

Nonharmfulness (*ahimsā*) in Classical Indian Thought

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Overview

The concept of *ahimsā* was foundational to classical Indian culture. Reinvigorated by Mahatma Gandhi in the twentieth-century, it was central to ethical teaching and social theory throughout the Sanskrit-based civilization of the South Asian Subcontinent. The classical period may be taken to extend from c. 500 BCE to the Muslim and European conquests in the modern era. The Sanskrit word is a compound of *a* (non-) and *himsā* (harm, desire to harm, cruelty), and occurs in Upanishads (mystic teachings) that belong to an even earlier society, prior to 500 BCE and classical texts. Later, its meaning varies with genre of literature (ethical, legal, philosophic, etc.) and school or sect. But a common cluster of ideas and practices was promoted under the *ahimsā* banner by outlier Jaina and Buddhist religions as well as within a Hindu mainstream.

A derivative of the verbal root *han*, “kill, harm,” in an irregular form of the desiderative—normally, “He/she/you/I *desire* to X”—the word *ahimsā* carries a desiderative sense: *himsā* is “desire to harm” and *ahimsā* “desire not to harm.” The desiderative form is also used for will and intention, thus “will to X” and *ahimsā*, for example, as “intention not to harm,” i.e., nonharmfulness. The popular translations “non-

injury” and “nonviolence” are satisfactory, but the etymological lesson is that the word connotes an attitude or personal policy. Nonharmfulness is an attitude one adopts, or tries to adopt. The idea suggests a rule, or set of rules, governing effort and action.

Early in the classical culture the word is used for an ethical principle, or principles, and for a virtue. Both as principle and character trait, the concept is blended into broad ethical, social, and metaphysical views. Nonharmfulness is a part of *dharma*, the right way to live, which can, like *ahiṃsā*, be looked upon as a set of ethical (social, legal) rules and as a character trait. The word *dharma* is used at the highest level of generality, including both social norms and personal ethics.

The part is used to stand for the whole, so that we hear that *ahiṃsā* is the heart of *dharma*, the “capstone of Indian morals” as well as the “highest *dharma*.” But there are of course other principles and virtues besides nonharm, some of which in certain circumstances trump it. To mention virtues, there are austerity, charity, self-control, gratitude, fidelity, forgiveness, non-stealing, and non-cheating which commonly appear on early lists. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (c. 700 BCE), which contains the word’s earliest occurrence so far identified, has austerity, charity, uprightness, *ahiṃsā*, and truthfulness (3.17.4 and 6.4.34) as the marks of a person fit for supreme felicity. In later texts, perfect *ahiṃsā* is considered the practice of the saint, the Brahman-knower, the accomplished mystic, who has become liberated (*mukta*) from birth and death and rebirth.

To elaborate, in Upanishads we learn that virtuous character, including kindness towards people and animals, is a prerequisite for yogic and mystic accomplishment—which is to say, for the goal of life, liberation

(*mukti*) or enlightenment (*bodhi*) according to almost all later Indic religion. For the unliberated, practice of *ahiṃsā* is said to secure a favorable reincarnation according to laws of karma and justice. Rejecting the social patterns of Vedic society along with many of its religious beliefs, Buddhism and Jainism originated around 500 BCE long after Hinduism's Vedas, Brahmanas, and early Upanishads. But in broad overview all three religions adopt a similar soteriology of karma and reincarnation, and find *ahiṃsā* necessary for realization of the supreme personal good, *paramapurusaṛtha*.

Though idealized in this way to serve the goal of religion, *ahiṃsā* was not regarded as natural. Both nature and other people were expected to be selfish and aggressive, carnivorous and murderous—according to early Upanishads and early Buddhist and Jaina texts as well as later literature. With a few exceptions, life was not romanticized. The assumption is that people tend not to restrain their appetites, tend not to be charitable or compassionate. Furthermore, the Vedic civilization prior to the classical culture does not seem to have been particularly kind towards animals. Even the cow—staple of prosperity and sacrificed in elaborate rituals performed in order to maintain cosmic harmony and the nurture of the gods who are forces of nature—was also eaten as well as worked. In classical times, protection of animals and proper animal husbandry were grouped with protection of forests and marketplaces as part of the *dharma* of the king—according to Kautilya's handbook on polity, the *Arthaśāstra* (c. 300 BCE) and other sources. Butchery was a common occupation in the villages and small cities. It is expressly mentioned as an inappropriate occupation for, for example, a follower of the Buddha—so we learn from the

earliest stratum of Buddhist literature. Consonantly, it is presupposed in all the philosophic traditions that practice of *ahiṃsā* and the entire ascetic discipline are supererogatory and a matter of swimming against the currents of life.

Nevertheless, scholars concur that the popularity of the ascetic ideal, which was established early and was in outline pan-Indian, explains the later breadth and importance of *ahiṃsā*. In the widely cited *Laws of Manu* (c. 100 BCE), for instance, nonharmfulness is enjoined for all four human classes or castes, including the worker and servant, not just for ascetics who, we imagine, were largely high-caste.

