

Chapter 4

Heidegger and Gandhi: A Dialogue on Conflict and Enmity

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Abstract While Heidegger and Gandhi share the conviction that conflict is an inevitable feature of the human condition, they differ on what that conflict entails and what it may accomplish. For Gandhi, human finitude means that any individual and any culture will have only a partial perspective on the truth, whether in religious matters or in questions of justice, and therefore conflict is the necessary result of these differences. Although Heidegger also argues that we are finite beings, he would disagree with Gandhi's view that we may critique ourselves and our institutions in the light of a truth that, if only partially glimpsed, transcends our particularity. For Heidegger, there is no transcendence to a world of timeless principles and ideals, only the immanence of historical belonging. This means that while Heidegger believes that conflict plays a role in refining a community's sense of its own historical destiny, he would condemn as nihilism Gandhi's view that conflict can invite us to transcend ourselves. For Heidegger, genuine conflict reveals the opponents as incommensurable enemies; for Gandhi, the goal of conflict must always be the possibility of reconciliation, and conflict must unfold in a way to promote this. The essay argues that Gandhi's position on what I call soft enmity offers a more promising understanding of the dialectic between our rootedness in historical traditions and our need to judge those traditions by standards that go beyond them.

Heidegger—and Gandhi? Gandhi—and Heidegger? The conjunction might seem improbable, even preposterous. After all, Heidegger was a thinker's thinker,¹ one of the most difficult and profound (his detractors would say obscure) philosophers of the twentieth century, whereas Gandhi frequently repudiated the title of thinker

¹ Hannah Arendt called Heidegger "the hidden king" of German philosophy in the 1920s; see Arendt (1978).

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or scholar, preferring to identify himself as a man of action and of devotion to his faith. Indeed, some might take offense at the juxtaposition of Gandhi and Heidegger. After all, Heidegger was—at least for a time—an ardent supporter and promoter of National Socialism, one of the most violent and racist regimes in human history, whereas Gandhi dedicated his life to nonviolent action as the way to uphold principles of universal justice and human equality. Nevertheless, there are many ways in which their respective thought addresses common concerns, and it is precisely because of their differences that the comparison will be fruitful. Both Heidegger and Gandhi view the modern world as in crisis: Heidegger discerns the root of this crisis in what he calls nihilism, and while Gandhi does not use that term, his view that humanity is on the verge of self-destruction through nuclear war and an overreliance on technology intimates as well a sense that nihilism stalks our modern age.² Both argue that the human condition is grounded in facing up to the challenge presented by one's own community's historical situation, and both hold that a kind of critical fidelity to one's own tradition is essential to authentic human life. Heidegger and Gandhi also share a suspicion of technology and modern science as the putative salvation for our woes and as the high road to a true understanding of the human condition. But just what it is that constitutes our era's nihilism, and how human conflict plays into that crisis, is what will provide the ground for the dialogue and the disagreement between Heidegger and Gandhi.

4.1 Beginning with Being: Finitude and the Ethics of Conflict

As Heidegger emphasized many times over the course of his career, the central focus of his thought was “the question of the meaning of Being” (*die Frage nach dem Sinne des Seins*).³ While Heidegger's work has the reputation (not without reason) of being terribly difficult, his motivating question is in fact quite simple. In German, the word *Sein* is a nominative composed from an infinitive: *sein*, in English, *to be*. The English “Being” obscures what Heidegger is asking about, because “Being” gives the impression that we are inquiring about some *thing*, some fundamental reality that underlies everything else real, a “supreme being,” or God, or the equation $E=mc^2$, or what have you. But Heidegger's question is simply about what it means for something, anything, *to be*, not about what explains the substance of all reality. When we say that something *is*, what does that mean? One might be tempted to say that when we say that something *is*, we mean that it endures, that it

² In 1946, Gandhi wrote about the “cataclysmic changes in the world” brought about by the atom bomb and that “without the recognition of this truth [namely, truth of *satyagraha* as a moral force in each of us], and due effort to realize it, there is no escape from self-destruction.” The truth he means is the realization that every human being bears within, even if only dormant, the twin spiritual force of truth and non-violence. See Gandhi (2003, 279–80).

³ See Martin Heidegger (1962, 1).

exists as present and in some way as meaningful to us. For Heidegger, then, Being itself is *no thing*, but rather how it is that *any* thing that is, in any sense of that little word “is,” can be intelligible to us. But that is not yet an answer to the question of the meaning of Being itself; it is only a clarification of the question’s scope and domain. Heidegger takes his clue from our sense that what is *endures*, that it is in some sense (however attenuated) *present* to us *in* and *through* time. For Heidegger, *time* is the horizon for the understanding of Being, and we as human beings (what he calls *Dasein*) have the distinction of being the being for whom Being itself arises as a question. But Heidegger also insists that Being is not simply enduring presence, even if that has become our dominant Western understanding of it, because Being is not merely static presence, as if (again) it were a thing. Rather, *Be-ing* is verbal; it is a *presencing* that also entails *absence*—the coming in and going out of presence.

