

“Why I Can’t Say ‘No’”:  
Albert Camus and Mahatma Gandhi Respond to Infinite  
Responsibility

by

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## INTRODUCTION

# FEELING THE QUESTION

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The tie with the other is knotted only as responsibility, this moreover, whether accepted or refused, whether knowing or not knowing how to assume it, whether able or unable to do something for the Other. To say: Here I am. To do something for the Other. To give. To be a human spirit, that's it.

—Emmanuel Levinas  
*Ethics and Infinity*

### THE ULTIMATE COMMITMENT

This thesis has always been about the Holocaust, but you will quickly notice that the word does not even appear in the title. Perhaps then it is more accurate to say that I am not discussing the Holocaust as an historical event, but rather I am reflecting on the question of whether it is ever possible to say “No” to someone asking for help who would surely die without it. In such a situation, this someone, who may have had no connection to us at all, becomes morally bound to us with the force of our entire humanity. It is this bond and its sheer strength that *feels* right and can lead us to a new sense of moral commitment.

The Holocaust's immediacy to my own family led me to persistently think about such notions of extreme moral responsibility and commitment,<sup>1</sup> but the more I thought about it the more I began to see this dilemma in abstract terms. We can think of offering assistance to someone in need as an expression of a moral commitment

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<sup>1</sup> On conceptions of altruism in Holocaust rescuers and the theoretical and social implications of rescuing people in extreme situations, see Lawrence Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Pearl M. Oliner et al., eds., *Embracing the Other: Philosophical, Psychological, and Historical Perspectives on Altruism* (New York: New York University Press, 1992).

which can be explained in any different number of ways. However, in every case, the moral commitment is backed by a sense of moral responsibility that corresponds to it. When the Polish farmer morally commits himself to saving the Jewish escapee even at the risk of his own life, he does so because he feels morally responsible for the sake of another human being's life. Reflecting on such feelings of moral responsibility leads us to ask whether one can ever say "No" and thus to the heart of our most fundamental distinctions between what is right and wrong.

In the case of the Polish farmer and the Jewish escapee, I would like to say that what is right is what is human, or rather what *feels* human, and what is wrong is anything that would seek to destroy our shared humanity. My thinking of this humanist distinction originated from thinking about the experience of my four grandparents who survived the Holocaust. I came to think that this humanist question of wondering whether it is ever possible to say "No" encapsulated a wide array of moral issues in extreme situations that had no easy answers.<sup>2</sup> From these reflections, I have gone far beyond the context of the Holocaust and arrived at a vision of moral commitment that is based on our ethical inter-subjectivity as grounded in responsibility.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, oppression and violence have not stopped sending millions into exile or suffering, and there are still countless occurrences when people approach others for help, without which they might surely perish. But we should not get stuck

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the rest of this thesis, the term "humanist question" will refer back to the question of whether it is ever possible to say "No" to someone asking for help who would surely die without it.

<sup>3</sup> Ethical inter-subjectivity is a way to describe the concept of selfhood or being a moral agent. It is only when another person and I enter into, or can imagine ourselves in, a relation with certain moral qualities regarding our interconnectedness that that we become ethical selves or moral agents. For the purposes of this thesis, interpersonal responsibility is the primary moral quality of the ethical relation.

in attempting to compare human tragedies with one another or with the Holocaust; we should ask how to oppose them all rather than how to compare them to each other.<sup>4</sup>

As a common element among all, human suffering leads the way to developing a sense of moral commitment rooted in a kind of humanism where we feel that the suffering of others calls upon us to act.

Such a conception, however, is not the only form of humanism that we can find within the Western tradition. Philosophical and religious ethics have generally considered human well-being and cultivation as intrinsic to what is morally good and right, even if the specific details of this human good differ among traditions, groups, etc.<sup>5</sup> It is generally thought that humanism reached its peak during the Enlightenment with Kant, since in many ways the twentieth century can be characterized as an attack on humanism. War, genocide, and political oppression took their toll. Heidegger regarded the fate of Being as more important than innocent people while Foucault announced the “end of man.”<sup>6</sup> The contemporary challenge to humanism also includes environmental antihumanists who critique the “overhumanization of the world”<sup>7</sup> and question the claim of a distinctive human worth in an attempt to protect other forms of life from the expansion of human power. However, we have witnessed a stunning revival of humanism as well. The intolerable acts committed in the twentieth century were met with determined responses in the name of a shared human

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Seeskin, “What Philosophy Can and Cannot Say about Evil,” in *Echoes from the Holocaust: Philosophical Reflections on a Dark Time*, ed. Alan Rosenberg and Gerald E. Myers (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 101-2.

<sup>5</sup> William Schweiker, “Theological Ethics and the Question of Humanism,” *The Journal of Religion* 83, no. 4 (October 2003): 539. The current and next paragraphs are paraphrased from Schweiker’s article.

<sup>6</sup> We should be sure not to forget that Nietzsche’s antihumanism carried over from the end of the nineteenth-century.

<sup>7</sup> For a more in depth discussion, see Régis Debray, *Transmitting Culture*, trans. Eric Rauth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

dignity and vulnerability, of which Martin Luther King, Jr., and Gandhi stand out as two prominent exemplars.

## THE COHORT OF HUMANISTS

In this paper I seek to open ourselves to the lives and philosophies of four central figures in order to better gauge if saying “No,” and thereby closing ourselves off to another human being, is ever a moral possibility. These four are Emmanuel Levinas, Knud Ejler Løgstrup, Albert Camus, and Mahatma Gandhi, whom I have arranged into two categories.

In the first category, Levinas and Løgstrup provide us with a theoretical framework of a humanism that “leans on the transcendent”<sup>8</sup> and seeks to clarify certain notions of our responsibility to other human beings. They are principally working with the idea that a radical or infinite imperative or relation defines our ethical inter-subjectivity. They call this idea the ethical demand and the Face of the Other, respectively.

Løgstrup was a Danish theologian and philosopher who took on the motto “Human first, Christian second”; his foremost ethical claim is that there is no Christian morality or secular morality—there is only human morality.<sup>9</sup> Through Jesus’s teachings from the Sermon on the Mount, Løgstrup constructed an asymmetrical, “utterly exorbitant demand” that dictates to always act for the sake of the other human being standing in front of us; he believes such an ethical demand in

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<sup>8</sup> Tal Sessler uses this phrase to indicate the religious inclinations of Levinas’s humanist theory. I believe it can be applied to Løgstrup’s as well. See *Levinas and Camus: Humanism for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 57, 70.

<sup>9</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre and Hans Fink, “Introduction,” in *The Ethical Demand*, by Knud Ejler Løgstrup (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), xxii, xxxviii.

relation to another human being to be true because our relationship to God is wholly determined in and through our relation with the other human being.<sup>10</sup>

For Levinas, we cannot understand his transcendent humanism without first acknowledging the undeniable influence of the Holocaust; his time as a Nazi prisoner-of-war and the murder of his parents and siblings made him much more aware of his Jewish identity as an inspiration for philosophical reflection.<sup>11</sup> In the postwar article “Honneur sans drapeau,”<sup>12</sup> Levinas recounted the inescapable feeling of culpability that one feels as a survivor of genocide. This intense feeling is clearly evident in his subsequent philosophical writings, since he understands total responsibility for the Other as the essential, primary, and fundamental structure of subjectivity.<sup>13</sup> But this ethical relation to the Other is not built around a plain notion of responsibility. In witnessing the human face, we feel an “epiphany, a trace, a reflection of a metaphysical essence,”<sup>14</sup> which Levinas explains through an analogy with the Cartesian infinity of divinity. Thus the Face of the Other reflects an ethical relation of infinite responsibility that is also divinely asymmetrical, since we see the Other as coming from a “dimension of height, a dimension of transcendence.”<sup>15</sup> The Other evokes the image of God from on high.

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<sup>10</sup> Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2007), 51.

<sup>11</sup> Richard A. Cohen, “Introduction,” in *Humanism of the Other*, by Emmanuel Levinas (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), viii; Bettina Bergo, “Emmanuel Levinas,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/levinas/>.

<sup>12</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Honneur sans drapeau,” *Les Nouveaux Cahiers*, no. 6-8 (1966): 1-3.

<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen, 1st ed. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 95.

<sup>14</sup> Sessler, *Levinas and Camus*, 37.

<sup>15</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 215.



Thus in the first chapter I offer a further interpretation of Løgstrup and Levinas as the main theoretical component in my conception of moral commitment. This chapter as a whole is an overview of several different perspectives on moral commitment from philosophy and psychology. I have placed Løgstrup and Levinas at the end in order to highlight their uniqueness and because of their direct influence on the humanist question. Although they were not centrally concerned with determining the range of specific actions that infinite responsibility compels us to take, their “humanism of the Other”<sup>16</sup> is an attempt to revitalize the notion of shared human dignity after having experienced war and genocide.

Turning to the second category of humanists, I show how Camus and Gandhi respond to the challenge of the humanist question and the extreme notion of responsibility explicated by Løgstrup and Levinas. Camus and Gandhi do not offer us a prepackaged answer to the humanist question nor how to deal with the crushing moral force of infinite responsibility. Rather, we must look at their deciding to remain engaged with the twentieth century world even in the face of extreme violence and injustice to see how we can come to terms with infinite responsibility.

Camus’s life-long metaphysical struggle against theoretical abstraction is the mirror image of his lived resistance against totalitarianism. He adamantly rejected any totalizing metaphysical theory because the risk to humanity and the dignity of the individual was too great, proven by the rise of European totalitarianism in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Instead, Camus proposes a form of human rebellion that is based on respecting certain limits, as opposed to accepting infinite responsibility which leads to striving for infinite power.

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<sup>16</sup> This phrase has become a common synonym for Emmanuel Levinas’s transcendent humanism.

Gandhi is most popularly remembered as the leader of the non-violent resistance movement that ousted the British from India. However, *satyagraha*, his method of non-violent resistance, reflects a lifetime of deep reflection on the unity of life and the striving for Truth. From out of his reflections and acts of service, he came to conclude that *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *tapasya* (self-suffering) were indispensable methods of action for remaining engaged with the world. Most importantly, Gandhi redefined these two traditional Hindu concepts in order to develop a different idea of courage. This notion of courage accepts suffering and sacrifice as essential for developing an infinite fearlessness, which Gandhi saw as the truest and most powerful way to remain active in the world in the face of infinite responsibility.

In using these two seemingly dissimilar figures, I must be clear that the point is not to read the two men's lives or ideas as necessarily overlapping or congruent. Instead, I think each gives us a glimpse of the necessary attitude we need to have in order to comprehend and face the humanist question and its daunting challenge of infinite responsibility. The story of Camus's moral development reflects the integrity of a resolute non-conformity, while an explication and analysis of Gandhi's ideas shows us how we can all cultivate an infinite courage to match infinite responsibility.

Thus the second chapter mainly takes us through an intellectual chronicle of Camus's life, underscoring how he was always inclined to reject any metaphysical abstractions from blinding him to the immanent reality of human life. While he never used Levinasian terms like "the Face" and "infinite responsibility," he clearly could relate to a humanist demand that pressed upon him the need to do whatever he could in the fight against evil and totalitarianism and for justice and freedom. Joining the

Resistance towards the end of the war was a life-changing experience, but the postwar purge fundamentally changed Camus's attitude towards the use of violence as a means to achieve the ends of justice and freedom. While always somewhat of an outlier in the Parisian intellectual scene, he was definitively excluded and shunned after infamously criticizing the Soviet Union and refusing to support the National Liberation Front (FLN) in its violent struggle for Algerian independence. He came instead to advocate for a measured rebellion as the method for defending and expressing the most fundamental aspects of our shared humanity. In the last decade of his life, Camus struggled to convince others that the struggle to preserve life should always take precedence over the struggle for any ideal metaphysical or historical end.

The third chapter moves on to review Gandhi's principal ideas and interprets them within the framework of this project's main humanist question. While Gandhi did not shy away from explicitly using religious language or relying on traditional Hindu principles, he was always convinced that his ideals and method could be carried on by anyone anywhere. His concepts of *satya* (absolute Truth or being) and *ahimsa* (non-violence) were famously described by Gandhi as two sides of the same coin and reflect his belief in the underlying unity and moral harmony of all life. This corresponds to his belief in *Advaita* (Hindu monism), which leads Gandhi to develop his overall political philosophy around the central idea of a shared community of life. Gandhi's thought is perhaps even more noteworthy in its emphasis on means, which includes *ahimsa* but also looks to *tapasya* (self-suffering) and *abhaya* (fearlessness or

courage). As a believer in *karma yoga*,<sup>17</sup> Gandhi believed that selfless service to the other was essential. The *Bhagavad Gita*, a central Hindu religious text, was his most important guide for developing this notion of service and the associated necessity of self-suffering. This latter concept is the basis for Gandhi's reconstructed notion of courage along Hindu rather than traditional Western lines. His ideals of fearlessness and self-suffering lead us to a sense of infinite courage that enables us to fulfill the humanist demand amidst the challenge infinite responsibility.

In the end when we bring all four together, we find ourselves with two broad components. On the one hand, Løgstrup and Levinas reflect a resounding call of duty that plays on our feelings of a shared humanity and ethical inter-subjectivity defined as infinite responsibility. On the other, Camus and Gandhi set the example for how to interpret this humanist demand and still be effective moral agents in this world. All four point toward the endeavor to attain and retain a moral integrity or human wholeness, which William Schweiker equates with humanism's ultimate goal of human freedom.<sup>18</sup> For these four, moral integrity and human wholeness were paramount in their struggles of resistance and perceptions of suffering in the world. Drawing on their lives and teachings, we can learn to resist injustice out of a strong felt connection to the shared value of human dignity.

I believe these four unite to form an interesting humanist vision. Drawing on the phenomenological perspectives of Løgstrup and Levinas, the humanism that emerges from these two has the potential to underlie an understanding of moral commitment from the perspectives of our feelings as indicators of moral rightness. Such a

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<sup>17</sup> An active life of selfless action.

<sup>18</sup> Schweiker, "Theological Ethics and the Question of Humanism," 555.

phenomenological understanding, however, is still analytically robust and philosophically deep. When we often feel small and insignificant in the face of worldwide oppression and violence, it is always uplifting and never demoralizing to look to the persistent zeal of Camus and the steadfast discipline of Gandhi. The fusion of a love of life and a belief in non-violence can take us much farther than most would imagine. It is this kind of courageous, sacrificing humanism that our world could use more of today.

## CHAPTER ONE

# TOWARDS INFINITY

### *Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives in a Theory of Moral Commitment*

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By our very attitude to one another we help to shape one another's world. By our attitude to the other person we help to determine the scope and hue of his or her world; we make it large or small, bright or drab, rich or dull, threatening or secure. We help to shape his or her world not by theories and views but by our very attitude toward him or her. Herein lies the unarticulated and one might say anonymous demand that we take care of the life which trust has placed in our hands.

—Knud Ejler Løgstrup  
*The Ethical Demand*

#### PHILOSOPHICAL AND PERSONAL ORIGINS

This first chapter covers several theoretical aspects of moral commitment in order to set the stage for the ideas of Løgstrup and Levinas. In understanding their respective philosophies of infinite or radical responsibility as the central element in a theory of moral commitment, Camus and Gandhi offer us two ways to deal with such an extreme demand and still stay active in the world without acquiescing in the violence or injustice of others. It is in this light that I find Camus and Gandhi both inspiring and fit for a new interpretation within the context of what it means to be morally committed. Løgstrup and Levinas, although arguably the most important part of this chapter, enter towards the end in order to better highlight their uniqueness and, indeed, radicalness.

This feeling of an infinite responsibility to another is also a central component of how I personally perceive we should live in this world. I was initially drawn to

Løgstrup and Levinas because of the resonance between their ideas and my own reflections about what a moral commitment could actually mean during a time like the Holocaust. The Second World War and the Holocaust were immensely important events in the lives of both Løgstrup and Levinas, and scholars have argued that those formative years distinctively shaped their philosophical thinking for the rest of their lives. Personally, the Holocaust has been a growing influence on my understanding of moral commitment and the belief that an understanding of moral commitment itself is critical for a just society. However, in such reflections I am not trying to place myself in the hypothetical situation of the “choiceless choice,”<sup>1</sup> since I agree with Habermas that it is impossible to know what we would have done if confronted by such a situation.<sup>2</sup> Rather, I am more concerned with what the past can teach us about how to respond to contemporary conditions of injustice and oppression. Thus even though Løgstrup and Levinas drew the inspiration for their metaphysical deliberations from events in the middle of the twentieth century, their thought is still highly relevant today in many contexts when we talk about a just society and political oppression.

In focusing on Løgstrup and Levinas as the centerpiece of a theory of moral commitment, I have admittedly chosen an esoteric perspective of what it means to be morally committed. There are some moral philosophers and developmental psychologists who would even say that these two philosophers are misguided, overly theological, and oblivious to several hotly debated topics in metaethics and the

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence L. Langer, “The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps,” in *Echoes from the Holocaust: Philosophical Reflections on a Dark Time*, ed. Alan Rosenberg and Gerald E. Myers (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 120.

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Work and Weltanschauung: The Heidegger Controversy from a German Perspective,” trans. John McCumber, *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 2 (1989): 431-456.

science of cognition. I take such criticisms seriously, but I think they speak more to our meager understanding of how moral commitments actually work than to the worth or potential of ideas such as Løgstrup and Levinas's. These professional critics are primarily concerned with making sure any theory of moral commitment agrees with the commonly held wisdom in their disciplines, but this is not my most pressing concern.

Rather, I find Løgstrup and Levinas's humanism as an incredibly rich context within which to think about contemporary issues of justice and political oppression. Camus and Gandhi then offer their unique ideas and experiences as different ways to come to terms with our moral responsibilities in the world. These two men are exemplary in their own right and still highly relevant to contemporary political conditions, but they are also noteworthy for being able to reinvigorate a conception of moral commitment predicated on a Levinasian humanism of the Other.

## WITTGENSTEIN VERSUS TRIGG | THE (UNSOLVABLE?) DEBATE OF JUSTIFICATION

The first thing to keep in mind is that commitment itself can be either moral or non-moral, with the vast majority of non-moral issues of commitment revolving around economics, business, marriage, and family life. While I am not primarily interested here in the non-moral issues, it is important to be aware that not all commitments imply an affinity for a particular notion of what is the good. I can be committed to opening the blinds when the sun rises every morning, but this action has no moral qualities. My opening the blinds does not affirm any notions of what is right in any moral sense.