Another factor discussed by scholars is the belief that animals might incarnate spirits of one's ancestors. Thus one would practice *ahiṃsā* towards animals not to harm one's own grandmother. Cross-species reincarnation was indeed a widely held notion, it seems, to speak not only of common opinion but presuppositions in high-brow texts. Classical philosophers do not themselves, however, cite this as a reason to practice *ahiṃsā* towards animals.

A humanism implicit in the ascetic ideal is worth noting. In the *Laws of Manu* and elsewhere, most duties adhere to particular stations, which include age and gender as well as family, caste, and occupation. With *ahiṃsā*, in contrast, we have a duty that is universally prescribed. This virtue is declared part of the *dharma* that is common to every human being. Thus a common human sphere is defined partly in terms of its obligations. Other virtues similarly universally prescribed according to *Manu* include both self and other-regarding practices, such as cleanliness and honesty (a similar list occurs in the *Yājñavalkya Smṛti*, also a major text of

jurisprudence). It is interesting, in any case, concerning *ahiṃsā*, that all species with breath, not just humans (*mānava*), all beings capable of feeling pain, are, despite their inability themselves so to practise, to be counted among the targets of nonharm.

Mahatma Gandhi, more politician than scholar, may be forgiven a bit of nationalistic romanticization of *ahiṃsā*. He was not entirely wrong to insist that from the earliest *ahiṃsā* fit into a positive ethical vision, that it is, and was, not just a negative trait corresponding to a negative rule of restraint. In support of this interpretation, Vedic scholar Gonda has shown that in a wide range of cases privatives—and the word *ahiṃsā* in particular—were used to stand for “ideal states, positive conditions, desirable behavior, favorable circumstances” (1959, p. 99). So, in Buddhist ethics the idea of *ahiṃsā* converges with that of compassion, both being forerunners, as Gandhi alleged, of his “soul-force.”

The concept does indeed run together with several other ethical notions—sometimes presenting dilemmas in the early epics, especially the *Mahābhārata*, as shown by Proudfoot (1987) and other scholars. As we shall see, *ahiṃsā* can be trumped; it is not the only value. Nevertheless, in stories of Mahāvīra and the Buddha or the Buddha-to-be, the hero seeks the good of all and has the *ahiṃsā* attitude towards animals as well as human beings. In Hinduism, the virtue is thought to flow from God’s positive love for all creation, which the saint manifests, or from the yogin’s realization of a cosmic self (*ātman*). Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (c. 200 BCE) says that “the best” are “delighted in the welfare of all creatures,” *sarva-bhūta-hīte ratāḥ* (5.25), a phrase that is repeated in the only slightly later *Laws of Manu* (e.g., 6.75) and an idea recurring in

hundreds of subsequent texts.

In the lawbooks and elsewhere, the boundaries of the behavior required by *ahiṃsā* are sometimes vague, and not even vegetarianism, which today is considered an uncontroversial application, has been so in all periods: the earliest Brahmanic, Jaina, and Buddhist monks and nuns ate meat if offered, as shown by Schmidt (1968) and others. Specific laws and practices have complex origins. There are, furthermore, real issues in the relationship between *ahiṃsā* as an ascetic ideal and concerns of social justice. Nevertheless, it finds few detractors among modern ethicists. Since Gandhi, in the broader Indian renaissance and globalization of modern thought, environmentalism and respect for nature have been championed as among the entailments of the classical concept of *ahiṃsā*.

In sum, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism all lay claim to *ahiṃsā*. The principle/virtue is extolled in sacred as well as philosophic and interpretive texts, in Sanskrit and close derivatives of Sanskrit used in different periods and sects. As we shall see, the concept is at the center of impersonal ethical argument reminiscent of Kant in the West, as well as interpreted as a principle of exceptionless application, a duty that binds people together as humans. But it is also used in prudential reasoning tied to peculiarly Indian ideas about rebirth and karma. Within Hinduism, it is, though a universal duty, *sādhāraṇa-dharma*, to be practiced by everyone, subject to circumstances that admit of exception. These include, according to some authorities, rituals with animal sacrifices, along with, to be sure, soldiering, punishment of criminals, etc., the justifiable violence of a good king maintaining order in the social and political spheres.

Nonharmfulness in Early Indic World Views

The single self (*ātman*) of the Upanishads

J.N. Mohanty (2000) says that it is wrong to think that classical philosophers considered principles of ethics to be derivable from metaphysical truth, but this is not the standard interpretation. The unity of Brahman, the Absolute, or of the Upanishadic *ātman*, which is the single self of all creatures, or, in a distinct conception, the ubiquity of sentience in Jaina cosmology, or the universal accessibility of *nirvāṇa* in Buddhism, does, in each case, if not necessitate an ethics of *ahiṃsā*, according to both classical and modern authorities, at least motivate the practices. Clearly, no one can say that only his preferred metaphysical theory entails *ahiṃsā*. Mohanty is right about this. But each of several views seem sufficient, being used to justify, motivate, and explain the practices.

