self is rather a pure eternal consciousness underlying all of these. Advaita actually deems these other elements – ego, personality, body, and so on – to more or less obscure our true Self, and thus holds that it is only by disidentifying with these extraneous elements that we can realize the *atman*; this view is held also by Gandhi:

My experience tells me that, instead of bothering about how the whole world may live in the right manner, we should think how we ourselves may do so. . . . To know the *atman* means to forget the body, or, in other words, to become a cipher. Anybody who becomes a cipher will have realized the *atman*. (Letter to B. Mehta; August 1932; Brown 43)

Gandhi believes that to know the *atman* one must forget the body and become a cipher (‘nothing’ or ‘zero’). This recalls what became a well-known dictum of Gandhi’s – to “reduce oneself to zero”: “There comes a time when an individual becomes irresistiblė and his action becomes all-pervasive in its effect. This comes when he reduces himself to zero” (from Easwaran 136). The ideal of reducing oneself to zero describes the attempt to eliminate the personal ego and attachment to the body, in order to identify with a wider whole. It reflects again on Gandhi’s ideal of “selfless service” – by reducing his own personal desires and wishes to zero, he intends to be of maximum possible service to others.

We thus see the respective desired self-transformations and self-realizations of Foucault and Gandhi to be profoundly different. The self-transformation Foucault sought was an aesthetic one – an attempt to change his views and opinions through his work; constantly remaking himself as an artist continually produces new works of art. Gandhi’s sought for self-realization is a spiritual one – an attempt to radically disidentify himself with the individual ego, personality, and even the body, and identify himself instead with the limitless ocean of life. Foucault’s self-transformation appears to relate mostly to himself, whereas Gandhi’s self-realization rather paradoxically speaks to a desire to ultimately drop all concern with himself in order to best benefit others. While it might thus appear that Foucault’s work is almost entirely ‘selfish,’ in contrast to Gandhi’s in which the moral dimension is paramount, to assert this would be a bit too quick: in drawing attention to the machinations of power hidden in apparently harmless or benevolent societal practices, Foucault’s work was very important in revealing how certain institutions harm the vulnerable, and also sometimes in warning us away from their further
We may note however that this is interestingly more related to the ‘external’ side of Foucault’s work: Foucault helped draw attention to oppressive structures through his outward focus on institutions. On the other hand, Gandhi’s very self-realization – his internal focus – was itself dedicated to dropping all concern with the individual self in the interest of being able to work purely for “others.”

**Part II: Fulfilling Foucault’s Dream: Gandhi as Modernity’s Example of Epimeliea Heautou and Parrhesia**

**Foucault on Epimeliea Heautou, Care of The Self: His Contemporaries’ Critiques**

In the final years of his life, Foucault became intensely interested in the ancient Greek and Hellenic philosophical ideal of *epimeliea heautou*, the “care of the self.” Foucault felt that modern thought had neglected the crucial dictum of ancient philosophy that one must “take care of oneself.” Intriguingly some of Foucault’s contemporaries, scholars of ancient thought, criticized Foucault for interpreting the goals of these practices in what they felt were overly “aesthetic” terms; these scholars argued that Foucault had missed the crucial characteristic of *epimeliea heautou* entailing also a transcendence of one’s personal self and an understanding of one’s inseparability from existence as a whole. We will suggest that these scholars criticized Foucault for leaving out precisely those aspects of “care of the self” which Gandhi emphasized as integral to knowledge of his own true self, and which we argued above differentiated Gandhi’s concept of the true self from Foucault’s.

The leading writer to suggest these shortcomings in Foucault’s interpretation of *epimeliea heautou* has been French scholar of ancient philosophy Pierre Hadot. As Arnold I. Davidson, following Hadot, relates, Foucault emphasized the ancient Hellenistic philosophers’ valuation of “the experience of a pleasure that one takes in oneself”: “The individual who has finally succeeded in gaining access to himself is,” Foucault wrote, “for himself, an object of pleasure” (Foucault CS 41; from Davidson 128). We may immediately see this emphasis on the pleasure

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6 Hadot’s most specific critique on this matter comes in an article available only in French (“Reflexions sur la notion de ‘culture de soi,’” in *Michel Foucault, Philosophe* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1989)), a language of which our knowledge is not sufficient for philosophical analysis. We thus are working from Arnold I. Davidson’s article in English which provides an excellent summary and discussion of Hadot’s arguments (Davidson, “Ethics as Ascetics,” *Cambridge Companion to Michel Foucault*, 2nd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005).
obtained through self-work to suggest working on oneself aesthetically: we feel pleasure when we partake of something aesthetically attractive (we may reflect on how intuitively we combine these terms in calling something ‘aesthetically pleasing’); while art has a variety of goals, perhaps its foremost is to provide aesthetic pleasure. Foucault’s interpretation thus suggests the ancient practices of epimeleia heautou to follow precisely the mode by which Foucault sought to change himself through his own work – the aesthetic one. Foucault lent support to this interpretation, of pleasure as the principal end of epimeleia heautou, with a quote from the Roman philosopher Seneca:

