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Rethinking Ecology: Gandhi, Duties, and the Limits of Rights-Based Ethics

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Abstract: Much of contemporary environmental ethics continues to centre on a rights-based framework, highlighting rights for non-human animals, ecosystems, and future generations. However, this approach often remains entangled in anthropocentric legalism and utilitarian calculations while frequently ignoring the more profound ethical call for responsibility and restraint that Gandhi so eloquently articulated. This paper seeks to re-examine the ethical foundations of ecological responsibility through the lens of Mahatma Gandhi's duty-centred moral philosophy. In an era of ecological collapse, this insight invites a radical reconsideration: Can a duty-based ethics offer a more grounded and transformative ecological ethos than the dominant rights-based paradigm?

The study presents a framework in which environmental ethics is based on individual and group responsibilities rather than rights by examining Gandhi's writings, especially *Hind Swaraj* and his thoughts on trusteeship, self-control (*aparigraha*), and nonviolence (*ahimsa*). This duty-based philosophy challenges both consumerism and legalistic environmentalism by emphasizing voluntary simplicity, interdependence, and a spiritual orientation toward nature. The study makes the argument that duties, particularly when spiritually driven, might promote greater ecological awareness than externally imposed rights regimes. It bases this on both Gandhian ethics and recent criticisms of liberal environmental theory.

The limits of the duty-based ethics include issues with inclusivity, enforcement, and the potential for moral elitism. However, it makes the case that Gandhi's moral philosophy provides an essential counterbalance to pragmatic and technocratic approaches to ecology. Gandhi's ethics may offer a way toward a non-anthropocentric, cosmocentric ecological worldview based on humility, restraint, and reverence by changing the conversation from "what nature owes us" to "what we owe the Earth."

Keywords: Gandhian ethics, Duty-based environmentalism, Ecological responsibility, Nonviolence (*Ahimsa*), Sustainable living

Introduction

In recent decades, environmental ethics has progressively embraced the language of rights, including both moral and legal rights, rights of future generations, rights of ecosystems, and rights of animals in order to determine the membership of the moral community. This change has surely played a significant role in drawing attention to the ethical concerns associated with environmental degradation. However, a deeper ethical deficit remains. The environment continues to degrade, and patterns of human behaviour remain largely unchanged in spite of legal developments and moral justifications based on rights. The issue is whether the language of rights is sufficient to encourage the kind of profound ecological responsibility that the times require. Gandhi's oft-quoted observation, "The Earth has enough resources for our need but not for our greed," offers a perspective that remains relevant in rethinking contemporary ecological challenges (Gandhi, *Collected Works*, Vol. 34, p. 255). Gandhi primarily addressed duties rather than rights. According to him, the basis of an ethical existence is not what we are owed, but rather what we owe, particularly to other people, the community, and eventually the planet Earth. This focus on responsibility and restraint, central to Gandhi's moral framework, warrants closer philosophical attention in the light of current ecological limits and the shortcomings of legalistic approaches. He warned humanity that there will come a moment when those who are currently in a frenzy of increasing their demands in the mistaken belief that they are adding to the actual knowledge of the world will turn around and regret their actions. This essay examines the philosophical possibilities of an environmental ethics based on duties that draws inspiration from Gandhi's ideas. Gandhi challenges us to reconsider our connection with nature, not as owners or benefactors, but as modest players in a greater, interrelated whole, by introducing us to important ideas like *aparigraha* (non-possession), *ahimsa* (nonviolence), and trusteeship. This viewpoint, which emphasizes simplicity, interconnectedness, and spiritual duty, contradicts both the consumerist mentality and the prevailing rights-based paradigm.

