

# THE MAN IN GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY

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Every philosophy of social reconstruction must build on certain assumptions regarding the nature of man or human nature. Assuming man to be innately selfish, wicked and lustful, ancient Hindu philosophers could easily argue that in the absence of "raj-niti" (the science of politics) and "dandaniti" (the science of sovereignty), a condition of "matsyanyaya" (logic of the fish) wherein the big fish would eat the small fish would prevail. On the other hand, Marxists assumed human nature to be a social construct determined by the economic forces of production and ownership of property and argued that all we have to do is to work for appropriate changes in material conditions in order to bring about consequential changes in human nature.

Gandhism as a philosophy of social reconstruction discards both these assumptions regarding human nature viz. that man is inherently wicked as well as that human nature is a social construct. Gandhi was prepared to concede that certain changes in the structure of society can bring about changes in human nature, but argued that such changes do not abolish the evil in man. To abolish the evil in man one must tackle the very source of that evil. According to Gandhi the source of evil was man's will to power (his ego) and his insatiable greed for more and more material possessions. The intellect cannot help much in the elimination of evil, argued Gandhi, unless the will is first disinterested, in the sense of being non-attached. Marx gave the call to the labourers of the world to unite saying you have nothing to lose but your chains. But the experience of decades, Gandhi claimed, has shown that labourers have not been able to cast off their chains in spite of their unity for they suffer from the same

malady viz. possessiveness. Hence Gandhi's message to the workers was, 'Shed your possessiveness, your chains will then fall down'. In short, whereas Marxism saw human nature as a social construct that would change, once the economic forces moulding society, more specifically the ownership of the means of production, changed; Gandhi understood human nature in terms of the moral will, the will to be non-attached to self and things of this world, and argued that as man would evolve morally, becoming more and more non-attached and consequently non-violent, the state would wither away.

*The Gandhian Premise: Man Essentially Good.*

The basic Gandhian premise is that man is essentially good at the core. Vinoba seeks to drive home this point by comparing man or human nature to the head of a cabbage, whose inner layers always retain their freshness.<sup>1</sup> Hence Gandhi always instructed Sarvodaya workers to have faith in man's inward core of goodness and strive to reach for it, undismayed by the outward appearance. According to Gandhi, man was destined to lead a good life because it was the eternal and immutable law of nature. Gandhi saw moral progress as an inevitable evolutionary process. To quote him, "I believe that the sum total of the energy of mankind is not to bring us down but to lift us up and that is the result of the definite if unconscious, working of the law of love"<sup>2</sup>. There is an innate nobility even in an apparently ignoble man. The evil we see around us is due to the weakness of the human will to conquer the qualities of "rajas" or our lower self such as greed, lust, anger, pride and jealousy; and, failure to develop the qualities of "sattva" or our higher nature such as self-sacrifice, non-attachment etc.

Since Gandhi believed innate goodness and the will to improvement to be universal aspects of human nature, he rejected such doctrines as Darwin's survival of the fittest and mutual conflict as the dominant or governing principle of life. Believing in the essential unity of all men, Gandhi argued, "If one man gains spiritually, the whole world gains with him and if one falls, the whole world falls to that extent"<sup>3</sup>. Or, as Vinoba put it, "Since God made all men, it is impossible to conceive of one man's interest being in conflict with that of another,"<sup>4</sup> In other words, self-realization according to the true law of one's nature, can

never mean advancing the good of an isolated individual. All men being aspects of the same divinity, self-realization must mean the self-realization of all.

If in spite of this we see conflict everywhere today, Gandhi and Vinoba attributed it to the defective system of education and to a false sociology that indoctrinated people into believing that mutual conflict is inevitable. Today, the principle of mutual aid and love operate at best within the small confines of a single family. "No father would desire the welfare of his one child at the cost of his other children" asserts Vinoba and argues, "We have to extend this family law to the nation, to all man-kind".<sup>5</sup>

### *The Non-Violent Character of Self*

According to Gandhi man is a truth seeking animal and Gandhi identified truth with God. Before 1931 Gandhi used to say 'God is Truth', but from a little before that year he began to say 'Truth is God'. But merely identifying truth with God was not enough. The more important question was, how are we to realize God or Truth? The realization of Truth or Satya, according to Gandhi, requires true knowledge or 'Chit' and it is only when the latter has been acquired that one enjoys true Bliss or Ananda; only, true knowledge according to Gandhi meant the path of non-violence.