‘Disce gaudere, learn how to feel joy,’ says Seneca to Lucilius: ‘I do not wish you ever to be deprived of gladness. I would have it born in your house; and it is born there, if only it is inside of you . . . for it will never fail you when once you have found its source . . . look toward the true good, and rejoice only in that which comes from your own store. But what do I mean by ‘your own store’? I mean your very self and the best part of you.’ (Foucault CS 66-67; from Davidson 128)

Foucault could perhaps be excused for taking Seneca to be speaking in largely aesthetic terms. “Learn how to feel joy . . . rejoice only in that which comes from your own store,” can easily be taken to suggest a Foucauldian artistic cultivation of the self and the resulting enjoyment of the fruits this may bear; we do often closely associate the words ‘joy’ and ‘rejoicing’ with pleasure.

However, Davidson and Hadot argue that it is misleading for Foucault to characterize the joy Seneca describes as “a form of pleasure.” This is because “[as Hadot has convincingly argued . . . ], Seneca opposes pleasure and joy – voluptas and gaudium” (Davidson 129). Davidson and Hadot suggest that joy for Seneca is not a joy associated with the individual self, but rather one flowing from a wider notion of the self: “Seneca finds his joy not in his self per se, but in that ‘best part of the self’ that Seneca identifies with perfect reason and, ultimately, with divine reason” (Davidson 129). Seneca speaks of a joy flowing not from a rejoicing in what we

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7 We might recall for instance Wordsworth’s famous definition of poetry: writing whose end is “to produce excitement in co-existence with an overbalance of pleasure” (Preface to Lyrical Ballads 3). His short manifesto of poetry employs the words “pleasure” and “pleasurable” over twenty-five times (cf. Preface to Lyrical Ballads).
ordinarily view as our self – the body or personality – but flowing rather from the self’s most divine aspect. Furthermore, as Davidson translates Hadot:

The ‘best part’ of oneself, then, is ultimately a transcendent self. Seneca does not find his joy in ‘Seneca,’ but by transcending Seneca; by discovering that he has in him a reason that is part of a universal Reason, that is within all human beings and within the cosmos itself. (Hadot 262; quoted in Davidson 129)

Hadot argues that Seneca through his philosophical practice sought to transcend (the personal, individual) ‘Seneca,’ with the purpose of finding within himself the part he shares with a universal Reason, which is within all humanity and the cosmos. This must immediately remind us of Gandhi’s wish to transcend (the personal, individual) ‘Gandhi,’ in order to view himself as identified with all life, which is within all beings and the entire cosmos. Hadot insists that a crucial element of epimeliea heautou is a consciousness of being part of this cosmic whole:

Hadot has argued that an essential element of the psychic content of the spiritual exercises of ancient philosophy is ‘the feeling of belonging to a Whole,’ what he often describes as a cosmic consciousness, a consciousness of being part of the cosmic whole. This consciousness is summarized in Seneca’s four words Toti se inserens mundo (‘Plunging oneself into the totality of the world’). (Davidson 129)

Hadot and Davidson, among other scholars, feel that Foucault misses an essential element of these ancient practices – the transcendence of the individual self in order to “Plunge oneself into the totality of the world.” This plunging oneself into the totality must again remind us of Gandhi’s desire to merge his identity into the “limitless ocean” of life. It seems that Hadot and Davidson criticize Foucault for leaving out precisely those aspects of the ancients’ care of the self that characterize Gandhi’s own care for himself, in service of his own self-realization.

Trying above to imagine Gandhi’s opinion, informed by his Advaitic metaphysics, of Foucault’s desired aesthetic transformation of the self, we suggested that he may have seen such a focus as being rather frivolous, and even pernicious due to the attendant risk of obscuring the true self. In a similar way, Hadot became concerned that “Foucault was suggesting ‘a culture of the self that is too [purely] aesthetic.’” In other words, Hadot wrote, “I fear a new form of dandyism, a version for the end of the twentieth century” (Davidson 130; Hadot 267). Hadot felt
that Foucault’s interpretation of *epimeliea heautou* lacked real depth because it left out the crucial focus on cosmic consciousness. It was for this reason that he feared Foucault’s interpretation might not be able to inform a genuine ethical engagement with the world but could lead instead to mere ‘dandyism.’ Just as we imagined Gandhi seeing Foucault’s aesthetic picture of care of the self as rather shallow, Hadot had similar concerns.