Furthermore, *ahiṃsā* practice is uniformly considered to have a converse side, namely, fearlessness, suggesting transcendence of life's evils. We learn this first in Upanishads, which only Hinduism claims as sacred but which express ideas continuous with the outlooks of Jainism and Buddhism too. The *Īśā* (c. 500 BCE) makes a connection between self and fearlessness in a common theme: realization of a cosmic self (*ātman*) brings freedom from fear and, it seems, all undesirable psychological states. Verse 7:

Those who see all beings as in the self alone

And the self in all beings, henceforth do not recoil (from anything).

For whom all beings are known as just self,

For him how can there be delusion? How can there be grief? For he sees (everywhere) unity. (Translation by S. Phillips.)

There is only the single self, the knowledge of which banishes fear. In the midst of punning and obviously false etymologizing, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* (c. 800 BCE), which may be the oldest Upanishad, amusingly brings out the logic of the claim. From 1.4.1–2: “In the beginning the world was Self (*ātman*) alone . . . He was afraid. . . . Then this one thought to himself, ‘Since there is nothing else than myself, of what I am afraid?’ Thereupon, verily, his fear departed, for of what should he have been afraid?”

Nonharmfulness is also said to be—or, more generally, assumed to be—an attitude one should take towards oneself. In the *Yogasūtra* (c. 400 CE), not to mention modern yoga studios, *ahiṃsā* is tied to *santoṣa*, self-acceptance (*Yogasūtra* 2.29–35). The idea is not to injure oneself long-term in yoga practice, to “honor the body,” even as short-term the pain of the postures (*āsana*), breath-control, or meditation becomes intense. Consonantly, the Upanishadic theoretical founding of *ahiṃsā*—that since in reality we are one in self or spirit (*ātman*), we should practice nonharmfulness—presupposes that *ahiṃsā* towards oneself is both right and natural.

In lineages of yoga, as reflected in famous verses from the *Gītā*, the *ahiṃsā* prescribed is, we may note, no mere intellectual recognition of others as deserving respect. Rather, one is supposed to be so sensitive to others’ pain and suffering that one may well experience it first-hand. The idea is dramatized in yogic lore in stories of sympathetic wounds.

A related *Gītā* verse runs (6.32):

Who sees through the lens of likeness to self the same everywhere,
 Arjuna,
 Whether pleasure and happiness or pain and suffering, that yogin
 is deemed the very best.

The commentary by Śaṅkara (c. 700 CE, the oldest and most important classical interpreter) takes the words “pain and suffering” to mean the pain and suffering of others, others disliking it just as one dislikes one’s own pain and suffering. Similarly, with the favorable attitudes all have towards pleasure and happiness. Śaṅkara:

As to me pleasure is desired, so to all beings with breath pleasure is agreeable. . . . And as what pain or suffering is mine is disagreeable, disliked, in that way for all beings with breath pain and suffering are disliked, disagreeable. So it is explained that one who seeing the same in all beings sees through the lens of likeness to self pleasures and pains as similarly regarded by all, well, such a person does not do anything disagreeable to anyone, becoming an *ahimsika*, one who desires no harm—this is the verse’s meaning. The one who is in this way an *ahimsika*, firmly settled in a vision of equality, is deemed, i.e., considered, the very best yogin, preeminent among all. (Translation by S. Phillips.)

Śaṅkara interprets, in line with Advaita Vedānta metaphysics, the self mentioned here and elsewhere in the *Gītā* as identical in everyone. The discipline to be practiced to realize it includes seeing others as like oneself. Thus Śaṅkara and hosts of later Vedāntic interpreters, even of rival

subjects, tie the practices of *ahiṃsā* both to a yogic goal and a conception of commonality, or identity, of consciousness.

Jaina and Buddhist teachings

According to Jaina doctrine, everything is sentient. There is a hierarchy of consciousness, some beings having only a single faculty, two, three, and so on. (Human beings have eleven sense faculties: five external senses of knowledge and five more of action along with *manas*, the inner sense.) There is a corresponding hierarchy in the prescription of *ahiṃsā*. Monks and nuns, for instance, have duties that differ from those of the laity; only saints try not to hurt beings even of a single sense faculty. Since a goat or a cow has, like us, all eleven (counting *manas*), lay people too should try not to harm such a creature. More elaborately, householders (those of small vows, *anuvrata*) are to desist from dishonest business practices, lying, illicit sexual relations, and so forth, whereas a monk or nun makes constant effort not to harm anyone in any fashion. For, it is said, a monk or nun aspires for perfection, or the supreme good, immediately. A householder, in contrast, is not expected to aspire for the supreme good in this lifetime but only for the good karma that will ensure a similarly situated reincarnation. Thus a householder need not practice *ahiṃsā* in its extreme forms. Monks and nuns (those of great vows, *mahāvratā*), on the other hand, are enjoined to extreme actions, such as wearing masks to prevent harm to insects.

