Chapter 3
Human nature

Gandhi's theory of human nature was closely bound up with his views on God and religion. It was complex, at places deeply ambiguous, and not entirely consistent. Briefly, and at the risk of some oversimplification, he thought that three fundamental facts characterized human beings. First, they were an integral part of the cosmos. Second, they were necessarily interdependent, and developed and fell together. And third, they were four-dimensional beings made up of the body, the *manas*, the *ātman*, and the *swabhāva*, whose interplay explained their behaviour and formed the basis of morality. We shall take each in turn.

The cosmocentric view

Unlike almost all the major traditions of Western thought, which neatly separate human beings from animals and assign the former a supremely privileged position on earth, Gandhi followed Indian traditions in taking a cosmocentric view of human beings. The cosmos was a well-co-ordinated whole whose various parts were all linked in a system of *yajna*, or interdependence and mutual service. It consisted of different orders of being ranging from the material to the human, each governed by its own laws and standing in a complex relationship with the rest. Human beings were an integral part of the cosmos, and were tied to it by the deepest bonds. In Gandhi's favourite metaphor, the cosmos was

not a pyramid of which the material world was the base and human beings the apex, but a series of ever-widening circles encompassing humankind, the sentient world, the material world, and the all-including cosmos. Since the cosmic spirit pervaded or infused the universe and was not outside it, the so-called natural world was not natural or material but spiritual or divine in nature.

Since everything in the universe bore the mark of divinity, it needed to be approached in a spirit of cosmic piety and *maitri* (friendliness). Gandhi thought that the idea that God had given the universe to human beings as a property to be used as they pleased was both incoherent and sacrilegious. The former because God was neither a person nor separate from the universe, the latter because the divine could not be an object of property. The universe was a common inheritance of all living beings, who were equally entitled to its resources and should live in a spirit of mutual accommodation. Being rational, human beings were the custodians of the rest of creation and should respect its rights and cherish its diversity. Since their very existence so required, and since nature constantly reproduced and replenished itself, they might help themselves with such natural resources as they needed to live in moderate comfort. They had no right to take more, for that amounted to 'theft', nor to undermine the regenerative capacity of nature by polluting and poisoning it, by rendering land barren and infertile, or by exhausting its resources.

Since Gandhi considered all life sacred, he vacillated on the question of whether human life was superior to the non-human. By and large he thought that it was, because of the human capacities for rationality and morality. However, the superiority was not 'absolute', for non-human beings too were divine in nature and legitimate members of the cosmos. Human beings might therefore take animal life only when absolutely necessary, and then with a sense of regret. Poisonous snakes and animals, which threatened crops, were not to be killed but caught and released in safe places or driven away. Animals were not to be killed

for food except when the climate or local circumstances so required, and never for pleasure or even scientific experiments. The body needed food, which contained life, required the use of insecticides, and involved cultivation with its enormous destruction of life. Gandhi called the body the 'house of slaughter' and was deeply anguished by the violence its survival entailed. Since violence was built into the human condition and thus unavoidable, he thought the only moral course of action was to minimize it by reducing one's wants and to compensate for it by taking tender care of nature.

Human interdependence

That human beings were necessarily interdependent and formed an organic whole was another 'basic' truth about them according to Gandhi. Individuals owed their existence to their parents, without whose countless sacrifices they would neither survive nor grow into sane human beings. They realized their potential in a stable and peaceful society, made possible by the efforts of thousands of anonymous men and women. They became rational, reflective, and moral beings within a rich civilization created by scores of sages, saints, savants, and scientists. In short, every human being owed his humanity to others, and benefited from a world to the creation of which he contributed nothing. For Gandhi human beings were 'born debtors', and involuntarily inherited debts that were too vast to be repaid. Even a whole lifetime was not enough to pay back what they owed their parents, let alone all others. Furthermore their creditors were by their very nature unspecifiable. Most of them were dead or unknown, and those who were alive were so numerous and their contributions so varied and complex that it was impossible to decide what one owed to whom. To talk about 'repaying' the debts did not therefore make sense except as a clumsy and metaphorical way of describing one's response to unsolicited but indispensable gifts.

