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Between Ecocentrism and Anthropocentrism: Situating Gandhian Philosophy of Environment

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Abstract. While Gandhi is portrayed as an inspiration for proponents of ecocentrism, specifically Deep Ecologists like Arne Naess, Ramachandra Guha suggests that Gandhi was more concerned with anthropocentrism. Rather than ascertaining whether Gandhi was a Deep Ecologist, this paper aims to determine the implications of his philosophical anthropology for the Anthropocene. Dwelling on Gandhi's comprehension of the other, including non-human nature, we situate Gandhian environmentalism between ecocentrism and anthropocentrism as a weak form of anthropocentrism that can be interpreted as 'stewardship' with the potential for an ethic of care. The Gandhian ideals of *Swadeshi*, *Swaraj*, and *Sarvodaya* are invoked to discuss the significance and alignment of Gandhi's philosophy of environment to contemporary ideals of ecologically and socially sustainable societies.
Keywords: Deep Ecology, Gandhian Ethics, *Advaita*, Self and the Other, Environmentalism.

Tarp ekocentrizmo ir antropocentrizmo: beieškant gandiškosios aplinkos filosofijos vietos

Santrauka. Nors Gandhi įprastai vaizduojamas kaip ekocentrizmo šalininkų, o ypač *giliosios ekologijos* atstovų, tokių kaip Arne Naessas, įkvėpėjas, Ramachandra Guha teigia, kad Gandhi labiau orientavosi į antropocentrizmą. Vietoj bandymo išsiaiškinti, ar Gandhi buvo gilusis ekologas, šiuo straipsniu siekiama apibrėžti jo filosofinės antropologijos pasekmes antropocenui. Remdamiesi Gandhi Kito – įskaitant nežmogiškąją prigimtį – samprata, Gandhi environmentalizmą siūlome traktuoti tarp ekocentrizmo ir antropocentrizmo kaip silpnąją antropocentrizmo formą, kurią galima interpretuoti kaip „rūpestį", kurioje yra potencialo rūpesčio etikai. Pasitelkiami Gandhi idealai *Swadeshi*, *Swaraj* ir *Sarvodaya*, kurių kontekste aptariama Gandhi aplinkos filosofijos reikšmė ir jos sąsajos su šiuolaikiniais ekologiškai ir socialiai tvarių visuomenių idealais.
Pagrindiniai žodžiai: gilioji ekologija, Gandhi etika, *Advaita*, Aš ir Kitas, environmentalizmas

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Introduction

Many a time, philosophy begins when reason vacillates between two equally plausible yet contradictory claims that are made about the same phenomenon. The Indian tradition of philosophy too attests to this – it is said that doubt arising due to contradictory knowledge occasions reflection. Many aspects of Mahatma Gandhi's thoughts are uncertain as they could be interpreted one way or another. As Akeel Bilgrami, an eminent thinker on Gandhi's philosophy, has pointed out, nobody can be sure on many occasions that they got Gandhi quite right (2002, 79). Gandhi thus continues to be a fertile resource for philosophers. In what follows, we wish to merely flag off the enigmatic nature of the relationship between humans and nature – the question that the crisis of the Anthropocene raises (Gutauskas 2024, 46) – in Gandhi's philosophy of the environment. The enigma gets accentuated when we have two different and opposing readings of Gandhi's engagement with the environment, one in terms of Ecocentrism, specifically Deep Ecology, and the other in terms of anthropocentrism.

Gandhi and the Enigma of Nature

Many environmental philosophers and Indian environmentalists often explicitly acknowledge their indebtedness to Gandhian philosophy. For instance, Arne Naess, who coined the term 'Deep Ecology', explicitly mentions Gandhi as a source of inspiration for it (Weber 1999, 349). Ramachandra Guha, a foremost environmental historian and a biographer of Gandhi, rightly recognises Gandhi as a source of inspiration for the environmental movement in India:

> The [environmental] movement [in India] truly began with the Chipko Andolan in April 1973; in one of the first printed accounts of Chipko, a breathless journalist announced that Gandhi's ghost had saved the Himalayan trees. Ever since Mahatma Gandhi has been the usually acknowledged and occasionally unacknowledged patron saint of the environmental movement. (1994, 95)

Nevertheless, Guha is sceptical about Gandhi's environmentalism, a doubt indicated by the interrogative mood of the title of his article "Gandhi the Environmentalist?" (1994)[1]. To understand why so many consider Gandhi "the patron saint of the environmental movement", we must recall that there are broadly two approaches within environmental ethics, namely, anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, each with a distinctive ontological basis in construing the relation between humans and nature. While in anthropocentrism, a separation between humans and nature is emphasised, a unity conception with an inseparable bond between humans and nature is assumed in ecocentrism.

