



# Redistributive Justice in Sikh Philosophy: Langar, Seva, and the Metaphysics of Food

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**Abstract.** This paper aims to develop a distinctive food philosophy that represents an indigenous concept of ontological unity and social justice by examining the Sikh traditions of Seva (selfless service) and Langar (community kitchen). The study argues that Sikh food practices offer a non-Western framework for reinterpreting justice and collective nourishment by drawing upon textual analysis of Sikh scriptures - Guru Granth Sahib or the Adi Granth and Sikh Rahit Maryada - and a Langar case study conducted at Guru Ram Das Langar situated at Golden Temple, Amritsar. Langar serves as a ritualized act of resistance against social hierarchies of caste, class, and gender and is not merely a charitable activity. Understanding food labour from the fundamental Sikh metaphysical principle of Oneness of Existence moves to dissolve the binaries of giver/receiver, sacred/profane, labour/ritual, and essentially the ontological binaries of self and other. Seva undermines the transactional paradigms of service and hospitality that are common in capitalist systems by redefining labour as sacred and selfless. Instead of Rawlsian distributive justice from the perspective of a "veil of ignorance," this ritualized setting enacts what could be called a "redistributive justice" based on an awareness of oneness. The absence of differentiated treatment—no special lines, portions, or privileges—creates an egalitarian social space while maintaining sensitivity to specific needs, such as providing seating accommodations for those unable to sit on the floor. Rooted in simplicity, oneness and shared resources, Langar emerges as a model of equitable consumption through this paradigm. This study advocates rethinking food as a tool for ontological, social, and spiritual change rather than only as a tangible good or cultural symbol. Therefore, food metaphysics, as articulated in Sikh scriptures and as embodied communal practice, offers a critical philosophical contribution to emerging food studies. Therefore, the study offers a unique viewpoint based on Sikh philosophy and religion by placing itself at the nexus of food metaphysics and justice.

**Keywords :** Langar, Seva, Justice, Oneness of Existence, Social Justice, Redistributive Justice

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S. Sharma et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the International Conference on Emerging Food Studies: Intersections of Culture, Science and Sustainability (ICEFS 2026)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 1017,

[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-583-6\\_31](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-583-6_31)

## 1 Introduction

As Korthals notes, philosophical investigation into food has been marginal since Plato, but more contemporary research has started to examine the metaphysical, ethical, and political aspects of food [1]. According to Kaplan, food philosophy is a discipline that encompasses aesthetics, existential meaning, ethics, and metaphysics [2]. The metaphysics of food investigates what constitutes "food" and why. For him, food has no fixed essence—it exists relationally as food-for-someone, shaped by human interpretation [2]. Heldke understands food as a network of connections rather than a fixed material [3]. Shotwell and Szymanski emphasize the ethical nature of food by emphasizing accountability, camaraderie, and the critique of commodification [4,5]. Derrida reframes eating as infinite hospitality, asking not what but how to eat well [6], while Levinas places eating inside an ethics of responsibility, where acknowledging the hunger of the Other grounds moral obligation [7]. Eating is a duty of care—to oneself, others, and the community—according to Telfer and Korthals [8,9]. Abramson further reframes this as eating ethics, emphasizing coexistence and interdependence within nourishment itself [10]. Thus, Food, though undermined philosophically in the past, has been part of the scholarship in the recent times.

While philosophy largely ignored food, religion followed a different course. According to Korthals, Western thought would have been altered if traditions like Judaism had been included sooner because of their deep understanding of the anthropological and moral significance of food [1]. Norman observes that in all faiths, from Brahman creating the world to Adam and Eve being evicted over a fruit, food mediates divine-human connections and moral knowledge. By highlighting humility, compassion, and mindfulness, religious eating customs help believers develop a relationship with the divine, their community, and the universe [11]. Dahlan-Taylor argues that dietary laws reflect philosophical concepts about identity, morality, and the ethics of life [12]. Cohen emphasizes sacred food as an expression of theological truths [13], whereas Boisvert contends that ritual meals such as Shabbat turn ordinary meals into holy communion [14].

