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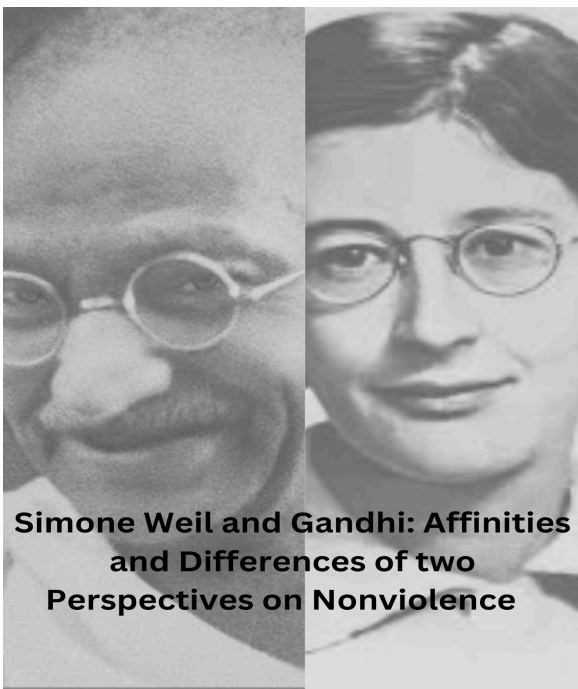
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Simone Weil and Gandhi: Affinities and Differences of Two Perspectives on Nonviolence

-by Alice Carta



Abstract

Gandhi and Simone Weil, two of the most renowned thinkers associated with the principle of nonviolence, present a fascinating study. While both advocate nonviolent civil disobedience and resistance, a detailed analysis of their

philosophies reveals significant points of convergence and divergence, adding depth and complexity to our understanding.

In terms of similarities, Gandhi and Weil view nonviolence not just as a political strategy and a moral virtue, but as a deeply personal commitment. They believe that nonviolence arises from an ethical and spiritual dedication to truth and justice, transcending violence or force. Their shared belief in the necessity of personal suffering and self-purification on the part of the oppressed is both inspiring and demanding.

However, key differences emerge in their conceptualisations. For Gandhi, nonviolence (*ahimsā*) was deeply rooted in India's Hindu and Jain traditions, representing an active, constructive approach to conflict resolution and social change. Contrastively, Weil approached nonviolence from a Christian humanitarian perspective, viewing it as self-emptying that transcends human power dynamics.

It is important to note that while Gandhi and Weil converge in upholding nonviolence as an ethical necessity, their philosophical foundations differ significantly. Gandhi's perspective, rooted more in Eastern spiritual traditions, emphasizes the collective impact. In contrast, Weil's perspective, influenced by Platonic philosophy and Christian mysticism, is more grounded in Western notions of individuality. Understanding these core aspects of their philosophies is key to appreciating their powerful models of ethical, nonviolent resistance.

“Thus, violence overwhelms everyone it touches. In the end, it appears as external to the one who wields it as to the one who endures it. This gives rise to a notion of destiny, where executioners and their victims are equally innocent, and conquerors and the conquered become brothers in the same misery”.¹

- Simone Weil

1. The Religiosity of Simone Weil and the Contact with Lanza del Vasto

¹ Weil (2014 b), p. 48.

Weil's religiosity appears to be marked by two opposing and seemingly irreconcilable tensions, which she managed to harmonise in the final months of her life. Much like Gandhi, Simone Weil read the *Bhagavadgītā* during this time, interpreting it as a complement to the Gospel.

One possible interpretative key to Weil's work lies in the tension between action and contemplation. The continuity between these two dimensions significantly impacts her practice, rooted in ancient Greek philosophy, to which the French philosopher frequently refers.