So how then should we begin to think of and structure moral commitment? For starters, we can look to one particular idea regarding the role of beliefs in Roger Trigg's *Reason and Commitment*. Trigg is primarily concerned with rebuffing relativism and advocating the thesis that beliefs are either objectively true or false, for everyone. His main theoretical analysis tries to show that in denying the possibility of an all embracing rationality as our guide to truth, we suggest that there are no such things as reasons for commitment. He reaches the conclusion that it would then be impossible to say why a Nazi is wrong in his beliefs.<sup>3</sup>

The term "reasons" itself is widely debated within metaethics, but generally we think of having reasons as critically important in terms of justifying our commitments. For moral commitments, the burden of justification is especially weighty. I want to feel that my moral commitments, which by definition concern what is right and wrong, are stable and retain some normative standard. Thus I seek a more objective justification for what I believe because I find the existentialist's justification through sheer acts of will as insufficient but also want to avoid the trap of relativism. Trigg believes in a rationally achievable objectivity concerning the truth of beliefs that inherently underlie every commitment.<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein, on the other hand, rejects the ability to judge ethical systems against each other,<sup>5</sup> which leads Trigg to claim that Wittgenstein must then reject all reasons which could help us decide between different moralities.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Roger Trigg, *Reason and Commitment* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 121.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

This disagreement between Wittgenstein and Trigg nicely encapsulates the question of justification, which is perhaps the most burning, unsolvable issue within the philosophical area of moral commitments. We feel the need to be able to give reasons or make claims for why it makes sense for us to have the commitments that we do, and many different philosophers have put forth different theories trying to answer this question. The theme of rationality follows a Kantian trend of objectivity that proposes the existence of moral facts about the world and our epistemological capacity to grasp them. Such a theory is known as moral realism. On the complete other side of the spectrum, someone like an existentialist would claim that the world is valueless until the individual makes certain fundamental choices that are then translated into actions. These actions are what create values which are valid only for that specific individual. Thus existentialist ethics adhere to anti-realist theories of morality.

Neither end of this metaethical spectrum can necessarily fully explain how to justify moral commitments. However, somewhere in the middle we find the field of moral phenomenology, which is the branch of moral philosophy that deals with explaining what we feel when undergoing a moral experience. Briefly, a moral experience is one in which we perceive a moral force being applied to us. Thus moral phenomenology is as an especially attractive method for discovering the justification-giving qualities in Løgstrup and Levinas as it explains why the moral force of infinite responsibility *feels* objective.

## THE EXPLANATORY FALLACY | WHY PHILOSOPHY NEEDS PSYCHOLOGY

However, we would still be missing a significant piece of the puzzle if we only looked at a selection of philosophical arguments. Indeed, moral commitment is a dual phenomenon that brings together morality, which is often assumed to be monopolized by philosophers, and commitment, which is, in fact, a complex and widely studied *cognitive* function. With the advent of modern clinical psychology and neuroscience, philosophical constructs of the mind (which follow into constructs of morality) can now be empirically tested.<sup>7</sup> This poses a unique and interesting challenge to philosophers who might have been able to advance a theory fifty years ago that today can be empirically proven as incompatible with human behavior. Thus not only does Marcel Lieberman identify the traditional philosopher's constraint of logical possibility, but he also refers to the new constraint of psychological possibility.<sup>8</sup>

We must then seriously endeavor to pair together philosophy and psychology when constructing a plausible theory of moral commitment. However, in moving forward with my discussion of Camus and Gandhi, I intend to draw much more heavily on Løgstrup and Levinas (and Levinas at that) than any other philosopher or developmental psychologist. Thus I have endeavored to cover the philosophical and psychological perspectives that I feel are the most conducive to a richer understanding of Løgstrup and Levinas's ideas and of Camus and Gandhi as moral

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<sup>7</sup> Uriah Kriegel, "Moral Phenomenology: Foundational Issues," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 7, no. 1 (March 2008): 17.

<sup>8</sup> Marcel S. Lieberman, *Commitment, Value, and Moral Realism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 7.

exemplars. Once again, this project does not purport to be a definitive argument for a particular theory of action or cognition. Rather, I recognize that the psychological aspect of moral commitment cannot be ignored in outlining certain key theoretical themes. The necessary pairing of philosophy and psychology will strengthen certain aspects of infinite responsibility as the basis for moral commitment while undoubtedly making other arguments for such a theory of moral commitment untenable.

## PHILOSOPHICAL COMPONENTS

One of the difficulties of providing a view into the philosophical literature on moral commitment is the rather surprising scarcity of critical works that engage moral commitment as the primary object of investigation and reflection. The most promising option is to look within the field of moral philosophy, which can then be further divided (roughly) into two main subfields: normative ethics, which asks what is good, and metaethics, which asks what it means to be good.<sup>9</sup> The primary aim of moral philosophy is thus to clarify the properties of morality and our relationship to such a concept, but in doing so the issue of moral commitment certainly comes up quite often.

Before jumping into the literature, some definitions and explanations are in order. Uriah Kriegel neatly explains the fundamental question of metaethics, and how that leads to cognitivism/realism vs. non-cognitivism/anti-realism.<sup>10</sup> In asking whether there are external, mind-independent moral facts, an affirmative response leads to

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<sup>9</sup> Kriegel, "Moral Phenomenology," 5.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 10-2. The current and next paragraphs are paraphrased from Kriegel's article.

moral realism, while a negative response leads to anti-realism. These metaphysical positions on moral facts relate to positions on the psychology of moral commitment in fairly straightforward ways. Cognitivism is the view that moral commitments are cognitive states that represent the world to include certain facts about goodness, wrongness, etc. These cognitive representations would be incorrect if there were no such facts, but then we would find ourselves in the uncomfortable situation of considering our moral life as simply an illusion. Thus if we adopt cognitivism and reject the idea of our moral life as illusionary, we must accept such external, mind-independent moral facts, leading to realism.

On the other hand, internalism (or non-cognitivism) is the view that moral commitments are inherently motivating. This would mean that all moral facts would have to exhibit the property of “to-be-pursued-ness” in order to make their ensuing moral commitments inherently motivating. However, there is something odd about such a property. It seems even more implausible when considering that the claim of “to-be-pursued-ness” would have to be made on an entire set of facts. Thus it is more reasonable to suppose that there are no such moral facts, leading to anti-realism.

With these definitions in order, we can begin to piece together the different interpretations of metaethics and moral commitment. Starting with realism, Marcel Lieberman’s ultimate goal in *Commitment, Value, and Moral Realism* is to defend the truth of moral realism and the possibility of moral facts. He chooses to do this indirectly by showing how commitment, which we all hold dear, can only be possible if we accept the truth of moral realism.<sup>11</sup> Lieberman is ultimately interested in explaining the kind of commitment one has to political causes, moral principles or

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<sup>11</sup> Lieberman, *Commitment, Value, and Moral Realism*, 1-2.

ideals, and even other human beings.<sup>12</sup> From within philosophy and psychology, he identifies three features of commitment that he believes can only be explained and retained by accepting moral realism: a commitment must be stable over time, revisable, and reconsiderable; it is an action-guiding force; and, perhaps most importantly for Lieberman, it fundamentally relates to our notions of self-understanding and identity.<sup>13</sup>

We think that having a proper and solid understanding of what commitment means is important because we talk about commitment as different from an ordinary judgment or assessment. We might intuitively understand concepts such as “care” or “concern” as similar to moral commitment, but we hold commitment apart as something unique and even rare. We know that commitments are different because we respond to their being challenged differently and in a way that reflects commitments’ being more than simply peculiar feelings or inclinations.<sup>14</sup> When our commitments are challenged, we defend them by offering reasons for believing that they are worthwhile or valuable (and thus true); these reasons are more than just personal quirks or idiosyncrasies, but rather they are expressed as reasons that others, even if they disagreed, could find intelligible or reasonable.<sup>15</sup> Lieberman is thus following the Kantian tradition of Trigg and others by arguing that to call a moral commitment rational is to affirm some degree of agent-independent validity to such a commitment.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 114.

This type of argument leads to the daunting question of what falls under the category of “rational.” Even the way we phrase the question reveals a great deal of disagreement. A cognitivist like Lieberman would ask what it means for something to *be* rational, but a non-cognitivist like Allan Gibbard would ask what it means when we *judge* that something is rational. Gibbard takes the word “rational” as what we mean when we say something “makes sense”; the rational act “is what makes sense to do, the right choice on the occasion. A rational feeling is an apt feeling, a warranted feeling, a way it makes sense to feel about something.”<sup>16</sup> This leads Gibbard to introduce his metaethical theory of norm-expressivism which proposes that to call something rational is to express one’s acceptance of a system of norms that permit it.<sup>17</sup> Norm-expressivism is then primarily a non-cognitivist (and also anti-realist) explanation of how we can come to make normative judgments and defend their interpersonal validity without relying on philosophically suspect claims of objectivity.

Gibbard proposes three questions concerning what is really at issue when we talk about objectivity, but I will only focus on the second one here. This question is aimed at clarifying the distinction, if there is one, between accepting something as a requirement of rationality and making an existential commitment to it.<sup>18</sup> The picture is further complicated by having to deal with the notion of personal ideals. The crucial task is then clarifying the distinction between a personal ideal, a requirement of rationality, and an existentialist commitment.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>19</sup> In discussing Gibbard’s ideas, I use his terms of “requirement of rationality,” “existential commitment,” and “personal ideal” according to the definitions he gives.

On an expressivistic analysis, all personal ideals are matters of rationality, and a commitment to anything one thinks a fundamental requirement of rationality is unconditional.<sup>20</sup> Thus holding a personal ideal of X means having unconditional affinity to X as well. You do not hold this ideal at certain times but not others; you are committed to its fulfillment at all times, no matter if at times you should feel like doing the opposite. But because holding a personal ideal means that you hold it rationally, it is a requirement of rationality to make others see that they should fulfill this ideal as well, and in defending your personal ideal you claim to be “seeing” something that others do not.<sup>21</sup> Thus on an expressivistic analysis there is no difference between thinking something a requirement of rationality and being committed to it as an ideal.

Thus it would seem that there is no difference between a personal ideal and a requirement of rationality. However, on *ordinary* ways of thinking, it seems reasonable for a person to have a strong or even overriding personal ideal and yet not think it a demand of rationality.<sup>22</sup> In this case, a personal ideal is a choice about what kind of person to be, in a fundamental way, which one does not take to be dictated by considerations of rationality.<sup>23</sup> Thus Gibbard uses the label “idiosyncratic existential commitment” to describe a personal ideal on an ordinary ways of thinking, but he is uncomfortable with this conclusion. Gibbard tries to find a way to incorporate the idea behind an existential commitment within the more reliably normative framework of norm-expressivism.

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<sup>20</sup> Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, 167.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.



Recall that in Gibbard's norm-expressivism to call Y rational is simply to express one's acceptance of a norm or system of norms that permits Y. The question then becomes how to treat such a norm as we would an existential commitment, which would mean that the acceptance of the norm is a choice not dictated by considerations of rationality but by considerations of what kind of person to be. Gibbard concludes that in order to treat a norm in this way, one has had to have already accepted a higher order norm that permits it along with several other incompatible, alternative lower norms. Thus we still have the element of choice, since we have alternatives which make the norm existentially meaningful, but it is also then not a full demand of rationality precisely because it is one among options.<sup>24</sup>

Lieberman is quick to point out that certain things in Gibbard's account seem awkward and untenable.<sup>25</sup> Drawing on Gibbard's example of the ideally coherent anorexic,<sup>26</sup> Lieberman argues that there is still a sizable hole in Gibbard's theory. The example of the ideally coherent anorexic takes a person who prefers starvation over having a body weighty enough to sustain life. This preference matches the norms that he or she has accepted, meaning that the ideally coherent anorexic considers starvation to be a rational action even though everyone else does not. The ideally coherent anorexic is acting irrationally not in virtue of our preferences that regard life as more important than a perfect physique, but in regard to norms that are valid independently of one's acceptance and prohibit starving oneself for the sake of a trim figure.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 169-70.

<sup>25</sup> Lieberman, *Commitment, Value, and Moral Realism*, 30.

<sup>26</sup> Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, 165-6.

Lieberman shows how higher order norms have the potential to complicate Gibbard's understanding of the ideally coherent anorexic. If two people have accepted the same higher order norm but then selected different lower order ones, we would not say that they perceive the other as irrational, but rather they are simply disagreeing. If we recall that Gibbard's definition of rational is what it means for something to make sense, most of us would then say that anorexia is irrational and not simply a matter of disagreement on the possible options open to us.

Lieberman also makes the crucial counterargument against Gibbard's thinking on objectivity that it only seems to offer criteria for judging whether someone *else* is treating his or her claims as objective, but it does not offer a first-person perspective of what it means for a speaker to think his or her claim objective.<sup>27</sup> Non-cognitivism, Lieberman claims, is unclear as to how we could ascribe validity to a norm independent of its acceptance if we have no recourse to truths or facts in order to justify its objective status.<sup>28</sup> Lieberman argues that Gibbard simply assumes that the conversational demands we make on others are valid independent of acceptance, but he never gives an explanation as to how that is; Gibbard does not say what it means for an agent to think something objective.<sup>29</sup> This critique will become exceptionally important at the end of this chapter when we discuss moral phenomenology, which seeks to answer precisely this question of what it means to experience something as objective.

The issue of what we experience and what role corresponding feelings play in our moral judgments is obviously central to moral commitment. While Lieberman draws

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<sup>27</sup> Lieberman, *Commitment, Value, and Moral Realism*, 28.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

a clear distinction between commitment and feeling, he is rather amenable to the idea of moral faith.<sup>30</sup> Robert Adams claims that morality has a need for some kind of faith and that this moral faith is a stance in relation to goodness and duty, and in relation to the possibilities of human action, thought, and feelings.<sup>31</sup> Moral faith, however, is not simply a sheer exercise of will power or an expression of emotion. It is centrally concerned with respecting something “more commanding, and at least in some cases more external to the self, than mere personal preference and feeling.”<sup>32</sup> We can see why Lieberman would find such a view helpful to his own perspective of moral realism. The belief in moral facts which can never be empirically verified seems to be very much in need of a kind of moral faith.

With moral faith, however, we quickly leave Lieberman’s realm of moral realism and enter into a less solidly realist arena. The most important reason we have for speaking of moral faith as a type of belief is the possibility of error that moral faith admits.<sup>33</sup> Why we hold certain beliefs as true is largely a matter of *feeling*, but in this kind of faith we must acknowledge the possibility that we are mistaken.<sup>34</sup> We must wonder, however, why we cling so strongly to something like moral faith, especially if there is an inherent possibility of doubt. Perhaps we do so because it feels wrong to give up on faith,<sup>35</sup> but Adams sees the insistence to hold on as suggestive of something more. Moral faith represents a state of courage that is distinctively felt

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Merrihew Adams, “Moral Faith,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 92, no. 2 (February 1995): 75-6.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 95.

rather than chosen; it is synonymous with “an inner force which carries one forward, and is *felt* as sustaining determination.”<sup>36</sup>

In talking about faith, an inner force, or the significance of something as felt, we have moved away from some of the limits of Lieberman and Gibbard. Even though Lieberman and Gibbard are just two philosophers among many, they touch upon some of the most enduring metaethical debates in moral philosophy. However, it is with Adams’s perspective concerning the role of faith in moral phenomena that we begin to move beyond traditional metaethical concepts and towards a more “felt” conception of moral experience. But before arriving at the transcendence of Løgstrup and Levinas, we must first go through the second theoretical half of moral commitments.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL COMPONENTS

The normative and metaethical subfields of moral philosophy have led to investigations into the psychology of moral agents and their personal values, that is, to moral psychology.<sup>37</sup> We can think of moral psychology as the fine line where moral philosophy and psychology overlap,<sup>38</sup> but it is indeed a fine line. It is highly unlikely that philosophers and psychologists will reach a solid consensus on the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Kriegel, “Moral Phenomenology,” 5.

<sup>38</sup> One could say that moral sociology is the analogous field concerned with the sociological dimensions of morality and moral phenomena. In this regard, Émile Durkheim is still the preeminent moral sociologist.

intersection between their two disciplines anytime soon because there are still deep and fundamental divisions within their own ranks.<sup>39</sup>

However, we know today that it would be intellectually dishonest to ignore the valuable and indispensable knowledge that psychology has to offer for a fuller, more accurate understanding of moral commitment. We might then ask how to incorporate Løgstrup and Levinas's philosophy into a psychologically plausible story, and an overwhelming problem might arise when we receive the answer that psychology cannot tell any such compatible story.

This incongruity is both not terribly surprising nor seriously discouraging. Our contemporary understanding of the human mind is far beyond the level of the immediate postwar period. This increased knowledge is due to many factors, but one undeniable one has been the incredible pace of technological advancement that has allowed us to peer even further into the human brain. This growing amount of empirical evidence led to a new kind of interdisciplinary scholarship. Beginning around the 1960s, moral philosophers became more and more sensitive to and aware of the need to incorporate empirical psychological research into their theories; in turn, other social scientists investigating moral phenomena also started becoming more aware of the philosophical issues inherent in their research.<sup>40</sup>

However, both Løgstrup and Levinas had been contemplating the ideas which would eventually become central to their main ethical positions for many years before

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas E. Wren, "Introduction," in *The Moral Domain: Essays in the Ongoing Discussion Between Philosophy and the Social Sciences*, ed. Thomas E. Wren (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), viii.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

the 1960s.<sup>41</sup> This puts us in a somewhat awkward position, because if we value their work for its general insight and inspiration, we surely do not want to discard their ideas because they do not fit into modern psychology's story. On the other hand, we must question the reliability (or even appropriateness) of their transcendent philosophy for a theory of moral commitment that must take into account contemporarily acceptable psychological theories.

In order to resolve this difficulty, I once again turn to the purported aim of this thesis. I find Løgstrup and Levinas to have explicated truly inspiring ideas, which I believe can lead to new interpretations of Camus and Gandhi as exemplary figures who responded to the challenge of infinite responsibility in addressing injustice and oppression. Epistemological and methodological difficulties should not constrain the deep meaningfulness we come across in Løgstrup and Levinas on their own terms. But as they form a rich background with which to think about the twentieth century's moral heroes, we are presented with the opportunity to reinvigorate contemporary theories of social and political justice.

Anne Colby and William Damon are two noted developmental psychologists who are trying to do precisely that in their investigations of moral exemplars' commitments. In their famous study of twenty three moral exemplars across varying sectors of the United States,<sup>42</sup> Colby and Damon stress that their relatively small endeavor has not definitively clarified the complex issues in studying moral commitment. However, what they have found, although anecdotal rather than

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<sup>41</sup> Løgstrup's *The Ethical Demand* was first published in Danish in 1956, and Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* first appeared in French in 1961. The first English translations of Løgstrup's and Levinas's work date to 1997 and 1969, respectively.

<sup>42</sup> Anne Colby and William Damon, *Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

statistically based, has great value in directing further research in the area of moral commitment.

At the outset, Colby and Damon admit that we often greet affirmations of moral commitment with wonder and surprise because we readily recognize instances of moral commitment but still do not fully trust in their sincerity.<sup>43</sup> The big questions involved in how people come to make and retain their moral commitments in the face of enormous pressure are the critical points that need answering. In the attempt to elucidate these issues, I will highlight three elements in Colby and Damon's findings that revolve around the issues of social influence, vision and self understanding, and the role of truth.