In Jainism, we may pause to underscore, as in all the early soteriologies, rebirth is presupposed. Everyone, not just monks and nuns, should

practice at least a minimal *ahiṃsā* in order to maintain the virtue necessary for good fortune both in this and, more importantly perhaps, future lifetimes.

In Buddhist metaphysics and cosmology as well as in the early Jaina, the virtue of *ahiṃsā* is highlighted by the assumption that all embodiment is by nature suffering: *sarvam duḥkham*, “All is suffering,” which is Buddhism’s First Noble Truth. Pain and suffering arrive in practically infinite forms and degrees. The best one can do is to be calm and inactive, not generating disturbances in the cosmic web.

In a different interpretation of the truth of suffering, our experience is viewed as suffering in comparison with the Buddha’s. Here, as with the Upanishadic *ātman* doctrine, practices and teachings of *ahiṃsā* are incorporated into a vision of interconnectedness. “All is suffering” is matched by the Third of the Four Noble Truths, the Truth of Nirvāṇa. This is seen as something positive, a Void or Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) vibrant with compassion and bliss that is the true self, or non-self, *anātman*, of everyone—much like the *ātman* of the Upanishads.

An interconnectedness of everything, despite the truth of “non-self” (i.e., no isolated, independent self), is proclaimed especially in Northern or Mahāyāna Buddhism, which emerged in approximately the first century BCE and spread throughout Northern Asia (Tibet, China, Korea, Japan). The position is called *pratītyasamutpāda*, interdependent origination: everything is born under the influence of everything else and influences everything. We suffer insofar as we fail to see ourselves like this, that is to say, to realize our interconnectedness.

Arguments for Nonharmfulness

Arguments centering on *ahiṃsā*, which find explicit formulation first in early Jaina and Buddhist texts, proliferate in later literature. Perhaps the most interesting draws on the idea of likeness of self that we have seen in Śaṅkara's interpretation of the *Gītā*. But prudential reasons are also given. Both types of argument proliferate throughout the long and expansive history of classical Indian thought. First, the prudential reasoning, which has two parts, a high road and a low road.

The high road is the view that by developing the virtue of *ahiṃsā* one becomes fit for supreme felicity, the supreme personal good, *paramapurusaṛtha*. Every early Indic view of a *summum bonum* is continuous with every other, the goals conceptualized as self-realization, liberation from rebirth, enlightenment, immortal bliss, Nirvāṇa and so on. Despite the variety, practices of *ahiṃsā* were, and are, almost universally considered to have instrumental value for the ultimate good. One must practice *ahiṃsā* to achieve the best for oneself.

Now on the high road the prudential is argued not to be just a matter of self-interest. It is claimed that in seeking the supreme good concern for self and concern for others coincide. Although the *summum bonum* is personal, it has social value: the liberated (enlightened, etc.) act for the benefit of everyone, "to hold together the worlds," in the phrase of the *Gītā*.

The low road relies on the teaching that virtue is its own reward. Probably, liberation is beyond one's reach in this lifetime or anytime soon. Each of us is responsible for making ourselves the persons we are and will

become. This is one side of the truth of karma (the other being retributive justice). The best sort of person into which to make oneself, both now and in lives to come, is a person who practices *ahiṃsā*.

Karma also involves payback or justice. We get what we deserve, whether in this or another incarnation. Thus we should practice nonharmfulness in order to avoid suffering on our own part. The cosmos, in particular in its laws of reincarnation, embodies principles of moral retribution, whether explained, as in Buddhism, as due to interconnectedness (*pratītyasamutpāda*), or, within Hindu theism, God's justice, or, in other views, simply karma itself as an autonomous and impersonal cosmic force (*adr̥ṣṭa*, the Unseen Force).

In support of these lines of prudential reasoning, an analogy to expert testimony is drawn. As only an expert craftsperson has the capacity to judge precisely what is good within the domain of the craft, only a person who is himself or herself of good character is the expert on character. One sees that the saints and holy people practice *ahiṃsā*, sometimes in extreme form. These people are the experts, the wise about the good. One makes oneself like them by behaving as they do. Then there is the content of the expert testimony, the words of the yogis and saints, of Mahāvīra and the Buddha and Krishna. Of course, a person, as we have seen, would not be regarded as a saint if he or she were not to practice *ahiṃsā*. Nevertheless, on analogy to any expertise, the circularity is not vicious, and so it stands that, as taught by the moral experts, we should practice *ahiṃsā*.

In a second broad group of arguments, nonharmfulness is defended by an idea of likeness of self, *ātman*. Jains should probably be credited for

innovating the line of reasoning, which in an old version runs: everything that is conscious hates injury, and the fact that others are like oneself in being conscious and hating injury demands the practices of *ahiṃsā*. From the *Acaraṅgasūtra* (c. 350 BCE):

If you say that suffering is pleasing to you, your answer is contradictory to what is self-evident. . . . And just as suffering is painful to you, in the same way it is painful to all animals, living beings, organisms, and sentient beings. [Therefore, one should practice *ahiṃsā*.] (Translation by M. Kumar, 1981.)