This may all seem tremendously abstract and infinitely distant from the nitty-gritty of Gandhi’s nonviolent political action, but it helps to recall that Gandhi titled his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. That wording is important, and Gandhi meant it with the utmost seriousness. Let’s start with “Truth,” which is a translation of the Sanskrit *satya*. English and Sanskrit, as well as modern Hindi, German, and ancient Greek, among many other languages, all share a common archaic parentage in the Indo-European language. *Satya*, truth, whose stem, *sat-*, has its ancient root in the Indo-European stem *es-*, which is cognate with the German *ist*, the Greek *esti*, the French and Latin *est*, and the English *is*, among many other related languages.⁴ So here we have the link: for both Heidegger and Gandhi, their life’s work may be understood as an endeavor to understand this *is*, or Being—although we should be on guard against assuming that they understand or answer the question of Being in the same way. In Gandhi’s case, he insists on calling his nonviolent action his *experiments* with truth because he shares a conception of *satya* that is common to the Hindu tradition: *satya* is the absolute Truth,⁵ the final reality that transcends all transient phenomena and serves as their source and support. Drawing on the tradition of the Sanskrit mantra, *om tat sat*, Gandhi declares:

Truth is not a mere attribute of God, but He is That. He is nothing if He is not That. Truth in Sanskrit means *Sat*. *Sat* means *Is*. God is, nothing else is. Therefore the more truthful we are, the nearer we are to God. We *are* only to the extent that we are truthful.⁶

For Gandhi, precisely because this ultimate Truth, as the essence of what is, transcends the world of becoming to which we belong, even if it undergirds it as well, he stresses again and again in his writings that human beings, who are themselves transient elements of the world, may never grasp this final Truth in its entirety while they exist in their present form. (As a Hindu, he leaves open the possibility of *moksha*, a transcendent liberation of the human spirit from the illusions of the world and from the cycle of birth and death, a final and complete unification of the limited

⁴ See the entry for *es-* in Watkins (1985, 17).

⁵ We will render *satya* as capitalized *Truth* to emphasize its distinctive importance in Gandhi’s thought; this is consistent with conventions for translating key Hindu terminology.

⁶ Quoted in Bondurant (1965, 19).

self with Truth, or Brahman, the true Self.) What this means for Gandhi is that while human beings may have faith in this ultimate Truth, the best we can achieve is to attain glimpses and intimations of it, but we cannot lay claim to authoritative and complete possession of the Truth. Gandhi therefore distinguishes between *absolute* Truth and *relative* truths:

I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found him, but I am seeking after Him. I am prepared to sacrifice the things dearest to me in pursuit of this quest. Even if the sacrifice demanded my very life, I hope I may be prepared to give it. But as long as I have not realized this Absolute Truth, so long must I hold by the relative truth as I have conceived it.⁷

For Gandhi, Truth as Absolute is beyond us, even if we catch glimpses of it that illuminate our existence; but because these are only glimpses, they are partial and refracted by the contingent circumstances of the lives that we and our communities are leading, here and now.⁸ Gandhi is not a relativist in the sense of a relativism that holds that all truths are relative to historical circumstances and that there is no “Truth” beyond those contingencies. His relativism is a plea for a kind of modesty, in opposition to what we might call an epistemological arrogance: we must concede that the truths to which we have access, though intimations of the absolute Truth will always be distorted by our own biases, desires, and misunderstandings. To take a characteristic quote:

Finite human beings shall never know in its fullness Truth and Love, which is in itself infinite. But we do know enough for our guidance. We shall err, and sometimes grievously, in our application.⁹

We might call this a *constructive skepticism*, because it is optimistic rather than petulantly deconstructive or hubristically dogmatic. Our finitude makes absolute knowledge of the Absolute virtually impossible, but our finitude is nevertheless illuminated by what transcends it, and therefore guided by it, however haltingly. Hence Gandhi’s emphasis on “My Experiments” with Truth: what we *hold to be true*, we must also always *hold open to question* through experiences and arguments that challenge these convictions, and we must be ready to adjust our positions as the Truth shows itself in a new light. They are “My” experiments, because each of us must come to such challenges to our understandings of the truth from the unique starting place by which we each must start his or her “Story.”

⁷ Gandhi (1957, xiv).

⁸ I would argue, though I do not have space to do so here in full, that Gandhi’s notion of being a *seeker* after Truth has a great deal in common with Plato’s understanding of the nature of the philosophical life. See Fried (2006), where I argue that Plato distinguishes between *zetetic* and *echonic* philosophy, where the former understands truth as a goal to strive for, the latter as a possession to be owned. In my reading, Plato comes down decisively in favor of philosophy as *zetetic*: as guided by heuristic ideals, as constructively skeptical and non-dogmatic, and yet still able to make claims about justice.

⁹ Gandhi (1982, 67), quoted from *Young India*, April 27, 1927.