The Dominant Rights-Based Paradigm in Environmental Ethics

When we talk of the environment in contemporary times, especially in academic and policy circles, we often hear the word rights. The rights of animals not to suffer. The rights of rivers to flow freely. The rights of future generations to inherit a liveable planet. One of the earliest contemporary discussions on rights of animals and other living beings is Joel Feinberg's 'The

Rights of Animals and Unborn Generations.' Feinberg's essay left an impact and helped draw attention to the seriousness of ecological issues. When read narrowly, it provides just a conceptual analysis of what constitutes a meaningful right and what does not. Unlike others, Christopher Stone argued for the extension of legal, if not moral rights to forests, water bodies consisting of seas, oceans, rivers and other 'natural objects in the environment, indeed, to the natural environment as whole'(Stone 1988, 456). Effective arguments have been made for extending rights beyond humans by prominent intellectuals such as Tom Regan, Peter Singer (known for his Animal Liberation Movement), and even more policy-focused individuals. Singer and other utilitarians have maintained that when evaluating an action, the interests of all sentient beings—that is, entities with the capacity for pleasure or pain, including non-human ones, should be equally taken into account. Although Peter Singer has used utilitarianism to support the moral status of animals, Tom Regan has created a defence of animals based on their rights. Regan states unequivocally that certain animals have rights, and that these rights require us to uphold high moral standards. Like Singer, Regan opposes a wide range of human actions that have an impact on animals for ethical reasons. The use of animals for food, scientific and commercial research, and recreational purposes such as sport or big game/game shooting, zoos, and pets are examples of these activities. Though not because of the misery they inflict, Regan thinks that these actions are immoral in theory. They deprive certain animals of their inherent moral worth, which is a violation of animal rights. Western intellectual traditions, especially liberalism and utilitarianism, provide the foundation of much of these ideas. Aldo Leopold's famous *Land Ethics* argues for 'biotic rights'— to birds, soil, water, plants and animals. These frameworks have influenced our understanding of ethics, which is now negotiated through systems of autonomy, justice, and quantifiable results rather than emerging from inside. These arguments frequently have a structure that depends on determining advantages or guaranteeing equality within a framework that is created by humans. And part of the issue is that: by definition, rights are about assertions. What do I deserve, they ask? What safeguards am I entitled to? In areas like human rights or civil justice, this is crucial. Applying the same paradigm to the environment, however, has the potential to transform our relationship with nature from one of connection to a contract. Whether the forest has rights or not, we can sue it, pass laws to protect it, or assign a value to it. Courtrooms may benefit from this legalistic and frequently transactional mode of thinking, but it finds it difficult to foster a more profound feeling of concern or belonging. Having legal standing makes protecting a river one thing. It is entirely different to feel a moral obligation to protect it from pollution, even when no one is

looking. Notwithstanding its institutional effectiveness, the rights-based paradigm frequently leaves little space for that internal sense of obligation, the type that stems from conscience rather than the law.

It is at this point that Gandhi's ethical approach presents a significant alternative. Instead of asking what we or nature are entitled to, Gandhi starts with a more personal, and perhaps more uncomfortable, question: *What do we owe?* In the next section, we'll explore how Gandhi's emphasis on duties, not rights, challenges us to rethink not only our relationship with nature, but also the very foundations of ethical life.

Gandhian Ethics: Duties Over Rights

Gandhi's ethical framework places duty at the heart of moral life. In contrast to the dominant rights-based models that characterize much of Western liberal thought, Gandhi's vision of ethics derives from self-discipline, relationality, and spiritual obligation. For Gandhi, the idea of duty is not imposed externally by the state or law; it flows from one's moral awakening and the pursuit of truth (*satya*). He held that rights are secondary and derivative. Gandhi wrote, 'The true source of rights is duty. If we all discharge our duties, rights will not be far to seek' (Gandhi, *Young India*, 8 July 1926).

This emphasis on duties has important implications for environmental ethics.

While both Gandhi and Immanuel Kant place duty at the centre of ethical life, their conceptions differ significantly in spirit, source, and scope. Kant's deontological ethics, as outlined in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, defines duty as the rational obligation to act according to the moral law, which is determined by the categorical imperative: to act only according to maxims that one could will as a universal law. For Kant, the moral subject is autonomous and bound by reason alone, and the moral worth of an action lies in its motive, not its consequence. Gandhi, by contrast, grounds duty in spiritual self-discipline and relational ethics. Rather than deriving moral obligation from rational universality, Gandhi locates it in the self's obligation to truth (*satya*), nonviolence (*ahimsa*), and the welfare of others. While Kantian ethics is rooted in a formal conception of autonomy, Gandhi's view is fundamentally embedded in interdependence and moral responsibility towards the community and the Earth. Thus, although both thinkers emphasize duty, Gandhi's ethics extends beyond the rational individual to include a cosmological and spiritual understanding of moral life.

