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# Gandhi and Sustainability. An Attempt to Update Timeless Ideas

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**Abstract:** Linking Gandhi and sustainability may seem like a fashionable gimmick at first glance. However, if sustainability is understood in a holistic way, as a transformation of human–environment relations as well as of social and economic structures, this image changes. If one also takes seriously that Gandhi's understanding of non-violence does not only include the avoidance of physical violence, but a fundamental attitude in different areas of life, such as economy or the use of technology, it becomes clear that sustainability, as it is currently being promoted by the United Nations in *Agenda 2030*, and Gandhi's concept of *satyagraha* pursue identical goals. Gandhi, as well as elements of the Christian ethical tradition, can enrich political programs with a spiritual dimension, without which profound changes in human attitudes will not be possible.

**Keywords:** Gandhi; sustainability; nonviolence; Catholic social thought; alternative development

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**Citation:** Guggenberger, Wilhelm. 2021. Gandhi and Sustainability. An Attempt to Update Timeless Ideas. *Religions* 12: 753. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090753

Academic Editors: Ephraim Meir, Ed Noort, Louise du Toit and Wolfgang Palaver

Received: 27 July 2021
Accepted: 7 September 2021
Published: 13 September 2021

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This text deals on the one hand with Mohandas K. Gandhi's significance for the issue of sustainability and on the other hand looks for traces of this issue in Gandhi's thinking. Why this choice of topic? Gandhi is known for having led India to independence, but arguably not as a leading figure in sustainability thinking. In the first line, he is revered as a hero of non-violence. That Gandhi's ideas could also be important in an environmentalist context has only been discovered in recent years (Syal and Kumar 2020; Allen 2019). One could now argue that such a discovery is not at all appropriate to reality. Would it not be possible either that a current buzzword is attributed to an idealized figure or that this figure is being misused as a figurehead of the current environmental and climate-protection movement to give it an additional boost? Either one side or the other would then be misused as a publicity stunt.

At first glance, this perception may seem justified. If we look at things a little more closely, I guess we can see that this is based on two misconceptions. One misunderstanding concerns a too-narrow understanding of sustainability, the other concerns the interpretation of non-violence (*ahimsa*) in the sense of Gandhi. To provide argumentative support for this claim, I will first discuss the term sustainability, which is used so frequently—if not inflationary—today and then have a look at Gandhi's understanding of non-violence and its realisation in this context. Ultimately, it should be possible to show that Gandhi's thinking, particularly his concept of *sarvodaya* and the challenging project of sustainability overlap in many ways. I therefore advocate that Gandhi's thinking be used as a source of inspiration for the global transformation process that we are currently facing. Moreover, it will also be shown, at least to some extent, that there are clear parallels between Gandhi's approach and the tradition of Christian social ethics. This is significant because it shows that spiritual impulses from different origins can contribute to bringing sustainability goals to life in the world society. Reading the following it is important to bear in mind that both Gandhi as a person and large institutions such as the United Nations or religious communities such as the Catholic Church often fail in realizing their own ideals and objectives. However, this should not lead us to discard valuable ideas and convincing arguments, even if the deed admittedly remains more convincing than the word.

## 1. Towards a Comprehensive Understanding of Sustainability

The first thought we associate with sustainability is probably that of environmental degradation and protection. This is by no means without reason. As it is generally known, the term sustainability originates from forestry (Caradonna 2014, pp. 20–21). During the period of early industrialisation, only a few agents recognized the limitations of natural resources to be an obstacle to technological and economic growth. If one is cutting his forests to expand his or her ore- or coalmine, faster than new trees are growing the expansion either will come to an end or become quite expansive as the means of production will have to be brought over from far away. Thus, the main field of sustainable action from the beginning was the ecological environment. Nevertheless, the term was coined within a context concatenating natural preconditions and economic outcomes. Such an interconnection of economic and social processes on the one hand and the natural environment on the other seems not to be surprising within a framework of somehow enlightened human self-interest.

In the beginning, the idea of interconnectedness of human and non-human spheres remained almost only anthropocentric, a fact that has changed meanwhile at least slightly. Eventually, the imagery of a holistic, complex network has become crucial in talking about sustainability. That means that nature, including bodily human reality, is not only recognized as a factor of production but rather as comprehensive precondition of human existence. Further economy is reclassified as it is not the unique aim of social activity but only one aspect of enabling quality of life. On a global level, this shift of perception gained importance at the latest with the publication of the so-called Brundtland Report *Our Common Future* in 1987.

