

2.2. The Duty of Self-Development

A passage from what is likely the oldest of the Upanishads, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* (c. 800 BCE), contains the seed of the idea that virtue is its own reward. The passage is noteworthy not only for the karma doctrine but for its formulation in connection with rebirth.

‘Yājñavalkya,’ said he [Jāratkārava], when the voice of a dead man goes into fire, his breath into wind, his eye into the sun, his mind into the moon, his hearing into the quarters of earth, his body into the earth, his soul (*ātman*) into space, the hairs of his head into plants, the hairs of his body into trees, and his blood and semen are placed in water, what then becomes of this person (*puruṣa*)?’

‘Ārtabhāga, my dear, take my hand. We two only will know of this. This is not for us two to speak of in public.’

The two went away and deliberated. What they said was *karma*. What they praised was *karma*. Verily, one becomes good by good action, bad by bad action.¹

Jāratkārava’s question targets personal survival, and the answer seems to be that only karma survives. Note that the word used for “person” is *puruṣa*, which connotes the fully particular individual, whereas the dead man’s *ātman* (“self” would be a better translation than “soul”) is said to merge into ether, *ākāśa*, translated above as “space.” As in the later *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, the question of survival concerns the person as an individual, not as the cosmic self, *ātman*. Anticipating the Buddhist positions of “no self” and karmic continuity (to be examined in chapter three), the Upanishad identifies karma as key to a translife personal identity. It is also the most important element in the composite that makes up the living man or woman. Karma can be good or bad, including, presumably, the karma that survives and shapes a subsequent birth: “Verily, one becomes good by good action, bad by bad action.”

Even without belief in future lifetimes, it is not hard to see how the idea of karmic virtue could provide moral incentive. What’s wrong with being a thief? Well, you’re a thief, and likely to remain one. Your choice

1. Translated by Robert Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, p. 110.

to be a thief binds you to being-a-thief, a karmic pattern that can determine what you'll be like tomorrow and next month and next year and in a decade. But the body ages and dies, and strategies to make life as pleasant as possible might prudentially include thievery. Against this, the Upanishadic idea seems to be its rebirth teaching. What if I am determining myself unendingly, such that I am choosing to be a thief not only in this lifetime but into another and endless incarnations? Contrast such a person with one who acts now compassionately and begins in this way to become someone who is forever compassionate. Which would one want to be? Perhaps a thief, a very successful thief who felt no danger of being apprehended, would feel little push to change. But coupled with belief in rebirth, the karma teaching of the Upanishads (you are responsible for your dispositions) would appear to provide powerful moral incentive.

Eastern karma theory provides moral push in two other ways, each of which is the subject of an upcoming section, (a) karmic payback (karmic justice) and (b) progress towards whatever is the yogic *summum bonum* (enlightenment, liberation, etc.). In this section I want to explore the self-development dimension of karma theory together with the deontological virtue of *ahimsā*, “non-injury” or “non-violence.” This virtue tops the list in the *Yogasūtra* of (social) “restraints” (*YS* 2.30: non-injury, truth-telling, non-stealing, sexual restraint, and non-possessiveness are the *yamas* constituting the first limb of the “eight-limbed,” *aṣṭāṅga*, yoga of Patañjali), and is central in several traditions of yogic practice.²

Non-injury hooks up with Western ethical systems centering not on self but others, on the features of others that make them deserve respect. This is puzzling. For, yoga practices seem self-directed. It once seemed to me that *ahimsā* is merely, like all yoga prescriptions, a prudential teaching: considering self-cultivation, harming another would not be expedient.³ Fighting would require too much involvement with the world,

2. See, for example, the lists of virtues in the *Gītā*—5.7, 6.29, and so on—which include *ahimsā* despite the martial context of the Kurukṣetra war. We may also mention that the ethics of non-violence is not only most probably Yoga’s greatest contribution to moral philosophy as a whole, it is, through Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, a major contribution to a global political ethic.