Gandhi's environmental sensibility emerges most clearly through his concepts of *aparigraha* (non-possession), *ahimsa* (nonviolence), and *trusteeship*. Each of these notions

redefines the human-nature relationship as governed not by entitlement but by moral responsibility. The principle of *aparigraha*, or non-possession, forms a central aspect of Gandhi's ethical and ecological thought. Gandhi maintained that the accumulation of material goods beyond one's genuine needs constitutes a moral failing and contributes directly to ecological degradation. He asserted that excessive consumption undermines both individual character and environmental balance. His statement, "The Earth has enough resources for our need but not for our greed," (Gandhi, *Collected Works*, Vol. 34, p. 255) highlights the ethical implications of economic inequality and affirms the necessity of limiting desire as a foundation for sustainable living. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi criticized modern civilization for its emphasis on bodily comfort, which he viewed as ultimately futile and morally misguided. He asserts that "civilization seeks to increase bodily comforts, and it fails miserably even in doing so" (Gandhi 2001, 40–42).

He proposed simplicity as a moral ideal rather than a mere lifestyle choice. This perspective appears consistently throughout his writings and speeches, where he described greed and consumerism as forms of violence against the Earth. In a speech delivered at Madras in 1916, he declared that "real happiness and contentment consist not in multiplying our wants but in reducing them"(Gandhi 1916, 230-231). For Gandhi, *aparigraha* demanded a deliberate ethical transformation grounded in restraint, sufficiency, and a respectful relationship with both human society and the natural world.

Gandhi's interpretation of *ahimsa*, commonly translated as nonviolence, encompassed a comprehensive moral framework that included the natural world. He applied the principle not only to human beings but also to animals, plants, and the Earth itself. For Gandhi, avoiding harm extended beyond physical actions to include thought and speech, and his ethical commitments reflected a deep concern for the well-being of all forms of life. In *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, he affirmed this position by stating, "My love for nonviolence was never far from my love for all life, including animals and plants" (Gandhi 1958–94, vol. 39, 319).

A letter dated 24 December 1924 further illustrates his reverence for nature: "I need no inspiration other than Nature's. She has never failed me as yet. She mystifies me, bewilders me, sends me to ecstasies" (Gandhi, *Collected Works*, Vol. 29, 342).

This view challenges anthropocentric assumptions and aligns with what some scholars have identified as a cosmocentric ethic, in which humans are situated within, rather than above, the moral order of the natural world (Bilimoria, 2013). Gandhi regarded nonviolence as

inseparable from *satya* (truth), a principle that affirmed the unity of all life. This understanding required a reverential and restrained relationship with nature. His diaries reflect consistent attention to ethical detail, which record Gandhi's concern for injured animals, the felling of trees, and the lives of even the smallest organisms. Gandhi's concept of *ahimsa* thus embodied a spiritual ecology rooted in the Jaina and Vaishnava traditions, yet extended into a universal ethic of environmental responsibility.

The concept of trusteeship constitutes a central element of Gandhi's ethical and environmental thought. He argued that wealth, land, and natural resources should not be treated as private possessions but as trusts held for the benefit of society. In *Harijan* (3 July 1937), he wrote, "A trustee has no rights of ownership. He is a caretaker, not a master." This statement reflects the moral responsibility that he attached to material resources. Gandhi rejected the notion of absolute ownership and insisted that those who possess wealth have a duty to use it for the common good. In a 1931 article in *Young India*, he stated that "all property is a trust held and used for the good of society" (Gandhi 1958–94, vol. 49, 321). He later elaborated this principle in his *Constructive Programme*, where he declared that "the rich man will be left in possession of his wealth, but will act as a trustee of it for the welfare of the people" (Gandhi 1940, 260). This framework indicates that property carries responsibility rather than entitlement. From an environmental perspective, trusteeship rejects the idea that humans hold dominion over nature and proposes that they serve as stewards who must protect ecological integrity for future generations. Gandhi confirmed this view by stating, "Man is not the owner of nature. He is a trustee for the generations to come" (Gandhi 1947, 39). The ethical basis of trusteeship rests on *nishkama karma*, which refers to action without selfish attachment and connects Gandhi's socio-economic philosophy to classical Indian moral thought. This principle supports a vision of environmental justice that rests on humility, accountability, and moral discipline.

