Gandhi and the Means-Ends Question in Politics
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I.
The dominant model of contemporary political philosophy – what sometimes falls under the category of normative political theory – is animated almost exclusively by the question of “ends.” That is, it attempts to define and justify institutional arrangements, rules, and practices according to how best they coincide with or embody a set of norms and values (usually of a liberal and democratic kind). In the most prominent neo-Kantian schools of political theorizing, associated with the work of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, the project of legitimation/justification is further understood to require in the first instance an abstracting away from questions of praxis, power, and history – i.e. from questions of “means,” of practical contexts, constraints and possibilities – in the project of reaching an agreement on the principles of justice. As a result, normative theory tends to construe the problem of means narrowly, as a question of how to “apply” principles and norms to a specific set of institutional or policy situations. Questions of feasibility, adverse effects, or unintended consequences intrude into normative theory only in extreme cases when recognizably “unjust” means are employed and the coercive imposition of principles of justice is contemplated, i.e. in relation to war and revolution.

The aim of the larger project, of which this paper is a part, is to move the problem of “means” to the center of political theorizing. To take “means” to be a central problem of politics is to prioritize dilemmas of political action, from basic questions of how to persuade people to accept or enact political reforms in historically-specific contexts, to the myriad ways that any particular political decision or action encounters and engenders resistance in the contingent field of political contestation. Political theorizing would not be confined to debates about value-pluralism or disagreements about what the good life entails (this is the sort of conflict Rawlsian and Habermasian models seek to address and overcome) but would also turn to considerations about how even broadly agreed upon ideals entail different modes of interpretation and implementation and inevitably face opposition, contestation, and attempts at subversion. The project is therefore premised on a series of doubts about the overly “idealist” or ends-orientation of much contemporary political theorizing, both in terms of its limited and often skewed characterization of the scope and nature of politics and the forms of reasoning, criticism, and action taken to be most appropriate to understand and intervene in the political world.

Despite its recent marginality, however, the means-ends question was a major topic of political debate throughout the twentieth century. A whole range of Marxist, existentialist, progressive, anarchist, and anticolonial thinking wrestled with the legitimacy and efficacy of new forms of mass political action – such as the boycott or the
general strike – as well as the specific question of the use of violence in politics, of what counts as coercion in politics and when it could be deemed permissible and necessary. This is the background context within which Gandhi developed his distinctive understanding of the means-ends question in politics.

II.

Meditations on the means-ends question confront a central dilemma about whether and to what extent political ends can justify the use of morally dubious and dangerous means. This formulation in turn inevitably pries open, and puts pressure upon, a classic disjuncture between the demands of politics and the demands of morality. Very often the problem of dangerous means is taken as a problem of statecraft, of leadership and decision-making, in which the statesmen or political leader confronts extreme situations that require difficult moral compromises and calculations. But when this kind of conflict between politics and morality is taken to be a more regular occurrence, and not just a feature of emergency or extraordinary circumstances, it also evokes the idea of politics as a discrete realm of social interaction or specific kind of activity – for example, in the Weberian idea of a distinct sphere which requires and contains its own internal structure of morality or ethical value, values and standards that (almost by definition) come into conflict with traditional and/or universalist ethical norms. In this sense, the means-ends question intersects with a set of deeper theoretical conundrums about the character and autonomy of the political as such.

On one side of the traditional debate on means and ends, you would find conventional political realists, thinkers such as Machiavelli or Trotsky who prioritize the political vis-à-vis the moral and openly declare that effective politics, especially radical political transformations and extreme ideological conflict, necessitate the overcoming of traditional ethical constraints, whether understood in terms of Christian, bourgeois, or liberal norms. For twentieth-century realist critics on both the right and left, liberal-bourgeois norms were taken to be not just ineffective but also a kind of evasion of real politics; their alleged universalism merely an ideological veneer for expressions of power of another kind. In his 1938 essay, “Their Morals and Ours” Trotsky put the case sharply: the appeal to “abstract norms,” “eternal moral truths” or any other kind of exterior, “supraclass morality” was merely a way of discrediting political action from below, the way “the ruling class forces its ends upon society and habituates it to considering all those means which contradict its ends as immoral.” Morality more than any other form of ideology was thought to be thoroughly imbued with a class character and as such a central and “necessary element in the mechanism of class deception.”

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3 Ibid., 26-27.
was simply hypocrisy to dwell on the morality of the means employed in political struggles, what mattered was the justness of the desired end; even democracy, Trotsky reminds us, did not come “into the world...through the democratic road.” Ultimately, “Means can only be justified by its end, but the end in its turn needs to be justified. From the Marxist point of view...the end is justified if it leads to the increasing power of humanity over nature and to the abolition of the power of one person over another.”

Poised against the realists are a less defined array of moralists and idealists (liberals, Kantians, pacifists, etc.) – their critics deem them to be absolutists – who are wary of attenuating moral principle in the face of the expedient demands of politics. They claim that to concede that political life necessitates the suspension of moral norms or that politics as a realm of social interaction requires and contains its own values and standards that regularly come into conflict with universalist ethical norms is to open the door to pure power politics and its stark relativisms. Absolutism itself covers a variety of even divergent claims: from a strong commitment to protect features of individual lives and liberties from political dispute and intervention; the belief that only moral means can lead to moral ends; to a broad insistence that moral intention, criteria, and judgment have independent validity (regardless of political consequences), all of which seek in one way or another to privilege the ethical/moral over the strictly political.

In the landscape of contemporary political theory, this is arguably the implicit orientation of most moral philosophical approaches to political theory. In Bernard Williams’ formulation, political philosophy tends towards a form of moralism that sees the political as a subset of the moral and works hard to provide/impose a moral framework on political life. In its contractualist form, it seeks to elaborate and justify legitimate uses of power in a predominantly liberal idiom, and increasingly in the language of human rights, and thereby focuses on establishes pre-political limitations on state power and action. But even beyond Rawslian and rights-based approaches, the anxiety about the nature and limits of the political inflects a wider swath of contemporary political theorizing. And in important ways, the most radical challenge to the language of means and ends, comes from the Arendtian tradition, which rejects instrumentalism per se as an appropriate category of and for politics.

Of course, this stark contrast between so-called realists and absolutists obscures as much as it reveals; I will say something about its limitations and offer a way to think beyond it. We can note at the onset that it is far from clear that conventional political realism was or is as realist or as consequentialist as it often claims to be. As Dewey noted is his response to Trotsky, realisms themselves often rely on uncritical

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4 Ibid., 37.
5 Ibid., 54.
6 Bernard Williams, “Realism and Moralism in Political Theory,” in In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn (Princeton, 2005), 1-17.
commitments to the political efficacy of violence, whether conceived in terms of the necessity of class-struggle or, in today’s terms, the always ready-at-hand “military option.” Realisms commit to a particular set of means regardless of whether those means will actually lead to the desired end. And in doing so, “in avoiding one kind of absolutism,” as Dewey forcefully noted, they “plunge into another kind of absolutism.”