Given that the debts could never be repaid and the favours returned, all

that human beings could do was to 'recognise the conditions of their existence', and continue the ongoing universal system of interdependence by discharging their duties and contributing to collective well-being. They should look upon their lives as *yajna*, an offering at the universal altar, and contribute to the maintenance and enrichment of both the human world and the cosmos. As Gandhi put it, '*Yajna* having come to us with our birth we are debtors all our lives, and thus for ever bound to serve the universe.' Such service was not only their duty but also their right, for without it they lacked the opportunity to fulfil themselves and affirm their dignity. In Gandhi's view, right and duty were inseparable not only in the usual sense that one person's rights created corresponding duties for others, but in the deeper sense that they were two different ways of looking at the same thing. One had a duty to exercise one's rights and a right to discharge one's duties. We shall return to this complex issue later.

Since human beings were necessarily interdependent, every human action was both self- and other-regarding. It affected others and shaped the agent's own character and way of life, and necessarily influenced his relations with others and with himself. When human beings developed themselves, they awakened others to their potentialities and inspired, encouraged, and raised them as well. And when they fell, others too suffered damage. For Gandhi, human beings could not degrade or brutalize others without degrading or brutalizing themselves, or inflict psychic and moral damage on others without inflicting it on themselves as well. This was so in at least three ways. To degrade others was to imply that a human being may be so treated, and thus to lower the moral minimum due to every human being from which all alike suffered. Secondly, to degrade others was to damage their pride, self-respect, and potential for good, and hence both to deny the benefits of their possible contributions and to increase the collective moral, psychological, and financial cost of repairing the damage they were likely to do to themselves and others. Thirdly, as beings capable of morality and critical self-reflection, human beings could not degrade or

maltreat others without hardening themselves against the latter's suffering, building up distorted systems of self-justification, coarsening their moral sensibilities, and lowering their own and the collective level of humanity. As Gandhi put it, no man 'takes another down a pit without descending into it himself and sinning in the bargain'. Since humanity was indivisible, every human being was responsible to and for others and should be deeply concerned about how they lived.

Gandhi's concept of indivisible humanity formed the basis of his critique of systems of oppression and exploitation. Such dominant groups as the whites in South Africa, the colonial governments in India and elsewhere, and the rich and the powerful in every society believed that their exploitation and degradation of their respective victims did not in any way damage them as well. In fact it degraded and dehumanized them as much as their victims, and sometimes even more. White South Africans could not deprive blacks of their livelihood and dignity without damaging their own capacity for critical self-reflection and impartial self-assessment, and falling victim to moral conceit, morbid fears, and irrational obsessions. In brutalizing blacks they also brutalized themselves, and were only prevented by their arrogance from noticing how sad and shallow their lives had become. They did enjoy more material comforts, but that made them neither happier nor better human beings. Colonial rulers met the same fate. They could not dismiss their subjects as 'effeminate' and 'childlike' without thinking of themselves as hypermasculine and unemotional adults, a self-image to which they could not conform without distorting and impoverishing their potential. In misrepresenting their subjects, they misrepresented themselves as well and fell into their own traps. They also took home the attitudes, habits, and styles of government acquired abroad, and corrupted their own society. Colonialism did promote their material interests, but only at the expense of their larger and infinitely more important moral and spiritual interests. Since human well-being was indivisible, a system of oppression had no winners, only losers, and it was in the interest of all involved to end it.

Four-dimensionality

In much of Western thought human beings are conceptualized either as bipartite beings made up of the body and the mind or as tripartite beings made up additionally of the soul. In Indian traditions they are theorized differently. Following some of these traditions, Gandhi saw human beings as four-dimensional in nature (M ii. 16–48). They had bodies, which for Gandhi had a twofold ontological significance. The body was self-enclosed, distinct, clearly separated from others, and capable of maintaining its integrity only by preserving its separateness. As such it was the source of the individualist 'illusion' that each human being was self-contained and only externally and contingently related to others. The body was also the seat of the senses, and thus of the wants and desires associated with them. The senses were inherently unruly 'like wild horses' and knew no restraint. Human desires were similar in nature and, being capable of infinite extension, inherently insatiable.

In addition to the body, the human being also had a mind (*manas*). Gandhi's view of the mind was highly complex and somewhat ambiguous. The mind included *chetanā* (stream of consciousness), which began at birth and ended with death. It included *buddhi* (intelligence), which took many forms and operated at several levels, and gave rise to such capacities as discernment, analytical reason, insight, and intuition. The *manas* was also the seat of passions, thoughts, memory, and moods. For Gandhi it was primarily an instrument of knowledge and action, and sought to understand, control, and find its way around in the world. Although distinct from the body, it was closely tied up with it. Reflecting on its worldly experiences as an embodied being, the human mind developed the notion of the ego or self, the source of the human sense of agency and particularity. Since the self desperately strove to preserve its separateness and temporal continuity, the mind was inherently restless and insecure. It was 'crowded' with memories, 'weighed down' by the emotional

baggage of the past, obsessed with the future, and lacked suppleness and the capacity for silence.