When taken as a whole, these viewpoints show that food is not merely a material substance but also an expression of ethical and ontological relationship—where justice, sustenance, and being converge. Furthermore, food is seen by religion as a moral and metaphysical link between self, society, and the cosmos—both substance and meaning. Within this lineage, Sikh philosophy—through Langar and Seva—offers a distinctive philosophy of food grounded in Oneness of Reality, realizing equality and redistributive justice through shared nourishment. It offers an underexplored non-Western model where food becomes the site of metaphysical realization and social redistribution. While the West, especially, Rawlsian framework, define justice in economic or procedural terms, Sikh philosophy situates it in the ontological recognition of the unity of all existence. Sikhism's unique metaphysical and ethical perspective on food will thus be revealed by analyzing how actions of consuming in Langar via Seva impact the relationship between self and other, making a significant contribution to world food philosophy.

This paper argues that Langar and Seva together constitute a philosophy of “redistributive justice” in Sikhism—one that reimagines equality through embodied, communal, and spiritual practice rather than contractual reasoning. The Sikh worldview dissolves binaries of giver/receiver, sacred/profane, and self/other, replacing them with a relational ontology of shared being.

The argument draws upon analysis of Sikh scriptures (Guru Granth Sahib and Sikh Rahit Maryada), supported by fieldwork conducted at Guru Ram Das Langar, Golden Temple, Amritsar. By bringing textual and lived dimensions together, the paper also reveals Sikh food metaphysics as both doctrine and praxis.

## 2 The Metaphysical Ground of Justice in Sikhism: Oneness of Reality

Sikh philosophy begins with the understanding that there is One Reality. The principles of love and oneness, in Sikhism, stem from the metaphysical understanding that everyone is created from the same light and by the same creator, God. Thus, there can be no distinctions among people: social, moral or of self/other. The distinction between self and other is surpassed and everyone is seen as part of the Whole self [15]. This gives rise to a deep understanding of oneness among individuals and love for humanity as a whole. This concept of Oneness of Reality is evident in the following few selected excerpts, among many, from the Guru Granth Sahib [16]:

“Amongst all is the Light—You are that Light. By this Illumination, that Light is radiant within all. Through the Guru’s Teachings, the Light shines forth. That which is pleasing to Him is the lamp-lit worship service.” [16, p. 13]

“You are the tree; Your branches have blossomed forth. From the very small and subtle, You have become huge and manifest. You are the Ocean of Water, and You are the foam and the bubbles on its surface. I cannot see any other except You, Lord.” [16, p. 102]

“The Merciful Lord is totally pervading and permeating the water and the land” [16, p. 105]

“In each and every heart, the One Lord is pervading. He is totally permeating the water, the land, and the sky.” [16, p. 133]

“He is contained in the nine continents of the world, and within this body; each and every moment, I humbly bow to Him. I have made the Guru’s Teachings my ear-rings, and I have enshrined the One Formless Lord within my being.” [16, p. 208]

“Many millions are the evil nature-spirits, ghosts, pigs and tigers. He is near to all, and yet far from all; O Nanak, He Himself remains distinct, while yet pervading all.” [16, p. 276]

“He Himself created the four sources of creation, and He Himself fashioned speech; He Himself created the worlds and solar systems. He Himself is the ocean, and He Himself is the sea; He Himself puts the pearls in it. By His Grace, He enables some to find them — those whom He makes Gurmukh.

He Himself is the terrifying world ocean, and He Himself is the boat; He Himself is the boatman, and He Himself ferries us across. The Creator Himself acts, and causes us to act; no one else can equal You, Lord.” [16, p. 552]

“The True Creator Lord is pervading and permeating the water, the land and the air. The True Creator Lord is invisible and infinite; His limits cannot be found.” [16, p. 579]

“He Himself is the field, and He Himself is the farmer. He Himself grows and grinds the grain. He Himself cooks it, He Himself puts the food in the dishes, and He Himself sits down to eat. He Himself is the water, He Himself gives the tooth-pick, and He Himself offers the mouthwash. He Himself calls and seats the congregation, and He Himself bids them goodbye. One whom the Lord Himself blesses with His Mercy — the Lord inspires him to obey the Hukam of His Command.” [16, p. 550-551]

