

Gandhi and Socrates

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Abstract:

Gandhi composed his ‘translation’ of Plato’s *Apology* while he was in South Africa. Gandhi was responding to political restrictions against the Indian community and was also influenced by John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last*. Interestingly, the translation was banned by the British authorities in India. This paper explores the background to Gandhi’s translation and examines the role of Plato’s work in the development of his idea of *satyagraha*.

Keywords:

Gandhi, Plato, Socrates, *Apology*, John Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, Gujarati, Greek, translation, India, South Africa, *satyagraha*, British Empire

Gandhi first came to think of Socrates as a *satyagrahi* in South Africa. Gandhi read Plato’s *Apology* while he was serving a jail sentence in Johannesburg, in early 1908; he rendered the *Apology* into Gujarati, later in the same year, and published the Gujarati version across several instalments in *Indian Opinion*. The South African years have been extensively studied, of course, and numerous commentators have discussed the important place they hold in Gandhi’s life. These years (1893–1914) were significant for his development as a political activist and philosopher of *satyagraha*, and indeed these were the years when he began to formulate his conception of Indian nationalism. Gandhi was himself to say later that he discovered his ‘vocation in life’ (Gandhi 1928, p. 509) in South Africa and that he ‘was born in India but was made in South Africa’ (*CWVG* vol. 84, p. 380). As we try to understand Gandhi’s ‘story’ of Socrates, we should bear in mind the South African context and the evolution that Gandhi underwent

there as a political thinker. Over the course of his life, Gandhi appears to have read Plato's dialogues, a few works by Aristotle, and a few books on Greek philosophy, but he read voluminously in general and had no special interest in the ancient Greeks. In Socrates, he had an abiding interest, and it was in South Africa that he first began to identify with the Athenian philosopher.

It was in South Africa, moreover, that Gandhi read a book that had an even more powerful impact on him than the *Apology*, namely, *Unto This Last*, by John Ruskin. The book was given to him by Henry Polak, in 1904, and Gandhi famously read it in one sitting on the train from Johannesburg to Durban, rising 'with the dawn, ready to reduce these principles to practice' (*CWMG* vol. 39, p. 239). The 'conversion experience' that followed from a reading of this work prompted Gandhi to write a Gujarati version, which he entitled *Sarvodaya*, a word which could be translated roughly as 'the uplift of all' or 'the advancement of all'. The preface (*prastavana*) to the Gujarati version of *Sarvodaya*, which began to appear in *Indian Opinion* soon after the last instalment of Gandhi's version of the *Apology*, explicitly connected Ruskin to Socrates: 'Socrates gave us some idea of man's duty. He practised his precepts. It can be argued that Ruskin's ideas are an elaboration of Socrates's. Ruskin has described vividly how one who wants to live by Socrates's ideas should acquit himself in the different vocations' (*CWMG* vol. 8, p. 241). One could scarcely argue with the first half of this analysis, and the latter half is arguably consistent with some views ascribed to Socrates, but Gandhi's remarks in general raise a question: in what way could Ruskin's book be seen as an extension of Socrates' words?

Gandhi's interpretation of Ruskin is notoriously eccentric, and scholarly readers have not fully accepted the reading that Gandhi puts forward in his *Autobiography*. But Kathryn Tidrick has reminded us about the important elements of 'self-sacrifice, even

unto death,' that Gandhi discerned in *Unto This Last* (Tidrick 2006, p. 68). If the good of the individual lay in the good of all, as Gandhi said, the individual might need to make the ultimate sacrifice and lay down his or her life for the benefit of society. This readiness to die for the community was almost a sacred duty, and it was a duty that Ruskin himself alluded to in *Unto This Last*.

The fact is, that people never have had clearly explained to them the true functions of a merchant with respect to other people. I should like the reader to be very clear about this.

Five great intellectual professions, relating to daily necessities of life, have hitherto existed—three exist necessarily, in every civilized nation:

The Soldier's profession is to *defend* it.

The Pastor's to *teach* it.

The Physician's to *keep it in health*.

The Lawyer's to *enforce justice* in it.

The Merchant's to *provide* for it.

And the duty of all these men is, on due occasion, to *die* for it.

“On due occasion,” namely:—

The Soldier, rather than leave his post in battle.