Likewise, idealisms are never as absolute as they hope or claim to be. As Weber argued in his classic essay, “Politics As A Vocation,” moral purists in the face of conflict and recalcitrance are easily tempted to compromise on the use of force; “those who have been preaching ‘love against force’ one minute issue a call for force the next,” often in a haphazard and dangerous manner. Here we confront what might be the most severe limitation of how the means-ends question is traditionally conceived and debated; the question comes to hinge less on the problem of means as such than on competing ideals or ends. For, a large part of what is at issue between realists and absolutists is which ends/ideals one privileges and their expansiveness and temporality – the long-term ends of revolution, national security, democracy or progress, development, peace, versus the sanctity of persons and the immediate moral demands of existing lives and ways of living.

To begin to work out of this impasse, it is crucial to distinguish between political ends understood as ultimate goals/ideals and ends understood as consequences, as the effects, entailments, and outcomes that are brought forth by particular forms of political action. To consider ends as consequences as the distinctive challenge that the means-ends question poses is also to attend more closely to problem of means as such, without folding it into, or subordinating it to, the problem of ends. Both Dewey and Weber, in different ways, sought to focus attention to means as consequences, for both were concerned that something about the subjective attachment to ends seemed to deny acknowledgement of and responsibility for action’s consequential effects. For Weber, the problem of unintended consequences is one of the definitive features of politics, and attending to them, the definitive ethical demand of political life, for it is the problem of consequences (as opposed to ideological or moral purity) that recommends a politics of responsibility. But it was arguably Gandhi, who more than any other thinker took the problem of means and their consequences as the central and defining problem of political life. It may seem jarring to treat Weber and Gandhi together as thinkers who equally stress the political problem of consequences, since almost all cursory readings of “Politics As A Vocation” would cast Gandhian nonviolence as the kind of absolutist ethic of conviction that Weber’s criticizes and therefore the polar opposite of the hard-headed and mature realism that Weber recommends. This interpretation however is premised on misreading of both Weber’s own realism as well as, and especially, Gandhi’s supposed absolutism and idealism.

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Gandhi in his political practice as much as in his political thinking attempted to subordinate and even collapse the problem of ends to the that of political means in such a way as to: (1) foreground the ways in which means and ends were interlinked, i.e. that the choice and enactment of means defined, shaped, and changed the character of the ends; and, secondly, (2) to shift attention more generally to the consequences of means, especially the unintended effects and incalculable burdens of action. It was this second feature which in fact demanded the vigilance described in the first. What I mean is that what concerned Gandhi was not only that the means chosen should actually lead to proposed ends. But also, for Gandhi, a distinct vigilance was required to ward off and mitigate the adverse consequences of political action, namely, the forms of coercion and escalation that are endemic to the dynamics of political contestation.

Gandhi took politics to be defined by acute tendencies towards violence, structurally in the centralized state’s hierarchical organization,9 and dynamically in the interactive structures of political contestation that tend towards coercion and escalation.10 When the pursuit of ends becomes abstracted from scrupulous attention to the practical means necessary to enact them, for Gandhi, it gives free reign to the negative entailments of politics: to forms of incitation and indignation, resentment and hostility that dehumanize political opponents; and to psychological temptations towards violence and attendant forms of moral erosion. To prioritize means is therefore an imperative to orient oneself towards these negative entailments and burdens of action. In this manner, Gandhi’s means-orientation, I will argue, enables a kind of consequentialism that is strategic, tactical, and vigilant but one that also avoids the descent into pure instrumentalism.

III.
Max Weber is arguably the seminal theorist of ethics and politics as competing domains and, as such, an important starting point of twentieth-century meditations on the specificity of the political.11 In “Politics As a Vocation” and “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions” Weber puts forwards a view of politics as a distinctive realm of social interaction defined most importantly by the specific means employed, namely violence. For Weber, violence and the instrumentalism of political life place politics in a continual and often stark tension with universalist ethical norms. In “Religious Rejections” Weber situates this tension within the larger historical process of (religious) rationalization, where “acosmic brotherliness” comes into profound tension and disarray against discrete and rival value spheres, from the political to the economic,

11 See Eckert Bolsinger, Autonomy of the Political: Carl Schmitt’s and Lenin’s Political Realism (Westport, 2001); Raymond, Geuss, Philosophy and Real Politics (Princeton, 2008).
aesthetic, erotic, intellectual/scientific spheres. In “Politics As a Vocation,” Weber’s classic 1919 meditation on the “inner joys” and “qualities” necessary for a life in politics, this tension takes the form of conflict between an ethic of principled conviction [Gesinnungsethik] and an ethic of responsibility [Verantwortungsethik]. At the conclusion of the essay, Weber contemplates how to render these ethics complementary, but he more often juxtaposes them rather starkly, even as “irreconcilably opposed maxims” in their relation to the problems of political life. Weber’s agenda is to argue from the side of responsibility and foreground the hazards and limitations of the consistent application of an ethic of conviction to the political realm.

For Weber, the fundamental problem associated with an ethic of conviction was its seeming refusal to accept responsibility for the consequences that follow from the taking of a political stand. And in this respect, a conviction ethic appears to be indifferent, morally and politically, to the unintended but foreseeable consequences of political action. Weber at times equates the ethic of conviction quite deliberately with the ethic of “the Sermon on the Mount,” and its absolute interdiction against violence and its injunction to universal love. It is tempting to read this critique in a Machiavellian-Realpolitik vein, for Weber implies that the adherence to an absolute commitment to peace and nonviolence is inadequate, even “childish,” in its refusal to expose the soul to the moral compromises necessary in politics. Moreover, Weber certainly was clear that any serious political attitude must understand that politics required, in an oft-quoted line, “making a pact with diabolical powers,” for violence and power were the definitive features of political life; they are the unique means that differentiated politics from all other life-spheres.

But what is striking is that Weber reserves his most severe rebukes, and indeed real, palpable scorn, not for the tragically misguided pacifists, but for the revolutionist, the syndicalist and the socialist, that is, for political actors who are absolutist in their devotion to a cause and the absolute moral rightness of that cause, so much so that all means seem open and available, all actions regardless of effects and consequences can be explained, redeemed, or justified vis-à-vis that cause. In Weber’s eyes, the revolutionist’s claim that their violence is ethically purer because it supposedly springs

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13 Gesinnungsethik has been variously translated as an ethics of “ultimate ends” (Gerth & Mills), “conviction” (Lassman and Speirs), “passion” or “sentiment” (Mayer), and “single-minded conviction” (Schluchter).
15 Ibid., 362.
16 It is important here to recall the immediate context of Weber’s reflection, Germany’s defeat in WWI, but more importantly, the short-lived Bavarian revolution led by Kurt Eisner. Weber gives this lecture in Munich in the middle of this revolutionary fervor.
from “noble intentions” and “new ethics” is unsustainable. For not only do their opponents and enemies seem equally (subjectively) sincere in their “claim to noble ultimate aims” but the fact that the revolutionist is willing to employ the same means – violence – as his or her enemy cannot “really be a matter of such indifference.” To think that one can make easy and categorical distinctions between just and unjust uses of violence is to evade the distinct “ethical demands placed on politics.” In others words, there is, for Weber, no way that one can distinguish a priori which ethical end, and to what extent, can sanctify the use of dubious means.

