CHAPTER – IV
THE DISCOURSE ON MODERNITY: A GANDHIAN APPROACH

In the preceding chapters, we have discussed Gandhian conceptions on caste and gender. The present chapter is chiefly intended to explore the notion of modernity as understood by Gandhi. What we set out to do in this chapter may be put in the following way: first, modernity and its trajectory in relation to historical and cultural matrix. Second, Gandhian critique of rationalized Western modernity as an alternative modernity, so to say, modernity as a way of life and third, its consequences for varied humanitarian world views, where diverse cultures, civilizations and ethnicities might negotiate with one another by having a belief in diversity, concrete human values and values of social, political and cultural transformations.

Though the question of the nature of modern civilization is the most fundamental one that we confront today, yet it is almost universally neglected by the world of scholarship. There is no specialization concerned with modernity as such, although we have a wealth of studies of its component periods and parts. The fact of the matter is that modernity has not yet become a question for scholarship, precisely because our scientific investigations are so much part of it. The assumptions of our world are too deeply imbedded in our scholarship. These considerations suggest that we need look into the notion of modernity via the notion of tradition because without understanding as to what tradition is, the notion of modernity cannot be understood thoroughly.

Tradition Vs Modernity

Before embarking upon a consideration of the role of modernity in the Gandhian context, a proper understanding of the nature of tradition might be of some help in overcoming the apparent paradox that most of the discussions regarding ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ often suffers from. While those who stand for change are inclined to underestimate the significance of tradition by regarding it as coming in the way of constituting or creating a
rational society, the conservatives, on the other hand have a tendency of over-estimating its role as they think that any deviation from tradition would culminate in a total collapse of inherited social order which deserves preservation against all odds. Such an approach is based on confusion about the origin, growth, transmission, flourishing and decline of traditions.

The term ‘tradition’ has its roots in the Latin term ‘tradere’, which means to handover or deliver. The Latin noun was used to mean (i) delivery, (ii) handing down knowledge, (iii) passing on a doctrine and (iv) surrender or betrayal. Thus, the term ‘tradition’ may be understood as signifying all that a society has inherited from the past. In this sense, except for very few innovations that each age creates for itself, all elements of social life would be traditional. It would be relevant to note that the role of tradition in social life very closely resembles that of memory in the life of a person. It is important to keep in view that recognition and interpretation of a tradition is based not on mere observation and recording of facts concerning the past but always involves a selective reconstruction of the past expressing a value-judgement about what one believes to have rightly obtained in one’s society. When ever some one makes the claim that ‘it is our tradition that...’ then it is being implied that a certain way of acting, a certain order or pattern was recognized and being accepted as right or desirable. The maintenance of a tradition is the assertion of such an earlier normative judgement. Tradition may be conceived as, to use a metaphor, a kind of stream flowing down through the centuries from one generation to another. Each generation may contribute something to this stream and yet something is left behind with each generation, some sediment drops to the bottom and does not reach the future generations. It is in this sense that a tradition can be regarded as a collective memory of a community, constituted by shared amnesia and shared recollections, for it is assumed to provide the members a set of convictions and beliefs concerning the community. These ideas -- whether false or true— influence human conduct and illuminate the contours of a society. In the transmission of a tradition from one generation of individuals to the next, the process involved includes imitation. Normally, during our adult life, when we are presented with an idea we are expected to consider whether the idea is true or false; and in
case of norms we may consider the question whether they are appropriate or inappropriate. But in our formative years we are encouraged to believe in certain ideas not because they are true but because our elders tell us that such beliefs are regarded as proper or improper in our society. It is not difficult to see that all societies exert certain pressures upon their members to adhere to certain beliefs and reject others. It would be wrong to think that tradition is a monolith. On the contrary, traditions always consist of a large and diverse accumulation of customary ways of thought and action. To put it in other words, in any society there are always more than one tradition, i.e. there is, plurality of traditions as diverse kinds of social, cognitive, technological, moral and political developments combine to make up the distinctive cultural patterns in a society, e.g. depending upon one’s interest and perspective, one may prefer to put an emphasis on dissent rather than conformity being seen as the dominant tradition in the history of a society. But it is important to remember that a tradition lives in, is constituted by, through its own enactment remains a constant demand for its very existence. An examination of traditions of different societies would show that norms and beliefs of one society might be in conflict with the norms and beliefs of another society. What is considered right in one society may be regarded as wrong in the other, and vice versa.¹

In modern times the notion of tradition has been looked upon with great suspicion. The content of a tradition serves as a model and exemplar for the succeeding generations in order to reevaluate, reaffirm and preserve the experiences of the wise acts and yearnings of the past. The content of long tradition has passed the test of countless generations. Tradition, therefore, is not simply everything that ever happened, but only what appears significant in the light of those who have appreciated and described it. Thus, tradition by itself is not an object but a rich source from which multiple themes can be drawn according to the motivation and interest of the inquirer. Here, the emphasis is neither upon the past or the present, but upon mankind living through time. Therefore, the point is that we need to look into historicity to see if human action in the time can engender a vision, which sufficiently
transcends its own time to be normative for the present and directive for the future.

It would be erroneous, however, to consider this merely as a matter of knowledge, for it would then engage not the entire peoples but only a few whom it would divide into opposing schools. The project of a tradition is much more broader and can be described only in terms of the more inclusive existential and phenomenological horizon which includes body spirit, knowledge, justice and peace. Therefore, the sense of good or of value, which constitutes tradition, is required also in order to appreciate the real impact of the achievements and deformations of the present. Without tradition, present event becomes simply facts of the moment, succeeded by counter facts and the like. Therefore, an understanding Gandhian views on the concept of modernity inevitably draws our attention to the concept of tradition. Having stated the above, this chapter particularly intends to answer the following question: What are the basic critiques which Gandhi offers to the notion of modernity and how far they are justified from the point of view of Indian cultural, religious and social dimensions? This question stands in contrast to the cumulative richness of vision acquired by peoples through the ages and consequently throws another important issue, which may be read as the following: Can we talk of modernity in terms of dual phrases such as in terms of ‘our’ and ‘their’? It could be the case that what others think of as modern may not be acceptable to them or what we have cherished as valuable elements of modernity need not be considered as modern at all. Then the question is: Can modernity be understood as a contextually located and enormously contested idea?  