The Physician, rather than leave his post in plague.

The Pastor, rather than teach Falsehood.

The Lawyer, rather than countenance Injustice.

The Merchant — what is *his* “due occasion” of death?

It is the main question for the merchant, as for all of us. For, truly, the man who does not know when to die, does not know how to live.

(Cook & Wedderburn 1905, pp. 39–40)

Since Gandhi was from a *bania* or merchant community and had studied law in London, he was arguably both a lawyer and a merchant and thus was familiar with two of the ‘five great intellectual professions’. As a lawyer, Gandhi found no rest in South Africa and was constantly agitating for the rights of Indians and others. In these pages of *Unto This Last*, Ruskin was nonetheless interested in the merchant more than the lawyer: he wrote that the merchant ought to be ready to suffer on behalf of his men and even to suffer more than his men; the merchant or manufacturer should give of himself ‘as a father would in a famine, shipwreck, or battle, sacrifice himself for his son’ (Cook & Wedderburn 1905, p. 45). In effect, Ruskin was showing Gandhi that a merchant could be a ‘hero and martyr’ if he were prepared to act in a spirit of self-sacrifice (Tidrick 2006, p. 69).

But Ruskin mentions the soldier, pastor, and physician as well as the lawyer and merchant in his list of five great intellectual professions, and we might also think of the affinity between Gandhi and the first group. In relation to the pastor, it is not difficult to point to passages in Gandhi’s writings, even at this early date, where he speaks of his religious and spiritual convictions and offers people advice on religious, spiritual, and moral issues. The Socrates of Gandhi’s *Apology* speaks at times as if he were a preacher or as if he had an especially close connection to the divine. Nor is it difficult to think of Gandhi as a healer and physician, despite the scepticism he expresses about conventional ‘Western’ medicine. In the preface to his version of the *Apology*, he writes that the Indian body politic is diseased. ‘When the disease is diagnosed and its true nature revealed in public, and when, through suitable remedies, the body [politic] of India is cured and cleansed both within and without, it will become immune to the germs of the disease, that is, to the oppression by the British and the others.’ Readers can find ‘in the words of a great soul [Gandhi uses a form of *mahatma*] like Socrates the

qualities of an elixir' (*CWMG* vol. 8, p. 174). When they have drunk this elixir, or *amrit*, Gandhi's readers may be able to fight off the disease and cure the afflicted body. Gandhi/Socrates is a special kind of physician who will help his followers and disciples overcome the moral sickness that restricts their spiritual growth and hinders their intellectual development.

Ruskin also places the soldier in the five professions he mentions in *Unto This Last*, and it is interesting to see Gandhi, the professor of non-violence, give prominence to the soldier, or warrior, in the heading under which he offers his version of the *Apology*. The title that he uses is *Ek satyavirni katha*, which can be translated as 'Story of a true soldier' or 'Story of a soldier of truth', the latter being the form employed in the English edition of the *Collected Works*. 'True soldier' is arguably more martial than 'soldier of truth', but in any case the association of Socrates with 'soldier' in Gandhi's version suggests that he thinks of Socrates as a figure who is ready to go to battle and to give up his life for what he knows to be the truth. Gandhi's Socrates is religious and pious, a man who says he believes in God, and a philosopher who has a soldier's toughness to withstand the hostility that he encounters in many quarters. Rather than choose words or terms that might connect Socrates simply or uniquely to a philosophical, spiritual, or religious tradition, Gandhi refers to the Athenian as a *satyavir* and by that expression emphasizes his willingness to fight unto death for his cause.

By making a soldier a part of his title, Gandhi may also be recalling the terms used by Plato in his *Apology*. Socrates uses military language to describe his own pursuit of philosophy in the face of threats to his wellbeing; he suggests that when he stands fast at his trial and declines to run away he is acting like a soldier at his post; and he also implies that his own obedience to god is comparable to the obedience of the

soldier to his commanding officer. In Henry Cary's translation, Socrates says, 'I should then be acting strangely, O Athenians, if, when the generals whom you chose to command me assigned me my post at Potidaea, at Amphipolis, and at Delium, I then remained where they posted me, like any other person, and encountered the danger of death, but when the deity as I thought and believed, assigned it as my duty to pass my life in the study of philosophy, and in examining myself and others, I should on that occasion, through fear of death or any thing else whatsoever, desert my post' (*Apology* 28d–29a). Following Socrates, Gandhi is reframing the figure of the soldier or warrior and reclaiming him for his own particular cause and struggle.