The first element was the most intriguing for the two psychologists, since it involved a rather unexpected paradox. They found that all twenty three moral exemplars in their study exhibited a lifelong openness to change while still retaining a core stability in their moral commitment.<sup>44</sup> In trying to understand this unexpected result, Colby and Damon have focused on the psychological principle of developmental change, which in their opinion could best explain the role of social influences on the moral development of the people in their study. Developmental change happens when social influences match up with an individual's goals in a way that triggers a reformulation of that individual's goals; this process is considered a critical catalyst for moral development and tends to decrease rapidly with age. However, in the cases of Colby and Damon's moral exemplars, they experienced

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 184.

developmental change in their moral development well into the later years of their lives.<sup>45</sup>

The second element, vision and self understanding, is best understood through the lens of optimism. Martin Seligman's theory of learned optimism claims that when people are committed to something larger than themselves, and when their lives have a sense of transcendent purpose or meaning, they are much more likely to be optimists rather than pessimists.<sup>46</sup> Such people, due to their transcendent view of the world, tend to believe that the good is more permanent than the bad in life, which correlates with believing in the ultimate goodness of humanity and that notions of truth and justice have enduring value.<sup>47</sup> This view of the world resonates quite strongly with Adams's characterization of moral faith as fundamentally concerned with something external to and more commanding than the self. Indeed, the vast majority of Colby and Damon's exemplars identified their strong sense of positivity (or moral faith) within the Christian notions of love, service to all people, and a gratitude towards others for allowing the exemplar the opportunity to help them.<sup>48</sup>

The exemplars' positive, transcendent view of the world led to their exceptional (and unintentional) unity between sense of self and morality. While it is quite common to experience some form of this unifying process over the course of a lifetime, the two concepts remain relatively uncoordinated for most people, but moral exemplars exhibit a highly unusual level of overlap.<sup>49</sup> However, measuring this level of overlap can be difficult because the psychological concept of moral judgment does

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 168-9.

<sup>46</sup> Martin Seligman, *Learned Optimism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1991).

<sup>47</sup> Colby and Damon, *Some Do Care*, 287.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 278-9.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 304.



not necessarily determine the place that morality holds in a person's life.<sup>50</sup> Moral judgment, as traditionally defined by Lawrence Kohlberg, is the conceptual system that we use to weigh options and determine what is the moral thing to do; this is distinct, according to Augusto Blasi, from a sense of responsibility to act morally, which is more directly linked to self-identity and determinant of one's actual moral conduct.<sup>51</sup> Under Blasi's perspective, moral exemplars' unusually high levels of unity between a sense of self and morality translates into their being much more attuned to deontological rather than utilitarian ways of thinking. They sincerely try to take into account the moral worth of all human beings with whom they are engaged or who could be potentially affected by their actions.

The role of truth is the last, but certainly not least, of the three most significant elements from Colby and Damon's study. While each of the twenty three moral exemplars in the study worked in a different field and helped different people, at the bottom of all of their moral commitments was a core commitment to honesty and truth.<sup>52</sup> Seligman's theory of learned optimism is useful for explaining the importance of positivity in sustaining moral commitment, but it prioritizes a sense of control over adversity in life and consequently places too low a value on truth.<sup>53</sup> There are many other psychological coping mechanisms that people can use to enhance feelings of efficacy and positivity, in effect shielding themselves from a crushing feeling of "real world blues"; however, whenever we try to shield ourselves from the pressures and difficulties of the world, we inevitably welcome a certain

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>51</sup> Augusto Blasi, "Moral Identity: Its Role in Moral Functioning," in *Morality, Moral Behavior, and Moral Development*, ed. William M. Kurtines and Jacob L. Gewirtz (New York: Wiley, 1984).

<sup>52</sup> Colby and Damon, *Some Do Care*, 77.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 289.

degree of untruthfulness into our lived experiences.<sup>54</sup> Moral exemplars, however, do not accept this “solution” of untruthfulness as a way to cope with the harsh realities of the real world. Instead, they establish and maintain positive attitudes of engagement with the world while still seeking to uphold truth within the framework of their moral goals and values.<sup>55</sup>

When we talk about moral goals and values, we are indirectly referring to a conception of moral rules or norms that tell us to act in certain ways and not in others. But how do we come to know what moral norms a person really has? That is, how do we know what moral norms are psychologically operative for a person in representing certain things as categorically good or bad?<sup>56</sup> Since moral norms are theoretical constructs, we cannot observe them directly. Neither is behavior a good indicator, since the same behavior can be morally and non-morally motivated. Even Kohlberg’s perspective on moral judgment is not sufficient, since we can accept a moral argument without then acting upon the moral norms it proscribes.<sup>57</sup>

To determine if a moral norm is psychologically operative or not, we should instead look to its dichotomous character. A personal moral norm can be wrong (in the sense that it can contradict certain principles of ethical theory) but still be *experienced* as obligatory for oneself and others.<sup>58</sup> That a moral norm can be experienced as obligatory is simply a more technical way of saying that it *feels* right, where rightness represents the philosophical good. This means that I could hold a

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<sup>54</sup> Jutta Heckhausen and Paula B. Baltes, “Perceived Controllability of Expected Psychological Change Across Adulthood and Old Age,” *The Journal of Gerontology* 46, no. 4 (1991).

<sup>55</sup> Colby and Damon, *Some Do Care*, 290.

<sup>56</sup> Leo Montada, “Understanding Oughts by Assessing Moral Reasoning or Moral Emotions,” in *The Moral Self*, ed. Gil G. Noam and Thomas E. Wren (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 293.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 293-40.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

moral norm which is technically invalid because I *feel* it is right. Feeling that something is right is a manifestation of how our moral emotions can indicate the existence of a psychologically operative moral rule, which tells us to act in certain ways and not in others.<sup>59</sup>

Moral emotions are also said to be authentic in that they are not simply hypotheses about reality but rather are assertive cognitions, which makes them an attractive tool for determining moral norms.<sup>60</sup> If I *feel* that X is right, I would not say that maybe it is important, good, etc., but rather I would definitively claim X's worthiness. Recent psychological research has corroborated this idea, suggesting that Kant might have erred when he said that emotions are capricious and unreliable; today we consider emotions as understandable evaluative responses to cognized or imagined "facts."<sup>61</sup>

Traditionally, we do not tend to think of facts as supported by appeals to emotions but rather by appeals to reason. Facts are supposed to be conclusions at which we have arrived through reasoned and rational deliberation, which is the traditional opposite of emotional confusion. However, moral psychologists such as Leo Montada and Maria Antonaccio are seeking to problematize this traditional relationship by opening up space to include our emotions in the metaethical theories we use to classify properties of morality.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 295. Such talk of facts makes us think of Lieberman's moral realism and wonder how this development would affect his metaethical theory. On the one hand, Lieberman seems to benefit from this psychological insight, which suggests that our emotional responses are indications of an understanding that certain facts exist in this world. However, on the other hand, these "facts" are analogous to existentialist values since they are created through our own volition and thus do not represent any normative standard.

Such an endeavor is crucial for enhancing our understanding of Løgstrup and Levinas. Their philosophies form a kind of humanism that inherently relies on our emotional capacity to feel responsible for other human beings. However, their notion of infinite responsibility brings with it an infinite risk as well. If we do not find a way to come to terms with such a crushing emotional force as infinite responsibility, then we risk becoming alienated from the world and becoming disengaged. Løgstrup and Levinas developed deep philosophical insights concerning the farthest limits of moral responsibility, but their aim was to uplift rather than to pressure or depress. They tried to emphasize an idea of ethical inter-subjectivity where we experience being infinitely bound to each because they had just gone through a period in history when it seemed that human beings had completely lost touch with any trace of a shared human dignity. But in order to impress upon us the full significance of our humanity, Løgstrup and Levinas made their ideas radical, infinite, and transcendent. Perhaps paradoxically, they made our humanity godlike.

KNUD EJLER LØGSTRUP AND EMMANUEL LEVINAS |  
ANSWERING TO THE UNANSWERABLE

Løgstrup and Levinas are principally working with the idea of how we experience some sort of demand or relation in our moral lives. They call this the ethical demand and the Face of the Other, respectively. These two ways of thinking about ethical inter-subjectivity become the basis for their visions of humanism, where responsibility for another human being is paramount. Not only is responsibility the most important aspect of the ethical relation, but the responsibility we have to another

person is radical and infinite. We are consistently feeling a moral force upon us that we can never satisfy, which makes us feel like our responsibility to humanity is infinitely large.

Thus Løgstrup and Levinas's notion of infinite responsibility is the essential challenge at the heart of a theory of moral commitment based on the main humanist question of whether it is ever possible to say "No." In the theory of moral commitment based on their ideas, I am morally committed to helping other human beings because I understand myself as an ethically worthy individual only in relation to how I can cultivate the well being of others. At the same time, however, I also know that I will never be able to protect or be responsible for every person I encounter all the time, and thus my moral commitment is based on a feeling of infinite yet unfulfillable striving.

Some people consider the specifics of Løgstrup and Levinas's ideas to be irrational and unhelpful, since no one person can have infinite responsibility as no one person has infinite power. But at the bottom of a moral commitment that draws its inspiration from their humanist ideas, it is not necessarily the pressure of an infinitely great feeling of responsibility that motivates me. Rather, the underlying humanist ideal that we are all responsible for each other and that the sum total of our shared human dignity is infinite is what draws me towards a vision of moral commitment that is fundamentally rooted in protecting the sanctity and value of human life.

In going through the writings of Løgstrup and Levinas, I hope to make it even clearer that, as phenomenologists, they were trying to develop a conception of humanism that was morally powerful in the kinds of feelings it engendered. I have

thus adopted their ideas as a way to think about becoming morally committed due to an intense feeling of responsibility and human solidarity. But if on such a view one's commitments are based on feelings, how can we talk about their being justified besides from simply saying that they "feel right"? It is in this light that we turn to moral phenomenology in order to understand how feelings can become the ultimate basis for justification.

Moral phenomenology is the branch of moral philosophy that deals with explaining what happens to our consciousness when we undergo certain moral experiences. As one of the most important moral phenomenologists, Maurice Mandelbaum conceives of moral experiences, in which an agent takes himself to be bound by a moral obligation to perform a certain action in a specific situation, as exhibiting what he called a *felt demand*.<sup>62</sup> This felt demand is a moral force that we feel directed against us and originating from something (or *someone*) other than ourselves.<sup>63</sup> At this point it should be clear as to why moral phenomenology would be an appropriate tool for analyzing Løgstrup's ethical demand and Levinas's infinite responsibility. The two philosophers themselves were also trained as phenomenologists, so it would make sense that their visions of humanism significantly rely on this concept of the felt demand.

As a philosophical method, moral phenomenology is principally concerned with the first-person study of the moral experiences in our moral life.<sup>64</sup> When I undergo a moral experience, I perceive it as having a certain phenomenal character. A phenomenal character is a moral quality that is applied to specific kinds of

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<sup>62</sup> Kriegel, "Moral Phenomenology," 4.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 7. The current and following paragraphs are paraphrased from Kriegel's article, p. 7.

phenomena. For example, we perceive lying as having the phenomenal character of being wrong. Thus when I undergo the moral experience of judging slavery as wrong, I perceive this particular moral experience of judging to have the phenomenal character that I associate with experiences that exhibit objectivity. Essentially, when I judge slavery as wrong, I *feel* that I am expressing an objective fact.

So if I were to have a moral commitment against the use of torture, every moral experience that is associated with this moral commitment would be perceived to have a phenomenal character typically exhibited by experiences that I regard as factually objective. All these experiences would have the phenomenal character of objectivity *for me* because they are fundamentally related to *my* moral commitment, which clearly is objectively valid by definition. Thus moral phenomenology gives us a more sophisticated way to discuss the justification-giving qualities of felt moral commitments rather than simply saying that it “feels right.”

The interesting point of overlap between Løgstrup and Levinas concerns how they understood the sources of meaning in our moral lives. Phenomenologically, Løgstrup and Levinas viewed our moral experiences as having a phenomenal character typical of experiences not necessarily based in objective fact but rather in faith. They clearly understood the source of objectivity in theological terms, drawing on their lived experiences as a Danish theologian and resister and a Jewish, naturalized French citizen taken captive by the Nazis. Amidst the upheavals of the Second World War and the Holocaust, their humanism became inextricably linked with their religious perspectives.

While Løgstrup's motto "Human first, Christian second" explicitly supported a humanist ethical system, he was also deeply influenced by certain key teachings in his own Christian tradition. Løgstrup insisted that even without believing in Jesus as Christ, his life and words exemplify human possibilities that reflect a fundamental demand because they speak to something basic in human life. For Løgstrup, this was a basic trust that underlies all types of moral interaction between people; when we interact, a part of another person is placed in my hands, and I know it is wrong to cause it harm but just to care for it.<sup>65</sup> For this reason, Løgstrup was one of the earliest supporters of armed resistance as the only honorable course of action during the German occupation of Denmark.<sup>66</sup> One could not stand by, either idly or inefficiently, if one accepted this idea of an inherent trust and responsibility to care for others and resist evil. These religiously-inspired moral bonds of our shared humanity led Løgstrup to the conclusion that resistance was the only acceptable position he could take at that time in his life.

On the other hand, Levinas's humanism appears to us as much more secularly-minded, since, unlike Løgstrup, he came to advanced theological studies much later in life and never received any technical theological training. His humanism engaged with the deep and dark political moods and events of the twentieth century in a time when people felt deeply skeptical of the value of humanism. Amidst the great horrors of his time, Levinas stood firmly in defense of humanism, particularly his own "humanism of the Other."<sup>67</sup> Richard Cohen argues that after spending the war years as a Nazi prisoner and having his parents and siblings murdered, Levinas's sense of

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<sup>65</sup> MacIntyre and Fink, "Introduction," xxix.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., xxii.

<sup>67</sup> Cohen, "Introduction," viii, ix.



his Jewish identity was undeniably influenced by his experience in the Holocaust.<sup>68</sup> In 1974, Levinas dedicated one of his most famous books to those “closest among the six million murdered by the National Socialists” and the millions of others “who were victims of the same hatred of the other, the same anti-Semitism.”<sup>69</sup> Levinas’s sense of justice, argues Cohen, is thus rooted in the Jewish tradition of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world),<sup>70</sup> which holds that service to others is an essential part of justice.

The issue is now to show how these philosophers’ theologically-inspired humanism, which has deep roots in their experiences in the Second World War and the Holocaust, leads to a theory of moral commitment that takes the value and dignity of human life as paramount. We can group the elements of their ideas into the categories of the humanist, the religious, and the radical or infinite to better understand the similarities and differences in their theological perspectives concerning the origin of the demand and its power over us. Essentially, they combine a religious metaphor that infers notions of infinity with a humanist message that emphasizes the primacy of the human being.

For Løgstrup, the humanist aspect is very much tied into and congruent with his religious tradition. As a Christian humanist, he draws on Jesus’s teachings from the Sermon on the Mount to develop the ethical demand. It pressures us to act for the sake of the particular human being in front of us, which can either be a neighbor, an

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<sup>68</sup> Cohen, “Introduction,” viii; Bergo, “Emmanuel Levinas.”

<sup>69</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1991).

<sup>70</sup> Cohen, “Introduction,” xxxvii. My translation.

enemy, or a stranger.<sup>71</sup> But this demand is “ridiculous,” according to Simon Critchley, since Jesus is essentially asking his listeners to be perfect and godlike. As a humanist and theologian, Løgstrup is concerned with uniting the relation to the neighbor with the relation to God. He does so by claiming that our relationship to God is *wholly* determined at the point of our relation to the neighbor,<sup>72</sup> adding a significantly transcendent character to the traditionally humanist precept of ethical inter-subjectivity.

However, Løgstrup says that we should abandon metaphysics in favor of phenomenology in order to focus on the radical *human* demand that faces us instead of simply accepting obscure metaphysical beliefs about religion.<sup>73</sup> By referring to phenomenology as the method for focusing on the human demand, Løgstrup is choosing to underscore that it is the feeling of human responsibility, not obscure doctrine, which has the phenomenal character of experiences that exhibit objectivity. Having a sincere caring concern for human beings feels right in its own right, and we do not need religious backing in order to assure us of human dignity.

Levinas’s humanism, on the other hand, has a more secular ontological perspective because originally he was more particularly concerned with distinguishing his humanism from Heidegger’s theory of being. For Levinas, the dignity of the self arises in and through a feeling of unfulfillable moral responsibility to the other person, which eventually leads to a demand for justice for all humanity.<sup>74</sup> Since I am morally vulnerable to the Other’s vulnerabilities, I am moved to help the

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<sup>71</sup> Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 51.

<sup>72</sup> Knud Ejler Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, trans. Alasdair MacIntyre and Hans Fink (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 3-5; Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 51.

<sup>73</sup> Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 54-5.

<sup>74</sup> Cohen, “Introduction,” xxvii.

Other when I see suffering in the Face.<sup>75</sup> Responsibility is placed on me exclusively in a way that I cannot refuse without relinquishing a part of my own self; this is what Levinas calls “the supreme dignity of the unique,” since the self becomes the sole measure of responsibility, a “non-interchangeable I.”<sup>76</sup>

According to Levinas, the “Other comes to us from the outside, a separated—or holy—face.”<sup>77</sup> The Hebrew word for holy, *kadosh*, can also technically mean “separate” or “apart,” which resonates with Levinas’s other descriptions of the Other as “infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign.”<sup>78</sup> The Other comes from a “dimension of height, a dimension of transcendence,” clearly evoking an image of God from on high; but the Other who “dominates” me with his transcendent character is also “the stranger, the widow, and the orphan,”<sup>79</sup> evoking an image of everyday life. We also learn how the Face presents itself in its refusal to be contained, that is, it cannot be comprehended or encompassed,<sup>80</sup> which loosely refers to Levinas’s idea of Infinity which he takes from Descartes’s proof for the existence of God in the Third Meditation.<sup>81</sup> Levinas uses the metaphor “curvature of intersubjective space” to express the “surplus of truth over being.” This metaphor is meant to explain how I experience the Other as higher or above me rather than my equal, causing the curve.<sup>82</sup> This metaphor places both truth and the Other in the high point of the metaphorical curve, evoking a parallel with God in light of the references Levinas makes to the

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., xxxiii.

<sup>76</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 101.

<sup>77</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 291.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>81</sup> Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 58.

<sup>82</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 291; Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 59-60.

Other's infinite transcendence in his "elevation."<sup>83</sup> Thus the surplus of truth is the "divine intention of all truth," and the curvature of space is "the very presence of God."<sup>84</sup>

The last aspect, that of infinity or radicalness, is the most interesting because it is the part that comes the closest to answering the main humanist question first posed in the Introduction. Levinas describes the ethical relation to the Other in terms of infinity, using Descartes's idea of the Infinite, where what an idea aims at is infinitely greater than the very act through which one thinks it.<sup>85</sup> In the Face of the Other we experience the same notion of infinity, where our accessing it is exceeded by its access.<sup>86</sup> The curvature of intersubjective space as the ethical relation is another formulation of this idea of Infinity, since when I am in the relation it does not appear as equal and my responsibility towards the Other is infinite.<sup>87</sup> Løgstrup, on the other hand, holds the ethical demand as radical because it is unspoken and intrudes disturbingly into my own existence and isolates me.<sup>88</sup> But, unlike Levinas, just because the demand is radical in these senses does not mean that a person has an unlimited responsibility to another.<sup>89</sup>

So how then do these perspectives on infinity and radicalness answer my question? Interestingly, only Løgstrup confronts the idea of one who protests the demand,<sup>90</sup> but in the end he still contends that the demand can never be reciprocal, agreeing with Levinas. Thus both essentially uphold my responsibility to another

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<sup>83</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 88.