Respect for others flows from seeing them as like oneself. Other traditions repeat the reasoning more or less explicitly, as in the quote above from the Vedāntin Śāṅkara.

The eloquent arguments of the Buddhist philosopher Śāntideva (c. 700 CE) target compassion, the central Buddhist virtue, not *ahiṃsā*. Compassion is said to comprise *ahiṃsā* within a larger concern to eliminate suffering, not just not to bring it about. Śāntideva's verses are commonly considered some of the best writing within a particular genre of Buddhist Sanskrit literature. They may be a high point within the whole world history of philosophical ethics. A sample may be drawn from Chapter Eight of *The Bodhicaryavatara* which is full of arguments that hinge on likenesses among subjects. Verses 90, 94, and 95:

At first one should meditate intently on the equality of oneself and others as follows: “All equally experience suffering and happiness. I should look after them as I do myself.” . . .

I should dispel the suffering of others because it is suffering like my own suffering. I should help others too because of their nature as beings, which is like my own being.

When happiness is liked by me and others equally, what is so special about me that I strive after happiness only for myself?

Śāntideva endorses the Buddhist “non-self” theory: there is neither one’s own self nor others’ selves as enduring realities. Nevertheless, one should try to end all suffering. Verses 101 and 102:

The continuum of consciousness, like a queue, and the combination of constituents, like an army, are not real. The person who experiences suffering does not exist. To whom will that suffering belong?

Without exception, no sufferings belong to anyone. They must be warded off simply because they are suffering. . . .

Metaphysically, there is nothing special about oneself or others. The nonharm attitude we apply to ourselves for whatever reason (“just because suffering is what it is”) we should apply to others equally. Verse 103:

. . . If it [suffering] must be prevented, then all of it must be. If not, then this goes for oneself as for everyone. (Translation by K. Cosby and A. Skilton, 1996.)

Permissible Violence and the Karma Yoga of the *Gītā*

As early as the earliest lists of virtues required of the yogin, exceptions to *ahimsā* have been identified. At the very end of the long prose *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (c. 800 BCE), we learn that animal sacrifice “at holy places” is excluded. Thus, in a dramatic statement:

. . . he who is harmless (*ahimsant*) towards all beings except at holy places (*tīrtha*), he, indeed, who lives thus throughout his length of life, reaches the Brahman-world and does not return hither again—yea, he does not return hither again! (Translation by R. Hume.)

Again we may remark that nonharmfulness is not the only value, that it can be trumped according to circumstance. The question is, then, what circumstances. What is more important than *ahimsā*? The answer appears to be cosmic harmony, here in this text from the late Vedic age as also practically throughout classical literature, a standard answer much elaborated. There are exceptions, notably the teaching of nonharm in the *Yogasūtra* (c. 400 CE) as part of a program of world-withdrawal, and indeed much Sāṃkhya philosophy which is a prominent classical school and tradition. But the enormously popular *Gītā* has this vision, as we shall see, as do the Purāṇas and the didactic literature of all sects. From the earliest, concern for balance among life-worlds, mortal and immortal, and prosperity, which depends upon favorable natural forces, appear to have motivated animal sacrifice. As Patton puts it (2000, p. 43, quoted in Sridhar and Bilimoria, 2006, p. 301):

. . . as many Vedic texts and later ritual texts . . . indicate, sacrifice of an animal into the [sacred] fire was part of the ecological balance in the ancient Vedic world; the killing and distribution of the animal was part of a larger understanding of human harmony with natural forces. . . . The gods are given food and return it through their natural bounty; thus, the ecology of sacrificial food production and consumption is the central, guiding metaphor for the survival of earthly and celestial worlds.

Over the centuries, animals were used less and less in the rituals of Hinduism, but an ethics of cosmological balance remained in force. That one should strive to perform inner sacrifice, offerings of action to harmony, in order personally to gain equanimity and prosper spiritually, was an idea that progressively came to dominate Hindu sensibilities. The trumping power of justice in the political and social spheres can be understood as further manifestations of the harmony motif. Promotion of *ahiṃsā* in the *Mahābhārata* and throughout the Purāṇas and elsewhere is mitigated by a larger concern for harmony.

Nowhere is outright tension between *ahiṃsā* and a larger duty more evident than in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (c. 200 BCE). Not only is nonharmfulness preached by Krishna on (of all places) a battlefield, the dialogue between the divine guru and his warrior interlocutor Arjuna is precipitated by Arjuna's taking a step towards an *ahiṃsā* attitude. Arjuna refuses to go into combat against those he loves. Krishna, the divine teacher, insists he fight. Arjuna declares at the very beginning—in the first chapter (out of eighteen) and the beginning of the second—a sense of sin in killing even

in the name of right rule. Details of plot and some salient passages show Krishna melding *ahimsā* into a theology of cosmic harmony.