The question before man who seeks truth or God realization is: 'Shall I bear with those who create difficulties for me or shall I destroy them?' But to destroy others, Gandhi argues, is to make no headway because, after all, the evil is not without but within one. To eliminate evil one must therefore look to oneself first. He who was more perturbed about the evil in others and sought to destroy the evil in others first, neglected to that extent the evil within him and to that extent receded from the object of his quest viz. truth. Thus it is that for Gandhi 'ahimsa' becomes 'paramo dharma', the supreme duty and the maturest fruit of truth. Truth or God dwells within man and Ahimsa is the means to realize that end.<sup>6</sup>

But the statement 'Ahimsa Paramo Dharma' raises many issues. Is it a mere negative quality of non-injury or also something positive. Gandhi's answer is that it is much more than non-injury. Ahimsa means pure love, a positive love of the oppressor

which compels one to want to reform the wrong doer rather than destroy him. We cannot destroy human life, Gandhi wrote in the *Harija* issue of 18th May 1940 because God resides in all and if this is so the possibility of reform exists even in the meanest of creatures. To destroy human life was to deny the existence of God and thus the capacity of reform in others. "Given the opportunity" asserts Gandhi "every human being has the same possibility for spiritual growth".<sup>7</sup>

This explains why Gandhi was willing to make exceptions in case of animals but not in case of human beings. When a friend once enquired whether non-violence was to be practised against monkeys that regularly destroyed crops and kidnapped children, Gandhi replied, "I am not able to accept in its entirety the doctrine of non-killing of animals. I have no feeling in me to save the life of those animals who devour or cause hurt to man".<sup>8</sup> With regard to the animal and plant kingdom Gandhi's position was that one should never use violence unnecessarily. Thus his advice to all the inmates at his Ashram (rest-house) was that they should never break branches or tear leaves from a plant violently, but always do so gently causing least hurt to the tree or plant. But when it came to human life, Gandhi was not prepared to admit of any exception.<sup>9</sup> To quote Gandhi, "The question may arise as to why this rule (of Ahimsa) should not apply to human beings. It cannot because however bad, they are as we are. Unlike the animal, God has given man the faculty of reason". In 1943, when a friend wanted to know whether fighting with love for the enemy in one's heart was permissible, Gandhi explained that we cannot have mixed motives and that there is no such thing as "shooting out of love in the way you suggest".<sup>10</sup> In Yerwada Mandir Gandhi categorically asserts that to hurt, even to wish another ill in order to serve "a so called higher interest" is ruled out by Ahimsa. This absolutist streak comes out again and again in all Gandhi's writings after 1931. Thus to a query as to how one should confront a murderer non-violently Gandhi replied, "Let your blood be spilt but do not spill that of the assailant. I have no doubt in my mind that when it is a question of choice between killing oneself and the assailant the first should be the choice".<sup>11</sup> Likewise in the nineteen forties when women approached Gandhi for advice as to how they could non-violently resist a molester or rapist, his answer was typical. "They ought

to learn to die before a hair of their head could be injured" he said and by way of a helpful suggestion advised every women in danger of molestation to carry a small bottle of poison and gulp its contents rather than submit to dishonour.<sup>12</sup> His advice to the brother or friend of the women who may be a witness to the molestation was, "The brother or friend thus will stand between his protege and her assailant. He will then either dissuade the assailant from his wicked purpose or allow himself to be killed by him in preventing him. In so laying his life he will not only have done his duty, but given a new accession of strength to his protege who will now know how to protect her honour".<sup>13</sup>

Even foreign aggression was to be resisted non-violently. Given his assumption regarding human nature, Gandhi could quite easily argue that "an army that dares to pass over the corpses of innocent men and women would not be able to repeat that experiment". To a question put by one Mrs White as to how he would non-violently resist the atom-bomb, his reply was characteristic. "I would run into the open field", Gandhi said, "and looking up towards God pray with folded hands that God make the pilot see reason; and seeing me in this prayerful posture the pilot would not have the heart to drop the bomb".<sup>14</sup>

To sum up, for Gandhi the self is essentially truth seeking and non-violent. The essence of man, like the centre of the cabbage, is always fresh. The outer layers may get rusted by the environment but once the outer layers are peeled off, the inner man is universal, essentially good and non-violent. This fact enabled Gandhi to stoutly deny that Ahimsa was alright for the extraordinary few like the saints but not for ordinary mortals. Gandhi's most significant contribution lay in attempting to devise techniques by which the ordinary man could practise non-violence in the social and political fields.

