

ESSAY

Gandhi and Empowerment

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I shall offer a few reflections on the idea of empowerment. The idea of empowerment as a motivation for social/political action is a modern idea. I think it even has a post-modern tinge about it—at least a post-Marxian change of emphasis. Marx talked about the dictatorship of the proletariat, and not about the empowerment or enfeeblement of the proletariat. Of course Marx can be interpreted in such a way as to suggest that the very basis of the Marxist framework of understanding human reality is the notion of empowerment and its opposite: enfeeblement. But the talk of empowerment which has now become a part of our moral-political vocabulary really derives its spirit from a more recent popular western ideology; and this ideology in turn derives its strength from a strand of 19th century European thought which perhaps finds its most powerful expression in the writings of Nietzsche, and, in a somewhat less rhetorical way, in those of Schopenhauer.

Inalienable Motivations

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Empowerment presumes a distinction between the powerful and the powerless. It is also connected with a central notion of the late 20th century ideology, namely, that power is the inalienable human motivation. A necessary constituent of this idea is that all human motivations are reducible to the basic motive of power; even motivations which are apparently as far removed from power as can be imagined. This really was the crux of Nietzschean thought. The idea that there is a basic human motivation to which all other motivations can be reduced is of course a familiar one. We all know that for Freud the irreducibly basic human motivation is sexuality. In his

monumental work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud argued with great power and imagination that the apparent disjunction between motives other than sexuality and sexuality is only apparent, that in reality there is no motive which does not have an inalienable basis in sexuality. Nietzsche, coming a generation earlier, thought that he had shown with utter finality that all human motives are reducible to the motive of power. The contrast between this understanding of human motivation and another idea, very closely associated with a dominant Indian cultural and intellectual tradition, is quite stark, specially when we consider the belief, associated with the latter idea, that the state of total desirelessness is the best possible human condition.

What I wish to suggest here is that the idea of empowerment is really a natural corollary of a whole way of thinking which has become increasingly pervasive in the contemporary west centering round the notion that all human motivations are reducible to the motive of power. Another point that is important to note in this connection is that a central thesis of the ideology of power is not just the relationship between the obviously dominating and the obviously dominated. Power works in multifarious and invidious ways. Even those who exercise power or those who are the victims of power are frequently not aware of the fact that they are the wielders or the victims of power. So, power, as it were, has autonomy, a life of its own, and it also appropriates all other human capacities in the pursuit of its own ends.

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The most important aspect of this latter phenomenon is that power co-opts *knowledge*; this, more than anything else, is the great contemporary innovation in our thinking about power. To say that power appropriates knowledge is the same thing as to say that power is constitutive of knowledge and this idea is obviously very different from the old idea that knowledge is an instrument of power. For power to be constitutive of knowledge is for it to be an essential element in the very idea of knowledge: the epistemic enterprise is, as it were, essentially an exercise in the pursuit of power. So, it is not merely as though western science with its incredible technical spin-off can be put to use in man's attempt to gain control and mastery over nature. This certainly is true; but, more importantly, scientific knowledge itself is both a product and an articulation and exercise of power.

This view of knowledge is a radical departure from the traditional conception of knowledge in that traditionally knowledge itself was regarded as a fundamental human motivation: a motivation whose aim was to achieve truth. On the power-knowledge theory, truth, which certainly remains closely associated with the idea of knowledge, is no longer considered to be something which has a status independent of the knowledge process. Truth, like knowledge itself, is a product of power and, in turn, serves the interests of power. This completes the power-knowledge theory's undermining of the traditional philosophy of knowledge.

Another notion which may be worth mentioning in the context of empowerment is the notion that the seat of power is not just the individual; the individual, of course, in a minor, peripheral way does wield power. But the seat of power, centrally, is the community. It follows therefore that life is necessarily a continuous, unceasing power game between groups and communities. The best that can happen is an uneasy, ever so tenuous, equilibrium between these groups and communities. Therefore the battle for

empowerment of dalits, women, subalterns, and tribals is a battle for achieving such equilibrium, tenuous, as it will necessarily be. The venue will be different, the actors and contestants will be different, but the game continues. The above is the background against which much of our contemporary talk about empowerment takes place.

Gandhian Perspective

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Now Gandhi's thought is in stark contrast to the views about power and knowledge that I have outlined. To Gandhi all this would have appeared utterly strange. On a Gandhian perspective, the view that power is the only human motivator involves an incredible distortion of the idea of a human being. Similarly, the view that power is the generator of knowledge and constitutive of it makes, from a Gandhian point of view, a travesty of the concept of knowledge: power cannot generate knowledge; it can only generate illusion. This, I think, is the Gandhian view of knowledge.

Power is essentially self-centred, and self-centredness has to do with selfishness. Selfishness is really the prime enemy of authentic self-knowledge. Authentic self-knowledge and authentic knowledge of the other are two sides of the same coin. You can know yourself only through genuine knowledge of the other, and your knowledge of the other must have a basis in genuine self-knowledge. It is in the constant interplay of the two that knowledge and understanding grow. For Gandhi, a central necessary condition of authentic self-knowledge is *ahimsa*, which, in a more positive mode, is love. This is certainly one reason why Gandhi said that truth and *ahimsa* are one and the same thing. Self-knowledge

generated and informed by *ahimsa* is necessarily generative of self-confidence. Gandhi would therefore talk of self-confidence and *swaraj* rather than of power. What we must strive for is not a tenuous, uneasy equilibrium of power—an equilibrium which is always on the brink of being upset. Gandhi's preferred word here is 'fellowship'—fellowship between communities and individuals.