But how can Weber seemingly combine under the single rubric of an ethic of conviction both pacifists who for any and every end may well refuse the legitimacy of force (and refuse to participate it) as well as revolutionists/ radicals who explicitly accept that sometimes political ends can only be gotten through coercion, violence, and revolution? I want to suggest that part of the answer lies in an important feature of Weber’s analytical orientation or social theory, namely the distinction between the logical/theoretical implications of an ethos and the psychological predicament it entails. This is the sort of contradiction or paradox that Weber had so acutely assessed in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, in terms of the relationship between the logical simplicity of Calvinist doctrine and the practical, psychological consequence of that same dilemma. For Weber, that belief in predestination led to a radically this-worldly asceticism was not logically determined. Predestination is logically compatible with many kinds of withdrawal or flights from the world, from renunciation to nihilism, since there is absolutely no connection between good acts in this world and salvation. The protestant or puritan ethic is a response not to a logical predicament, but a psychological one. Predestination gives rise, according to Weber, to a deep anxiety, even terror, about whether one is amongst the elect predestined for salvation, and the relentless turn to work as form of this-worldly aestheticism functions to ward off that anxiety and display signs of election to those around you. As a form of action, it is purely exemplary, deeply irrational in that it has no instrumental connection to the end strived for. The historical irony is that the rise of capitalism is the unintended effect of such a resolutely non-instrumental orientation to action.

Similarly, the ethic of conviction in politics reaches a number of insoluble logical conundrums. On the one hand, it necessarily confronts the problem of power and violence, but cannot fully reconcile itself with the use of violent means. On the other, no end can ever fully sanctify morally dangerous means on its own terms; that is, for ends to justify dangerous means another scale of value (a not fully of moral one) would have to be brought in to explain the compromise.

No ethic can get round the fact that achievement of ‘good’ ends tied to employing morally suspect or morally dangerous means, must reckon with evil side-effects. Nor can any ethic determine when and to what

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extent the ethically good end ‘sanctifies’ the ethically dangerous means and side-effects.\(^\text{18}\)

For Weber, the only logically consistent response to these necessary dilemmas – and perhaps also the only dignified and meaningful response – is to be a sincere and consistent absolutist: to be “a saint in all things”\(^\text{19}\) and reject any and all action that employs morally dubious means. Anything less is a kind of fraud or deception, and therefore it might just be better to leave the realm of politics and “cultivate plain and simple brotherliness with other individuals.”\(^\text{20}\)

The problem, Weber contends, is that though perfect nonviolence is “in theory” the consistent and dignified response to the problem of applying moral values to politics, in practice, “the proponent of conviction turns into a chiliastic prophet” who compromises on the use of the force but in a haphazard and ultimately dangerous manner.\(^\text{21}\) And it is in this slip from absolutism, “that the ethics of conviction is bound to founder hopelessly” on the irresolvable “problem of how the end is to sanctify the means.”\(^\text{22}\)

Importantly the slip is not a logical but psychological entailment. The psychological predicament is akin that of the puritan’s, an existential or ontological anxiety stemming from the inability to “bear” – to accept and face up to – the “ethical irrationality of the world.”\(^\text{23}\) Ethical irrationality, for Weber, was given in the brute fact that destiny and merit do not always coincide and that, in the context of ethical action, meaning cannot be easily imposed on the world of action and the political actor can neither fully calculate nor control the effects of political action. In this sense, for Weber, the moral absolutist, as well as the “power politician”

know nothing of the tragedy in which all action, but quite particularly political action, is in truth enmeshed…it is a fundamental fact of history…that the eventual outcome of political action frequently, if not regularly, stands in a quite inadequate, even paradoxical relation to the original, intended meaning and purpose.”\(^\text{24}\)

The absolutist is an ethical rationalist who desperately wants his or her actions to have real, practical meaning in the world. And it is this drive that produces an attitude towards politics that is for Weber especially dangerous, for it is tempted to value the

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 360.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 358.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 369.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 361.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 361.
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 362.
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 354-355.
moral rightness of the act over and above a clear-eyed assessment of its costs and consequences, and thereby evades moral responsibility for unintended effects.

Weber associated conviction ethics with three interlinked kinds of perverse moral thinking. And, again, it is important to see these as psychological and not logical entailments of the ethic of conviction. One moral effect that I have already noted, is the inability to see that the use of the same means – namely violence – for avowedly different ends compromises the claim to moral superiority as well as the practical realization of those ends. This in turn enables a subjective orientation that tends to be indifferent to consequences; the commitment to the right cause outweighs any instrumental calculation of relation of that commitment or stance to practical outcomes or effects. Though the notion of an “indifference to consequences” has a deep Kantian resonance – you can think of Kant’s famous injunction to always tell the truth even if it means telling a murderer where your friend (and their prey) is hiding – what Weber had foremost in mind was less the pacifist worried about sullying his or her soul, than the anarchist/syndicalist/revolutionist who prefers to escalate political tension knowing full well that “the likely consequences of his actions will be, say, increased chances for the forces of reaction, increased oppression of his own class, a break on the rise of his class. But none of this will make the slightest impression.”

Here the moralist most cares about igniting moral passion,

ensuring that the flame of pure conviction (for example, the flame of protest against the injustice against the social order) is never extinguished. To kindle that flame again and again is the purpose of his actions, actions, which judged from the point of view of their possible success, are utterly irrational, which can and are only intended to have exemplary value.

The real end of action has no concrete purpose but to demonstrate fervor and the capacity the act. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, the diremption between means and causal/instrumental success underpins and exacerbates a dangerous psychological response to the experience of political failure and disappointment. The indifference to consequences leads to an aggressive denial of responsibility where the burdens of failure are placed squarely on the “shoulders of others.” This orientation ultimately “holds the world, not the doer, responsible.”

25 Ibid., 360.
26 Ibid., 360.
27 Weber criticized especially the tactic of critique assassination along these lines. For him, it epitomized the logic of “the propaganda of the deed” in which he discerned no concrete purpose but a reckless destabilization of the social order to cultivate fervor and demonstrate the capacity to act.
The power and insight of Weber’s diagnosis of the paradoxes and hazards of inscribing and translating ethical values to the domain of politics was not matched by an equally convincing or satisfactory solution. Though Weber stressed the irreconcilability of the ethical demands of politics, he longed for their coming together, as indeed indispensable for the calling of politics. Weber thus asks for a reckoning in terms of a combination of passion and judgment, detachment and perspective, maturity and fortitude, an orientation which tethers the sober calculation of consequences to the profound “inner weight” of true conviction. But it is far from clear whether this proposed antidote can move beyond an elegiac call for politician’s individual political responsibility.