**Modernity: Etymological Perspective**

The term modern has a long history. According to Robert Jauss, the word “modern” in its Latin form “modernus” was used for the first time in the late fifth century in order to distinguish the present from the past. With varying content, the term modern again and again expresses the consciousness of an epoch that relates itself to the past of antiquity in order to view itself as the result of a transition from the old to the new.
Some writers restrict the concept of modernity to the Renaissance but this is historically too narrow. With the ideals of the French Enlightenment, the idea of being “modern” has been an attempt in looking back to the anciently changed belief that is inspired by modern science towards the advancement of social and moral betterment. The most recent concept of modernism simply makes an abstract opposition between tradition and the present. The characteristic of such modern is said to be the “new”. The project of modernity formulated in the eighteenth century by the philosophers of the enlightenment have intellectually theorized certain objectives of modernity with an end in view to develop objectives, Science, universal morality, law and autonomous art. In other words, it was meant to re-look on the rational organization of everyday social life. The project of modernity, the global diffusion of western rationality and the institutional forms associated with modern life as for example capitalism, industrialism etc. constitutes merely one narrative of it.

Modernity: The human Predicaments

Traditional communities and forms of life have indeed dislocated, disturbed and disorganized by corrosive consequences of modern rationalities. The impact of the institution of modernity upon traditional customs, practices and beliefs has divided human self have provided a complex society. The question of modernity and its consequences is effectively a question of the Post-Enlightenment development of western civilization and the rationalizing project with which it has been articulated. Since the eighteenth century there has been a prominent assumption that increasing rationality is conducive to the promotion of order and control, achievement of enhanced level of social understanding, moral progress, justice and human happiness. The pursuit of order, promotion of calculability and celebration have been identified as pivotal features of modernity. However, modernity in turn, has become the focus of increasing critical reflection in the course of twentieth century. The benefits and securities assumed to be corollary to the development of modernity have become matter of doubt. What are we to make of these developments?
Traditional World View

Modernity is simply the sense or the idea that the present is discontinuous with the past; it is the process of social and cultural changes (either through improvement, that is, progress, or through decline) that are patterned and structured in the day today life and are fundamentally different from life in the past. This sense or idea as a world view contrasts with what we will call tradition, which is simply the sense that the present is continuous with the past, that the present in some way repeats the forms, behavior, and events of the past. The "crisis of modernity" is the sense that modernity is a problem, that traditional ways of life have been replaced with uncontrollable change and unmanageable alternatives. The crisis itself is merely the sense that the present is a transitional point not focused on a clear goal in the future but simply changing through forces outside our control.4

Experiencing modernity in the west

We experience change as either progress or transition, that is, we view our historical situation and our lives teleologically, that is, as deriving meaning and value in some unrealized future. Consequently, we experience modernity as a proliferation of alternatives either in regard to lifestyle or historical possibilities; future directed behavior (as opposed to tradition) tends to accelerate the proliferation of alternatives. Traditional cultures see themselves as repeating a finite number of alternatives in the present; in modern cultures, the future opens up a vast field of historical and lifestyle choices. This proliferation of alternatives is a source of great anxiety and often results in cultural attempts to restrict alternatives in the face of this anxiety. Let's keep in mind that it is not the alternatives themselves, which create this anxiety, it is the sense that the proliferation of alternatives has become unmanageable.5

Modernity has created a worldview that is primarily abstract, that is, we experience the world as composed of discrete, fragmented, and separable units. Abstraction is a difficult word to define; for our purposes, it is the idea that areas of existence and culture can be separated from, that is abstracted out of, other areas of existence and culture. In addition, we form social groups that are largely based on abstractions (corporations, nations, economic
classes, religious preferences, race (which is really an abstract rather than a physical or biological category), sexual preferences, etc.) rather than real or biological relationships. As a result, membership in social groups tends to be unstable and transitory as one can easily move between social groups. This, again, creates a high sense of anxiety and tension, which results, on the one hand, in attempts within these abstract groups to define themselves as real, that is, not abstract, and on the other hand, in attempts to limit the possible social groups, that is, to manage the alternatives. In distinction to modernity, traditional cultures tend to experience the world as whole and integrated; separate areas of existence and culture are seen as integrally related to other areas of existence and culture. In addition, social groups are based on real, biological kinship ties so that social relations tend to be stable and permanent.

The above discussion leads to think that we see ourselves as having lost tradition, that is, that our behavior patterns, our rituals, etc., are all new and innovative, that we are not repeating the past. But in fact, the experience of modernity is, in fact, to live in traditional ways and to repeat tradition in unrecognizable forms. Modern cultures still perform traditional rituals, such as sports (which are originally religious rituals) or shaming rituals, yet the origin and original meaning of these rituals have passed out of the culture. Modern cultures still repeat ways of thinking in the past—in fact, the bulk of modern culture is based on traditional ways of thinking repeated relatively unchanged—yet modern cultures tend to view these ways of thinking as practices and ideas from our collective memory of their origins and meaning innovations. Although we base our social groups on abstract categories, the structure and content of these social groups repeat the structure and content of kinship groups. In other words, we base our abstract social groups on principles derived from real, biological relationships; we do not, however, experience these social groups as real, biological relationships. In sum, modernity should not be understood in the sense that the present is discontinuous with the past, which is an illusion and this illusion creates modernity itself. What has changed is social memory; we have disconnected most of our dynamic social heritage.6

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The Contours of Modernity

The contours of modernity and its philosophical analysis has always been a subject matter of critical scrutiny among the philosophers from Immanuel Kant to Habermass and in contemporary times by Post-Modernist and Post-Structuralist philosophers including Richard Rorty. ‘Modernity cannot be understood without the notion of ‘other’ which is giving it long lasting confrontation with the non-modern. The other is integral to the project of called Modernity in its literal sense. Modernity can realize itself only through an engagement with that which is not itself. If this is so about Modernity, then its ‘other’ is not necessarily another country or society. It is therefore critical to ask: what is specific to Modernity that necessitates the postulation of the ‘other’? Modernity needs the presence of the other in order to realize itself.7

If we carefully analyze as to what is specifically evident in the project of Enlightenment, then we find that whatever is entailed under Enlightenment as values, beliefs, principles, ethics, morality, and so on, has been thought of universal in the thinking and practice of all human beings. An embodiment of that which is universalizable, theoretically, cannot ever be partial spatially. So that which is not modern must become one with it globally and that which is not modern is the ‘other’ of Modernity. Hence every thing not in harmony with Modernity is the ‘other’ of modernity. Modernity thus intrinsically contains an element of exclusivity, and critics of Modernity are on strong grounds on this count.