<sup>84</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 291.

<sup>85</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 91.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>87</sup> Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 59.

<sup>88</sup> Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 44-5.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

person in virtually every circumstance and reject the possibility of my ever being able to say No. As Cohen interprets Levinas, to suffer for others is to serve “them,”<sup>91</sup> using the plural to suggest the possibility of opening up the ethical relation to include all of humanity. Indeed, Cohen is one of the most generous when it comes to applying Levinas’s idea on a *global* scale, having chosen to understand Levinas and his humanism through a distinctly Jewish perspective based in the principle of *tikkun olam* (“repairing the world.”)

Unlike Løgstrup, Levinas distinctly believes that we cannot say “No,” and that to give up on the Other would mean to give up on ourselves. As we have seen, infinite responsibility is fundamental for the structure of subjectivity,<sup>92</sup> so thus “to utter ‘I’...means to possess a privileged place with regard to responsibilities for which no one can replace me and from which no one can release me. *To be unable to shirk: this is the I.*”<sup>93</sup> To be a morally autonomous agent means to always rise to the occasion, without fail; not only can no one offer the help I can, but no one can offer help *like* I can. For Levinas, the accomplishing of an “I” and morality constitute the very one and the same process in being.

Morality comes to birth not in equality, but in the fact that infinite exigencies, that of serving the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, converge at one point of the universe. Thus through morality alone are I and the others produced in the universe.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Cohen, “Introduction,” xxxiv.

<sup>92</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 95.

<sup>93</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 245. Emphasis added.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

## SO WHAT IS INFINITY?

However, it is also possible that the attempt itself to answer this humanist question is actually quite similar to the Cartesian thought aiming towards the idea of infinity. The practical complexities of an actual answer to my question, in all its clarifications and consequences, are infinitely greater than the very act of thinking of any such possible answer. This resonates with Levinas's own personal conception of Descartes's relation to the Infinite as a Desire that can never be satisfied.<sup>95</sup> I desperately want to know more about the infinite limits of my responsibility to the Other, but if I were to know the boundaries and extent of such an extreme ethical relation, it would stop being such a preoccupation in my mind and moral consciousness.

It is the very unknown and mysterious character of infinity that makes Løgstrup and Levinas's transcendent humanism a powerful force on which to base our moral commitments. We can never know the limits of infinity, but we continually strive to do so, hoping that we perhaps can reach a point where, in Levinas's words, the curvature of intersubjective space becomes linear. The intensity of an infinite feeling is meant to be a constant reminder of how the suffering and injustice in the world seem beyond our control. It seems unfair to then say that suffering which is beyond our control is still within our responsibility, since how could we possibly make any difference if we do not have the power to affect change?

This dilemma leaves us two possibilities. Either we can continue to struggle against overwhelmingly great odds that are not in our favor, knowing that our actions

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<sup>95</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 92.

might be practically limited but symbolically meaningful. Or, we can fight for and demand infinite power to meet our feelings of infinite responsibility. Here lies the danger of feeling infinitely responsible. In trying to do the most good we can, we are liable to become consumed by abstract feelings greater than ourselves and forget our original intentions. It is the fear of infinite abstraction that drives Albert Camus to reject infinity and demand a limit. That limit is the human being.

## CHAPTER TWO

# THE STUBBORN HUMANIST

*Albert Camus and the Human Community*

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And I am tempted to tell you that it so happens that we are fighting for fine distinctions, but the kind of distinctions that are as important as man himself. We are fighting for the distinction between sacrifice and mysticism, between energy and violence, between strength and cruelty, for that even finer distinction between the true and the false, between the men of the future and the cowardly gods you revere.

—Albert Camus  
*Letters to a German Friend*

### INTRODUCTION

Quite shockingly, the historical experience of the twentieth century has been largely erased from the memory of academic political theory; there are thousands and thousands of pages written about justice and morality as if Auschwitz had never existed.<sup>1</sup> In the face of such an intellectual and moral gap, I believe we would greatly benefit from revisiting Camus's profound, if perhaps somewhat perplexing, moral commitments. Today when we think of Camus, it is most often in regards to his literary accomplishments or legacy as a moral voice amidst twentieth century European upheavals. This latter aspect leads me to see a Camusian theory of moral commitment that then offers us a way to deal with and respond to the humanist question of infinite responsibility.

To introduce Camus and the context within which I want to view his moral commitments, I would like to highlight two short passages. The first is from his

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 12-3.



*Notebooks, 1942-1951* and regards his concern for political action. As Jeffrey Isaac notes, Camus felt intuitively unfit for politics because he eschewed the death of any adversary, yet he also felt ill at ease with the thought of being removed from politics.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, Camus was concerned with politics, “in spite of myself and because, through my defects rather than my virtues, I have never been able to refuse any of the obligations I encountered.”<sup>3</sup>

Camus wrote these words in 1948 after painstakingly coming to terms with the postwar purge as a disgrace and disaster, and trying to champion the cause of internationalism amidst increasingly polarizing Cold War sentiments. This passage is in fact reflective of Camus’s deep sense of moral responsibility, which is based on an ethical sensitivity, at times even anguish,<sup>4</sup> to the injustices he witnessed. Camus’s early *personal* encounters with the people of his working class Algerian neighborhood and the other outlying provinces of French Algeria established the base for what would become his deeply felt obligation to help others in distress and sustain human dignity. However, at first Camus only recognized this feeling on a personal, one-to-one level. What I consider his moral commitment to human dignity is not present from the beginning but rather grows out of this early sense of care, eventually becoming intertwined with more theoretical moral principles regarding the common bonds of humanity.

The second passage comes from Camus’s “Letter to Roland Barthes on *The Plague*” which the former wrote in response to the latter’s criticism of the novel. Camus defends the allegorical character of *The Plague*, reflecting on how his thought

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Camus, *Notebooks, 1942-1951*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Knopf, 1966), 215.

<sup>4</sup> Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*, 15.

has developed since *The Stranger* and how the anti-totalitarian novel in fact reflects his belief in human solidarity and responsibility. For Camus, *The Plague* represents a “transition from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles must be shared. If there is an evolution from *The Stranger* to *The Plague*, it is in the direction of solidarity and participation.”<sup>5</sup> Such an image undoubtedly brings to mind characters such as Rieux, Tarrou, and Rambert, but the idea of a human community imbued with solidarity and facing a shared struggle also gives rise to the primary moral principles in *The Rebel*. Most importantly, however, Camus expresses a truly emotional charge in this moral position since he genuinely believed in the truth of the bonds of humanity.

Some tend to assert that emotion usually comes at the expense of reason, and this charge has certainly fallen on Camus’s wartime writing at *Combat*, the French Resistance newspaper where Camus was editor-in-chief from 1944 until 1947. Patrick McCarthy criticizes Camus’s articles not for their lack in contemporary applicability but rather for how Camus’s “moral impulse” has produced “moralizing rather than moral thinking.”<sup>6</sup> Mark Orme’s conclusion that Camus’s writing sometimes has the tendency to sound rather simplistic<sup>7</sup> rings poignantly true to us today, since at times we cannot help but consider how history has proved Camus tragically wrong on certain issues. His hope that the Resistance would become a cohesive moral and political force for postwar France met the same denial as his hope

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<sup>5</sup> Albert Camus, “Letter to Roland Barthes on *The Plague*,” in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Knopf, 1968), 339.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick McCarthy, *Camus: A Critical Study of His Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1982), 204.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Orme, *The Development of Albert Camus's Concern for Social and Political Justice: "Justice pour un juste"* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 111-3.

for a federated solution to the Algerian War.<sup>8</sup> As Jonathan King aptly puts it, Camus seemed to always join on the side of the losers; but today, it seems like what he said nearly sixty years ago is almost prophetic in terms of Algeria's decade of internal violence and the dirty truth of Soviet totalitarianism.<sup>9</sup>

Thus we must recognize that Camus was not a conventional political theorist or thinker. We have taken to analyze his writings, both fiction and non-fiction, with the same kind of academic rigor we would apply to traditional texts of political theory, even though, as Isaac would emphasize, we see the value in Camus precisely because of his unconventionality. In this light, Camus's moral commitments need to be grounded in the feeling of moral responsibility to answer the call for help from those most in need around the world. Thus what he first experienced in Algeria as a specifically-oriented awareness towards endemic poverty and starvation became a much more metaphysical, but not ideological or abstract, sense of moral responsibility to fight injustice and even evil itself.

This transition in Camus's thinking reflects a moral commitment to activism that grew into a moral commitment against evil and for humanity. The story of how Camus's concern for social justice in Algeria transformed into something much more profound when confronted with the incomprehensible destruction of his time is essentially the story I hope to tell in this chapter. As already noted, growing up in poverty was a significant factor for Camus's developing his moral senses, which would unfold into a life-long preoccupation with freedom and justice. In joining the Resistance and writing for *Combat*, Camus came face to face with the nihilistic and

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan H. King, "Introduction," in *Albert Camus: Selected Political Writings*, ed. Jonathan H. King by Albert Camus (London: Methuen, 1981), 26-7.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

destructive philosophies of modernity, rejecting them in favor of a philosophy of life and human dignity. This conviction moved to the next level when the failure of the postwar purge meant further disillusionment with theories of historical justice and their insistence on violent means. Instead, Camus came to see that an ethics of limits and the notion of a reasoned rebellion were indispensable for safeguarding our shared human dignity.

Starting in his early adolescence, Camus began to clarify his own understanding of cruelty in the world, moving from the idea of an “*ephemeral* nature of contingent adversity on the social scale” to an “*eternal* nature of a priori ‘unjust’ features of human experience on the metaphysical scale.”<sup>10</sup> This period of Camus’s life was fundamental for the formation of a moral perspective that concerned the dignity and immediacy of people over the political requisites of parties and ideologies. It formed the basis of what Orme calls “Camusian justice,” which is “essentially empirical in nature, drawn from a moral sensibility that is rich in compassion and generosity.”<sup>11</sup>

## CHILDHOOD THROUGH YOUNG ADULTHOOD

The first time Camus felt shame and despair regarding his family’s relative poverty was upon entering the lycée in Algiers. He then realized that not everyone is poor and experienced, what David Sprintzen calls, the first signs of his “anguished sensitivity.”<sup>12</sup> His socioeconomic background growing up did not immediately lend itself into a fully thought-out theoretical position regarding social justice, but it did

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<sup>10</sup> Orme, *Camus's Concern for Social and Political Justice*, 39.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>12</sup> David Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 25.

give him a concrete starting point to formulate his ideas on what social justice might signify in a broader sense.<sup>13</sup> At the very least, he would forever have the knowledge and experience necessary to be able to put himself in the shoes of someone less fortunate. This quality of being able to better understand another's perspective is what Jeffrey Isaac defines as the pattern of representational thinking and a significant element of Camus's political philosophy.<sup>14</sup> This ability would become crucial for his later political position regarding limits and human dignity.

As noted above, Camus was ambivalent about the way politics was actually carried out, and this became clearly apparent while he was a member of the French Communist Party in Algeria. According to Jonathan King, Camus came to politics "very much on his own terms," with a political commitment of the kind that "seeks to transcend politics in the direction of moral and spiritual identity."<sup>15</sup> From the beginning it was clear that Camus was never interested in the party networks and bureaucratic functions of politics, but rather he placed his concerns much deeper. As Orme notes, his political stance was based on a sincere concern for the dignity and aspirations of human beings in society,<sup>16</sup> and from the beginning this concern found human suffering to be particularly problematic.

Soon Camus began to apply a theoretical stance to this position, thereby broadening his concern beyond his personal encounters and giving a theoretical structure to his moral sense of "unknown suffering."<sup>17</sup> Camus began to use the language of ethical discourse in his personal notebook and other writings, reflecting a

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<sup>13</sup> Orme, *Camus's Concern for Social and Political Justice*, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*, chap. 5-6.

<sup>15</sup> King, "Introduction," 3.

<sup>16</sup> Orme, *Camus's Concern for Social and Political Justice*, 50.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

new “theoretical charge” in his moral reasoning.<sup>18</sup> What was at first a simple yet passionate emotional response to the exploitation and oppression that Camus witnessed on a person-to-person scale began to grow into a larger, metaphysical recognition of human suffering. Orme refers to Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi’s opinion that Camus’s *engagement* (commitment) is more “sentimental and more deep-rooted than intellectual or Marxist.”<sup>19</sup> In his correspondence with Jean Grenier, Camus himself expressed a similar notion that his political commitment was grounded in a sense of human empathy rather than a clear understanding of philosophy.<sup>20</sup>

Before the outbreak of hostilities in 1939, Camus was in his mid-twenties and actively involved in the theatre company *Théâtre du Travail* which he founded and used as a political platform. It was in working with the theatre group on anti-Franco projects and plays that we first see a turning point in the transition of his moral commitments. Through theatre Camus began to articulate his conception of political justice and the ignobility of fascism and authoritarianism.<sup>21</sup> France’s nonintervention on the side of Republican Spain was particularly frustrating and morally reprehensible to Camus. In denouncing French policy in Spain, he highlighted the plight of the Spanish *people* and how France’s passivity was, if not betraying them, then severely letting them down. So when Camus calls into question the theory of nonintervention itself,<sup>22</sup> he is predicating such a position on his strong and deeply felt sense of moral responsibility to help those in need in the most extreme situations.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 53. Quoted from Lévi-Valensi’s remarks originally broadcast on *France Culture*, 25 November 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Albert Camus, *Correspondence, 1932-1960 / Albert Camus & Jean Grenier*, ed. Marguerite Dobrenn (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 22. Orme’s translation for this and all subsequent citations.

<sup>21</sup> Orme, *Camus's Concern for Social and Political Justice*, 59, 61.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

*Revolt in Asturias* stands out as this case in point. In this play, Camus began to refine and unite his concern for justice as both a social issue akin to the kind of experiences he witnessed in Algeria, as well as a political issue<sup>23</sup> bearing on the necessity to fight fascism and tyranny wherever they threaten to stamp out the human being.

## THE DEMAND ARISES

A year before the Second World War, Camus became a journalist with the leftist newspaper *Alger républicain* and truly found his voice of justice. Through journalism he took on the role of a social reformer, actively trying to change the status quo on someone else's behalf and espousing a firm belief in justice as the protection of human rights.<sup>24</sup> While working for *Alger républicain*, Camus experienced two events that would forever influence the moral stance of his writing and also deeply shake his personal sense of reflection on what exactly a shared human community should mean. The first came in the form of a series of articles published between June 5<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>, 1939, under the title of "Misery in Kabylia" and told of the dire famine raging in that region. The second concerns a much more ephemeral encounter with the men aboard the convict ship *Le Martinière*. In both we can see Camus beginning to formulate an idea of shared moral responsibility that would eventually drive his concerns during the Resistance and after.

Germaine Brée, the noted French literary expert, claims that justice for Camus was not an abstract principle but rather was born of his intense understanding of the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>24</sup> Orme, *Camus's Concern for Social and Political Justice*, 68, 78; Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*, 11; Stephen Eric Bronner, *Camus: Portrait of a Moralizer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 144, 154.

misery of other people; “Misery in Kabylia” thus represents a major milestone in Camus’s engagement with justice as a moral issue.<sup>25</sup> The most significant aspect of these articles, however, is not only the consolidation of Camus’s sense of justice and ethics as interpersonally based. The tone, style and content of his articles speaks to his belief that moral repugnance caused by the suffering of others does not come from recourse to a general theory or ideology. Rather, it is keenly felt, with a sharp sense of anguish that pushes us in the direction of action. As the “suffering” and “unbearable sights” of famine followed him everywhere, Camus himself felt that the destitution in the Kabylia region is “neither an idea nor a topic for meditation. It is a matter of fact. It shouts out and drives to despair.”<sup>26</sup> Thus Camus is beginning to articulate his concerns through the perspective of a moral commitment that is driven by an urgent and recognizable feeling of responsibility to help others.

His experience with the men from the convict ship *Le Martinière* provides an even more dramatic manifestation of this perspective. The emotional and moral influence that meeting these men had on Camus would follow him throughout his life and into the years before his death.<sup>27</sup> As he witnessed the treatment of the mainly Arab captives aboard the ship, he could not but comment on how they appeared to have lost all their humanity in their deplorable, caged conditions; his article for *Alger républicain* about this experience is aptly titled “Those Men Who Are Struck from

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<sup>25</sup> Germaine Brée, *Camus* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1959), 28; Orme, *Camus's Concern for Social and Political Justice*, 69.

<sup>26</sup> Albert Camus, *Fragments d'un combat, 1938-1940: Alger Républicain, le Soir Républicain*, ed. André Abou and Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi, vol. 1, Cahiers Albert Camus 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 280, 335, 288. Orme’s translation for this and all subsequent citations.

<sup>27</sup> Orme, *Camus's Concern for Social and Political Justice*, 225n. 36.



the List of the Living.”<sup>28</sup> The sight was too much to bare, but what really put Camus over the edge was the slightest interaction with one of the men who had asked for a cigarette. Camus simply walked past him and did not answer.

This aspect of interaction, or rather the lack thereof, was what really came to weigh heavily on Camus’s moral sensibility. With his “pathetic response to someone just asking for a sign of support and a human gesture,”<sup>29</sup> Camus saw himself as exemplifying a rotten ideal of humanity in not responding. Camus did nothing while someone else near by was calling out for a trace of shared humanity. For that second, he glimpsed a true sense of human responsibility, which he would later come to make the cornerstone of his call against evil and to end suffering, but at the moment he did nothing.

Camus the young journalist “tremble[d]” in front these convicts because he shamefully knew that he had forsaken the bonds between them.<sup>30</sup> As he himself put it, “it is not a question of pity here, but of something completely different.”<sup>31</sup> Stronger than pity, these bonds between us exist because of the moral fact of a shared human dignity. Resistance to Nazism then came to solidify this sense of moral solidarity as the ultimate weapon in the struggle to preserve human dignity.

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<sup>28</sup> Emmett Parker, *Albert Camus: The Artist in the Arena* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 14-5.

<sup>29</sup> Albert Camus, *Fragments d'un combat, 1938-1940: Alger Républicain, le Soir Républicain*, ed. André Abou and Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi, vol. 2, Cahiers Albert Camus 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 361. Orme’s translation for this and all subsequent citations.

<sup>30</sup> André Abou, “Combat pour la justice,” in *Albert Camus, 5: "Journalisme et politique: l'entrée dans l'histoire, 1938-1940"*, ed. Brian T. Fitch (Paris: Lettres Modernes, 1972), 49. Orme’s translation for this and all subsequent citations.

<sup>31</sup> Camus, *Fragments d'un combat*, 2:362.

## IN DEFENSE OF HUMANITY | THE ETHOS OF RESISTANCE

According to Mark Orme, Camus found Hitler so repugnant due to the latter's violent break with liberal principles, such as toleration and mutual understanding.<sup>32</sup> While this is an apt characterization, I think that Camus was so distinctively outraged with Nazism because of his humanist ethics and strictly high regard for the value of human life. He saw Hitler's doctrine as "one of the most abominable forms of *evil* in political thought and in political life"<sup>33</sup> because every concern Camus ever had about justice, freedom, and the rights and dignity of the human being was being willfully and viscerally obliterated by Hitler's regime. Some contend that in his condemnations of Hitler, Camus substituted sentimental moral rhetoric for specific political analysis.<sup>34</sup> This view, however, tends to overlook the significance of Camus's deeply felt humanist morality as a valid perspective on anti-totalitarianism.