IV.
For both Weber and Gandhi, politics is, in a profound and fundamental sense, tied to the problem of violence and its consequences. Indeed, for Gandhi, violence as such is necessarily conjoined to political effects and entailments that can neither be fully controlled nor contained; chains of intentionality seemingly run deep and wide, undoing any sharp distinction between means-ends, intentions-consequences in moral and political life. Moreover, both Weber and Gandhi were attentive to the affective or moral-psychological dimensions of politics. Like Weber, Gandhi noted the enormous pull of (egotistic) attachment to principles, so much so that we easily mistake securing passion for ideals with their realization. For Gandhi, violence in politics stems in part from the contemplation and cultivation of ideals without regards to how they can be in fact enacted in the world. Gandhi’s solution and demand was to pay very close attention to means and their consequences, indeed to prioritize the problem of means over ends. To prioritize means is to orient oneself pointedly to the burdens of action.

Gandhi’s reorientation of what he took to be the accepted priority of ends over means in politics is one of the most striking and recurring features of his political thinking. Gandhi offered several overlapping formulations of the means-ends question and, in this paper, I will explore a few variations with the aim of establishing how they point to the revised notion consequentialism intimated above. Perhaps the most general Gandhian statement about means and ends took the following form: means and end are “convertible” terms. This equation of means and ends has often be read in broadly Kantian terms, as an argument for taking means as ends in themselves. In this absolutist


reading, Gandhi is seen to primarily offer a theory of means-restriction, one that takes the imperative to nonviolence to be an absolute constraint on political action. In this vein, Raghavan Iyer, for instance, contended that Gandhi sought the purification of politics by insisting that “every act must be independently justified in terms of the twin absolutes, satya [truth] and ahimsa [nonviolence].” To my mind, this rendering of the resolution, however, merely reasserts the primacy of ends, of truth and nonviolence as “good in themselves and not merely the means to a higher good;” that is, as moral absolutes by which all action ought to subsumed. Here, nonviolent action (satyagraha) is akin to a politics of conviction/conscience, a demonstration of “how the man of conscience could engage in heroic action in the vindication of truth and freedom against all tyranny.”

There are a number of drawbacks to this formulation, not least of which is the priority placed on the moral purity of the actor, or some version of the “dirty-hands” problem, with the static corruptions of political life as the primary danger to avoid. As such, the formulation does not capture well Gandhi’s emphasis on the anticipated efficacy of satyagraha, where satyagraha refers to a broad-ranging set of self-limiting political tactics and practices that could effect transformation in a political realm that is admittedly understood to be marked by acute dangers. Indeed interpreters who emphasize a strong moralist reading tend to reject efficacy as a central component of Gandhian action, for it is taken to immediately entail instrumentalism. Moreover, the form of political action that is taken as the adjunct to the goal of moral purity looks very much like conviction politics. But Gandhi held a politics of pure conviction – and more generally forms of moral and political dogmatism and enthusiasm – in suspicion; they were for him one of the central dangers of modern politics.

In an alternative formulation, Uday Mehta views Gandhi’s denial of the effectual distinction between means and ends less as the conversion of means into ends than as a mark of Gandhi’s radical indifference to political ends as such:

Non-violence, like the practices Gandhi associates with it, is championed precisely because nothing external follows from it. The practices are not tied to a future, or dependent on a past. As practices they lack the requisite abstractness to have implications. They are in a manner contained by the act itself. There is here a resonance with Kant’s ethics because only if an act can be separated from its purposeful effects can it

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32 Ibid., 369.
33 Ibid., 252.
34 Mantena, “Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Nonviolence.”
be, for both Gandhi and Kant, autonomous.\textsuperscript{35}

Mehta is here less concerned with the problem of political expediency per se than with how far Gandhi eschews the instrumentality tied to the “inherent idealism” of modern politics, where action is justified or giving meaning in relation to an effect that lies outside and beyond it.\textsuperscript{36} In speaking of an indifference to ends, Mehta captures Gandhi’s concern that abstract discussions of ends distract from and fail to take seriously the question of means. At the same time, Mehta’s understanding of this indifference leads to a view of nonviolent action as primarily a work of abjuration from the consequentialism of politics.

Gandhi’s prioritization of the means over the ends might be better understood as working in the opposite direction, not as a rejection of politics in favor of moralism or the pure ethical act, but, on the contrary, a plea for the heightened scrutiny of politics and its endemic dangers. Consider these two analogous formulations:

They say ‘means are after all means’. I would say ‘means are after all everything’. As the means so the end. Violent means will give violent swaraj. That would be a menace to the world and to India herself...There is no wall of separation between means and end. Indeed, the Creator has given us control (and that too very limited) over means, none over the end. Realization of the goal is in exact proportion to that of the means.\textsuperscript{37}

The clearest possible definition of the goal and its appreciation would fail to take us there if we do not know and utilize the means of achieving it. I have, therefore, concerned myself principally with the conservation of the means and their progressive use. I know that if we can take care of them, attainment of the goal is assured. I feel too that our progress towards the goal will be in exact proportion to the purity of our means.\textsuperscript{38}

For Gandhi, then, to prioritize means was to insist that ends had to be understood in terms of the means they entail and the means required in attaining them.

But if, as I have suggested, collapsing the distinction between means and ends, or subordinating ends to means was not simply a mode of means-restriction, then what

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid.}, 357-358, 363, 368-369.
\textsuperscript{37} M.K. Gandhi, “‘An Appeal to the Nation’ (17-7-1924),” \textit{CWMG}, 28, 310. The “they” in this quote refers to the signatories of a petition which sought amongst other things the removal of a clause in the Congress constitution that referred to using only “peaceful and legitimate” in the nationalist cause.
would the prioritization of means require in practice? What does \textit{tactical vigilance} and \textit{scrupulous attention} to means really entail? What would “the conservation of the means and their progressive use” look like in terms of concrete forms of political action? I would like to examine these questions through the example of Gandhi’s idea of \textit{swaraj} or self-rule, specifically through a consideration of the forms of action he advocated for its attainment. Attending to Gandhi’s understanding of the \textit{content} of the struggle for independence yields some surprising and counterintuitive insights into his distinctive approach to the work of politics.

V.

Gandhi’s intervention in the Indian independence movement began with the 1909 publication of what would become his most famous political tract, \textit{Hind Swaraj} \textit{[Indian Home Rule]}. At the time Gandhi was fully enmeshed in South African politics; it would be a full ten years before he would lead the Indian National Congress and the first national mobilizations against British rule. \textit{Hind Swaraj} was written, furiously Gandhi tells us, in ten days in late 1909, on a return seabornd voyage from England to South Africa, after a failed attempt to press the grievances of Indian migrants in South Africa. The crucial, defining event of his stay in London – the event that sparked the urgency of \textit{Hind Swaraj} – was the assassination of Sir William Curzon Wyllie, aide-de-camp to then Secretary of State for India Lord John Morley, by Madan Lal Dhingra. Dhingra was an Indian student with close ties to militant nationalist groups in London, especially those that coalesced around India House and radicals like Shyamji Krishnavarma and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. 39 (Savarkar would later become infamous as the founder and central ideologue of the Hindutva movement, and was himself implicated in Gandhi’s assassination almost forty years later).