Heidegger shares with Gandhi the sense that human existence is, as it were, *storied*: that we each inevitably begin with the sheer fact that we are always already born into a specific time and place that gives our world meaning in a richly particular way and that points us in the direction of distinct but bounded horizon of possibilities for our future. He calls this givenness of meaning our *thrownness*, which in turn is part of the *historicity* of our human existence, namely, that we understand our own Being in terms of time. But Heidegger parts company with Gandhi in denying that there is any transcendent reality beyond the historicity of human meaning, beyond the time that we are given and the world that we inhabit as historical beings. Heidegger takes his stand in radical opposition to a Platonism that asserts that what truly *is*, what is most in Being, is a world that is absolute, eternal, unchanging, and complete, a world beyond the shadows and messiness of this world. Furthermore, for Heidegger, Platonism is responsible for a fundamentally distorted interpretation of Being that has had repercussions for the whole history of Western thought and life:

The entire spiritual existence [Dasein] of the West is determined to this day by [Plato's] doctrine of ideas. Even the concept of God arises from the idea, even natural science is oriented toward it. Christian and rationalist thought are combined in *Hegel*. Hegel, in turn, is the foundation for currents of thought and world views, above all for *Marxism*. If there had been no doctrine of ideas, there would be no Marxism. So Marxism cannot be defeated once and for all unless we first confront the doctrine of ideas and its two-millennia-long history.¹⁰

Heidegger holds Plato responsible, more than any other philosopher, for the *nihilism* of the West that has culminated in its contemporary crisis, a nihilism he discerns in both the Christian faith in a transcendent God and in the atheist's faith in reason. At the root of this nihilism is a conviction that Being is equivalent with what truly is, and that true Being is something that exists as an *idea* (or perhaps even beyond the Platonic ideas), eternal and accessible to reason, beyond the historical jumble of worldly phenomena. Heidegger attributes the nihilism of Western thought to what he calls its *metaphysics*, by which he means an interpretation of Being that treats Being as simply another being, a thing, rather than the temporal unfolding of a field of meaning within which things in general become meaningful to us.

Heidegger wants to distinguish between *Being* (as the unfolding source of how things are meaningful to us) and *beings* (things, entities, or simply what is), and he argues that forgetting this distinction is what underlies the millennia-long history of Western metaphysics that treats Being as a being. Heidegger would probably argue that Gandhi (like the Greeks) tends to identify Being, truth, and that-which-is (or at least the *supreme* entity). If *satya* means "is-ness," or *Sein*, then it can't be absolute and separable from us, according to Heidegger, even though some entities (mathematical objects, for example) might be. For Heidegger, there is no eternal Truth; instead, there are only epochal *unconcealings* of what the world means to

¹⁰Heidegger (2010, 118), translation amended.

historical human beings. Truth, for Heidegger, is grounded not in a trans-historical reality, but rather in what makes the world open and accessible to us as historically situated beings.

Heidegger famously engaged in dialogues with Eastern thought, but these tentative encounters were with East Asian traditions—the Taoism of China, and the Zen of Japan¹¹—not with the myriad traditions of South Asian thought from the Indian subcontinent. Although Heidegger never discussed Gandhi, as far as I know, it is probably fair to say that he would have placed him squarely within the company of Western metaphysics, and he might have attributed this affinity to the Indo-European roots of Hindu metaphysics, which would link it linguistically with the metaphysics of the Greeks. In Gandhi's reading of Hinduism, there are unmistakable parallels to what Heidegger takes to be the nihilism of Platonism: the notion that Being is beyond time and the phenomena of this world, that it is absolute and timeless, perfect and unchanging. That Gandhi often said things such as quoted above—that “I am prepared to sacrifice the things dearest to me in pursuit of this quest” for Absolute Truth, that he would wish to reduce himself to zero, that he strives to attain *moksha* (which he defines as “absolution from the need to have an embodied existence”¹²), and thereby release from the cycle of life and death¹³—Heidegger would take as further signs of a nihilistic understanding of Being. Heidegger draws upon Nietzsche's understanding of nihilism as a retreat into a notion of Being that is hostile to life and all its Becoming, and whether it is a fair characterization or not, he shares with Nietzsche the notion that pining for release from the wheel of life's suffering is a nihilistic attitude: “No Buddhism—the opposite!”¹⁴

This point leads us directly to the *politics* of Being for Heidegger and Gandhi. In a lecture course delivered in 1933–1934, Heidegger proclaimed:

For us, the issue is whether we can arrive at an essential understanding of the essence of truth through [Plato's] doctrine of ideas. If we talk of the doctrine of ideas, then we are displacing the fundamental question into the framework of ideas. If one interprets ideas as representations and thoughts that contain a value, a norm, a law, a rule, such that ideas then become conceived of as norms, then the one subject to these norms is the human being—not the historical human being, but rather the human being in general, the human being in itself, or humanity. Here, the conception of the human being is one of a *rational being in general*.

¹¹ For a discussion of this connection, see Parkes (1987).

¹² Gandhi (2003, 273).

¹³ For example, in speaking of his experiments with Truth and how far he still has to go: “I must reduce myself to zero.” And: “Not until we have reduced ourselves to nothingness can we conquer the evil in us.” And: “The first step towards *moksha* is freedom from attachment. Can we ever listen with pleasure to anyone talking about *moksha* so long as our mind is attached to a single object in this world?” See Gandhi (1982, 35, 62) and Gandhi (2003, 81, 28–29, 170).