The ancient world, including Greece and Rome, was accustomed to plurality of belief. There were innumerable pagan cults with differing, and sometimes-conflicting views of right and wrong, each with its own perspective on life. One culture might accommodate several rival cults serving rival deities, which were usually harmonized into a semi-hierarchical pantheon. From the fourteenth century onwards we see the influence of the Renaissance; from the sixteenth century we see the power of the Reformation and the new scientific discoveries regarding the nature of the world and the universe. These influences would gradually lead to what is generally termed the Enlightenment, and the birth of modernity, with its new certainties and meta-narratives.8
Modernity is the intellectual and cultural heritage of the Enlightenment project, namely the rejection of traditional and religious sources of authority in favour of reason and knowledge as the road to human emancipation. It has produced a variety of social, political, and economic developments, including democratization and consumerization, a sense of progress from promise to fulfillment, whereas for so many other religions history is cyclical. Modernity sought to relegate religion to the private sphere, denying it the authority of reason and knowledge, which were reserved for the public sphere.

**Modernity: Manifold Meanings**

There are no definitive explanations for the meaning of ‘modernity’, different writers have different ideas about its meaning. Two of the most significant thinkers of the period were, in biology, Charles Darwin and, in political philosophy, Karl Marx. Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection undermined the religious certainty of the general public, and the sense of human uniqueness of the intelligentsia. The notion that human beings were driven by the same impulses as lower animals proved to be difficult to reconcile with the idea of an ennobling spirituality. Karl Marx seemed to present a political version of the same proposition: that problems with the economic order were not transient; the results of specific wrong doers or temporary conditions, but were fundamentally contradictions within the “capitalist” system. Both thinkers would spawn defenders and schools of thought that would become decisive in establishing modernism.\(^9\)

In western thought, the term ‘modernity’ was used to contrast the project of enlightenment from the received religious cultural views. To become modern was seen as accepting the new sensibility of critical reasoning and empirical sciences against the medieval religious world-view based on the authority of divine revelation and complete faith in the sacred scriptures. Modern world or society is different in significant respect from the pre-modern or non-modern forms of society in terms of the aspirations, sensibility and vision, which have guided human conduct at the individual and collective level. The modern sensibility assumed the possibility of an endless growth of knowledge which would enable human beings to know, control and transform nature, society and other facets of human condition in pursuit of their well
being and perfection. While cognitive activity was regarded as human endeavor to represent, model and mirror reality in universal terms, each new development in history was characterized as an improvement or progress over the past.

New discoveries in various scientific disciplines and their technological applications played a significant role in the widespread acceptance of the project of modernity. As it can be noticed, everything did not go well with the project though it did bring about significant transformations in comparison to the living conditions and outlooks of the pre-modern or non-modern societies in many ways. Certain facts that stand out for reflection may be enlisted as the following:

(1) Introduction of an intense form of social division of labor by dividing the training for, and pursuit of, various productive activities and other social services under distinct and specialized professions such as agriculture, industry, education, health, bureaucracy, scientists, technologists, managers, doctors, educationists, with their own narrow specializations and sub-divisions.

(2) Modern worldview revolves around the ideal of sovereign self-sufficient individual. However, following the logic of pursuit of self-interest in the name of self-sufficiency, it turned its back on common interests, which are a prerequisite for realizing the ideal of self-sufficiency. Consequently, modern consumerism has retrenched itself in the private world of consumption of goods for the satisfaction of personal phantasies.

(3) Conflict between individual aspirations and social inequalities intensified the feelings of frustration and hostility among competing individuals, groups and communities resulting in violence and destruction, environmental degradation and alienation.

(4) An awareness of various forms of oppression, exploitation, inequalities, curbs on individual freedom, injustice, violence and other disorders in the modern world encouraged a growing sense of disenchantment with the project of modernity.
Modernity: The Gandhian Perspective

It is in this context that Gandhi’s critique of western modernity becomes a thesis for further analysis. Gandhi’s text questions some of the practices and ideals that we take for granted and particularly his views on modernity. Gandhi calls on the core of tradition as resourceful in formation of an ideal society. Gandhi confronts the foundational principles of the modern world which he sees providing complexity, materialism and poverty. He offers an idealized conception of traditional life in rural India. He sees modernity addressing a person’s interests or wealth (artha) and desire (kama) but ignoring questions about a person’s responsibilities in the wider world (dharma).10

In Gandhi’s view, modernity displaces other modes of thinking and moral points of references, such as those found in religion, tradition, and the folk ways of rural societies. One problem Gandhi finds with modernity is that its standards are internal and if it meets the standards it has set for itself, it declares itself a success. This, Gandhi vehemently rejects. Goals and practices must be judged by more rigorous standards than provided by ‘artha’ and ‘kama’ or production and consumption. For Gandhi, a person’s own tradition as mediated by a person’s conscience provides men and women with grounded, external standards to judge.

In Johannesburg Gandhi had witnessed a rapacious form of capitalism, which laid the seeds of conviction in his mind that capitalism and industrialism were twin evils. Gandhi’s opposition to it has attracted a good deal of attention. He wrote in 1940 'Pandit Nehru wants industrialization because he thinks that if it is socialized, it will be free from the evils of capitalism. My view is that the evils are inherent in industrialism, and no amount of socialization can eradicate them.'11

To Gandhi, industrialization meant slave labor (something on which he and Karl Marx were in agreement), the concentration of wealth in the hands of few and the saving of labor instead of the generation of it. He agreed that there must be mass production in people’s homes.12 In an industrial society the towns prospered at the expenses of the villages. Instead of this, ‘the
proper function of cities is to serve as clearing houses for village products.\textsuperscript{13} Gandhi went all out in promoting hand-spinning throughout the country. There were several ideas behind this. It would provide a supplementary source of income, especially in between harvest; it would be a symbol of self-sufficiency and would promote the ideal of simplicity. There was another reason for Gandhi's dislike of industrialization. He believed that the people could take charge of their affairs, whether social, economic or political, only if the units were small. Big complexes invariably led to the concentration of power in the hands of a few and to the risk of exploitation. The people he had especially in mind were the rural masses of India who maintained themselves through agriculture and not through industry.