3. The *ahimsā* teaching seemed to me to be part of a system of ethical egoism: “The Conflict of Voluntarism and Dualism in the *Yogasūtra*” (1985).

making meditation difficult. There are, however, better explanations for the yogic emphasis. Yogically, the attitude of *ahiṃsā* seems to be not only a part of a moral dimension of self-development but, more profoundly, the heart of the yogic attitude towards self and consciousness.

Surely “non-injury” is to apply not just to others but to oneself.⁴ And the “pull” of one’s future self, the self one is helping to make right now, is arguably the weightiest of moral forces. Except in special circumstances, there is no person to whom one owes greater responsibility, since over others, except in unusual circumstances, one has no comparable power to make and shape what the person is. Of course, emergencies occur, and sometimes we must act immediately to help another without concern for ourselves. Prudence is not the only virtue. Perhaps some people, such as pregnant women and parents whose children are very young, live normally in “abnormal” circumstances. Nevertheless, it is only over ourselves that we have decisive influence, and thus there is a special duty to our own good future self or selves.

Non-injury tracks the fact that sentient beings, both people and animals, exert a kind of constraint on our actions. Why should people and animals not be harmed? The answer has the consequence that *ahiṃsā* as applied to oneself provides push to self-development, and, indeed, to yoga practice, which is a special form of self-development, a kind of prophylactic or immunization to harm. Consonantly, we may note the contemporary movement in medicine to recognize asana as preventive practice and even essential to holistic health (a theme of chapter four).

The philosophic answer to the question “Why practice *ahiṃsā*?” is in a Jaina text to which we shall turn in a moment. First, however, a caveat. Ethical philosophy often offends the complexity of action. There is enormous diversity in life circumstances. The rules of good rock climbing are not the same as those for gardening. Of course, those would not, by and large, be moral rules. But even considering only ethical dimensions, it is not the case that all action can by any single standard be very

4. This is emphasized in Arvind Sharma’s work on Jaina philosophy: *A Jaina Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion* (2001), p. 43: “while *hiṃsā* has ordinarily been understood as harm to others; for Jainas, however, it refers primarily to injuring *oneself*—to behavior which inhibits the soul’s ability to attain *mokṣa*.”

meaningfully judged. The imperative to respect others may or may not be categorical, but it most definitely is indeterminate, insufficient in itself as a moral guide. The non-unitary account of six types of *prima facie* moral duty put forth by the great Aristotelian scholar W. D. Ross may well simplify moral considerations theoretically about as far as possible. Ross's list:

1. Duties of fidelity (e.g., keeping promises) and duties of reparation (both deriving from previous acts of my own)
2. Duties of gratitude (deriving from previous acts of others)
3. Duties of justice (deriving from possibilities of distribution of pleasure or happiness)
4. Teleological duties: maximize the good (Ross calls these "duties of beneficence")
5. Duties of self-improvement (not only of moral self-improvement, but in development as a musician, carpenter, etc.)
6. Duties to respect the rights of others and to refrain from injuring them (Ross says contra J. S. Mill this is needed in addition to #4).⁵

Individuals resolve conflicts, according to Ross, by weighing duties, and weighting them differently in different circumstances—some get trumped by others—and acting by her/his "best lights."

Unfortunately, neither Ross nor anybody else tells us precisely how these "best lights" are to illumine conflicts. Am I to keep the promise to my mother *or* do what I see as best for my self-development? Examples of conflict are legion, so readily imaginable that we see why philosophers have taken such pains to find a single first principle. Ross's "duties of self-improvement" are particularly messy, a Pandora's box of little bits of moral weight accruing to very different talents and areas of potential development but all relevant to moral calculation. On the other hand, there does seem to be something right about this. Because of different

5. W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, pp. 19–21.

talents and widely different opportunities, people are right to form different life plans, and ethical systems should be sensitive to several dimensions of diversity. My purpose now is not further to expound on Ross or the general principles of ethics but to show that the Yoga ethics of moral self-development (you make yourself into a good or bad person through your choices) links nicely with a second, Jaina-inspired foundation for morality that seems at first blush distinct from moral incentive. For, the answer to the question of what grounds non-injury as an ethical attitude is an idea of others simply as selves, as embodied consciousnesses liable to injury.