The assassination, and the excitement it generated in India, demonstrated, in Gandhi’s words, the extent to which his “countrymen” had come to believe that “they should adopt modern civilization and modern methods of violence to drive out the English.” \textit{Hind Swaraj} was written to demonstrate that in taking this stance they were “following a suicidal policy.” 40 \textit{Hind Swaraj} is staged as a dialogue between a Gandhi-like figure, the Editor, and a Reader who approximates the stance of a Hindu militant-nationalist youth like Dhingra. The Reader is “impatient” for \textit{swaraj} and especially weary of traditional modes of parliamentary/constitutional appeals to the British crown for political concessions and, therefore, argues for more radical, violent forms of resistance to British rule. Gandhi’s strategy was to position himself on the side of the militants in their unhappiness with petitioning (and the deference to legalistic channels of protest), but to also show them that the nationalism they espouse, the nationalism of the Western educated-elite, was not thorough or radical enough precisely because it was...

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overly enamored of the achievements of modern civilization. In this respect, *Hind Swaraj* is remembered, and rightly so, as Gandhi’s most sustained indictment of modern civilization as a civilization that degrades and “de-civilizes.”41

Late in the dialogue, after the Reader/militant nationalist is seemingly converted to the necessity of thinking of *swaraj* in more expansive terms, the Reader asks the Editor: “Why should we not obtain our goal, which is good, by any means whatsoever, even by using violence?”42 The burden of Gandhi’s response is to show that in politics one could not be indifferent to the means of seeking and attaining an end; indeed, the means adopted determinately shape and define the character of political ends. Gandhi offered the following example to demonstrate the ways in which the very definition of “ends” or “results” was dependent on the nature of the means adopted to procure them:

If I want to deprive you of your watch, I shall certainly have to fight for it; if I want to buy your watch, I shall have to pay for it; if I want a gift, I shall have to plead for it; and according to the means I employ, the watch is stolen property, my own property, or a donation. Thus we see three different results from three different means.43

In more political terms, if freedom is sought through all available means, including arms or fraud, it can result in conquest and usurpation as easily as true *swaraj* or self-rule. For Gandhi, the idea that “we” nationalists “were justified in gaining our end by using brute force, because the English gained theirs by using similar means” was fundamentally mistaken. In “using similar means,” i.e. brute force to drive out the English, “we can get only the same thing that they got,”44 namely an unstable conquest sustained and legitimated by domination and fear. And Indian freedom, in Gandhi’s iconic rendition, would be nothing more than “English rule without the Englishman.”45 In ridiculing the nationalist conception of independence as “a change of masters only”46 or “a mere change of personnel,”47 Gandhi intimated an alternative vision of self-rule, which in later writings would take the shape of a pluralist, decentralized polity based on the self-organizing capacity of the Indian village.48 Gandhi was in part criticizing the substance of independence as elitist, but crucially it was an elitism that was also implicated in the very means of militant nationalism. Political violence in the form of

48 Mantena, “On Gandhi’s Critique of the State.”
“secret societies and the method of secret murder”\footnote{M.K. Gandhi, “Letter to The Times of India (22-8-1919),” \textit{CWMG}, 18, 304.} was a mode of political action open only to the few and privileged and entailed a vanguardist structure of leadership. In aiming at igniting patriotic fervor and hostility against the ruling power it offered little in terms of a model or method for attaining swaraj “in terms of the masses;”\footnote{Gandhi, “Speech at Meeting of Deccan Princes,” 91, 372} that is, it did not seek true social, moral, and economic freedom for India’s peasant millions.

In \textit{Hind Swaraj}, this alternative model of swaraj as well as the means required to shape it are only intimated in a broad and formal sense. We learn that true self-rule has to be truly self-determining. Swaraj was not to be had for the asking, “everyone will have to take it for himself.”\footnote{Gandhi, \textit{Hind Swaraj}, 10, 305-306.} Similarly, it could not be demanded of, and therefore conceded by, the British; it had to be “taken” by building up strength and power from within. This would also immediately demonstrate the capacity to self-rule, thereby making British rule irrelevant. In \textit{Hind Swaraj}, Gandhi associated the path to self-rule with a program of swadeshi – the pursuit of self-reliance – through satyagraha (nonviolent resistance).\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 310-311.} Although \textit{Hind Swaraj} is often taken to be Gandhi’s definitive statement about the nature of self-rule, it important to keep in mind the limited scope of its elaboration in that work. \textit{Hind Swaraj} in this respect served more to clear the field and stake out a position vis-à-vis what swaraj would entail but as yet offered little by way of positive substance.

VI.
One of the defining moments for a more substantive elaboration of swaraj came in the crucial decade following Gandhi’s return to India, which saw Gandhi’s dramatic rise to power and the first major mass mobilizations against British rule, the apex of which was the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-1922). Gandhi had only returned to India in 1915 and, in four short years, became the effective leader of the Congress party. He was instrumental in its reorganization and its extraordinary expansion, giving Congress “a new creed, a new agenda, and a new constituency.”\footnote{Rahul Ramagundam, \textit{Gandhi’s Khadi: A History of Contention and Conciliation} (New Delhi, 2009), 137. See also Judith Brown, \textit{Gandhi’s Rise to Power: Indian Politics 1915-1922} (Cambridge, 1972).} The Non-Cooperation campaign took place under the revised Congress banner and as an explicit experiment in mass nonviolent action. The campaign itself came to a sudden and controversial end after the outbreak of violence at Chauri Chaura (UP), where policemen, after firing on protesters, were chased into a police station which was then set alight (leaving 23 dead). It was in this charged crucible of extraordinary mass awakening, with all its hopes, expectations, and ultimately disappointments that Gandhi would shape the
means and methods of swaraj.\textsuperscript{54} The agenda of swaraj would be explicitly formulated and implemented as a distinct project of construction – variously termed constructive work, constructive nonviolence, or constructive satyagraha – in which constructive work and action would play a dual role (1) as experimentation and education in self-rule (especially for the peasant millions); and (2) a mode of localized action that would mitigate, channel, and suppress the temptations of and tendencies toward political violence.

The Non-Cooperation Movement was, for Gandhi, the spectacular or extraordinary face of the struggle for independence; it was also primarily its negative or destructive side. Non-cooperation properly aimed at a “complete severance of the British connection,” where Indians would “cease to patronize the very institutions that are the emblems of British power and instruments for holding us under subjection.”\textsuperscript{55} This was in part a top-down program that sought to wean the western educated-elite from supporting institutions that “confirmed English authority;”\textsuperscript{56} non-cooperation therefore entailed the surrender of all honorary titles and offices as well as the boycott of Council elections, the civil service, and state-run courts and schools. The more bottom-up or grassroots platform for mass mobilization and resistance focused on the boycott of foreign manufactured goods, especially imported cloth. For Gandhi “construction must keep pace with destruction;”\textsuperscript{57} therefore the political vacuum had to be reconstituted and redeemed through the generation of alternative, national/indigenous institutions (especially prominent in the sphere of education and the economy) – a whole series of nation-building enterprises that aligned well with ideology of swadeshi. Constructive work went further, however, it was also to be a vehicle for “the curing of India’s ills” – ills internal to the social life and unity of the incipient nation/polity. From it inception, the agenda of the Constructive Programme therefore included three central pillars: the forging of Hindu-Muslim unity, the elimination of untouchability, and the promotion khadi (home-spun cloth). Over the years, the official Constructive Programme would continually expand to include an increasingly broad range of social reform programs focused on everything from sanitation and hygiene to the status of women, prohibition, adult education as well as a whole series of attempts at village reconstruction and regeneration. The structure of constructive work was national in scope but would take place as localized, village-level campaigns.