This report, which still points the way forward, was also met with fierce criticism. A major reason for this was that according to the Brundtland Commission, combating global poverty only seemed possible based on further growth. Distributive justice and the necessity of equal opportunities were mentioned of course. However, the report assumes that more efficient but continued growth—including industrial production and mining—is indispensable to improve the situation of humankind. “Many essential human needs can be met only through goods and services provided by industry. The production of food requires increasing amounts of agrochemicals and machinery. Beyond this, the products of industry form the material basis of contemporary standards of living” (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987, chp. 8, No. 2). The demand for economic growth to be made ecologically compatible, as it were, came both from the technically and economically highly developed states and from the countries of the global South (von Weizsäcker et al. 2010, p. 17). The approach, which seeks to decouple growth and environmental degradation on the one hand, and to make growth more equitable on the other, is probably not radical enough given the magnitude and seriousness of the challenges. As Tim Jackson has shown in his famous book *Prosperity without Growth,* technological progress and increased efficiency in using resources will not avoid the destruction of our planet as long as the number of humans, as well as individual demands, will increase (Jackson 2017). It was further mentioned in a critical manner that “there is no emphasis on spiritual values, or individual responsibility in the Brundtland report. Rather the focus is on collective institutional responses, efficiency gains, and social responsibility” (Robinson 2004, p. 373).

In any case, the merit of *Our Common Future* is that ecological and social challenges are presented as interrelated ones. Since then, the need for a holistic way of thinking that perceives society and the environment as an interconnected unit has become more and more apparent. As it is said in the report: “A world in which poverty and inequity are endemic will always be prone to ecological and other crises” (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987, chp. 2, No. 4). The task of integrating both aspects—the social and the ecological one—is by no means easy but undoubtedly indispensable and requires a synthetic, transdisciplinary way of thinking which “actively creates synergy, not just summation” (Robinson 2004, p. 378).

In line with the report of 1987 is the current UN programme called *Agenda 2030*. Considering the status of such a programme elaborated by representatives of all the UN member states and its prominence it seems justifiable to focus on it in our context even if there are manifold other approaches to sustainability and even if it may be questionable in detail. This framework for sustainable development of humankind until 2030 consists of 17 different goals (SDGs, i.e., Sustainable Development Goals) covering such diverse topics as reduction in poverty and hunger, improving innovative technologies and decent working conditions, reducing gender injustice, protecting global climate and ecosystems or engaging for peace. One may say that there is too much included in this agenda to enable purposeful action. By trying to reach all these aims at the same time one necessarily must fail in reaching one of them.

Even if it may be true that the agenda is too ambitious, its strength lies in the fact that it does not split sustainability into a multitude of individual, independently considered topics, but rather counts on synergies between the areas and realises the likelihood of trade-offs as well. Of course, it cannot be denied that the devil is in the details also in this case. This is expressed, for example, in the debate about whether the term sustainability is preferable or whether we should speak of sustainable development. The former draws attention to a change of basic attitude towards the natural environment and our life in it, the latter focuses on more pragmatic or technical management of environmental damage that affects us uncomfortably (Robinson 2004, p. 371). Sustainable development in this context is harshly criticised for its focus on a techno-economic concept of development. “Sustainable development, on this view, is a classic case of a technological fix, which will perpetuate the underlying disease by treating only the symptoms” (Robinson 2004, p. 377). This criticism applies in particular to Goal 8 of the *Agenda 2030*, which calls for sustained economic growth and full and productive employment for all.

Nevertheless, the accusation that goals and targets contained in the agenda are fundamentally contradictory is based on the concept of a conflictive and rivalling reality. Such a concept is not only incongruous with the concept of sustainability as such (Singh et al. 2018, p. 24) but also quite different from Gandhi’s worldview. If our world would consist of separated functional systems competing with each other the wellbeing and unfolding of the one had to be tantamount to the diminishing and suppression of the other. Such a logic of mere trade-offs for example would mean that an economy providing human prosperity unavoidably had to exploit if not even to destroy nature. According to a common saying, you cannot have your cake and eat it. Although that undoubtedly is a fact a fundamental error of reasoning must be recognized if we consider nature a piece of property or a consumer item, which is at our disposal instead of acknowledging it to be a self-reliant vivid reality with which we must coexist enabling co-prosperity including the wellbeing of nature and human society. A study looking for co-benefits among particular SDGs focussing on ocean-related sustainability-targets states in this context: “A final hypothesis is that the SDGs that tightly couple environment, society, and economy may be the most important for meeting/achieving diverse sustainability goals” (Singh et al. 2018, p. 229). Thus, the current understanding of sustainability, even if requiring economic transformation, is not anti-economic as it must not refrain from social engagement. More generally speaking, it is far from being exclusively concerned with ecological issues. This opens a first connection to Gandhi who like the most part of pre-modern oriental as well as occidental philosophical and religious tradition “never demarcated between economics, politics, religion, education of man. For him they constitute an integral whole” (Sambasiva 2019, p. 35). None of these aspects of the comprehensive “Lebenswelt” (living world) can be practised or even understood separated from each other or separated from nature on which humans hinge and to which they belong as bodily beings.