We are not in a position to say with certainty who is more correct – Foucault or his critics – regarding the precisely correct interpretation of *epimeliea heautou* in ancient philosophy. The present writer, not himself a scholar of ancient philosophy, is insufficiently versed in ancient Greek and Latin to pass an informed judgement. He tends however, with Davidson, to see Hadot’s position as more persuasive; one reason for this being that we can easily see how Foucault’s deep personal interest in the aesthetic care of the self could motivate him to project this reading (consciously or unconsciously) onto his ancient sources. As Davidson writes: “I do think that Hadot’s interpretation of these ancient texts is the historically accurate interpretation. Foucault’s interpretations are, I believe, motivated, at least in part, by his specific interest in the history of the present, by, for example, his interest in the nature of . . . askesis [an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought8] and by his insistence . . . on linking the ascetic and the aesthetic” (Davidson 144 n. 23).

**Gandhi’s Absolute/Relative Truth Distinction**

We must now analyze Gandhi’s conception of Truth, upon which we saw he placed supreme importance; we will later examine this alongside Foucault’s fascination in the final years of his life with truthfulness as a moral activity, particularly the ancient Greek practice of fearless truth-telling or *parrhesia*. We saw for Gandhi how important was Truth – he declared, “I worship God as Truth only” (*Autobiography* 15). Actually, Gandhi worshipped God as “Absolute Truth” in particular; he made what was for him an important distinction between “Absolute Truth” (or “God”) and “relative truth” (“the relative truth of our conception”). Gandhi suggested the realization of Absolute Truth or God to be extremely difficult, describing it as something he had not yet achieved himself: “I worship God as Truth only I have not yet found Him, but I am seeking after Him” (15). What so far kept him from fully finding this Truth,

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8 We take this definition of *askesis* from Lisa Downing, *The Cambridge Introduction to Michel Foucault* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), p. 96.
Gandhi said, were his own passions: “it is the evil passions within that keep me so far from Him, and yet I cannot get away from them” (17). In view of Gandhi’s rigorously self-disciplined life, we must assume complete realization of this Absolute Truth to be difficult indeed. But for Gandhi, one cannot realize Absolute Truth without deep self-purification: working on oneself, eliminating worldly passions such as greed, lust, and anger, and acting selflessly rather than for personal gain; one must forget the body, drop the ego, and ‘make oneself zero’ if one wishes to know God.

However, until this lofty goal is reached, Gandhi held that one still could – and should – hold by “the relative truth of our [i.e., one’s own] conception.” We are to rely on this truth in the meanwhile until we realize Absolute Truth; relative truth is both an ethical code for acting within the world as well as a path to the ultimate goal of Absolute Truth. Thus Gandhi wrote, “as long as I have not realized this Absolute Truth, so long must I hold by the relative truth as I have conceived it. That relative truth must, meanwhile, be my beacon, my shield and buckler” (15). Relative truth is for Gandhi his beacon – providing him some light with which to penetrate the darkness of this world’s endemic untruth and illusion – and his shield and buckler – providing him with protection.

Now while this begins to explain these truths ethically (how they can inform how we act in the world), one might wonder how to understand Gandhi’s truths metaphysically. We can explain as follows: Absolute Truth is that Truth analogous to the omniscient knowledge of God; because it comes from a universal perspective rather than one particular point of view, this truth is infallible. Just as all-knowing God cannot be incorrect, so too the understanding of one who realizes the Absolute Truth must be correct because it is not limited by the boundaries of individual perspective. To fully understand the Absolute Truth would be something akin to having the consciousness of a God or demi-god. However, we can imagine that this is of course profoundly difficult to attain: it necessitates (at the very least) a radical disowning of the personal ego; one must “die to” one’s old individual perspective if one wishes to approach the eternal life of this universal divine consciousness. In lieu of this, the majority of us (who have not realized Absolute Truth) may instead simply hold to the relative truth of our conception: “relative truth” is the truth relative to our particular position in the world and our individual life experience: the truth as it appears to us, from our necessarily limited perspective. Because relative to our station
in life, this relative truth may at times (and does quite often, as a look at worldly life soon attests) clash with the held truths of other individuals: even two sincere people may disagree as to the real truth of a given matter; even the most genuine relative truth may remain imperfect and fallible.