\textbf{Integrity of Individual}

One of Gandhi's most basic assumptions was his firm belief in the integrity of the individual. The individual is the one supreme consideration and if the individual ceases to count, what is left of society? Gandhi said that he feared the power of the state, because "it does the greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality, which lies at the root of all progress." For Gandhi each individual must act on her own truth regardless of the consequences and regardless of whether others think she is in error.\textsuperscript{14} Bhikhu Parekh, in his book on Gandhi's political philosophy lists five "distinctively human powers"--self-determination, autonomy, self-knowledge, self-discipline, and social cooperation--that Gandhi would have required for any great civilization. According to Gandhi, all five of these capacities are threatened by modern civilization, with the last three as the most weak and vulnerable.

\textbf{Separation of Ought from Is}

Gandhi's principal problem with modernism is its separation of fact and value. Ramashray Roy, a scholar on Gandhi, who, because of his vast knowledge of modern European philosophy, has been able to diagnose this problem most successfully. By separating the "ought" from the "is," human life loses its moral focus. The goal of modern life, especially in its most utilitarian forms, is simply the satisfaction of one desire after the other. Self-gratification is not only accepted but encouraged, and gradually higher purposes are
replaced by lower ordinary ones. In *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi equates modernism with sensual self-gratification, and condemns it primarily for this reason. The modern worldview not only alienates us from nature, but also alienates our desires from any moral end. The teleology of the ancients, that which gave their life its ultimate meaning and purpose, has been eliminated in modernism.

Gandhi is often seen as taken an extreme even eccentric – stance in regard to what is defined as ‘modernity’. His masterpiece of 1909 *Hind Swaraj*, is quoted as evidence that he rejected almost all aspects of western civilization, as imposed on India and other colonized regions of the world by the imperialist powers. There are however problems with this reading of Gandhi, as it assume a questionable dichotomy between western civilizational values and Gandhi’s alternative morality. The difficulty flows from the term ‘modernity’ itself. What is modernity?

In English, the word dates back to the eighteenth century, and it is frequently taken to denote the paradigmatic philosophical, scientific and governmental beliefs and practices that originate in Europe. ‘Modernity’ the term is deployed in other ways for example to denote the experimental art and writing of the period 1890-c. 1940. However in recent years it has been taken as a short hand term for the values associated with Enlightenment which ‘post modernist theorists seek to critique.

Gandhi endorsed many key aspects of this understanding of modernity, such as the doctrine of human rights, the fundamentally equality of all humans, the right of all to democratic representation, the principal of governance through persuasion rather than coercion and so on. In these respects, he can hardly be said to have been antagonistic to modernity. Rather, he took the position that in these respects Westerners frequently did not practice what they preached. The liberal regimes of the west were, for example, far less democratic than they claimed, and extremely undemocratic in a colonial context.

If we carefully look into the issue we see that Gandhi was taking up a strategic position within the debates of his day. His relationship to modernity was a dialogic rather than antagonistic one. What is taken as Gandhi’s *Hind
Swaraj generally refers to his critique of the doctrines of materialism and instrumental rationality, the belief in scientific and technological progress, practices such as large scale methods of production, rapid transportation, allopathic medicine, adversarial parliamentary system of democracy and so on. Against this, he counterpoised his own definition of what entailed a genuine ‘civilization’ that had, he argued, to be rooted in an alternative morality.

For Gandhi, every civilization was inspired and energized by a specific conception of human beings. If that conception was mistaken, it corrupted the entire civilization and made it a force for evil. In his view that was the case with modern civilization. Although it had many achievements to its credit, it was fundamentally flawed, as was evident in the fact that it was aggressive, imperialist, violent, exploitative, brutal, unhappy, restless, and devoid of a sense of direction and purpose. In Gandhi’s view, the modern civilization has “grown as terrible as a wolf through its hunger for wealth and its greedy pursuit of worldly pleasure.” Elsewhere he equates it with the Upas tree, which is rooted in, thrives on, and irradiates immortality because of its preference for, and active propagation of, the cult of bodily welfare as the prime object of life.

Since criterion for judging which appetites must be satisfied and which must be suppressed and for ascertaining where to stop is simply not available, life becomes a ceaseless struggle for trying to acquire more and more for oneself. Since resources are extremely scarce, the scramble for getting access to scare resources initiates a process of what Gandhi calls “life corroding competition” leading to exploitation, domination, inequality, and oppression. The reflection of these phenomena can be seen not only in the relationship of one country with another. That is why Gandhi describes modern civilization as operating on the maxims of “might is right” and “survival of the fittest.”

Gandhi was an ardent critic of modern civilization. He attacked the very notion of modernity and progress and challenged the central claim that modern civilization was a leveler in which the productive capacities of human labor rose exponentially, creating increased wealth and prosperity for all and
hence increased leisure, comfort, health and happiness. Far from attaining these objectives, modern civilization, Gandhi argued, contributed to unbridled competition among human beings and thereby the evils of poverty, disease, war and suffering. It is precisely because modern civilization ‘looks a man as a limitless consumer and thus sets out to open the floodgates of industrial production that it also become the source of inequality, oppression and violence on a scale hitherto unknown to human history’.20

Gandhi was strongly convinced that industrialization as it manifested in the west would have a devastating effect in India. His alternative revolves round his concern for providing profitable employment to all those who are capable. Not only would industrialism undermine the foundation of India’s village economy, it ‘will also lead to passive or active exploitation of the villagers as the problems of competitions and marketing come in’.21

Gandhian philosophy concerning modernity primarily emerges from his vernacular writings such as Hind Swaraj, where he offers an engaging critique of science, rationality and modernist way of looking at social, political and cultural transformations. Gandhi attacked the common view that civilizational progress could be judged in terms of the sophistication of machines, technology and weapons and standards of material comfort enjoyed by a society. Such yardsticks ignored issues of morality and religious ethics. Gandhi refuses to accept modern systems of transport, printing presses and the like as defining features of ‘civilization’. In Hind Swaraj he put forward a different understanding of the term: ‘Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing we know ourselves. The Gujarati equivalent for civilization means “good conduct”’.22 In the original Gujarati in which Hind Swaraj was written Gandhi used the word sudharo, stating that su meant ‘good’ and dharo meant ‘way of life’. In doing so Gandhi appeared to have been providing an ‘Indian’ understanding of the concept. In fact, Gandhi’s definition was as novel in Gujarati as in English.
Gandhi: The Notion of Good Life

Gandhi put forward a novel and radical way of understanding the concept of ‘civilization’. His ‘good way of life’ meant placing a curb on our material desires and refusing to fetishise technology. Above all, we should not value competition as the supreme value that drives forward ‘progress’. He claimed that in pre-colonial India people followed their occupations in uncompetitive ways, being satisfied to earn enough for an adequate subsistence. This allowed for an elevation of morality. He concluded: ‘So understanding and so believing, it behooves every lover of India to cling to the old Indian civilization even as a child clings to the mother’s breast.’

