

# Philosophy in Review

## BOOK REVIEW

**Richard Sorabji.** *Gandhi and the Stoics: Modern Experiments on Ancient Values.* University of Chicago Press, 2012.

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**Richard Sorabji.** *Gandhi and the Stoics: Modern Experiments on Ancient Values.* University of Chicago Press, 2012. 240 pp. \$35.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780226768823).

Sorabji begins his book with a question: ‘Was Gandhi a philosopher?’ He answers immediately and affirmatively, explaining, ‘He was forever seeking a consistent rationale for all that he did, and, more than any philosophers I have encountered, he subjected his views to relentless criticism, sometimes his own, but more often that of other people, which he published voluminously in his weekly newspapers’ (1). To this consistency in method Sorabji seeks to apply a consistency in theoretical framework. He finds this in Stoicism. By finding commonality between Gandhi and the Stoics, Sorabji aims to show that Gandhi’s life and work were those of a consistent Stoic-minded philosopher. But there is another objective to this comparison: while the Stoics ‘tended to admit that probably no Stoic had succeeded in putting all their ideals into practice...Gandhi sought to practice most of these pursuits’ (3). That is, in addition to showing that the Stoics provide a theoretical basis on which Gandhi can be seen as consistent, Sorabji aims to show that Gandhi provides evidence that Stoic theory can be put into practice.

The organization of the book involves a heavy emphasis on dividing its discussion with subheadings. The Introduction alone contains twenty-three such sections, sometimes brief, focusing on, among other things, influences on Gandhi such as Ruskin, Tolstoy, Christianity, and Plato’s *Apology*. These connections are developed in the book as Sorabji draws parallels, not only between the Stoics and Gandhi, but also, to a lesser extent, between each of these and early Christianity and Plato. This can be a source of diffusion, but widening the base of comparators enables Sorabji to elaborate themes that are not sufficiently developed by considering just Gandhi and the Stoics. For example, on the issue of moral conscience, the comparison with Gandhi is clearer with Socrates and early Christianity than with Stoicism.

An important commonality considered between Gandhi and the Stoics is emotional detachment. Sorabji explains that Gandhi’s understanding of *ahimsa* (non-violence) involved love for all. Love would seem to require an emotionality at odds with emotional detachment. But Sorabji notes that Gandhi turns to the *Bhagavad Gita* and its view that emotional detachment from the fruits of one’s actions is the way towards spiritual realization. He further explains that for Gandhi, emotional detachment is needed for ‘chastity, truthfulness, fearlessness, and poverty’ and that these are ‘needed for a nonviolent mind’ and hence for a loving nature that is able to embrace others (31). The implications of emotional detachment on political life are also discussed. Sorabji here asks: ‘For goals in politics are typically urgent; is that compatible with detachment?’ (46). He answers affirmatively and explains that, for Gandhi, political life is not an end unto itself but rather, by helping others, it is a means towards realizing a religious and moral end, and as noted, this requires emotional detachment.

The relation between emotional detachment and political life is less clear in the case of the Stoics, and this leads Sorabji to closely consider an interpretation by Isaiah Berlin. Sorabji explains his interest in tackling this interpretation: ‘More than one of [Berlin’s] arguments was precisely that [the Stoics’] emotional detachment made political choice and engagement pointless.... The case is important because, although Gandhi achieved a certain detachment about politics, he was most famous of all as a politician. Berlin’s picture of the Stoics would make them totally unlike him’ (179). Gandhi certainly did not think emotional detachment requires being non-political. But

Berlin indicates otherwise and his reading of the Stoics raises a challenge to the claim that there is a similarity between Gandhi and the Stoics on this key point. Accordingly, Sorabji conducts a prolonged consideration of Berlin to carefully make the case that he misinterprets the Stoics.

Emotional detachment was, for both the Stoics and for Gandhi, a means toward serenity and freedom. Sorabji observes that for both, freedom was not the freedom to follow one's passions, but rather the freedom of not being enslaved by the passions. Thus, one who is self-restrained, and emotionally detached and undisturbed, is free. Gandhi exclaims: 'We are our own slaves, not of the British' (69). But Sorabji notes a difference: 'Gandhi also believed in a different kind of freedom that has no parallel in Stoicism, the spiritual liberation called *moksha*' (72). This may be a difference in end goal, but the similarity in their view of freedom as freedom from passion remains, and the emphasis on self-restraint and emotional detachment is a cornerstone for both.