Anthropocentrism construes nature as 'the other' and accords it only an instrumental value. The strong version of anthropocentrism construes nature as an object to be conquered and subjugated for the betterment of humans. In short, the guiding principle

[1] However, Guha elsewhere makes a persuasive argument that Gandhi's philosophy enables sustainable environmental practices (1997, 168).

of anthropocentrism seems to be that 'nature is for the sake of humans'. Ecocentrism, on the other hand, assigns an intrinsic value to nature. The relationship between humans and nature in ecocentrism is a harmonious one. In certain understandings of ecocentrism, nature is perceived as sacred, and humans look up to nature with reverence and awe. Of course, within anthropocentrism, too, there could be a perspective where nature is seen as transcendentally constituted by the human subject, *à la* Kant or Husserl, and yet maintain a separation between the ontological realm of nature and humans, unlike Deep Ecology[2]. While it is true that the current scholarship surpasses the opposition between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism in advancing various nuanced stances within environmental philosophy, the focus here is how scholars interpret Gandhian ethics in relation to the environment and the non-human forms of life.

Deep Ecology is a branch of ecocentric philosophy, or Eco-philosophy, which has taken a more holistic view of nature, recognising that humans are among many other species in the ecosystem. The distinction between Deep and Shallow ecologies brought out by Naess was so significant that later debates in environmental ethics hover around this. According to Naess, Shallow Ecology views humans and their environment as separate entities. Thus, Shallow Ecology is tantamount to "weak anthropocentrism"[3]. According to it, only humans have intrinsic value; nature has only an instrumental value. Meanwhile, Deep Ecology views all living and non-living things as having intrinsic value. According to the philosophy of Deep Ecology, humans are just one order of being among others in the biotic community. Thus, it projects "the relational, total-field" image of the environment and humans (Naess 1973, 95). Instead of looking at nature from the outside, Deep Ecology locates humans as an integral part of the being we are dealing with. For Deep Ecology, it is impossible to say that nature ends here and that humans or other forms of reality begin there.

Many consider anthropocentrism a primarily Western mode of construing the human-nature relation and ecocentrism predominantly oriental. Thus, Lynn White Jr. (1967, 1203–1207) indicts Western Christianity as promoting anthropocentrism that lies at the root of our environmental crisis[4]. It is this very same sentiment that prompts the champions of

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[2] We are thankful to the anonymous reviewer for pointing out this possibility to us.

[3] Brian Norton distinguishes between two forms of anthropocentrism, namely, strong anthropocentrism and weak anthropocentrism. He writes:

> "A value theory is *strongly anthropocentric* if all value countenanced by it is explained by reference to satisfactions of felt preferences of human individuals. A value theory is *weakly anthropocentric* if all value countenanced by it is explained by reference to satisfaction of some felt preference of a human individual or by reference to its bearing upon the ideals which exist as elements in a world view essential to determinations of considered preferences." (Norton 2003, 165)

Here, a felt preference is a desire or need of an individual prompting him/her to act in accordance with the same without any rational assessment of the desire. In contrast, a considered preference is a desire or need that one expresses after careful deliberation.