Thus, as is evident from the above excerpts, Sikh metaphysics is rooted in the concept of Oneness of Reality. The Lord not only created the world and all its constituents but also permeates its creation, thereby linking and tying the whole of creation together in a tapestry of shared Divine Light. The metaphysical understanding depicted in all these excerpts can be seen summarized in the following excerpt of Guru Granth Sahib that ties its metaphysics with the ethics of Sikh Philosophy:

ਅਵਲਿ ਅਲਹ ਨੂਰੁ ਉਪਾਇਆ ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਕੇ ਸਭੁ ਬੰਦੇ ॥  
ਏਕ ਨੂਰ ਤੇ ਸਭੁ ਜਗੁ ਉਪਜਿਆ ਕਉਨ ਭਲੇ ਕੇ ਮੰਦੇ ॥੧॥ [17]

(First, Allah created the Light; then, by His Creative Power, He made all mortal beings. From the One Light, the entire universe welled up. So who is good, and who is bad?) [16, p. 1349]

The fact that One Divine Light permeates all points to the equal standing of all beings. This principle grounds all ethical relations. Since every being is an expression of the same divine essence, oneness is a dynamic relational ontology rather than abstract monism. To know the One is to act justly toward the many. The moral and the metaphysical are inextricably linked. Sarbat da bhala, or "welfare of all," is a Sikh concept that implies fairness as being in accordance with divine order (hukam), not moral admonition.

Justice, in Sikh Philosophy, therefore, emerges from recognition of unity rather than negotiation of difference. Everyone has a responsibility to make society better. Justice involves more than just upholding legal rights; it also entails attending to communal needs, especially if some people do not have access to resources. Because of this, achieving justice becomes a shared responsibility that requires everyone to accept their place in society and strive for the improvement of others. Seva, or selfless service, is a constructive approach in Sikhism towards realizing this universal brotherhood [18]. The best translation of term "Seva" into English is "selfless service" rather than service or social service [19]. The next section covers the concepts of Seva and Langar which serves as the vehicles of food justice in Sikh Philosophy.

### 3 Seva

Sikh ethics is based on three central tenets: Kirat Karna (Earn an Honest Living), Naam Japna (Meditation on the Name of God), and Vand Chakkna (Sharing with Others). Furthermore, Sikhism entails the fundamental values of Deg, Tegh, and Fateh. Fateh is the unwavering belief in the triumph of a just cause, with a firm belief in victory, Tegh is the strength of organization and resistance against oppression through the use of a sword and Deg means providing food to those in need through a communal kitchen [20]. It is within the concepts of Vand Chakkna and Deg that Seva is situated.

Sikhism recognizes three types of service: physical labour (Tan), charitable giving (Dhan), and intellectual contributions (Man). These services can be performed in various ways such as cooking, providing food to the needy, caring for the sick, supporting the poor and distressed individuals, among others. Dhan entails making charitable contributions to institutions like hospitals, schools, etc. without taking the name of the beneficiary into account. In order to support these causes, Sikhs are supposed to provide at least 10% of their income (daswandh). Interpreting and teaching the Holy Scriptures, as well as praying and hoping for the welfare of others, are all components of intellectual service (Mann) [21]. Seva isn't just about distributing resources to achieve economic fairness but also involves educating others about Sikh texts and the concept of Seva itself, which can help them understand justice, practice it, and move toward liberation. In Sikhism, liberation involves releasing ego (haumai) in order to break the cycle of birth and rebirth and becoming a self-realized (sachiara). Therefore, metaphysics, epistemology, and morality are intertwined in Sikhism. Understanding oneness, love, practicing virtues, and realizing hukam leads to shedding haumai and the path to liberation [15]. Seva can be defined theoretically as comprehension of justice, and practically as its execution in the world.

ਸੇਵਾ ਕਰਤ ਹੋਇ ਨਿਰਕਾਮੀ ॥  
ਤਿਸ ਕਉ ਹੋਤ ਪਰਾਪਤਿ ਸੁਆਮੀ ॥ [17]

(One who performs selfless service, without thought of reward, shall attain his Lord and Master) [16, p. 286]

Performing social service without a basis of love and devotion to God is not genuinely altruistic or detached. Such service may result in arrogance and conceit, as the individual involved may seek recognition or rewards in this life or the next. Thus, Seva must steer clear of both pity and pride as a selfless ideal. According to the Sikh Gurus, Seva must be voluntary, self-imposed, and practiced without any expectation of a reward [18].