Even his strong admirers in other respects have harshly criticized Gandhi for his supposed attack on modernity. Dalton regards the argument of Hind Swaraj as grossly overstated and sometimes absurd—Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreau and other figures that Gandhi admires in the work were, after all, products of modern civilization. Dalton explains Gandhi’s tone in terms of a certain immaturity of style, with an extreme position being advanced which he would later modify to accord with his more inclusive approach to the problem.

Gandhi’s critique was selective. He focused on what he saw as the fetishising of technology and science with its assumption that any technological improvement or scientific advance represented ‘progress’ he condemned the consumerism that this promoted, with a constant valorization of whatever innovation was seen to be the latest and most sophisticated. He also condemned the economic and political rivalry that lay at the heart of Western civilization, with its emphasis on the value of competition over and above cooperation. These elements of modernity, in his view, compromised the great achievements of this civilization, such as the doctrine of human rights.

The Ethical Root of Civilization

Gandhi wanted instead a civilization rooted in an ethical science and technology, by which he meant investigation and invention that was applied to human need on a human scale. As he said in 1925: ‘I think that we cannot live
without science, if we keep it in its right place.' He himself was fascinated by science as a subject, and saw no harm in scientific harm in scientific research if it was undertaken for the sake of knowledge rather than for profit or material gain. It had, however, to conform to ethical principles. Another problem with scientific research as that it was the preserve of elites, who were detached from the manual labor. Without an understanding of practical needs, as experienced through such labor, the research was unlikely to be of great benefit to the mass of humans. It was thus far more important to devise a new, improved spinning wheel which could be used by village artisans, rather than invent some dazzling new labor-saving machine which could be afforded only by the rich.

For Gandhi, industrialization remained the driving force behind western civilization. ‘Machinery is’, he characterized, ‘the chief symbol of modern civilization; it represents sin. (Hence) if the machine craze grows in our country, it will become an unhappy land.’ Condemning the role of the machines in ‘de-humanizing’ the workers toiling in the factories for ‘profit’ in which they had no share, Gandhi thus argued that ‘it is necessary to realize that machinery is bad. We shall then be able to do away with it. If, instead of welcoming machinery as boon’, he further mentioned, ‘we would look upon it as an evil, it would ultimately go.’ Thus, Gandhi categorically narrates that “machinery is a grand yet awful invention. It is possible to visualize a stage, at which the machines invented by man controls the machines, then they will not; but should man lose his control over the machines and allow them to control him, then they will certainly engulf civilization and everything.’

In Gandhi’s view, modernity displaces other modes of thinking and moral points of reference, such as those found in religion, tradition, and the folkways of rural societies. For him, these alternatives modes of knowledge are not merely one option among many ways of knowing; he sees them addressing persistent moral issues about the nature of human beings in ways he thinks modernity cannot. This is so, Gandhi believes, because modernity has only partial ways of organizing and guiding practice. Moreover, he holds that modernity, fixed on present performance, is unwilling to learn from the past and unconcerned about the fate of the real human beings in the future.
Gandhi, thus, finds that modernity does not have the resources to correct its own defects.

Gandhi’s analysis of modernity comes from a person who is part of an ancient, practiced tradition as well as of a colony where alien principles and practices are presented as superior to indigenous ones. In attacking British colonialism, Gandhi insists that political independence is an essential but only partial requirement for an India where everyone is autonomous. What is needed, according to Gandhi, is to challenge modernity with its emphasis on materialism and its destruction of community and tradition.

In many ways, Gandhi’s attack on modernization parallels Rousseau’s reading of civilization in *The discourses on the origins of inequality*. Although their respective criticisms rest on different theoretical groundings, they see modernization exactly heavy costs, and in very different ways they offer alternatives to safeguard the autonomy of everyone. Rousseau begins his narrative in a state of nature where everyone is free and equal. When we leave its simplicity and innocence and march down the road of complexity, dependence and acquisitiveness Rousseau detects individuals losing their equality and freedom. For him, they travel this road because they deceive themselves about what is important and believe they can remain free in spite of growing inequalities and dependencies. In many ways, Gandhi has similar views with Rousseau, wants people to think the prize worth having freedom. Gandhi’s critique of westernization and his admiration for nature are closely related with Rousseau’s idea of self sufficient, autonomous individual in the lap of nature. Gandhi had the advantage of observing modern civilization both from European and non-European perspectives, he was more familiar with and sympathetic to the latter, and saw it primarily through the eyes of one of its victims he called it modern rather than European or western partly to highlight its historical specificity, and partly to emphasize that Europe itself had long nurtured a different civilization that had much in common with its non-European counterparts, including the Indian.
Civilization and its Human content

For Gandhi every civilization was inspired and energized by a specific conception of human beings. If that conception was mistaken, it corrupted the entire civilization and made it a force for evil. In his view that was the case with modern civilization. Although it had made many achievements to its credit, it was fundamentally flawed, as was evident in the fact that it was aggressive, imperialist, violent, exploitative, brutal, unhappy, restless, and devoid of a sense of direction and purpose. Gandhi blamed all this on its underlying conception of man. In his view modern civilization neglected the soul, privileged the body, misunderstood the limits of reason, and had no appreciation of the individual swabhava.