Solider, physician, pastor, lawyer, and merchant: Gandhi had affinities with all five and discerned in Ruskin's prose the exhortation to give up his own life if that were required of him. This emphasis on martyrdom and death is arguably even stronger in Gandhi's version of the *Apology* than in Plato's text. Gandhi writes in his preface that Socrates 'had no fear of death' and he goes on to describe the last moments of the Athenian philosopher. We are told about the hemlock that he administers to himself and the speech that he delivers in the presence of Phaedo. Gandhi adds, 'It is said that up to the very last moment Socrates showed no fear, and that he took the poison smilingly. As he finished the last sentence of his discourse, he drank the poison from the cup as eagerly as we might drink sherbet from a glass.' Socrates was 'a great satyagrahi' and a role model to Indians in the subcontinent as well as in South Africa: 'We must learn to live and die like Socrates.' Gandhi urges his readers not to be afraid and not to act out of 'fear of dishonour or death' and to grasp the true nature of the problems afflicting Indian society and culture.

While Gandhi omits or condenses other parts of the *Apology*, he affords his readers a fuller view of Socrates' remarks on death. We are reminded of Socrates'

views on death in the last three of the six instalments that Gandhi published in *Indian Opinion*. The sixth and final instalment, in particular, begins with a statement by the editor (Gandhi) saying that he had mistakenly announced the end of the serialization of the *Apology* the previous week. Gandhi notes that Socrates was found guilty by a majority of the jurors and he then offers a translation of the remarks made by the Athenian after the vote and the award of the death penalty. Gandhi ends the instalment by insisting on the historicity of the trial and defence of Socrates. ‘We pray to God, and want our readers also to pray, that they, and we too, may have the moral strength which enabled Socrates to follow virtue to the end and to embrace death as if it were his beloved. We advise everyone to turn his mind again and again to Socrates’ words and conduct’ (*CWMG* vol. 8, p. 229)

Gandhi doubtless had several reasons for not wanting to leave his rendition of the *Apology* incomplete, but the reference to death in these passages would have certainly been a factor in his decision to finish the job. Bearing in mind that Plato composed his dialogue in Greek, let us set down here an excerpt from the sixth instalment in the Gujarati of Gandhi and in the English translation of the *Collected Works*. Let us, for the sake of comparison, also set down the parallel passage in the translation by Henry Cary. Gandhi does not say which translation of Plato he read in jail, in 1908, but he is likely to have read the *Defence and Death of Socrates*, which was a small book that contained only the *Apology* and part of the *Phaedo* in Cary’s translation. (The list of authorities appended to *Hind Swaraj*, a text in dialogue form which Gandhi wrote in 1909, includes the “Defence and Death of Socrates.”—from Plato’.) Cary published his translations of Plato in the nineteenth century; the *Defence* was printed in 1905 and distributed in South Africa as well as in Britain.

Indian Opinion, 9 May 1908. In *Gandhijino akshardeha*, vol. 8, p. 218.