Gandhi's emphasis on duties has received renewed attention in contemporary philosophical and ecological discourse. Rajeev Bhargava (2013) argues that duties offer a counterpoint to the atomism of rights-based ethics. Duties are relational; they begin with the other. This ethical orientation is particularly relevant in ecological matters, where the consequences of one's actions often affect distant others, both human and non-human. Vandana Shiva (2005) has drawn on Gandhian thought to propose an ecological ethic rooted in interdependence and care. Gandhi's model for Shiva points to the need for an 'earth

democracy', where life is based not on rights to exploit resources but on protecting ecological balance.

Importantly, Gandhi's emphasis on duties does not negate the importance of rights. Rather, it attempts to ground rights in moral responsibility. As Arne Naess, the founder of deep ecology, noted, 'Gandhi was perhaps the first in modern times to show by example and argument that the fight for the environment can be a spiritual quest' (Naess, 1989, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle).* Gandhi bases morality in spiritual discipline rather than legal entitlement. Through this he talks of a transformation in consciousness, not just the extension of legal frameworks.

This philosophical approach is important not only theoretically but also practically. The protection of laws can be challenged or ignored, but moral obligations are difficult to escape. A rights-based environmentalism may protect a forest in the courtroom, but it is a duty-based ethic that encourages someone not to cut it down in the first place. This interiorized moral compass, which Gandhi aimed to cultivate through *swaraj* (self-rule), suggests a more enduring form of ecological responsibility.

Gandhi's model also addresses the asymmetry between those who pollute and those who suffer. Modern industrial societies often claim rights while shifting ecological damage onto the global South. A duty-based approach shifts the ethical burden to those who have the power to act responsibly. It asks not what they can claim, but what they must relinquish. As Gandhi stated, 'To possess without a sense of responsibility is a form of theft'(Gandhi, *Young India*, 19 March 1925). Gandhi's reinterpretation of *asteya* (non-stealing) to mean that "amassing of wealth, or even the possession of more than one's immediate needs amounts to theft" resonates strongly with the 19th-century French philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. In his seminal 1840 work, *What Is Property?* Proudhon famously and directly answered his own question with the maxim, "Property is theft!" (Proudhon 1994, 13). This radical moral framing critiques consumerism at its root and reimagines the ethical subject not as a claimant but as a caretaker.

Underlying Gandhi's moral worldview are the interrelated principles of humility, restraint, and reverence. These virtues shape the ethical posture he advocates toward both society and nature. Humility (*vinaya*) arises from the awareness of human limitations and the refusal to assert mastery over others or the Earth (Gandhi 1932, Chapter XII). Restraint (*sanyam*) reflects the ethical necessity to limit desire, consumption, and interference, especially in a world shaped by excess and exploitation (Gandhi 1932, Chapter VI). Reverence (*shraddhā*)

points to a spiritual appreciation of life in all its forms, and treats even the seemingly insignificant as morally significant (Jain 2017, 230). Gandhi's insistence on walking barefoot, spinning his own cloth, and acknowledging the sacredness of animals and rivers were not mere symbols, but practical enactments of these values. These virtues move ethics beyond mere duties and rights, toward a deeper transformation of the self, an ethical ecology grounded in character, not just action.

In sum, Gandhi's ethics challenges the instrumentalism of rights-based environmentalism by re-centring moral responsibility. His ethical orientation, grounded in *aparigraha*, *ahimsa*, and trusteeship, presents a moral framework in which reverence and restraint shape human interactions with the natural world. In contrast to the individual-centred logic of many modern ethical systems, Gandhi's approach shifts the moral focus toward relational and collective obligations. This turn toward duty, grounded in spiritual and relational ethics, offers not only a critique of legalistic approaches but also a vision of ecological life based on humility, interconnectedness, and moral clarity.

