Gandhi’s Asceticism: Inhuman or Humanizing?

Mohandas K. Gandhi was unquestionably a human being, but was he authentically human? What, for that matter, constitutes humanity? Can one turn one’s back on the pleasures of sex, food, and intimate friendship, as Gandhi did, without turning one’s back on one’s own humanity? Yes. In Gandhi’s life, one finds an example of a man whose ascetic practices actually humanize. Gandhi’s asceticism was truly human in that it was motivated by his desire to engage the world, not to escape it.

British novelist, journalist, essayist, and critic Eric Arthur Blair, more commonly known by his pen name, George Orwell, wrote his Reflections on Gandhi roughly a year after Gandhi’s assassination.¹ Orwell has many good things to say about Gandhi in his tentatively positive article; Gandhi “enriched the world simply by being alive” and “regarded simply as a politician, and compared with the other leading political figures of our time, how clean a smell he has managed to leave behind!”² One of Orwell’s major aims, however, is to critique Gandhi’s spiritualism and asceticism. According to Orwell, Gandhi is staunchly anti-humanist in that he puts God before Man and sees the world as “an illusion to be escaped from.”³ Gandhi’s rejection of meat and other animal products, alcohol, tobacco, flavor, sex, and close, exclusive human relationships make his philosophy inhuman.⁴ For Orwell,

The essence of being human is that one does not seek perfection, that one is sometimes willing to commit sins for the sake of loyalty, that one does not push asceticism to the point where it makes friendly intercourse impossible, and that one is prepared in the end to be

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¹ George Orwell “Reflections on Gandhi,” 85-92.
² Ibid., 87, 92.
³ Ibid., 88.
⁴ Loc. cit.
defeated and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one’s love upon other human individuals.\textsuperscript{5}

Not everyone wishes to reject the full bounty of embodied life and become a saint; a saint is not a human being.\textsuperscript{6} Nonetheless, one can rescue some of Gandhi’s laudable pacifistic teachings from his religious worldview by following his methods and disregarding his motivation.\textsuperscript{7} In sum, Gandhi’s rejection of the pleasures and pains of life and love strive for something less than humanity and humanism.

Was Orwell right? Does renunciation and asceticism, the rejection of normal and apparently natural pleasures for the purpose of a spiritual goal, deny one’s humanity? It is undoubtedly true that Gandhi sought, not just to master, but to eliminate desires most would never dream of renouncing. For Gandhi, “One should eat not in order to please the palate, but just to keep the body going.”\textsuperscript{8} He gave up sexual relations in his marriage after he realized his marital fidelity consisted of nothing more than “making my wife the instrument of my lust.”\textsuperscript{9} Bad company corrupts good morals, and thus “all exclusive intimacies are to be avoided…he who would be friends with God must remain alone, or make the whole world his friend.”\textsuperscript{10} Good to his word, Gandhi took pains to treat his family impartially.\textsuperscript{11} But Gandhi took his asceticism a step further. He was not merely trying to abstain from pleasure, he was seeking to extinguish desire altogether. This conviction can be traced to Gandhi’s favorite book, \textit{The Bhagavad-Gita}, which proclaims that “Sensuous objects fade when the embodied self abstains from food; the

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 89.  
\textsuperscript{6} Loc. cit.  
\textsuperscript{7} Loc. cit.  
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 205.  
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 19.  
taste lingers, but it too fades in the vision of higher truth.”\textsuperscript{12} Gandhi took this quite seriously. For him, physical fasting has no benefit unless it is conjoined with mental fasting.\textsuperscript{13} The goal is not so much to abstain but to achieve a state of mind where one no longer needs to exert effort to abstain.