Having not yet realized Absolute Truth or God, Gandhi commits himself to the strict observation at least of relative truth. This will entail “truthfulness in word,” “truthfulness in thought” (Autobiography 15), and also “truth[fulness] in action” (from Brown 45). Gandhi commits to speak, think, and act from the relative truth of his conception in every situation he faces. He does this for its own value as well as in an effort to reach the higher Absolute Truth or God. Thus the realization of the highest Truth does not come easy for Gandhi: it requires observation of strict truthfulness in the everyday events of life, which itself of course necessitates rigorous self-discipline.

Foucault and “Philosophy as a Way of Life”

One important aspect of epimeleia heautou emphasized by Foucault was that, for most ancient philosophers, access to knowledge was not considered something universally available to anyone who could think. These philosophers held rather that to attain knowledge one had to undertake as preparatory work certain disciplinary or “spiritual” practices: before one could know anything of importance, one first had to take care of oneself. Foucault related how these ancients had highlighted two important philosophical mottos: epimeleia heautou (‘take care of yourself’), and gnothi seauton (‘know yourself’). Foucault was concerned with modern thought’s apparent discarding of epimeleia, care, in favour of an exclusive focus on gnosiss, knowledge. Whereas the ancient philosophers had emphasized both of these, modern philosophy seemed to stress knowledge alone; modern philosophy, Foucault pointed out, appeared to utterly neglect the ancient principle that one should take care of oneself.

In seeking to discover what had brought this change about, Foucault ultimately located what he felt to have been a major “archaeological shift” in the philosophy of Descartes. Foucault saw what he called “the Cartesian moment” as being characterized “by philosophically requalifying the gnothi seauton and by discrediting the epimeleia heautou” (Foucault HS 14; quoted in Stone 144-145). As Stone comments on Foucault’s findings here: “At the heart of the
Foucault and Gandhi

Cartesian moment is the belief that self-knowledge is a given” (145); Descartes feels himself to have proved this in his Second Meditation. “From this self-knowledge, one can then proceed, with certainty, to knowledge of God, mathematics and even the physical world itself. What is missing here, Foucault points out, is the ancient notion of care of the self” (Stone 145). Descartes felt that the facts about himself, God, and the entire universe, were potentially available to him through the bare use of his (not necessarily cared-for) mind. Descartes suggested no need for preparatory work on himself in advance of obtaining his knowledge (as he dramatized it, he simply sat one day in his stove-heated room and thought). Foucault sees the Cartesian moment as representing the crucial break in this area between ancient and modern philosophy – the philosophical privileging of knowledge alone and the end of any perceived necessity for first taking care of oneself.

Foucault defined what is missing from philosophy since Descartes as “spirituality” (Stone 145). Foucault did not use this term strictly to refer to one’s religious practices (as it is often understood today), though he maintained that sense as one mode of the term (Stone 145): he defined spirituality as “the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth” (HS 15). As Foucault (and many of his contemporaries including Hadot) described it, ancient philosophy “was the pursuit of the kind of life that would lead to knowledge, not just an analysis of what could be known and how one could know it” (Stone 145). Ancient philosophers sought to find how one should live, not merely what one could know, and felt moreover that the observation of spiritual practices was a necessary precursor in any case to any attainment of knowledge.

We have seen that both Gandhi and Foucault exemplify this ancient principle that philosophy should not be a mere search for knowledge, but should involve work on the self. Foucault claimed to seek through his philosophical work not only to obtain “a certain amount of knowledgeability,” but to effect his own self-transformation. Gandhi too, while apparently working in the political field, declared that he was always working on himself; he also betrayed a constant and near-obsessive concern with how he himself should live. In common with Foucault’s picture of epimeleia heautou, Gandhi also saw work on himself as necessary for him to access knowledge or truth – he felt that it would be impossible for him to realize Absolute Truth until he had conquered his own “evil passions” (see p. 16 above). Gandhi, like the ancient
practitioners of care of the self, believed that serious self-purification was a necessary pre-condition for realizing the highest knowledge; he had to take care of himself if he hoped to glimpse Absolute Truth. Moreover, as we saw in Part I, the part of himself that Gandhi had to take care of was the divine element within – the “best part of him[self]” as Seneca would have called it.