#### *How to Rouse Innate Goodness*

Having postulated that man is universally and essentially good at the core, Gandhi next addressed himself to the question of how to rouse this innate goodness. Gandhi argued that in the case of a base character, a change for the better can be brought about, either by self effort (*tapasya*) or by *agraha* (appeals to the heart).

Tapasya or penance is the means by which one eliminates self-love. It is only when self-love or the ego is so eliminated that the innate goodness is roused or comes to the fore. In Yerwada Mandir, Gandhi defines tapasya as the ethical discipline which implies not only the control of the acquisitive instinct but also the sex instinct and control of the palate. Tapasya implies "great study" and "tremendous perseverance" and sacrifice. It implies, "subduing the flesh for the strength of the soul grows in proportion as you subdue the flesh". Tapasya also implies developing the spirit of vairagya and aparigraha, the spirit of detachment and non-attachment. This is considered essential since Gandhi perceived attachment, fostered by the philosophy of materialism as the major obstacle to man's moral development and evolution towards non-violence. Materialism robs man of the means to be truly human, and hence man must go beyond materialism to find the incentives to goodness. As Jayaprakash Narayan put it, "the task of social reconstruction cannot succeed under the inspiration of a materialist philosophy".<sup>15</sup> The practice and development of tapasya also helps one to lead a non-violent life for it is only when one has ceased to be attached to one's self that one can offer non-violent resistance to an aggressor or oppressor.

The second method, Gandhi advocated for rousing the latent goodness in man was the method of "appeal". Gandhi deemed satyagraha and fasting to be appeals par excellence. The aim of satyagraha and fasting was never to cow down or browbeat the oppressor or evil doer; rather the aim was to establish a spiritual identity with the evil doer through willing self-suffering. Satyagraha was a moral act and hence Gandhi insisted that the Satyagrahi must scrupulously avoid making capital of the enemy's difficulties. Satyagraha was "suffering love" and if need be the Satyagrahi must give up his all, including his life, for the vindication of truth and conversion of the oppressor's heart. In Gandhi's words, "indeed victory lies in the ability to die in the attempt to make the opponent see the truth which the satyagrahi for the time being expresses."<sup>16</sup> Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience and Fasting were all meant to inflict suffering on the self in order to rouse the conscience of the wrong doer; and man being inherently good, Gandhi was convinced that such appeals which he compares to the soul calling the soul, were

bound to awaken the oppressor to his wrong-doing, provided of course the Satyagrahi was sincere and honest in his objective.

J. V. Bondurant describes satyagraha as 'the Gandhian dialectic in action'.<sup>17</sup> The satyagrahi poses himself as the anti-thesis to the oppressor, perceived as the thesis. But the anti-thesis does not seek to destroy the thesis. Instead it tries to transform it. What is more, it is ready to be transformed itself. The satyagrahi does not seek a one-sided victory. To the extent satyagraha seeks synthesis, Bondurant claims it to be superior to Conservatism, Idealism and Marxism which fail to solve the problem as also liberal democracy which usually stays content with mere compromise.

#### *The Man in Gandhian Politics*

Gandhi, very much like Aristotle, postulated that man is a political animal intended by nature to live in the polis or the political community. Only gods and beasts, Aristotle had argued, could live outside political communities. Gandhi (very much like Aristotle before him) saw a conceptual connection between activities that realize human nature and political participatory activities. Failure to participate in political activity meant failure to realize human nature.

In true swaraj says Gandhi, life will be self-regulatory and men will govern themselves through freely formed associations. The more political life becomes self-regulatory, the more will the state wither away.