Thus I want to emphasize Camus's experience in the Resistance and as a witness to the Holocaust as pivotal aspects in the theory explaining his moral commitment against evil. Sociologist Rainer C. Baum and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman offer a view of the Holocaust as evil through moral indifference, which helps to understand Camus's wartime and postwar writings as rejecting the horror and loss of humanity of the Holocaust in favor of a shared struggle and moral community.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Orme, *Camus's Concern for Social and Political Justice*, 110.

<sup>33</sup> Camus, *Fragments d'un combat*, 2:635.

<sup>34</sup> Orme, *Camus's Concern for Social and Political Justice*, 111.

<sup>35</sup> Since Baum and Bauman are particularly focused on the Holocaust, I have chosen to look at Camus's work that deals with Nazism, but his polemics against the moral depravity of Stalinism reject the same horror and loss of humanity. However, immediately following liberation, French intellectuals almost unanimously showered praise and support on the Soviet Union, which lasted well into the 1950s. Camus's strongest criticisms of the Soviet Union only came after the Resistance had crumbled because of French Communists' recalcitrance. His anti-Soviet (and arguably increasing anti-Communist) position appears in detail in *The Rebel* published in 1951. For a detailed account on how a generation of French intellectuals were "swept into the vortex of communism" after liberation, see

Baum suggests that we need to view the Holocaust as a fundamentally modern phenomena and the result of the division of labor's altering, even threatening, the moral harmony of humanity.<sup>36</sup> Due to increased specialization in all facets of life, moral issues are broken down into smaller, manageable parts to such a degree that we have become unaware, disengaged, and unmoved by the reverberating consequences of our actions.<sup>37</sup> Such moral indifference, characterized by the lack of a caring concern for the foreseeable consequences of our actions on others, is to blame for the atrocities of the Holocaust being allowed to happen. In other words, the suffering and death of the Holocaust did not happen because a few psychopaths held ignoble ideologies; for Baum, the Holocaust happened because the vast majority of people simply did not care.<sup>38</sup>

Zygmunt Bauman takes a similar yet slightly different approach as to the question of why the Holocaust happened. Like Baum, Bauman does not think that the majority of the perpetrators of the Holocaust were psychopaths; rather, they were, by and large, normal people.<sup>39</sup> The concepts of *mediation of action* and a *universe of obligation* help to explain how the Nazis' managed to exploit the moral pitfalls of modernity in murdering more than ten million people. Their most sinister triumph was turning normal people into monsters by making the moral character of an

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Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>36</sup> Rainer C. Baum, "Holocaust: Moral Indifference as the Form of Modern Evil," in *Echoes from the Holocaust: Philosophical Reflections on a Dark Time*, ed. Alan Rosenberg and Gerald E. Myers (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 56.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-8.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>39</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 18-9.

individual's actions become completely invisible to that individual.<sup>40</sup> The Nazis were able to turn modern bureaucracy and technology into "moral sleeping pills" that enlarged the psychic distance between perpetrator and victim to such a degree that the former repressed the moral significance of his or her actions; *mediation of action* is this condition whereby an individual experiences the state of complete separateness from his or her own actions.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, Holocaust victims themselves became morally invisible to the perpetrators. The Nazis managed to cultivate amongst their followers such a strong *universe of obligation* outside of which all moral questions and precepts were unbinding and moral evaluations were meaningless; the very humanity of the victims became invisible.<sup>42</sup>

While Camus never sought to specifically explain the origins of the Holocaust, he did respond to the nihilistic and antihumanist elements in the modern Western tradition which he saw as culminating in Nazism and Stalinism. Camus became wholly involved in the Resistance's cause, seeing it as his moral duty and obligation to struggle on the side of truth and justice and sacrifice his life if necessary.<sup>43</sup> *Letters to a German Friend* is one of Camus's most emphatic and moving pieces where we see him calmly yet defiantly argue for the victory of reason and human life over darkness and the irrationality of nihilistic violence. In these four letters, Camus discovers a philosophical and moral identity to complement the sense of purpose and active idealism he was feeling as part of the collective experience in the Resistance.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 24-5.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>43</sup> Orme, *Camus's Concern for Social and Political Justice*, 118.

<sup>44</sup> King, "Introduction," 10.

Thus even as Camus shares in the metaphysical skepticism of his time, he still holds onto his humanist truths. There is something with an ultimate meaning in this absurd world, he believes, and “that is man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one.”<sup>45</sup> Against the moral indifference that has condemned innocent men, women, and children to death,<sup>46</sup> Camus responds to his “German friend,” who is clearly meant to represent the nihilistic excesses of Nazism as the product of German idealism and the absurd. Nazism supposes that in an absurd world with an “absence of any human or divine code the only values were those of the animal world—in other words, violence and cunning.”<sup>47</sup>

In *Letters to a German Friend*, we see why France, having sacrificed dearly, will destroy Nazi Germany and triumph in the name of truth and justice. However, Camus is careful to describe the choices that France represents in not following the German path of tyranny, since both countries faced the same issues of the absurd and violence. As Camus admits

I, believing I thought as you did, saw no valid argument to answer you except a fierce love of justice...

Where lay the difference? Simply that you readily accepted despair and I never yielded to it. Simply that you saw the injustice of our condition to the point of being willing to add to it, whereas it seemed to me that man must exalt justice in order to fight injustice, create happiness in order to protest against the universe of unhappiness. Because you turned your despair into intoxication, because you freed yourself from it by making a principle of it, you were willing to destroy man’s works and to fight him in order to

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<sup>45</sup> Albert Camus, “Letters to a German Friend,” in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Modern Library, 1963), 22.

<sup>46</sup> Camus includes the story of eleven captured Frenchmen who are driven from their prison somewhere in France to a cemetery where they will be executed. Five or six had indeed engaged in acts of resistance, but the others had done nothing. “This hour is harder for them because they are dying by mistake or as victims of a kind of indifference” (Ibid., 11).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 21.

add to his basic misery. Meanwhile, refusing to accept that despair and that tortured world, I merely wanted men to rediscover their solidarity in order to wage war against their revolting fate.<sup>48</sup>

When talking about why the French war effort was initially lagging behind the Germans, Camus uses the metaphor of a “detour” to describe the sacrifices that the French had to pay, specifically in order to know if they had “the right to kill men.”<sup>49</sup> Thus the difference to be found between the republicans of France and the Nazis of Germany is in this detour, which, for Camus, clearly designates France “clean as victims.”<sup>50</sup> This detour “safeguarded justice and put truth on the side of those who questioned themselves.”<sup>51</sup> Self-questioning and reflection are necessary in order to achieve the kind of moral courage that one needs in order to sacrifice for truth and justice, to “face torture and death when you know for a fact that hatred and violence are empty things in themselves.”<sup>52</sup> Compare this to the Nazi who has “concluded that man was negligible and that his soul could be killed, that in the maddest of histories the only pursuit for the individual was the adventure of power and his only morality, the realism of conquests.”<sup>53</sup>

Camus’s experience in the Resistance was then a major step towards the fuller development of his humanist principles, but he was not there quite yet. While participating in the Resistance gave Camus a true sense of human solidarity and pointed him in the direction of the idea of rebellion, it is likely that Camus looked

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 21.

back on the months following the Liberation as “the darkest moment of his life.”<sup>54</sup> Through engaging in armed struggle against Nazism, Camus came to the conclusion that violence, though sometimes necessary, could never be legitimized; human life must be asserted above all else.<sup>55</sup> But the Resistance had a darker effect on Camus as well, solidifying the belief in human over divine justice, “giving a chance to the justice that man alone can conceive.”<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately, this chance led Camus into the postwar purge’s darkest grasp.

#### FROM DEATH, LIFE | THE DISGRACE OF THE PURGE

Just shy of a week after the Battle of Paris and four days after the Liberation, Camus wrote “The Age of Scorn” as an editorial for *Combat* in order to remind his readers of the “naked and defenseless human beings systematically mutilated” by the Nazis and to wonder who “would dare speak here of forgiveness?”<sup>57</sup> After the German surrender on August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1944, France was rife with tension, anger, and passion, and it was clear that there would be a demand for revenge.<sup>58</sup> But France immediately ran into a rather significant problem: there was no legal or institutional basis for trying crimes of collaboration on such a wide scale, which led to the enactment of retroactive laws that were unsystematically enforced. This attempt at institutionalizing transitional justice, however, did not restrain the purge from

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<sup>54</sup> Alexandre de Gramont, “Introduction,” in *Between Hell and Reason: Essays from the Resistance Newspaper Combat, 1944-1947*, by Albert Camus (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1991), 28.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>56</sup> Camus, “Letters to a German Friend,” 22.

<sup>57</sup> Albert Camus, *Between Hell and Reason: Essays from the Resistance Newspaper Combat, 1944-1947*, ed. Alexandre de Gramont, trans. Alexandre de Gramont (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1991), 42-3. Originally printed on August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1944.

<sup>58</sup> Judt, *Past Imperfect*, 57. This paragraph on the purge is paraphrased from Chapter 3.

descending into chaos and a medium for settling personal vendettas, sending thousands to their deaths for crimes or minor transgressions that in no way warranted capital punishment.

But in the beginning of the purge, before the mayhem, Camus supported the use of capital punishment in the pursuit of postwar justice. His support was based on a view of justice that took the victims' memory and honor into very serious consideration, so that even in death a person's human essence remained among the moral community of which it was once part. This is another central theme of *Letters to a German Friend*. The moral and true path of victorious France is so greatly indebted to the selfless sacrifice of those who resisted that to forsake them would be to forsake justice. As Camus wrote, "we are not men of hate. But we require that those who killed and permitted murder be held equally responsible in the name of the victims."<sup>59</sup>

This put him on a straight collision course with François Mauriac, a prominent Catholic writer who disapproved of the purge in favor of attempting national reconciliation in the name of religious charity. For about a year, Camus and Mauriac sparred back and forth through several editorials in *Combat* and *Le Figaro*, where Camus accused Mauriac of choosing eternal silence over human justice<sup>60</sup> while Mauriac accused Camus of essentially being an apologist for another Inquisition.<sup>61</sup>

At the bottom of their disagreement was a fundamental difference in religious opinions. Camus the militant atheist believed that any appeal for salvation or justice from a divine power was actually a grave betrayal of humanity. In his response of

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<sup>59</sup> Camus, *Between Hell and Reason*, 23.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>61</sup> Judt, *Past Imperfect*, 69.



October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1944, Camus rejected the language of mercy for the “language of a generation of men brought up with the spectacle of injustice, men who are strangers to God but lovers of humanity, men who are resolved to serve humanity despite a destiny that is so often meaningless.”<sup>62</sup> For Camus, the value of the human being has not only displaced the eminence of God, but it has fundamentally surpassed it. Thus there is nothing greater, bolder, or purer than human justice, which struggles against the unjust suffering of children and murdering of innocents. On the other side, there could be nothing more servile or grim than the religiously-minded acceptance of human suffering without the consequent feeling of a call to action. On January 11<sup>th</sup>, 1945, Camus confidently wrote that he will “forever refuse a divine charity which frustrates the justice of men.”<sup>63</sup>

Tragically, neither the Resistance nor the purge followed Camus’s hopes for regeneration and moral integrity, and by August 30<sup>th</sup> he proclaimed the purge “not only a failure but also a disgrace. The word *purge* is painful enough in itself.”<sup>64</sup> In the end, the purge had only encouraged the kind of moral cynicism and self interest which it had sought to overcome, but worst of all was the sense that it was carried out under the principle of winner take all, not justice.<sup>65</sup> Camus himself was willing to give up his moral principles, even the primacy of human life, and sanction the use of any means necessary to achieve what he thought was a pure end.<sup>66</sup> When the depressing realization set in that the purge had failed, Camus fell into a deep and haunted preoccupation with the question of whether violence could ever be morally

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<sup>62</sup> Camus, *Between Hell and Reason*, 73.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>65</sup> Judt, *Past Imperfect*, 70, 73.

<sup>66</sup> Orme, *Camus's Concern for Social and Political Justice*, 137.

justifiable as a political instrument; in seeing the purge's violence as wrong, Camus came to appreciate and support the need for a plurality of moral values.<sup>67</sup> He would accept charity with justice.

During a lecture in 1948, Camus admitted that François Mauriac was right concerning the fundamentals of their argument.<sup>68</sup> Whereas justice for Camus during the Resistance meant the destruction of his enemy, after the failure of the purge he became much more skeptical of any absolutist notion of justice that leans, even ever so lightly, on violence as a means. Rejecting the legitimacy of political violence was a bold move for Camus, and it would preoccupy the rest of his life as tensions in Algeria boiled over into terrorist violence and state torture. Thus Camus began to write *The Rebel* as he was in the process of clarifying to himself what he thought about the need for limits and the rejection of historical murder, so that the noble experience of human resistance shall never lose sight of its original moral intentions.

## THE TURN TO REBELLION | RECLAIMING HUMANITY

There is no doubt that Camus's work came from a deep sense of moral reflection. But as Jonathan King points out, we can never be sure "whether Camus's commitment responds to a desire or to a sense of obligation, whether it complements an inner need or whether it is felt as an imposition."<sup>69</sup> In both cases, however, Camus's moral commitments reflect a deep perception of the ethical problems in modern times. Indeed, Camus was nothing if not a man torn by internal

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 139-40.

<sup>68</sup> Albert Camus, "The Unbeliever and Christians," in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Modern Library, 1963), 52.

<sup>69</sup> King, "Introduction," 2.

contradictions and tensions that he devoted his entire life to resolving. During the last ten or so years of his life, Camus's idea of rebellion became his existential obsession. Rebellion was not solely an intellectual challenge but rather an "almost despairing response to the terrifying bloodshed and cynical justification of violence which characterized twentieth century Europe."<sup>70</sup> Camus envisioned the ideal rebellion as against moral indifference but also for the care of the other and the suffering of victims in an age when they can be all the more easily hidden. It is in this respect that Camus's political writings contain, as Emmett Parker notes, a sincere concern for the human being's grandeur and weakness, aims and aspirations.<sup>71</sup>

The idea of rebellion is then essential for the purposes of understanding how Camus would respond to the Levinasian dilemma of infinite responsibility and the main humanist question posed at the beginning of this thesis. Although Camus never directly or explicitly asks the question of how to deal with being infinitely responsible to another person, or whether we should help someone else even if it means risking our own life, we can tell from his analysis of rebellion that he would immediately reject the very idea of infinite responsibility as too dangerous. Such a feeling could lead to a feeling of infinite power, so Camus develops his notion of rebellion along much more human-oriented dimensions of responsibility. He sees his ethics of rebellion as "getting it right" precisely because it is an ethics of limits, of a way of life and acting in the world that has delimited our action from the realm of infinity to the realm of the human being.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>71</sup> Parker, *Artist in the Arena*, 168.

The basic idea behind Camus's rebellion is that being a rebel means saying "Yes" and "No" at the same time.<sup>72</sup> Rebellion implies this "No" through affirming the existence of a limit beyond which no injustice can be tolerated; a rebel says "No" in the sense of "You will not do this any longer." The "Yes" of rebellion takes this argument to the next level. In rebelling and affirming a limit, the rebel comes to experience "the sudden, dazzling perception that there is something in man with which he can identify himself."<sup>73</sup> In this sudden flash, the rebel comes to see human dignity as the supreme good, for which rebellion demands recognition in the name of human solidarity. Thus the act of rebellion implies a certain feeling that "transcends the individual in so far as it withdraws him from his supposed solitude and provides him with a reason to act."<sup>74</sup>

Camus develops the key themes of human dignity and solidarity as fundamentally linked through the concept of rebellion. He also draws the distinction between rebellion and revolution. Rebellion always retains "the refusal to be treated as an object and to be reduced to simple historical terms. It is the affirmation of a nature common to all men," while revolution is the "attempt to conquer a new existence by action that recognizes no moral structures."<sup>75</sup> This distinction reflects how Camus understands the Soviet and Hitlerian revolutions as originating in platforms of rebellion that subsequently lost control of their original intentions and became totalizing revolutionary projects.<sup>76</sup> Camus greatly fears such revolutions precisely

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<sup>72</sup> This paragraph's definition of rebellion is paraphrased from Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 13-7. Additionally, the "No" of rebellion is not the same "No" of the main humanist question.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 106.

because their insistence on totality concludes with justifying universal murder. The main imperative of *The Rebel* is thus to try and elucidate how revolution, which always starts from rebellion, loses its sense of limitedness.

In Camus's analysis of rebellion, we find that the modern revolutionary movement is the only logical consequence of a metaphysical rebellion, which he defines as a "claim, motivated by the concept of a complete unity, against the suffering of life and death and a protest against the human condition both for its incompleteness, thanks to death, and its wastefulness, thanks to evil..."<sup>77</sup> While the metaphysical rebel does not inherently have to be an atheist, he is "inevitably a blasphemer. Quite simply, he blasphemes primarily in the name of order, denouncing God as the father of death and as the supreme outrage."<sup>78</sup>

When the throne of God is overturned, the rebel realizes that it is now his own responsibility to create the justice, order, and unity that he sought in vain within his own condition, and in this way to justify the fall of God. Then begins the desperate effort to create, at the price of crime and murder if necessary, the dominion of man.<sup>79</sup>

According to Camus, metaphysical rebellion starts from the claim against human suffering and ends in the validity of murder. If the metaphysical rebel's claim is underscored by a feeling of infinite responsibility for the unjust suffering of humanity, then there will be nothing to stop him from denouncing God as the supreme offense to humanity and demanding infinite power in order to put a stop to human suffering. Thus for Camus, infinite responsibility engenders the demand for

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 24, 105.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 25.

infinite power, which is simply another name for what always ends up being universal murder. Camus sees such a possibility in Ivan Karamazov, the most significant of metaphysical rebels. Ivan sides with humanity and rejects God through refusing to recognize the suffering of children as necessary for the acquisition of truth.<sup>80</sup> In rejecting all and any notion of transcendence or immortality, Ivan can only live in his state of metaphysical rebellion by pursuing it to the bitter end, famously proclaiming “Everything is permitted.”<sup>81</sup> What started from the infinitely absurd injustice of a child suffering became the capacity to completely reformulate notions of justice, “to become God,”<sup>82</sup> to be infinite.

But as Camus points out at the end of *The Rebel*, one “can master in himself everything that should be mastered. He should rectify in creation everything that can be rectified. And after he has done so, children will still die unjustly even in a perfect society.”<sup>83</sup> Thus the recourse to infinity is just an illusion, since there will always be some measure of suffering in the world. Instead, we should not let ourselves get carried away with extreme notions of responsibility that we then forget about rebellion’s “affirmation of a limit, a dignity, and a beauty common to all men.”<sup>84</sup> These are the qualities that remind us that “rebellion in itself is moderation”<sup>85</sup> and intended by Camus to be fundamentally opposed to metaphysical abstractions precisely because of the danger such thinking poses to the dignity of the individual human being.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 55-6.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 57-8.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 294, 251.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 301.