નહીં, તોપણ મારે થોડો જ વખત હવે જીવવાનું હતું. તેટલી ટૂંકી મુદતને સારું તમે નિર્દોષ માણસને મોતની સજા કરી અપયશના ધણી થયા છો. તમે થોડી મુદત થોભ્યા હોત તો મારું મોત પોતાની મેળે જ આવત, કેમ કે હું બહુ ઘરડો થયો છું. મેં તમારી આગળ હલકી જાતની દલીલો વાપરી હોત ને સાધારણ ઈલાજ લીધા હોત, તો હું મોતની સજાથી રહિત થાત, પણ તે મારો ધર્મ નહોતો. હું માનું છું કે, આઝાદ (સ્વતંત્ર) માણસ મોતના કે એવા બીજા ભયથી છૂટા રહેવાને કદી આજુઘટનું કામ નહીં કરે. મોતથી ભયવાને ગમે તેવા ઈલાજ લેવા એ માણસનું કર્તવ્ય નથી. લડાઈમાં માણસ હથિયાર છોડીને શત્રુને શરણે જાય તો બચે છે. પણ તેને આપણે હિંચકારો ગણીએ છીએ. તેમ જ જ માણસ મોતમાંથી ભયવાને અનીતિના ઉપાય લે તે નીચ ગણાય. હું માનું છું કે નીચપણમાંથી ભયજી એ મોતમાંથી ભયવાના કરતાં વધારે મુશ્કેલ છે. કેમ કે નીચપણ તે મોતના કરતાં વધારે અપાટથી દોડે છે. તમે ઉતાવળા ને ઉછાં-છળા છો તેથી તમે વગર વિચાર્યે ઝડપથી દોડતી અનીતિનું પગલું ભર્યું છે. તમે મને મોતની સજા કરી છે. હું હવે આ દુનિયા છોડીશ. મારા સામા પક્ષે સત્ય છોડવું ગણાશે ને તેઓ અન્યાયના ધણી થયા કહેવાશે. મારી સજા હું ભોગવીશ. તેમને તેમની કરણીની સજા ભોગવવી પડશે. આમ જ થયા કરે છે. તેમાંયે ઠીક જ હશે.

CWMG vol. 8, p. 228:

In any case, I have only a few years left to live. You could not be troubled to wait and you have earned an evil name for yourselves by condemning an innocent man to death. If you had waited a while, I would have died in the course of nature, for I am an old man, far advanced in years. If I had used ignoble arguments before you and adopted the course common on such occasions, I would have escaped the death penalty. But that would have been inconsistent with my duty. I am sure a free man will never do anything unworthy

Cary 1905, pp. 38–40:

For the sake of no long space of time, O Athenians, you will incur the character and reproach at the hands of those who wish to defame the city, of having put that wise man, Socrates, to death. For those who wish to defame you will assert that I am wise, though I am not. If, then, you had waited for a short time, this would have happened of its own accord; for observe my age, that it is far advanced in life, and near death. But I say this not to you all, but to those only who have condemned me to die. And I say this, too,

of himself to save himself from death or other danger. One ought not to try to save oneself from death by any and every means. In battle, a man can save himself by laying down his arms and surrendering to the enemy. But we think such a man a coward. In the same way, anyone who resorts to unscrupulous means to save himself from death is an unworthy person. I think it is more difficult to save oneself from wickedness than from death, for wickedness is swifter than death. Being impatient and rash, you have taken a step which spells wickedness—wickedness which is so swift in its advance. You have sentenced me to death. I shall now leave this world. My opponents will be looked upon as men who betrayed truth and perpetrated an injustice. I will suffer my punishment. But they will [also] suffer the penalty for their [evil] deeds. This is what always happens. Perhaps it is just as well that it should be so.

to the same persons.

Perhaps you think, O Athenians, that I have been convicted through the want of arguments, by which I might have persuaded you, had I thought it right to do and say any thing, so that I might escape punishment. Far otherwise: I have been convicted through want indeed, yet not of arguments, but of audacity and impudence, and of the inclination to say such things to you as would have been most agreeable for you to hear, had I lamented and bewailed and done and said many other things unworthy of me, as I affirm, but such as you are accustomed to hear from others.

But neither did I then think that I ought, for the sake of avoiding danger, to do any thing unworthy of a freeman, nor do I now repent of having so defended myself; but I should much rather choose to die, having so defended myself, than to live in that way. For neither in a trial nor in battle is it right that I or any one else should employ every possible means whereby he may

avoid death; for in battle it is frequently evident that a man might escape death by laying down his arms, and throwing himself on the mercy of his pursuers. And there are many other devices in every danger, by which to avoid death, if a man dares to do and say every thing. But this is not difficult, O Athenians, to escape death; but it is much more difficult to avoid depravity, for it runs swifter than death. And now I, being slow and aged, am overtaken by the slower of the two; but my accusers, being strong and active, have been overtaken by the swifter, wickedness.

And now I depart, condemned by you to death; but they condemned by truth, as guilty of iniquity and injustice: and I abide my sentence, and so do they. These things, perhaps, ought so to be, and I think that they are for the best.