**Radical Truth-Telling: Parrhesia**

This leads us to examine Foucault’s deep late interest in the ancient philosophical practice of uncompromising truth telling, which the Greeks called *parrhesia*: “For several years prior to his death,” Stone notes, “Foucault was obsessed with the question of truth-telling as a moral activity” (Stone 146). Foucault defined *parrhesia* as “verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty” (Foucault *FS* 12; quoted in Stone 147). *Parrhesia* involves a personal relationship: it is not merely logical or epistemic truth, but truth as relates to one’s personal ethical code. The practitioner of *parrhesia* (the *parrhesiastes*) risks his own life out of the duty he recognizes to speak the truth. Foucault felt that there was great value in this uncompromising personal relationship to truth: it was because he was concerned with the apparent absence of any such value in modern thought that he sought to investigate “what *parrhesia* is, how it was used,” and moreover “what hope there is for us in the modern age to reclaim it as a philosophical practice” (Stone 147).

Explaining the importance of *parrhesia* for the ancients, Foucault emphasized three points: First, “ancient philosophy was not separate from how one was to live one’s life”; and

*parrhesia* was key to the living of a philosophical life. The ancient thinkers concerned themselves not just with truth-telling (*dire-vrai*) but also with the true life (*la vraie vie*). The question of the true life, for the most part, is missing in the modern philosophical age. (Stone 147-148)

Second, philosophy in the ancient period “never stopped addressing, in one way or another, those who governed” (Foucault *GSA* 316; quoted in Stone 148): Foucault argued that a crucial feature of *parrhesiastic* philosophy was its role in advising and maintaining dialogue with the politics of
its day. As he described it, “philosophy is a form of life; it is also a kind of office – at once both public and private – of political counsel” (GSA 317; Stone 148). Third,

The ancient thinkers did not limit their work to the classroom. Any audience could be the audience of a philosophical discourse, and any location could become a philosophical classroom. Philosophy was a public enterprise, never a subject taught in school to a select band of people or a solitary armchair contemplation of thought experiments; its goal was to improve people’s souls. The philosopher had ‘the courage to tell the truth to others in order to guide them in their own conduct.’ (Stone 148; final quotation from GSA 318)

Foucault emphasized that philosophy in antiquity had not been a mere academic subject – taught in school and then gradually forgotten along with French and parabolas, as one left such things behind to learn the ways of the “real world” – but a way for people to live their lives. Not merely theoretical work to be discussed in essays and seminars, it was practical wisdom intended to influence people’s entire lives, and to improve their souls.

**Gandhi as Modern Parrhesiastes?**

We will here suggest Gandhi to represent precisely the modern example of *parrhesia* that Foucault despaired of finding. First, though, we should note one perhaps obvious objection to our contemplated nomination: while Foucault’s research was primarily on ancient *philosophers*, Gandhi is not frequently identified as a “philosopher”; Gandhi was labelled variously throughout his life, most famously being given the title of “Mahatma,” or “great soul,” by his admirers (he did not enjoy this: “Often the title has deeply pained me; and there is not a moment I can recall when it may be said to have tickled me” (*Autobiography* 14)). Later, when some described him as a “saint losing himself in politics,” he remarked to his friend Polak that, actually, “I am a politician trying my hardest to become a saint” (Polak 228). Gandhi was called many things; while not often explicitly called a “philosopher,” our exploration in Part I showed nothing if not that his life was deeply thought out and “philosophical” enough for him to earn the title. These generic concerns thus should not get in the way of our analysis.

Whatever we call Gandhi, he shared many qualities with the ancient *parrhesiastes*. First, Gandhi deeply embodied the first precept of *parrhesia* listed above: “ancient [parrhesiastic]
philosophy was not separate from how one was to live one’s life” (Stone 147). When the Shanti Sena peace brigade secretary wrote Gandhi asking for an inspirational message, he replied simply, “My life is my message” (Rajmohan Gandhi 615). Two years earlier, Gandhi gave a similar reply to a Chicago journalist asking for a message for the American people: “My life is its own message. If it is not, then nothing I can now write will fulfil the purpose” (615). For Gandhi, mere theory or discussion was secondary: his message – his philosophy of truth and nonviolence – had to be reduced to practice in every aspect of his life, if it was to be any message at all. As he advised one interviewer, “You must watch my life, how I live, eat, sit, talk, behave in general. The sum total of all those in me is my religion” (from Easwaran 155). For Gandhi, just as for the ancient parrhesiastes, his work and philosophy could not be divorced from every aspect of his daily life.