To the question, why should a person practice *ahiṃsā*, the answer is, according to the *Acaraṅga-sūtra*, that the existence and nature of others as selves demands it.⁶ Actually, two answers are given; first, that others are selves, and second, that they are capable of feeling pain. The thesis is that being-a-self, alternatively, being-capable-of-feeling-pain, is a moral-sphere-making characteristic. That is to say, anything that is a self (or capable of feeling pain) has moral rights such that to propagate what selves see as bad for themselves (i.e., dislike) is to commit a moral evil. Now, the text goes on to say, no self likes pain or injury, and thus to cause pain or injury is to commit moral evil.

To a philosopher schooled in Western ethics, this conception and argument would appear to line up with Immanuel Kant and to require no idea of a good to be accomplished through action independently of what the other considers harmful, namely, pain and other forms of injury. One refrains from injuring others because of *them*, because of what they are, selves capable of being hurt. The Jaina argument does not conclude with a moral imperative to further the good of others but rather with the prohibition not to do something that the other deems harmful, namely

6. The argument may well appear for the first time in this Jaina text, although I invite others to find an earlier reference: *Acaraṅga-sūtra* xxx. Non-injury is the premier moral virtue throughout Jainism, and connected to the universally applicable rule that a person should refrain from hurting any being. In certain Hindu systems, in contrast, it is a conditional virtue connecting with the hypothetical imperative that, certain conditions not being present (such as a being a soldier in a just war), one should practice non-violence. In other systems, as in Buddhism, harm is universally proscribed.

injury. The reason is not, as with Kant, autonomy, or potential autonomy, although the Kantian move, we shall see in a moment, aligns nicely with Yogic interests. Rather, it is simply the feature of another that he or she is a self liable to injury. (The Kantian recognition of the value others' consciousness does not go far enough.)

To the question, how is it known that, for example, a cow does not like pain, the answer is that it is obvious in the cow's behavior, in her running away from the angry man shouting with an upraised stick.⁷ In an immediately adjoining verse, the contention is further supported by a directive to ask whether one oneself would like to be harmed. The comparison is in a way epistemological: one can find out about the other's likes and dislikes by making a comparison to oneself. Isn't it just obvious, by what we know of ourselves, that cows do not like to be hit? But there is also a moral point. No shallow skepticism, the text implies, should obscure the force of the precept to practice non-injury.

Insofar as a self is harmed by an agent, that agent has committed a moral wrong. Thus we seem to have in *ahiṃsā* a concept that the Western ethicist would call deontological, i.e., concerned with a sphere of moral constraint, as opposed to teleological, that is, as opposed to an idea of maximization of a preconceived notion of a universal good (e.g., happiness or pleasure). But Yogic systems of ethics are famously teleological, as directed towards realization of the "highest good" (*niḥśreyas*). And so, too, do I wish to interpret *ahiṃsā*. The connecting thesis is karma, one's power to determine one's future self, although non-injury is not merely a prudential teaching in the egoist sense. My contention is that the self-comparison used in the Jaina argument has ethical punch in both obverse and reverse sides of the relationship. That is, one sees oneself as like the other in being a self, not only the other as like oneself. Right self-understanding involves seeing oneself as what one is, namely, a self like others. And I myself should not be harmed because all selves have moral worth. This is part of their essence.

Convergence of moral push (incentive) and moral pull (constraint) in yogic ideals has often been missed. Interpreters of Yoga philosophy have

7. *ibid.*, p. xxx.

been perplexed by a corollary to doctrines about self-discipline, namely, that social morality (*dharma*) can be superseded by exigencies of the path.⁸ But it is a mistake to view Yoga ethics so narrowly as to be derived from the notion of a supreme good. In fact, the teaching about the path's potentially superseding customary moral dictates *blocks* deductions of social norms from the conception of a yogic goal. This is apparently hard for many to appreciate. However, the point is not that there is a new Yoga brand of ethics but that Yoga teaches goals that sometimes compete with other-directed duties, like having fun versus doing a chore.⁹ Moreover, a common supplement to Yoga self-development teachings is the advice not to disturb the minds of those who are not practitioners by revealing powers and encouraging them prematurely to practice advanced forms of self-discipline.¹⁰ Other consciousnesses are more or less ready for one or another step along a spiritual path, and each step has to be taken by a uniquely individual self. So, one should leave others alone. You cannot really do much of anything for them, but you can for yourself.