Although action and contemplation were initially distinct in her thought, they gradually harmonised as Weil's Christian understanding deepened. From the period when she lived in Marseille—where she engaged with both Rhenish-Flemish and Hindu mysticism—Weil developed a transversal and interreligious Catholicism. This synthesis brought together the two guiding principles of her life: concrete commitment and contemplation. Marseille can be considered the place for the turning point in Simone Weil's life. In the French city, the philosopher's contacts with Father Perrin and Gustave Thibon intensified, and here she met again her former study companion René Daumal, who initiated her to study the Sanskrit language. In the same city, in 1941, Simone Weil met the intellectual Lanza del Vasto (a friend of the above-mentioned Daumal), who had just returned from a pilgrimage to India, where he became a Gandhian disciple. Thanks to the mediation of the common friend, Simone Weil and Lanza del Vasto met in a café in the Provençal city, spending the entire night between May 13 and 14, 1941, in conversation.

Simone Weil was the first person Lanza del Vasto to whom he confided about his project to create a community inspired by the model of Gandhian *āshrams* in India. While the French philosopher and the European Gandhian disciple had no direct reciprocal influence, we can say theirs was an encounter between kindred spirits. Lanza del Vasto introduced Weil to a new way of being Christian—one that integrated Christian faith with Gandhian principles.

He also initiated Weil into a community-based Christianity influenced by India and Gandhian nonviolence, where action and contemplation merge. Among the theoretical foundations of Gandhi's work, the message of the *Bhagavadgītā* stands out, teaching that social commitment, when carried out selflessly and without attachment to the fruits of action, is a form of spiritual advancement. Although Weil didn't understand Gandhi's message deeply, she was profoundly illuminated by the *Bhagavadgītā*, which she began reading just a few months earlier.² She wrote then: "The *Bhagavadgītā* and the Gospel complement each other".³

As Lanza del Vasto could observe, Gandhi himself believed that the two scriptures taught the same lesson. In a letter to his mother, he wrote that Gandhi is the one "who has truly and vividly brought us the word of Christ and the light of God."⁴

Lanza del Vasto encouraged Weil to engage more thoughtfully with Gandhi's philosophy. She eventually recognised that Gandhi's method of nonviolence was not merely a form of pacifism, as she had previously thought, but rather a form of struggle. Initially identified with pacifism, Simone later began to oppose it after a period of solid support.

Until 1939, Weil had been a committed pacifist, driven by her rejection of force. However, that same year, she came to see it as her moral duty to abandon any pacifist scruples. She reluctantly acknowledged the necessity of war as the only means to resist Adolf Hitler's violent imposition on Europe. Simone not only shifted her position but also convinced herself that pacifism had contributed to a widespread inclination toward betrayal of one's homeland, confusing the repugnance to kill with the aversion to die and masking the latter with the former.

² Weil noted: «In the spring of 1940 I read the *Bhagavadgītā*. Curiously, while reading those wonderful words which sounded so Christian, spoken by an incarnation of God, I strongly felt that one owes much more to religious truth than just the kind of adherence one gives to a beautiful poem. One owes it an adherence far more categorical» (Weil 2008, p. 31).

³ Weil (1982), p. 233.

⁴ Lanza del Vasto (2003), p. 79.

For her, on the contrary, it is necessary to find the appropriate means to keep these two feelings separate, not mixing philanthropy and hypocrisy, and instead finding "a way of being present in the war itself, and indeed, a much more painful and dangerous way than that of the soldiers",⁵ which would lead her to develop the Project of front-line nursing training, where we can find several points in common with the Gandhian doctrine.

2. *Simone Weil and Gandhi*

After the conversations she had with Lanza del Vasto, Simone Weil found herself reconsidering the Gandhian doctrine. She admitted that it doesn't deny the obligation everyone owes to their homeland, as she had superficially thought before, but that it constitutes a "method to fulfil it."⁶

It should be noted that in her works, Weil generally avoids using the term "violence", preferring the word "force". However, for our discussion, the two terms can be considered synonymous.