As Camus's vision of rebellion is primarily concerned with limits, Jean-Paul Sartre's was fundamentally based in the efficacy and meaning of violence. In the preface to Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre's claims that it is through fury and hate that the colonized "have become men."<sup>86</sup> Whereas Camus sees the legitimization of violence as the greatest risk to our shared humanity, Sartre supports the irrepressible violence of the colonized as "man re-creating himself."<sup>87</sup> This image of violence as self-constitutive could not be more antithetical to Camus's post-purge views.

Sartre, however, did not take kindly to Camus's humanist vision of rebellion. In his sweeping condemnation of European humanism, Sartre takes an obvious stab at Camus as a collaborator in the history of colonialism.

Let us look at ourselves, if we can bear to, and see what is becoming of us. First, we must face that unexpected revelation, the strip tease of our humanism. There you can see it, quite naked, and it's not a pretty sight. It was nothing but an ideology of lies, a perfect justification for pillage; its honeyed words, its affection of sensibility were only alibis for our aggressions. *A fine sight they are too, the believers in non-violence, saying that they are neither executioners nor victims.*<sup>88</sup>

People have tried to cast a heavy layer of doubt over Camus's moral commitment to his vision of rebellion, claiming that his colonial origins inherently contradict with

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<sup>86</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Preface," in *The Wretched of the Earth*, by Frantz Fanon, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 17.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-5. Emphasis added.

his humanist beliefs.<sup>89</sup> Camus's writing on Algeria is "exemplary" because it is representative of a crisis of conscience in liberal, humanist European minds attempting to come to terms with Third World ambitions for political and cultural independence from Europe and the West. His colonial origins are today a matter of fact that must be acknowledged, but this fact does not call for his total censure or disregard. I see a consensus around Bertrand Jakobiak's view that Camus was a colonizer undoubtedly opposed to certain injustices, but in reality he was allied to a system he never wished to challenge.<sup>90</sup>

Thus at the height of the Algerian War during the late 1950s, Sartre railed against Camus's calls for moderation and dialogue and continued to call for supporting violent revolution.<sup>91</sup> In our current day, with no doubt as to the validity of Algerian independence, it is sometimes hard to read some of the things Camus said and wrote about Algeria. At times he was simply wrong, impractical, or overly idealistic. However, this should not lead us to conclude that his entire moral outlook and underlying moral feelings regarding suffering and evil, truth and justice were any less sincere or real. Camus had an "undeniable commitment to human solidarity"<sup>92</sup> even if his political stance regarding Algerian independence seemed to reflect otherwise for certain people. In fact, his position in the Algerian War was completely in line

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<sup>89</sup> Contrarily, Jonathan King finds Camus's writing on Algeria "exemplary" precisely because they represent the crisis of conscience in the liberal, humanist European mind attempting to come to terms with Third World ambitions for political and cultural independence (King, "Introduction," 26).

<sup>90</sup> Bertrand Jakobiak, "Camus le colonisateur sublimé," *Souffles* 12 (1968): 25. Orme's translation.

<sup>91</sup> In 1959, Camus told Jean Bloch-Michel, his close friend and one of the founders of *Combat*, that when a referendum on Algerian independence takes place he will campaign for self-determination but against complete independence. Shortly after that exchange, Camus confided in Bloch-Michel that that he had given up hope that Algerian Muslims would accept anything less than total independence from France (Parker, *Artist in the Arena*, 165-6).

<sup>92</sup> Orme, *Camus's Concern for Social and Political Justice*, 85.



with the conclusions he drew in *The Rebel*: sympathizing with the Muslim Algerians' cause, he still would not support violence as a means to justice.<sup>93</sup>

## CONCLUSION

While Camus scholars and commentators all highlight different perspectives on his concern for the human being, he himself said it best when it came to the urgent sense of needing to protect the individual from tyranny. Going back to *Letters to a German Friend*, it was the absurdity of this world, devoid of all meaning except the human being, that represented the infinite demand which Camus sought to overcome through rebellion.

This world has at least the truth of man, and our task is to provide its justification against fate itself. And it has no justification but man; hence he must be saved if we want to save the idea we have of life. [...] But we shall at least have helped save man from the solitude to which [Nazism] wanted to relegate him.<sup>94</sup>

Camus felt such a radical demand to help the other because he believed that in a world with no ultimate meaning, where the absurd “militates against moral commitments, social involvements and political responsibility,” the human being remained as the only value on which to base rebellion, freedom and passion.<sup>95</sup> Camus was morally committed to the dignity of the human being because it was the only source of value and truth in his—and our—violent, modern world.

On the other hand, Sartre was morally committed to human dignity because of its capability to create value and truth *through* violence. To Jean Daniel, a French

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<sup>93</sup> de Gramont, “Introduction,” 33.

<sup>94</sup> Camus, “Letters to a German Friend,” 22, 25.

<sup>95</sup> King, “Introduction,” 9.

Algerian writer and friend of Camus, Sartre was being counterproductive and completely illogical in this justification of violence.<sup>96</sup> History would come to prove Daniel correct. And in 1955, Camus himself almost foresaw the authoritarian and violent state that would become independent Algeria. In his “Letter to an Algerian Militant,” Camus decries that war, even if it does make history progress, only “makes it progress toward even greater barbarism and misery.”<sup>97</sup> Rebellion within limits, however, only adds to human solidarity and dignity.

Perhaps the most interesting transition that Camus undergoes from the time of *Letters to a German Friend* to that of *The Rebel* has to do with the attitude he is trying to present in his writing. There is no question that *Letters to a German Friend* burns with a subtle anger that sometimes borders on the thirst for vengeance, which would only be called into question after the debacle of the purge. However, in *The Rebel*, Camus tells us that rebellion cannot survive without “a strange form of love” or the “heart-rending cry of Karamazov.”<sup>98</sup> A fierce emotional response bordering on hate pushed the Resistance along, but something fundamentally different sustains rebellion.

For Camus, this all-encompassing love of humanity is borne of the demand for justice. However, the search for justice is not the only thing that engenders a love of humanity. As we shall see, the capacity to invite suffering on ourselves is an even more powerful way to express an infinite love of all life.

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<sup>96</sup> Marie-Pierre Ulloa, *Francis Jeanson: A Dissident Intellectual from the French Resistance to the Algerian War*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 248-9. For an interesting take on how Sartre’s support of violence came back to haunt him (literally), see Alek Baylee Toumi, *Madah-Sartre: The Kidnapping, Trial, and Conver(sat)ion of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir*, trans. Alek Baylee Toumi (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

<sup>97</sup> Albert Camus, “Letter to an Algerian Militant,” in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Modern Library, 1963), 95.

<sup>98</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, 304.

## CHAPTER THREE

# THE DISCIPLINE OF COURAGE

### *Satyagraha as a Response to Infinite Responsibility*

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When I refuse to do a thing that is repugnant to my conscience, I use soul-force.

—M.K. Gandhi  
*Hind Swaraj*

A man cannot then practice *ahimsa* and be a coward at the same time. The practice of *ahimsa* calls forth the greatest courage.

—M.K. Gandhi  
“On *Ahimsa*: Reply to Lala Lajpat Rai”  
*Modern Review*, October 1916

Voluntary service of others demands the best of which one is capable, and must take precedence over service of self. In fact, the pure devotee consecrates himself to the service of humanity without any reservation whatever.

—M.K. Gandhi  
*From Yeravda Mandir: Ashram Observances*

## BEYOND REBELLION

In the previous chapter, we saw how Camus rejected the notion of infinite responsibility on the same grounds that he eschewed metaphysical abstractions. He believed that the infinite character of such concepts made them dangerous as they inevitably lead to the struggle for infinite power, which always ends in human domination and destruction. Instead, Camus proposed that we engage in limited human rebellion in order to resist, since this method intrinsically safeguards and advances human dignity through the respect of limits. The concern for the human being is what drove Camus to fundamentally reject the infinite character of

metaphysical abstractions. However, rebellion's limited nature does not mean that it is a pacifist or non-violent method of action. On the contrary, rebellion often must resort to violence. But in these cases, as long as rebellion adheres to its original structure of limitation, it will never collapse into revolutionary violence which inherently seeks to legitimize itself as a necessary (and just) means for achieving an historical end or metaphysical ideal.

While there is a distinct area of overlap between Camus and Gandhi in regards to their concern for the human being, they differ markedly in their views on violence. Even after the purge, Camus did not fully renounce violence even though he significantly curtailed his views on when violence was an appropriate means of action. Contrarily, Gandhi always adhered to a non-violent method of action in his life. Later in life, however, he distinctively came to eschew such labels as "pacifism," "passive resistance," and "weakness." Indeed, it might surprise many people to know that in a situation where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, Gandhi would advise violence; for while non-violent conduct is never demoralizing, cowardice always is.<sup>1</sup>

Thus in this chapter I hope to show how Gandhi was not solely an avid believer in the power of non-violent action, but he was also a fierce advocate for a different kind of courage he and millions of other South Asians could call their own. Through a close analysis of Gandhi's thought, we can come to appreciate *satyagraha*, Gandhi's method of non-violent social and political action, as a response to the challenge of the humanist question. *Satyagraha* mitigates against the crushing, alienating effects of

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<sup>1</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Teachings of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. Jag Parvesh Chander (Lahore: Indian Printing Works, 1945), 408.

infinite responsibility through redefining the standard Western notion of courage into a vision of a resolute fearlessness which accepts self-suffering and non-violence as sources of strength.

Gandhi's achievement in developing a sense of courage rooted in his Hindu tradition and amenable to the non-violent techniques of *satyagraha* is not simply of philosophical interest. In the struggle against the British, he was able to mobilize the Indian masses to a much greater extent than the nationalist elites had ever done precisely because he employed a definition of courage that would appeal to an Indian, and specifically Hindu, audience. Working within this cultural and political framework, Gandhi was able to help Indians overcome the long-endured psychological and emotional oppression of British colonialism. Without undoing this sense of inferiority, there would have been no way of forming a movement robust and intense enough to rally the people to struggle for independence. The lasting testament to this revitalization of the Indian psyche is Jawaharlal Nehru's opinion that Gandhi psychologically changed India, "almost as if some expert in psychoanalytic methods had probed deep into the patient's past, found out the origins of his complexes, exposed them to his view, and thus rid him of that burden."<sup>2</sup>

## WHAT IS GANDHI? | CAUTIONARY NOTES

Before going over Gandhi's belief and ideas in depth, we need to consider what Gandhi is and is not, since this affects how we approach his writings. Gandhi was definitively not a philosopher in the academic sense, but he did hold personal

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<sup>2</sup> *The Discovery of India*, 2nd ed. (London: Meridian Books, 1947), 304.

reflection in very high regard.<sup>3</sup> He never wrote any long philosophical treatise in which he systematically outlined his position. The collection of his writings primarily consists of short articles, sermons, or responses to critics that together seem to suggest a system of ethics or, more properly said, a way of life based on a metaphysical formula, which Joan Bondurant claims is essentially a religion.<sup>4</sup> As Raghavan Iyer aptly notes, Gandhi's thought is not meant to be a fixed formula or definite system; rather it is a particular ethical standpoint which is meant to be taken seriously.<sup>5</sup> Thus even though critics and theorists claim that Gandhi was most certainly not a traditional philosopher, he still was involved in serious metaphysical speculation whenever he attempted to explain *satya* or *ahimsa*, since his thought sprang from firmly held metaphysical beliefs.<sup>6</sup>

This inevitably led to the further critique of Gandhi as willfully ignoring glaring inconsistencies and offering unsophisticated ideas. Most Gandhi scholars would claim the defense that such aspects, which are irksome for Western political theorists, are inherently valuable parts of his overall philosophy and method when seen as a whole within its own context. One cannot turn to Gandhi's own written work for a definitive statement of political theory since he was not a theorist.<sup>7</sup> Writing in his English language weekly *Harijan*, Gandhi himself countered the claim of inconsistency:

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<sup>3</sup> Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, Rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), vi.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Raghavan Narasimhan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 13.

<sup>6</sup> Glyn Richards, *The Philosophy of Gandhi: A Study of His Basic Ideas* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1991), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, 7. Gandhi himself claimed that his teachings were not meant for academic analysis (*Ibid.*, 146), but since countless other scholars have overlooked this statement, so will I.

At the time of writing I never think of what I have said before. My aim is not to be consistent with my previous statements on a given question, but to be consistent with truth as it may present itself to me at a given moment. The result has been that I have grown from truth to truth; I have saved my memory an undue strain; and what is more, whenever I have been obliged to compare my writing even of fifty years ago with the latest I have discovered no inconsistency between the two.<sup>8</sup>

So traditional political theory does not tend to look favorably upon the (lack of) analytical rigor in Gandhi's ideas, claiming that they are not systematically integrated or unified.<sup>9</sup> However, his ideas are still indispensable for holistically understanding the origins and workings of *satyagraha* as a method of non-violent resistance. Some have argued that his religious ideas are necessary in order to properly understand how Gandhi conceived of *satyagraha*, but that they are not necessary in order to appropriate and use the technique elsewhere under different conditions. Bondurant goes even further than this. She thinks that, in addition to dropping Hindu religious ideas, it is also possible to exclude the beliefs about how to live a righteous life that Gandhi deemed necessary for *satyagraha*, such as *brahmacharya* (celibacy) and *aparigraha* (non-possession), without losing the technique's power.<sup>10</sup> However, M.N. Srinivas is inclined to think differently. He concludes that *satyagraha* does not make any sense when shorn of its religious underpinnings that Gandhi took from the

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Iyer, *Moral and Political Thought*, 12-13.

<sup>9</sup> Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

*Gita*<sup>11</sup> and, to a lesser degree, the Bible; when it comes to Gandhi, it is impossible to separate the political, economic, and social dimensions from the religious ideas.<sup>12</sup>

I am more inclined to agree with Bondurant, but I do think that Gandhi's account of an ethical life deserve more attention than she concedes. Since Gandhi believed that all religions essentially held the same truth, then the specifically Hindu origin of some of the underlying principles should not matter as long as one holds certain ethical ideals, such as tolerance and the value of non-violence. This was surprisingly (and to some spectacularly) proven by the Frontier Pathans. Aside from being Muslim and having a reputation for violence and warfare, the Pathans lacked any sort of familiarity with the most significant concepts in *satyagraha*.<sup>13</sup> Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the leader of the Pathan *satyagraha* group *Khudai Khidmatgar* (Servants of God), cultivated a certain interpretation of Islam that closely followed the ideas of the eminent Indian Muslim Syed Ameer Ali.<sup>14</sup> Ali believed that the primary meaning of the root of the word *Islam* is "to be at perfect peace" and that its secondary meaning is to "surrender oneself to Him with whom peace is made."<sup>15</sup> Ghaffar Khan himself was characterized as being tolerant, inclusive, and deeply fond of the principles of freedom, service to all humanity, and reconciliation between religions and peoples.<sup>16</sup>

As we shall see, this interpretation of Islam resonates strongly with Gandhi's Hindu precepts of *ahimsa* and *tapasya*. The Muslim Frontier Pathans' *satyagraha*

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<sup>11</sup> The *Bhagavad Gita* is a principal Hindu religious text that tells of Krishna's advice to Arjuna regarding devotion and duty right before the latter is to enter into an epic battle.

<sup>12</sup> M. N. Srinivas, "Gandhi's Religion," *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 25 (June 24, 1995): 1491.

<sup>13</sup> Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, 132, 140.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>15</sup> Syed Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam* (Calcutta: S.K. Lahiri, 1902), 117-118.

<sup>16</sup> Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, 143.



campaign provides strong evidence for Bondurant's view that Gandhi's teachings are not dependent on their Hindu roots. Ghaffar Khan showed how Gandhi's ideas could be incorporated into and articulated within another cultural and religious tradition.

Thus Gandhi's own understanding of his teachings as non-technical and the Muslim Frontier Pathans' *satyagraha* campaigns together reflect the viability of Gandhi's method beyond India or Hindu populations. As Gene Sharp believes, non-violent resistance is not something that needs to be restricted to mid-twentieth century India despite what the many critics say. That is why I hope to undertake a unique (re)interpretation of Gandhi's ideas in light of the humanist question of this thesis and Løgstrup and Levinas's challenge of infinite responsibility. Dividing Gandhi's thought into the themes of *satya* (Truth), *ahimsa* (non-violence), the *Gita* and religion, and finally *satyagraha* (literally Soul-Force, or non-violent resistance),<sup>17</sup> I will stress those aspects that have an affinity with Løgstrup and Levinas's humanism in order to conclude with Gandhi's redefined notion of courage.

## SATYA

The first and foremost important principle for Gandhi's life and thought is *satya*, Truth. This term comes from the Sanskrit *sat*, which literally means "that which exists or is" and essentially means reality.<sup>18</sup> In deriving *satya* from *sat*, Gandhi maintains certain ethical and metaphysical traditions within Hinduism, specifically *dharma*, the universal law of duty, and *rta*, the cosmic moral law.<sup>19</sup> Gandhi came to

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<sup>17</sup> It is nearly impossible to cleanly separate the different themes since they very often blend together and are highly interrelated.

<sup>18</sup> Richards, *Philosophy of Gandhi*, 1, 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 1. Today, most Hindu philosophy generally subsumes *rta* under the idea of *dharma*.

favor the phrase “God is Truth” fairly early on, claiming that “nothing is or exists in reality except Truth” and that is why Truth is “perhaps the most important name of God.”<sup>20</sup> The progression to “Truth is God,” which was firmly held by Gandhi by 1931, is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of Gandhi’s conception of Truth, since it leads him to resolve humanity’s inevitable problem of ethical relativism.<sup>21</sup> Thus Gandhi’s autobiography was subtitled “My Experiments with Truth” because he described himself as nothing but a “seeker after Truth.” He further notes:

I claim to be making a ceaseless effort to find it. But I admit that I have not yet found it. To find Truth completely is to realize oneself and one’s destiny, that is, to become perfect. I am painfully conscious of my imperfections, and therein lies all the strength I possess, because it is a rare thing for a man to know his own limitations.<sup>22</sup>

The reformulation from “God is Truth” to “Truth is God” was indeed a “fine distinction”<sup>23</sup> that commentators rightly regarded to have substantial significance. With the phrase “Truth is God,” Gandhi is not necessarily equating the two concepts, but rather he is making a value judgment regarding the concept of Truth by using the word “God” as a bearer of absolute value. Thus he does not mean to imply that Truth is the ultimate theological conception in the universe, but rather the concept of absolute Truth is so important to our lives that it shares certain qualities we could call God-like.

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Ethical relativism is the theory that claims moral codes are relative to the norms of one’s culture.

<sup>22</sup> Dinanath Gopal Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, vol. 2 (Bombay: V.K. Jhaveri and D.G. Tendulkar, 1951), 98. Originally published in *Young India*, 17 November 1921.

<sup>23</sup> Dinanath Gopal Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, vol. 3 (Bombay: V.K. Jhaveri and D.G. Tendulkar, 1951), 176.