Toward a Synthesis: Complementarity of Duties and Rights

While Gandhi's emphasis on duties offers a necessary correction to the excesses of rights-based environmentalism, a rigid dichotomy between rights and duties may not serve the complexity of ecological ethics. Duties and rights need not exist in opposition. Rather, they can operate as mutually reinforcing ethical commitments. Duties, which are based on moral conscience and spiritual responsibility, generate in the individual an inner sense of respect and observance of rights. In contrast, when duties are neglected, rights emerge as an institutional framework that protects the weak and disadvantaged, especially the marginalized.

Philosophers such as Amartya Sen argue that rights and duties coexist in an ethical relationship, and that their practical effectiveness depends on one another. Sen maintains that rights function best when they are supported by social norms and ethical behavior (Sen, 2009). Gandhi, too, did not reject rights entirely. Instead, he sought to locate them within a broader moral economy of responsibility. For example, his insistence on *swaraj*, interpreted not only as political independence but as self-rule, requires both the internal discipline of duty and the external recognition of dignity and freedom. Gandhi wrote: 'Real rights are a result of the performance of duty; these rights flow automatically' (Gandhi, *Young India*, 8 July 1926).

This complementarity is particularly important for environmental ethics. When rights are legally granted to nature, such as the rights of rivers, forests, or future generations, this

establishes an essential normative baseline. But if this is not accompanied by a culture of duty, such rights become limited to mere formalities, and their moral effect is diminished. For instance, when the Ganges and Yamuna rivers were granted legal personhood by the Uttarakhand High Court in 2017, it marked a symbolic victory. Yet enforcement remains elusive without a community ethic that takes seriously the obligation to protect and preserve the rivers (O'Donnell & Talbot-Jones, 2018).

Integrating Gandhi's duty-based ethics with selected rights-based frameworks may offer a more holistic model. The idea is not to subsume one under the other, but to hold them in productive tension. Duties without rights can become paternalistic or coercive. Rights without duties can lead to entitlement without accountability. A synthesis would recognize the institutional value of rights while grounding them in ethical self-restraint, compassion, and ecological humility.

Such a model also draws from traditions beyond Western liberalism. Classical Indian philosophy, particularly within the Dharmic traditions, has long emphasized duty (*dharma*) as the foundation of social and cosmic order. The term "Dharmic traditions" refers broadly to the family of Indian philosophical and religious systems, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, that centre ethical life around *dharma*, a concept encompassing duty, moral order, and cosmic harmony. Unlike the Western liberal emphasis on individual autonomy and rights, these traditions often emphasize the relational and contextual nature of ethics. In Hindu thought, for instance, *svadharma* (one's own duty) guides ethical action based on one's stage of life, social role, and circumstances. Jaina ethics promotes *ahimsa* as the highest virtue, extending nonviolence even to minute life forms, and demands rigorous self-discipline. In Buddhism, the *Eightfold Path* prescribes moral conduct rooted in compassion and mindfulness, with ethical precepts serving as means to liberation. These traditions share a vision in which duties are not externally imposed rules but expressions of inner cultivation and cosmic responsibility. Gandhi's ethical project draws deeply from this civilizational ethos, which interprets *dharma* not as religious law but as a mode of life anchored in care, self-restraint, and universal concern. Therefore, rights were not absent, but they were always understood within the matrix of responsibilities to others, family, community, and nature. In Gandhi's political and ethical project, this civilizational ethos finds renewed relevance.

Gandhi's ecological consciousness was deeply shaped by the devotional and ascetic traditions of Vaishnavism and Jainism. As a devout Vaishnava, Gandhi was raised in the *bhakti* ethos of the *Vaishnava Jana To* tradition, which emphasized compassion for all beings (*dayā*)

and humility before the divine (Lal 2020). This worldview cultivated an affective disposition toward nonviolence, especially through the figure of Krishna, who embodies moral action and care for the Earth (Klostermaier 1998, 246–54). Equally influential was Jainism, particularly through his exposure to Jaina monks and lay practitioners in Gujarat. Jain teachings on *ahimsa*, practiced not just in ritual but in daily conduct, which instilled in Gandhi a radical attentiveness to the sanctity of all forms of life, however smal (Tahtinen 1976, 8). This sensitivity translated into his ethical lifestyle, vegetarianism, avoidance of leather, and even his reluctance to harm insects. The fusion of Vaishnava compassion and Jain austerity contributed to Gandhi's unique vision of environmental ethics, one that viewed nature not as an inert resource but as a network of lives deserving reverence and restraint.