2.1. *The main difference: the problem of collectivity*

In any case, Weil, like Gandhi, approves of nonviolent action as a testimony to the Truth. However, she harbours doubts about its effectiveness on a larger scale. According to Weil, nonviolence is fully sustainable as an individual stance, but not as a policy for the State. In her view, in fact, "Only the soul, in the most intimate secrecy of its solitude, is given to orient itself towards such perfection".⁷

For Weil, respecting humanity is a moral obligation, and thus one should always strive to act nonviolently. However, when necessity compels us to resort to violence, even if only to some extent, the question arises: How do we determine when such recourse is genuinely unavoidable? Is it possible to establish rules to discern when

⁵ Weil (1980), p. 140.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 139.

⁷ *Ibid*.

violence is inevitable? Weil's rule states: "Never go even a millimetre beyond the obligation you have towards others and yourself".⁸ However, this principle primarily concerns the individual's conscience. Weil emphasises the challenge of maintaining a constantly vigilant conscience, which demands exceptional willpower. She argues that if this is challenging for an individual, expecting the same from an entire group is even more difficult. According to Weil, while nonviolence can be effective on a personal level, it is unlikely to be practical for the collective.

Weil contends that a "collective consciousness" does not genuinely exist. She believes that a group does not possess independent rationality or conscious decision-making capabilities but instead acts on instinct, similar to what Plato describes as a "big animal" – a social creature. In her view, collectives are driven more by passions and fears, leading individuals to lose their sense of individuality and critical capacity. Thus, Weil concludes that extending Gandhi's nonviolent method to the collective level is not only improbable but essentially unfeasible.

2.2. *Key similarities*

Beyond the issue of collectivity, which remains unresolved in Weil's thought and sets her apart from Gandhi, there are numerous points of convergence between Gandhi's nonviolent method and Weil's perspective. As Sabina Moser highlights, two main aspects stand out in their shared approach:⁹

- i) The need for coherence between the goal of an action and the means used to achieve it.
- ii) The intellectual attitude in the search for truth.

Regarding the first point, Gandhi emphasised that the means used should reflect the moral quality of the end sought, arguing that nonviolence is essential to achieving just outcomes. Weil, however, extends this analysis further. By examining historical events like the Soviet Revolution and the Spanish Civil War, Weil

⁸ Weil (1985), p. 58.

⁹ Weil (2019), p. 182.

observed that prioritising the end (such as establishing justice) over the means often corrupts both. She argues that violent means not only distort the intended outcome but can also replace it entirely. This explains why, throughout history, even noble intentions have frequently resulted in outcomes far from peaceful. Weil believes that force has a transformative power that reduces human beings to mere objects. Those who inflict violence become obscured in their moral vision, losing sight of their obligation to respect the intrinsic sanctity of every individual. For Weil, the use of violence turns both victims and perpetrators into dehumanised entities: the former are petrified by suffering, while the latter are blinded to their moral responsibilities. As she notes, “the very nature of violence is to be a blind impulse that drags man well beyond the strict obligation”, implying that even intending to cause limited harm, violence inevitably leads to unintended and often excessive destruction.¹⁰

Therefore, Weil underscores the importance of using methods that closely align with the intended objective. By ensuring this coherence, one can mitigate the destructive impact of the force-driven mechanism. Focusing on the alignment between means and ends helps shift attention away from the ultimate goal, reducing the risk of perverting the means employed. As Simone Weil articulates: “Do everything you do, not because of a good, but out of necessity”.¹¹ We find a similar concept in the *Bhagavadgītā*: “Acting in renunciation of the fruits of action.” This idea parallels the “dark night” described by St. John of the Cross, which underscores the necessity of experiencing the failure of human efforts to purify the will from the pretence of achieving its ends without the intervention of Grace:

“True goodness can only emerge from outside ourselves, never from our own efforts. We can never produce anything better than ourselves. Therefore, the effort genuinely aimed at achieving good must inevitably fail; it is only after enduring a prolonged and fruitless struggle, where one

¹⁰ Weil, (1985), p. 58.