Since Gandhi does not specify what this absolute Truth is or even that it is necessarily attainable by a human being, he transcends the constraints of ethical relativism. The noted Indian intellectual N.K. Bose agrees and explains how this new innovation allows Gandhi to “easily accommodate as fellow-seekers those who looked on Humanity” or some other concept “for which they were prepared to sacrifice their all.”<sup>24</sup> Even though Gandhi explicitly believed in a religious God as an Absolute or Ultimate force in the universe, he explicitly noted that this Absolute could possess whatever qualities a person chose it to have.

In this way, Gandhi became increasingly more interested in the method for reaching Truth rather than Truth as the end itself.<sup>25</sup> This method was *ahimsa* (non-violence) and is Gandhi’s ingenious answer to the inevitable problem of ethical relativism. Since Gandhi acknowledges that we as mere humans in ephemeral bodies could only hope to attain relative truths that always contain some measure of error, it would be morally wrong to use violence in order to impose what can only be our relative conception on someone else. Thus for Gandhi, “the only certain means of knowing God is non-violence—*ahimsa*—love,”<sup>26</sup> and as the principle of *ahimsa* became more defined, Gandhi’s conception of God became freer and more indeterminate.<sup>27</sup>

Gandhi’s appreciation of the relative status of human truths came to him from the Jain doctrine of *syadvada*, which can be loosely translated as “the doctrine of the manyness of reality.” He learned this concept from the prominent Jain philosopher

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<sup>24</sup> N.K. Bose, *Studies in Gandhism*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: Indian Association Publishing Co., 1947), 269.

<sup>25</sup> Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Gandhi, *Teachings of Mahatma Gandhi*, 266.

<sup>27</sup> Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, 20.

Raychandbhai, whom Gandhi greatly admired and held in the same regard as Tolstoy and Ruskin.<sup>28</sup> Technically, *syadvada* is an epistemic doctrine that holds that many apparently conflicting judgments are possible about any object or problem because of the different perspectives of different people.<sup>29</sup> As the Indian philosopher N.A. Nikam notes, Gandhi's *syadvada* helped him understand another's point of view and see himself as others saw him; through this doctrine, Gandhi came to see the need for an all-encompassing love for others even when we disagree with each other. This loving embrace of all of humanity was a fundamental part of his love of Truth.<sup>30</sup>

Even though it is the very base of all Gandhian ideas, *satya* can at times seem indeterminate or overly effuse. Gandhi's idea of Truth is hard to grasp because it seems like it can cover virtually anything. This point is actually one of the concept's positive qualities. If we look at *satya* etymologically once more, we see that it comes from the Sanskrit word *sat* which essentially means reality. Thus Gandhi is so unspecific precisely because he is trying to encapsulate all of reality into one word. He does this to emphasize the belief in the underlying moral harmony and orderedness of all life. *Satya* is what binds us all to each other, it is what guides us to recognize that our actions can have consequences beyond what we intended. That is why we need to practice *ahimsa* (non-violence) as the means to strive for Truth.

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<sup>28</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 176; M.K. Gandhi, *Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, trans. Mahadev Desai (Washington, DC: Public Affairs, 1954), 114.

<sup>29</sup> N. A. Nikam, "Gandhi's Philosophy," *The Review of Metaphysics* 7, no. 4 (June 1954): 669.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

## AHIMSA

Like *satya*, the word *ahimsa* comes from Sanskrit and contains a deeper meaning when unpacked etymologically. The ancient Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist ethical precept of *ahimsa*, most commonly translated as non-violence, comes from adding the negative prefix “a” to *himsa*, which loosely means injury.<sup>31</sup> *Himsa* is actually the desiderative (volitional) form of *han*, which means to kill or damage, so that *himsa* means to want to kill or damage.<sup>32</sup>

As a follower of the *Advaita* (monistic) branch of Hindu philosophy, Gandhi made no distinction between *Atman* (the true Self or soul) and *Brahman* (Truth, God, or the existential oneness of the Universe), so that committing violence upon others was equivalent to committing violence upon God, undermining Truth, and also violating one’s “higher Self” or *Atman*.<sup>33</sup> Thus the path to Truth can only be through *ahimsa*, and Gandhi believed that “*ahimsa* and Truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them. They are like the two sides of a coin . . . *Ahimsa* is the means; Truth is the end.”<sup>34</sup> Bondurant emphasizes *ahimsa* as the operative principle in *satyagraha* in order to overcome problems of ethical relativism, and Iyer emphasizes how *ahimsa* incorporates the aspects of humility and tolerance that naturally come with seeking Truth since it is ever elusive.<sup>35</sup>

It is this aspect of *ahimsa* that leads Gandhi to develop the significant distinction between its positive and negative variants which together comprise the full concept of

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<sup>31</sup> Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and Its Development*, trans. Charles E.B. Russel (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936), 79.

<sup>33</sup> Richards, *Philosophy of Gandhi*, 32.

<sup>34</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *From Yeravda Mandir: Ashram Observances*, trans. Valji Govindji Desai, 3rd ed. (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1945), 8.

<sup>35</sup> Iyer, *Moral and Political Thought*, 230-231.

*ahimsa*. As early as 1916, Gandhi defined the positive form of *ahimsa* as “the largest love, the greatest charity. If I am a follower of *Ahimsa*, I must love my enemy or a stranger to me as I would my wrong-doing father or son. This active *Ahimsa* necessarily includes truth and fearlessness.”<sup>36</sup> This positive half of *ahimsa* joins the more intuitive negative form of refraining from harming or injuring any living creature. *Ahimsa* according to Gandhi went even further than the traditional “love thy neighbor” found in the Sermon on the Mount. It extends even to our mental life, where we should not think ill of anyone, even our enemy.<sup>37</sup> But Gandhi fervently believed that *ahimsa* was the law of humanity; it was meant for everyone, not only saints.<sup>38</sup>

This exorbitant demand of *ahimsa* gives it an affinity to the infinite responsibility we find in Løgstrup and Levinas. However, Gandhi, unlike the latter two, makes a much greater effort to address our human fallibility in thinking about how we are to practically fulfill such demands. Løgstrup and Levinas leave us with a heavy burden and without any consolation of how we can reconcile our practical life with their radical notions of ethical inter-subjectivity. Gandhi, on the other hand, has the “superb clarity”<sup>39</sup> to qualify *ahimsa* in light of our living in an imperfect world. He had come to see later in life that “that there is nonviolence in violence” and thus there are certain situations, such as euthanizing a dog with rabies or killing the rampant gunman in the street, where “violence is nonviolence.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>37</sup> Gandhi, *Teachings of Mahatma Gandhi*, 405-406. This idea was originally delivered in an address to the YMCA at Madras, 16 February 1916.

<sup>38</sup> Iyer, *Moral and Political Thought*, 90; Richards, *Philosophy of Gandhi*, 34-35.

<sup>39</sup> Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth*, 374.

<sup>40</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 14 (Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1958), 505, 509, 510. Quoted in Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth*, 374-375.

Gandhi saw that no matter how careful we are in abiding by the dictates of *ahimsa*, there will still be some measure of *himsa* that we inevitably commit in our lives. Gandhi called this our being “caught up in the conflagration of *Himsa*,”<sup>41</sup> and held it to be inevitable since, as social beings,<sup>42</sup> it is impossible not to “participate in the *Himsa* that the very existence of society involves.”<sup>43</sup> Gandhi would say that our life is not a single straight line but rather a bundle of duties very often in conflict with one another, and we are continually called upon to make important choices between one duty and another.<sup>44</sup>

Glyn Richards warns against interpreting Gandhi as making a fetishism of *ahimsa*,<sup>45</sup> which would posit that non-violence was an absolute rule that was never to be broken regardless of the consequences. Clearly, this was not what Gandhi intended by *ahimsa* as the Law of action based on Love.<sup>46</sup> Bondurant’s emphatic warning against misinterpreting the emphasis that Gandhi placed on *ahimsa* powerfully resonates with Camus’s warning from *The Rebel*. If taken as a single-minded faith and sole commitment, says Bondurant, non-violence “may serve only to create the vacuum through which those who hold the highest humanist values can be drawn into tyranny and destruction.”<sup>47</sup>

Another central part of Gandhi’s *ahimsa* is the notion of self-suffering as an active refusal to submit to injustice through actively accepting personal discomfort.<sup>48</sup>

*Ahimsa* includes conscious suffering but carries no connotations of submission to

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<sup>41</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Truth is God*, ed. R.K. Prabhu (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1955), 38.

<sup>42</sup> Richards, *Philosophy of Gandhi*, 36.

<sup>43</sup> Gandhi, *Truth is God*, 38.

<sup>44</sup> N.K. Bose, *Selections from Gandhi* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1948), 175.

<sup>45</sup> Richards, *Philosophy of Gandhi*, 36.

<sup>46</sup> Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, 25.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>48</sup> Iyer, *Moral and Political Thought*, 183.

evil; rather it calls for the “putting of one’s whole soul”<sup>49</sup> against the forces of injustice. Gandhi invoked the Indian notion of non-attachment by claiming that *ahimsa* actually does imply the inability to go on witnessing another’s pain, giving rise to mercy and heroism as the cardinal virtues associated with *ahimsa*.<sup>50</sup> He believed that it was “bad logic to say that we must look on while *others* suffer” simply because we want to achieve non-attachment with regard to our own suffering.<sup>51</sup> Irritated with overly narrow interpretations of *ahimsa*, Gandhi attributed such interpretations to the extreme fear of death; in response, he went on to further insist that *ahimsa* is a deliberate stand against ill-will, a real fighting stance against wickedness rather than a form of resignation or simply self-restraint.<sup>52</sup>

Even though *satya* and *ahimsa* are considered to be the two cornerstones of Gandhian thought, it would be inaccurate to say that these principles comprise everything. Gandhi’s religious ideas (such as his interpretation of the *Gita* and views on divinity) and general socioeconomic outlook also contain important precepts and ideas for how he structured *satyagraha* as a technique of non-violent action.

Thus no reflection on Gandhi’s *satya* and *ahimsa* would be complete without an analysis of Gandhi’s interpretation of the *Gita* and his ideal of *sarvodaya*, which is usually translated as the welfare of all but technically means “universal uplift.”<sup>53</sup> In these two aspects of Gandhi’s thought, we begin to see a much clearer and attainable relationship between Løgstrup and Levinas’s moral dilemma of infinite responsibility

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<sup>49</sup> Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, 26.

<sup>50</sup> Iyer, *Moral and Political Thought*, 182.

<sup>51</sup> Mahadev H. Desai, *The Diary of Mahadev Desai*, trans. Valji Govindji Desai, vol. 1 (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1953), 110.

<sup>52</sup> Iyer, *Moral and Political Thought*, 182-183.

<sup>53</sup> Richards, *Philosophy of Gandhi*, 72.



and the practical issue of how to face down, non-violently, the untruth and injustice in the world. I do not mean to try and fit Gandhi into a strict, neatly definable relationship with Løgstrup and Levinas. I am simply encouraged by the Gandhian idea of courage through sacrifice that the feeling of infinite responsibility would seem to engender. On a humanist way of thinking, the only thing that could approach the infinite significance and value of human life is human life itself, so that in order to meet the standard of a humanist ideal of infinite responsibility, I have to sacrifice a part of my human worth for the sake of the other. Such a sacrifice would clearly involve a great degree of fearlessness or courage, which is painfully lacking in Løgstrup and Levinas's transcendent humanism. Thus we are left with an ideal of human transcendence that seems infinitely unattainable. Although Gandhi's *satya* is also out of human reach, he at least gives us certain practical measures, such as *ahimsa*, to use in our daily lives. In the Hindu religious text of the *Gita*, Gandhi further develops the principles that comprise his method of *satyagraha*.

## RELIGION AND THE *GITA*

In some ways, Gandhi's views on religion are similar to his views on truth. Just as Truth is absolute and unattainable in this world, absolute Religion is impossible for us to grasp; relative truths contain some degree of Truth, and all religions contain some degree of absolute Religion.<sup>54</sup> As with truth, Gandhi believed that there was an underlying unity in all religions that pointed towards a higher, universal transcendent religion that was in complete harmony with *satya* and *ahimsa*.<sup>55</sup> As I have pointed

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 18, 24.

<sup>55</sup> Srinivas, "Gandhi's Religion," 1491.

out, Gandhi was a follower of *Advaita* (Hindu monism) and did not draw a distinction between *Atman*, the Soul within or true Self, and *Brahman*, the essence of the universe. The purpose in life is to know the Self, that is, to realize God and know Truth.<sup>56</sup> For Gandhi's search for Truth, this meant cultivating a life along the lines of *karma yoga*, or an active life of selfless action.

As a practical idealist who saw action as necessary for the completion of ideas,<sup>57</sup> Gandhi considered the *karma yoga* teachings of the *Gita* to be essential for learning how to practically live out the ethical precepts of *satya* and *ahimsa*. Unlike most orthodox commentators, Gandhi did not believe that the battle described in the *Gita* actually happened, since he privileged the allegorical interpretation of the text.<sup>58</sup> The epic battle scenes are not descriptions or lessons of physical warfare, but rather they are principles of right living. Thus he found in the *Gita* the "most excellent way to attain self-realization" through renouncing the fruits of action; Gandhi explains that this means we should pursue desireless actions where we dedicate all our activities to God.<sup>59</sup> It is not enough, however, that we factually know that we are benefiting others and accepting self-suffering as a natural corollary of *ahimsa*. Desireless action carries with it the burden of a "constant heart-churn"<sup>60</sup> without which devotion would be nothing. One needs to *feel* devoted and truly committed, continually professing faith in one's heart, that living a life of service through selfless acts is the true path to knowing oneself by knowing the truth of others' suffering. Thus throughout his life,

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<sup>56</sup> Richards, *Philosophy of Gandhi*, 13.

<sup>57</sup> Srinivas, "Gandhi's Religion," 1489.

<sup>58</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *The Gospel of Selfless Action: Or, The Gita According to Gandhi*, trans. Mahadev Desai, 1st ed. (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1951), 128.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

Gandhi would claim that the *Gita* was his most trusted guide and truest source of inspiration on a daily and life-long basis.

I believe that it is important to relate Gandhi's *Advaita* with his insistence on following the *Gita*'s *karma yoga*, since a belief in the divine unity of all existence clearly lends itself to a certain interpretation of a life of service. This stands in contrast to Weber's interpretation of a life of truth as a life of contemplation and withdrawal from society. Gandhi saw a life of truth as actively following an imperative to be engaged in the world, to fight injustice. As Gandhi believed in the "essential unity of God and man and for that matter of all lives,"<sup>61</sup> it is not difficult to take the next step and claim a universal responsibility that binds us all through our common transcendence. As Gandhi insisted, "if one gains, all gain, if one falls, all fall; we can't stand by and watch"<sup>62</sup> the suffering of our fellow humans as we are all involved in realizing our oneness through mutual uplift (*sarvodaya*). Humanity's moral solidarity was an ever-present fact for Gandhi rather than simply a formulated political ideal; Gandhi's belief in our oneness with others was fundamentally based on his perception of the divinity of humanity, as he claimed that he was "part and parcel of the whole" and "cannot find [God] apart from the rest of humanity."<sup>63</sup>

Statements like these tend to be the reason behind the attribution of saintliness to Gandhi. Erik Erikson takes this attribution to the next level, in terms of a psychoanalytical historical perspective, and labels Gandhi as a classic example of a *homo religiosus*. For Erikson, this means that Gandhi's life contained a logic similar to that of other saints in that he could only find peace "by always believing that the

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<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Iyer, *Moral and Political Thought*, 91.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 93.

budding ‘I’ harbors a truthfulness superior to that of all authorities because this truth is the covenant of the ‘I’ with God, the ‘I’ being even more central and more pervasive than all parent images and moralities.”<sup>64</sup> There is no doubt that Gandhi believed himself to be acting for the sake of a larger, more significant force, but Erikson is clearly correct in claiming that Gandhi, as a *homo religiosus*, could only find some measure of peace in his connection to God. Gandhi often described hearing a voice that would relieve his burdens of crushing responsibility. Only this voice could end his painful inner struggles, and after he would *feel* the absolute correctness of the actions he knew he had to take, believing in the strength of the heart (and his faith) over the intellect.<sup>65</sup>

#### SARVODAYA

The concept of *sarvodaya*, or the welfare of all, is a natural corollary of Truth. Unlike the rest of the concepts covered thus far, *sarvodaya* does not actually have any direct roots in traditional Hindu thought. While in South Africa as a lawyer during the early part of the twentieth century, Gandhi’s friend gave him John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* to read on the twenty-four hour train ride from Johannesburg to Durban. As Gandhi describes in his autobiography, Ruskin’s book “gripped” him and he found it impossible to set it aside.<sup>66</sup> He describes *Unto This Last* as the one book to have occasioned “an instantaneous and practical transformation” in his life, discovering

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<sup>64</sup> Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth*, 118.

<sup>65</sup> M.K Gandhi, *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. Raghavan Narasimhan Iyer, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 31, 128-129, 132.

<sup>66</sup> Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 364.

support for some of his most deeply held convictions.<sup>67</sup> Being so influenced and awed by Ruskin,<sup>68</sup> Gandhi translated *Unto This Last* into Gujarati and titled it *Sarvodaya*.

On the face of it, *sarvodaya* (the book and concept) contains the Gandhian principles of political economy, which were essentially a warning against the moral bankruptcy that would follow India's industrialization if she tried to imitate Europe.<sup>69</sup> However, like all Gandhian concepts, *sarvodaya* has its metaphysical underpinnings in *satya*, which leads to a further interpretation that speaks much more closely to the issue of moral responsibility in the notion of universal welfare.

In emphasizing the aspect of *satya* in *sarvodaya*, one throws up a distinct barrier to interpreting this *sarvodaya* in anything less than strict moralistic terms. However, it is precisely such a strongly moralistic interpretation of *sarvodaya* that lends itself most favorably to a relationship with the infinite responsibility of Løgstrup and Levinas. In fact, it seems clear that *sarvodaya* would entail an element of impossibility when it is thought of as a corollary of *satya*, Truth, which is unattainable in this world. But as Gandhi continually professed, the only way to know Truth or see God was through service to humanity.

This teaching from the *Gita* contains the double injunction of telling us to always act but to do so selflessly. Thus action "alone is thy province, never the fruits thereof; let not thy motive be the fruit of action, nor shouldst thou desire to avoid action"

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 365.

<sup>68</sup> The chapter in Gandhi's autobiography that deals with the influence of Ruskin's *Unto This Last* is aptly titled "The Magic Spell of a Book."

<sup>69</sup> M.K Gandhi, *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. Raghavan Narasimhan Iyer, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 430-432. See also M.K Gandhi, "Hind Swaraj," in *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony Parel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

(*Bhagavad Gita* 2:47).<sup>70</sup> Gandhi's belief that our actions should bear the quality of sacrifice in our service to others finds its complement in both Løgstrup and Levinas's claiming a non-reciprocal quality in our moral obligations to the other people.