The body had two basic characteristics for Gandhi. It enclosed the agent within himself and bred individualism, and it was the seat of desires. Since modern civilization privileged the body, it was necessarily driven by the two interdependent principles of greed and undisciplined self-indulgence. It was appetitive, dominated by desires, given over to unrestrained satisfaction of wants, and lacked a sense of limits and moral depth. It was ‘materialist’ in its nature and orientation in the sense that it valued material possession and consumptions to the exclusion of almost everything else, and made the economy its centre. Driven by greed and ruthless competition, the economy led to the accumulation of vast amount of wealth in the hands of a ‘few capitalist owners’. They had only one aim. To make a profit, and only one means to do so, to produce goods that satisfied people’s ever increasing wants. They had a vital vested interest in constantly whetting jaded appetites, planting new wants, and creating a mental climate in which not to want the goods daily pumped into the market was to be abnormal. Not surprisingly, little value was attached to self discipline or moral regulation of desires.

In Gandhi’s view, machines relieved drudgery created leisure, increased efficiency, and were indispensable when there was shortage of labour. Modern civilization was only propelled by the search for profit, machines were introduced even when there was no obvious need for them and they were likely to throw thousands out of work.
For Gandhi, mechanization or the fetishism of technology was closely tied up with the larger phenomenon of industrialism, another apparently self-propelling and endless process of creating larger and larger industries with no other purpose than to produce cheap consumer goods and maximize profit. Modern economic life reduced human beings to helpless and passive spectators and represented a new form of slavery, more comfortable and invidious and hence more dangerous than the earlier ones. Modern civilization, according to Gandhi, undermined man's unity with his environment and fellowmen and destroyed stable and long-established communities. In the absence of natural and social roots which gave human beings a sense of identity and continuity, they had become abstract, indeterminate, empty, and related to each other at best by mutual indifference, at worst by mutual hostility.

As a result moral life suffered profound distortion. It became as abstract as the human beings whose relations it regulated, and replaced virtues by a set of impersonal rules. Morality was reduced to reciprocal egoism or enlightened self interest. In modern civilization, morality was a form of prudence, a more effective way of pursuing self-interest, and virtually exorcized out of existence.

In Gandhi's view the exploitation of one's fellow human beings was built into the very structure of modern civilization. Consumers were constantly manipulated into desiring things they did not need and which were not in their long-term interest. Workers were made to do boring jobs at subsistence wages under inhuman conditions, and given little opportunity or encouragement to develop their intellectual or moral potential. The poor were treated with contempt, the weaker races were regarded as subhuman and bought and sold, and weaker nations were conquered and mercilessly oppressed and exploited.

For Gandhi European imperialism was only an acute manifestation of the aggressive and exploitative impulse lying at the very heart of modern civilization. It was hardly surprising that modern civilization rested on and was sustained by massive violence. It involved violence against oneself. It also involved violence against other persons at both the personal and collective
levels. Thus Gandhi vehemently speaks: “What I object is the craze for machinery, not machinery as such. The craze is for what they call labour-saving machinery. Man go on saving labour till thousands are without work and thrown on the open streets to die of starvation. I want to save time and labour, not for a fraction of mankind, but for all. Today machinery merely helps a few to ride on the backs of millions. The impetus behind it all is not the philanthropy to save labour, but greed. It is against this constitution of things that I am fighting with all my might.”31

Modern civilization also involved an egregious amount of violence against nature. The latter’s resources were ruthlessly exploited and its rhythm and balance disturbed, and animals were freely killed or tortured for food, sport, fancy clothes, medical experiments. In Gandhi’s views the modern society was full of violence. Gandhi’s critique of multifaceted violence that emanates from modernity, can be referred to his one of his important letters, where he offers an stringent critique of western modernist development project. In 1895 Gandhi in a letter to the Editor of the Natal Advertiser wrote:

“....The utter inadequacy of materialism which boasts of having given the world a civilization which was never witnessed before, and which is alleged to have done the greatest good to humanity, all the while conveniently forgetting that its greatest achievements are the inventions of the most terrible weapons of destruction, the awful growth of anarchism, the frightful disputes between capital and labour and diabolical cruelty inflicted on innocent dumb, living animals in the name of science, falsely so called.”32

Gandhi’s critique of modernity does not premise upon his rejection of science as mode of critical inquiry, where science is used as a vehicle of enslavement, consumption and process of creating an in equalitarian world order. “Nothing that the modern civilization can offer in the way of stability can ever make anymore certain that which is inherently uncertain; that when we come to think of it, the boast about the wonderful discoveries and the marvelous inventions of science, good as they undoubtedly are in themselves, is after all, an empty boast. They offer nothing substantial to the struggling humanity, and the only consolation that one can derive from such visitations has to come from a firm faith not in the theory, but in the fact, of the existence of a future life and real Godhead.”33
Gandhi further notes that “I would categorically state my conviction that the mania for mass production is responsible for the world crises. Granting for the moment that the machines may supply all the needs of humanity, still, it would concentrate production in particular areas, so that you would have to go about in a roundabout way to regulate distribution, whereas, if there is production and distribution both in the respective areas where things are required, it is automatically regulated, and there is less chance for fraud, none for speculation.”

Gandhi criticizes modernity and its bureaucratic centralizing tendencies and offers an alternative modernity where there is space for principles of decentralization or democratization of collective unit known as villages and there is a connection of these small units to the larger collective units such as Zila (district) Parishads and state. Gandhi does not limit the discourse of modernity rather offers fresh interpretive insights to organize a more democratized polity, rooted in the experience of agents, groups who form the local. Gandhi says,

“I would say that if the village perishes, India will perish too. India will not be no more India. Her own mission in the world will get lost. The revival of the village is possible only when it is no more exploited. Industrialization on a mass scale will necessarily lead to passive or active exploitation of the villagers as the problems of competition and marking come in. Therefore we have to concentrate on the village being self-contained, manufacturing mainly for use. Provided this character of the village industry is maintained, there would be no objection to the villagers using even the modern machines and tools that they can make and can afford to use. Only they should not be used as a means of exploitation of others.”