¹¹ Weil (1982), vol. III, p. 258.

reaches a point of despair and expectation ceases, that the true gift—unexpected and freely given — arrives as a wonderful surprise”.¹²

The second fundamental point of convergence between Weil’s and Gandhi’s thought is their pragmatic-mystical approach, a notion that might initially seem paradoxical. Gandhi and Simone Weil embarked on spiritual paths that ultimately led them to a realization that “Truth is God” rather than the more conventional “God is Truth”.

This perspective is closely aligned with Gandhi's concept of *satyagraha*, a method of nonviolent resistance that emphasizes the affirmation of truth through peaceful civil disobedience. *Satyagraha* is based on the understanding that truth represents the eternal light illuminating reality. This awareness comes from direct experience and affirms that everyone is a part of a singular reality. Furthermore, it emphasizes that the knowledge of God and truth cannot be acquired through books alone, but must be realized within the individual’s consciousness.

Gandhi writes:

“There is a mysterious force that pervades everything. I feel it, even though I do not see it. It is this invisible force that makes itself felt and yet defies any manifestation, because it is so different from everything I perceive with my senses. It transcends the senses. But to a certain extent, it is possible to demonstrate God’s existence through reason. I vaguely perceive that while everything around me changes and moves, beneath all these changes there is a living, unchanging force, which holds everything together, which dissolves and recreates. This force or informing spirit is God. And as nothing else I merely see with my senses can persist or will persist; He alone is. And is this force benevolent or malevolent? I see it exclusively as benevolent, because I see that amid death persisting life, amid lies persists

¹² *Ibid*, p. 238.

truth, amid darkness persists light. I deduce that God is Life, Truth, Light. He is love. He is the supreme God. I also know that I will never know God unless I struggle with and against evil even at the cost of my life”¹³.

Weil expresses a similar sentiment in a letter to the Dominican Father Perrin, recounting a direct, “person-to-person” encounter with God. She describes this experience as authentic, even though she neither actively sought it nor was influenced indirectly, as she had not yet encountered the writings of the mystics at that time.¹⁴ This encounter led her to a profound conviction: “One can resist God if one does so out of pure love for truth. Christ wants truth to be preferred to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one moves away from him to pursue truth, one will not walk far before finding oneself in his embrace”.¹⁵

For both Weil and Gandhi, the pinnacle of religious experience consists in directly experiencing the spirit. This experience, moreover, teaches one to be guided solely by a non-material, nonviolent force—the only force capable of uniting opposites, namely love.

Here lies the point of the deep connection with Gandhi's doctrine of *satyagraha*, according to which God is truth. Gandhi compares *satyagraha* to a coin with the word “truth” inscribed on one side and “love” on the other as two different ways of perceiving the same empirical reality. For Gandhi, the true *satyagrahi* never forgets that he and the opponent are one. This is the authentic meaning of *ahimsā*: total love, which means much more than the mere absence of violence.

Moreover, the term *ahimsā* has no negative connotation, as the English translation “nonviolence” might suggest; *ahimsā* is not something to be acquired, but

¹³ Gandhi, (1987), pp. 83-84.

¹⁴ Weil's family was Jewish, but her parents were agnostic, and she and her brother André were brought up in this environment.

¹⁵ Weil, (2014 a), pp. 69-70.

something always present within us that we need to unveil. Love is our very nature, and *satyagraha* is nothing but love in action.

For Gandhi, the law of love or truth does not depend on the consent of others to be enacted; it is both independent and invincible. However, it demands inner strength and the ability to endure suffering, as it involves affirming the truth through one's suffering rather than inflicting suffering on others.¹⁶

The Gospel narrative, on the other hand, simultaneously reveals the identity between truth and love, demanding a measure of suffering and sacrifice embodied in the cross. Both Gandhi and Simone Weil frequently reflect on Jesus' death sentence, imposed by the political and religious authorities of his time. However, while Gandhi defines it as the "eternal event in the history of humanity",¹⁷ Simone Weil expresses it more philosophically: "To find the One, one must exhaust duality, reach the end of duality. It is the crucifixion".¹⁸ Moreover, duality is the quintessence of 'evil' for both Gandhi and Weil, and regaining victory over it through violence is nothing but an illusion: one cannot overcome duality or win over evil by opposing another form of evil to it.