To conclude these considerations, sustainable development must be understood as the coevolution of people, structures and institutions of society which may be called anthropo-sphere and their ecological environment, i.e., the geo-, atmo-, and the biosphere. Realising this is not an easy task at all and will not be achieved without conflict but the ideal guiding our decisions and actions must be a mode of coexistence of human individuals, peoples, nations, and the nonhuman creation lifting and supporting each other while at the same time guaranteeing a place for future generations. Therefore, sustainability cannot be limited to political programmes or strategic tools. It presupposes a transformation of prevalent worldviews. Insofar as worldviews are not only rational concepts, but also contain emotions, attitudes, and beliefs, which are more difficult to change than information-based knowledge, we are ultimately dealing with a spiritual challenge. Gandhi's longing for *satyagraha* is one possible path to such an innermost change. Even if the *Agenda 2030* itself is an expression of at least an incipient rethinking, such a political project probably cannot adequately capture the dimension of the necessary inner change of heart. If this is true, the implementation of the agenda requires cultural and spiritual impulses, such as those that can come from the world's religions (Pope Francis 2015, No. 63; CWMG 1956–1994, p. 33). It is about a changed, more appreciative way of dealing with oneself, one's fellow human beings and nature.

## 2. Non-Violence in the Face of Multiple Forms of Violence

The latter idea leads directly to the issue of non-violence in the sense of Gandhi. It seems obvious that Gandhi was well aware of the multidimensionality of violence (Allen 2019, p. 6), which matches with his conviction that non-violence (ahimsa) has to be all-pervasive in the sense of a live shaping tenet. That means that not only he addressed direct, physical violence but also what in the wake of Johan Galtung we may call structural and cultural violence (Galtung 1969, 1990). Each social structure or institution preventing people from meeting their needs and developing their potentials represents structural violence. Cultural violence is rooted even deeper in the collective consciousness and justifies structural sometimes direct violence by providing imageries of "normal" or justified exploitation, suppression, or exclusion. We could add the form of epistemic violence currently under discussion, which can be seen as an expression of cultural violence in academically influenced discourse. The essential element of this violence consists in not allowing a certain part of reality, especially marginalized groups of people, to have their say (Spivak 1993). Particularly in a situation in which we are faced with scientific expertise and its authority widely marketed in the media, the depiction of reality distorted by narrow-minded epistemic frameworks is a crucial aspect of indirect violence that demands our attention. The use of terms and theories shapes public discourse and thus could establish manifest structures of violence. That Gandhi addressed the group of untouchables as Harijan (children of God) can be interpreted as an action against epistemic violence. Even if this is criticized today as a possible trivialization of a dramatic situation of injustice, Gandhi's intention to express the dignity of Dalits beyond all caste logic by using this term seems to be beyond doubt. This is supported by statements like the following: "The removal of untouchability means treating the so-called untouchables as one's own kith and kin. He who does treat them so must be free from the sense of high and low ... " (CWMG 1956–1994, p. 379).

With regard to the concrete handling of the Indian caste tradition, there have always been disputes. The best known is probably the conflict between Bhimrao Ramji Ambedakr and Gandhi. Ambedkar, who himself had to suffer the experience of untouchability represented a reason-centred approach, which was strongly influenced by western enlightenment thinking. This led the important reformer to a kind of strict secularity that—although it does not discard religion completely—was far from Gandhi's understanding (Rodrigues 2011, p. 57). Gandhi largely judged modernity to be a reality that "was deeply caught in violence and stressed on power. It was not self-determining moral agents that were its priority but satisfaction of externally induced wants" (Rodrigues 2011, p. 60). He fundamentally valued India's religious tradition. In the course of this effort, he may have portrayed an element such as the ideal meaning of caste too positively and criticised too little the real political outcome and impact in the present. Nevertheless, he clearly condemned untouchability (Gandhi 2015, pp. 37–38). The disputes between Ambedkar and Gandhi require a more in-depth discussion, which cannot be achieved here. It may suffice to note that both persons emphasised different aspects of social reform, which must complement each other. For Gandhi, the spiritual maturation of individuals and the inner change of attitude were at the centre of any social design, while Ambedkar had more of an eye on the question of structures.

Since violence comes in such a variety of forms, ahimsa must signify more than pacifism or foregoing of the use of weapons or brute force, it requires a change in the structures and concepts that shape our thinking and our attitudes and thereby also society at its core. Gandhi was deeply aware of this. Let me refer to two social areas now in which we particularly may detect both structural and at least traces of cultural and epistemic violence: economy and technology.

### 2.1. Economic Violence

Gandhi often mentions economic violence like exploitation or exclusion from the area of sufficient survival conditions. Perhaps his most sensational action during the Indian independence movement, the Salt March of 1930, was directed against a form of economic, structural violence. As Gandhi mentioned: "The salt-tax is not a small injustice" (CWMG 1956–1994, p. 12). His approach to the sphere of economy moreover is stricter than the mainstream of the traditional Christian one that should have shaped the actions of the British colonial government. In Christian tradition, Thomas Aquinas mentions that keeping much more goods than is needed while others are lacking necessities is injustice. In this context, he speaks of abundance (superfluous goods), which denotes possession exceeding what is appropriate to a person's social position. (Summa Theologiae II-II q. 32, a. 5–6) To Gandhi economic violence is already there when one takes more for her- or himself than absolutely necessary. As he put it: "A thing not originally stolen must nevertheless be classified as stolen property, if we possess it without needing it" (CWMG 1956–1994, p. 103). However, both traditions consider glaring economic inequality violence. Accordingly, not only does the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching speak of justice being another name for peace, but Gandhi also says that any political programme is "a structure on sand if it is not built on the solid foundation of economic equality" (CWMG 1956–1994, p. 381). Therefore, for Gandhi exploitation of the weak ones must be overcome no matter in whom it originates, either in foreign colonial powers or in domestic elites. Gandhi's resistance is thus not to be understood as a purely anti- or postcolonial one. If it is against anything at all, it is against injustice and violence in all its forms; but it is more appropriate to speak of resistance in favour of the oppressed and the poor.