Gandhi strikingly fits also the second attribute Foucault highlighted about the parrhesiastes: that they constantly addressed “in one way or another, those who governed” (Stone 147; GSA 316). This is a constant throughout all of Gandhi’s worldly projects: beginning with his satyagraha campaigns in South Africa, and continuing through his increasingly bold and extensive campaigns in India, he was constantly addressing the colonial powers. In this direction, we may note another crucial aspect of the parrhesiastes that Foucault highlights: “Foucault claims that parrhesia is the result of a moral decision to tell the truth, even if doing so is dangerous” (Stone 151). Gandhi risked danger in so often speaking the truth to power, as we can see by his frequent imprisonment at the hands of the colonial government. His fearless speaking of his convictions ultimately brought about his own death, at the hands of one of his own countrymen who disagreed with his opinions.

The third characteristic of ancient parrhesiastic philosophy – that “any audience could be the audience of a philosophical discourse, and any location could become a philosophical classroom”; that “philosophy was a public enterprise” not taught merely to “a select band of people” (from Stone 148) – perhaps fits Gandhi best of all. As we saw in Part I, he presented his “experiments with truth” to the general public for them to undertake themselves. He conducted these “[not] in the closet, but in the open,” because he “[had] all along believed that what is possible for one is possible for all” (Autobiography 14), describing only experiments that even children could understand: “Only those matters of religion that can be comprehended as much by
children as by older people will be included in this story” (14). Gandhi’s addressing of children is a far cry from most philosophers today, whose work most commonly addresses fellow academics, or students rigorously trained in their field.

Gandhi was also a pioneer in opposing the orthodox exclusivity surrounding his own Hindu tradition’s sacred texts: such texts were meant to be read only by members of the higher castes (and in antiquity even the mere hearing of these was forbidden to the lowest castes). Gandhi however introduced his own Gujarati translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* with the assertion that “this rendering is designed for women, the commercial class, the so-called Sudras [lowest of the four castes], and the like, who have little or no literary equipment, who have neither the time nor the desire to read the Gita in the original, and yet who stand in need of its support” (*BGG* xvi). Even when it meant going beyond the usual boundaries of his own religious tradition, Gandhi epitomized the *parrhesiastic* ideal of teaching not to “a select band of people,” but rather for all – “to improve [all] people’s souls.”

**Objection: Gandhi as Voice of All the People, Not Lone Voice in the Wilderness**

Critics might offer another objection to our attempt to call Gandhi a *parrhesiastes*: the ancient *parrhesiastes*, as described by Foucault, was generally a *solitary individual* confronting larger institutions or state exercises of tyranny – a ‘lone voice in the wilderness,’ as it were. Typifying this characteristic is Foucault’s example, given in his final lecture series (1983-84), of the aged Solon’s “taking a stand,” a story frequently recounted in Greek literature: witnessing the rise of Pisistratus’s personal tyranny in Athens, Solon decides to speak out against the tyrant at the assembly. Solon is the only citizen with the courage to speak out, and Foucault describes the implicit message of his speech as being: “I am wiser than those who have failed to understand the designs of Pisistratus, and I am more courageous than those who have understood but remain silent out of fear” (Foucault *CT* 76). Solon’s position is dangerous precisely because he is *the only citizen* with the courage to stand up against the tyrant. And indeed, he remains the only one – “after Solon’s speech . . . the Council replies that in fact Solon is going mad (*mainesthai*)” (Foucault *CT* 77).

Gandhi’s fearless speaking of truth to power looks to have come in a different situation. Certainly he still courageously put himself in danger of harm from the colonial government;
however, while the ancient *parrhesiastes* were lone voices of reason generally even among their fellow citizens, Gandhi’s was not a lone voice among his people. His stance against colonial rule was in harmony with that of the vast majority of India; his fearless telling of truth came in the context of a massive nationwide independence movement wherein almost all of his fellow citizens shared his general position and sentiments. Furthermore, one might suggest his method of non-violence to be less extreme, and perhaps to put his person at less risk of harm, than some of his contemporaries’ advocated more physically violent revolutionary methods.

However, we might suggest other ways in which Gandhi was more of a *parrhesiastes* even in relation to his own people. We can see this in his willingness to not only denounce foreign British rule, but also to speak out in unpopular criticism of the independence movement itself. This is evident as early as his 1909 *Hind Swaraj*, at a time when Gandhi was unique within the movement in his advocacy of strict non-violence (*ahimsa*); other independence leaders generally advocated revolution based to a greater or lesser extent on violent resistance. Also understandably prominent within the movement were emotions of anger towards the English. At this time, Gandhi took the surprising stance of urging his countrymen to be more co-operative towards their occupiers:

I can never subscribe to the statement that all Englishmen are bad. . . . We who seek justice will have to do justice to others. . . . if we shun every Englishman as an enemy, Home Rule will be delayed. But if we are just to them, we shall receive their support in our progress towards the goal. (Gandhi *HS* 17)