¹⁴ Heidegger (1989, 171). For a discussion of this passage, see Polt (2006, 174). Heidegger is obviously referring to Buddhism's goal of release in nirvana from life's cycle of suffering, rather than Hinduism's deliverance through *moksha*, but I believe it is fair to say that he would see both notions as closely related and nihilistic, because they seek to nullify the tragic nature of existence through an escape to something beyond it.

In the Enlightenment and in liberalism, this conception achieves a definite form. Here all of the powers against which we must struggle today have their root.

Opposed to this conception are the *finitude*, *temporality*, and *historicity* of human beings. The confrontation in the direction of the future is not accidental either...¹⁵

Heidegger spoke these words at the moment of his most ardent activism for National Socialism, when the movement had just arrived at power in Germany and when he was serving as rector of his university as a Party member. For Heidegger, “all of the powers against which we must struggle today” are summed up in the *universalism* of the Enlightenment and of liberalism, a universalism that Heidegger reads all the way back to Plato, and which he traces through Christianity and the secularized versions of Christianity in liberal democracy and international socialism. This universalism, wedded to the notion of *ideas* that transcend particularity, forms the core of the idea that fundamental rights and principles of justice apply generally to all human beings, irrespective of time and place. In this sense, even Marxism, with its projection of an endpoint to all human history that would encompass humanity on a planetary scale, is a form of Platonizing idealism. I mean *idealism* in the following sense here: the focus on an ideal beyond what now is as the criterion for the moral evaluation of what merely *happens to be* in light of what might or *should be*.

When Heidegger opposes this liberal universalism in the grand sense to his conception of “the *finitude*, *temporality*, and *historicity* of human beings,” he means that what is most important to what it means to *be* human is our connection to a *particular* history and a *particular* community rooted in a *particular* homeland. For Heidegger, this belonging is not fungible; it is not something one may simply *choose*, it is something one already is, because it is the source of how the world makes sense to us as bearers of a specific history that *owns* us and binds us within a horizon of meaning. Nevertheless, this same finitude of our identity means that this very identity is always open to question and must be revisited as a question throughout a people’s history. Heidegger’s opposition to liberal universalism is rooted in his view that a people cannot discover its own identity by measuring it against some trans-historical categories of inalienable rights, human nature, and so forth. Instead, Heidegger argues that each people works out its identity through a constantly renewed confrontation with the meaning of its own past as the foundation for its future. In practice, this meant for Heidegger the absolute rejection of the classic enterprises of liberalism, such as the universal rights of man or the notion of a global “league” of nations, in favor of each people working out its destiny for itself. As I have put it elsewhere, what Heidegger supported was a form of multiculturalism and pluralism—but among nations, not within them.¹⁶

It is remarkable that Heidegger and Gandhi begin with the premise of the radical finitude of human beings and yet arrive at such different conclusions about what this means for politics. For Heidegger, our finitude precludes universalism; for Gandhi,

¹⁵ Heidegger (2010, 127).

¹⁶ See Fried (2000, 19, 233).

the former requires the latter. For Gandhi, our finitude is grounded in our at once being connected to the Truth, the Absolute, while at the same time being unable to grasp that Truth completely as a whole; for Heidegger, our finitude is grounded in his rejection of the very existence of a trans-temporal, eternal, unchanging Reality: all we have is our bounded passage through time, and this is what we must come to terms with; Being is the ground of finitude, not of our link to the infinite. For both Gandhi and Heidegger, finitude means that *conflict* is an inevitable part of the human experience, since both hold that it is not possible for us to grasp the whole. Where they differ is in *how* that conflict should be engaged.

For Gandhi, conflict is inevitable because both individual persons and entire cultures each have, at best, only a partial (or “relative”) perspective on the Truth. And yet that Truth undergirds all partial perceptions of it. Because of this, we will inevitably clash over decisive questions, whether religious, philosophical, social, political, or economic—and for Gandhi, these are all bound together—but there are also grounds for hope that these very clashes will bring us closer to the Truth, and to each other. In Gandhi’s form of skeptical idealism, his experimental pragmatism, such conflicts are not simply inevitable, they are essential, because they provide the opportunity for us to analyze, refine, and develop our necessarily limited understanding of the Truth. When Gandhi says that “all religions are true,”¹⁷ he does not mean that every detail of each religion’s doctrine is correct, for that would be absurd; he means, rather, that given our finitude, each of the world’s great religions is equally on a pathway to the Truth, that each has its insights, as well as its blind spots. His political practice of *satyagraha* is meant to open both contending parties in any conflict to make progress on that pathway.