ਚਾਕਰੁ ਲਗੈ ਚਾਕਰੀ ਨਾਲੇ ਗਾਰਬੁ ਵਾਦੁ ॥  
ਗਲਾ ਕਰੇ ਘਣੇਰੀਆ ਖਸਮ ਨ ਪਾਏ ਸਾਦੁ ॥  
ਆਪੁ ਗਵਾਇ ਸੇਵਾ ਕਰੇ ਤਾ ਕਿਛੁ ਪਾਏ ਮਾਨੁ ॥  
ਨਾਨਕ ਜਿਸ ਨੋ ਲਗਾ ਤਿਸੁ ਮਿਲੈ ਲਗਾ ਸੇ ਪਰਵਾਨੁ ॥੧॥ [17]

(If a servant performs service, while being vain and argumentative, he may talk as much as he wants, but he shall not be pleasing to his Master. But if he eliminates his self-conceit and then performs service, he shall be honored. O Nanak, if he merges with the one with whom he is attached, his attachment becomes acceptable) [16, p. 474]

Therefore, Seva is a way of realization of Justice in Sikhism. In accordance with the scope of this paper, the focus will be on the aspects of Seva that encompasses the ambit of food and its philosophy. Langar (community kitchen) is the most prominent way of exercising Seva

in the realm of food. Therefore, using concepts of Tan, Mann, and Dhan to provide food via Langar to all those who visit is part of Seva and eventually realization of justice.

## 4 Food Ethics in Scriptures

Before moving on to the institution of Langar and how it serves as a vehicle of realization of justice, let us focus on the various ethical imperatives related to food and Seva as given in the Sikh scriptures.

Most of the ethical imperatives of food in Sikh scriptures comprise duties and obligations that one holds towards oneself. However, they provide a perfect segway to the obligations related to food towards others. One of the most important responsibilities is that of sharing which is listed in multiple Rahitnamas in multiple forms. First are the obligations specifically towards other Sikhs:

“The Sikhs who are rich, it is their duty to make provision for the poor Sikhs. If they see any foreign Sikhs, they should impart suitable service to them. They should speak sweetly with everybody and keep only Sikhs in their employment.” [22, p. 45]

“The Sikhs should celebrate ‘Gurpurbs’ like other religious ceremonies and cook ‘Langar prashad’ and ‘kara prashad’ for the celebrations.” [22, p. 43]

“Those who offer food to other Sikhs, they are honoured by the Guru.” [22, p. 73]

All the above Sikh specific responsibilities are found in the earlier Rahitnamas but not in Sikh Rahit Maryada. The following are the injunctions that pertain to the ethical responsibilities towards whole of humanity.

“They should offer food to others before they themselves eat it.” [22, p. 47]

“The Sikhs of the Guru should think themselves as God’s trustees for their wealth and provide food and other necessities of life to the poor and the needy.” [22, p. 27]

“The Khalsa supports the poor and the destitute.” [22, p. 19]

“Perform physical, hearty and financial services for God and His Creation.” [22, p. 15]

“The Sikhs who act as priests and are paid for their services, they should accept such money as is required for their subsistence. If it is more than their needs, they should give the surplus to other needy people.” [22, p. 49]

“Sikhs should give 1/10th of their earnings for noble causes. Such people will earn great honour in the world.” [22, p. 39]

“..should give one-tenth of his/earnings in charity.” [22, p. 17]

“They should give one tenth of their earnings for noble causes.” [22, p. 29]

“Who does not give to charity, he/she shall suffer scute miseries and will be condemned to one thousand hells.” [22, p. 19]

All of these injunctions clearly state the importance that is given to Seva in Sikhi. Most of these injunctions do not directly mention food, but food is at the core of their manifestation. These ethical values of sharing and charity form the foundation of food-related obligations. For

example, giving to charity, giving dasvandh (1/10th of a person's total earnings), voluntary service (Seva), helping the poor, giving surplus to people in need, etc., are all manifested in many ways, an important one of which is food. The same is visible in the Langars by the Sikhs and the humanitarian aid provided to the needy and distressed, especially in the form of food and shelter.