The main story-line of the 100,000-verse-long *Mahābhārata* concerns a dispute about princely succession. The poem presents a picture of a civilization organized politically into city states in what we imagine was an increasingly urbanized Gangetic plain. Krishna rules a neighboring state, and though able, just, and politically astute, is not the divine guru (*bhagavad*) in the main part of the epic that he becomes in the *Gītā*. The political issues are complex, but the one side of a quarreling family, and not the other, has the just claim. The rightful heir with his four brothers and their allies and troops and elephants are arrayed on one side—Arjuna is the third of the five brothers on this, the side of justice. The usurper along with, unfortunately, many venerable sages and heroes are lined up on the other. Arjuna’s own archery teacher, who has guided his pupil to incredible proficiency, “best in the three worlds,” is in the enemy camp.

Arjuna insists that it cannot be morally right to kill his kinsmen, teachers, and friends who face him on the far side of the battlefield. Verses 1.31b-35:

No good do I see in killing my own family in battle. I desire not victory, nor rule, nor pleasures, Krishna. What is power to us, enjoyments, or life, Govinda? Those who make rulership desirable for us, and enjoyments and pleasures, it is they that are arrayed in battle (against us), abandoning life and wealth. Teachers, fathers, sons, grandfathers, uncles, in-laws—these I do not wish to kill even if it means that I must die, Krishna—not even to rule the

three worlds, why then for the earth?

Despite the sincerity of moral feeling, Krishna says the right thing to do is to fight, to kill the opposing warriors, and to win the battle, all the while taking a yogic attitude which, in apparent paradox, involves *ahiṃsā* (10.5, 13.8, 16.2, and 17.14).

The attitude Arjuna is to take in action, called karma yoga, comprises the *Gītā*'s most striking and original theme, although similar ideas are found in middle Upanishads (the *Kaṭha* in particular) and in precepts for monks in Buddhism. The yoga of action (*karma-yoga*) is a discipline of acting in a spirit of sacrifice, says Krishna. Apparently any action can be a gift, so long as it is offered with the right feeling and attitude. Specifically, one is to give without concern for personal benefit. However, the sacrificer is to be confident there is karmic benefit if not transcendence of karmic consequence altogether. Normally, one creates psychological dispositions, or habits, through action, some of which bind one and invite payback into future lifetimes. This is, as remarked, one side of the law of karma. Only action done as karma yoga, Krishna teaches, avoids moral retribution. In the following passage, Krishna also explains the cosmic foundations of action, in a ritual image of sacrifice.

3.8. Do controlled work, for action is better than inaction. The very maintenance of your body would not be accomplished without work.

3.9. Without personal attachment undertake action, Arjuna, for just one purpose, for the purpose of sacrifice. From work undertaken for purposes other than sacrifice, this world is bound to the laws of

karma.

3.10. Bringing forth creatures along with sacrifice, the Creator said of old, “With this may you bring forth fruit; let it be your horn-of-plenty [literally, wish-fulfilling cow].

3.11. “With this, may you make the gods flourish and may the gods make you flourish. Mutually fostering one another, you will attain the supreme good.

3.12. “For made to flourish by sacrifice, the gods will give you the enjoyments you desire. One who without giving to them enjoys their gifts is nothing but a thief.”

3.13. Good people eating the remains from sacrifices are free from sin. But those sinners eat evil who cook for their own sake.

3.14. From food beings come to be; the origin of food is from rain. Rain comes to be from sacrifice. Sacrifice has its origin in works.

3.15. Know works to have their origin in Brahman, and Brahman its foundation in the Immutable. Therefore is the omnipresent Brahman established through all time in sacrifice.

3.16. The wheel is thus set in motion. One who does not follow its rounds, evil in intentions, sensual in delights, he lives in vain, Arjuna.

3.17. But the person delighting only in his higher Self and satisfied living in it—for such a person, thoroughly contented in the Self alone, there is nothing that must be done.

3.18. Nor is there for him any gain in what he has done or has not done. Nor do his interests depend in any way on anyone or

anything else.

3.19. Therefore, ever unattached do the work that has to be done. For the person who is unattached in performing action attains the supreme good.

3.20. For by work alone did Janaka [a king who is a character in the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upaniṣad*] and others attain perfection. Considering also the holding together of society, you should be doing works.

3.21. Whatever the superior person does that indeed is what others try to do. The standard he sets the world follows.

3.22. For me, there is nothing whatsoever that has to be done, Arjuna, in the three worlds; nor anything unattained that I need to attain. Still I continue in action.

3.23. For if I did not continue ever tirelessly in action, my example people would follow, Arjuna, as they always do.

3.24. Societies would come apart if I were not to do works, and I would be the author of chaos in the world. I would destroy these creatures.

3.25. The unenlightened, who are attached to their actions, proceed in works, Arjuna; so should the enlightened, unattached, to hold together society.

...

4.19. One whose instigations and undertakings are all free from the motive of personal desire, the wise see that person as the truly learned, him whose karma has been burned up in the fire of

knowledge.

4.20. Having abandoned attachment to the fruits of works, constantly satisfied, independent, one does nothing whatsoever even while thoroughly engaged in works.

4.21. Transcending hope and expectation, controlled in heart and mind, with all possessiveness renounced, one doing simply physical actions accrues no (karmic) adversity.