A form in which structural violence manifests itself today is post-democracy in which an economic elite rules over the majority of the people although formally democratic structures do exist. The majority of people is excluded from very decision-making and overruled by the restricted interests of a small group of haves. "Their accumulated wealth has given them the power to influence governments" (Gandhi 2020, p. 78). Post-democratic structures can therefore be understood as a form of economic violence in which the one-person-one-vote principle is undermined by the logic that each act of purchase is a vote. The number of votes a person has is thus analogous to his or her ability to pay. Such conditions seem to be quite present in today's India confirming Gandhi's warning that a liberated India that follows Western patterns will never be truly free.

These brief reflections may suffice to draw our attention to the possibilities of economic injustice, since it is probably uncontroversial that economic exploitation and extreme inequality constitute a form of oppression that we rightly call violence against which Gandhi's *satyagraha* approach was consequently directed. Much more controversial is the topic of technology.

### 2.2. Violent Aspects of Technology

In general, advancement in technology today is considered to be one of the most important tools to overcome poverty, social inequality and also ecological threats. Gandhi however considered the modern mode of technical development to be structural violence. He made this judgement under the impression of British industrialisation, which alienated and enslaved the masses of workers. He feared an analogous effect for India. Particularly in his early book *Hind Swaraj* he rejected technology which he called machinery completely. “I cannot recall a single good point in connection with machinery” (CWMG 1956–1994, p. 59). Such and similar formulations contributed to Gandhi’s reputation as an anti-modernist ignorant of the reality of our time and its requirements. *Hind Swaraj* was written in 1909. In an introduction newly written on a further edition of the book 16 years later, the editor quotes the author still arguing that technological tools are but a lesser evil. His approach depicted there one may not only deem radical but also somatophobic. For Gandhi claimed that technology—like the human body—was inevitable but—like the body—it was also a hindrance to the highest flights of the soul and therefore had to be rejected (CWMG 1956–1994, p. 255). However, Gandhi realized that his approach though helpful in the context of the individual longing for spiritual growth could not be equally helpful in shaping communal life. Therefore, he argued a little bit more sophisticated nevertheless sceptical about technology, when the student Ramachandran, asked him during an interview in 1924 if he had been against all machinery. His response was: “How can I be when I know that even this body is a most delicate piece of machinery? The spinning-wheel itself is a machine; a little tooth-pick is a machine. What I object to, is the craze for machinery, not machinery as such” (CWMG 1956–1994, pp. 250–51). The mentioned craze is rooted in greed according to him by which modern economy, as well as science and technology, are driven for the most part. The central point of his argument is that machines and factories should not work “for profit, but for the benefit of humanity, love taking the place of greed as the motive” (CWMG 1956–1994, p. 251) Therefore, the human person must be placed at the centre of considerations. Or as it was put by J.C. Kumarappa an economic advisor of Gandhi: “Gandhism aims at the development of the human being” (Kumarappa 1951, p. 48).

Since Gandhi’s scepticism towards technological progress in general and the technologization of the economy in particular is not only accused of being backward but also could be perceived as rooted in a specific Hindu-Buddhist asceticism and renouncement, two more current approaches should be mentioned. They have emerged in the Western world and are characterised by a Christian approach to the topic. This may prove that Gandhi-like critique is not irrelevant to the western sphere as well as that it must not be attributed to resentment-ridden victims of colonialism, but rather always appears in a similar form where a spiritual–holistic worldview is established and urges for the formation of a new mindset.

One approach was developed by Ivan Illich one could call a catholic dissident or even anarchist, who like Gandhi was very sceptical about institutions of education and health care as far as they do not consider personal subjects comprehensively enough, including all their physical, intellectual, emotional, interrelational and spiritual dimensions. In general, there are parallels in the approaches of Illich and Gandhi that cannot be overlooked (Hardiman 2003, pp. 87–89). It is said that Illich “once told Madhu Suri Prakash that all of his writings could be thought of as a series of footnotes to Mahatma Gandhi’s work” (Grego 2013, p. 92). His critical thoughts on technique can be found in a compacted form in his 1973-book *Tools for Conviviality*. In German, this book is titled *Selbstbegrenzung* (self-limitation); a term closely related to self-rule (*swaraj*) as it means a conscious decision for what is necessary and helpful for the unfolding of one’s freedom, whereby the dominance of drives and external influences is broken. This kind of self-limitation entails the search for a new form of technology that no longer encounters us as an independent power to which we are subject in analogy to the laws of nature. “People need new tools to work with rather than tools that “work” for them. They need technology to make the most of the energy and imagination each has, rather than more well-programmed energy slaves” (Illich 1973, p. 23).