Interestingly, as surmised by J. N. Mohanty,¹¹ *ahimsā* is supported by metaphysicians in classical India by argument not so much from a concrete conception of the truly real (though the tactic is tried by some Yoga thinkers) but from the premise that beings are deluded in a variety of fashions and that each consciousness has its own route to freedom from delusion. Non-injury means in effect non-interference. Consonantly, in (Tantric) traditions which view the *summum bonum* as perfection of the individual and not just the individual's reabsorption in the One (or dissolution in Nirvana, etc.), paths of development—*svadharma*, “a person's own individual *dharma*”—are said to vary almost endlessly (musician, carpenter, gardener, etc.).

It seems, then, that we have here implicitly a libertarian social ethic, and indeed a value pluralism. (Compare the oft-cited list of four distinct values in Hinduism corresponding to different life stages or

8. refs., e.g., the *Gītā*; Sri Aurobindo, the chapter, “Standards of Conduct and Spiritual Freedom,” in *The Synthesis of Yoga*.

9. ref. to the bhakti practice of slipping away from one's daily duties to dally with God.

10. refs.

11. *Classical Indian Philosophy*, p. 108.

circumstances: *kāma*, pleasure, especially “sexual pleasure,” *artha*, “wealth” and power, *dharma*, familial and community “duty,” and *mokṣa*, “liberation,” the transcendent goal of yoga.) We leave people alone to pursue their own ends, to make their own selves. Self-determination, in the individualist sense, is to be respected. I make me and you you.

This reading is right as far as it goes, but it leaves out the convergence of the teleological and deontological in karma theory and the notion of self-development. Practicing non-injury is good karma, making us better persons morally. Not to smoke tobacco is a practice required by respect for a future self, the self to whose lung cancer, etc., I might well contribute were I to develop the habit. Not smoking is a duty to self on a par with my duty not to subject others to harm. A distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding action may be fundamental for law and political philosophy, but in ethics it is more fundamental to see others and self as comparable.¹² Furthermore, as will be elaborated in the next section, practicing *ahiṃsā* is said to help make us “fit” (*adhikārin*) for the yogic *summum bonum*, for our own “supreme personal good,” *paramapurusaṛtha*. It is also said to make us immune from “karmic payback,” the topic of section four. So, one, *ahiṃsā* makes a future self a good person (a person practicing *ahiṃsā*). Two, it fulfills a weighty moral duty. Three, it has instrumental value with regard to the yogic goal. Finally, four, it wards off consequences of bad karma. Thus we have a quadrad of converging considerations showing that by respecting selves, others and myself, we achieve our own good.

Let us consider now an objection to the implication that *ahiṃsā* is central to a Yoga ethics of self-development. Many Yoga systems, such as forms of Buddhism, teach an activist morality, principally the good in “compassion,” *karuṇā*, which translates into the dictum to try actively to

12. Not only is this move made in the Jaina argument, it is implicit in Christianity’s “Golden Rule,” it seems to me, as well as in Confucius. See in particular *Analects* 15.23 where “likeness to self” is said to be the “single thread of morality.” Kant perhaps makes the most convincing case for it in discussing applications of the categorical imperative where it all hinges on our ability “to stand in the other’s shoes,” to see ourselves and others as alike as “ends in themselves”: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

help to alleviate the suffering of others (whether or not one is personally responsible). “Non-injury,” in contrast, seems negative, not trailing, as pointed out, an activist social ethic or indeed any activism at all. As a virtue, it might be thought to be negative in comparison with, for example, generosity, which would inspire acts of kindness towards others and not just restraint from harming them. Now my own view is that *ahimsā* is a positive virtue. But I admit this is not commonly realized, despite the good efforts, we might mention, of Gandhi, who tries to give *ahimsā* an activist spin.¹³ Resisting distinguishing it as an ethical attribute from a spiritual attitude of service to humanity, Gandhi argues, in effect, that there is “mutual entailment of the virtues.” This is a thesis familiar in the West through Plato and his followers, in particular certain Stoics.¹⁴ The Mahatma did not use the following terminology, but in his writings one gets a sense that he sees compassion as the positive side of a single attitude that manifests negatively as non-violence. And indeed, as a fact of moral psychology, it does seem as though selfless people interested in the welfare of others are more prone to practice non-injury.