4.22. Satisfied with whatever gain comes, passed beyond oppositions and dualities, untouched by jealousy, equal-minded and balanced in the face of success and failure, such a person though he acts is not bound.

...

4.31. Those who eat the nectar of immortality left over from a sacrificial action, they go to the eternal Brahman. This world does not belong to one who fails to sacrifice, so how could the next, Arjuna? (Translation by S. Phillips.)

Thus would be compatible (a) an attitude of *ahiṃsā* and (b) violence called for in the interests of “holding together the worlds,” consonant with the Upanishadic exception of animal sacrifice, or, in the immediate case, Arjuna’s society. Arjuna is not to intend harm, as part of a yogic attitude, as he works to destroy the opposing warriors, including his own teachers and family, and win the battle. As said by Krishna time and again and confirmed by the circumstances of the conflict, in entering combat Arjuna follows *dharma*, the right path of action, the only action suitable for offering with inner sacrifice.

Jaina Intellectual *ahiṃsā*: The Metaphysics of Perspectivalism

Scholar Padmanabh Jaini rightly remarks in many places that whereas *ahiṃsā* is promoted in Buddhism and Hinduism as well as in Jainism, only in Jainism is it all-important, the very touchstone of perfection in “thought, word, and deed.” To this we may add the observation of several others that Jainas seem to practice nonharm even in the controversies of philosophy. The Jaina metaphysics—called *anekāntavāda*, the view that no one view (exclusively) is correct, commonly rendered “non-absolutism”—has at its methodological heart admirable effort to find a grain of truth in every theory. Although difficult to accomplish, the promise seems in good faith: Jainas enjoy the reputation of being the best historians of ideas among the philosophic authors, at pains to represent fairly a range of positions, whereas polemical misrepresentation is common elsewhere. Furthermore, Jaina metaphysicians do try to synthesize positions of opposed camps.

Such perspectivalism—*anekāntavāda*, non-absolutism, a championing of pluralism of perspectives—is, then, the view that reality is so rich that it makes true, with qualifications, every intellectual stance. Thus the Jaina metaphysics, unlike Buddhist and Nietzschean perspectivalism, is not a form of skepticism, but rather a bold promise of reconciliation of apparently opposed points of view. Or, as a skepticism it targets only the exclusivism, or absolutism, which partisans propose for their preferred positions, blind to the truth within their opponents’ views. In other words, Jainas do not set out to challenge even the most general positive claims about the nature of everything or an underlying reality. The point is not to

deny but to affirm, to affirm seemingly incompatible perspectives. A special sevenfold logic—called *sapta-bhaṅgī*, seven styles (seven combinations of three truth-values, truth, falsity, and indeterminacy), also called *syādvāda*, maybe-ism—was developed to facilitate the disarming of controversy, the project to which the Jaina commitment to *ahiṃsā* apparently leads. Here we find the weapons of intellectual *ahiṃsā*.

There is a similar meta-philosophical position in Buddhism, the avoiding of extremes, *anta*. Matilal (1998, p. 129) remarks:

Avoidance of the two extremes (*anta* = one-sided view) was the hallmark of Buddhism. In his dialogue with Kātyāyana he is said to have identified ‘it is’ as an *anta* (= extreme) and ‘it is not’ as the other extreme, and then he said that the Tathāgata must avoid both and resort to the middle. Hence Buddhism is described as the Middle Way.

Here one needs to know that the Buddhist anti-metaphysical position of Nāgārjuna (c. 100 CE) and his Middle or Mādhyamika school, which picks up this theme of the avoidance of extremes, is distinct from other prominent Buddhist schools which do take a metaphysical stance, especially the nominalist and idealist Yogācāra. What distinguishes the Buddhist anti-intellectualist and the Jaina perspectivalist is that the former rejects, while the latter accepts, the gist of an extreme position. To take up a simple example discussed by Matilal (p. 130), Jains argue that Yogācāra doctrines of momentariness, etc., at the one end, and Vedāntic doctrines of permanence, etc., on the other, are complementary and without the other incomplete:

. . . we can place the Advaita Vedānta at one end of the spectrum, as they hold Brahman, the ultimate reality, to be a non-dual, permanent, substantial, and all-inclusive being. This is where the “being” doctrine culminates. The Buddhists [of the Yogācāra school] on the other hand are at the other end of the spectrum. Their doctrine of momentariness (as well as emptiness) is also the culmination of the “non-being” doctrine, For “non-being” equals “becoming.” . . . And the two, the Jainas argue, are inextricably mixed together. . . . Being and becoming mutually imply each other, and to exclude the one or the other from the domain of reality is to take a partial (*ekānta*) view.

The limits to such inclusivism are only practical, though very real nonetheless. Even non-absolutism is viewed as non-absolute, subject to the logic of the “maybe,” despite opponents’ allegations of self-refutation—non-absolutism as purportedly presenting itself as absolutely true, so the Vedāntin Śaṅkara alleges. But there is no self-referential inconsistency in application of perspectivalism to itself, although some modern interpreters, such as Mohanty (2000), apparently following Śaṅkara, would label it as itself absolutist. Only an omniscient being would be able to comprehend all viewpoints. There are no true, false, or even indeterminate propositions outside of a framework, a *vāda*, a theory or perspective of interlocking beliefs, that is to say, a *naya*, standpoint, more about which below. And a special logic governs standpoints.