For Gandhi, those who have experienced *satyagraha* know that all that exists is one and that fighting evil through evil cannot be the solution. The only possible way to overcome evil is, in fact, by showing the perpetrators how far they have strayed from the good. This is only possible by allowing evil to follow its course, highlighted by the brave suffering of those who unjustly endure it: this is the passion, the crucifixion, or, as Simone Weil would say, the *non-agent action*, which renounces the illusion of vengeance, but without renouncing action.

In her reading of the *Bhagavadgītā*, Simone Weil was particularly struck by these verses: "Action is what concerns you, never its fruits; let the fruit of action never be your motive". While Gandhi interprets the *Gītā* as depicting the internal struggle

¹⁶ Gandhi, (1969), p. 13.

¹⁷ C. Drevet, (1965), p. 38.

¹⁸ Weil (1982), p. 116.

between the forces of good and evil within the human heart, Simone Weil views the story of the warrior Arjuna as illustrating the tragedy of the human condition — an existence burdened by misfortune and a form of existential slavery. In the *Bhagavadgītā*, Arjuna is a warrior who finds himself at the beginning of the battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, known as the “battle of Kurukshetra”. Arjuna faces opponents on the battlefield, who include many of his relatives, uncles, cousins, and teachers. Upon seeing his loved ones lined up against him, Arjuna is overwhelmed with doubt and fear. Unable to muster the courage to fight and kill those he cares about, he is engulfed by uncertainty and despair. Arjuna's dilemma places him in a conflict between his duty to fight a just war and his familial bonds, which compel him to avoid killing his loved ones. In this moment of profound turmoil, Krishna offers to guide Arjuna towards making the right choice. Simone Weil interprets Arjuna's dilemma not merely as a moral obligation but as a necessity that the warrior must accept and submit to, highlighting the need for acceptance in the face of overwhelming circumstances. At its core, it mirrors the act performed by Jesus: by accepting unjust condemnation and death, Christ achieved the ultimate kenosis, embodying the “decreation” central to her thought. Weil writes in her *Notebooks*: “To become something divine, I do not need to leave my misery, but only to adhere to it. [...] It is at the extreme bottom of my misery that I touch God”.¹⁹

According to Weil, Christ has charted the path for humanity's redemption from misery, embodying the quintessential mediator as a suffering being, starkly contrasting to the untroubled Krishna, who advises Arjuna with a serene spirit. Simone Weil's reflections on nonviolent action and the core themes of the *Bhagavadgītā* were further developed through her engagement with Gandhi's philosophy, facilitated by Lanza del Vasto. The latter's influence also contributed to shaping Weil's *project for training frontline nurses*, which proposed creating a group of volunteers to provide physical and moral support to wounded soldiers directly on the battlefield.

In a letter presenting her project to French President Charles De Gaulle, Simone Weil writes:

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 405.

“The mere act of maintaining a humanitarian presence amidst the heart of battle, at the peak of ferocity, would serve as a more profound challenge than the aggression imposed upon us by the enemy”.²⁰

Although the project was meticulously detailed, it was deemed impractical by President De Gaulle and rejected. Nonetheless, its underlying spirit resonates deeply with Gandhi's principles. The initiative aimed to confront war in a fundamentally different way than traditional methods, adhering to the belief that victory does not belong to the strongest, but to the wisest—the one who embodies and practices the wisdom of nonviolence. The true wisdom lies in resisting the brutality of force, while making it evident, thereby enabling those who wield it to recognize their own subjugation to it, rather than their control over it.

Weil writes in her *Notebooks*:

“In truth, man merely endures force and never handles it, regardless of the situation. The exercise of force is an illusion. No one possesses it: it is a mechanism”²¹.