It is relevant here to compare Gandhi, the arch critic of parliamentary democracy with James Mill the best known advocate of parliamentary or representative government. James Mill, in his new classic treatise, *Essay on Government*, claiming to give the scientific account of human nature, had argued that every man or human being is determined by his pains and pleasures and that his happiness corresponds with the degree in which his pleasures are greater and his pains small.<sup>18</sup> Mill perceived the function of government, to be, to merely assist human beings in attaining the objects of their desire or pleasure. Among the many things men desire, Mill gave prominence to property because ownership of property provides man with the security that he will

be able to enjoy the fruits of his labour. In Mill's philosophy government is needed to protect man's property as much as his life and liberty. To quote Mill, "There is need for government whereby a great number of men combine to delegate to a small number the power necessary to protect them all."<sup>19</sup> But because human nature is universal, any individual who is in power, will also seek, wealth and still more power. There is therefore need for checks and balances; and for Mill the most effective device to that end was a system of representative government. The system of parliamentary government or democracy thus became for Mill the best means for controlling governmental abuse.

Gandhi presents a sharp contrast to Mill. Whereas from his presumption of human nature, Mill built a case for representative government Gandhi condemns parliamentary government in no uncertain terms. He condemns parliamentary government as an unnecessary imposition of Rule by Majority and a denial of the self to be self-governing. Gandhi condemns the representative parliament as not only coercive (imposing majority rule), but also as "sterile" (since it cannot do anything on its own initiative and requires the executive to goad it to action) and "a prostitute" (since it sells its conscience to the ruling majority).

Since it is the telos of man to be self-governing, man can only live effectively in small self-governing, relatively autonomous communities. Gandhi considered the village to be an ideal such self-governing community. The village community will endeavour to meet all its primary needs and a good many secondary needs through its own self-exertions (swawalamban or self-sufficiency). For such needs as cannot be met by self-effort, the village communities will federate to form voluntarily, the Taluqa community and set up the Taluqa Panchayat. Likewise talukas may federate to form the district community and District Panchayat; and the districts federate to form the National Community with its National Panchayat.

Now here reference must be made to another aspect of the nature of man in Gandhi's politics. Man being essentially good and truth-loving, Gandhi saw no difficulty in the small face to face village community unanimously electing its five wise men or Panchas. Likewise he saw no serious problem in the Panchas, in turn, arriving at decisions on the basis of unanimity or consensus,



because as Gandhi perceived it there can be only one just and correct solution to a problem and if wise men think and decide honestly and disinterestedly, they are bound to reach unanimous conclusions.

As opposed to powerful central government directly elected by the people, Gandhi saw Panchayats which delegated powers upwards as being more in keeping with the self-governing nature of man. Since the higher tiers of government would be created only when necessary and entrusted only with such functions as were beyond the capacity of the lower tier, Gandhi called his system organic and compared it to a series of concentric oceanic circles; at the centre of which was the human being ready to sacrifice for the village (the outer circle); the villages ready to sacrifice for the taluqa; the taluqas for the district and the district for the nation.

Gandhi advocated such a communitarian, participatory political system, not only because it accorded with the telos or self-governing nature of man; but also because a participatory system alone can be self-sustaining, that is to say, the qualities necessary to support it are generated by the very act of participation itself. Participatory democracy recognises the self-developmental character of man, and enables him to gain in self-esteem. Whereas Mill and other political philosophers like Carole Pateman and Peter Bachrach saw democracy as a means of exercising control over government, Gandhi understood it as governance itself. Dahl and Schumpeter view political participation in instrumental terms and argue that for man time is a scarce commodity and hence political participation involves costs, since spending time in political activity means foregoing some other activity or pursuit, whether it be science, painting, art or music<sup>20</sup>. Gandhi, on the other hand, was simply not prepared to view political activity in instrumental terms and as involving costs since to him political activity was an activity of self-understanding.

#### *The Man in Gandhian Economics*

Just as Gandhi postulated a political man, he likewise postulated an economic man. Gandhi's economic man is premised on the concept of Bread Labour. Man by nature, argued Gandhi lives to work; being idle was against man's true nature or self.

That is why Gandhi insisted on employment generating technologies and viewed industrialization which increased profits and GNP, but rendered workers jobless, as criminal activity. Gandhi was opposed to indiscriminate use of technology imported from the West, because he realized that would produce more unemployment than was either safe or good for India, especially since the size of its population was much larger and its growth rate much faster than in the West. For Gandhi it was more important that we provide people with work than merely aim at higher GNP through industrialization. It was the nature of man argued Gandhi, to demand both bread and work. That is why even if it is possible to provide people bread without work, it would be unwise to do so, because nothing can be morally more corroding than enforced idleness.