The *ātman* was the third dimension of human beings. Although it is often translated as soul, and although Gandhi himself sometimes used that term, it is better translated as spirit. As we saw, Gandhi believed that the cosmic spirit permeated or infused all living beings. The *ātman* referred to the cosmic spirit as manifested in them, and represented the divine. For Gandhi, all living beings and not just humans had the *ātman*, it was the same in all of them, and it was not a 'spark' or 'part' of the cosmic spirit as he, borrowing the Christian vocabulary, sometimes remarked, but one with and the same in nature as the totality of the cosmic spirit. As Gandhi put it, 'we have but one soul' and are 'ultimately one'. Since he regarded the heart as the most appropriate metaphor for the soul, he often used the two terms interchangeably.

Being a manifestation of the cosmic spirit, the *ātman* shared many of the latter's basic attributes. Like the cosmic spirit, it was not an entity, a thing or a being, but a 'force', an 'active principle', a 'source of intelligent energy'. It was eternal and indestructible, both active and a spectator, and the ultimate ground of being. The destiny or the inner *telos* of the *ātman* consisted in recognizing its identity with and merging into the cosmic spirit, the state Gandhi called *moksha* or liberation from the illusion of particularity.

Thus far Gandhi's thought was in harmony with the classical Indian traditions, especially the *advaita* or monistic tradition. He now gave it a new twist, and argued that, since the cosmic spirit was manifested in all living, especially human, beings, identification with it consisted in identifying oneself with them in a spirit of universal love and service. By giving the idea of *moksha* such a humanist or worldly orientation and defining spirituality in moral terms, Gandhi gave the Indian traditions an activist turn for which he was both much admired and criticized by his countrymen.

The belief that the *ātman* was not a particle or a spark but the totality of the cosmic spirit led Gandhi, as it had done many a classical Hindu writer, to develop an unusual notion of spiritual power. For him the *ātman* was not a being or a thing but a force, a source of energy. Just as the body was the source of physical energy, the *ātman* was the source of spiritual force or energy. Since the *ātman* was identical with the cosmic spirit, it obviously had access to the latter's infinite energy which, if tapped, could work wonders. Like many an Indian thinker, Gandhi argued that, if the individual were to shed the illusion of particularity or selfhood and become a transparent medium of the cosmic spirit, he would be able to mobilize enormous spiritual energy within himself and exercise great moral and spiritual power over his fellow men. This was for him the secret of the powerful hold of Jesus, Muhammad, and the Buddha over their followers. All through his life Gandhi strove to generate such a spiritual power in himself, which was why his political life was integrally bound up with his pursuit of moral perfection.

Finally, human beings had a distinct *swabhāva* or psychological and moral constitution, made up of various tendencies and dispositions. For Gandhi it was an obvious fact of life that, from their very birth onwards, human beings exhibited different temperaments and psychological and moral inclinations, were drawn to and repelled by different things, and developed according to their inner bent. This unique individual nature was ontologically as important, and as central to their identity, as the universal human nature that they all shared in common. It held the individual together and constituted the ground of his unique being or ontological truth.

The natural uniqueness of each individual needed to be explained. God could not be its source for he loved all human beings equally and would have no obvious reason to endow them differently and unequally. Parents could not be its source either, for their *swabhāva* was often quite different from that of their children. Following almost all the major Indian traditions, Gandhi thought that the only plausible 'hypothesis'

was that the individual's *swabhāva* was a product of his previous life. In addition to their physical bodies, human beings possessed a *sukṣma ṣarira*, a subtle and non-material 'body' or personality. It survived their physical death, persisted through several lives, and formed the basis of their unique personal identity or *swabhāva*. What is mistakenly called transmigration of the 'soul' was really the transmigration of the *sukṣma ṣarira*. The latter was made up of the 'impressions' or 'traces' left behind by the kind of life lived by the agent in his previous life. Since the subtle or non-material 'body' was the product of the individual's own past deeds, it was capable of alteration in this one, and inclined, but did not determine, him to act in specific ways.