[4] However, there are studies that have discovered ecophile tendencies in the Christian faith, cultivating a positive attitude toward nature in Western countries such as Lithuania (cf. Kalenda, Č., 1996. About the Formation of Ecological Ethics. *Problemos* 50, 102–112. https://doi.org/10.15388/Problemos.1996.50.6981). There are also empirical studies that reveal the prevalence of environmental destruction in non-Biblical cultures of both the East and the West since antiquity (cf. Tuan, Y., 1968. Discrepancies between Environmental Attitude and Behaviour: Examples from Europe and China. *The Canadian Geographer* 12, 176–191. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0064.1968.tb00764.x).

environmentalism in India to appropriate Gandhi as their patron saint. In doing so, they seem to be not wholly without justification. After all, Gandhi condemned the Western civilisation[5] in no uncertain terms in his *Hind Swaraj*:

> The tendency of the Indian civilisation is to elevate the moral being, that of the Western civilisation is to propagate immorality. The latter is godless, the former is based on a belief in God. So understanding and so believing, it behooves every lover of India to cling to the Indian civilisation even as a child clings to the mother's breast. (1938, 46)

Coupled with the criticism of Western civilisation and the inherent evil of industrialisation, Gandhi's philosophy of *Ahimsa*, i.e., his principle of non-violence, and his firm belief in the essential unity of all beings make him the harbinger of radical environmentalism. In addition to activists such as Sunderlal Bahuguna, Baba Amte, and Medha Patkar[6] who draw their inspiration from Gandhi, academicians such as Bhikhu Parekh portray Gandhi as espousing radical environmentalism. Parekh argues that Gandhi had not only a philosophical reason but also a political one for rejecting anthropocentrism:

> If nature had no dignity and was a mere means to human self-interest, women, non-white races and the poor, who on a conventional definition of rationality could be presented as living close to nature or like animals, were fair game for those fancying themselves as fully rational. (1995, 87)

However, one may be at a loss to understand how Gandhi, given his characterisation as a firm believer in *Advaita*[7], would be able to assert the intrinsic value of nature, as *Advaita* metaphysics does not regard nature as ultimately real. Again, in *Advaita*, '*moksa*' or liberation is the realisation that plurality and diversity of beings is ultimately an illusion or '*maya*'. Environmentalism, on the other hand, asserts the reality of the world as well as the plurality of beings. The self-realisation that environmentalism defines is the realisation of the non-difference of oneself and the processes of the natural world without sacrificing the plurality of beings.

Eliot Deutsch, however, interprets *Advaita* metaphysics as offering full-blooded ethics of the environment. He says:

> The statement [*Brahma satyam jagan mithya jivo brahmaiva na aparah*] is affirming that Brahman, the oneness of reality, is the most fundamental ground of all existence; that the individual self, in its essence, is identical with this reality; and that this world, when taken as independent and self-sufficient, when taken as purely "objective" and separate from man, is a false world. (Deutsch 1970, 79–80)

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[5] Gandhi equated Western civilisation with materialistic values and contrasted it with the Indian civilisation which, according to him, is oriented towards spiritualistic values. Needless to say, this binary is problematic and perhaps may be intended by him as a critique of colonialism.

[6] Sunderlal Bahuguna (1927–2021) led the 'Chipko Andolan' of the 1970s, a non-violent protest against deforestation in India. Baba Amte (1914–2008) and Medha Patkar (born 1954) led the 'Narmada Bachao Andolan' of the 1980s, a movement to save the Narmada River in India. Both movements are among the most celebrated among the Indian environmental initiatives.

[7] Gandhi says, "I believe in *advaita*, I believe in the essential unity of man and for that matter of all that lives" (1927b, 421).

According to Deutsch, the *Advaita* metaphysics accords intrinsic value to nature and agrees with the idea of natural reverence. He points out that the concept of '*maya*', rather than obfuscating the relevance of nature, provides the creative play required for a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. He writes:

> With maya, with creative play, there is nothing more natural than "natural reverence": it has its own kind of necessity, which is basically "aesthetic" rather than either rational or empirical in character. This necessity is concerned with rightness or appropriateness without a predetermined end. It is a working-with not a working-at: it is creative throughout. (Deutsch 1991, 271)

It is this 'working-with' dimension that, in a way, prompts Parekh to understand Gandhi as rejecting anthropocentrism in favour of ecocentrism. He notes:

> Not man, but cosmos was… [Gandhi's] starting point. The cosmos consisted of different orders of being ranging from the material to the human, each autonomous and standing in a complex pattern of relationship with the rest within a larger framework. It was polycentric and without a dominant centre to which the rest of the universe could be instrumentally related. Since man represented only one order of being, obviously he could not be the centre of the universe. And since Gandhi conceived the cosmic spirit as a principle of order and not as a creator, it too lacked the separateness, transcendence and independence necessary to constitute one. Man was an integral part of the cosmos, tied to it by a million bonds and incomprehensible outside of it […]. (Parekh 1995, 86)

Having thus rejected anthropocentrism and allayed our fears about the availability of environmentalism from the *Advaita* perspective, it seems almost convincing to claim Gandhi for the cause of ecocentric environmentalism. Inevitably, his concept of *Ahimsa* lends him support for such an ethics. Or does it?