\textsuperscript{54} The outbreak of violence was what Gandhi would later dub his “Himalayan blunder,” stemming from a naïve over-confidence in the nonviolent character of mass satyagraha. One of the key lessons he learnt from these first large-scale experiments in satyagraha was that the majority of Indians – and not just the educated elite – did not yet have the discipline and self-control to mount nonviolent campaigns on a mass scale, hence the increasing emphasis on constructive work.


\textsuperscript{56} Gandhi, \textit{Hind Swaraj}, 10, 274.

\textsuperscript{57} Gandhi, “Is It Non-Co-Operation?” 27, 369.
The *khadi* program, as understood and propagated by Gandhi, was to be the heart of the constructive programme; it was also arguably its most successful achievement, symbolized by the rapid adoption of *khadi* as a kind of uniform of the nationalist struggle. It was for Gandhi the essential, “positive side” of the successful boycott of foreign cloth.\(^{58}\) The underlying ideology of the *khadi* program was closely tied to the nationalist economic critique of colonialism, inaugurated in the seminal work of Dadabhai Naroji, *Poverty and Unbritish Rule in India* (1876), and R.C. Dutt, *The Economic History of India* (1902/1904). This critique charged British rule with deindustrialization (the decimation of India’s craft industries to make room for English manufactures) and the drain of wealth from colony to metropole. But whereas the first major economic boycotts of the original *swadeshi* campaign in Bengal (1905-1908) tied the boycott of English goods to the cultivation of Indian industry, Gandhi’s agenda focused on rejuvenating non-industrial village production – cooperative or cottage industry – as the mechanism for overall economic self-reliance (for freedom from economic slavery at both the national and individual level).

*Khadi* was offered both as a solution to rural poverty and underemployment as well as a model for cultivating self-rule or self-constraint. While the argument for the collective economic benefits of *khadi* was relatively clear and coincided with the mainstream of Indian anticolonial thinking, what was more interesting and elusive was how Gandhi sought to tie the act of spinning itself with the creation of *swaraj*. *Khadi* and *charkha* (the spinning wheel), for Gandhi, intimated a new (nonviolent) structure of rule and authority. *Khadi* was an exemplary model of large-scale decentralized, voluntary enterprise – a mode of cooperation that was collective in nature but also premised on the patient work of *isolated* individuals, where each and every individual could separately cultivate discipline and experience self-rule. Moreover, “through *khadi* we teach the people the art of civil obedience to an institution which they have built up for themselves” and thereby “train the masses in self-consciousness and the attainment of power,” requisites for both nonviolent disobedience and the attainment of *swaraj*.\(^{59}\)

But spinning was intended as a universal practice, an equalizing practice that traversed distinctions of high and low, rich and poor.\(^{60}\) Gandhi called for Congress leaders especially to take the lead in daily spinning, to demonstrate service to, and egalitarian solidarity with, the laboring, rural poor. Gandhi was so enamored with the broad-ranging moral and political effects of *khadi* that he attempted to make spinning, and later the “constant wearing” of *khadi*, an absolute prerequisite for Congress membership and office-holding.\(^{61}\)

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\(^{60}\) Gandhi, “Is It Non-Co-operation?” 27, 370.

\(^{61}\) On the controversy around Gandhi’s attempt to institute a “spinning-franchise” within Congress, see Ramagundam, *Gandhi’s Khadi*, 124-171.
In its initial phases the *khadi* campaign was closely coordinated with, and tied to, the expanding structure of Congress organization, with its avowed attempt to place its workers in every one of India’s 700,000 villages. A considerable amount of subaltern participation grew around constructive work and *khadi* activities. It not only brought in large-scale peasant participation, but would also successfully target and incorporate women (as both producers and conspicuous consumers of *khadi*) in wider political campaigns. But even as *khadi* became a crucial hinge in the conversion of Congress into a mass organization and thereby an effective instrument for mobilization, it also ignited continuing controversy within Congress, one that would eventually sideline constructive work’s political role in the freedom struggle.

As mentioned above, over the course of his political career, Gandhi continually expanded the Constructive Programme in breadth and scope, so much so that he regularly equated it with both the means and ends of *swaraj*. In his words, “the constructive programme is the truthful and nonviolent way of winning *poorna* [total] *swaraj*. Its wholesale fulfillment *is* complete independence.”

Despite Gandhi’s resolute insistence on the importance of the constructive programme and constructive work, both were met with equally insistent skepticism and often outright resistance. The main charge was that constructive work was essentially nonpolitical or apolitical, a social agenda that was distracting Gandhi and the national movement from the real political work of resistance to British rule. Gandhi’s more severe critics also thought that its very substance was traditionalist and backward-looking or, worse still, merely a vehicle for propagating his “faddish” spiritual politics on a national scale. From the thirties onward, socialists began to argue that as a program of social and economic reform, the promotion of *khadi* and cottage industry was too piecemeal and small-scale to effect far-reaching economic renewal – especially for overcoming class exploitation and caste oppression. For critics on the left, the fundamental socio-economic transformation that Gandhi thought the constructive program ushered in could only come after independence, with the capture of political power and through the agency of the postcolonial state.

For many, both within and outside the Congress fold, the core connection between spinning and *swaraj* that Gandhi insisted upon, therefore, was neither obvious nor necessary. At the same time, people like Jawaharlal Nehru – left leaning modernists within Congress – lauded the *khadi* program in their own terms. For them, its main function was as a kind of mass contact program, the means to make the case for Congress among the peasantry, and to bring them into the cause of national independence. Constructive work was seen primarily as a mode of political pedagogy, of propaganda and consciousness-raising that set before the peasants the full force of the moral ideal embodied in the national project. In this way, those closest to Gandhi would invest in the symbolic implications of *khadi* and constructive work, without

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subscribing to the full range of political and moral (as well economic and social) effects Gandhi himself attribute to it. In other words, they adopted Gandhi’s language of self-discipline and the cultivation of fearlessness, but did not see these as intrinsic to constructive action or to the substance of swaraj.

At issue, in part, were divergent senses of the meaning of politics and political education. For Gandhi, constructive work was not primarily a symbolic politics or an ideological project that would prepare the ground for national unity; rather it was the actual substance of politics. Gandhian constructive work was also a program of pedagogy, but one that was premised upon, and implied, a very different mode of political education:

constructive work is the basis for solving political problems. Opinions may differ on whether this means the spinning-wheel or some other activity. But the time is drawing near when there will be general agreement that the true solution of political problems lies in the education of the people. This education does not imply mere literacy but an awakening of the people from their slumber. The people should become aware of their own condition. Such awareness is possible only through public work and not through talks. This does not also mean that every outward agitation is useless...But outward agitation cannot be given the first place. It is of subsidiary importance and it depends for its success entirely on the success of that which is internal, viz. constructive work.  