Conceptually, however, non-injury is different from compassion. It is easy to imagine a case of non-injury practiced without compassion. Even if an incipient compassion normally accompanies a *resolve* to refrain from doing harm, we can imagine someone, a curmudgeon, lacking much of any positive feeling for anyone, making himself follow the rules of non-injury. Perhaps compassion is a sufficient, though not a necessary, condition for *ahimsā*: it is hard to imagine a truly compassionate person causing that which makes her weep. Let us then agree with Gandhi with qualification. With some individuals, compassion and non-injury are part and parcel of the same attitude.

Just as individuals have different talents that they develop in different ways given the widely varying opportunities for self-development, we grow emotionally in different ways, too, and a universal injunction to *ahimsā* seems much more realistic than an injunction to compassion.

13. Mahatma Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers*, ch. 4, “Ahimsa or the Way of Non-violence.”

14. J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (1977). M. Murphy, *The Future of the Body*, pp. 558–62, talks about the “interdependence of transformative practices.”

Perhaps a person tends to become compassionate by trying to practice non-injury. Psychological laws are not rigid formulas, but one side of karma is surely that our practices affect our emotions. Note again that *ahiṃsā* is traditionally treated as a very broad injunction, counted in many (though not all) Hindu Dharmaśāstras as *sādhāraṇa dharma*, a “common duty” or “duty for all,” whereas other precepts are said to be conditional, dependent on age, sex, caste, stage of life, and so forth. A connection between practice of *ahiṃsā* and emotional growth seems to me to be part of the reason why, as mentioned, the *Yogasūtra* has *ahiṃsā* at the top of its list of social restraints or preconditions.

The connection between a sense of others’ suffering and a kind of emotional growth fostered by yoga is perhaps also the deep sense of the Buddhist First Noble Truth, “All is suffering” (*sarvam duḥkham*).¹⁵ Now it is the standard interpretation to read this in a prudential spirit, to wit, that regard for one’s own self and consciousness, or future self, requires one to try to see life’s pleasures as well as its pains as all in fact suffering, that is, in the light of the bliss that would be ours were we to Awaken.¹⁶ By looking at our experiences in this fashion, we become non-attached and take a prudential step towards freedom from all suffering, becoming immune to harm.

The deeper interpretation I alluded to supplements this one. I confess that it occurred to me not from patient reading of Buddhist commentaries but in connection with the “yoga of art” articulated by Abhinava Gupta (see above, p. xxx) along with the *rasa* theory of the large genre of Sanskrit literature known as “literary criticism,” *alaṃkāra śāstra*. Although this is a rich and diverse literature, there is an amazingly durable

15. This is not exclusively a Buddhist teaching. The *Yogasūtra*, for example, says that the proposition “All is suffering” is true to the “discriminating,” by which presumably is meant those who have self-knowledge: *YS* 2.15.

16. “All is suffering” is not precisely what the “First Sermon” of the Pāli Canon says. There the “First Noble Truth” is not “All is suffering” but rather “Birth is painful, old age is painful, sickness is painful, death is painful, sorrow, lamentation, dejection, and despair are painful.” Tr. Edward J. Thomas, *The Life of the Buddha*. Nirvana is, nevertheless, not conceived in the Sermons simply as pain’s extinction but as a self-sustaining bliss. The formulation, *sarvaṃ duḥkham*, “All is painful,” is quite old, itself appearing, *sabbe dukkhā*, in the Pāli Canon as well as throughout Buddhist literature: refs.