Gandhi had a conception of work quite different from that of Western thinkers like Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse condemns work as something unpleasant that mankind can seek to avoid with the help of machines and technological innovations. Once machines take over all man's "drudgery", argued Marcuse, man will be free to be creative, to make love in the meadows.<sup>21</sup> Describing the present civilization as repressive, Marcuse wanted to build "a non repressive civilization" in which the individual will be free to live his natural, creative and contemplative self. In the non-repressive civilization all laws will be self-given by individuals and there will be maximum use of science and technology and minimum use of labour. I have cited the views of Marcuse to indicate two divergent attitudes to man and machine. Whereas Gandhi condemns machines as products of capitalist greed which generate unemployment and to that extent are destructive of the natural self which views work as an identity giving activity; Marcuse welcomes machines for the potential they have in ushering in his "libidinous civilization".

The second aspect of the nature of Gandhi's economic man that must be noted is his belief that man's true nature or self can find real happiness or contentment only when it seeks to deliberately limit or reduce wants. In Yerwada Mandir Gandhi described true civilization as one which believes, not in the multiplication but in the voluntary reduction of wants, because "this alone promotes real happiness and contentment and increases the capacity for service". In accordance with this true

nature of man, appropriate technology for Gandhi was one which enabled man neither to exploit fellow-men nor nature. When man is blinded by greed he fails to realize his true nature and seeks to exploit fellow-men by adopting labour saving technologies for the sake of generating more profits. Likewise, blinded by greed he becomes unmindful of his true nature and indulges in short-sighted, indiscriminate exploitation of scarce, non-renewable resources thereby jeopardizing the well-being of future generations and making for unsustainable futures.<sup>22</sup> All the evils our modern civilization is plagued with today, Gandhi claimed, would disappear if man stayed content with decent simple living (adequate food, clothing and shelter) and shunned the curse of seeking after or hankering for ever rising standards of living. Wanting more than the basic needs of adequate food, shelter and clothing, according to Gandhi, was destructive of the self, since it implied seeking material progress at the cost of moral development.

#### *A Critique of the Gandhian Man*

Finally, turning to a critique of the Gandhian man, the first question I would like to raise is, can one attain the position of "sunyavatha" or complete zero by practising aparigraha or non-attachment to persons and things, to such an extent, that one is willing to allow oneself to be destroyed rather than seek to destroy another, even in legitimate self-defence. Now, even if for the time being we admit that such self-sacrifice is the highest form of morality, it can certainly be contended that it is anti-biological and against the first law of human nature viz. self-preservation. Selfishness, according to biologists, was the driving force of preieval organic life. The main functions of the protozoan, the earliest form of life, were divided between self-preservation and self-reproduction. It was again this pride in self that provided the motive of life, the elan vital of Bergson. Over the centuries, man may certainly have changed culturally but has he also changed biologically? Gandhi may refuse to accept the biological nature of man and instead claim that man is a naturally moral and self-sacrificing animal. But can social scientists proceed to restructure society on this premise?

Once the biological nature of man is accepted, it makes more sense to argue that the use of force or power, as such, is neither good nor bad. It is very much like the knife, which

can be used rightly (for surgery) or wrongly (to commit murder). Therefore, like many other things so capable of use, force must justify itself. Suppose one were to come across an international smuggler or drug trafficker about to blow up a passenger train and the only available way to stop him (and the loss of hundreds of innocent lives) was by shooting or physically incapacitating him, most reasonable men would be inclined to agree that in this case using violence was justified. In other words, the use of force has to be judged by the effects it produces and therefore we must first make up our mind regarding what effects we consider desirable.

But Gandhi was not a pacifist who merely advocated abstinence from violence. Rather he advocated positive non-violent action. This would mean that the true votary of non-violence seeing drug trafficker about to blow up the train would attempt to convince him, rather convert him, and even be willing to invite death on himself in the process of so seeking to convert him.