The fictional interlocutor of *Hind Swaraj* (representing the voices of other independence leaders) responds: “All this seems to me at present to be simply nonsensical. English support and the obtaining of Home Rule are two contradictory things”; “You have prejudiced me against you by discoursing on English help. I would, therefore, beseech you not to continue this subject” (*HS* 17). This indeed was the attitude of most of Gandhi’s countrymen and colleagues: loathness even to listen to such a surprising suggestion. For a nation – and indeed, a world – which had never before witnessed non-violent revolution on a scale as large as that required by India, the notion that being “just” to the English, in order to receive their support, must understandably have seemed entirely nonsensical.
Gandhi does not stop there. When his interlocutor expounds his position on military strength: “We must own our navy, our army, and we must have our own splendour, and then will India’s voice ring through the world” (HS 27). Gandhi responds, “[in effect you mean that] we want English rule without the Englishman. You want the tiger’s nature, but not the tiger; that is to say, you would make India English, and, when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindustan but Englistan. This is not the Swaraj that I want” (HS 27). At this time, most Indians dreamed of an India that was a strong military power like England. This was understandable – how were they to throw off the strong and heavy shackles of colonial rule without physical force? Gandhi, however, dreamed of another solution, and was willing to speak his convictions on these matters whether his colleagues and fellow citizens agreed with him or not. Gandhi in some respect is thus a double parrhesiast – speaking his truths not only to his nation’s occupiers, but also from the first speaking what he must have known would be his baffling and unpopular views without reservation to his own countrymen.

Foucault need not have despaired of finding a parrhesiastes in the modern age. Rather than looking back resignedly over two thousands to ancient Greece and Rome, he might have looked more optimistically to 20th century India, to find Gandhi exemplifying these same epistemological and ethical philosophical principles which he held so dear. Gandhi strikingly shares with these ancient philosophers both the characteristics of the parrhesiastes and an emphasis on epimeleia heautou – believing that spiritual exercises in care of the self are necessary forerunners for the attainment of the highest knowledge. Moreover, if the criticisms of Davidson and Hadot are correct, Gandhi might have come closer to genuinely exemplifying the ancient principles of epimeleia heautou than even Foucault himself could have realized, due to Foucault’s own contested interpretation of these practices through his own preferred aesthetic lens. Perhaps we can add two more labels to Gandhi’s collection – politician, philosopher, saint, and also modern parrhesiastes, and exemplar for the care of the self.

Appendix: Suggestions for Why Academia Has Yet to Appreciate Gandhi as Modern Parrhesiastes

We have already suggested a few possibilities for why Foucault, and the academy generally, has heretofore neglected seeing Gandhi as possibly fulfilling the role of modern parrhesiastes – why, to this author’s knowledge, not a single work has entertained this notion.
We noted the possible concerns that: first, Gandhi was not a “philosopher,” but a politician and leader of men; and second, that Gandhi was not a lone voice speaking against tyranny, but one voice among a vast chorus which was nearly all India – though perhaps the strongest one – crying out for an end to colonial rule. We have seen, however, these two apparent disjunctions to be easily resolved: first, Gandhi’s writings and thought were deeply philosophical enough for us to consider calling him a philosopher; and second, though Gandhi indeed spoke largely in chorus with his countrymen against the British, he was doubly a parrhesiast in his determination to speak truth to his own people when he believed it necessary, however discordant these truths might sound, and for which outspokenness he ultimately paid with his life.

Two Sets of Chasms – Philosophy and Life; Philosophy East and West

Perhaps we will find the more compelling explanations for the neglect of these connections to be rooted not so much in the facts of the matters themselves, but rather stemming more from certain deeply engrained academic tendencies. We will suggest two “chasms” reflecting unfortunate tendencies in academic research. The first of these is the oft-bemoaned cleft between academic philosophy and “the real world” – between books and real flesh-and-blood people. Academic discourse often seems woefully separated from reality “on the ground” (perhaps professors have difficulty seeing ground level clearly from the height of the ivory tower; or maybe their heads are in the clouds). However, common as this problem may be to many philosophers, it actually seems unfair to include Foucault in this category: Foucault was rigorous in his research of real-life situations in advance of any writing, constantly concerned with overcoming abstraction to engage issues genuinely important to people’s lives. Foucault was outstanding among academics when it came to knowledge of people, history, and events “on the ground.”