Gandhi uses forms of the noun *maut* (for the English ‘death’) frequently in this passage, although elsewhere he also uses *mrityu*, and we can see that he deploys the term in order to give prominence to Socrates’ attitude to death and to his execution. In Gujarati as in English, Gandhi is more terse than Cary and he keeps the focus on the jurors’ decision and Socrates’ response to death. Socrates is innocent, he is old, he acts in a manner that

is consistent with his own principles, and he is prepared to meet death worthily rather than run away from it in a cowardly fashion. His opponents are bloodthirsty; they seek an old man's death; they are reckless, wicked, and unjust. Cary's translation conveys something of this sensibility, but perhaps also gives the reader a sense of the philosopher's interest in wisdom and rational argument. Cary does not stray far from Plato's Greek. Yet, Gandhi in the Gujarati does wander from Cary's English, and one of the interesting points about Gandhi's rendition in this and other passages that touch on the issue of death is precisely that by his excisions he amplifies the emphasis on death. That Socrates is happy to lay down his life in the right way, for the right reason, and at the right time is a message that Gandhi takes to heart and strives to put across to his readers.

In claiming that Ruskin's *Unto This Last* is a reading of the *Apology*, Gandhi is, I think, reminding us of Ruskin's emphasis on duty and self-sacrifice and the spiritual obligation to commit one's life to the cause of equality. Socrates' speech in the *Apology* has no overt connection with the political economy discussed extensively by Ruskin in his work. Ruskin derived the title of his book from chapter 20 of Matthew in the New Testament. When some labourers point out to a householder that they have worked for longer hours than the workers who arrived at his vineyard later in the day, the householder says that he will pay the last man the same amount of money as the first: 'Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee.' There is, in Plato's *Apology*, no trace of this parable, or of Ruskinian socialism, or indeed of an ethic that might have guided the founding of Tolstoy Farm. We might surmise that, with his paraphrase of the *Apology*, Gandhi retains the ambiguity in Ruskin's title and interprets it not just in the terms of equal pay to all workers but also in the terms of a

principled commitment to be upheld to the very end of one's life, that is, unto the last or unto death. Gandhi is certainly aware of the Biblical significance of the phrase and observes in his version of *Unto This Last* that he employs the title *Sarvodaya*, rather than a literal translation, since the expression from the New Testament will 'be understood only by a person who has read the Bible in English' (*CWMG* vol. 8, p. 241). (It is notable in this context that Socrates was commonly seen as a Christ figure in the nineteenth century and earlier and that Gandhi's Socrates bears some similarities to Christ. Gandhi may have absorbed the parallels drawn between Christ and Socrates in the course of his readings in London and South Africa. Perhaps not incidentally, Gandhi in his later years was compared to both Christ and Socrates.)

The emphasis on death in the *Apology*, however, need not be taken to refer to some sort of naive or starry-eyed outlook on the part of Gandhi. He may have been deeply influenced by 'a Jain-inflected Hindu orthodoxy and late Victorian psychomancy, the world of Madame Blavatsky, Theosophy, *planchette*, and the Esoteric Christian Union', but he was also uncannily successful in his dealings with political opponents (Anderson 2012, p. 19). Both his South African and his British opponents were unnerved by the moral certainty and conviction that he showed in his dealings with them, and they would have been rattled by the notion that they were dealing with an activist who was prepared to wage his battle unto the last breath. Jail sentences scarcely troubled him, and he wrote, in 1922, that 'the prison cell where Socrates drank the poison cup was undoubtedly the way to bliss' (*CWMG* vol. 22, p. 245). Secondly, although Gandhi wrote his version of the *Apology* before he threw himself fully into the independence movement in India, he had already begun to develop the concept of *satyagraha*, and it is possible to see in his words nascent support for those Indians who were, literally and otherwise, soldiers in the war against British

colonialism. As Ajay Skaria (2010, p. 217) observes, ‘. . . the heroic nationalists who gave their life to the nation also practiced a certain living by dying, where they gave themselves to their very death for a cause. This very giving of themselves to their death authorized a living on and an evading of death so that their cause, the nation, could be better pursued.’ Gandhi’s rendering of the *Apology* is, in this sense, consistent with the behaviour of anti-colonial nationalists and it clarifies their actions. And third, Gandhi’s attitudes to death and mortality were part of a complicated if mostly consistent spiritual and political programme. This programme evolved somewhat over the course of Gandhi’s life, was shaped by such things as his experience of religion, Indian diaspora communities, and colonialism, and nurtured *satyagraha* and *ahimsa*, with their distinctively Gandhian attributes. Gandhi’s willingness to accept death was intimately connected to his philosophy, to his way of being in the world, and in particular to the principles of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* that he espoused and followed until the end (Skaria 2010, Sorabji 2012).