One could, with Orwell, call this kind of renunciation of the staples of human life (sex, tasty food, intimacies, etc.) inhuman, but to do so would be to misunderstand Gandhi’s motivation for his ascetic practices. Gandhi mortified his flesh in order that he could better serve humanity. Again, Gandhi finds his inspiration from the \textit{Gita}. He rejected exclusive relationships so that he could be “Impartial to foe and friend…free from attachment.”\textsuperscript{14} Impartial, universal love is more commendable than exclusive love in the same way that “The devotion of a servant…[is] a thousand times more praiseworthy than that of a wife to her husband.”\textsuperscript{15} Drawing from the Hindu traditions of the importance of virtue in political rulers, Susanne Hoeber Rudolph writes that “If Gandhi lived his private life in public and if his private restraint became a matter of public concern, it was because both he and those who observed him believed that a man's claim to be just, to command others, and to attain the wisdom of a statesman, were proportional to the capacity for self-restraint, for inner restraints.”\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, Gandhi himself writes that “Fasting and similar discipline is, therefore, one of the means to the end of self-restraint,” and that renunciation without a desire for restraint is worse than worthless.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{The Bhagavad-Gita}. Translated by Barbara Stoler Miller, Chapter II: 59.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{The Bhagavad-Gita}. Translated by Barbara Stoler Miller, Chapter XII: 18.
\textsuperscript{16} Susanne Hoeber Rudolph. “Self-Control and Political Potency: Gandhi's Asceticism,” 82.
\textsuperscript{17} Mohandas K. Gandhi. \textit{An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth}, 332.
Gandhi subverts Orwell’s distinction between a human being and a saint by employing his sainthood to promote his humanitarian cause. According to Veena Howard, Gandhi used “His status and moral standing as a brahmācārin…to interweave selected traditional myths, folklore, and symbols to communicate the supernatural powers of brahmacarya, as well as to advocate his strategy— both of which aimed at inspiring mass mobilization.”18 There were plenty of human beings working for Indian independence during Gandhi’s time, but the people needed a saint, someone with spiritual power.

It is simply incorrect to say that Gandhi recoiled from humanity, his own or others’. He found himself restless when he was not engaged in humanitarian work.19 For him, inhumanity was not a product of voluntary renunciation but of injustice.20 Indeed, humanity is at its best when it seeks to give up so that others could receive.21 All human beings are children of God, and an attack on one is an attack on the entire universe.22 As Kasturbai, Gandhi’s wife, put so poetically, “It is a rare thing in this world to be born as a human being, and I would far rather die…than pollute my body…”23 Though near to death due to sickness, Kasturbai refused to partake in meat, valuing her ability to choose and to live according to her conscience over even her life. This is Gandhi’s conception of humanity.

Today, one does not often hear about how Gandhi’s asceticism was linked with his nonviolent resistance. To all appearance, it seems as if Orwell was right: one can divorce Gandhi’s activism from his personal life without losing what is valuable in the former. But one

ought to be careful to dismiss the roots of Gandhi’s method while praising the fruit. Martin Luther King Jr., a great admirer and practitioner of Gandhian nonviolence, a hero in his own right, nevertheless held Gandhi’s extreme asceticism in suspicion; King’s secret life continually threatened to discredit the Civil Rights Movement in the eyes of the American public. To generalize, how many worthy political and social causes have been defeated or delayed, not by any fault of their own, but because of the moral failings of their public champions. Perhaps Gandhi was right to place such an emphasis on his personal life; if asceticism, true, heartfelt self-denial, can in fact build up one’s self-control and character, perhaps it ought not to be considered a frivolous and odd ornament of Gandhi’s otherwise useful nonviolent program.

In summary, Orwell’s critique of Gandhi largely fails for the reason that he fails to understand Gandhi. Gandhi was not a world-renouncing ascetic insofar as his asceticism was motivated by a desire to see truth and justice actualized in the world. Self-restraint, achieved through ascetic practices gave him the inner strength to weather hardship in his crusade against injustice and the moral authority to ask others to do the same. By rejecting sex, food, and exclusive relationships, Gandhi was able to give himself wholeheartedly to the service of humanity and beyond. Whereas Orwell views imperfection as the hallmark of humanity, Gandhi might say that human beings are unique in that they can strive to be perfect, to live according to Truth. Gandhi’s asceticism was not an “escape from the pain of living, and above all from [the hard work of] love,” but rather an enlargement of his affection beyond those close to him, a taking of the entire planet into his heart. 24 What is more deeply human than going without so that others can be sustained?

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24 George Orwell “Reflections on Gandhi,” 89.
Works Cited