However, Løgstrup and Levinas differ rather sharply from each other in terms of the purported scope and range of such moral obligations. Løgstrup is quite clear that his ethical demand imposes itself on an individual's relationship only to one other individual in a specific situation. Levinas leaves us more room to interpret his Other as playing the role of humanity in certain cases. But neither one is as clear as Gandhi in his insistence on the unity of existence, derived from the metaphysical presuppositions of *satya* in the *Advaita* school of Hindu philosophy. As pointed out earlier this chapter, Gandhi's belief in *satya* leads to the belief in an underlying moral harmony. The moral bond connecting all life implies an inescapable moral obligation to all our fellow human beings. As the culmination of these beliefs, *sarvodaya* is fundamentally concerned with embodying and implementing the practical aspects of moral harmony.<sup>71</sup> As we shall see, it is precisely this moral harmony that Bondurant excludes from her secularized story of *satyagraha*

## SATYAGRAHA IN POLITICAL THEORY

We can trace the origins of *satyagraha* the method and term back to 1906, when Gandhi coined the word while working with the Indian community in South Africa to organize and demand their civil rights. Prior to that point he was using the term "passive resistance" to describe his budding method, but Gandhi never liked this term

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<sup>70</sup> Gandhi, *The Gospel of Selfless Action*, 161.

<sup>71</sup> Richards, *Philosophy of Gandhi*, 76, 161.

due to its inaccuracy. *Satyagraha* was the active, non-violent weapon of the strong rather than the weak, which was the connotation of the phrase passive resistance. The boldness of *satyagraha* would later become crucial in order to encourage an authentically Indian notion of courage vis-à-vis the British colonizer. So when Gandhi announced a competition in *Indian Opinion*<sup>72</sup> to find a new name, the initially chosen term of *sadagraha*, or firmness in a good cause, was soon slightly modified by Gandhi to better express the true meaning of his method.

I liked [*sadagraha*], but it did not fully represent the whole idea I wished it to connote. I therefore corrected it to “*satyagraha*.” Truth (*satya*) implies love, and firmness (*agraha*) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement “*satyagraha*” that is to say, the force which is born to Truth and Love or non-violence, and gave up the use of the phrase “passive resistance.”<sup>73</sup>

This force (which Gandhi also sometimes referred to as Truth- or Soul-Force) is Gandhi’s most lasting contribution to India and the world. While the preoccupation with Gandhi as a saint is pervasive in the popular context, Gandhi emphatically meant for *satyagraha* to be a potential tool in the hands of any individual, regardless of sex, religion, or even age. After having reviewed all the major themes in Gandhi’s thought that converge to form his method of *satyagraha*, one may point out that every single principle or idea essentially relies on a Hindu religious precept. One must then wonder whether Gandhi’s guide to *satyagraha* needs to be secularized in order to be picked up in other places around the world.

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<sup>72</sup> Gandhi established the newspaper *Indian Opinion* while in South Africa to help him in organizing his civil rights campaign.

<sup>73</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, trans. Valji Govindji Desai, 2nd ed. (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1950), 109.

Joan Bondurant's *The Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* was one of the first books to seriously tackle the complexities of Gandhi's *satyagraha* within the framework of Western political theory. In 1965, Gene Sharp, the preeminent scholar of non-violent resistance, wrote in his review of her book that the time had passed when intelligent people could say that non-violent methods of action were "esoteric,' 'typically Indian,' or 'irrelevant' to the modern world."<sup>74</sup> Bondurant's aim, to more clearly and analytically define Gandhi's method as a social and political technique, has been labeled by Sharp himself as "immensely significant" for Western political theory and practice.<sup>75</sup> Her chief concern is two-fold. First she needs to formulate an approach to *satyagraha* that explains it as a philosophy of action brought forth from the social and political experiments conducted in India in the twentieth century. Second, she needs to be able to generalize this philosophy so that it could be applied in various places under different cultural, political, and social traditions but without losing any of the inspirational meaning.<sup>76</sup>

The challenge then becomes one of abstracting the principles and message of Gandhi's *satyagraha* to the larger and more general issue of social and political conflict itself.<sup>77</sup> The first thing that Bondurant does away with in her formulation are the ascetic and religious notions that Gandhi drew mainly from Hindu teachings, which he regarded as fundamental for attaining the central message of *satyagraha*.

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<sup>74</sup> Gene Sharp, "A review of Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of violence: the Gandhian philosophy of conflict*," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 3, no. 4 (December 1959): 409.

<sup>75</sup> Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, v; Sharp, "Review," 401.

<sup>76</sup> Gandhi actually developed *satyagraha* during his time in South Africa at the turn of the twentieth century. He returned to India some twenty years later feeling confident in his philosophy's potential for social and political change. Despite this fact, *satyagraha* is most commonly associated with Gandhi's success in expelling the British from India rather than winning the civil rights of South African Indians.

<sup>77</sup> Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, xiii-xiv.



Gandhi's rather heavy emphasis on the religious concepts have tended to lead non-Indians to perceive him as a saint and/or reject him as irrelevant for the current age. This view has had two consequences: it obscures important aspects of Gandhi's thought and hinders our understanding of Gandhi's achievements.<sup>78</sup>

Bondurant claims that strict vegetarianism, sexual continence, and non-possession are some of the religious precepts that are not necessary for implementing *satyagraha* in action.<sup>79</sup> The Hindu religious principle of *tapasya* (self-suffering) is especially obscure to the Western mind and difficult to translate into familiar terms for traditional Western political theory. *Tapasya* connotes certain values of purification and a means to attain non-attachment in the Indian tradition,<sup>80</sup> which holds the latter as a central precept in the teachings of the *Gita*. However, most Westerners would not consider voluntary self-suffering or non-attachment to be necessary or useful parts of a solution to political and social issues.

One of Bondurant's greatest achievements in *Conquest of Violence* is being able to explain self-suffering through a secular perspective that a westerner could understand. In *satyagraha*, self-suffering serves to demonstrate one's deep commitment to the cause of struggle and has the potential to cut across rationalized defenses.<sup>81</sup> Many philosophers and social scientists have noted that there is a certain interpersonal quality to the phenomenon of suffering. It has the potential, according to Naomi Mitchison, to shift emphases in a conflict so that our field of vision

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>79</sup> Sharp, "Review," 401.

<sup>80</sup> Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, 228.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

becomes enlarged or altered, making us aware of morality.<sup>82</sup> Like Rousseau's principle of pity in human nature which makes us sensitive to the suffering of others prior to the existence of society or any form of reason, thus self-suffering acts as a form of "shock treatment" when rational argument, the primary and first stage of *satyagraha*, fails to convert the opponent.<sup>83</sup>

Such adaptations of rather untraditional concepts in Western political theory are typical for Bondurant. She draws many connections between political theory and *satyagraha*, showing where the latter offers new insights for a theory of conflict.<sup>84</sup> I find two such connections of particular interest. First, Bondurant questions whether *satyagraha* can offer a new and effective way of combating totalitarian regimes. Second, we can think about redefining the traditional means-ends relationship in light of what *satyagraha* has to offer. In answering the latter, the requirement of *ahimsa* in *satyagraha* leads us to fundamentally reexamine the relationship between ends and means in political philosophy; the novel aspect is that *satyagraha* itself claims to be more than just a means to the end of Truth. It contains a significantly constructive and creative element whereby the *satyagrahi*, through engaging in experiments with Truth, must focus on each small, perhaps mundane, step as if it were the final end; in this way, Bondurant claims that the method of *satyagraha* is "end-creating" on itself, which can be thought of as a direct challenge to Spengler's belief that man needs, above all, some noble end to latch onto.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Naomi Mitchison, *The Moral Basis of Politics* (London: Constable, 1938), 286-288.

<sup>83</sup> Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, 229.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 6.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

But the question of whether *satyagraha* could work against totalitarian regimes seems to be, in a way, the more deeply troubling question. In 1938, Gandhi believed that German Jews were in a favorable position (even more than the Indians in South Africa had been) to offer *satyagraha*, and that it could not hurt their then current condition to try; however, the most jarring part in Gandhi's advice is his claim that if *satyagraha* were offered sooner rather than later (this being before war had been declared), it could prevent Hitler's "calculated violence" from resulting in a "general massacre of the Jews" in any war between Germany and France, Britain, and the United States.<sup>86</sup>

#### SATYAGRAHA: THE PATH TO INFINITE COURAGE

The feasibility and efficacy of *satyagraha* under totalitarian regimes is indeed a very interesting and hopefully promising avenue of research. We know that some elements of *satyagraha* would indeed simply be impossible, such as the use of wide spread publicity and propaganda to bring people together. However, an act of non-cooperation should theoretically have the same debilitating effect on a totalitarian regime as on any other.<sup>87</sup> Even after considering the challenges, *satyagraha* might be the only possible option left open to oppressed peoples in an age of highly technical means of oppression.<sup>88</sup> That Bondurant could call label the time period of her writing<sup>89</sup> as one of highly technical means of oppression only means that our current world faces even more advanced but yet ever subtler means. With the growth of mass

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<sup>86</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha)*, ed. Bharatan Kumarappa (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 348-350.

<sup>87</sup> Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, 226.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>89</sup> The original edition of *Conquest of Violence* was published in 1958.

media and television, fear has become the operative method. We live in a society blanketed by an elusive yet ever present fear, and it was precisely this fearfulness that Gandhi hoped *satyagraha* would eradicate from the hearts and minds of Indians under British colonialism.

Indeed, Susanne and Lloyd Rudolph see the real value of *satyagraha* not necessarily in winning Indian independence but in reversing the deep seated psychological and moral effects of British imperialism, which led both Britons and Indians to believe that the negative attributes of non-violence, such as passivity, weakness, and cowardice, were actually the norms of Indian culture and character.<sup>90</sup>

All the metaphysical and religious precepts in *satyagraha* come down to this aspect of a robust yet non-violent fearlessness which Gandhi sought to cultivate in the Indian population. This fearlessness is essentially another perspective on how to respond to the feeling of infinite responsibility. Gandhi seeks to instill in us a resolute sense of courage and fearlessness in our pursuit of truth and justice. He once complained that Indians were in the habit of saying “Yes” to everything and needed to develop the courage in order to say “No” to evil, injustice, untruth and violence.<sup>91</sup> This power to reject and rebel was something he thought modern India needed to learn from the West, and Iyer in fact draws the parallel between Gandhi’s courage and Camus’s stubborn belief in rebellion as the safeguards against the “empire of slavery.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and Lloyd I. Rudolph, “The Fear of Cowardice,” in *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays: Gandhi in the World and at Home* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 178.

<sup>91</sup> Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, 2:61.

<sup>92</sup> Iyer, *Moral and Political Thought*, 132.

It is in this image of the totalitarian regime as monster and destroyer of humanity that Gandhi's words resonate so strongly with Camus's insistence on freedom and justice, for *satyagraha* "is to violence, and therefore to all tyranny, all injustice, what light is to darkness."<sup>93</sup> Gandhi believed in the primary importance of individual freedom and integrity as bulwarks against society's ever encroaching control and use of fear; he even echoes Camus's opening line in *The Rebel*, portraying a similar scene to Camus's rebellious slave demanding that his master respect the transcendent and unifying human essence that requires his freedom. Similarly, Gandhi sees that the "bond of the slave is snapped the moment he considers himself to be a free being. He will plainly tell the master: 'I was your bondsman till this moment, but I am a slave no longer'."<sup>94</sup> The two thinkers converge in their appeal to an ultimate value,<sup>95</sup> which for Camus is the dignity and essence of human life, while Gandhi emphasizes the oneness of all life as sacred. Gandhi's concept of Truth acts to undermine an external authority which would seek to suppress and destroy the moral autonomy and authority of individuals.<sup>96</sup> Their respective appeals were most intensely put to the test while witnessing the heights of brutality in Europe and India. It meant summoning up the courage and faith to stop the tide of injustice and evil.

Thus while the thought of totalitarian violence victimizing an entire continent, if not world, inspired the feeling of infinite responsibility for Løgstrup and Levinas, *satyagraha* offers the possibility of responding with infinite courage and fearlessness.

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<sup>93</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. Shriman Narayan, vol. 6 (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1968), 183.

<sup>94</sup> Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, 30; Dinanath Gopal Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, vol. 6 (Bombay: V.K. Jhaveri and D.G. Tendulkar, 1951), 199.

<sup>95</sup> Iyer, *Moral and Political Thought*, 118.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

This courage is fundamentally rooted in Gandhi's teachings on *ahimsa* as the strongest type of courage, definitively stronger than any physical force on the planet, because it receives its strength from one's will to sacrifice. Thus Gandhi made sure to build into his method the recognition that non-violence is the superior "weapon." He believed that the "votary of non-violence has to cultivate the capacity for sacrifice of the highest type in order to be free from fear."<sup>97</sup> This type of fearlessness corresponds to the courage to cultivate the perfect *ahimsa*, "the largest love, the greatest charity,"<sup>98</sup> even unto death.

Løgstrup and Levinas interestingly do not talk about courage or fearlessness in their discussions of what the feeling of infinite responsibility could entail. It seems rather clear and intuitive that such a feeling would make us realize the moral necessity of making tremendous sacrifices, but how to come to terms with such a realization and still be able to go through with it are separate issues entirely. Gandhi's conception of courage, on the other hand, responds to this problem by explicitly expressing *satyagraha*'s fearlessness in terms of the willingness to sacrifice and suffer for Truth.

Erikson believes that we would understand much more about Gandhi's will to sacrifice if we could better understand what he really meant when he said that he "literally believed"<sup>99</sup> the story of *Harishchandra* which tells of a king who, when tested by the gods, showed the utmost goodness and virtue by strictly adhering to truth, justice, and *dharma*. Gandhi saw in the parable an "intrinsic *actuality* much superior to any question of *factual* occurrence, while he later strove towards—and,

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<sup>97</sup> Gandhi, *Teachings of Mahatma Gandhi*, 422.

<sup>98</sup> Iyer, *Moral and Political Thought*, 180.

<sup>99</sup> Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 17.

indeed, succeeded in—living on the level of parables while engaged in the most concrete activities.”<sup>100</sup> Erikson explains that we can divide what we mean by “real” into factual reality, which is what can be known because it is demonstrably correct, and actuality, which reflects that which feels effectively true in action.<sup>101</sup> Thus there is something about sacrificing in the service of others that had a phenomenologically upright and true quality for Gandhi. He strove towards the idealized, parabolic level of sacrifice, and succeeded, according to Erikson, because he believed in the truth of virtue and in the virtue of Truth. Thus Gandhi was infinitely fearless in his non-violence.

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<sup>100</sup> Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth*, 119-120.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 397.

## CONCLUSION

# A NON-VIOLENT FUTURE(?)

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A person is more holy than a land, even a holy land, since, faced with an affront made to a person, this holy land appears in its nakedness to be but stone and wood.

—Emmanuel Levinas

Interview with Alain Finkielkraut and Shlomo Malka on  
Radio Communauté (28 September, 1982)

While the initial impetus for this thesis primarily came from reflecting on my own family's experience in the Holocaust, the final product has broadened into something much more than that. My original plan was to develop a theory of moral commitment based on an intense felt connection to other human beings, but soon after beginning to research and explore I realized that I was much more interested in this underlying humanist question than developing the potential theory itself. In trying to put together different philosophical and psychological perspectives, I took a fateful detour that pleasantly led me in the direction of Løgstrup and Levinas, Camus and Gandhi.

At the outset, I had to decide how I wanted to deal with the principal issues of philosophical justification and “moral grip” that we encounter when trying to explain moral commitments. First, justification entails the rationale or reason for why we should find a moral commitment credible. This usually, but not always, requires us to show that our moral commitments could be understood and accepted by anyone if they chose to accept it as well. Moral grip, on the other hand, is what comes after the initial choice and concerns how moral commitments retain their hold over us through



time. Thus while justification deals with explaining the commitment's worthiness to someone else, moral grip is more concerned with how we experience the worthiness of the commitment itself. This issue is just as important as that of justification, because without a solid understanding of moral grip there is nothing to keep us from making and then simply unmaking our moral commitments.

The very phrasing of the humanist question itself, "Is it ever possible to say 'No' to someone asking for help who would surely die without it?", explicitly assumes there is a moment when we find ourselves seized by certain feelings of moral responsibility with an infinite character. But such feelings of moral responsibility do not have to arise only in the contexts described by Løgstrup and Levinas. Both philosophers develop different reasons for how their understanding of ethical intersubjectivity has an infinite character, but the simplest and most obvious reason is that humanity's life-sustaining needs are so much greater than any individual's human capacity. Thus, individually, it seems like we are carrying an infinitely weighty burden on our shoulders.

It was, however, my growing interest in this idea and feeling of moral grip that led me much more strongly in the direction of using the ideas of Løgstrup and Levinas as a philosophical background for my work. They are primary examples of how we could constructively interpret this feeling of moral grip as infinitely powerful but also within a humanism that "leans on the transcendent."<sup>1</sup> Seeing how Levinas and Camus significantly mirror each other in their anti-totalitarianism was the logical

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<sup>1</sup> Sessler, *Levinas and Camus*, 57, 70.

next step.<sup>2</sup> That Gandhi could be read inter-textually with these two in order to show how an active life in the face of infinite responsibility must accept self-suffering as the path to infinite courage was a much more deliberate conclusion.

Gandhi's non-Western background initially seemed to clash with the overtly Western-centric worldview and intellectual perspective of both Camus and Levinas. His abundant references and adherence to religious principles are, on the one hand, completely contrary to Camus's militant atheism but, on the other, also somewhat amenable to Levinas's embrace of a humanistically-interpreted element of transcendence. The vision of moral grip that we see in Gandhi moves within a rather undefined, fluid area between the transcendent and the human. But Gandhi always sought to make this vision available to everyone, regardless of religion or cultural background, through his unwavering faith in tolerance and *ahimsa*.

I went into this thesis not knowing much about Gandhi, having only a basic understanding of Camus, and never having even heard of Løgstrup or Levinas. At the other end of it all, not only do I feel like I know a considerable amount about each of these four figures, but the synthesis of their thought in one "mega" humanism has really opened my eyes and heart.

Even though I have discussed these four central figures within the context of twentieth century resistance and the Holocaust, I was always thinking about their current relevancy. I was drawn to these thinkers because their ideas resonated with

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<sup>2</sup> See Sessler, *Levinas and Camus*. It is quite surprising that this connection has not been previously explored or analyzed in much greater detail. Sessler claims that his book is the "first work which purports to offer an examination of Levinas and Camus, as there is no published work which strives to establish a political dialogue (or any other dialogue, for that matter) between Levinas and Camus (Ibid., 1).

the way I conceived of moral responsibility, but also because I believe that the way they explicate such extreme notions of moral responsibility are important for our world today.

There is a need to revitalize a sensible humanism and the Face of the Other amidst the current conflict in the Middle East. At the beginning of the year I was not so sure how much I believed in the efficacy of a humanist method of non-violent resistance. Now at the end of the process, the synthesis of Løgstrup, Levinas, Camus and Gandhi has changed my mind about a non-violent resistance movement backed by a sensible and disciplined humanism—it would truly be a formidable force.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict,” *International Security* 33, no. 1 (July 1, 2008): 7-44. In this revolutionizing study, the researchers have found that non-violent resistance campaigns from 1900 to 2006 were successful 53 percent of the time, compared with only 26 percent for violent resistance campaigns.

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