Depicting social reality as being in accordance with conviviality Illich targets the participation of people in decisions on technological development which requires small and manageable structures. As the Indian philosopher Gobinathan Pillai put it according to Gandhi, he "would appreciate the technological development beyond the "primitive" but it would be a highly selective technology and would be of such a nature that it could be controlled by relatively small communities" (Gopinathan Pillai 1988, p. 381).

Self-responsibility and self-rule on the one hand and a social system that enables participation on the other are two sides of the same coin. Both are more likely to come into play where the mere pursuit of possessions and power is not dominating. Illich worked out this connection clearly when he reflected on the fact that we have tried for a hundred years to replace slaves with machines that should work for us only to discover at the end that machines are enslaving men (Illich 1973, p. 24). This paradoxical development was depicted in a similar way by Hans Jonas (Jonas 1984, pp. 140–42). Illich answered the question of what went wrong with our intentions to make humanity freer by fostering technology as follows: "The illusion prevailed that the machine was a laboratory-made homunculus, and that it could do our labour instead of slaves. It is now time to correct this mistake and shake off the illusion that men are born to be slaveholders and that the only thing wrong in the past was that not all men could be equally so. By reducing our expectations of machines, however, we must guard against falling into the equally damaging rejection of all machines as if they were works of the devil" (Illich 1973, p. 33). This quotation shows the necessity to rethink our self-perception as rulers, which does not at all mean that we do not have the ability or even liability to shape and conduct our life and its conditions including the use of technical tools. On the contrary, it should lead us to a constructive mode of self-rule as Gandhi would put it. Conviviality based on such self-rule according to Illich, would mean an "autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment; and this in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment" (Illich 1973, p. 24).

Insofar as technology as such represents a habit of domination, it becomes understandable that it "is incompatible with the accomplishment of a non-violent, decentralised social order" (Gopinathan Pillai 1988, p. 378). Partnership rather than domination provides the guiding principle for conviviality that helps us to overcome the mingling of means and ends by showing "that only persons have ends and that only persons can work toward them" (Illich 1973, p. 65). The last point may sound too anthropocentric to a contemporary environmentalist's ears. Nevertheless, Illich claims that such a person-centrism is the precondition to re-establish ecological balance. It also resembles Gandhi's critique that in our modern way of living more and more means have been treated as ends.

However, we must recognize that presumably different concepts of reality are deeply engrained in the traditions of East and West, respectively. Human beings as well as God in western tradition cannot be imagined other than being individuals distinct from others. As the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber underlines, a personal individual cannot become a self without a You (Buber 1937, p. 11). This asserts relationship to be constitutional to human beings, however, a relationship that connects different entities. The starting point of eastern traditions on the other hand seems to be unity permeated by one vivid force or soul that interweaves everything. In Gandhi's very words: "I believe in absolute oneness of God and therefore also of humanity. What though we have many bodies? We have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through refraction. But they have the same source" (CWMG 1956–1994, p. 199). Further: "The only way to God is to see Him in His creation and be one with it. This can only be done by service of all. . . . I am part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity" (CWMG 1956–1994, p. 297). Thought through to the end, this also means, any distinction between human dignity the dignity of all living beings and the dignity of all existing reality is less fundamental in this context. For Gandhi, unity among human beings is primary, but where this is realized, there will also be unity between humanity and the whole of creation (CWMG 1956–1994, p. 285). We should try to bring both approaches—the western and the eastern one—together to foster the respect of human persons on the one hand and to strengthen the respect of each kind of living creature on the other. Both will be necessary to find "an alternative to technocratic disaster" (Illich 1973, p. 25).

At this point of reflection, it may be appropriate to introduce the second author of whom Gandhi reminds us today: Jorge Mario Bergoglio, elected Pope Francis in 2013. Quoting the German philosopher and Catholic theologian Romano Guardini several times he criticises what is called the technocratic paradigm in his second Encyclical Letter *Laudato si*. A crucial argument in this context is that we as modern humans are not trained in a proper way to use the power we have gained by science and technology in the right way. Therefore, the formation of responsibility and consciousness did not keep up with the dynamic development of tools and skills we have undergone since the Age of Enlightenment (Pope Francis 2015, No. 104–5). Tools and skills embedded in a technological paradigm tend to become mere means of domination, domination of other people and domination of nature. This way of dealing with our environment has become so self-evident that there seems to be no alternative. Thus, the Pope writes: "It has become countercultural to choose a lifestyle whose goals are even partly independent of technology, of its costs and its power to globalize and make us all the same. Technology tends to absorb everything into its ironclad logic, and those who are surrounded with technology "know full well that it moves forward in the final analysis neither for profit nor for the well-being of the human race", that "in the most radical sense of the term power is its motive—a lordship over all" (Pope Francis 2015, No. 108). From that clearly follows: not the physical object, a specific machine or infrastructure has to be criticized rather it is the habit carrying on the whole system or culture, which occurs to be fundamentally violent. Once again in the very words of Pope Francis: "My criticism of the technocratic paradigm involves more than simply thinking that if we control its excesses everything will be fine. The bigger risk does not come from specific objects, material realities or institutions, but from the way that they are used. It has to do with human weakness, the proclivity to selfishness that is part of what the Christian tradition refers to as "concupiscence"" (Pope Francis 2020, No. 166).