The initial context of publication also explains why Gandhi’s *Ek satyavirni katha* becomes a vehicle for civil disobedience from an early date. I have touched on some of the circumstances above, but it is worth noting that the instalments appeared in *Indian Opinion*, a bilingual (initially, multilingual) English and Gujarati newspaper that was, at the same time, not a newspaper in the conventional sense of the word (Hofmeyr 2013). In the issue (9 May 1908) that contained the sixth instalment of Gandhi’s *Apology*, *Indian Opinion* ran articles or editorials on government Bills that affected the rights of Indians in the region; the colour question; the poll tax; the ‘Asiatic Question’; ‘Asiatic Passive Resistance’; and ‘A Progressive Indian’, to name a few topics. As these examples show, *Indian Opinion* was concerned with the predicament of Indian immigrants around the Empire and took a stand against racial injustice and

political oppression, especially when these affected Indians. The newspaper informed the Indian diaspora community in South Africa but was also, in its overseas location, contributing to an evolving sense of Indian nationhood (Devji 2012). Moreover, the International Printing Press, which printed the newspaper, additionally published pamphlets and items from the newspaper and then distributed these separately to readers in South Africa and India: one of these pamphlets was none other than the translation of Plato that we have been considering. Gandhi's interpretation of the *Apology* was thus part of a print culture in which moral teachings and political demands existed side-by-side with sundry translations, reportage, and reflections on India, the British Empire, South Africa, and race.

The Gandhian provenance of Plato's *Apology* made it suspect in the eyes of the British authorities, who, in 1910, banned the pamphlet in Bombay. According to a notice in *The Bombay Government Gazette* (March 24, 1910, No. 12, Part I, p. 442), the translation of the *Apology* was seized by officers since it deployed 'words which are likely to bring into hatred and contempt the Government established by law in British India and to excite disaffection to the said Government'. These expressions were formulaic and evoked the strictures of the Press Act of 1910. The *Gazette* also disclosed that three other works were banned by the government, namely, *Hind Swaraj*, *Sarvodaya*, and a copy of a speech delivered by Mustafa Kamal Pasha. The last was a reference to a speech given by Mustafa Kamal Pasha, in October 1907, in Alexandria, a few months before his death, which occurred, in February 1908, in Cairo. Gandhi, who was sympathetic to the Egyptian, had translated the speech into Gujarati and published it in *Indian Opinion* in June 1908 (*Indian Opinion* 27 June 1908; *CWMG* vol. 8, p. 326). The text of Plato's *Apology* now belonged to a literature that, in the language of the Press Act, contained 'words, signs or visible representations which are likely or may

have a tendency, directly or indirectly, whether by inference, suggestion, allusion, metaphor, implication or otherwise' to threaten the British government of India.

The inclusion of a translation of Plato's *Apology* in the list of banned works was slightly anomalous in so far as it is the only one of the four that went back to antiquity. Clearly, the source of the publication and the identity of the 'translator' set off alarm bells in the British administration. Gandhi's version was not the first translation of the *Apology* into an Indian language; it was not even the first version into Gujarati. 'Ala al-Din Sharif Salih Muhammad published the second edition of his Gujarati account of Socrates—which admittedly draws on various dialogues by Plato and not just the *Apology*—in Bombay as early as 1897 (*Pletonan prasnottara*, 2nd edn., Bombay). Indian treatments of Greek philosophy were permitted to circulate by the colonial authorities (e.g. the Urdu discussion of Ihsan Allah published in 1883), as were other translations of Plato. In Gandhi's lifetime, the British administrator Frank Lugard Brayne wrote *Socrates in an Indian Village* and a series of related titles as part of his programme of rural development in the Punjab. In 1931, more strikingly, Sir John Gilbert Laithwaite, a British civil servant and later private secretary to the Viceroy, wrote a pseudo-Platonic dialogue between Socrates and Gandhi, for the entertainment of another civil servant, Sir (Samuel) Findlater Stewart, the permanent under secretary of state for India (British Library, India Office Records, MSS Eur/F138/171). It was not Socrates or Plato who troubled the officers of the British government in India; it was Gandhi's portrayal of Socrates that was the source of the grievance.