As the polestar of transformative political and social action, from the most humble personal dispute to campaigns for decolonization, Gandhi insists that conflict must be carried out in a spirit of love and nonviolence, or *ahimsa*. On the one hand, we have a duty to take a stand based on our present understanding of the Truth; on the other, we must simultaneously acknowledge the limitedness of our understanding: the possibility that we might be wrong, perhaps in particulars or even completely, and that the opponent sees something of the Truth that we do not. Hence Gandhi’s name for nonviolent political action: *satyagraha*. This term is usually translated as “truth-force,” or sometimes “soulforce,” but its root meaning is “holding to the Truth.” At first blush, this might seem like an arrogant and intransigent insistence upon one’s own righteousness and infallibility, but while Gandhi does insist that we must not flinch from the duty of confronting injustice and falsehood as we see it, he understands the *satya-* of *satyagraha* in his particular way: as a Truth to which we have only partial access. Once again: his constructive skepticism. This means engaging the opponent resolutely but also openly, with the hope of genuine reconciliation at the resolution of the conflict. For Gandhi, this limitedness of ours can also be the source of the unity of religion, if only we will let it be:

I believe that all the great religions of the world are true more or less. I say “more or less” because I believe that everything that the human hand touches, by reason of the very fact

¹⁷ See Gandhi (1982, 54 and passim).

that human beings are imperfect, becomes imperfect. Perfection is the exclusive attribute of God and it is indescribable, untranslatable. . . . It is necessary for us all to aspire after perfection, but when that blessed state is attained, it becomes indescribable, indefinable.¹⁸

Gandhi's seemingly contradictory embrace of skepticism and idealism makes him what I would call a partisan of *asymptotic perfectibility*: that we may continuously approach but not decisively arrive at the Truth and absolute justice, because we are mortal and time-bound; still, we can make *progress towards* that endpoint, but only if we seek out constructive conflict as the necessary engine of that progression, and do so in the spirit of *satyagraha*. This is another way of understanding Gandhi's desire to reduce himself to zero, for that is what pushing ourselves to that limit-approaching-infinity means.

For Heidegger, too, conflict is essential to what it means to be human. As I have argued,¹⁹ Heidegger takes his bearings from his interpretations of the one of the sayings of pre-Socratic philosopher, Heraclitus: "*Polemos* is the father of all things, and the king of all, and it reveals some as gods, others as human beings; it makes some slaves, others free."²⁰ The Greek *polemos*, from which we get the English *polemical*, means war, conflict, confrontation. Heidegger holds that *polemos* defines what it means to *be* human precisely because of our finitude and because there is no Absolute, no Truth existing in an ideal realm, by which we might reconcile our divergent ways of understanding the world. It is worth quoting at length one of the most chilling passages in Heidegger's work, from the same lecture of 1933–1934 discussed before, where he declares:

One word stands great and simple at the beginning of [Heraclitus'] saying: *polemos*, war. This does not mean the outward occurrence of war and the celebration of what is "military," but rather what is decisive: standing against the enemy. We have translated this word with "struggle" to hold on to what is essential; but on the other hand, it is important to think over that it does not mean *agon* [Greek: contest], a competition in which two friendly opponents measure their strengths, but rather the struggle of *polemos*, war. This means that the struggle is in earnest; the opponent is not a partner but an enemy. Struggle as standing against the enemy, or more plainly: standing firm in confrontation.

An enemy is each and every person who poses an essential threat to the Dasein of the people and its individual members. The enemy does not have to be external, and the external enemy is not even always the more dangerous one. And it can seem as if there were no enemy. Then it is a fundamental requirement to find the enemy, to expose the enemy to the light, or even first to make the enemy, so that this standing against the enemy may happen and so that Dasein may not lose its edge.

The enemy can have attached itself to the innermost roots of the Dasein of a people and can set itself against this people's own essence and act against it. The struggle is all the fiercer and harder and tougher, for the least of it consists in coming to blows with one another; it is often far more difficult and wearisome to catch sight of the enemy as such, to bring the enemy into the open, to harbor no illusions about the enemy, to keep oneself ready

¹⁸ Gandhi (1982, 56).

¹⁹ See Fried (2000), chapter 1.

²⁰ I take responsibility for this rendering of Heraclitus' fragment 53, although I gratefully acknowledge advice from Martin Black. The Greek, transliterated, is: *pólemos pántôn men patêr esti, pántôn de basileús, kai tous men theoús édeixe tous de anthrôpous, tous men doúlous epoiése tous de eleuthérous*.

for attack, to cultivate and intensify a constant readiness and to prepare the attack looking far ahead with the goal of total annihilation.²¹

The contrast with Gandhi could not be more extreme: rather than reconciliation, the expected end of conflict is “total annihilation” (and it must not be forgotten that at this time in Germany, the paramount internal and hidden enemy was supposedly the Jew); the opponent is a true enemy in the most extreme sense of that word: someone whose very existence constitutes a threat to one’s own existence. Conflict is then not a step to self-purification in reconciliation with the opponent on the pathway to a Truth that both parties could, in principle, share. This means that violence, both in spirit and in deed, is inevitable. Indeed, Heidegger seems to imply that violence is desirable, because a people’s sense of itself as a unity may even require that it “*make* the enemy.”