Even if Gandhi as a Hindu does not use the concept of original sin and concupiscence and even if I have not found evidence for explicit Gandhian Influence on Bergoglio until now the two approaches resemble each other very much (Tschudin 2020, pp. 264–65) just as they both have similarities with Illich's approach. Particularly the Pope's call for more solidarity and respect of human dignity "has demonstrable synchronicity with a Gandhian approach" (Tschudin 2020, p. 268). All three concepts have in common to consider the intrinsically domination-seeking and acquisitive habit spurring modern economy and technology the crucial problem. As Gandhi answered the question about the reason for the personal and global chaos we observe: "It is exploitation . . . And my fundamental objection to machinery rests on the fact that it is machinery that has enabled these nations to exploit others. In itself it is a wooden thing and can be turned to good purpose or bad. But it is easily turned to a bad purpose as we know" (CWMG 1956–1994, p. 129).

A self-centred, domination-addicted human habit does not only affect human interrelations but also the relation between humans and nature. As Douglas Allen writes referring to Gandhi: "In modern civilisation, nature has no inherent value and serves as a valueless object, a resource, a nonhuman other, for us to control, dominate, and exploit for our own, human instrumentally-defined ends. Modern technology is a glorified means for exploiting nature. In Gandhi's *swaraj*, *dharma* civilizational approach, nature has value, allowing us to experience and constitute integral, meaningful, harmonious, sustainable relations with the other, and in realizing our unity and interconnectedness with reality. Nature, as other, is an integral relational part of our process of self-realization, self-transformation, and world-transformation" (Allen 2019, p. 121).

A fundamentally violent habit underlying a competitive style of economy, which is motivated by greed and a kind of technology, which has become an end in itself as far as it seems to guarantee power destroys nature, destroys human interrelations and in the end destroys our possibility to become mature human personalities. Thus, we have to consider such a kind of violent habit a core obstacle to sustainable development as mentioned before in all its different dimensions.

## 3. *Sarvodaya*—An Integral Concept of Non-Violent Sustainability

Let us now move from the analysis to possible solutions. Gandhi's concept of *sarvodaya* could be taken as the epitome of sustainable development rooted in a non-violent habit. The Sanskrit term *Sarvodaya* denotes the comprehensive up-lift of all and is closely related to what we call common good also known as common weal in western tradition. The Catholic *Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Church* puts this as follows: "The common good does not consist in the simple sum of the particular goods of each subject of a social entity. Belonging to everyone and to each person, it is and remains "common", because it is indivisible and because only together is it possible to attain it, increase it and safeguard its effectiveness, with regard also to the future" (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, No. 164). According to John Rawls, each "government is assumed to aim at the common good, that is, at maintaining conditions and achieving objectives that are similarly to everyone's advantage" (Rawls 1971, p. 205).

### *3.1. Longing for the Uplift of All*

Gandhi's understanding of common weal was immensely influenced by John Ruskin whose 1862 Essay *Unto this Last* (Ruskin 1907) he translated into Gujarati and published it under the title *Sarvodaya.* He referred to this text as "the magic spell of a book" (CWMG 1956–1994, p. 238). Ruskin may not be recognized as a scientific authority by the mainstream of social and economic science. However, it is a matter of fact that he had a good sense according to ethical questions appearing with the industrial revolution and liberal market-society as well as to shortcomings of modern economic thought. Even if Ruskin may have inspired Gandhi in a more moral way primarily understood as affecting the habits of the mind or even hart his approach nevertheless has become a source of political and economic considerations in the long run. This—as Douglas Allen writes—is due to the fact that Gandhi was not willing to distinguish morality sharply from economics, politics, technology and so on: "Moral living is necessarily political, since it is concerned with real human suffering, exploitation, oppression, poverty, violence, war, inequality, and injustice. The political is necessarily moral, since it is not value free or an end in itself, but is concerned with establishing relations that are nonviolent, peaceful, compassionate, egalitarian, democratic, and promote welfare for all" (Allen 2019, p. 5).

The central point of Ruskin's book is the distinction between political and mercantile economy. The former is aimed at preserving and promoting the common good or as Ruskin put it at augmentation of the riches and well-being of the nation, the latter at increasing the wealth of individuals (Ruskin 1907, p. 133). Therefore, it is essential to focus on the actual goal of all economic activity, which is the continuance of the "happiness and power of the entire human nature, body and soul" (Ruskin 1907, p. 198), whereby, for Ruskin, it is out of the question that this must not be just the happiness of a small minority. In his autobiography *My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi writes that the first of three teachings he found in Ruskin was "that the good of the individual is contained in the good of all" (CWMG 1956–1994, p. 239). Which is quite the opposite to the liberal concept of gaining the good of all through everybody's striving for his or her own profit.