Gandhi emphasizes religion as central to his vision of civilization and by implication his concept of modernity. But this is a position that is liable to be misunderstood by those committed to secular values, and hence needs some elaboration. By religion he does not mean any particular religion, but “that religion which underlies all religions.” In other words, he refers to some essential and ideal category. It undergirds the idea that he also links religion with morality. Gandhi writes:

“Formerly when people wanted to fight with one another, they measured between their bodily strength; now it is possible to
take away thousands of lives by one man working behind a gun
from a hill. This is civilization. Formerly, men worked in the open
air only so much as they liked. Now, thousands of workmen
meet together and for the sake of maintenance work in factories
or mines. Their condition is worse than that of beasts. They are
obliged to work, at the risk of their lives, at most dangerous
occupations, for the sake of millionaires. Formerly, men were
made slaves under physical compulsions, now they are
enslaved by temptation of money and of the luxuries that money
can buy. There are now diseases of which people never dreamt
before, and an army of doctors is engaged in finding out their
cures, and so hospitals have increased. This is a test of
civilization."36

For true civilization Gandhi was of opinion that

"Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the
path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality
are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery
over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves.
The Gujarati equivalent for civilization means ‘good conduct’."37

Gandhi and Indian Traditionalism

The Indian tradition refers to Purushartha perspective on human life
which classifies the totality of man’s purpose into four broad categories: artha,
kama, dharma, and moksha. The pursuit of artha (creation and acquisition
of material goods and services), and the satisfaction of desires (kama) are
necessary factors in making man happy. However, since there are two
dangers implicit in a life given to pleasure and pelf- the danger of social
conflict as a consequence of incompatibility between individual interests, on
the one hand, and the danger of the total immersion into materiality at the risk
of the soul damnation, on the other, - the pursuit of dharma (righteousness)
and moksa (salvation) becomes necessary. Without following dharma, social
peace and harmony are threatened

Gandhi does more than simply the reject the basic premises of modern
civilization. He offers a concrete proposal for recording society that promises
to do away with the ills associated with modern civilization. The cornerstone of
is proposal provided by his conception of the uniqueness of being human.
Rejecting all attempts to reduce the uniqueness of being human to biological,
psychological, or sociological considerations, he sees the destiny of man to lie
in his ethico-religious quest of self-transformation. But this quest for self-
knowledge, far from being pursued in the isolation of Himalayan cave, occurs
in the world of here and now and provides the basis for man’s relationship
with the outer world that is characterized by an organismic vision emphasizing
inseparable unity, harmony and non-injury.

Modern civilization in Gandhi’s opinion, places the pursuit of self-
interest at the centre of man’s existence. Given the goal of material well-
being, the individual’s entire effort focuses on acquiring as much riches as
possible for his own use. This elevates the pursuit of self-interest to the
highest pedestal and makes it the pivot around which men build their world.
Since the pursuit of self-interest is deemed as rational as well as desirable,
any restraint imposed on such a pursuit is considered to be restrictive of the
full flowering of individuality itself.

But once the pursuit of self-interest is recognized to be central in life,
certain consequences follow. The pursuit of self-interest not only crowds the
“vision of things above” but also renders the search for morality and spirituality
insignificant and irrelevant as well. It is true that the search for individual
happiness compatibility with others becomes necessary for individuals well-
being and the health of the social order. However, this is only a second order
goal considered important for the promotion of the first order goal, i.e.,
individual happiness. When the pursuit of self-interest becomes the central
value, it makes violence the dominant characteristic of modern civilization.
Since the criterion for judging which appetite to satisfy and which to suppress
and for ascertaining where to stop is not available, life becomes a ceaseless
struggle for acquiring more and more for oneself. A process of what Gandhi
calls “life-corroding competition” ensues leading to exploitation, domination,
inequality and oppression. This is reflected not only in the relationship of man
with man and nature but also in the relationship of one country with another.
That is why Gandhi described modern civilization manifesting the maxims of
“might is right” and “the survival of the fittest.” Consequently, Gandhi would
reiterate that modern civilization based as it is on violence “does not respect
all life and, in its progress onwards, it has not hesitated to resort to wholesale
destruction of even human life.” The relentless competition for acquisition as
a means of raising the level of material well being expresses itself in the opposition of man to man and of one group to another. Discontent, unrest and conflict become endemic in modern civilization. As Gandhi wrote to a friend in 1919:

"Economic distress, political repression and an awakening amongst the masses in particular in all countries have all played an important part in bringing about the present world conditions where, enquiring of every country, you find them affected without exception by unrest of deep seated character. In America, it is class warfare; in England, it is labor unrest; in Russia, Bolshevism, and in India, it is an all round unrest due to repression, famine and other causes. This situation which now faces the western nations was inevitable; for western civilization, based on the basic principle of brute force as a guiding motive, could have ultimately led only to mutual destruction."^{40}

Gandhi has always showed his discomfort with the western sense of democracy. Hence, he has aptly remarked that the enlightenment project is completely defeated in its western side and observed that this project is contradictory in meaning as well as in content. Therefore, Gandhi offers certain observations about the epitome of democracy, practiced through parliamentary institution. Gandhi points out the limitations of western parliamentary democracy, which becomes clear from the following remarks:

"The Mother of Parliament" as a "sterile woman and prostitute." People's representatives in the parliament, instead of promoting and protecting interest of all, become prisoners of particular interests. They become "hypocritical and selfish. Each thinks of his own little interest." Independent thinking is not only discouraged but ruled out. "Members vote," Gandhi notes, "for their party without a thought. Their so-called discipline binds them to it. If any member, by way of exception, gives an independent vote, he is considered a renegade."^{41}

The Uniqueness of Human Subject

Gandhi counterpoises his own world-view in order to restore the fullness and wholesomeness of human being. Gandhi conceives the uniqueness of being human in terms of ethico-religious pursuit. He recognized that man, while he is rooted in and springs from the animal world, he has also the capacity to rise above it and can, only if he recognizes and wills, set on a journey to give free play to his moral and spiritual propensity for self-development. He also recognizes that attribute of being uniquely human are
neither fixed for all times nor immutable. He insists on the goodness of human nature as real basis for self-realization. He pegs his hope on the perfectibility of human nature.