Gandhian Metaphysics of Human-Nature Relationship

Gandhi understands Hinduism as essentially proscribing killing. For a practitioner of *Ahimsa*, killing a living being is sinful. 'Living beings' for Gandhi include not only humans and animals but also all sub-human forms of life. However, it is impossible to live without killing some forms of life. Thus, living itself becomes sinful. This needs to be reconciled, and thus, Gandhi works out a practical reconciliation by saying that *Ahimsa* as a principle is the expression of perfection. Since all of us are only imperfect beings, we cannot practise *Ahimsa* in its perfection. He writes:

> Ahimsa is a comprehensive principle. We are helpless mortals caught in the conflagration of himsa. The saying that life lives on life has a deep meaning in it. Man cannot for a moment live without consciously or unconsciously committing outward himsa […] A votary of ahimsa therefore remains true to his faith *if the spring of all his actions is compassion*, if he shuns to the best of his ability the destruction of the tiniest creature, tries to save it, and thus incessantly strives to be free from the deadly coil of *himsa*. He will be constantly growing in self-restraint and compassion, but he can never become entirely free from outward himsa. (Gandhi 1927a, 291–292; emphasis added)

K. J. Shah (1969, 515) remarks that the general principles adopted by Gandhi and the principles of his thinking about specific concrete cases are sometimes not only different but also irreconcilable. He points out that, in order to draw limits to the principle of *Ahimsa*, Gandhi appeals to Hindu tradition. Hinduism has laid down that killing for sacrifice is not '*himsa*' (violence). What is inevitable, unavoidable, is not regarded as a sin. He lists three classes of violence that Gandhi mentions as unavoidable violence:

> (i) We do destroy as much life as we think is necessary for sustaining the body, e.g. (a) we breathe, (b) we use disinfectants, (c) we eat food. (ii) We commit violence for protecting those under our care, or for the sake of others, i.e. for the benefit of the species, e.g. we kill (a) the carnivorous beasts, (b) a man run amuck. (iii) Sometimes we kill or commit violence for the sake of those whose life is taken […]. (Shah 1969, 515)

In other words, Gandhi never made *Ahimsa* a fetish of principle. Once Gandhi said, "Should my child be attacked with rabies and there was no helpful remedy to relieve his agony, I should consider it my duty to take his life" (1953, 92). An actual case was of a calf that was in extreme pain due to an accident and seemed beyond cure. Gandhi permitted to kill it to relieve it from the painful struggle for its life. All these acts of violence may be explained as falling into the category of unavoidable violence and, as such, are exemptions to the principle of *Ahimsa*. Gandhi's notion of compassion as the ground of such outward *himsa* may even justify these actions as ultimately one of *Ahimsa*.

Some followers of Gandhi held that the principle that one must commit only minimum, unavoidable violence implied the non-tenability of non-vegetarianism. Thus, they concluded that one should be a vegetarian and not entertain non-vegetarians. However, Gandhi did not accept this extension of his non-violence on the grounds that enforcing temporary or permanent vegetarianism on non-vegetarians is greater violence than serving non-vegetarian food to them. Shah forcefully argues that Gandhi modified *Ahimsa* by rejecting the claim that "all life is one". He writes:

> [For Gandhi] though in theory all life is one, in practice, some life is more equal than another. It is not only that the life of man is more important than the life of insects and carnivorous animals, but more importantly…the freedom of opportunity of a human being to eat meat is more important than the life of an animal. (Shah 1969, 523)

According to Gier (1998, 116), the oneness that Gandhi emphasises is often between human and God and not necessarily the whole of being. Thus, Parekh's arguments notwithstanding and despite the availability of ecocentrism within *Advaita*, Gandhi seems not to be an apostle of radical environmentalism. His environmentalism may be characterised as anthropocentrism in a weak form.