In Foucault’s case, we suggest that the situation expresses a second, no less treacherous, chasm: the intellectual fissure between East and West. An often significant gap remains between philosophical thought in Asia (and Africa, and elsewhere) on one hand, and Europe and North America on the other. Western philosophers have been bafflingly slow to recognize the importance, and relevance on many issues, of leading figures in Asian thought such as Gandhi. Murphy Halliburton has decried this phenomenon in the field of anthropology, a discipline which, far more than philosophy, constantly seeks the most inclusive cultural stance:
In anthropology, despite our fundamental effort to be deferential to alternative ways of perceiving the world, we have generally failed to engage prestigious, literate non-western philosophers and social analysts as what I call ‘authoritative sources’ in our work. . . . Anthropologists might use Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, or Lacan to understand the self or the body in India or West Africa . . . but we do not use Sankara or Gandhi to understand such issues in India or anywhere. (Halliburton 794)

The situation in philosophy is often far worse; many Western philosophers have little to no knowledge of (and sometimes little respect for) leading thinkers of the East. The academic study of philosophy, even in our increasingly ‘globalized’ world, still remains distressingly parochial. Hopefully more studies like the present one can help motivate researchers in philosophy to make an effort to look beyond our traditional boundaries, engaging seriously with thinkers from East as well as West.

**Connections Between Two Ancient Cradles**

Finally, many philosophers, even those with an open attitude to engaging with different philosophical traditions, might argue that Gandhi has not been frequently cited or described as representing a modern exponent of these ancient Greek concepts simply because his philosophy derives primarily from Indian and not Greek sources. Because his thought comes from a fundamentally different tradition, they might say, similarities are incidental or coincidental, and there is little to no profit in their study. Let us first acknowledge the truth of these critics’ first premise: the foundations of Gandhian thought we have discussed do indeed have their source overwhelmingly in the Indian, not the Greek, tradition. While Gandhi was a philosophical experimenter of the highest degree, creating his own unique *mélange* from a diversity of sources, there is no evidence that he ever read much of Seneca, Plutarch, or the other principal philosophers Foucault discusses in relation to *epimeleia heautou*. Rather, Gandhi took the principles discussed here – the need for spiritual self-purification to realize God; the desire to

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9 Though he is said to have been impressed by some of Plato’s works (in particular the *Apology*), Gandhi was generally not an avid reader of the ancient Greeks.
identify with all life – from Indian spiritual sources such as the *Bhagavad Gita, Upanishads*, and his near-guru Raychandbhai.¹⁰

However, rather than dismissing the correspondences between Gandhi and the Greeks as irrelevant due to their stemming from different traditions, this should be taken to encourage, not discourage, further research: this may intriguingly suggest still further examples of the parallelism increasingly being found between ancient Indian and Greek philosophy. Research in recent decades continues to unearth intriguing evidence – archaeological, textual, intellectual, and otherwise – suggesting the possibilities of significant cross-fertilization between ancient Greek and Indian societies and systems of thought. This research may begin to suggest that, though Greece and India are often described as the “cradles” of Western and Eastern civilization respectively and distinctly, both regions might in fact be of profoundly mixed heritage in ways still not fully understood. As Thomas McEvilley notes, the field of comparative historical philosophy has been for centuries and remains today sorely neglected, often for reasons distressingly less related to the material itself than to nationalistic and political concerns:

[T]he project of truly investigating the relationship between Indian and Greek philosophies has formidable obstacles in its way. First, there is the racist imperialist projection put upon this material by scholars from colonizing nations beginning in the eighteenth century, and the bad reputation the whole enterprise has been saddled with as a result, and second, the nationalistic and somewhat xenophobic reaction by Indian scholars in the late and postcolonial periods . . . Under these circumstances it is not surprising that the story of the relationship between Greek and Indian philosophies has remained a closed book to this day. (McEvilley, xxx)¹¹

We as researchers should do what we can to ensure that the comparative philosophical project does not, for such unsavoury political reasons, remain a closed book. There will be many points

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¹⁰ Cf. *Autobiography*, Parts I and II.
¹¹ As McEvilley discusses further, Western intellectuals have been reluctant to imagine Indians as fathering “Western” schools of thought, whenever evidence has hinted at this. Conversely, Indian intellectuals have bristled at suggestions that their ancient Indian civilizations became sophisticated largely due to the influence of foreign invaders, whenever such suggestions have been made. The resulting intellectual climate has been one characterised more by nationalistic concerns than by academic honesty or integrity.
of entry for investigating connections between Greek and Indian thought, and we hope that even those as unusual as our present juxtaposition of Gandhi, Foucault, and the ancient parrhesiastes, might help to pry open this hoary tome just a little wider. Whatever story this ancient book might tell would surely be no mere triviality, but could alter our understanding of the deepest historical foundations of human thought.
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