The gravity of the status of Seva in Sikhi can be clearly understood by the following injunction clearly laid out in the Sikh Rehat Maryada :

“A Sikh's personal life should comprehend: 1. Meditation on Naam (Divine Substance) and the scriptures 2. Leading life according to the Gurus teachings and 3. Altruistic voluntary service.” [22, p. 82]

Seva, therefore, is a means of realization of liberation by engaging in activities that curtails one's ego (haumai) and sets one towards the path of sarbat da bhala (welfare of all), forming the basis of re-distributive justice. Food, via the institution of Langar, becomes the means of practicing the voluntary service in line with the teaching of the Gurus.

## 5 Langar : Practice of Redistributive Justice

The gurdwara's Langar, a communal kitchen, serves free meals to everyone, irrespective of caste, gender, religion, income, or cultural differences. Everyone eats the same meal that was made through the act of communal Seva while sitting in the same line (pangat). While Sikh volunteers run the kitchen, everyone eats together on the floor. Importantly, all Langar meals are vegetarian. Anyone can volunteer at Langar, regardless of their affiliation—Sikh or not [23].

Sikhism emerged during a time of significant gender, caste, and class inequalities and widespread injustice. As a result, these inequalities and injustices formed the foundation for Sikhism's understanding of justice. The Sikh Gurus developed their conception of justice in a pragmatic and practical manner, in contrast to Rawls' theory of justice [24], which calls for assuming a veil of ignorance from an initial position. Although Rawls' theory is impressive, it is a utopian concept that is not feasible in practice since it is impossible to create an original stance and veil of ignorance. In contrast, Sikhism begins with a 'prevalent' or 'given' state of society that is unjust and unequal and introduce the concept of Seva and Langar to promote justice. These ideals can be considered to form a framework I call a 're-distributive justice', in which individuals strive to redistribute resources and opportunities to those who require them. This entails recognizing and addressing the underlying causes of inequality and seeking solutions that benefit the entire community, particularly those who are the most marginalized.

My case study at Langar at the Golden Temple also corroborates the ideas presented in this paper. Firstly, the ingredients required to prepare the food at the Langar are almost always provided by sangat, which can be understood as their dasvandh, to the gurdwaras. Thus, those who are placed in an economically privileged position or even those who earn a decent amount but can still contribute dasvandh in Langar, donate their share to these community kitchens which is then distributed with love and compassion, without any discrimination, to the partakers of the Langar who may be economically or socially marginalized in society. The resources which were earlier part of the societal system form a collective pool of the shared resources in the Langar or Gurdwaras and these shared resources are then re-distributed among all those who visit these Langars. The raw material in these community kitchens is pooled and cooked to make delicious

meals by volunteers and some Sevadars working in the Langar. However, it must be understood that most of the work from making to serving of the Langar is carried out by volunteers as part of their Seva.

As discussed above, in Langars, people, irrespective of their religion, caste, class or gender, sit side by side on the floor and partake free food served to them. It serves as vehicle to shatter all pre-established social hierarchies. Therefore, the Langar does not just feed people but also reshapes the social field. The Langar is not a form of charity but justice through equal access keeping a 'veil of ignorance' with respect to the partaker or shall I say an 'awareness of oneness' of all those who come to have a meal. The need to have a 'veil of ignorance' in 'original position' to ignore the biases for distributive justice in Rawls's theory is flipped in Sikhism by not knowing one's societal standing but transcend this standing through an awareness of shared divinity and equality in a re-distributive justice model. As observed on the Langar site, the makers, servers, and partakers were from all different religious, social and economic backgrounds but they were all considered equal. There were no gender or caste roles when it came to preparing or serving food in the Langar. Further, while serving the Langar, the servers are seen to be chanting the words 'dal waheguru' (lentils Waheguru), 'chaul waheguru' (rice Waheguru) – essentially addressing the partakers as Waheguru and asking if they need more lentils or rice etc. The previously held belief that all beings possess the same light of God, which acknowledges their unity and dispels otherness—the main cause of differences between beings—is supported by this revelation. This activity not only feeds the hungry but also serves as a potent example of how interconnected everything in existence is. The Langar is based on the idea that everyone is equal before God and that people can embody and reaffirm their unity with the Divine and each other by sharing the same meal that is prepared and eaten in a communal environment. It breaks down social and economic boundaries so that everyone can benefit from the divine grace that sustains all living things equally, regardless of background. Each act of eating is a microcosmic representation of universal spiritual exchange. Therefore, there is a dissolution of boundaries between individual and universal consciousness. The binaries of self/other, giver/receiver, sacred/profane are transcended as Langar and Seva are rooted in and are the physical manifestation of the Sikh metaphysical understanding of Oneness and Unity of All.