This mechanism, for Weil, can only be broken by love, “by love that never forces, that is never forced,” or “the supernatural love, charity”.²²

This transformative movement of love is also present in Gandhi's philosophy. For Gandhi, the force of truth is synonymous with the force of love and is thus "superior to all other forces combined". It is not suffering in itself that defines the fundamental force of the human condition; instead, love can transform pain into new love, not the other way around. Gandhi's perspective emphasises that life and the world are founded on an exclusively positive force, inherently non-negative. Consequently,

²⁰ Weil (1994), pp. 26-27.

²¹ Weil, (1982), p. 198.

²² *Ibid*, p. 142.

negativity, culminating in destructiveness, cannot be considered a legitimate creative principle deserving of respect and adherence. For both Gandhi and Weil, the individual must prefer internal suffering rather than resorting to violence or fantasising about transferring it onto another. For the Mahatma, the opposite of violence is the love that retains suffering within itself to overcome it without spreading it. The possibility of recognising the whole nature of love has a fundamental hermeneutic condition: to avoid reducing it to the mere sphere of feeling, recognising its much broader horizon, at the same time, religious, metaphysical, epistemological, political, and ethical. The liberation from the negative doesn't depend on the individual's effort to isolate herself to process and purify her inner life and then return to relationships with others and to politics. In fact, commitment is simultaneous and interrelated: *satyagraha* and *ahimsā* must be undertaken by starting from oneself, but not individually or in a merely introspective manner.

This path of humanisation demands that we cultivate the strength of political love within ourselves—both as individuals in our interpersonal relationships and in our public life as part of society. It involves an ongoing harmonisation between our inner and outer worlds.

In conclusion, Gandhi's thought is deeply influenced by Hindu ethics and Indian spirituality, where it is fundamentally rooted. In contrast, while sharing the principles of nonviolence and ethical-political engagement, Simone Weil primarily draws from Western philosophical traditions, particularly Plato's thought and the Christian Gospel. In the last years of her life, she also incorporated elements of Renano-Flemish mysticism into her philosophy.

The fundamental difference between the two thinkers lies in their views on collectivity and politics. Gandhi saw the political and collective sphere as integral to achieving truth and justice through organised mass movements. In contrast, Weil perceives the political and collective sphere as a "social animal" from which the individual must become emancipated to reach truth and justice. Despite

acknowledging its importance and actively engaging in it, Weil is profoundly sceptical of political and social action.

This theoretical divergence is reflected in their practical actions. Gandhi organised several mass civil disobedience campaigns in India, such as the 1930 Salt March, which mobilised tens of thousands of people to challenge the British colonial system through nonviolent resistance.

Conversely, Weil's actions were often more solitary and individualistic. In 1934, she protested alone against the law banning strikes in France by resigning from her job as an act of personal disobedience. During World War II, Gandhi continued to mobilise large groups for Indian independence. At the same time, Weil, despite invitations from French intellectuals to join organised resistance, chose to act according to her conscience. This led her to briefly fight as an anarchist in the Spanish Civil War in 1936.

While Gandhi's *satyagraha* in South Africa (1906-1914), as well as his non-cooperation and civil disobedience campaigns in India (1917-1942), involved thousands of people in nonviolent mass actions against racial and unjust colonial laws, Simone Weil decided to show her solidarity to the French workers by working in some factories during the war (1940-1942): she repeatedly volunteered to replace the workers who had to fight for the French army, acting, once again, individually.

3. *Conclusions*

Despite their theoretical and practical differences, Gandhi and Weil are convinced that nonviolence and moral resistance are the only viable means to achieve meaningful and lasting social change. They reject violence and coercion, advocating emancipation and liberation through personal commitment and testimony. Their firm moral convictions are rooted in a metaphysical foundation grounded in love.

While they start from distinct philosophical traditions, Gandhi and Weil converge in their criticism of violence, emphasising the importance of nonviolence in upholding the truth. The most significant difference between them lies in their views on the political and collective realm: Weil approaches it with more scepticism, while Gandhi is more actively engaged with the 'collective'. Despite this divergence, the universal relevance of their messages remains intact, each conveyed in a distinct and meaningful way.

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