Recognizing self-realization as the true orientation of man as a person, Gandhi insists on demolishing the wall of separation between one part of man and another and between man and the outer world. Gandhi’s argument was that there is no feasible way in which any process of industrialization can avoid the creation of exploitative and inhumane relations of exchange between town and country. He states that this quite clearly when he argues that Khadi is the only sound economic proposition for India. “Khadi is the only true economic proposition in terms of the million of villagers until such time, if ever, when a better system of supplying work and adequate wages for every able-bodied person above the age of sixteen, male or female, is found for his field, cottage or even factory in every one of the village of India: or till sufficient cities are built up to displace the villages so as to give villagers the necessary comfort and amenities that a well-regulated life demands and is entitled to. I have only to state the proposition thus fully to show that must hold the field for any length of time that we can think of.”42

In 1944 Gandhi proposed a new khadi ‘philosophy’. It was on the fundamental principle that rural production must be primarily for self-consumption and not for sale. This had not been followed in the khadi programme so far, because the emphasis was more on providing a little additional employment to the rural poor and most khadi was spun in return for wages. This was not in keeping with the fundamental objective of the khadi philosophy, which was to create an economic order in which the direct producer would not have to depend on anyone else for his basic necessities. If villagers continued to spin only in order to sell the yarn to khadi organizations, then despite the popularity of khadi cloth in the cities the entire programme would be founded on wrong economic principles. “An economics which runs counter to morality cannot be called true economics.”43

Gandhi’s writings are full of extensive and all-round criticism of the machine. Let us take an illustrative example of railways, which was a target of Gandhi’s criticism in Hind Swaraj. It may appear obvious to most of us that
trains did a lot of useful work. It transported coal, minerals, and wood to long distances. It carried armies quickly to long distances. It quickly carried finished goods to distant markets and provides a means for people to go to distant places in relatively short period of time. We may think that such service is by the railways was necessary and useful for the purpose of modern industry, national defense/imperial governance, trade and lucrative employment, etc. But there is necessarily the other side to each one of these ‘useful’ acts performed with the help of the steam engine. When raw materials and resources are lifted away on a large scale, life around those places is disorganized completely. As for example, if witness tribal life today, we will increasingly come to realize this aspect of human life. When things are sold at great distances from the site of production, trade grows and what follows is the deprivation of labor-intensive areas, growth in the financial strength of the capitalized and tertiary sectors of the economy. The useful work done by these machines has been useful only for the Europeans and their allies elsewhere.

Gandhi’s view on Swadeshi in regard to machine seems to be an effective one. In the sphere of machines, swadeshi means use of local raw material, exchange in the local market, and control of the local territory as well social community. For Gandhi, the modern city was a disembodied world: the home of abstractions and the modern machine. The dynamism of the city was not of a creative kind. The city as a site of perpetual mobility lacked memory. To recover the Indian sources of creativity demanded that we reclaim the Indian city. For Gandhi this could only be achieved through a threefold recovery of an agricultural view of the world, a naturopathic approach to life, and the concept of handiwork.

Gandhi pointed that the machine is an expensive affair. It requires raw material from distant places and seek market all over the world. The story of plunder, exploitation, accumulation, genocide, and wars put into the service of this enterprise has been told over and again. The historical course as narrated always appears as an unstoppable sequence of events. The necessity and the inevitability of these forces owe their existence to a new factor that appeared with the advent of the machine or the capital.
The machine embodies a technology, which is part of modern science. Speed, scale, noise, and glitter are its characteristics one observes at first glance. The machine organizes men, materials, energy, and information on a scale unknown before and at an ever-increasing speed. So does it disorganize societies and destroy their knowledge bases elsewhere on a colossal scale with equal speed. It has produced wealth and glitter for a few, and poverty, darkness, and 'noise' for the rest. Underlying creation and destruction, organization and disorganization, lays a common characteristics of modern technology: Modern technology is violent for all.

This uncompromisingly violent nature of the machine seems to be the immediate cause for Gandhi's position on non-violence. The strategic weaponry it commands today measures the nation's power; its progress is measured by the amount of steel, power, and chemical fertilizers it produces; and by its possession of the latest technologies including computers and telecommunications. Food, clothing and shelter available to the people do not even count in the measurement of material progress achieved. Technology has tended to assume the status of the criterion for everything. But all this has involved large scale destruction of nature—forests, minerals, and agriculture—and large-scale destruction of human societies all over the world. Technology, and therefore, violence has thus penetrated our idea of ourselves; conception of force, aggression, and power have occupied centre stage in the modern conception of man, society, history, etc. The moral and aesthetic have given way to the mechanical and the pleasure-seeking activities of man. Thus technology robs man of his activity. Genuine human activity knows no violence.

Thus the first victims of modern technology are the politicians, the scientists and the capitalists. It takes them from one choiceless situation to another and with them the whole society. Therefore it seems that the peasants and the artisans shall have the last laugh, going through this battle, which is waged on them by the machine. Accordingly, in tune with Gandhi's opposition to the machine, opposition to modern technology is of equal theoretical and practical significance. However, it is necessary for this opposition to be real, that it be rooted in non-violence.
So far we have been articulating the broad contours of modernity and its historical, cultural and philosophical aspects. It has been attempted to establish that modernization as well as modernity is a major aspect of our facticity, for it is the situation in which we find ourselves. We have also attempted to outline some of the major habitual patterns, which comprise the particular mode of fallenness to which modern persons/civilizations are prone. These patterns represent the modern form of inauthenticity, the character of being lost in the ‘they’ or the public interpretation of things.

While analyzing Gandhi’s critique of modernity, we have critically evaluated the notion of tradition and its relatedness with modernity as well as the relatedness between scientific structures and modernity. What is significant is that Gandhi applied tradition to the emergent situations. ‘He must have departed from situation and tradition but only far enough to accommodate the objective pressure of what I may call existential modernity, that is modernity as a set of concrete life conditions, which should be distinguished from modernity as an ideology accepted consciously after critical reflection.

The first kind of modernity is inescapable to anyone living in a certain place at a certain time. The second kind, ideological modernity, is subject to critical reflection to a greater extent, and in fact, it provides some space outside existential modernity from which one can see alternatives to it. It may be pointed out that Gandhi has accommodated existential modernity without succumbing to ideological modernity.

Naturally, this process is not without its inherent contradictions. Existential modernity as understood here removed certain contradictions between morality and politics as practiced by Gandhi but it has also opened new contradictions. Since morality and politics are relatively independent spheres in social life, every elimination of certain contradictions between them and constitution of a new unity itself opens the way for a new contradiction and a new unity. In fact, this is the lesson that we learn from Gandhi’s mixing of tradition with modernity. In responding to the above issues, we have critically evaluated Gandhi’s response and subsequently explored the broad
contours of alternative modernity and its relatedness with Gandhi’s philosophical thought.

Notes and References

11. The Harijan., 29 Sep 1940, p.299.
15. Williams, Raymond, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, Fontana, London 1976, p.208.


29. CW 48: 353.