Further, the anonymity of social standing furthers this purpose- there were no VIP lines for Langar, the portions did not vary depending on individual, no different sitting area- everyone is to sit on the floor together. However, it shall be noted that few benches were installed just outside the Langar for people who are medically unfit to have a seat on the floor. This is a rather inclusionary and sensitive practice towards people who need special attention but still wish to partake in Langar.

Moreover, in capitalist thought, labour is commodified; in Sikhism, it is sanctified. The body, in the process of exercising Seva in Langar, becomes a site of divine expression. The recognition of Divine essence in the partakers makes the whole act of Seva a sanctified act. Every movement in Seva—cooking, serving, cleaning—is worship in action. Unlike Western paradigms that separate body and spirit, Sikh metaphysics fuses them through embodied practice. Seva in Langar is not menial labour but participation in divine order—an act that reclaims dignity for manual work, historically marginalized under caste hierarchies.

Seva creates an economy of grace, not exchange. There is no giver or receiver, only participants in divine flow. In Langar, wealth is redistributed without record or reward. It is justice without the architecture of law.

Therefore, Langar serves as the most powerful, continuous, and embodied example of justice (specifically food justice) in Sikhism. It is about restoring balance, dissolving inequalities and distinctions, and affirming dignity. It does not point to a utopian world but a very tangible, pragmatic way of addressing the issues of justice, not from a place of a 'philosophical discourse' but everyday lived reality rooted in love and compassion.

## 6 Food, Re-Imagined

From the discussed lens of Justice through Langar and Seva rooted in the metaphysics of Oneness, Food and the act of eating is transformed - from a means of subsistence and nutrition to a tool for spiritual development when it is shared freely, free from materialistic and greedy tendencies. In addition to serving as a symbol of equality, Food, further, becomes a means of realizing justice and promoting moral responsibility and spiritual growth. The transforming power of food, in this sense, is noteworthy because it forces people to reevaluate how they relate to material possessions and to adopt a deeper dedication to the welfare of society. Thus, food is both material and spiritual—symbolizing interdependence. Eating together is a metaphysical act: it dissolves individual ego and affirms shared existence. Thus, the dining space becomes a site of ontology, not just nutrition.

## 7 Conclusion

Food holds a central position in nearly every religious tradition, yet Sikhism approaches it uniquely, primarily through the institution of Langar and the practice of Seva, distinguishing it significantly from other religions. The paper has shown how Sikhism's metaphysics of Oneness translates into lived ethics through Langar and Seva—embodied forms of redistributive justice. Seva encompasses more than simply offering service; it also includes the belief that all beings are equal and interconnected and that love is the driving force behind this connectivity. Accordingly, justice entails lovingly and equally treating everyone, acknowledging that there is no such thing as a true "other." It promotes inclusivity and diversity celebration by recognizing the interdependence of all living things. By recognizing the interdependence of all living things, it promotes inclusivity and diversity exuberance. Unlike Rawlsian distributive justice, which seeks fairness through abstract rules, Sikh redistributive justice is experiential—it redistributes dignity, presence, and humility. Justice is not designed but realized in the act of communal eating. Where Rawls imagines justice from the "veil of ignorance," Sikhism realizes it through the awareness of unity. Ignorance is replaced by spiritual recognition; abstraction is replaced by participation. Moreover, in an age of ecological crisis and inequality, the Sikh model of Langar stands as a living pedagogy—teaching sufficiency, humility, and shared sustenance. It transcends charity by reconfiguring nourishment as spiritual equality. Sikh philosophy, thus, contributes a vital insight to global food studies: that food justice must be ontological before it is procedural. Justice begins with the recognition that there is no "other." The metaphysics of food in Sikhism thus becomes a metaphysics of justice—rooted in unity, sustained by service, and realized through shared nourishment.

## 8 Disclosure of Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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