Gandhi also thought that the law of *karma*, like the individual's *swabhāva*, implied rebirth. As we saw, since the cosmic spirit functioned in a rational and orderly manner, not only the natural but also the moral world was subject to unalterable laws. According to such religions as Christianity and Islam, God judges human beings after their death, and sends them to heaven or hell depending on the kind of life they have lived on earth. Like other Indian thinkers Gandhi found this belief incoherent. It presupposed that God was a being or a person, a view he found unacceptable for reasons mentioned earlier. It also implied that the judgement was made after death when human beings could do nothing to mend their ways. For Gandhi, God, or rather the cosmic power, was not a person but Law, and human actions produced their inevitable consequences according to the operations of that Law. Since human beings were responsible for the consequences of their actions and must reap the harvest of all they sowed, and since one life was too short for this, they had to go through several more until they succeeded in securing liberation from the cycle of rebirths.

In Gandhi's view then human beings were four-dimensional in nature, possessing a body, a mind, a non-material personality, and a spirit. The body was acquired at birth and disintegrated at death. The mind derived some of its tendencies from the *swabhāva*, and the rest in the

course of life, and was coeval with the body. The *swabhāva*, or subtle non-material personality, though subject to alteration, persisted over several lives and was the seat of intratemporal personal identity. The spirit or soul was eternal and, unlike the other three, identical in all human beings. The body and the soul represented two extreme points of orientation, and the mind was drawn towards both. Whether it more easily followed the demands of the body or the soul depended on the individual's *swabhāva*.

The body was the seat of particularity. It shut up individuals within themselves, reinforced their sense of separateness, and encouraged selfishness. By contrast the soul represented the principle of universality and disposed them to break through the walls of selfhood and become one with all living beings. The body-based illusion of particularity was extremely difficult to shed, and required intense self-discipline, conquest of the senses, sustained self-reflection, meditation, spiritual exercises, and divine grace. Many Indian traditions saw no role for the last but Gandhi did, largely under the *Vaishnavite* influence as mediated by the traditional Christian idea of grace.

Although all human beings had a common spiritual destination, namely *moksha*, they reached it in their own unique manner because of their distinct psychological and spiritual constitution. They had to start by accepting what they were, identify their native dispositions, and progressively move at their own pace and by a path suited to them towards their common destination. The spiritual training, the exercises, the religion, or the way of life that helped some might positively harm others.

The idea of one true religion or path to salvation was therefore logically incoherent. To require all human beings to live by an identical formula was to violate their ontological truth, to treat them as if they were not who they were. Each individual had to discover his own *swabhāva* and follow the spiritual path of development best suited to him. This did not

mean that others could not or should not help him. His *swabhāva* was manifest in his behaviour and way of life, and hence his friends, family, and above all a spiritually enlightened guru could feel his spiritual pulse, identify his constitutive tendencies and dispositions, and offer appropriate advice and help. However, it was up to the individual concerned to seek or follow their advice. If he rejected it and made mistakes, he should be left free to do so, not because his life was his or he alone knew his moral interests best as liberals argue, but because he was ontologically unique. Respect for his integrity required that his views and way of life should grow out of *his* way of looking at the world and reflect *his* being or truth. That was why persuasion was qualitatively different from coercion. Unlike the latter, it respected and reinforced the other's wholeness, and ensured that the new way of looking at the world took root in and grew out of his changed being. For Gandhi all compulsion was evil, justified only when an individual's actions had grave social consequences and could not be prevented in any other way. And then no euphemism or verbal sophistry should be allowed to obscure the fact that compulsion violated that individual's truth or integrity and was a regrettable necessity.

Like many Indian philosophers, Gandhi subsumed freedom under truth. Since each individual had his own unique ontological truth or constitution, he needed freedom to discover himself and develop at his own pace. Freedom was the necessary basis and precondition of his ability to be true to himself. To deny a person freedom was to force him to be untrue to himself, to live by someone else's truth, to plant a lie at the very centre of his being. For Gandhi the case for freedom was simple, and the same as that for truthfulness. Respect for truth implied respect for human beings as they were constituted at a given point in time and their need to follow the logic of their being. Love of truth involved love of one's fellow human beings in their uniqueness, not as one would like them to be, and ruled out all attempts to 'force them to be free' or sacrifice them at the altar of an abstract and impersonal ideal.

Moral theory

Gandhi's theory of human nature was the basis of his moral theory. As we saw, morality for him consisted in serving and becoming one with all living beings. Negatively it involved refraining from causing them harm, and positively it involved 'wiping away every tear from every eye' and helping them realize their full moral and spiritual potential. In Gandhi's view, morality and spirituality or religion were inseparable. Since spirituality consisted in becoming one with the cosmic spirit and cultivating the love of all living beings, it necessarily entailed morality. Conversely, the latter was embedded in and presupposed the former. Gandhi's reasoning is not easy to follow. By and large he seems to have thought that, since morality involved unstinting and uncalculating service of all living beings, no human being would have the reason, the disposition, the passion, and the energy to do so without an appropriate spiritual orientation. As he once put it, the moral man was like an honest mercenary, whereas the spiritual man was like an ardent patriot. Both did the right thing, but their actions varied greatly in their flavour, dependability, commitment, and energy.