According to Christian social thought, common weal will only come true if a community and every single individual in it is willing to consider the needs of the weakest and poorest first. This has also become a key idea of the political agenda of the UN, put there as the standard "to leave no one behind" (United Nations 2015, No. 4, 26 etc.). In Gandhi, exactly the same principle is crucial when he formulates as a test criterion for truthful action: "Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test: Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to *swaraj* for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away (CWMG 1956–1994, p. 125). At this point the connection of spiritually rooted self-rule and the realisation of common good in society becomes particularly clear. "As Gandhi repeatedly submits, it is when I discipline, control, and sacrifice my ego-driven self, when I identify with the needs of the suffering and unfree other, that is when the deeper, nonviolent, truthful self/Self, God, Reality, and so on, are revealed and become an essential part of my process of self-realization" (Allen 2019, p. 119).

However, self-realization is not the ultimate goal, it is an indispensable element in the process of transformation of mindset, individual life and social design. Part of the latter is the re-shaping of the economic system. According to Ruskin, exchange economy in which one party tries to gain maximised profit inevitably is "founded on the ignorance or incapacity of the opposite person" (Ruskin 1907, p. 174). Maintaining such a form of economy is tantamount to structural violence, which can only be overcome by empowering the uneducated and the poor. Accordingly, it is not sufficient to perceive the good of all as average welfare within a collective body but rather as situation free of structural violence. That means to remove all the obstacles which inhibit that many live a good life and long for his or her self-realization in the sense of *swaraj*.

### *3.2. Building Sustainable Societies from Below*

These considerations remind the Christian social ethicist of another principle that stands alongside the common good in Catholic social teaching: subsidiarity. In Catholic Social Ethics, subsidiarity is one of the basic pillars of a society shaped according to human dignity. "Believing that most often best decisions are made at the local level, closest to the people who will be most affected by them, subsidiarity means handing decision making downward to smaller entities. It can also mean moving upward to larger entities, even to transnational bodies, if this better serves the common good and protects the rights of people. Subsidiarity, in this sense, becomes a corrective against the concentration of power and resources in the hands of a privileged elite" (Groody 2007, p. 115).

I think in Gandhi this principle is embodied in the idea of *swadeshi*. In 1946 he depicted in *Harijan* what is meant by that: "Ultimately, it is the individual who is the unit. This does not exclude dependence on and willing help from neighbours or from the world. ... In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever widening, never ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units" (CWMG 1956–1994, pp. 32–33). As Gandhi states that the individual is ready to perish in favour of the comprehensive community and not that the community is ready to sacrifice the individual for its own sake—which is quite a crucial difference—the idea of common weal presented in this quote is shaped by the principle of subsidiarity, which supports the dignity of the person. "Therefore, the outermost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle but will give strength to all within and derive its own strength from it" (CWMG 1956–1994, p. 33).

Gandhi's attempt to realize *sarvodaya* as village-*swaraj* and an economy focussed on small self-sustaining and subsistent unities was disputed from the outset. By the way, he was himself aware that this was a directional, somewhat utopian idea and not a master plan.

The criticism of this is at least partly based on misunderstandings. Gandhi's concept of economic self-sufficiency should not be understood in the sense of group egoism, nationalism, or market protectionism. During India's struggle for independence, it was not a market that needed to be protected, but the mostly rural population that was kept in poverty and dependency on British goods (Kazuya 2001, pp. 303–4). Further, the proposed approach was not a revolutionary one resembling communism and its juxtaposition of hostile classes. On the contrary, "if Gandhi's theory of trusteeship is understood in the linkage with his *swadeshi* movement, we can see that he was trying to transfer peacefully the financial resources from the rich to the poor for the purpose of relief of the latter" (Kazuya 2001, p. 306). This follows from the principle of non-violence but also expresses the conviction that enforced justice stands on feet of clay unless the attitude of those driving the economy changes. Therefore, the approach to economy of the rich as well as of the poor should have been transformed. Such transformation unavoidably must start at a very local level, ultimately within each member of the community.

Village-*swaraj* of course includes the vision of economy mainly based on regional agriculture and handicraft. By the way, a praise of hand tools and manual work as an expression of creativity rather than cultivating then subduing or exploiting nature can also be found in Ruskin as well as in Illich.

However, we must concede that Gandhi's rural village concept taken literally or as the sole economic program will probably not work in today's India with 1.4 billion inhabitants nor in a global society in which already more than 50% of all humans are living in cities. Nevertheless, especially in the face of a worsening climate crisis and ecological threats, there are currently approaches that are related to Gandhi's ideas. One may admit that these will not replace the modern world economy in the short run, but they can complement and correct it in a beneficial way. In this context, a kind of "creatively reformulated Gandhi-informed approach can serve as an invaluable catalyst" (Allen 2019, p. 16) to support an urgently needed shift of paradigm. These approaches are certainly not completely in line with Gandhi's ideas and ideals, but they also aim at a more non-violent way of dealing with the ecological environment and more self-determination, especially for the economically and socially disadvantaged.

