



# Climate Change, Truth, and Nonhuman Animals

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## Abstract

I consider the role of nonhuman animals in a Gandhian devotional democracy based on the popular sovereignty of Truth. Such a democracy is based methodologically on a philosophical reconstruction I developed in my recent book, *Gandhi's Popular Sovereignty of Truth (GPST)* of neglected passages from Gandhi's writings concerning the people's voice as God's voice. The people speak God's voice of Truth not through voting, or even public discussion, but rather through everyday devotion to spiritual practices and community participation.

## Introduction

In *GPST*, I enlarge the scope of devotional democracy to include the 'spiritual practices' of nonhuman domesticated animals as co-participants in speaking God's voice of Truth. This draws upon not only the extraordinary history of spirit in stories of human to animal avatars, but also recent scientific work in cognitive ethology attributing moral and spiritual capacities to animals. It further draws upon recent work in political philosophy on domesticated animals as co-citizens of an interspecies Zoopolis.

Indeed, it reinterprets Gandhi own vision of animals as poems of pity by instead envisioning them as co-equal devotional participants in realizing Truth. After laying out the position I developed in *GPST*, I turn to the question of climate change. What are the conceptual and practical implications of this Gandhian vision of democracy for the ethics of climate change not just from the perspective of human but also nonhuman animal participants in realizing an interspecies sovereignty of Truth?

On one level, climate change is fundamentally a question of scientific truth. Empirically, what are the projected global impacts of rising temperatures, rising sea levels, etc., induced by human action? On another level, it is fundamentally an ethical question. How are the moral costs and benefits of addressing climate change and

how are these to be fairly distributed considering the greater vulnerabilities of some populations over others, as well as considering consequences of present action for future generations.

In the existing literature on climate change, the ethical question is not typically understood as a question of *truth* as much as consequences, ends, *obligations and rights*. This entails some, often uneasy, combination of consequentialist (utilitarian), teleological (ends-oriented) and deontological (rights-based) reasoning. All populations affected by climate change ought to be afforded equal consideration for their fundamental interests (whether avoiding suffering, realizing autonomy, etc.), as the kinds of beings they are, according to their corresponding ends in life, and entitled to be protected, either by moral or legal sanction, in those interests.

I rethink the ethical, as opposed to scientific, question of truth in relations to climate change. I do so methodologically through a philosophical reconstruction of some overlooked passages in Gandhi's voluminous writings. These writings concern the relationship between popular sovereignty and Truth. As a development of ideas from my recent book, *Gandhi's Popular Sovereignty of Truth* [1], I philosophically reconstruct some overlooked passages from Gandhi concerning the 'spiritual evolution' of democracy and Truth.

In a notable passage ignored by almost all his commentators, Gandhi remarks, 'the voice of the people is God's voice.' According to Gandhi, the concept of Truth is lexically prior to the concept of God; hence, 'Truth is God' rather than 'God is Truth.' God therefore does not speak Truth through the voice of the people. Instead, 'the people' speak the voice of Truth and, doing so, speak 'God's voice.' In other words, the people are sovereign (democratic authority) in speaking Truth, which is also God. This does not mean that Truth is established through voting.

According to Gandhi, the 'spiritual evolution' of democracy is a function of relearning ancient devotional practices, such as ahimsa (nonviolence) and aparigraha (nonpossession). Hence, the people are sovereign in speaking the voice of Truth (which is God), when they adhere devotedly to these mundane, everyday spiritual practices. As spiritual and devotional, Truth is neither scientific nor ethical in those standard forms defining the existing climate change literature.

What does any of this have to do with climate change? Human-induced climate change is but one manifestation in modernity of forgetting the ancient spiritual pathways of Truth. Such forgetting has resulted in great violence (himsa) done to the planet based on a materialistic ethos of unlimited possession (parigraha), acquisitiveness, exploitation, placing profit over sustainable climatic integrity.

What indeed does it have to do with nonhuman animals? Climate change is human, and not nonhuman, animal induced. Gandhi himself viewed nonhuman animals as innocent 'poems of pity,' that is, the hapless victims of human himsa and parigraha. Moreover, 'the people' speaking the voice of Truth is surely an exclusively human category of spiritual devotees.