Awakening and awareness were, for Gandhi, substantively defined in terms of the cultivation of fearlessness and discipline, and the aim of “solid political work” was training towards them as foundations of both the art of resistance as well as that of self-reliance. For Gandhi, “such training cannot be imparted by speeches alone,” rather teaching “this art to the people” was made through “silent, patient, constructive work.” This was “a task essentially for our national workers who must go and settle in the villages in their midst, win their confidence by dint of selfless service, identify themselves with them in their joys and sorrows, make a close study of their social conditions, and by degrees infect them with courage.”

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64 M.K. Gandhi, “Atrocities By Officials (23-9-1928),” CWMG, 43; 342.
67 Ibid., 247.
As experiments in, and education for, self-reliance, Gandhi understood constructive work in terms of self-consciousness as opposed to national consciousness; its substance was not the cultivation of duty to the national project as much as regaining the power of action. For Gandhi, the educated elite, the impatient youth, and political radicals tended to equate politics and political action too easily with “the clamour for unadulterated excitement”\(^\text{68}\) and the immediate capture of political office and power. There were “addicted” to the politics of speeches, resolutions, declarations, of cultivating and exciting public opinion, and therefore shunned the solid and silent work of construction upon which the moral and political revolution of the masses depended.\(^\text{69}\)

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, for Gandhi, sustained constructive work was also important as a bulwark against excitement and incitement, against the harboring of resentments and impatience that tempts one in the direction of political violence. And, in this respect, like the act of spinning itself, the imperative to work was a universal pedagogy, a remedy for both the political elite as well as the masses. On the one hand, “we want the people to become immersed in industries and constructive activities so that their temper is not exposed to the constant danger of being ruffled.”\(^\text{70}\) On the other hand, absorption in common constructive work will “steady and calm us. It will wake our organizing spirit, it will make us fit for swaraj, it will cool our blood.”\(^\text{71}\) The act of spinning again exemplified in miniature a practical and immersive exercise that cultivated patience, industry, simplicity as both an experience of self-rule and as a protection against passion and anger. Against the militants, Gandhi argued that the frenzied call for resistance and disobedience for something as broad and abstract as independence “without the co-operation of the millions by way of constructive effort is mere bravado and worse than useless.”\(^\text{72}\) Likewise, against the socialists, he contended that “those who play upon the passions of the masses injure them and the country’s cause...Agitation against every form of injustice is the breath of political life. But my contention is that, divorced from the constructive programme, it is bound to have the tinge of violence.”\(^\text{73}\)


\(^\text{70}\) M.K. Gandhi, “Letter to Konda Venkatapayya (4-3-1922),” CWMG, 26, 272.

\(^\text{71}\) Gandhi, “Notes,” 26, 254.

\(^\text{72}\) M.K. Gandhi, “Constructive Programme – Its Meaning and Place (13-12-1941)”, CWMG, 81, 373.

In the sharp contrasts Gandhi drew between the politics of speeches versus constructive work, agitation/revolution versus ordered progress, we can discern the fault lines that would eventually split apart Congress politics and Gandhian politics. Ironically, it would be Gandhians themselves, who would start to characterize their constructive activities in the language of their critics, as primarily humanitarian and apolitical. The constructive programme, divorced from a political project, would in the long term lose sight of any political objective. As a result, the post-independence Gandhian movement has come to inscribe the agenda of social reform and village reconstruction in terms of the depoliticized language of development. Likewise, decisively unmoored from constructive work, what sometimes comes to pass as Gandhian protest of an overtly political kind – for example in the staged public fast by prominent politicians as well as a whole culture of intimidating street marches and boycotts – can appear as little more than orchestrated farce, but unfortunately of a kind that contains more than a tinge of violence.

VII.
What does this revised understanding of swaraj amount to in relation to the means-ends question? Gandhian constructive work was premised on the deep reciprocity or convertibility of means and ends. Less than a model of means-restriction, means are taken to be broadly ends-creative. In Hind Swaraj, Gandhi offered the following organic metaphor to capture this kind of interdependence between means and ends:

Your belief that there is no connection between the means and the end is a great mistake. Through that mistake even men who have been considered religious committed grievous crimes. Your reasoning is the same as saying that we can get a rose through planting a noxious weed...The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree; and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree...We reap exactly as we sow.

Here, I explore two potential ways of theorizing this interdependence of means and ends in Gandhian action: as an enlightened instrumental model (associated with Dewey) and as a model of exemplary action (which some contemporary interpreters of Gandhi have employed). I conclude by proposing a third model of self-limiting, strategic action that incorporates elements of both instrumental and exemplary action but, I argue, better captures the interactive political logic, as well as the distinct ethical valence, of Gandhian action.

Dewey’s essay, “Means and Ends,” was premised on a broad agreement with Trotsky that means and ends were deeply interdependent and, moreover, that the only way

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74 I broadly follow Horsburgh in this distinction, see Horsburgh, Non-Violence and Aggression, 41-53.
75 Gandhi, Hind Swaraj, 10, 286-287.
means could be justified was by reference to the end towards which they aim. But, for Dewey,

what has given the maxim (and the practice it formulates) that the end justifies the means a bad name is that the end-in-view, the end professed and entertained (perhaps quite sincerely) justifies the use of certain means, and so justifies the latter that it is not necessary to examine what the actual consequences of the use of chosen means will be. An individual may hold, and quite sincerely as far as his personal opinion is concerned, that certain means will “really” lead to a professed and desired end. But the real question is not one of personal belief but of the objective grounds upon which it is held: namely, the consequences that will actually be produced by them.76

Dewey’s critique of Trotsky therefore turned on the fact that Trotsky had betrayed consequentialism correctly understood by introducing his own absolutist account of means. Dewey recommended instead a kind experimental and fallible pragmatism in which one would be willing to shift and adjust the ends-in-view (the ends that actually orient action) in light of objective consequential effects. For instance, if in some cases the tactics of class struggle were to lead to reaction and retrenchment rather than liberation, then alternative means have to be seriously contemplated.