One can think, for example, of the promotion of local economic cycles, which is pursued in some places through alternative currencies (Lietaer 2013). These LETSs—which means local exchange trading systems—ultimately are voucher systems intended to keep purchasing power in a particular region in favour of the reduction in transport distances and thus the ecological footprint. However, their aim is not only to protect nature but also to maintain small and preferably sustainably operating production companies, which in turn create jobs close to home. Particularly, the COVID pandemic has shown that a solid regional economy could be decisive to keep necessary production going on and maintain supply. Now some companies begin to manufacture components of products themselves again in order to become less dependent on overseas suppliers. Of course, this is not always easy to achieve in a short time. Structures that have been built up over many years are a hindrance, such as the practice of no longer planning storage areas in companies. The just-in-time logic shifts the storage of goods to the delivery route. This immediately may become a tricky concept in the case of the blockade of the Suez Canal or the closure of a major Chinese container port as we have experienced during the past months.

Another example is the at least partial self-supply of food by urban gardening or urban farming, which for many people represents much more than a romantic hobby. Famous is the case of the former Motor City Detroit, Michigan, which lost 30% of its inhabitants within one and a half decennium caused by the crisis of the automobile industry. What may be seen as progress from an ecological perspective deprived many people of work and income. High unemployment and manifest poverty prevail among the remaining population of the city. Especially in the poorer neighbourhoods, which are largely inhabited by African Americans, there is hardly any access to healthy food, and the consumption of fruits and vegetables declines with disposable income. Activities of urban agriculture practised in Detroit can meet the needs of the local community as well as environmental objectives.

The transformation of vacant land into community gardens can be observed " ... as a strategy to exercise political agency and bring about community transformation and, in the process, alleviate the food crisis and demonstrate social and political change" (White 2011, p. 15). This kind of initiative is often carried out by black women shaping spaces which "operate as a safe space where they are able to define their behaviour as a form of resistance, one in which their resistance is against the social structures that have perpetuated inequality in terms of healthy food access, and one where they are able to create outdoor, living, learning, and healing spaces for themselves and for members of the community" (White 2011, p. 18).

As the third example, the activities of Vandana Shiva should be mentioned, who coined the term *Earth Democracy* (Shiva 2016). One of the many initiatives launched by the ecofeminist Shiva is *Navdanya*, which in English signifies nine seeds. The primary aim of *Navdanya* is the preservation of traditional crops. Seeds are collected, archived, and made available to smallholders together with the necessary knowledge for cultivation. By that biological and cultural diversity should be maintained. Such initiatives try to create spaces of freedom from factual constraint which is imposed on us by what we ourselves have produced, may it be technical tools or economic structures particularly enslaving the poor. Thus, Shiva says: "For us, not cooperating in the monopoly regimes of intellectual property rights and patents and biodiversity—saying "no" to patents on life, and developing intellectual ideas of resistance—is very much a continuation of Gandhian *satyagraha*. It is, for me, keeping life free in its diversity. That is the *satyagraha* for the next millennium" (Shiva 2021). Even if one will hardly find explicit references to Gandhi in her publications Shiva in an Interview with S. London stated that she had two big role models. The one was Albert Einstein the other one was Gandhi. She said: "I believe Gandhi is the only person who knew about real democracy—not democracy as the right to go and buy what you want, but democracy as the responsibility to be accountable to everyone around you" (Shiva 2021).

In all the examples mentioned, both aspects are always present: the awareness of nature that has become vulnerable and our responsibility for it on the one hand and the commitment to reshape social coexistence based on personal responsibility and constructive cooperation on the other. Thus, such grassroots activities show a high affinity to a huge variety of sustainable development goals as formulated in the *Agenda 2030*. However, at the same time, they can also be understood in the spirit of Gandhi as creative, non-violent resistance by rediscovering self-rule to overcome prevalent structures violating the common good. Village-*swaraj* should therefore probably not be read as an economic instruction manual for the present, but as a critical inspiration, that subsidiary alternatives to an all too often destructive global economy are conceivable and realisable.

## 4. Conclusions

I would like to conclude my essay with this thought and thus also summarise that an in-depth look at Gandhi's ideas on the one hand and at the importance of sustainability on the other certainly justifies bringing the two realms together. In the end, it is not so much the details of organizing an economic system or deciding about the usefulness and appropriateness of specific technologies we may gain from Gandhi, rather it is the impulses and guidelines for a re-cultivation of our innermost convictions and habits. Since they are the very roots and sources of each engagement in favour of social transformation including a new appreciation of nature. The effort toward a universal uplift in solidarity and the attitude of nonviolence remains highly topical and presumably an unavoidable precondition to realize such transformation. Such transformation, in turn, is the central element of sustainable development, provided it does not want to exhaust itself in political lip service and the promotion of a few new technical instruments. Therefore, sustainable development and Gandhian thought are not only compatible with each other but different versions of the same agenda.

**Funding:** University of Innsbruck.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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