Gandhi's sentimentalism concerning innocent, hapless animals is rejected by Peter Singer, who non-sentimentally emphasized nondiscrimination, avoiding 'speciesism' through giving equal weight to sentience, or the capacity to suffer. Despite this difference, Gandhi and Singer both agree nonhuman animals are moral patients rather than agents. However, recent scientific work in cognitive ethology emphasizes nonhuman animal cognition and agency based on field observations of animals in their (wild and domestic) habitats, along with some controlled behavioral experiments. Cognitive ethologists claim evidence of many nonhuman animals demonstrating empathetic concern for other animals, including human animals, and, in some cases, a rudimentary sense, or cognition, of 'fairness'.

This is supported by recent historiographical work on animal resistance. For example, Jason Hribal emphasizes documentary evidence of animals demonstrating not just rudimentary moral but also rudimentary political capacities for resisting human oppression and cruelty. Moreover, recent philosophical work examines the relationship between animal resistance and interspecies political

solidarity – do duties to oppose injustice entail relations of political solidarity with all victims of injustice, across not just racial and gender, but also species lines?

Gandhi himself distinguishes between ordinary history – a chronology of violence and acquisitiveness – and extraordinary (or spiritual) history documented in ancient myths, legends, and fable of sages and avatars, spiritual teachers of ahimsa and aparigraha. He is clearly aware of the ordinary history of violence done to nonhuman animals; but, failing to see them as agents, as opposed to patients and poems of pity, he fails to see the philosophical implications of this history for interspecies political solidarity. He is thus surprisingly inattentive to the extraordinary history of animal sages and avatars teaching spiritual lessons to humans prone to forget their own devotional commitments to values, such as ahimsa and aparigraha. Gandhi thus misses the opportunity to integrate human/nonhuman animal solidarity in spiritual learning into his historiography of Spirit.

This 'missed opportunity' points to recent work in political philosophy by Davidson and Kymlicka on the *Zoopolis*, a political community recognizing co-participation not only across lines of only gender, race, handicap, and so on, but also species. *Zoopolis* gets Singer's nondiscrimination but in the context of recognizing non-human animals as agents rather than patients, as rudimentary moral and political participants). Donaldson and Kymlicka's work drew criticism for its lack of clarity on how nonhuman animals could act as co-participants in the *Zoopolis* as democratically sovereign and self-governing; as Roger Scruton once wryly remarked, 'horses don't vote.' This is substantially resolved by a Gandhian interpretation of the *Zoopolis* in which sovereignty – the sovereignty of Truth – is not a function of voting and representation but rather diverse acts of empathy, solidarity, and companionship of which all co-participants are capable, regardless of race, gender, or species.

I conclude by making three claims. 1) nonhuman animals capable of rudimentary moral, political, and spiritual agency may properly be understood as co-participants in the Gandhian popular sovereignty of Truth. 2) Such animals may also properly be understood as co-participants in the spiritual evolution of an interspecies *Zoopolis*, repudiating the materialist ethos of himsa and parigraha, causing the spiritual forgetting in modernity that created human induced climate change. 3) Further, as agents not patients, nonhuman animals may properly be understood as co-participants in an interspecies response to climate change by incorporating nonhuman animals into the Gandhian popular Sovereignty of Truth.

The Gandhian position I have sketched presupposes such a response to climate change entails not a technological or policy fix but rather a spiritual transformation that cannot be accomplished without acknowledging nonhuman animal co-participants in the *Zoopolis* as equally affected by climate change and, as such, co-participants in this spiritual transformational solution. Doubtless,

some will respond 'Yes, yes, that's all very nice but that'll never happen, we're never going to hold hand and hooves with horses and sing Kum baya to the planet: can we get real and get back to technological and policy fixes please?' While not unsympathetic to that hard-headed skeptical response, I am considerably more sympathetic to the Gandhian approach. Beyond the science, climate change is an ethical-cultural and spiritual problem. It raises not only the question of scientific truth but also the political question

of sovereign spiritual Truth in human-animal relations. My hope is that the Gandhian approach offers a framework for reevaluating the modern ethos of himsa and parigraha that has contributed to the climate change crisis threatening all species life.

### References

1. Michael Allen (2025) Gandhi's Popular Sovereignty of Truth: Devotional Democracy. London: Palgrave Macmillan.