In a general sense, Gandhian nonviolence adhered to this kind of experimentalism; it was not a simple or static position but referred to a range of tactics that attempted to overcome opposition and progress towards avowed ends. But Dewey’s vision is in some sense still beholden to an overly objective instrumentalism; it calculates the connections between means and ends in a way that distances the means (and their consequences) from the actors, from both the subjects who act as well the subjects who are acted upon. In this sense, Dewey’s resolution would be compatible with the claim that if the end is right then it is morally irrelevant which actors and which actions bring it about. In other words, from the standpoint of enlightened instrumentalism, if the act is taken to be correct in that it is properly directed toward achieving its end, there is little worry about the ways in which the actor is affected (changed or compromised) by the act itself. For Gandhi, the self was deeply implicated in action, both in terms of gaining internal power as well as forestalling psychological temptations and moral erosion.77

The model of exemplary action, by contrast, eschews any hint of instrumentality. In exemplary action – which can also be characterized as expressive or principled action (in the Arendtian sense) – the principle (or end) is enunciated in the action itself. And in

76 Dewey, “Means and Ends,” 76.

77 I was first alerted to this possible difference between Dewey and Gandhi by David Bromwich and his remarks on Dewey’s essay at the conference, “Means and Ends: Rethinking Political Realism” (Yale University, April 2011).
inscribing means into ends in each and every single act so that every act contains/entails its end, one can avert precisely any disjuncture between actor/act and means/ends. There is a great deal in Gandhi’s understanding of swaraj or self-rule that aligns with exemplary action in this sense. For Gandhi, the very attempt to win swaraj was its realization, for it involved a moral psychological transformation, an overcoming of fear and the constitution of new bonds of voluntary authority through the creation of self-sufficient and free institutions. It was in this way that Gandhi conceived of individual swaraj and collective swaraj as isomorphic. Constructive work contained and entailed the end of swaraj; through everyday acts of curing its own ills India would attain and sustain self-rule and thereby make British rule irrelevant.

Contemporary interpreters of Gandhi, for example James Tully, Akeel Bilgrami, and Uday Mehta, have been particularly attracted to this model of exemplary action. The tight temporal and conceptual imbrication of means-ends implied in the logic of exemplarity can be seen to overcome the abstraction or suspension between practices and principles that generates the possibility of violence, coercion, and imposition. But the kind of imposition or coercion that most concerns them stems from the disjuncture between particular acts and the principles or norms they embody; that is, through Gandhi these interpreters seek to question top-down models of norm generation in which the meaning of an act is subsumed under a universal principle or rule. For Tully, Gandhi’s constructive work was an attempt to ground nonviolence and civic friendship within local practices so as realize from below an alternative world. These practices thus intimate non-hegemonic ways of being in the world.78 For Bilgrami, nonviolence should be understood as a practice of exemplarity, where moral examplars instantiate universality without recourse to universalizable principles. The universalizability of principles, i.e. on the model of Kant’s categorical imperative, implies forms of criticism and judgment of the actions of other, which for Bilgrami, “have in them potential to generate psychological attitudes (resentment, hostility) which underlie inter-personal violence.”79 Mehta aligns this understanding of exemplarity to Gandhi’s rejection of the progressive teleology and idealism of modern politics more generally, in which political action is rendered meaningful only through its instrumental connection with, and subsumption under, desirable political ends. For Mehta, the meaning of the act – especially in acts such as spinning, fasting, and celibacy – is contained in the radical singularity of the act itself. It is exemplary in the sense that its meaning, purpose, and motivation bear no reference to moral and political principles exterior to or beyond it.80

There are important differences and nuances of interpretation to which I have not sufficiently attended here. The point of commonality I wish to highlight is a view of

78 James Tully, Public Philosophy in a New Key, Volume II: Imperialism and Civic Freedom (Cambridge, 2008), ch. 9, especially 308-309.
80 Mehta, “Gandhi on Democracy, Politics and the Ethics of Everyday Life.”
exemplarity which emphasizes the *self-contained* nature of Gandhian action. What is truly compelling is how the exemplary act contains a universality that does threaten compulsion or imposition. Others may be inspired to emulate the act or respond to its radical ethical demand, but only through the non-compulsory “force” of the example.\(^{81}\) As such, however, exemplary action more closely resembles a form of individual ethical action without a clear sense of its political valence. That is, there is little by way of an account of what that force entails for others, its impact on opponents and potential fellow citizens, and more generally its relation to a political audience and context that is necessarily characterized by contestation and recalcitrance. But, as I have tried to show, Gandhi developed models of nonviolent action that were closely attuned to action’s wider effects and entailments in the political world. The limits of exemplary action as it is currently being theorized (and sometimes attributed to Gandhi) are in part due to the fact that action is viewed as the site for the immanent constitution of norms or ends and rather than in terms of its situation within the interactive dynamics through which political relationships are reshaped and transformed. It is too closely tied to epistemological conundrums about judgment rather than the means-ends idiom appropriate for understanding action’s consequential effects.

Gandhian action, to my mind, is best characterized less as self-contained action than as self-limiting, strategic action; that is, a non-instrumental form of consequentialism that sought to curtail and mitigate endemic violence and sustain progressive change. Its vigilance was two-pronged: internally it aimed at averting moral erosion and the temptation to violence and externally it focused on nonviolent means to “convert” others to the cause of reform. In the case of civil disobedience and non-cooperation, that is, in negative or destructive *satyagraha*, self-limiting action seeks to mitigate the resentments that action entails, most importantly by taking upon itself the burdens and consequences of action. Likewise in constructive *satyagraha*, perhaps especially in its more pedagogical forms, self-limiting action attempts to undercut psychological impulses like impatience, bravado, self-righteousness, dogmatism through the cultivation of confidence, trust, and authority through work and service. Abstract ends – such as *swaraj* – needed grounding in immediate, intimate, and precise practices – such as spinning – as a way to ward off the temptation to look for “short-violent cuts” to temporarily satisfying but ultimately self-defeating gains.

VIII.
I will conclude with some speculative remarks on wider implications of turning to a means-orientation in politics, of a kind I attribute to Gandhi. I hope it can provide a different, critical angle from which to think about the recurrent fragility of norms and ideals in the face of the constraints and hazards of political action. When faced with disappointments and failures with respect to the implementation of ideals, there is a

temptation to turn back inwards to clarify or purify those ideals. For instance, in the body of twentieth-century political thought that tried to make sense of totalitarian and revolutionary violence, there was an attempt to pinpoint some logical fallacy or inadequacy in conceptualizations of liberty, freedom, progress, equality, or community pursued that was seen to be the deep source for the violence that ensued. One can think here of Berlin’s distinction between positive and negative liberty, Arendt’s account of political versus social revolution, or even Hayek’s privileging of equality before the law over and against equality of opportunity. But the question of why and how particular ideals in particular circumstances are accompanied by and enable violent or coercive politics may have as much to did with the forms of power used for their implementation – that is, the means employed to secure politics ends – than with the internal logic/coherence of the ideals themselves or the purity (or not) of the intentions of individual and collective agents that seek their instantiation. This is one lesson I take from a book like Arendt’s Origins of Totalitarianism, namely, that the recurring threat to principles of moral universalism and equality lies in the moral erosion that proceeds from the habituation to violence and domination. In other words, despite the recognition and sanctification of universal norms of human equality and dignity, these principles can all too easily be corrupted and degenerate when tied to and subsumed by the dynamics of power politics – nation-state rivalry, empire, war, and revolution. Here, I want to suggest that attending to means is to take seriously the processes of moral erosion that violence in politics is both premised upon and compounds, as consequential entailments of action that cannot be so easily dismissed or disavowed by claims about the purity of moral intention or the justness or universalism of the ideals pursued.