At issue between Heidegger and Gandhi is the ontology of politics. We do not have to accept Gandhi’s entire ethic of nonviolence or his views on religion to agree that something like his conception of finite understandings of the truth is a necessary public epistemology for a democratic, pluralistic society, and even for relatively peaceful international relations. Heidegger forces us to confront the idealism inherent to a universalistic pluralism. For Gandhi, recognition and acceptance of our finitude is what keeps hubris at bay; we may be radically incomplete beings, doomed to the cycle of birth, living, and death, but this fundamental limitation may also redeem us if we strive, in a kind of resolute modesty, to catch the glimmerings of Truth in the contingency of our existence. For Heidegger, though, there is no transcendence, no release in *moksha*, no escape from Plato’s cave, and therefore we must cleave to what is ours, here and now, as our only fleeting foundation. Peace would then at best only be a transitory truce between otherwise incompatible worlds, something possible only temporarily between nations, for a nation, to be a nation, must live through a people’s finite but shared self-understanding.

4.2 Self-rule and Pluralism

The contrast between Heidegger and Gandhi now seems at its starkest. But there is a surprising point on which they seem to agree, one indicated above: both hold that human beings must draw upon their own traditions in order to own up to what faces them in any particular time, and both insist upon a form of national autonomy in doing this. Although militant nationalism has found little support in contemporary theory, since the publication of the now-classic essay, “National Self-Determination” (1990) by Avishai Margalit and Joseph Raz, the question of the right to a national identity has received wide attention.²² The controversies that have erupted since the publication of Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis in *Foreign Affairs*

²¹ Heidegger (2010, 90–91); translation amended.

²² See Margalit and Raz (1990). For an example of how this question has played out, see Bachman (1997).

(1993)²³—and, in particular, the question of whether we should understand the so-called War on Terror as such an existential clash—show that the problem of national and cultural difference remains very much alive. The comparison between Heidegger and Gandhi may cast these issues in a productive new light by showing what is at stake. Gandhi famously struggled for India's *swaraj*, its independence from the British Empire. When Heidegger assumed the role of rector, or president, of Freiburg University in 1933, he entitled his inaugural speech "The Self-Assertion of the German University."²⁴ For Heidegger then, *Selbstbehauptung*, self-assertion, was the path to both university reform and national resurgence. For both Heidegger and Gandhi, the key again is *human finitude*: we necessarily find ourselves as members of an existing, historical community whose horizons are bounded by its own historical understanding, and we can only come to understand ourselves individually through a confrontation with our own community's history, both backwards into the past and forwards into the future. But this needs unpacking.

Swaraj literally means self-rule, which usually was understood to mean political independence for India, but Gandhi also took this word in the most expansive sense. He wrote once to a friend: "For me, even the effort for attaining *swaraj* is a part of the effort for *moksha* [ultimate liberation]. Writing this to you is also part of the same effort."²⁵ Self-rule, then, involves all aspects of both a person's and a people's striving for self-realization. Political emancipation is only one part of that; self-rule as governing the self ranges from economic independence and accountability for all classes in society to each individual's final self-realization in the liberation (*moksha*) from a time-bound existence. But the key for Gandhi is that each such path to self-realization begins within an embeddedness in a particular place, community, and tradition. When he proclaims that "all religions are true," this emphatically does not mean that they are simply identical and therefore indifferent as to content. Gandhi believed that conversion from one religion to another, while possible, is often ill-advised: one should work from the tradition in which one has one's roots, or else the very idea that all religions share a unity past their differences is belied.²⁶

²³ Huntington (1993). See also Huntington (1996), which removes the question mark and expands upon the thesis. It is worth noting, given the argument later in this essay, that Huntington's final sentence in the original articles was this: "For the relevant future, there will be no universal civilization, but instead a world of different civilizations, each of which will have to learn to coexist with the others." On this point, Huntington and I agree that we cannot address reality by simply imposing ideal theory upon it. The question remains, of course, what the ideal should be, and to what extent we can realize it in the messy present of the real and not allow that reality to overwhelm what improvements might be possible. Once again, Gandhi's pragmatic idealism seems to me to strike the right balance, even if one might not agree with his particular policies or his method of nonviolence.

²⁴ See Heidegger (1991).

²⁵ Gandhi (2003, 29).

²⁶ For example, see Gandhi (1962, 60–85). "I would no more think of asking a Christian or a Musalman or a Parsi or a Jew to change his faith than I would of changing my own" (1962, 66). Gandhi allows that true conversions may occur, but he is suspicious of missionaries of any faith, particularly those who prey on the poor, depriving them of their indigenous faith and thereby "destroying their social superstructure, which notwithstanding its many defects has stood now from time immemorial the onslaughts upon it from within and from without" (1962, 67).