But then quite legitimately can we raise the question, is it moral for the good to allow themselves to be so destroyed? After all, if someone has to be destroyed, let it be the wicked, of whose moral conversion we are not even sure, rather than the good. Putting it differently, the question we are raising is: Is it morally correct for the good to die for the dubious possibility that the wicked may reform thanks to such "self-suffering love".

Given his faith in man's capability to reform, in *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi proclaimed that in the ideal society there would be no police, no law-courts and no punishment.<sup>23</sup> But punishment as a deterrent can be ruled out only if we accept the Gandhian premise that "love never faileth" and "love conquers all". Once we accept the possibility of love failing to reform, punishment as a deterrent makes a lot of sense. At the most, self-suffering love may succeed in reforming or converting the hearts of a few wrong doers or wicked, where the latter happen to be personal witness to the act of self-suffering love. It cannot so easily succeed in cases where the oppressor is distantly located as in the case of capitalist exploitation of the poor or modern warfare.

#### *Is Man Naturally Political (Participatory)?*

The second broad criticism that can be made against the Gandhian concept of the self or human nature relates to the

postulate that man is a political animal in the sense that political activity comes naturally to him and is a part of his nature. Or, to put it differently, that for man political activity is an end in itself or a self-sufficient activity undertaken for its own sake and which cannot, therefore be delegated.

But is man a political animal in this sense of the term? In other words is the self always craving for self-governance? If one accepts that political activity is instrumental in value and not a self-sufficient activity, one may not deem it natural, in the sense, that to be a good citizen I must share in judicial or deliberative office. Rather than finding self-fulfillment in political participation, one may opt to delegate deliberative and judicial functions to others and stay content with the pursuit of a profession, trade or art. In other words, politics or political participatory activity may not be so central to human nature, as Gandhi makes it out to be. Most men are only informed and rational about what interests them and politics is not something that inevitably interests everyone. In the light of what has been said above, democracy must be viewed simply as a method of arriving at government or creating government, and not as an activity of self-governance. Many citizens feel quite satisfied with choosing between rival sets of leaders and letting the leaders govern.<sup>24</sup>

### *Is Man Perfectible?*

To conclude, I would like to question the very premise of which the entire Gandhian philosophy is premised viz. the unshakeable belief that man is perfectible. Somewhat like Kant and Godwin,<sup>25</sup> Gandhi argues that humans are so constituted that we have only to acquaint them with what is good and truly worthy and the passion for its attainment will be excited in them. Gandhi saw vice and weakness as the products of an improper education and false indoctrination and was convinced that moral education was all that was necessary to make men aspire for perfectibility. Gandhi saw all habits originating in judgement and hence argued that the only obstacles to perfectibilism were those that man had created for himself in his ignorance.

However to us man appears a very much more complex being. He has in him an inner recalcitrance, which more often than not, does not let him attain complete self-mastery. St.

Augustine for instance spoke of man's sinfulness due to his lusts (for revenge, anger, avarice, power etc) and how reason can be used to satisfy lust rather than overcome it.<sup>26</sup> Man, therefore, Augustine held, cannot rely on reason (his judgement) alone to perfect himself and must have "faith".

Likewise Burke spoke of man's nature being "intricate", thanks to the fact that he is imperfectly rational.<sup>27</sup> Man's instincts and natural sentiments (like love of luxury), argued Burke, fortify man's fallibility and frailty of reason. In other words, human nature is itself an obstacle to perfectibility. It was Gandhi's belief in perfectibility that made him believe that in the ideal state, men would be so perfect that the state as a coercive apparatus would wither away. In the perfect society, based on *purna ahimsa*, government by majority would be replaced by rule by consensus and political parties and elections would become redundant. However, once we discard the belief in perfectibility, we can ill afford to disband parliamentary institutions, armies, police and law courts, or, for that matter, put faith in the doctrine of Trusteeship which Gandhi advocates as the ideal mode to regulate industry. In short, man's nature being intricate, political institutions must be based on the intricate nature of man and not on some idealised version of it.

#### NOTES

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23. Vide Doctor, Adi H., *Anarchist Thought in India*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1964, Ch 3.

24. In fact Joseph Schumpeter opines that between elections voters must learn to exercise self-control, that is to say, they ought to acknowledge that political action is the business of those elected and not theirs. Vide *Capitalism Socialism and Democracy* Op. Cit p. 295)

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