Although morality required disinterested concern for all living beings, human beings had limited moral capacities, little knowledge of other societies, and limited energy. They should therefore concentrate on those they knew and to whom they were bound by ties of expectations, always making sure that they did not promote their interests at the expense of others. Moral life had to be lived locally and contextually, but the demands of the context had to be constantly judged by the imperatives of universal obligations. For Gandhi this was the only way to guard against both abstract universalism that ignored the demands of those to whom one had special ties and commitments, and an uncritical devotion to the latter in disregard of wider duties.

For Gandhi, service to one's fellow human beings was not a separate and independent activity, but informed all one did. Being a husband, a

father, a son, a friend, a neighbour, a colleague, a citizen, an employer, or an employee were not so many discrete roles, each governed by its own distinct norms and values, but different ways of realizing one's humanity and relating to one's fellow men. As a neighbour, for example, one should not only refrain from making a nuisance of oneself but should also help one's neighbours, take an active interest in their well-being and the quality of their surroundings, and help create a vibrant local community. A similar spirit of service and humanity should infuse one's manner of earning one's livelihood, which should be looked upon as a *yajna*, as one's form of participation in the promotion of communal well-being, of which monetary reward was not the purpose but an incidental though necessary consequence. Gandhi thought that, by bringing to his every activity the 'sweet smell of humanity', every person could in his own small way help transform the quality of human relationships and contribute to the creation of a better world. Such a 'quiet, unostentatious service' as consoling a widow, educating a neighbour's child, nursing a sick relative, and shopping for an invalid friend, and thus 'picking up one clod of earth' from the entire mass of human unhappiness, was just as important as the more glamorous forms of social service and political action, and sometimes had more lasting and beneficial results.

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 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?

Implications

Before concluding this chapter we should note three important features of Gandhi's theory of man. First, it bypassed the traditional Western debate on whether human beings were naturally good or evil. Since human beings had souls and were spiritual in nature, they had a deep *tendency* towards good. However, this did not mean that they always loved and pursued good, for they often lacked true self-knowledge, were subject to the body-based illusion of particularity, and their *swabhāva* might dispose them to do evil. All it meant was that human beings had a deep-seated capacity to perceive and pursue good and would act on it *if* that capacity were to be awakened and activated.

Secondly, Gandhi's theory avoided the familiar homogenizing and monistic impulse inherent in most theories of human nature. For these theories, human beings have a specific nature or essence which dictates how they ought to live. And since the essence is believed to be the same in all, only one way of life is considered to be the best for them and may legitimately be imposed on those falling short of it. Gandhi's view of human nature avoided that danger. Although all human beings had an identical soul or spirit and hence a common destination, they were also naturally unique and had different intermediate goals and ways of realizing them. Gandhi's view thus stressed both human identity and difference, and left ample ontological space for autonomy and diversity. As we saw, he explained human individuality in terms of a dubious theory of rebirth. There is no reason why we cannot reject that theory while appreciating his concern to ground diversity in the very structure of our conception of human nature.

Thirdly, Gandhi was deeply uneasy with the 'European' ideas of rights and duties and their artificial opposition. It is often argued that rights and duties are mutually exclusive in the sense that nothing can be both a right and a duty, and that rights are exercises of, and duties restrictions on, freedom. As we saw, Gandhi viewed the matter very

differently. For him the two were as inseparable as two sides of the same coin, and mutually regulative. For example, self-development or personal autonomy was a *right* because each individual was unique and should be free to evolve a way of life suited to his psychological and moral constitution. But it was also a *duty* because that was the only way he could make his distinct contribution to society and discharge his inescapable existential debts. Similarly one had a right to look after one's children because one had brought them into the world and wished to make sure they flourished, as well as a duty because otherwise they would be neglected, not develop into self-determining and morally conscious agents, and become a burden on society. In order to stress the inseparability of rights and duties, Gandhi preferred to use the polysemic Sanskrit term *dharma*, which signified nature, right, and duty. Since every human action was both a right and a duty and had an individual and a social dimension, rights had to be defined and exercised in a socially responsible manner, and duties defined and discharged in a way that took account of the agent's uniqueness and claims (M ii. 65–8; M iii. 496–8).