The notice in the *Bombay Government Gazette* did not pass unremarked on by Gandhi, who responded with a short piece in *Indian Opinion* (7 May 1910) and pointed out that the '*Defence of Socrates* or *The Story of a True Warrior* is a Gujarati rendering of Plato's immortal work printed in order to illustrate the virtue and the true nature of

passive resistance'. He also wrote that the banned publications, with the exception of *Hind Swaraj*, had been with the reading public for some time. These publications, Gandhi writes, 'are intended to impart a lofty, moral tone to the reader and are, in our opinion, works capable of being put into children's hands without any danger whatsoever'. The government was trying 'to stop the circulation of literature that shows the slightest independence of spirit' and was likely to be consumed by excessive zeal. Gandhi goes on to present himself and his associates as champions of passive resistance and maintains that they will not be affected by the government's repression. He agrees with the authorities that violence is unacceptable and adds that 'the only way we know to eradicate the disease is to popularize passive resistance of the right stamp. Any other way, especially repression, must inevitably fail in the long run' (*CWMG* vol. 10, p. 245).

By the time Gandhi returned to India from South Africa, Socrates was established in his mind as the exemplar of a *satyagrahi*. When the Rowlatt Act of 1919 took aim at the possession of seditious documents, the Satyagraha Sabha, led by Gandhi, decided to disseminate the same four tracts, including the Gujarati translation of Plato's *Apology*, that were banned for sedition in 1910. As one critic notes, 'the rereading and translation of the *Apology* becomes one of the first acts of civil disobedience for the 1919 *satyagraha*' (Gandhi 1996–1997, p. 120). The statement by the Sabha noted that the books had been selected since they were 'not inconsistent with satyagraha, and . . . therefore, of a clean type and . . . [did] not, either directly or indirectly, approve of or encourage violence' (*CWMG* vol. 15, p. 192). In the Congress Report on the subsequent unrest in the Punjab, Gandhi again expounded on the meaning of *satyagraha* as truth-force and observed that Socrates was a *satyagrahi* since he insisted on telling the truth to young Athenians and then laid down his life for that

principle (*CWVG* 17.152–53). *Satyagraha* was non-violent and involved self-control, he added, and it could not be blamed for the violence and pillaging of the protesters in the Punjab.

‘There was once a wise man, named Socrates, who lived in Athens. His unconventional ideas, which, however, spread love of truth and goodness, displeased the authorities, and he was sentenced to death’ (*CWVG* vol. 49, p, 169). As the letter to a relative confirms, Gandhi’s identification with Socrates persisted at least into the 1930s, when he again summarized the *Apology*, though far more briefly this time. Yet, it is a mistake to extrapolate from Gandhi’s references to truth and goodness in his writings on Socrates and to think of him as a simple, unsophisticated, or overly literal reader of Greek philosophy. Plato and Socrates are not the first names that come to mind in connection with anti-colonialism or civil disobedience or with spiritual renewal, but one of the interesting features of the engagement with Socrates, in South Africa and India, is how Gandhi ‘brings to insurgency’ the words of a Platonic text (Gandhi 1996–1997, p. 120). This reading of Socrates was not entirely new and took its inspiration from, among other things, the writings of John Ruskin and nineteenth-century conceptions of Socrates as a martyr. Ruskin, in particular, had awoken in Gandhi a powerful understanding of Plato’s text and affirmed for him that the struggle for *satyagraha* needed to be upheld at all costs, unto the last, even unto death. Many of Gandhi’s interlocutors, opponents, and gaolers would have had a far deeper knowledge than Gandhi of Plato’s Greek and a more wide-ranging familiarity with Plato’s dialogues (and, for that matter, of Ruskin’s work). Gandhi could not read classical Greek. But it was he, and not they, who perceived the transformative potential of the *Apology* in an English translation of the Victorian period and who thereby came to a better understanding of *satyagraha*, the truth-force that brought an Empire to its knees.

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