theory of human nature throughout. In the oldest version, eight dominant natural emotional states are matched to eight aesthetic “flavors” (*rasas*) aimed at by a poet or dramatist as what his work should provoke in a (cultured) audience. Interestingly, there is only one aesthetic state for which a radically different word and concept is used than that for the corresponding natural state, aesthetic eroticism matching sexual feeling, comedy matching laughter, the aesthetically horrible (as in a horror movie) matching fear, and so on. The one exception is suffering or “grief,” *śoka*, which as a naturally occurring feeling is said to be matched in the audience not with a form of *śoka* but with something radically different, namely, *karuṇā*, “compassion.” The thesis that links the two is that when we contemplate suffering in the aesthetically interested but personally disinterested fashion of a connoisseur (*sahṛdaya* in Sanskrit, “like-hearted” member of the audience) we taste the *rasa* of compassion. Perhaps one side of the First Noble Truth, interpreting the “All” to refer to things that concern others as well as ourselves, is to acknowledge the selfness of others and to practice *ahiṃsā*. Abhinava would say in the yoga of art that by empathizing with others’ suffering we grow in our dispositions to compassion (and indeed to experience the bliss of the true self, *ānanda*, since *rasas* are as hedonic states apparently “closer” to the self than are natural states, our everyday pleasures and pains) and progress yogically towards the supreme good. Thus again we find convergence of ethical push and ethical pull.

Finally, let me address a couple of areas of application of *ahiṃsā* that are particularly relevant to the enterprises of this book. First, there is American gym yoga, where the main concern is asana practice involving stretching and breath-control. Here *ahiṃsā* clearly means not hurting yourself. One is to listen and respond to bodily feedback, and learn not to push too hard. The whole advantage of asanas over other forms of exercise can be lost if you do not have an attitude of *ahiṃsā* towards your own body. For, yoga is conscious exercise, learning the kinks of one’s own body and patiently straightening them out, or not, depending on bodily signals. And of course asanas help one fulfill one’s duty to one’s future self by helping to ensure health, as is now recognized almost universally.¹⁷

One practices *ahiṃsā* with respect to oneself. Self and other are the same as targets of the *ahiṃsā* attitude. But one typically has more influence over one's own future self than the selves of others. Therefore, a duty to practice yoga can trump other moral values. Of course, the cash value of the duty of self-development is not necessarily practice of asanas. It may well be that one should develop more socially useful skills, depending on circumstances. There are, of course, many variables.

Nevertheless, the stories of Jaina saints starving themselves to death out of a concern for the feelings of plants (a pretty woolly-headed notion, it would seem) do not show the tradition in a good light, since self-starvation is a kind of harm. On the other hand, concerning intellectual dispute, for us one last area of application, Jaina tradition seems to be pretty close to the mark, that is, in its teaching of intellectual *ahiṃsā*. "Try to find the grain of truth in the other's point of view. Every view is true *from a perspective*." This is the deep meaning of the Jaina *anekāntavāda*, or "non-absolutism," a perspectivalism or pluralism that affirms that each philosophy (*darśana*) has some truth but not the whole. It is a meta-philosophical position that encourages Jaina philosophers to be accurate intellectual historians, not misrepresenting opponents' positions (unlike sometimes Buddhists and Naiyāyikas!). Although it seems to generate apparent paradox when it is defended (by arguments presuming that some views are right and others wrong), it does seem correct that philosophy and other forms of intellectual engagement need not be practiced with an intent to produce a "knock-down" argument, "giving the lie" to the opponent's position and indulging in all the fallacies of derision. The ethic of the Jainas is to show compassion even to positions you know are really regarded by them as false. Thus maybe (*syāt*) the Socratic method (of trying to show a contradiction in the views of an interlocutor) is not, pedagogically, the best way to train young thinkers. Of course, Yoga philosophy has generally not followed the Jaina model, but has been insistent upon one or another position as right and all others as wrong. Truth treads a narrow path. However, I would like to regard the minimalism in metaphysics championed in chapter one and the

17. Forward reference to a long note in chapter four on the substantial interest and literature on yogic practices in health science.

alternatives explored there in dualist interactionism as well as the forms of holism as proffered in the Jaina spirit. Again, the main point of Yoga philosophy is to defend possibilities of yoga practice and experience, not a single, absolutely correct view, the final word.