The Jaina *sapta-bhaṅgī*, a septad of styles or manners of valuation of truth, is comprised of all combinations of three truth-values, truth (+),

falsity (-), and indeterminacy (o):

+ , - , o , +- , +o , -o , +-o .

Because of the three truth-values, this has been misinterpreted as a paraconsistent or multi-valued logic like those championed by Riechenbach and others to resolve paradoxes and the problem, known to Aristotle, of the indeterminate truth-value of some statements about the future, future contingents. But the Jainas' is not a logic of truth-functional connectives with tables for "and," "or", "if-then," "if-and-only-if," but rather a hermeneutical tool. All truths are truths only within a perspective, but some are true to us and, so far as we know, true to everyone. Even if we are not aware of controversy concerning the claim that something *a* is F, this is still only from a perspective, and there may be a perspective in which *a* is not F or in which it cannot be determined which it is. We presume, without contrary advice, that *a* is F (or that the proposition *p* is true), but we do so fallibilistically—the *syād* in *syādvāda* means that a claim is presumptively true, false, indeterminate, and so on ("may well be _____" is a better translation). No claim is immune from the possibility of error. Nevertheless, some claims, or cognitions, are false, or non-veridical, from our own point-of-view and every point-of-view that we know of, and some are indeterminate, *avaktavya*, it is impossible to say. Note that on the classical Indian scene Advaita Vedānta is the philosophy famous for proposing a third truth-value, the inexplicable, *anirvacanīya*, which holds for statements about the relationship of Brahman the Absolute to the phenomenal display: we cannot know as finite individual knowers what the world looks like from Brahman's viewpoint. Jainas use

the category of the indeterminate similarly to classify apparently unanswerable questions—somewhat in the fashion of identification of antinomies by Kant.

So much for three of the seven styles, but what of the combinations of truth, falsity, and indeterminacy, the final four? In recognizing that a claim can be simultaneously true and false, or another combination, the Jaina again relativizes to a *naya*, a standpoint, here even more crucially than with the open-endedness of evaluation for the first three. From some standpoints, a claim is true while in others false. From our own standpoint, it is true in some standpoints and false in others. And so on. Our own standpoint conditionalizes over standpoints. Thus the Jaina theoreticians would make clear to themselves the tasks before them. For, they see reality as making true a claim in the one standpoint and making it false in the other. Reality is so incredibly rich that it can underlie and give rise to opposed pictures. However, understanding the details in particular cases of controversy is not easy, as shown by the struggles of Haribhadra (c. 750), Hemacandra (c. 1150), and company. The sevenfold schema is nevertheless a tool for work in metaphysics, allowing clear categorizing of problems and claims.

It is easy to make too much of Jaina discussions of particular standpoints, those of Vedānta, Nyāya, Buddhism, and so on, the various classical schools. In principle, *naya* are infinite in number, and the conditionalizing to particular standpoints that is pronounced in Jaina discussions seems due to the prominence of particular schools at particular times, not an effort to determine once and for all a substantialist standpoint, an

insubstantialist, and so on, as it sometimes seems. From the classic work of Dasgupta (1922, vol. 1, p. 178):

The *nayas* are . . . but points of view, or aspects of looking at things, and as such are infinite in number. . . . The Jains hold that the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, the Vedānta, the Sāṃkhya, and the Buddhists have each tried to interpret and systematize experience from one of the above four points of view, and each regards the interpretation from his point of view as being absolutely true to the exclusion of all other points of view. This is their error . . . , for each standpoint represents only one of the many points of view from which a thing can be looked at. The affirmations from any point of view are thus true in a limited sense and under limited conditions. Infinite numbers of affirmations may be made of things from infinite points of view. Affirmations or judgments according to any *naya* or standpoint cannot therefore be absolute, for even contrary affirmations of the very selfsame things may held to be true from other points of view.

Finally, it is worth repeating that the Jaina position is not self-refutational. It may have other weaknesses, but not this, though the point is subtle. A common misinterpretation of the *sapta-bhaṅgī* sees it as generating unconditional claims. For example, Mohanty (2000, p. 91): “ . . . the Jaina developed a method known as *syādvāda*, by which the truths of opposing predications may be synthesized, their one-sided truth claims rejected, and a perfect knowledge of the totality of reality arrived at. Each such predication is conditional, relative to a standpoint, but if

that condition is included in the predication, the judgment becomes unconditionally true.” This would be like practicing *ahiṃsā* towards everyone except oneself, a failure that has also been unfairly laid at the feet of Jaina theorists. Jainas do leave open the possibility of omniscience, but to use the seven truth-values to try to disarm metaphysical disputes is not to impute to oneself an absolute point of view. Nonharmfulness requires humility.

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