Ultimately, a reformed ecological ethics must combine legal and moral tools. The state may legislate rights, but civil society must cultivate duties. Educational institutions, religious organisations and local communities must play an active role in creating ecological sensibilities. As Vandana Shiva argues, 'The rights of the Earth and the duties of its caretakers go hand in hand' (Shiva, *Earth Democracy, Justice, Sustainability and Peace*, p. 47). This dual framework recognizes that ethics is not merely about regulation but about the transformation of consciousness.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Gandhi's duty-based ethical vision offers an important but underexplored alternative to the rights-centred approaches that have become prevalent in environmental thought. Gandhi's moral vision is based on principles such as *aparigraha*, *ahimsa*, and *trusteeship*, which encourage restraint, interdependence and reverence for all living beings. This vision does not remain confined to the legal realm but presents environmental responsibility as a spiritual and relational experience. In contrast to the anthropocentric and legalistic approach to rights, Gandhi's model emphasises a deeply rooted ethical and existential relationship.

However, it is not appropriate to view this duty-centred ethics as an alternative to rights. The two are not in competition but complementary. While rights provide institutional and moral safeguards, duties develop the moral attitudes and values that are necessary for the protection of these rights. When these two dimensions work together, it is possible to build an ecological consciousness that balances both the judicial system and individual awareness.

Nevertheless, Gandhi's duty-based ethics is not without limitations. His insistence on absolute moral principles often created dilemmas when applied to concrete situations. In his work *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi discusses his refusal to allow his son to consume meat despite medical advice, on the grounds that it would violate the principle of *ahimsa*. This incident has been widely cited to illustrate the potential rigidity of his moral code, especially when it prioritizes personal virtue over practical wellbeing. Critics have argued that such absolutism may lead to moral elitism, where ethical purity becomes more important than contextual sensitivity or compassion. Moreover, Gandhi's reliance on individual conscience and spiritual self-discipline may not provide adequate institutional mechanisms for dealing with large-scale ecological or social crises. These challenges do not invalidate his ethical vision, but they do point to the need for critical engagement and adaptation rather than unqualified acceptance.

This risk of moral elitism is particularly relevant when duty-based ethics become benchmarks for evaluating others, rather than guides for personal conduct. Gandhi's own ascetic lifestyle, marked by fasting, celibacy, and extreme self-discipline, set ethical standards that many may find admirable but unattainable (Gandhi 1932, Chapter on Celibacy; Gandhi, 1957, Chapter 108). In ecological debates, this can translate into prescriptive attitudes that alienate rather than inspire. If environmental responsibility is framed in terms of personal purity, it risks overlooking the structural and economic conditions that shape people's choices. A more inclusive model would require integrating Gandhi's moral aspirations with compassion for human limitations and social diversity.

A duty-based ethics may appear idealistic or overly demanding, particularly in the absence of institutional support. Yet in the face of an unprecedented ecological crisis, such a moral vision becomes not only relevant but necessary. Gandhi does not provide simple answers; rather, he offers a demanding yet hopeful ethical path, one where the change begins not in the courtroom, but in the conscience.

In rethinking ecology through Gandhi, we are reminded that living ethically with the Earth is not just about rules or rights, but about cultivating a way of being, anchored in care, reverence, and a deep sense of shared belonging. Perhaps the question is not what nature owes us, but what we quietly, urgently, and lovingly owe the Earth. Gandhi's ethical philosophy invites a shift from entitlement to responsibility, from consumption to restraint, and from dominion to care. Such a framework does not merely support environmental policy but calls

for a transformation in ethical consciousness, one that begins with how we live and what we owe to others and to the Earth.

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