

Richard Sorabji

Gandhi and the Stoics, Modern Experiments on Ancient Values (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), \$37.72.

Richard Sorabji's *Gandhi and the Stoics, Modern Experiments on Ancient Values* is impressive in its restraint, objectivity, and balance of research with reasoning. Divided into 11 chapters (excluding Introduction), this nuanced, readable book offers a worthy alternative to our impassioned politics of power and pity—namely, Gandhi's *numinous* politics. Although historical, Sorabji's method is also philosophical and theological. Using his comparison to shed light on Gandhi, the Stoics, and the ideas themselves (1-2), he also uses each to improve the other (4). Academically unique, because "few have noticed the much more indirect relation [of Gandhi] to the Stoics" (1), such comparative works heal post-colonial fissures with their lofty cosmopolitanism—redeeming the trite globalisms that distract us from true universals. The relationship between Gandhi and the Stoics being *indirect* (1, 3-4), their similarities indicate *uninfluenced* world historical parallelisms, even if tempered by their differences.

Sorabji sees Gandhi as a spiritual-moral leader—only then, a politician (50, 53, 196). In between, Gandhi also plays a *philosophical* role in eight ways (196-9) that include—subjecting his views to relentless *published* criticisms (1, 196, 198, 201), encountering the public not only to teach, but (unlike Diogenes or the Stoics) to "refine" his existing views (202-3); giving *philosophical* reasons for his views (196, 198); handling *philosophical* topics with "philosophical acumen" (196, 198). Sorabji details seven *philosophical* topics discussed by Gandhi (196-8)—including rights and duties (rights have to be earned by matching duties), two kinds of freedom (through political and personal self-rule), *svadharma* (individuation of duties), and nonviolence. Hardly a pacifist, Gandhi did not rule out all killing (82-3, 85-8, 197, 201). To be *nonviolent*, killing had to be for the sake of the killed (83, 86-8, 197). What Gandhi officially endorsed was *attitudinal* (not behavioral) nonviolence (82).

From Sorabji's portrait, Gandhi emerges a universal being—inspired by ideas from India *and* the West, yet transforming (reinterpreting) both (6). Ideas inspired by western influence could end up unlike the originals, whereas ideas converging with western ones may be "less altered" (5). Gandhi's direct western influences include Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (1894) (7), Ruskin's *Unto this Last* (1862) (6), Plato's account of Socrates, St. Matthew's of Christ, and Platonic and Christian writings (1). Sorabji cites many other western sources—especially the Stoics and Isaiah Berlin, but also the Cynics, Atomists, Epicureans, Aristotle, Kant, Charles Taylor, Adam Smith,

and Thoreau. Gandhi's Indian sources and ideas include the *Bhagavadgita*, the Jain doctrine of *anekântavâda* (multiple partial views of truth), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), reincarnation, *moksha* (spiritual liberation), and *Nirguna Brahman* (indescribable God) (201). Unimpressed by Indian conceptions, Gandhi learned from Tolstoy that nonviolence meant "an inner attitude, an ocean of compassion and good will" (7). Although he borrowed Tolstoy's expression, "the law of love," Gandhi went "far beyond" Tolstoy in his understanding of nonviolence (7).

There are significant differences between Gandhi and the Stoics. Gandhi used "indifferent" for an attitude, whereas the Stoics used it for an objective (32). Gandhi thought of one's nearest as a part of oneself, whereas Seneca thought of each individual as part of the wider community of rational beings (43). Stoicism would have disapproved of Gandhi's sacrificing "close friends or kin" (44-5). Gandhi used reincarnation but the Stoics did not believe in the soul's immortality (48). If *moksha* was a "dominating goal" for Gandhi, for the Stoics, this was virtue (52)—with no parallel for *moksha* (72). These differences do not diminish the remarkable affinities between Gandhi and the Stoics (2-3). They both found freedom in emotional detachment. Despite detachment, they both sought to engage in *politics*, believing in extending *love* to all humans. They were each ready to accept poverty, although in different ways. Their concern for humans led them both to duties—not rights. Character mattered to both (45). For different reasons, they were each suspicious of universal rules of conduct (2-3, 109).

Perhaps the strongest part of this book, Sorabji's profound anti-universalist analysis of conscience (chapters 6-8) opposes the universality inherent in Kantian thought and the Ten Commandments. Gandhian-Stoic moral relativism reaches far deeper than our present-day nihilistic relativism. Sorabji's own view—that "rules can only be a subordinate aid in ethics" (133)—is heartening in our Technocracy, where numberless rules (many utilitarian) drown the voice of conscience. Unlike Kant, but somewhat like the Stoics, yet for different reasons, Gandhi was against universal rules of conduct (109). Instead, he appealed to each person's conscience, believing in different duties for different people—these being based on differences in roles, character, capacities, and beliefs (91-3, 197-8). In Sorabji's view, Gandhi rightly hesitated to offer universal rules of conduct except as an "unattainable counsel of perfection (nonviolence), or where there was an alternative to what he forbade (lying)" (197). Here Sorabji distinguishes between Gandhi's likely treatment of conduct versus attitude, adding—"But even with the *attitude* of nonviolence, which alone he thought right, he did not wish to impose it on those with opposite