Conclusion: Between Anthropocentrism and Ecocentrism

A reading of Gandhi's philosophy of environment as one between ecocentrism and anthropocentrism seems justified by his famous remark that exemplifies the anthropocentric

concern of conservation and sustainable use of resources: "World has enough for everybody's need, but not enough for everybody's greed". Guha narrates an incident to show that Gandhi, unlike radical environmentalists, was never interested in wilderness or its conservation:

> When the Congress Ministries were formed in different provinces of British India in 1937, Thompson [a British educationist] tried hard to interest the national leaders in the cause of saving India's disappearing wildlife, with (as he noted) 'animal after animal…either extinct or on the danger list'. When he confronted Gandhi with the problem, the Mahatma merely joked, saying, 'we shall always have the British lion'. But then, noting Thompson's disappointment, Gandhi asked him to speak to Jawaharlal [Nehru], as one who might show more interest. (1994, 99)

Here, we think, lies the relevance of Gandhi's enigmatic ethics of silence, as evidenced in the above account of the dwindling wildlife in India. The exalted status of science and the unchallenged notion of objective truths that the confidence of 'enlightenment rationality' brought to us with regard to our role in the whole of nature have been eroded with the advent of hermeneutical readings of natural science (Kockelmans 1997, 229). The way we understand the cosmos, too, has now changed. We have now come to realise that humans are not the centre of the cosmos. As Midgley (1994, 106) points out, we now accept that the universe is so much larger and much less neatly organised that the very idea of it having a centre does not make any sense.

The relevance of the Gandhian approach to nature in the Anthropocene epoch can be seen from the fact that nature cannot be understood purely in mechanistic terms. Cartesian dualistic ontology encourages Science to manipulate nature. Its fundamental bias is to treat everything as though it were an object and meant nothing to us[8]. At the same time, the radical environmentalism of Deep Ecology is also problematic as "it is impossible to avoid anthropocentricity as a condition of experience" of the perceiving human (Gutauskas 2024, 49), and it is precisely our human capacity for rational thought that allows for the recognition of the gravity of the crisis of the Anthropocene.

The crisis of the Anthropocene calls for an ethic of care towards nature, specifically in terms of local self-sufficiency and self-reliance in production and consumption for fiscal autonomy (the Gandhian ideal of *Swadeshi*). The Gandhian approach to the environment provides an antidote to the fragmented vision resulting from the crisis of the Anthropocene, propelled by the forces of global capitalism. For Gandhi, the ideal of *Swaraj* (disciplined rule from within) comes not merely by putting an end to the exploitation and degradation by those in power. Rather, it results from checking the evils of capitalism and thereby ensuring a more equitable distribution of the "products of labour" (Gandhi 1960, 16–17).

[8] In *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Edmund Husserl highlights the crisis in Modern Science by comparing it to a machine. The method of Modern Science, once formalised, renders it into a mathematical process that idealises nature and makes its study a routine affair. The *Modern Scientist* seems to be satisfied with the successful operation of the 'machine,' which guarantees the success of practical achievement, especially in the form of technology that manipulates Nature (Tharakan and George 2025, 140).

Gandhian environmentalism thus urges us to reflect on rejecting strong anthropocentrism. As Gutauskas suggests, nature as the other of the human self can "decentralise us and open up new perspectives" even without leaving our human centrality, forming our subjectivities in "an environment of new co-existence, and not only in the human social medium" (2024, 61). The nature of the relation between 'self' and 'the other' in Gandhian environmentalism can be construed as 'stewardship'. Our awareness of the interdependence between humans and nature gives rise to the recognition that "one's freedom presupposes the freedom of others" (Arp 2000, 74). This kind of interdependence engenders collective responsibility and motivation for political action as envisaged in the Gandhian ideals of *Swaraj* and *Sarvodaya* (welfare of all). The open-endedness of Gandhi's principles and practices of care is such that he focused on the particularity of actual situations to determine the course of ethical action wherein the moral agent is seen as 'exemplar' (Bilgrami 2002, 88). Gandhian weak anthropocentrism as an ethic of care thus offers a non-Western approach to the environment that counters the apathy of strong anthropocentrism while also being sufficiently politically motivating in times of global environmental crisis, aligning with contemporary ideals of environmentally and socially sustainable societies.

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