Sorabji describes that while universal non-violence and love were ideals aimed at by Gandhi, our inability to fully realize these ends did not undermine their standing as ideals; to the contrary, this is a part of their spiritual quality. In this, Sorabji thinks that Gandhi borrows from Tolstoy, who borrows from Christ: 'Christ, in Tolstoy's view, offered not a set of achievable rules, but an unachievable ideal. Gandhi followed Tolstoy in favouring unattainable ideals. He argued that a religious or spiritual ideal should not be a 'cut-and-dry model' or 'code of conduct [...] possible for all' (125). Otherwise, there would be no room for 'that constant striving, that ceaseless quest after the ideal that is the basis of all spiritual progress' (125-6). Sorabji adds that such thinking would have been of aid to the Stoics: 'They were asked...what use was an ethics that described a perfect sagehood that no one was able to realize...Gandhi saw the situation in a more positive way in terms of a challenge that an imperfect person might sometimes live up to' (89).

Sorabji draws a distinction between *ahimsa* in a behavioural and an attitudinal sense. Absolute *ahimsa* in a behavioural sense was something that Gandhi recognized to be impossible: 'man cannot for a moment live without committing outward *himsa* [violence]. The very fact of his living – eating, drinking and moving about – necessarily involves some *himsa*, destruction of life, be it ever so minute (82)'. But the attitudinal sense remains as an imperative; according to Sorabji, it is the sense Gandhi 'officially endorsed' (82). Thus, if a violent act is necessary, the non-violent person is to remain loving and compassionate toward the object of violence.

This does not license all violent acts accompanied with a kind disposition, for the behavioural sense of non-violence remains an ideal towards which one should aim. The same seems to apply to the attitudinal sense as well: that is, perfect compliance here may be impossible, but it nonetheless serves as an ideal. We are an imperfect species, according to Gandhi, and are well served by having such ideals toward which to aim. For Gandhi, an indication of one's realization of non-violence is one's influence on others. Gandhi would often blame himself for the lapses or moral failings of others, believing he was an imperfect representative of the ideal. In this regard, it would seem that Gandhi's imperfection, in both the behavioural and attitudinal sense, was readily apparent to himself. While Sorabji does well to contrast these two senses of non-violence, there is similarity and a relationship to be further described.

Sorabji notes that both the Stoics and Gandhi emphasized individualized duties and were skeptical about universal rules of conduct. Sorabji explains that, for the Stoics, the right course of action requires attending to, not only our persona as a rational being, which we share with many

others, but also our individual personae, which we may not share with many others. An example is given of Cato, ‘for whom it was right to commit suicide... but it would not have been right for anyone else to commit suicide, even (according to some manuscripts) “*in the same circumstances*”... to the Stoics... there was no one else like Cato. He had always stood for an uncompromising austerity, and so he could not compromise and still be true to himself, to his persona’ (112). Sorabji notes that Gandhi draws on the Gita for his notion of personal duty (*svadharma*). As Gandhi translates, ‘the Gita says that it is better to die performing one’s own humble duty; performing another’s duty is fraught with danger’ (119). Gandhi also emphasizes following one’s individual conscience – that ‘still small voice’ as he would modestly say of himself – which he believes is sourced in God.

The emphasis on conscience, individual duties (*svadharma*), and unachievable moral ideals, all take emphasis away from moral rules or codes of conduct to be achieved by all. Sorabji discusses Bilgrami on this point, who contends that Gandhi refrained from common standards of conduct, to the extent that he would refrain from criticizing others who fell short. Bilgrami holds that Gandhi preferred to change others by setting an example (which he calls ‘exemplarity’). Sorabji correctly notes that Gandhi was not entirely above criticism, often ‘severe’, although he sought to uphold the attitudinal sense of non-violence by criticizing without ill will. Sorabji also correctly notes that Gandhi did impose moral rules on himself and the members of his ashram. But according to Bilgrami, Gandhi refrained from doing so universally, and for a very important reason: criticizing someone for falling short of a moral standard was a form of violence (in Sorabji’s behavioural sense, if not in the attitudinal sense). Instead, Gandhi preferred to affect others by way of setting an example, so as to not force change but draw it forth from within. Bilgrami’s argument here is one of few areas where further discussion would have been welcome. All in all, though, the book does very well in illuminating both Gandhi and the Stoics with an insightful comparison of their thought and practice.

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