In this sense, Gandhi shares with Heidegger an emphasis on historical authenticity. Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962 [1927]) emphasized *authenticity* (*Eigentlichkeit*) as an essential potentiality of human existence, one in which an individual, or perhaps a community, might self-consciously take on the burdens and opportunities of its own history rather than letting that history simply carry one along unthinkingly. Although Gandhi's notion of *swaraj* is no simple equivalent to Heidegger's *Eigentlichkeit*, both concepts share the sense that human beings are indebted to the historical situations within which they simply happen to find themselves, and that therefore authentically being a self must mean confronting that tradition in a constructive way, not avoiding it or passively allowing it to define one's existence. Self-rule for both individuals and communities, then, means a genuine engagement with the self, making sense of this individual and communal self both within a tradition and as having a future that is open to new possibilities that must always be drawn from that historical inheritance. It means confronting the history that has been granted, not running away from it into the exotic other. Gandhi understood national independence as *swaraj* in this way: not as a rejection of the unity of humanity, but rather as a recognition that distinct peoples must be free to make sense of their own histories and futures for themselves, without imperial or colonial interference.²⁷

Heidegger used the term *Selbstbehauptung*, self-assertion, in the early 1930s when he was an open and dedicated National Socialist. It is closely related to a family of words, such as *Selbstverantwortung* (self-accountability), that he employed to address how a community may take possession of its own destiny. In November of 1933, Hitler presented a plebiscite to the German people, asking them to approve or reject his national and international policies, including his plan to withdraw Germany from the League of Nations as part of the effort to overcome the effects of the treaty of Versailles. Heidegger made impassioned speeches in favor of a Yes vote on the plebiscite:

Neither ambition nor thirst for glory nor blind obstinacy nor lust for dominion, but solely the clear will to an unconditioned self-accountability in the bearing and mastering of the fate of our people demanded from the Führer the withdrawal from the "League of Nations." This is not a turning away from the community of peoples, but on the contrary: Our people, with this step, sets itself under that essential law of human Being to which every people must render allegiance, if it wishes to remain a people.

Precisely from this allegiance, equally observed, to the unconditional demand of self-accountability does the possibility of taking one another seriously arise, and so then of affirming a community. The will to a true community of the people holds itself as much aloof from an untenable, bondless reduction to world brotherhood as from a blind domination by violence. This will operates beyond these two opposing poles; it creates the open and manly standing by and up to one another of peoples and states. What happens in such willing? Is this descent into barbarism? No!²⁸

²⁷ It is worth comparing Gandhi on this point with a contemporary political theorist such as David Miller, who argues in Miller (1997) that liberal-minded people should not be afraid to embrace the idea of *nationality*, which can subsist in the context of respect for other national identities without leading to crude *nationalism*.

²⁸ Schneeberger (1962, 148–149); my translation.

What distinguishes Gandhi's struggle for *swaraj* as self-rule from Heidegger's insistence on self-accountability here? On the surface, it would *seem* not much. Heidegger says that the withdrawal from the League of Nations is predicated on a desire for genuine national independence and the rejection of a phony appeal to "world brotherhood." He wants to argue that a *true* community of peoples is based on each national community first standing on its own and for itself, for otherwise there can be no self-respect or mutual respect among nations. In an essay of 1937, "Paths to Discussion," aimed at a French audience, Heidegger claims that in facing up to its own historical tasks, a nation needs its neighbors to sharpen and bring into focus what is at stake:

Understanding one another here is also—and here above all—a struggle [*Kampf*] of putting oneself into question that is reciprocal between the participants. Only confrontation [*Auseinandersetzung*] impels each participant into what is most his own. This happens only if confrontation gathers up and endures in another way, in the face of the threatening uprooting of the West, an uprooting whose overturning demands the initiative of every people capable of creativity. The grounding form of confrontation is the actual conversational exchange of the creative in a neighborly encounter.²⁹

Once again, it seems as if both Heidegger and Gandhi locate the necessity of conflict in the finitude from which each historical person and community takes its bearings. It certainly sounds like Heidegger means that each community comes to greater self-understanding only through a "struggle" and "confrontation" that takes the form of a "conversational exchange" and "neighborly encounter" that does not seek to repress the other in its distinct finitude, but rather to allow that other to help one's own community to discern and confront what are its own historical tasks and burdens. Then it might seem as if both Heidegger and Gandhi advocate a similar view of national self-assertion: that each people must not surrender to a crude universalism that eradicates historical difference, but rather embrace its own traditions, in resolute but open "conversation" with other traditions.

And yet we must not ignore that "struggle" (*Kampf*) and "confrontation" (*Auseinandersetzung*) are two of Heidegger's preferred renderings for the Greek *polemos*, and it then becomes impossible to forget that passage in which he says that *polemos* is war in earnest with the enemy—an enemy that poses an existential threat to the people (even if that enemy must first be *made!*), an enemy that must be attacked to the point of "complete annihilation." Then his evocation of the "neighborly encounter" and his repudiation of "barbarism" ring hollow—especially in the light of what happened to France and the rest of Europe, not to mention the "hidden" enemies of the German people: the Jews, the Roma, and others.

At the root of what separates Heidegger and Gandhi, even in their evocation of national independence, is again their differing understanding of human finitude. In Gandhi's case, because our finitude is informed and guided by what transcends finitude, even if we can at best only grasp it fleetingly, then the differences of tradition—while real and deserving of respect—are not ultimate and need not irrevocably divide us. Gandhi's is a soft finitude. By contrast, Heidegger's finitude is a hard

²⁹ Quoted in Fried (2000, 180); translation amended.

one: because there is no universal, no Idea, no transcendence beckoning us from beyond our limited historical situatedness, communal difference may be (and often must be) an unbridgeable divide. The worlds that peoples inhabit, as what give them meaning, are simply incommensurable, and difference then may (or must) become implacable enmity—even as that enmity, through the inevitable confrontation, helps each group understand itself better in its own necessary and defining historical limitations.