Virtues and Internal Goods

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A debate in modern philosophy which may help us appreciate the Gandhian rejection of power as the fundamental human motive is the debate about the place of virtues in an adequate conception of human life. We may, to begin with, make a distinction between two kinds of

human goods and values. This, in fact, is a very old distinction. In recent times it has come into focus again because of the profound monistic implications of modern science and the culture it promotes and nurtures. This is the distinction between external good and internal good. The distinction may be thought of as implicit in the concept of human practice. A general point about the notion of practice is that if there were no practices in this sense, then human life, as we know it to exist, would not be there at all. Perhaps the best account of this practice is to be found in Alisdair McIntyre's book, *After Virtue*. The important points in McIntyre's definition of practice are: (1) It is a cooperative human activity. (2) It has goods internal to it; there are therefore also goods which are external to it. (3) Its internal goods are inalienably associated with standards of excellence specific to it. And (4) these standards of excellence are not static and are sometimes transformed in the course of the history of the practice.

The important point about practice from a Gandhian perspective is that pursuit of goods internal to a practice requires an active recognition of values as inalienably associated with engagement in a practice. Take qualities of character such as honesty (truthfulness), fairness (justice), courage and selflessness. The power-knowledge ideology would obviously treat such 'virtues' as instruments in the hands of power, and, therefore, in a deep sense, not virtues at all. But given the idea of practice just outlined and the distinction between internal and external goods, the instrumentalist account of virtues does not any longer seem plausible. Dishonesty in the pursuit of goods internal to a practice defeats the very purpose of such a pursuit; the appreciation of internal goods, of the standards of excellence, also requires the capacity to judiciously discriminate between the better and the worse, between the higher and the lower, between a Plato and a Karl Popper. Hence, justice. A practice is a cooperative human activity; it can thrive only on the

basis of a cooperative care for internal goods; and cooperation, in the real sense, is not possible without concern for the other, the fellow practitioner. Therefore, the need to be unselfish. This relationship between virtues and internal goods points to a moral order in the affairs of man insofar as these affairs allow for the possibility of practices in the sense that we have discussed. To deny this is perhaps to deny the very distinguishing character of human social life.

It is my contention that power is never an internal good, i.e., it is never a good which is internal to a practice; it is always external. One mark of the externality of power is that the virtues, *qua* virtues, need not come into play at all in the pursuit of power. So we come round to the Gandhian view that the pursuit of power, and therefore of empowerment as such, is an essentially self-centred and, therefore, selfish activity.

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CONFERENCE

Norms and Naturalization

The IAS, in collaboration with the Indo-French Program and the University Grants Commission, organized an international seminar on 'Norms, Reliability and Science/Knowledge' during May 26-28, 1998 at Shimla.

How much of our understanding of nature is guided by nature itself and how much is tainted by our own values? Despite great advances in the natural sciences, this tension between naturalization and norms exists since Plato, giving the philosophical discourse in the west its dynamic nature. While norms were sometimes located within the folds of naturalistic inquiry, it turned out that what looked like a norm is a fact of nature. The diminishing space of the normative, however, did not go unnoticed. Thus, the tension persists. The presence of this tension made the seminar significant. Equally significant was the fact that the intense, and at times animated, discussion on some of the core issues of analytic philosophy took place at a time when the epistemological foundations of

this discipline are increasingly questioned.

The tension between norms and the demand for naturalization was brought to the fore in the inaugural paper itself. Nirmalangshu Mukherjee found 'the normative aspects of logical theory, especially the logical distinction between syntax and semantics' inhibiting 'a proper naturalistic understanding of the structure of natural languages'. Paul Horwich, on the other hand, in his attempt to view 'truth' as a generalizing principle, was against any 'wholesale rejection of normativity because any such rejection would bring to its fore the rejection of truth and meaning which are normative'. These two positions thus highlight the tension.

Not surprisingly, the process of naturalizing 'norms' has been undertaken with the simultaneous process of naturalizing epistemology. Marshalling historical insights on this issue from Quine onwards, Elisabeth Pacherie focused on the issue of the status of

norms in epistemology. For Pacherie, an examination of this nature not only invites an understanding of moderate naturalism but also demands or seeks to achieve a particular epistemology.

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The question of realism is intimately related to the issue of naturalized epistemology. Both Mahasweta Choudhury, the convenor of the seminar, and Roberto Casati defended the notion of common sense realism. Choudhury made a distinction between commonsense realism and scientific realism and tried to defend an objective theory of knowledge on the basis of common sense realism. She argued that common sense objects endure changes in the cognitive systems. Casati argued for

colour realism based on common sense. He developed many examples in which our colour concepts cannot be traced to invariance at the physical level. In that sense, our colour beliefs are, strictly speaking, false.

Nevertheless, much of our cognitive activity cannot be made sense of without them.

From a different angle (i.e., the indispensability of the first person), the concept of consciousness has always been a challenge to naturalistic inquiry. Ned Block, working through the logical form of identity theories, showed that there exists a real 'explanatory gap' in this case even if we grant various other forms of reductionism. Ranajit Nair questioned the very basis of reductionism and its monistic implications. For Nair, the persistent failure of reductionism suggests an irreducibly pluralist ontology we must learn to live with.

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