4.3 Action and Ideal

Some might argue that even if this antagonistic sense of human identity might be true of the Heidegger of the 1930s, it is not true of the Heidegger after the war, the Heidegger who emphasized not *polemos* as the way for human beings to engage Being, but rather *Gelassenheit*: letting-be, or releasement.³⁰ With *Gelassenheit*, so goes the argument, Heidegger sought to counter the rampaging human will, and especially the will to power in the era of total war and the global reign of technology, with an unobtrusive openness and an attitude of simply letting what is *be*, and to be thankful for it.

But even if it were true that Heidegger made such a turn in his thinking, this turn can itself be criticized from a Gandhian point of view: *ahimsa*, or nonviolence is precisely a kind of *acting*, not a form of passivity. Must any assertion of the will be condemned as form of Nietzschean hubris now? Heidegger appears to have lurched to the opposite extreme from the 1930s and given up on action altogether. Gandhi insists on a justice that is not limited by human finitude, even if we can only imperfectly grasp what justice demands; but even that imperfect understanding demands that we engage the world in the light of ideas and ideals that transcend the imperfections of what merely happens to be.³¹

Where does this leave us? Readers who balk at Gandhi's religious language and nonviolence, or at Heidegger's opaque ontology, might wonder what any of this has to teach us about coping with enmity in the modern (or post-modern) age of terrorism, the diffusion of weapons of mass destruction, and rapid globalization, with all the environmental and human disasters that attend this break-neck pace of change.³²

But the key to addressing human enmity in such a world lies in what we think about the question of human finitude. We face the question of whether the diverse civilizations of this planet are fated to implacable conflict, rooted in their attachment

³⁰ The central text is Heidegger (1959, 1969). For an exemplary reading of the later Heidegger, in the spirit indicated here, see Richard Capabianco (2010).

³¹ I am grateful to Richard Polt for suggesting this point.

³² Another fruitful topic for comparison between Heidegger and Gandhi would be the question of technology and globalization, but there is no space for that here. Both are deeply suspicious of the modernist project for the conquest of nature, and both believe that technology uproots human beings from their attachments to tradition and to nature.

to incommensurable traditions, or whether we can find sufficient grounds for common understanding, even agreement—as temporary as it may be—while not sacrificing our sense of historical belonging to particular communities. As Nir Eisikovits suggests in his essay for this volume, “Truce!”, the Western emphasis on an absolute dichotomy between war and peace may have the paradoxical effect of making war all the more inevitable and intractable as an attempt to produce a permanent peace. Instead, we need to reconsider less ambitious peacemaking ventures, such as the truce, which acknowledge the limitations of human action to eliminating disagreement and conflict all at once.³³ What we need now are ways that we can avoid the absolutist “friend and foe” divisions of the world while neither ignoring our serious differences nor depending on dangerously utopian expectations for resolving those differences at one fell swoop. These more modest measures may give us the breathing room in which enmity may fade and lasting peace slowly and organically evolve in the absence of outright and intransigent confrontation. This does not mean relinquishing our ideals. Nevertheless, we must not make the mistake of missing opportunities for an imperfect peace in the present for the sake of a perfect peace imagined in the future.

Heidegger and Gandhi force us to confront these questions about the response to human divisions. For my money, Gandhi’s pragmatic idealism provides a far more compelling model for the kinds of epistemology and civic habits that are necessary for a diverse, democratic community that is sensitive to cultural difference while still upholding universal principles. This practical epistemology may be extended to international relations, too, with reservations granted for the lack of stable, democratic forms for global governance. Gandhi teaches us not to fear a *soft* enmity (rather than a hard, or utterly incommensurable enmity, as in Heidegger or Schmitt), for in the confrontation with the opponent, we presume the possibility of reconciliation, as well as the possibility that we ourselves might be proven wrong—and that we too may have something to learn. A community that embodies these virtues of resolute openness to constructive conflict must necessarily be an evolving balancing act. Quite the contrary to being nihilistic, Gandhi’s skeptical idealism points the way to making sense of conflict as an opportunity for enlarging human life and understanding.

Gandhi’s justifications for his political practice exemplify what I have elsewhere called a *situated transcendence*:³⁴ namely, the recognition that human beings must necessarily start out as members of the distinct historical communities to which they are attached, but also that fully understanding that attachment and refining it in the light of the struggles over justice that define all communities, forces us to evaluate our convictions in the light of ideals that transcend them. In turn, that confrontation between our convictions and our ideals forces us to understand more fully what those ideals really imply, and what they really are. Without this dialogue between

³³ See also Eisikovits (2010), where he has argued that openness understood as *sympathy* may be the royal road to forms of peace-making that are all the more successful because they don’t presume to settle all the sources of a given conflict at once.

³⁴ See Fried (2006).

our rootedness and our aspiration to something beyond it, we surely will lapse into the barbarism of self-idolatry and intransigent enmity. That is the true nihilism: a world without light at the end of the tunnel.

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